

African spirituality that shapes the concept of Ubuntu

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ABSTRACT

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Nolan(1982:7) shares an interesting concept of spirituality. He says:

“The Spiritual life is the whole of one’s life insofar as it is motivated and determined by the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus”.

This kind of spirituality shapes persons in such a way that they grow into the concept of Ubuntu (humanness). In other words, an integrated spirituality is a spirituality in which who we are, and what we do are intimately related. The process of an African spiritualist is also developed within the village. Mbiti reminds us that: “It takes a whole village to raise a child” (Mbiti 1977:23). In short, relationship is part of development of African spirituality. This article further explores on how elders within the village become leaders, and towards the end of their life journey, they become teachers and good ancestors, especially to younger generation. It is important to note that those who are good (while living) and are able to pass their knowledge and wisdom to others become good ancestors when they die...

1 INTRODUCTION

The great wonderful gift that God has given to people is the gift of life. We are therefore charged to manage and take care of our lives. In Africa, self management is closely related to one’s world. In other words, how one lives his or her life is part of management of this gift. In short, self management is all about the living of the highest quality of human life, as well as being able to enjoy life in a positive Ubuntu style. Bhengu had this to say about life lived within the style of Ubuntu:

“The enjoyment of life implicates that a person is aware of the value which gives joy to life and how to pursue this, especially being the master of life, as a person in the milieu of community and society” (Bhengu 1996:64).

The enjoyment of life is part of living as much as Ubuntu is part of humanity. In fact, one grows with the above concept from early

childhood, especially in rural African villages. As people grow and relate to each other they are taught by the elderly to pass what they learn to another person. This is the beginning of caring for each other. The notion of caring manifests itself in the respectful and humble way elders and superiors are greeted and addressed by young ones. This kind of Ubuntu is passed on from one generation to the other. It will not be wrong to say that a human being is nothing but humanness or Umuntu (a Zulu word for a person) as it is shared by many African tribes. This concept is further enhanced through the creation story in the Bible. In the story, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Genesis captures this beautifully:

“So God created man (sic) in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them”
(Gn 1:27).

In an African village the image and likeness of God is revered and when you add the concept of Ubuntu, you must also connect it to African spirituality which forms values and good character in a person. Their concepts are part and parcel of humanity from the beginning of creation story. For example, Hermes (from Egypt) wrote about these concepts, and Pythagoras continued to writing and developing the ideas further as he studied in Africa. Later on some of the African philosophers (Soclits and Onuphis) taught Hermes about the ‘inner values and African concepts of humanness’, which were given to human beings by God. An African writer by the name of Koka connected the above ideas by developing the concept of respect and connecting the ideas to African spirituality. For example he says:

“The word ‘Ntate’ (father) is used to address an old man or respected Father figure in the village or community”
(Koka 1996:13).

When children or young ones calls the word Ntate (father), they are showing a sign of respect to that adult person, and also see the one who shapes them into good citizens. As children continue to grow in the village, they are then shaped in respecting people, and the concept of ubuntu becomes part of their life. Broodryk reminds us that:

“Man (sic) was declared “Human” as soon as the element of “divine” (image) goodness (likeness) was instilled in him. This divine element that transformed man (matter)

into a human being was nothing but a humanness,
“ubuntu” that manifested the “Image and likeness” of
God in each individual person of the human race”
(Broodryk 2002:1)

Broodryk points out that it was the spark of life that transformed human beings into living souls and made them different from the rest of created beings. Hence, we contain the main consistency of the wholeness of life. Once again he reminds us that this concept of ubuntu was there from ancient times, and it never ceased to exist within the circle of the human race of well known ancient philosophers who in turn were scholars of the Hermetic Philosophy, theology and science – which were based on the “logos” (creative word) and the doctrine that was taught by African priests of Hermes in Egypt. For example, Pythagoras was one of those who studied this concept for twenty two years in the University of Heliopolis under two Egyptian high priests – Socht and Onuiphis. Their theory was centered around the inner-value and dignity of the human personality” which is nothing else but “humanness” instilled in human beings. The summary of their theory was further developed by Savory who finally said that:

“God (supreme God) did not only endow man (sic) with his goodness” but also equally inseminated this divine element into all human beings” (Savory 1988:29).

The above quotation reminds the author of the connection between creation (that is, image of God) and the gift of life (breath, breathed in all human beings), which brings us closer to the concept of Ubuntu, that leads into deep African Spirituality. As beings we are always searching for a higher being. The question to ask is what is spirituality?

2 CONCEPT OF AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY

The theme of Spirituality has become a common word in modern life. Current interest in spirituality is evident both at popular and scholarly levels. This theme is heard from radios, and televisions. These days it is also shared in seminars, conferences, universities, classes, course work and curricula. Modern society is re-visiting this old concept once again, in order to correct the values and dignity of Ubuntu that is lost. Why? South Africans lost their concept of Ubuntu during apartheid times, when they fought for their liberation. During those days, life lost its meaning – especially the concept of

the image and likeness of God, which kept them respecting each other. In the new democracy, with the emphasis on human dignity and human rights, the community is trying to recover old concepts that kept villagers and people respecting each other. The above has given us reason why we should re-evaluate or re-examine the concept of Ubuntu.

In the new democracy people are in need of or are searching for a deeper meaning of life. The main question to ask is how the church or religious institutions can address the spiritual hunger that is experienced by the nation in South Africa. It is also important to note with interest that many African people are now tracing back their African roots. For example, after 1976 riots, a lot of parents “started naming a well as re-naming their children African names. They departed from naming and using their English names. This concept is also seen through changing names of cities such as Louis Trichard to Makhado, Pretoria to Tshwane etc. Listening on the radio of 702, one could hear the efforts of whites who are also learning how to call or pronounce different African names struggling on radio discussions. The above changes are shifting old concepts of western ways of thinking into new African ways of life. On the other hand, the church is still struggling to address these issues of change. The struggles will continue as the new democracy grows. The result of these changes caused one of the Presbyterian Churches to overture the General Assembly in 1999. The problems that they were seeking to address were on the subject of African Spirituality and ancestor veneration. Our white members were questioning the above problem – especially the issue of a cult and idolatry. They felt the church was too liberal and accepting every thing that was African as we were approaching the new democracy. The debates were high as African people were trying to define ways of recapturing their African ness. The reader needs to note that the question of African spirituality and ancestor veneration as a cult became a crucial topic for African delegates. African people centered their arguments on the respect of the dead. They argued that the respect of the dead was important way of showing signs of respect to leaders who lived a good life. The argument was based on the concept of ubuntu and not on ancestor worship. The African delegates found themselves caught in areas of dualism. This concept became part of their lives, because of Christianity. They found themselves practicing the African way of

life, and also kept Christian principles which were foreign and western.

The debates made them aware that there are some Africans who live western as well as African way of life. Other Africans blamed colonialism for these two kinds of dualism. Those who favored Christianity as a way of life rejected those who practiced an African way of life. They referred to them as hedonism or unchristian. In other words, Christians were seen as good people. This way of life continued to divide Africans into two camps. History became an important way of arguing, especially regarding the concept of missionaries. For example, as missionaries continued to work among the Africans, they had to leave their way of life and embrace western concepts of life as a good way of living. They also developed a process of dividing Africans graveyards into three parts – one for the Christians, non-Christians and Catholics believers. This way of division further caused undermining among Christians and non believers. For example, Christians saw themselves as righteous, while others were sinners. After the new democracy that process was stopped. The above process caused some of the African's to resort to their African customs. Missionaries missed the point that the concept of ancestor relationship is idolatry forgetting the connection of respect of the dead and the notion of Ubuntu. There is a great belief among Africans that if a person lived a good life and dies (divine life), that person according to African belief system becomes a good ancestors. He or she is able to connect one to higher powers (Jesus the king). In other words, that person is believed to be in heaven. The second belief is that the person is given to another world (eternal life) – hence when they bury them, they provide food and other important items that are buried with them. The final belief is that ordinary human beings cannot speak to God directly, because God is not their equal – hence ancestors becomes abridge between the lower and higher being. The author is aware that Jesus is our mediator, who connects us-directly to God. I am merely stating the case of those who believe in the system of ancestor ship. The above concept share light to the way some Africans communicate in life, and thus, should not be taken lightly by those who do not operate in that world of communication. As a strategy it could have been used in order to connect them with Christian believes system.

The difficulty of some Africans speaking to a hierarchy is a problem in certain rural areas. They use a system of spoke person

(Induna's or mediators) especially when they speak to a king. That same process of communication was brought into Christian practices by some of them. They find it difficult to talk directly to higher being without a spoke person. When they share their problems they will always seek a mediator, because they feel that they are talking to someone who is not their equal. In other words, they will share their problems, happiness and sadness, or any other difficulty via a mediator. The concept of hierarchy and authority comes into play whenever they feel the person to be higher in position. For example, when one connects the above process with the concept of induna (spokes person) or spiritual mediator; one will begin to understand the world of communication among African people. Mbiti (1977:76) reminds us that;

“The African view of the universe or the world, understand Spiritual mediators as people who fill up the area between man (sic) and God”.

This concept can be a beautiful and beneficial contribution in understanding the world of communication among Africans, especially when introducing Christianity and the concept of Jesus as mediator. It could have helped them connect to the world of Jesus as savior of the world, especially its. Process of hierarchy. Therefore, one can only speak to the king through a spokes person. Returning to the concept of hierarchical structures (of African world – ancestors) It makes sense that one can only speak to King (God) through ancestors or mediators, especially the good ones who lived life to the fullest. Only good role models are respected, especially those who have shared their good behavior with others in the village. Let us now analyze the issue of death, which will help us to develop the concept of spirituality that leads to Ubuntu.

4 DEATH OF GOOD ELDERS

Generally speaking, not everybody becomes an ancestor in the true African life. For example, those who lived bad lives can never be considered as ancestors when they die. In Africa, (as mentioned before) death does not represent the end of human existence, but rather a change in its status. The notion of death creates a solution of continuity between the living and the dead – a solution marked by the differences on the scale between the “creditors” (the dead) and those “debtors” (their heirs). Belief in the existence of spirituality or

spirit is widespread throughout Africa. Mbiti (1977:70) continues to share the above idea by saying that:

“It is a natural consequence of the strong belief in African religion that human life does not terminate at the death of the individual, but continues beyond death. It follows, therefore, that there must be myriads upon my raids of human spirits. Many of them appear in legends, myths and folks stories; others are spoken about in normal conversations among people; and some possess people, or appear to people in visions and dreams”.

In other words, the African world has been interacting between the world of the living and the dead. Note that the process begins even before the last breath of the elderly has been breathed out. We are now entering the area of deep human spirituality through the process of death. For example, in certain villages, elders become living ancestors as they reach the prime age in their lives. They become spiritual advisors to the young ones. This process starts when they are sharing their spiritual gifts or insights while they are still alive, and then proceed to do so when they pass on to the other life. At the point of death or passing to another world, some of the villagers believe that they (ancestors) share the image and likeness of God. In short, they are closer to God. A bimbola when sharing this idea of good ancestors says:

“It is important to note that not all dead people automatically attain the status of ancestor ship. Death is not always a requirement for it. The notion of ancestor ship implies the idea of selection, before any other consideration to a social model based on the idea of exemplification in the strictest sense of the word....the good elder becomes an image of God when he (sic) dies” (Olupona 2000:11).

In other words, and ancestor is someone who has reached a great age and maturity in life. Who during his or her lifetime has acquired a vast experience of life, including deep spirituality? Hence they share their rich experiences and spiritual life with other young villagers. As mentioned before, this process starts in the prime of one's life while one is still alive. There are certain expectations required from a good elder, especially during their last stages of life. In short, his or her death must conform to the rules of the village or society to which

he or she belongs. Awolalu shared a good explanation on this issue of a death of an elder. He says:

“Death by ill “reputed” diseases [such as leprosy] or by accident [especially if provoked by lightning] Means exclusion from the village (society) of being an ancestor. (Olupona 1991:06).

The above quotations take seriously the steps of good position of ancestor ship. It also shares a passage of ritual that leads one to becoming an ancestor. The requirements lead to a position of maturity in a good life that develops a deep spirituality in a life of an elder. That life plays an important part in forming a good person. Especially towards entry into the world of ancestor ship. In other words, living a good life as well as sharing your values with others, creates a good personality that will remain within villagers even when you have died. A further explanation is that living a good life as well as sharing your good values with villagers even when you have died, leaves good memories that are internalized and used when difficulties of life approach you. One is able to use the wisdom shared by good ancestors. In short, passing of knowledge or wisdom creates a world of humanness (Ubuntu) among other people. The concept is further developed by a deep reverence or respect of the dead (ancestors) by villagers or African people. The above issue can be achieved by those who lived a good life that impacted on those who remain. Other Africans believe is that the society of these glorious dead represents a perfect community, unlike the society of the living, where one finds good and bad people, pure and impure people, handsome and ugly people etc. The above world introduces one to a concept of dualism, which is only experienced by the living, while the dead, especially good ones experience goodness alone. Mbiti summarizes this issue by saying:

“In the land of the dead, contradictions, tensions, Oppositions are exempted” (Mbiti 1990:36).

While Zahan continues with the idea further saying

“The world of the ancestors is one that is free of antitheses and violence, because it resides in a slow time. Ancestors can of course, become incensed and they are even susceptible to suffering” (Olupona 2000:11).

Returning to the overture of whites in the Presbyterian Church, they understood the world of ancestor ship as a cult or idolatry, and thus misunderstood the development of the spirituality that was connected to this concept, especially by those Africans who were Christians. If they understood this world of ancestor ship, how it operates, they would not have overture the General Assembly, because good ancestors are taken as people who are close to the Lord. Hence they are regarded as people closer to God or Supreme Being. Therefore African people will always talk or communicate with them because of the above relationship. The reader hopefully will understand the concept of communication that occurs between the servant and the king. The Induna's or mediators (spoken persons) plays an important part. With the above facts in mind, let us now analyze how African values connect and are shaped in the village or African community.

5 AFRICAN VALUES

The concept of Ubuntu, connected to the idea of ancestor ship shapes a way of living that respects human beings, life, the elderly, as well as the villagers (community). At this stage one is able to live with other people in a respectable way. It is a common saying among Africans, that it takes the whole village to raise a child. The statement captures good values, ethics and spiritual development of a person – it is holistically taken. This type of process forces one to internalize African values as a way of life. In other words, in an African community a person is expected to be in relation with other people. That is why an adult is allowed to discipline any child who is out of step. It is part of shaping values, ethics and spiritual life of a child. In the African village one is not allowed to live life alone like and island. Mbiti emphasizes this point by reminding us that:

“An individual does not exist alone except corporately”
(Mbiti 1970:109).

In other words, a way of life [which the author calls spiritual life] is lived in a community with others. Donker (1997:8) on the other hand had this to say about individualism:

“The individual is not a physical being, but A spiritual and divine individual, who lives with other human beings”.

It is interesting to note that in the world of Africans, the paternal (spiritual) and the Godly (divine) attributes of the individual are fully explored within the community. It can never be lived alone. In South Africa, the Nguni tribe shares another element of life that shapes a human being, through a powerful proverb or idiom that says: Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu. Meaning a person is a person because of other people”.

In other words, you cannot live a life of your own; you need other people who will help you live life to the fullest. Growing up in the village, the author discovered and came to appreciate that he is a communal being who was, and is still nurtured and shaped by the ethos of other villagers. In short, it took the whole village in order to formulate the authors’ spiritual life. The English saying became a reality to the author when living with others: It says: “no man (sic) is an island”. This process of African spirituality formed and continues to form the authors own moral, ethical and spiritual world. The author is aware that in the western world, people had to respect privacy and a space of an individual as well as other people. In an African village (community) one is surrounded by lots of people, tribes and kin’s men and women. Another concept that continues to shape African Spirituality and values of a person is the rites of passage (initiation) in the context of transformation during maturational process. This process enriches elderly people in order to share their experience with others at the initiation school. In short, the rites of passage such as circumcision, marriage and burials are good examples, which shape the process of growth that leads to socialization and integration of a person or group who would live harmoniously with other people. Setiloane (1986:13-16) affirms the above facts by saying that:

“In the African community, it is the responsibility of adults to shape children, so that they may learn how to live with others in the community”.

The above statement is important because it emphasizes how a community of adults’ shapes, nurtures and cares for the spiritual upliftment of young one’s within a village. African people are by nature, nurturing and caring people. They live in the company of others and share concepts of raising children together. Therefore being in relation to others, or belonging, represents the essential characteristics of being truly human. Hence they have no private

faith and spirituality. In other words, their faith and spirituality is communal.

6 CHALLENGES

With the above facts in mind, I need to share that the world has changed and continues to change in such a way that it challenges the above concept of Ubuntu. For example, we are experiencing violence and abuse within African communities. As African people face these challenges of women and child abuse, they were forced to re-examine where the concept of Ubuntu broke down. In other words, they need to analyze the way they are raising their children in these modern times. In today's society, the question they need to ask is, is the village failing or has it collapsed in its African structure of caring and nurturing children? They also need to dig deep into their African concept of spirituality, checking whether it is helpful in building the nation to its original way of living and respecting each other as they did before. The above challenges of abuse and violence in South African society are deeply rooted in the yearning of understanding that they are in relation to other human beings. Pato is helpful in sharing the following insights about these new challenges. He says:

“These challenges help us to dig deep into African wisdom and spirituality. They also help us to re-examine our problems and then meet the challenges that fence us in South Africa” (cited in Kourie and Kretzschmes 2000:96).

The above challenges introduce us to the world of globalization. Globalization and modernism present us with new challenges that force Africans to re-examine their faith and lifestyle. In the older days, African people were working closely to each other. The author is aware that the African community is breaking down; hence these problems of abuse and violence are emerging. African people need to examine and analyze the social structure of their communities i.e. tracing where the blockages or brokenness occurred, especially those of abuse and violence. They further need to ask questions on why they are experiencing these kinds' of problems. These questions will also help them realize that their whole pattern of life was viewed as religious from birth up to death is being challenged by globalization. Secularization is changing these concept of the whole process of African life which was based on spirituality, i.e. From the beginning

when a child was born, named, going through circumcision, confirmation to man or womanhood, marriage, work, dying and burial is going through challenges, even though they are still viewed as sacred and develop one's spiritual personality. Through this process a lot is expected from their elders, especially in rural areas. Mageza (1997:55) is right by saying that:

“As repositories of sacred traditions, the elders are bound by higher moral imperative to be accountable to the community and their eternal predecessors, i.e. the ancestors”.

These great expectations, not only from the community but also from the ancestral world are enforced upon them because of communal life. These are also taught to children so that they grow with these concepts in mind. That is why people who have accumulate experience within the village, are expected to pass them on to the next generation before their own death. This process of accountability is expected from all members of the community. If you follow it you then qualify to be a good ancestor after death. On the other hand, those who have lived and led an unethical life on earth are pronounced guilty, and excluded from ancestor hood at the time of death. In other words, they have misled others and did not play a prominent role in shaping spiritual personality. They were not accountable to community while alive. Olupona (2000:8) is right when he challenge elders:

“Their challenge then is to build into the spirit of Ubuntu, a new dimension of Citizenship to villagers”.

The expectation from elders is to live a good live that will eventually influence others in order to develop their own spiritual personality and thus become good citizens, good neighbors as well as fellow kinsmen. Now the reader will realize that certain parts of urban areas are faced squarely with the above challenge. As a result of the above changes and challenges, people are in search of the missing link of their life as well as the spirit of Ubuntu, due to the new democracy. A lot of people emphasize the individual rights more than the communal rights. That spirit of living together is slipping away. Those who live in South Africa will understand why we are battling with the issue of crime, abuse and violence. The new society has to deal with basic way of returning to the spirit of Ubuntu, and harness it for productivity and competitive purpose of building the nation. As

we cultivate this new spirit of Ubuntu, we need to harness it in order to manage the challenges of reconstruction and development.

The African spirituality that connect to the spirit of Ubuntu, will leads to team building, which will help form new values that will shape a generation that will work for peace. Mbigi and Maree (1995:9) say: that;

“This spirit of Ubuntu will also help us to find a new identify which will transcend the ethnic divisions that haunt the African continent”.

As we strive towards unity, it is in the spirit of Ubuntu with its emphasis on working together and respecting human dignity that will help us find our way forward as a continent. After addressing these problems faced by the new generation, we can celebrate our global citizenship, where we can be both tribal and cosmopolitan.

8 CONCLUSION

African spirituality is holistic and it impacts on the whole of life. It is not considered as an individual affair, because it is expressed in all levels of society, socially, economically, politically as well as among people – hence it contributes in the building of a nation. Pato identifies it in the following way:

“African spirituality is identified as reflecting the wholeness of life and is important in harmonizing life in all its fullness (cited in Kourie and Kretzschmar 2000:3).

In short, African spirituality has to do with the concept of nation building and the integrity of creation. In that life, every one is involved in rebuilding, spirituality in the lives of others – ancestors are also involved in this process, Kappen further says that:

“Contemporary spirituality impacts on the totality of life, it is non-dualistic, it does not posit a bifurcation between the secular and the sacred. It encompasses the entire life of faith, which includes body, mind, (and soul) as well as the social and political dimensions” (Kappen 1994:33).

The concept of body, mind and soul also includes issues of ecology. This issue is an important part of life, especially in the way Africans relate to nature. The above highlights the concept of spirituality which is ecological, manifesting, sensitivity towards and solidarity with the earth. Africans regard Mother Nature not as an object of

subjugation, but as a mother and symbol of the divine. In the olden days, Africans would not cut a tree without certain rituals. People were connected to nature. The connection with the whole of nature was therefore important, nurturing it instead of dominating it. In conclusion, life in an African village is connected to the entire God created part of life. In other words, Africans are connected to God as much as creation is part of God. We are therefore charged to care for it. We finally need to go back to basics, the spirit of Ubuntu.

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