

The Dimensions of 'Hunhu/Ubuntu'(Humanism in the African Sense): The Zimbabwean Conception

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Abstract: - 'Hunhu/Ubuntu' forms the foundation of the African conception of humanism. This paper conceptualizes 'hunhu/ubuntu' as a traditional African philosophy which thrives on the vision of a perfect and virtuous individual. It traces the emergence of 'hunhu/ubuntu' as a common ground of consciousness that all Africans or Bantu tribes in Zimbabwe share (Kamalu,1990). Hunhu/Ubuntu is conceptualized as a symbol of African identity. A brief critique of 'hunhu/ubuntu' as a communal and not an autonomous world view of humanness is provided. The paper also argues a case to show that lack of standardization of the dictates and the formalization of enculturation processes of 'hunhu/ubuntu' are the core causes of the perceived lack of 'hunhu/ubuntu' among the youths in Zimbabwe today. The generational gap and limited formal engagements on the dictates of hunhu/ubuntu between the adults and the youths of today could be the other causes. On these bases, the paper recommends the development of a flexible vision of 'hunhu/ubuntu' as a function of nationhood, globalization and changing times through formal systems such as deliberate citizenship education.

Keywords: - Hunhu / Ubuntu (Humaness), Africanism

I. INTRODUCTION

Traditional African philosophy thrives on the vision of a perfect and virtuous individual – an individual who upholds the cultural values and norms of a true African society. The morality and ethics of African thought, thus, derives from the dualities between good and bad or between what is right and what is wrong. Central to such African ethics is the insistence that each individual's existence is interconnected with that of the community and the overall environment in which he/she lives. Notwithstanding the diversity of cultures, research points out that there is a common ground of consciousness that all Africans or Bantu tribes share (Kamalu,1990). This common consciousness, while variant in contextual modification, is the same for all African cultures and is the basis of African identity. In Zimbabwean African tradition, this consciousness is referred to as hunhu / ubuntu. The focus of this commentary is to give a critical contextual analysis of the concept of hunhu / ubuntu in relation to broader philosophical conceptions of humanness. The assumption here is that, 'All the Bantu people share a common ideology of the concept of hunhu / ubuntu' (Samkange and Samkange, 1980).

II. THE CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF HUNHU / UBUNTU

In the Zimbabwean African sense, hunhu / ubuntu is what characterises a perfect human being. According to Nziramasanga (1999), hunhu / ubuntu is humanness in the fullest and noblest sense. Makuvaza (1996) in concurrence with Samkange and Samkange (1980) states that, there is a sense in which the word hunhu / ubuntu stands for much more than humanness. The word means more than the biological being. Samkange and Samkange (1980:89) implore that hunhu/ubuntu connotes, "The attention one human being gives to another : the kindness, courtesy, consideration and friendliness in the relationship between people, a code of behaviour, an attitude to others and to life..." Thus, a person with hunhu / ubuntu is one who upholds the African cultural standards, expectations, values and norms and keeps the African identity. This is a well rounded, respectable and respected human being (Nziramasanga, 1999). Black Americans regard the 'soul' as the parallel of hunhu / ubuntu. According to Keesing (1976), African culture is a picture of the ideational world of an African people, regardless of their geographical location, and pivots around hunhu / ubuntu. According to Africanism, a whiteman, for instance, can only have hunhu / ubuntu, over and above his perpetual humanness, if and only if he measures up to African traditional expectations hence such expressions as: 'Murungu uyu anehunhu / Umlungu lo ulobuntu'(This white person is upright). As such, a white person without hunhu/ubuntu is not conceived as human in the African sense. Hunhuism / Ubuntuism is therefore centered around the belief in the goodness and perfectibility of man where emotion, reason and behaviour are regarded as surest guides of man to happier life (July, 2004 :135). From this point of view, hunhu/ubuntu is reminiscent to the humanistic theories propounded by the likes of Karl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. These theories believe in the goodness and perfectibility of humanity.

Discipline, morality, altruism, self and social consciousness, responsibility and duty are all definitive of hunhu / ubuntu. Kamalu (1990) suggests that, the Ten Virtues of Eternal Happiness pursued by Africans of Egypt and summarised into the Four Cardinal Virtues of Justice, Fortitude, Prudence and Temperance by Plato, are all embodied in the African vision of hunhu / ubuntu. Truth and righteousness are also implicit in the philosophy of hunhuism / ubuntuism. Dzobo (1992) summarises the concept of hunhu / ubuntu as the African man's self-understanding that is driven by a motive force of his being. Hunhu / ubuntu, in this respect, defines a good citizen who is able to act upon both his / her rational consciousness and according to the expectations of the society. As Crick (1999:337) puts it, "It is a vision of a virtuous, active citizenry engaged in deliberation on the proper ends of their association ..." This further suggests that a person with hunhu / ubuntu should at least meet the standards of a reasonable citizen. He / she must be able to respect the community and the whole ecological system. Thus the person should be able to uphold the norms and values of the family, the community and the society at large. In addition, this person must be able, to abide by the country's laws and statutes, respect, him / herself, the elders as well as youngsters and also respect the leadership of the community, state and the world at large. Above all, the person must respect the spirits and God.

A 'reasonable' citizen is conceived by Steutel and Spiecker (1999) as one who above acting responsibly, both to himself and to society, has the willingness to recognise the burdens of judgment and the ability to accept the consequences of such judgements. It is on this basis that Nziramasanga (1999) came to view hunhu / ubuntu as a concept denoting a good human being or a good citizen, well behaved and morally upright person who is characterised by responsibility, honesty, justice, trustworthiness, hardwork, integrity, co-operative spirit, solidarity, hospitality and devotion to the family as well as to the community welfare. In other words, a person with hunhu / ubuntu should know him / herself, the group to which he / she belongs and the generality of the society of which he / she is part. He/she has to uphold the norms and values of that society. In Shona or Ndebele traditions of Zimbabwe, anything to the contrary will be met with such sarcasm as '*Hausi' hunhu ihwohwo / Ayisibobuntu lobu*' (This is not humanness). Makuvaza (1996:76) warns, "Those who fail to attain hunhu / ubuntu are looked upon as children even in their adulthood."

III. ASSESSMENT OF THE DIMENSIONS OF HUNHU / UBUNTU

From the foregoing conceptions of hunhu / ubuntu it appears that hunhu/ ubuntu is more of a corporate responsibility than an individual worldview. It is defined and conceived from a community point of view. In quering Samkange and Samkange (1980) for failing to acknowledge that hunhu / ubuntu can only be attainable through appropriate conduct, Makuvaza (1996 : 76) states, "It is the same community which bestows hunhuneess / ubuntuess upon an individual or withholds it from him / her." In concurrence, Kamalu (1990) reports that in the African traditional view, moral responsibility is corporate, that is, even a wrong done by one individual has ripple implications for the whole clan or even for the whole community. Such a unilateral view of what constitutes hunhu / ubuntu sounds disempowering of individual consciousness. Berry Poortinga, Segall and Dasen (1992) argue that such rigid conceptualisations of humanness, would not allow for novelty and change, hence would thwart one's ability to respond to new cultural situations. It defeats the spirit of globalisation and acts against the rubrics of cultural diversity and multiculturalism. Since the world has become a global village, it is reasonable to develop a flexible vision of what constitutes hunhu / ubuntu as a function of the changing times. This would enable adaptation to and accommodation of other cultural conceptions of ubuntu / hunhu or humanness. It would result a more diverse contextual understanding of the qualities of humanness. Usher and Edwards (1994), for instance, advocate for individual introspection as fundamental to the development of the qualities of hunhu / ubuntu, over and above the community surveillance of what constitutes appropriate behaviour. Nevertheless, the concept of hunhu/ubuntu should ever remain an African concept.

It is important of course that the conception of hunhu / ubuntu in Zimbabwe should respond to the dynamic multicultural processes of post-modernisation. Ncube (1998), while contending that the conception of what is right or wrong for children in Africa owes to their relationship with their parents and depend upon historical, social, economic, traditional and cultural dynamics, notes that there has been problems adjusting to contemporary international laws. This has been caused by lack of flexibility of beliefs on childhood and on what constitutes hunhu / ubuntu.

Further, while the concept of hunhu / ubuntu has largely become the main root of all African philosophy (Ramose, 1999) and sounds easily attainable at surface level, its identificability and definability may not be as easy. This is due to lack of laid down standards or parameters for its enculturation. African traditions hardly have policy documents that explicitly identify standard procedures and behaviour consequences. Of course, African traditionalists have a gallery of knowledge on such parameters or standards but they have not been published fully. Even though Keesing (1976) suggests that it is common knowledge that there are standardised experiences and beliefs that define the African personalities, the African scholars who have written on hunhu / ubuntu have hardly given a full declaration of the standards, norms and values of ubuntu / hunhu. At best, they have only given examples. As such the concept of hunhu / ubuntu has remained a paradox to the

younger generations. Unfortunately, the generational gap between the 'perfect' upholders of the philosophy of hunhu/ubuntu and the young generation has fuelled this paradoxical nature of hunhu/ubuntu. For that matter, this rift between the two generations, continue to perpetuate the belief by adults that today's youths have no hunhu/ubuntu. Perhaps it is from the foregoing that parents today have expressed distress about the moral decadence that seem to have set in and is ruining through all the strata of society (Nziramasanga, 1999). ter Haar, Moyo and Nondo (1992) complain of the vagueness and mystification of traditional African belief representations. The authors also complain that such belief representations as hunhu / ubuntu are not deliberately transmitted to children through formal means. Like I have already implicated elsewhere in this paper, however, no amount of record or formalization process should make the concept of hunhu/ubuntu sound English, American or British.

The above arguments seem to suggest the need to de-mystify the concept of hunhu / ubuntu in favour of transparent formal processes in its enculturation and acculturation, again, like I have already emphasized, without the danger of making it sound European or American so to speak. July (2004), for instance, postulates that the African idea of the perfectibility of man is understood through an appeal to the heart and spirit rather than through rational and practical means as would be in Western cultures. This renders the concept of hunhu / ubuntu even more abstract and ideational. The only concretisation of the concept is usually made by making reference to a living person with hunhu / ubuntu. The problem with such a reference is that a person who has hunhu / ubuntu to one member of the community may not be regarded as such by another member. On the same basis, an individual may present differently in different situations, at times as a means to attracting favours or recognition. From this analysis, it follows that the conception of hunhu / ubuntu is often a subjective generalization of what constitutes a perfect human being. As such, hunhu / ubuntu is difficult to measure because of the obscurities that surround its definition. Barrow and Woods (1988) contend that the parameters of hunhu/ubuntu can as well be 'value judgments couched in obscurity' and that the methods used to arrive at 'criteria for aesthetic excellence' in the African sense are not defined. Judging hunhuneess / ubuntuess by how an individual behaves in a particular situation might be misleading because humans are bound to pretend in order to adapt to changing situations.

IV. DISCUSSION

The foregoing deliberations do not suggest denial of the centrality of the concept of hunhu / ubuntu to the cultural philosophy of Zimbabwe. The thrust is to put forward a clearer conception of the idea. It should also be noted that the attributes of hunhu / ubuntu are not as exclusive to African hunhuneess / ubuntuess as most African researchers seem to claim. Samkange and Samkange (1980:77) at least acknowledge, "It does not follow that certain traits / attributes which are readily identifiable with ubuntu / hunhu cannot be found among other peoples who are not of Bantu origin." In this way, the orthodoxical definition of hunhu / ubuntu in the Zimbabwean African sense seems to be constrained by its contextualisation. There is a kind of a straight jacket approach to what should constitute hunhu / ubuntu. There is little or no consideration of the individual psychology or individual differences and circumstances. As long as one does not meet the perceived standards, he / she has no ubuntu / hunhu. Where a person is given a chance, such denegrating statements as 'Ubozinuka amakhwapha' (Check and acknowledge your faults) are expressed. Of course, this is an African way of instilling discipline, character shaping and ultimately of generating hunhu/ubuntu.

Kamalu (1990) argues that such subjective African ethical precepts may not serve as perfect guides to moral conduct since human nature is too complex to be constrained totally through such precepts. For instance, how Gillick's concept of the 'emancipated child' or the general ideology of child rights can be contextualised within the philosophy of hunhuism / ubuntuism has become one of the topical issues in African societies. Within African societies in Zimbabwe, the Age of Majority Act(1980) which designates persons of eighteen years of age and above as autonomous individuals has been one of the greatest legal disappointments of the times. By the way, a child with hunhu / ubuntu in African tradition, is one who listens to parents and adults without questioning, not one who would want to challenge authority and demand claims, entitlements and rights (Ncube, 1998). After all, a child is a 'child' even if he/she were an adult. Endowment of claims and entitlements in African tradition is a prerogative of elders and cannot be demanded by a child. Again these can only be given to a 'child' at the elders' discretion and that 'child' should have exhibited adequate hunhu/ubuntu.

V. CONCLUSION

I conclude here that, hunhu / ubuntu is a broad philosophical concept that defines what is expected of a member of an indigenous African character. Hunhu / ubuntu is humanness in the African Zimbabwean sense. A person with hunhu / ubuntu is able to uphold attitudes, values and lifestyles consistent with societal expectations. Such a person is able to exercise moral decisions, act responsibly and take control of the consequences of his / her behaviours. Critically speaking though, the concept of hunhu / ubuntu is a subjective view of what constitutes a perfect man. It is therefore desirable to advance a conception of hunhu / ubuntu that

is more dynamic and encompasses the global epistemological spectrum of values, behaviours, ethics and norms that define humanness in a more multicultural sense. Care must however always be taken to keep the African identity through formal enculturation processes of hunhu/ubuntu. I propose the inclusion of the concept of hunhu/ubuntu in the national curricula right from pre-school to university and deliberate citizenship education as some of the possible means of transmitting the values of hunhu/ubuntu.

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