ASPECTS OF UBUNTU FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES

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Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to show that the African culture and tradition of Ubuntu, has a significant contribution to make to biblical interpretation. The important question here is: Can Ubuntu, as an important aspect of African culture and tradition, be of help to the biblical interpreter in expressing Christianity in a more meaningful way to the African? I suggest that there are specific aspects of African culture and tradition that clearly illuminate scripture and can be useful to biblical interpretation without uprooting the African from his/her context as an African. To reject African culture and tradition as pagan and unbiblical, as did the early missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa is to throw away the baby with the bath water. There is no need for Africans to be stripped of their identity before they can be Christians. Rather, there are aspects of the African culture that inform faith and scripture interpretation, and, Ubuntu is not least among them.

Ubuntu as Context

The philosophy of Ubuntu underlies the behaviour of Africans towards one another and towards strangers. This philosophy, like many other African philosophies, is not easy to define. Moreover, to define an African notion in a foreign language and from an abstract perspective as opposed to a concrete approach is to defy the very essence of the African world-view. I will, therefore, not promise to define the concept with precision in this work. That would in any case be unattainable.

Ubuntu can best be described as a philosophy of life, which in its most fundamental sense represents personhood, humanity, humaneness and morality. It is the essence of being human. It describes a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony, hospitality, respect, and responsiveness that individuals and groups display for one another. Among its important values are group solidarity, conformity, compassion, human dignity and collective unity. Ubuntu is the world-view of African Bantu societies and a determining factor in the formation of perceptions which influence social conduct. Among those who have Ubuntu respect is mutual and reciprocal irrespective of race, ethnicity, class, age, and gender. In the words of Desmond Tutu, "A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed."[1] As this quote from Tutu suggests, the Bantu have strong feelings about sacrificing for the sake of others. Their view of sacrificing is embedded in the way they give their time, their resources, and even themselves for the work of others. The meaning of Ubuntu becomes much clearer when its social value is highlighted. Due to the limitations of this paper, I will highlight only three of its most important aspects, namely: community, hospitality, and kinship.

Community

The central importance of the idea of community among Africans has long been noted by scholars. According to Kwesi Dickson "it is commonplace that the sense of community is

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[1] Desmond Tutu, "Ubuntu," *Wikipedia*, n. p. [cited 23 December, 2008].

strong in Africa" (Dickson, 1984). Africans hold a collective view of humanity. The African pulse is continually beating to communal rhythms and communal fears. In the words of Westermann, "African society is characterized by the prevalence of the idea of the community. The whole existence from birth to death is organically embodied in a series of associations, and life appears to have its full value only in those close ties" (Westermann, 1949). This corporate perception of human existence is characteristic of the *Bantu*, and makes it naturally easy for them to receive one another. For Africans true life happens only in community. It is only in and through the community that an individual achieves personal self-realization. For example, among the Swazi life is ordered in groups, with reciprocal rights and duties, privileges and obligations, which determine behaviour patterns for each individual member towards other members (Hoernle, 1937).

In order to emphasize the ethic of community and group solidarity the Bantu coined proverbs which they pass on from generation to generation. One of these proverbs says "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,"[2] which translates as, "a person is a person by or through other people" or "a person is a person in community." This proverb is expressed in various languages throughout Africa. For example, "umuntfu ngumuntfu ngebantfu" in Siswati; "Motho ke motho ba batho ba bangwe" in Sotho; "munhu munhu nevanhu" in Shona; "mtu ni watu" in Swahili; "mundu ni andu" in Kikamba; etc. Wherever the proverb is found in the various African languages, the interpretation is the same – it is in the context of community that a person is made complete. According to Van der Merve, the proverb "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" means "To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form" (Van der Merwe, 1996).

As the proverb shows, for the African life must put emphasis on the virtues of sharing, listening, compassion, supportiveness, cooperation, collective unity and building community. A person receives and maintains his/her identity from and through others. As Mbiti puts it, "He is simply a part of the whole" (Mbiti, 1969). He or she belongs to the community, which must create and make him/her to be what the ultimate creator intended for him to be. In Mbigi's language, this is "collective personhood" and it is important to "encounter the collective we before we encounter the collective I" since "I am only a person through others" (Mbigi, 1997). In other words, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am." The proverb "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" expresses a profound sense of interdependence, from the extended family to the entire community. In a very real sense, everybody is interrelated.

This strong belief in collective solidarity and corporate-ness of life and being is well expressed by Mbiti as follows:

> Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or living. When he gets married, he is not alone, neither does the wife 'belong' to him alone. So also the children belong to the corporate body of kinsmen, even if they bear their father's name. Whatever happens to the individual

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[2] The proverb is expressed in other Bantu languages: "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" in Zulu; "Motho ke motho ba batho ba bangwe" in Sotho; "umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu" in Xhosa; "mtu ni watu" in Swahili; "mundu ni andu" in Kikamba; "munhu munhu nevanhu" in Shona, etc.

happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual (Mbiti, 1969).

As this quote from Mbiti shows, the individual's whole existence is relative to that of the group. This is manifested in anti-individualistic conduct, ensuring the survival of the group and concomitantly the individual. It is essentially a humanistic orientation towards fellow human beings. The effect of this belief on African communality is the constant awareness of the need for others to complement or even to complete one's life. This need for and dependence upon each other permeates every aspect of African life.

Ubuntu strongly discourages people from living in isolation. It inspires us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humanness so as to inform and enrich our own. Ubuntu suggests clearly that a person can't exist as a human being in isolation. It highlights and emphasizes the interconnectedness of humankind. No person can be human all by him/herself. A person who has Ubuntu is known for his/her sociability, kindness and generosity towards others. An example of collective solidarity among Africans is the Swazi *lilima*, described by Kuper as "communal work parties" (Kuper, 1952). When a Swazi has much work to do he/she normally invites other members of the community to join him/her do the work at no fee. Pay is normally by reciprocation of the same. Members who cannot attend for any reason contribute by sending food, normally in the form of smoothies (*emahewu*) or beer (*tjwala*) for the work party. The work party, which normally works through a rhythm of their own music,[3] is common during sowing, weeding, and harvesting seasons. Every member of the community, despite their socio-economic status, has a right to call a work party (*lilima*).

Illustrating the importance of generosity among the Bantu, Kuper explains how this virtue is cultivated in a Swazi community:

> From infancy, children are taught not to be greedy or to take too large a portion of food from the common pot, and they, themselves, soon enforce the rule of sharing. A mother who hides food for her own offspring will be insulted by co-wives and suspected of witchcraft, and the character of a headman is judged by his hospitality. A donor must always belittle his gift, while the recipient must exaggerate its importance and accept even the smallest article with both hands. . . . A person is thanked for a favour by the further request "Do the same [again] tomorrow" (Kuper, 1952).

But what if a person has a tendency to exclude himself or just does not participate in the community. The Bantu have various ways of correcting or punishing those who do not support the spirit of solidarity or community. Any person who habitually excludes himself and does not identify with the community is treated with suspicion and often branded by the community to discourage individualism. For example, among the Swazi a person can be called *umnyemu* (from the root 'nyemu' which means to withdraw) or *umkhwibi* if he or she

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[3] Mbigi, *Ubuntu*, 10, highlights the importance of working "together in the spirit of joyful service and harmony" as a significant characteristic of buntfu. A story is told of Harmon Schmelzembach, a Nazarene missionary who was named *Sibhaha*, meaning, bitter herb, after he saw a joyful work-party weeding at Phophonyane, northern Swaziland. Since they included his converts he reacted bitterly to their joyous mood and singing assuming they were drunk. However, since this was a party of women, it was highly unlikely that they were drunk - they were only a *lilima* working together in the spirit of joyful service.

does not participate in community projects or activities. A person who is an *umkhwibi* is associated with sanity problems and often suspected of harbouring criminal or even suicidal thoughts. In short, African culture and thinking has no place for individualistic self-sufficiency.

We must ask however, how the Bantu corporate view of life compares with scripture? First, it is important to note that the idea of the corporate personality or the solidarity of the group played an important role in Israel. For the Israelites a person's individual life is closely bound up with that of the group. For example, a son who married would continue to live in his father's house together with his wife and children and brothers. The family was not restricted to the nuclear but it was extended, including widows, orphans, resident aliens and illegitimate children (Judges 11:1-7). That this connectedness extends beyond family ties is exemplified by the story of Achan, a Judahite whose theft of a spoil from Jericho caused the death of his whole family and brought divine displeasure and military defeat upon the Israelite army (Joshua 7:1-26). The consequences of Achan's sin were suffered not only by him and his family but by the whole nation. This shows clearly that for the Israelite the life of one is tied to that of the many.

Second, community spirit was to be expressed by generosity. In the OT the corporate people of God are called upon to practise generosity towards the poor, strangers and aliens, widows, and orphans. They are commanded to keep their hands open towards the poor and needy neighbour and to "not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbour" (15:7, 11). The whole idea of the Sabbatical year, including the remission of debts and the emancipation of slaves, was to incorporate generosity, sympathy, and compassion into Israelite culture. The people of God were not to be found lacking in these qualities.

Third, Gordon Fee, examining the language the NT uses for the people of God, demonstrated 1) the strong sense of continuity with Israel, and 2) "their basically corporate nature" (Fee, 1991). He studied OT and NT motifs for the corporate people of God and showed how they suggest a corporate nature. In his own words, "the New Testament knows nothing about individual "saints," only about Christian communities as a whole who take up the Old Testament calling of Israel to be "God's holy people" in the world." On the covenant concept of election Fee observes that "in the OT the term refers not to individual election, but to a people who have been chosen by God for his purposes." It is by incorporation into and belonging to the chosen people of God that an individual is elect.

Hospitality

The second important aspect of Ubuntu is hospitality. Most definitions of Ubuntu highlight the significance of this ethic among Africans. Mbigi, for example, defines Ubuntu as "the spirit of unconditional collective hospitality" and further elaborates his definition thus: "When you call at an African home, you are immediately made to feel welcome. There is instant hospitality. You are invited into the house and given food, drink or water as a token of the spirit of hospitality" (Mbigi, 1997). The significance of hospitality as an integral part of Ubuntu is also highlighted in Mandela's definition of the concept: "In the old days, when we were young, a traveller through our country would stop at a village, and he didn't have to ask for food or water. Once he stops the people will give him food and entertain him. That is one

aspect of Ubuntu, but it will have various aspects."[4] Hospitality in the African world-view is not the same as hospitality in modern terms. It is not the shallow hospitality portrayed in modern times and perceived as entertaining family, relatives, friends and acquaintances. It is not like modern hospitality which is commercialized and marked by, as Ross puts it, "an industry with training courses, certificates, five star ratings, and meet and greet attitudes" (Ross, 2008). True Bantu hospitality embraces the stranger and foreigner who may not be capable of future reciprocation. Its guiding principle is the open view of kinship whereby all people are perceived to be somehow related.

The significance of hospitality among the holy people of God is stressed both in the Old and New Testaments. With the limitations of this paper, I will barely scratch the surface on this subject.

First, the culture of the ancient Near East, where the context of the OT is set, is marked by hospitality. Abraham offered hospitality to angels in the persons of three strangers who came to his tent (Gen 18:1-4). Koenig suggests, in the light of Abraham's hospitality, that "strangers may be God's special envoys to bless or challenge us" (Koenig, 1985). His hospitality taught later generations the virtue of helping strangers and remains a model for Jewish and Christian hospitality. Later the writer of the Testament of Abraham juxtaposes Abraham's willingness to offer hospitality with his righteousness: "But above all others he is righteous in all goodness, (having been) hospitable and loving until the end of his life" (*T. Ab.* 1:6). Similarly, Lot hospitably received two angels in the form of strangers (Gen 19:1-2). The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews possibly recalled Abraham and Lot's experiences when he wrote: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2).

Second, when the law was instituted it included a command to practice hospitality, which often embraced how the holy people of God must behave towards widows, orphans, strangers, the poor and those on the margins of society (Exod 22:21; 23:9). In doing this they will be emulating their God, who "defends the course of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing" (Deut 10:18).

Third, when the prophets of Israel decried moral decline among God's people they often cited the lack of hospitality, disregard for the poor, widows, orphans and the alien (Jer 7:6; Ezek 22:29).

Fourth, Matthew warns that hospitality will be the basis for judgement when the Son of Man comes in his glory: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you took me in" (Matt 25:35). Likewise Paul taught Roman believers to "extend hospitality to strangers" (Rom 12:13). It is clear that both the Old and New Testament writers were passionate about hospitality.

The Gospel of John takes the theme of hospitality to a higher plain by basing it on the archetypal hospitality of the divine family (John 1:1). The Johannine Jesus models a type of hospitality where strangers do not remain strangers but move on and become guests, friends, and family where the creator God is the ultimate Father. Johannine hospitality, as his

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[4] Nelson Mandela, "Ubuntu," n. p. [cited 23 December, 2008]. Online: http://ubuntu.wordpress.com/2006/06/01/the-meaning-of-ubuntu-explained -by-nelson-mandela/

Trinitarian theology, is based on creation.[5] The Persons of the Trinity are no strangers to each other, yet they model hospitality of the highest level. The disciples are no strangers to one another, yet they are commissioned to practice lifetime hospitality (13:15; 15:12-15). Johannine Trinitarian hospitality is not limited to strangers only. It is intrinsic to the long-term reciprocal life of the holy people of God. It is incarnational, compelling the one who extends it to be personally present in the life situation of the one who receives it. Johannine hospitality emphasizes not only sympathy but also empathy, and long-term presence of the one in the other's life situation.

Kinship

Another important feature of Ubuntu is a deep sense of kinship. Kinship governs the whole life and thinking of the individual and society. It controls social relationships and determines the behaviour of one individual towards another. Kinship, as understood by the African, is not the same as Western kinship, which is limited to the nuclear family and has strong impermeable boundaries. It is much more than the nuclear family of a man, his wife, and children. According to Dickson, "it is an extended family whose head has the duty, aided by others such as fathers and mothers, of socialising the younger members and generally ordering the affairs of family" (Dickson, 1984).

African kinship embraces "with a single term relatives who, in more specialized and isolating societies, are kept distinct" (Dickson, 1984). For example, the term 'mother' embraces a person's own mother, his mother's sisters, her co-wives, her co-wives' sisters, and wives of his father's brothers. Kinsmen covered by a single term "share a common identity and, in some situations, can serve adequately as substitutes for each other in case of need" (Kuper, 1952). African kinship is a vast network that stretches horizontally in every direction, embracing everybody in any given local group. This means that everybody is related to one another either as brother or sister, mother or father, grandmother or grandfather, uncle or aunt, or cousin, or brother-in-law, or something else, to everybody else.

But how might this be helpful in understanding scripture? African corporate view of life is not opposed to the view of life presented in scripture. The image of God presented in scripture is a plurality since God exists in plural form as a divine family of Father, Son and Spirit. The human family must emulate the diving family in unity, mutuality and solidarity. That the people of God belong together as one family is made clear in the Bible. In both testaments this is underscored among others by the "children of God" motif (Deut 14:1; John 1:12). In John those who hospitably welcome the Logos of God become the new community of "children" of God. The reference to the people of God as "children" has family overtones. It suggests unity and corporate belonging to God as Father, and to each other as brothers or sisters. The use of the "children" motif here is covenantal and is an allusion to the perception of those who are in a covenant relationship with God in the OT and 2TP (Culpepper, 1980). Here we must think of the fatherhood of God, where there is no discrimination between humans and people of all social status stand equal before God. Membership in the family of God is open to all and, as Bruce says, "has nothing to do with racial or national or family ties" (Bruce, 1983). The people of God, therefore, must shed all forms of injustice, discrimination, apathy, selfishness, indifference and unconcern, and embrace the unity and hospitality of the divine family.

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[5] Cf. 1:1-3; 17:1-5 and Gen 1:1-3. It is, therefore, not influenced by gender, ethnicity, social class or any form of classification.

Conclusion

So what? Is this a suggestion that the Bantu have no need for the gospel? No. This paper is neither meant to idealise Ubuntu; nor is it meant to elevate any one culture over another; for every culture has its own good and bad. This is a sympathetic examination of African traditional concepts and a suggestion that insights from these concepts can make Biblical ideas more real to the African. African culture has many similarities with 2TP Jewish culture and thus presents itself easily for comparison with some key Bible motifs. As Dickson says, "many aspects of life and thought in ancient Israel are for the African a present reality" (Dickson, 1984). The African ideas of communality, open-ended kinship, and hospitality present good models for Biblical interpretation. These ideas may illuminate the meaning of the solidarity of the people of God in the OT and the church as the body of Christ in the New and further help in understanding the important call to communal holiness in both testaments.

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