

# THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING AND TRAGEDY: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Madela Mashinini,

Theology student Nazarene Theological College- Johannesburg, South Africa

## *Introduction*

Twenty years ago on January 27, 1987, Mr Oliver Reginald Tambo, then president of the African National Congress (ANC) delivered a speech at Georgetown University, and said:

In our country racism is more than an expression of prejudice and practice of discrimination. It is based on the definition of the black people as subhumans, a specific creature of the animal world for use by those who are described as truly human and to be disposed of as befits the desires and the perceived interests of these superbeings. Apartheid is therefore inherently an act of violence. Its practice is necessarily tyrannical. The perpetuation of its relations, domination, and, therefore the system itself, demands the use of repressive force. In the practice we are talking about a system of virtual genocidal violence. We also refer to the violence perpetuated against millions of people through such apartheid policies as the Bantustan system, forced removals, and the imposition of a system of education designed to prepare the black youth for a life of subservience. We are talking of the deliberate impoverishment of the majority which has resulted in millions of children dying from sheer starvation. Those who survive are condemned to become ill adults solely because of deliberately imposed malnutrition.” (Johns and Davis, 1991: 262-263).

It is against this background that one is awe-struck upon reading the book *No Future without Forgiveness*, wherein Desmond Tutu reflects thus on the question of suffering when he writes:

Nelson Mandela did not emerge from prison spewing words of hatred and revenge. He amazed us all by his heroic embodiment of reconciliation. No one could say that he knew nothing about suffering (because) everything possible was done to break his spirit and to fill him with hate. Rather, he emerged a whole person. In this respect, the Apartheid system failed dismally.

Desmond Tutu continues:

Those twenty seven years and all the suffering they entailed were the fires of the furnace that tempered his steel, they removed the dross. Perhaps without that suffering, Mandela could have been less able to be as compassionate and magnanimous as he turned out to be. All the suffering on behalf of others gave him an authority and credibility that can be provided by nothing else in quite the same way. The true leader must at some point or other convince her or his followers that she or he is in this whole business not for self-aggrandisement but, for the sake of others. Nothing is able to prove this quite as convincingly as suffering. (Tutu, 1999: 39-40).

The story of Nelson Mandela is in many ways an embodiment of the suffering endured by millions of Africans in South Africa during the centuries of colonialism and apartheid.

While Mandela spent twenty- seven years inside a prison, the majority of Africans were also confined to a collective outer prison of overcrowded townships underdeveloped villages and poverty stricken homeland reserves. It was there that the oppressed experienced the ravages of cultural domination, economic and political exploitation, and spiritual as well as psychological trauma.

### *Psycho-Social Assault of Suffering*

This article examines the African worldview of Ubuntu or Botho, and its psych or social and cultural super structure. Further, it shall explicate the collective tools employed by the oppressed communities, to interact with the apartheid systems. Mutu alteration shall be focused on the spirituality and other cultural resources for community bonding, psychological healing and tradition as well as political and Christian resources for dealing with suffering and tragedy.

The majority intrinsic impact of Apartheid was the psycho-social assault on the individual and the collective dignity of the oppressed groups which included: the Africans, Coloureds and Indians. The oppression was made possible by a services of laws that were creating a society based on racial and ethnic social divisions, as a prominent way of ordering, sustaining and perpetuating the exclusive white world from the black world.

The most basic form of separation was through: the population Registration Act, The Group Areas Act, the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act. The Group Areas Act was the most single devastating piece of legislation on African lives in that, millions of people were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands, homes were demolished, property vandalized, livestock sold for pittance, and most significantly, the invisible community bonds formed over generations were shattered as families were separated for good.

Consequently, members of the majority of the oppressed groups were hauled into overcrowded rural reserves townships and villages which totalled merely thirteen percentage of the land. This inhumane ordering of space, and the poor architectural designs of townships houses, that became known as match box houses, ill-planned urban designed narrow roads, and inadequate social amenities had a negative impact on the collective psyche of the people. This was manifested in the prevalence of constrained and conflicted social interaction and generally high levels of stress-both as the level of the individuals, families and the communities.

The fact that 13% of the white population owned eighty seven percent of the land, did not register to them as something unacceptable, rather it was regarded as the best and the only

way to maintain harmony between black and white. Yet, within the black settlements life was far from harmonious. I recall as a child that growing up in Soweto was challenging and somewhat confounding. Although I was raised in a typical township environment, my father had a business that enabled him to build a relatively bigger house by township standards. Unlike the usual two, three or four room houses, ours was a six roomed house with an outside garage, which he lodged out to a family of between eleven to fifteen or more people, because they often hosted relatives from the rural areas who would come out to Johannesburg in search of employment.

In this garage, these families constituted of grand parents, three women in their late forties to mid fifteen, four men in their thirties and forties, young adults in their mid-twenties and toddlers, and boys and girls, all of them utilised the garage as their storage room, kitchen, bedroom, lounge, and dinning room a bathroom all in one. As a little boy living in the main house, I could not comprehend how they ordered their daily lives without trampling on each others' toes. Later on in life as I reflected on the family, it dawned on me as to how painfully abnormal their lot was.

Indeed they all tried to lead a normal family life, yet their emotional and spiritual resources were severely strained. Undoubtedly, children of this family were privy to adult matters and differences that were beyond their affective and cognitive capacity to handle. Surely in this instance the sacredness and dignity of adult relationships was violated, which meant that the normal family cultural processes of becoming an adult, could not be observe by the children.

No wonder that, although we grew up in the same yard, our worldview was radically different. Yet, Soweto life exposed one to the beauty and depth of African cultural and spiritual systems, religiosity and unique community dynamics. The African culture located the infinite values of a human being at the core of family community and national life.

*African Worldview: No one suffers alone*

This was possible through the African world-view known as Ubuntu or botho (meaning humanity). The fundamental pillars of ubuntu or botho are encapsulated in the common saying: umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu or motho ke motho ka botho, which literally means: "A person is person through other human persons." This means that one's complete identity and humanity is interconnected with one's family, community, one's nation and the entire human race. In this context, race and skin pigmentation is an inconsequential determinant in what constitutes a

human being. It is this ancient African conceptualisation and perspective of the human nature that influences our collective constructive of reality, whether good or evil.

In this ubuntu or botho worldview, love and respect are significant in the creation and sustenance of social networks. One loves the other, because without love one is incapable of becoming fully human.

Again the ubuntu or botho worldview is not only confined to the extrinsic, physical reality. It draws its life blood from the beliefs that the spiritual and the physical realities, the sacred and the mandate are intricately interwoven and inseparable. The world of the living and the world of the living-dead are united and are continuously shaped and transformed by The Divine Power. This means that in the context of suffering and tragedy, one never suffers alone. Because one's family's, community, the nation, one's family guardians spirit and the Grace Spirit: Unkulunkulu Modimo: God, participates in one's suffering and tragedy.

This world view was instrumental in fostering collective survival strategies during trying times such as the 1976 Soweto student uprising and the 1980's defiance against the imposition of the State of Emergency. Thousands of troops and police were sent to the townships, with the result that thousands of children, men and women were detained without trial, tortured, girls raped by police in the cells. Some comrades were assassinated.

These and many more experiences led to profound suffering. For the majority of the white population, including some white Christian churches, who saw the violations of human dignity and human rights viewed it as the inevitable consequences of fighting the evils of communism. Only a handful within the white Christian community openly identified with the cause for justice and the struggle for the suffering majority. As a consequence of that they were often ostracised and vilified by their fellow white compatriots.

Unquestioning the struggle for freedom, happiness and human dignity was conveniently conflated with communism which meant, that in their reasoning and justification of apartheid, African people, colored people and Indian people including all of their respective children became and integral part of the evils of the Soviet Union. Therefore, to the Apartheid regime, it became their Christian duty, to arrest, to torture and kill other Christians and non-Christians alike whether, they were African, Colored or India. To do that, was to do God's will.

*The Church's Silent Voice in the midst of Suffering*

Unfortunately other churches both black and white chose silence, spiritual indifference and political neutrality. They propagated a theology that was exclusively concerned with the salvation of the sinners and sanctification of the saints. Indeed theirs was a theology that was barren of Christian compassion and empathy towards their alienated, degraded and the powerless fellow human beings. It was devoid of the Christian social imagination for children rights, woman's rights, workers' rights as well as a concern for peace and reconciliation.

Their silence on the evils of apartheid was deafening especially to those Christians both black and white who dared to speak out against the lack of prophetic witness within the broad Christian community. How then did this Christian and community survive?

*Prayer: A Powerful Weapon of Healing and Reconciliation*

The answer to this question remains multifaceted, as will be demonstrated. Suffice to say that for both the traditional and Christian communities, prayer served as the paramount fountain for dealing with injustice, suffering and tragedy. Consequently, numerous night vigils were held, church services conducted to pray for the thousands of detainees and their families. Sadly, many of such gatherings were declared illegal by the Christian Apartheid regime.

In its quintessential terms, Ubuntu/Botho cannot operate at the level of the individual to the exclusion of society. Because it constitutes a peoples inherent powerful force that shapes, drives and determines their destiny.

Ubuntu/Botho could be conceived as part of what Carl G Jung calls the "collective unconscious." This powerful force surged during the 1980s, and prevented the Apartheid State-orchestrated violence from overwhelming the oppressed communities. Instead, street committees were established, which became the new and creative centres of peoples' power, thereby serving as sources of security, inspiration and strength. As such all and sundry, were interconnected at the deeper levels of the collective psyche to the pain, suffering and tragedy of all Apartheid victims – those near and far.

Mosala writes:

The new religion of the conqueror (the Christian religion) was a social force to continue the battle of subjugation of Africans at the ideological level... and also incorporated Africans into the mental and cultural universe of the Whites. Paradoxically, this same Christian religion fortunately had the inherent potential of achieving the opposite of the above because as the cry of the oppressed creature, it can also serve as an ideological protest against real suffering. It was, therefore, inevitable that the oppressed gained a new religious consciousness and engaged a new religious praxis; a praxis of ideological

and practical resistance to subjugation. This connection between religion and resistance was there right from the dawn of black religiosity. The African kings and queens who led the struggle against dispossession were both religious leaders as well as military commanders. In fact to them, the struggle against dispossession was a religious matter (Mosala & Tlhagale 1986: 119-120).

In other words, the emergence of the street communities was the continuation of the long prevailing tradition of community and solidarity. This was embodied in the formation of stokvels, which are social clubs, community burial societies, sports, cultural groups,

Womens' church groups and such like societies. All these emerged as the consequence of the failure of the commercial banks to provide financial services to the poor. These structures became community investment strategies. Most significantly, these societies became institutions for self-healing, through collective listening or community group therapists, which was a natural response to the inadequate mental health facilities for the oppressed. In fact, during the mid 1980s there were a handful of qualified African psychologists as compared to the numbers who were in the service of the white population.

As previously noted, the African culture became the community's major resource and instrument for shielding itself against the onslaught of Apartheid policies and ideology. Interestingly, the marriage of Ubuntu/Botho and Christianity became the saving force that prevented an outright rejection of the Christian faith post 1994 first democratic election, thus ensuring the church a place under the tree of African cultural systems and the values of Ubuntu/Botho. This fact is well-expressed by Frantz Fanon in his book, *THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH*, as he writes: "It seems to us that the future of national culture and its riches are equally also part and parcel of the values which have ordained The struggle for freedom" (Fanon 1963:198). In short, the Ubuntu/Botho values within the structures of the Africans helped communities to promote love, respect, forgiveness, hospitality, and cooperation

As for the recommendations for the Wesleyan communities of faith, regarding the role they can and should play in propagating the message of sanctification, for effective psychological healing, , spiritual formation, and reconciliation, is that we should work with rigor in creating a global institutional and leadership culture that will foster a new mindset to spearhead and open, truthful, and mature dialogue and deep listening among equals...so as to eliminate thoughts, actions, attitudes, and words that are ill-informed, insensitive, and culturally unsound.

Furthermore, we should endeavour to re-humanise those who were brutalized by Apartheid, as well as those who erroneously believed in racial superiority. Concomitant with that exercise, we should strive to rid the world of the residues of racism by challenging Christian communities to re-discover and to communicate unambiguously the fundamental beliefs of our faith, namely, that:

God created all of us, black and white in His image. And that  
In Christ Jesus, we all find our complete humanity.

### *Conclusion*

This article demonstrates the fundamental pillars of the source of suffering and tragedy in South Africa. Secondly, it identified the African religio-cultural and philosophical system of Ubuntu/Botho as the pre-eminent mainstay of Africa's struggle for freedom, human dignity and equality in coping with suffering and tragedy.

Undoubtedly, it is the values inherent within this African world-view that anchored Nelson Mandela during the reign of Apartheid tyranny. Its greatest contribution to the world was to endow South Africa's transition with the spirit of forgiveness, openness, and acceptance, hence Ubuntu/Botho became the hallmark of Nelson Mandela's presidency.

It may serve us well to ponder his final thoughts as he expressed them in his autobiography: *The Long Walk To Freedom*: "With freedom, come responsibilities." I believe that it is our responsibility as equal members of the universal body of Christ Jesus to be truly Christ incarnational, to be Christ's ambassadors in a divided and hurting world.

### *References*

- Fanon, F. *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963. London: Penguin Books.
- Jung, C.G. *Man and His Symbols*, 1964. London: Aldus Books.
- John, S. and Davis, R.H. *Mandela, Tambo, and the African National Congress*, 1991. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom*. 1994. New York: Back Bay Books.
- Mosala, I & Tlhagale. *The Unquestionable Right to be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, 1986. Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers.
- Tutu, Desmond. *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 1999. Johannesburg: Rider Books.