The Spirit of Ubuntu and the Common Good,

By, Dr. Uli Spalthoff, Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies, Germany

Abstract

The philosophy of Ubuntu, underlying many African indigenous knowledge systems, enjoys growing popularity in the northern hemisphere. As Yusufu Turaki summarized its essence, "People are not individuals, living in a state of independence, but part of a community, living in relationships and interdependence." Thus it is in stark contrast to Adam Smith and his followers, who emphasized the individual and its egoism as driver of economics.

In this presentation I explore in which way Ubuntu might provide a guideline for economic concepts overcoming the well-known shortcomings of our current systems. Ubuntu philosophy primarily relates to personal and community development emphasizing spirituality. It relates to economy as it attaches great ethical value to sharing and generosity. I will address how these ethical values are transferred to practice, and ask how they might help to further develop thinking about economy.

Introduction

The motivation for this presentation arose in the context of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies network of which I am a member (HumanDHS 2013). The last conference organised by our network was in April in Stellenbosch, South Africa. One of my recurring topics of interest is equal economic dignity and I attended that conference hoping to learn how Ubuntu is informing the current socio-economic discussion in South Africa.

One of the key themes of our work is the importance of "right relationships" (Jean Baker Miller 1987, Linda Hartling 2008). Relationships are at the heart of Ubuntu, too. This adds to Ubuntu's appeal as an indigenous knowledge system and its examination is expected to reveal further insight.

Specifically, I had four questions: (1) What can I learn from the indigenous knowledge system Ubuntu? (2) Which characteristics of South Africa's current system limit economic equal dignity for all? (3) What is imagined locally and globally to develop the current system to overcome its limitations?

This presentation does not try to give a definitive answer to these questions. However, discussions with Stellenbosch conference participants, with other people in South Africa, and additional reading result in a partial, subjective account of the situation. To report on this, I like to first present shortly what Ubuntu is all about, then talk about how Ubuntu empowers politics and grassroots organizations working to transform society. I will also address the open question how much impact Ubuntu has, or had. Finally some remarks on applying Ubuntu for business management will be made.

The concept of Ubuntu

At the website of the South African Ubuntu Foundation the essence of Ubuntu is presented (South African Ubuntu Foundation 2013):

"People are people through other people," and "I am human because I belong to the human community, and I view and treat others accordingly." From this inherently humane and humanistic perspective, only by being members of this universal human community can and do we fully know, experience, and express ourselves as individuals.

At its core Ubuntu reflects the deep spiritual truth that "We Are All One" – one spiritual essence, one planetary life system, one human race, and one inter-dependent human community.

The African proverb "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" resp. "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu" (Zulu, Nguni), respectively "Motho ke motho ka batho," (Sotho) often is translated as "A person is a person through other persons". This proverb, which exists in similar form in many african languages, is since about 1994 (the year when Apartheid was overcome in South Africa) used to describe the essence of Ubuntu (Gade 2011). Its underlying philosophy is understood as a loose equivalent to our western concept of "humanness". However, it places more emphasis on the social connectedness than on the individual personality of people, compared to our tradition.

Ubuntu became popular in an African context, especially during transition times like decolonization periods. However, as Lutz has noted, all traditional cultures are communal cultures, and Ubuntu thus shares common traits with many indigenous knowledge systems (Lutz 2009).

Historical context

The term Ubuntu can be traced back in writing to 1846 (Gade 2011), but is widely believed to be much older. Until about 1950, it is used mainly to describe a human quality described by a set of charactistics like caring, generous sharing, compassion, honesty and trustworthiness (South African Ubuntu Foundation 2013). In addition, since 1950 Ubuntu is often used in a more generic sence, describing a philosophy, or a world view, or an ethic.

Already in the early 1960s, Julius Nyerere based his program for decolonization of Tanzania on "Ujaama", which is the Kiswahili term for familyhood, related to Ubuntu. However, Nyerere used Ujaama ideologically as a justification for transition of Tanzania to a socialistic economy along the lines of soviet collectivism, which proved disastrous (Schweigman 2001). In the early 1980s, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe made reference to Ubuntu (unhunhu in Shona language) to rally public support for his politics (Gade 2011). Later, Desmond Tutu based his theology of liberation, reconciliation and hope on a combination of traditional judeo-christian theology and Ubuntu (Tshawane 2009). Since then, the concept of Ubuntu enjoys growing popularity worldwide.

Ubuntu is deeply rooted in traditional religion, but can also be interpreted as an offspring from ontogenetic development steps in the earliest phases of humankind. After early

insight by Charles Darwin, who wrote "Those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring. (Johnson 2013)", now biologists, sociologists and anthropologists present growing evidence of group selection respectively multi-level selection being an important driver of human development (Bergstrom 2002, Tomasello 2008). Research on mirror neurons adds to the understanding of communality as basic principle of human existence (Keysers 2011).

Current impact

As said on the website of the South African Ubuntu Foundation, "Ubuntu is a collective respect for human dignity." But how does such respect transform into meaningful action for the common good? I like to understand today's role of Ubuntu in a globalized economy, where traditional structures are under threat of extinction. Are there built-in limits to Ubuntu, which jeopardize its success? Are current power structures working against it?

Before addressing these questions, let me shortly mention one realm where Ubuntu definitely shows a great success. "Ubuntu" is the name of a successful Linux software distribution, initiated by South African's first (and so far the only) astronaut and Internet entrepreneur Mark Shuttleworth. Building on this, in July 2013, a crowdfunding campaign was started to create an "Ubuntu Edge" smartphone which can be connected to a monitor to also serve as a computer, based on that software. When naming the software "Ubuntu", and asking software developers and others to sign the Ubuntu Code of Conduct, Shuttleworth deliberately made reference to the Ubuntu philosophy (Shuttleworth 2012).

Besides this success story, how can Ubuntu's current impact be described? Of course, listening to news reports about Africa, one may ask oneself if Ubuntu is really having an impact on what is going on. Frequent violent clashes as well as everyday violence in families and social groups abound. Traditional family structures are crumbling under attack from many directions: HIV/AIDS, unemployment, drugs and alcohol abuse, deterioration of public services, corruption – in fact, one may justifiably wonder whether Ubuntu has survived the transition from a pre-modern to a post-modern society (Louw 2001).

However, when digging deeper than news headlines, it is easy to find Ubuntu being lived in many places. HIV orphans are raised by neighbours or members of the extended family, sharing of basic necessities among the most poor is done routinely, grassroots organizations are formed to alleviate poverty or to educate children. During my short stay in South Africa I became aware of many such initiatives. This paper can provide just a raw sketch of Ubuntu's current impact on jurisdiction, social development, and economics.

Let's start with jurisprudence. Ubuntu is mentioned in the epilogue of the 1993 Interim Constitution of South Africa: "there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimization". Despite the term missing in the 1995 Final Constitution, the Constitutional Court has at

least twenty times referred to Ubuntu in his rulings (Gade 2011). Apart that, as Cornell observed, "there have not been many attempts to incorporate ubuntu into post-apartheid jurisprudence" (Cornell 2003).

As said before, Desmond Tutu based his theology on a synthesis of Judeo-christian heritage and the African heritage of Ubuntu. This was very influential when he presided the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from 1993 to 1995. He surely made an important contribution to transition from Apartheid to a multicultural society which presents itself as "Rainbow Nation". Thus one can say that Ubuntu played a crucial part in overcoming Apartheid (Tshawane 2009).

I have already mentioned the history of public policy making refering to Ubuntu. In the 1997 White Paper on Social Welfare of the South African government, Ubuntu is presented as an underlying principle of social development:

"The principle of caring for each other's well-being will be promoted, and a spirit of mutual support fostered. Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through a recognition of the individual's humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being."

A statement like this, if not augmented by specific Ubuntu-inspired actions, points at a difficulty to apply the concept to a modern government initiative. Maybe that is why in later official documents, Ubuntu is rarely mentioned. As agreed by my interviewees, South Africa's current government and political leaders are no beacons of Ubuntu. Many see Ubuntu principles being violated in recent years.

South Africa's National Heritage Fund has organized Ubuntu Imbizo, a series of national conferences featuring critical discussions about the philosophical foundations of Ubuntu within an African and global context around 2006 to 2008 (SA National Heritage Fund 2007). However, this initiative seems to be abandoned since.

Ubuntu often is mentioned by people as the force which defends against further collapse of society. Former South African president Thabo Mbeki and the philosopher Alexander Shutte realized this when creating "The Common Ground Project", which has the mission to revive Ubuntu ethics. This is just one example of many people and grassroots organizations seeing Ubuntu as an important driver of social progress. Drucilla Cornell, a co-founder of "The Ubuntu Project" at the Stellenbosch Institute of Advanced Studies, critically analyzed whether Ubuntu

"… could be considered a crucial aspect of the democratization of the customary in South Africa, or alternatively, as it is viewed by its skeptics, as an empty signifier that has been cynically deployed by its proponents to promote and thus capture young black South Africans in the commercialism and consumerism of advanced global capitalism."

She concluded that

"First and foremost, ubuntu remained at the very heart of how the young black South Africans that I interviewed saw ethics and politics." (Cornell 2003)

My personal experience is in line with her conclusion.

Ubuntu as a management concept

Several authors discuss Ubuntu as a management concept (Mbibi 1997; Lutz 2009; Karsten and Illa 2001). McFarlin et al (1999) cite Mbigi and Maree (Mbigi 1997):

"As a philosophy, ubuntu is an orientation to life opposed to rampant individualism, insensitive competitiveness, and unilateral decision making. Mbigi and Maree propose several basic management principles derived from African tribal communities that embody ubuntu – these include trust, interdependence, and spiritualism."

Some South African companies have integrated Ubuntu in their management practice. McFarlin et al give this example:

"In 1994, SAA implemented what it called "the ubuntu service philosophy". Ubuntu at SAA is meshed into its espoused values of customer care, corporate citizenship, employee care, personal integrity, and team work. At SAA, ubuntu is reflected in employees' actions and in the way customers get treated. The company now functions as an extended family – sharing in the pleasure of profit and the disappointment of loss. This means that rewards are largely team-based. Ubuntu supports individual achievement – as long as it is aimed at the common good and not accomplished at others' expense."

I recently checked the SAA website and did not find any reference to their Ubuntu service philosophy. If it is still pursued, it is no longer used for marketing. Nor did I find anything about corporate citizenship. Things seem to have changed at SAA since 1994 …

Sigger et al. report on empirical results from Tanzania on applying Ubuntu as management concept (Sigger, Polak and Penninck 2010). More than 200 top managers from Tanzanian companies were interviewed, virtually all of them educated on business schools in Europe and the United States. Most claimed that they follow Ubuntu principles in their management style. However, as the authors indicate, further research will be needed to confirm how this influences real business practices or whether such allusions are just lip service.

Lutz observes that business education in Africa is not based upon the concept of Ubuntu, but relies on the same textbooks and paradigms as business education at western universities. He suggests steps to develop business education toward Ubuntu, the first step being to recognize that a firm is a community, not a collection of individuals. He also discusses observable corruptions of Ubuntu ethics, among them nepotism, group-think and suppression of individual initiative. All of them are clearly observable in the current South African society. However, they are clearly identified as deviations from the Ubuntu concept, not integral to it. Therefore, it is needed to further develop education, theory and practice of Ubuntu. Lutz remains optimistic that this can lead to a "globalisation for the common good", referring to Kamran Mofid's book (Lutz 2009).

Conclusions

Still today, the traditional philosophy of Ubuntu is regarded as important for development of Africa's socio-economic system. Ubuntu as indigenous knowledge system, however, is attacked by global consumerism. People are thrown into individualism as social and family structures crumble due to abject poverty and the HIV/AIDS epidemy. Nevertheless, Ubuntu is deeply embedded in the mindset of people, far from being dismissed as an irrelevant system of the past. Even when the current situation of a large majority of people in South Africa is dire, I tend "to see the glass as half-full, not half-empty". Most encouraging was to experience how people live the spirit of Ubuntu by caring, sharing and compassionately driving socio-economic development. Shortcomings of the current government and ruling elite are acknowledged as violations of Ubuntu and many people-driven activities aim to improve the social system by reviving Ubuntu principles.

Acknowledgments

Bibliography

Bergstrom, T.C. (2002). "Evolution of Social Behavior: Individual and Group Selection". Journal of Economic Perspectives 16 (2): 67–88. doi:10.1257/0895330027265.

Boele van Hensbroek, Pieter (2001). African Renaissance and Ubuntu Philosophy. QUEST An African Journal of Philosophy, Vol. XV No. 1-2.

Cornell, Drucilla (2003?). Exploring Ubuntu – Tentative Reflections. Accessed July 25, 2013 at http://www.fehe.org/index.php?id=281

Gade, Christian B. N. (2011). The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on Ubuntu. S. Afr. J. Philos. 30(3)

Gade, Christian B. N. (2013). Ubuntu and Restorative Justice. PhD thesis Univ. Aarhus. Retrieved July 23, 2013 from http://konfliktloesning.dk/side/17/restorative_justice

Hailey, John (2008). Ubuntu: A Literature Review. Paper prepared for the Tutu Foundation, London

Hartling, Linda M. (2008). Strengthening Resilience in a Risky World: It's All About Relationships.

In: Women and Therapy 31 (2-4), pp. 51-70. Retrieved July 24, 2013 from http://homepages.uwp.edu/crooker/745-Resile/articles/Hartling-2008-indiv.pdf

Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (2013). Website, accessed July 24, 2013

Johnson, Eric Michael (2013), "Survival of the Nicest. Check Out the Other Theory of Evolution.". Retrieved July 25, 2013 from http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/how-cooperatives-are-driving-the-new-economy/survival-of-the-nicest-the-other-theory-of-evolution

Karsten, Luchien and Illa, Honorine (2001). Ubuntu as a management concept. QUEST An African Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 15, No. 1-2, p. 91-112

Keysers, Christian (2011). The Empathic Brain: How the Discovery of Mirror Neurons Changes Our Understanding of Human Nature. Lexington, Ky.: Social Brain Press

Louw, Dirk J. (2001). Ubuntu and the Challenges of Multiculturalism in post-apartheid South Africa. QUEST An African Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 15, No. 1-2, pp. 15-33

Lutz, David W. (2009). African Ubuntu Philosophy and Philosophy of Global Management. J. of Business Ethics, 84:313-328

Mbigi, Lovemore; Maree, Jenny (1997). Ubuntu, the Spirit of African Transformation Management. Randburg, SA, Knowledge Resources

McFarlin, Dean B., Coster, Edward A. and Mogale-Pretorius, Connie (1999). South African management development in the twenty-first century Moving toward an Africanized model. Journal of Management Development, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 63-78

Metz, Thaddeus (2007). Toward an African Moral Theory. The J. of Political Philosophy, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 331, 334

Miller, Jean Baker (1987). Toward a New Psychology of Women, Boston, Beacon Press

Schweigman, Caspar (2001). Ujaama, a Phantom. QUEST An African Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 15, No. 1-2, pp. 113-126

Shutte, Augustine (1993). Philosophy for Africa. Rondebosch, South Africa: UCT Press.

Shuttleworth, Mark (2012). Ubuntu Code of Conduct 2.0. Retrieved July 24, 2013 from http://www.ubuntu.com/about/about-ubuntu/conduct

Sigger, D.S., Polak, B.M., and Pennink, B.J.W. (2010). 'Ubuntu' or 'Humanness' as a Management Concept. CDS Research Report 29, ISSN 1385-9218

Sober, Edwards. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_selection . Retrieved July 25, 2013

South African National Heritage Fund 2007. Accessed July 25, 2013 at http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2007/07102413151005.htm

South African Ubuntu Foundation (2013). Accessed July 23, 2013 at http://www.saubuntu.co.za/about/philosophy.

The Ubuntu Project (2013). Accessed July 25, 2013 at http://theubuntuproject.org/page9.php

Tshawane, Nwamilorho-Joseph (2009). The Rainbow Nation: A Ccritical Analysis of the Notions of Community in the Thinking of Desmond Tutu. Dissertation, Univ. of South Africa. Retrieved July 25, 2013 from http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/3761/thesis_tshawane_n.pdf

Tomasello, Michael (2008). Origins of Human Communication. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press

Turaki, Yusufu (2006). Foundations of African Traditional Religions and Worldview. Nairobi, WordAlive Publishers

Tutu, Desmond Mpilo (1999). No Future without Forgiveness. London, Ryder