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Theorising a theory of Ubuntu – the divide between individualism compared to a socialistic understanding of African society

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine Ubuntu from the socialistic perspective that is embraced by most Africans against Maslow's individualistic hierarchy of needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs encourages individualism that often fosters capitalistic demands in western countries whereas in the African continent the theory of Ubuntu by Mbigi is rooted in the Five Fingers approach and provides a socialistic outlook towards life. The principle of Ubuntu is akin to socialism where there is a communal outlook to living. This is long before Karl Marx spoke about socialism. The Ubuntu theory is based on the principles of caring and sharing so that it can meet the needs of communities and nation states. Discussions in this paper are based on the Collective Five Finger theory that has five values which are the cornerstones of Ubuntu. Each value represents a finger and all of them form a strong hand that can stand against trials and tribulations. Previously published African literature was reviewed to expose a solid stance that Ubuntu has on socialism. There is an increasing concern of whether Ubuntu is still relevant in this era of globalisation and how it impacts individuals, thus the rise of alternative terms such as Black Tax. Black Tax is a fast-growing trend in the black community that seeks to oust the original idea of Ubuntu. The Ubuntu policies need to be taught at schools and extended to the private sector.

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INTRODUCTION

Ubuntu is believed to have originated from the Bantu speaking people of Southern Africa. Nonetheless, many African countries have their own principles of Ubuntu that guide their lifestyles. Many scholars have written about Ubuntu on various platforms, but they all define Ubuntu differently. Indigenous to Africa is the concept of community which is characterized by a philosophical outlook to life that is supportive, cooperative and comprise a sense of camaraderie that holds African society, community, kinship, and family together. This philosophical outlook to an African way of life has been subject to much interest in the continent and elsewhere in the world. Ubuntu ploughs togetherness, where an individual does not survive alone but with others. In contrast, Maslow's hierarchy of needs insists that an individual must first fulfil their basic needs to be able to extend themselves to others which is contrary to what the Ubuntu principles advocates. It is in this context that the paper seeks to purport that Ubuntu can be considered to be socialistic in nature as compared to Maslow's theory of needs which promotes the fulfilment of individualistic needs which is characteristic of capitalistic society.

Theorising theory

Ngulube et al. (2015:10) claim that the "term theory is used in very different ways and there are competing and contradictory notions of the concept". Kawulich (2014) asserts that the word theory uses principles to explain events in the scientific discipline. From a philosophical perspective a theory should be able to predict future occurrences that can be tested through experiments or verified through empirical observation. Scientists predict theories in such a way that they should be able to arrive at testable hypotheses. In the humanities, the term theory refers to "the use of theoretical frameworks to study and interpret social structures and phenomena within a particular school of thought" (Kawulich, 2014:04). Whilst there is a plethora of theories in the world on aspects of human behaviour a significant number originate from the works of Western scholars. Theories that are Eurocentric in nature provide ways in which models and frameworks are constructed for the advancement of societies in the northern parts of the globe. Notwithstanding, the role of theories providing a lens through which the world is perceived and acted upon, in many instances have been used to shape and style the European world for its advancement through capital accumulation. This has achieved to maintain the huge gap between the first world countries and the third world countries. African countries who have attempted to implement Eurocentric theories on their predicaments have only succeeded in maintaining the gap between the rich and the poor. The Ubuntu theory cannot be applied to all African problems, but by its very nature can be considered a model that has the potential to shape, style and develop African societies. Its underlying principles cuts through various socio-economic fabric of African society that can address its social organisation and development.

Conceptualizing ubuntu constructs

Ubuntu is popularly known for assuaging an easy definition. It is an archaic and traditional African worldview that influences social conduct by its strong values of defining life (Mokgoro, 1998). Ubuntu cannot be given expression satisfactorily using non-African vocabulary as argued by some scholars. Former South African Constitutional Court Judge Yvonne Mokgoro (1998:10) wrote that "the concept Ubuntu, like many African concepts, is not easily definable. To define an African notion in a foreign language and from an abstract as opposed to a concrete approach is to defy the very essence of the African worldview which can be particularly elusive. Because the African worldview cannot be neatly categorized and defined, any definition would only be a simplification of a more expansive, flexible, and philosophically accommodative idea".

For one to understand and feel the warmth, hospitality, and other aspects of African culture, one needs to be part of the community as this cannot be learned from a distance. After a dispute, Ubuntu encourages cooperation, reconciliation, and communication in the interest of not only harmony but shared understanding. Through the principles of reciprocity, inclusivity, and a shared sense of destiny among people, Ubuntu encourages the significance of peacemaking, the spirit of giving and receiving forgiveness. The desire to seek revenge for past wrongs is then swept away (Murithi, 2006).

The late Nelson Mandela, the first South Africa's black president and a Nobel Prize winner, describes Ubuntu as a philosophy constituting a universal truth, a way of life, which underpins an open society (Mandela, 2006: xxv). "A person is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, or walk, or speak, or behave as human beings unless we learnt it from other human beings. We need other human beings to be human" (Tutu, 2004:25). The philosophy of Ubuntu encourages that people should address themselves to problems, but they should look at whether what they are doing improves the community and empower or help community members. This philosophy suggests that if people are treated well, they become productive and work well in their respective teams. Furthermore, "it is the basis of a social contract that stems from, but transcends the narrow confines of the nuclear family, extended kinship network and the community" (Khoza, 1994 cited in Sigger et al., 2010:03).

According to Molose et al. (2018:196) “Ubuntu as a culture is attributed to the longings of African people for communal bonds that researchers aspire to explain”. Mangaliso (2001) argues that Ubuntu is a conventional wisdom that supports customs and practices that serve only the common good. Similarly, Ramose (1999:20) asserts that “African philosophy has long been established in and through Ubuntu; there is a family atmosphere, that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa”. The author further notes that the Ubuntu philosophy is not limited to the Bantu people, but it is widely spread throughout West and sub-Saharan Africa. Hailey (2008) asserts that it loosely translates to the spirit of collectiveness and sense of responsibility for one another.

Widely cited African authority on Ubuntu, Mbeje (2010) posits that Ubuntu is about collective agency and morality as opposed to Descartes’s proclamation of “I think therefore I am” which ultimately promotes an individualistic sense of morality. This African philosophy promotes steadfast loyalty amongst kinship, family, and community members. The individualistic stance is discouraged purely on the basis that it divides people and creates weak links for outside forces to attack.

Sulamoyo (2010) asserts that Ubuntu is a system that is based on the African humanistic philosophy which defines life through others. Goduka and Swadener (1999) cited in Nxumalo and Mncube (2019:105) see Ubuntu as “striving for oneness of humanity through interconnectedness and interdependence of all creation”.

It is safe to contend that all the above scholars who have studied the Ubuntu philosophy have no contrasting understanding of what the concept is about. They all agree that fairness, integrity, collectiveness, and principled equal justice for all humans is the way that Africans have embraced as their lifestyle for centuries. All scholars who have been cited earlier note that Ubuntu is encapsulated by the maxim “*Umntu ngumntu ngabantu*” a phrase from the Nguni speaking people (Xhosa, Zulu, Swati, and Ndebele) meaning a person is a human being through the constant support of others where a well-established mutual recognition exists. The Ubuntu philosophy is widely used in African languages to sensitize the significance of oneself because of others (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013).

As much as Ubuntu holds African societies together, its knowledge and cultural system is rapidly being expropriated through modernization and globalization. The long existence of Ubuntu seems to be at jeopardy and to support this statement Engelbrecht and Kasiram (2012) posit that there are challenges in society which prohibit people from practicing Ubuntu, such as unemployment, poverty, HIV/AIDS, and western influences as some of the few prohibiting factors. In the same vein, Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013) note that political leaders use the Ubuntu philosophy to manipulate people into following orders.

Towards a theory of collective five fingers

Mbigi (1997) developed the Collective Five Finger Theory based on the Ubuntu theory of African humanism. The collective fingers’ theory according to Poovan et al. (2006:17) is a conceptual framework that was constructed from five key social values of Ubuntu based on the collective African way of life. Mbigi and Maree (1995) assert that aphids cannot be killed by a thumb even though it is strong, it will always require the assistance of other fingers. This is the African proverb that can best explain the principle behind this theory. The lesson in this proverb is two-fold. Firstly, the fingers according to Poovan et al. (2006) and Atiti (2013) represent individuals who collectively act together to achieve a certain goal. Secondly, a collective culture is formed and maintained through key values that are represented by fingers (Poovan et al., 2006:18). Mbigi (1997) identifies five key values related to Ubuntu: survival, solidarity spirit, compassion, respect, and dignity. The five key components of Ubuntu are discussed below.

Survival

Survival is the heart of Ubuntu as African people have been through difficulties and distress, but their determination driven by the will to survive has seen them prosper for decades. Poovan et al. (2006) posit that survival is the ability to live and exist despite difficulties. Zvitambo (2017:76) define survival as “sustained existence, particularly in a complicated situation. Meaning that people successfully develop and implement ways of overcoming problems”. When people rely on each other and work as a team by sharing what they have; difficulties become surmountable. Sigger et al. (2010) state that for the goal of the team to be realized; sacrifices must be made by individuals.

Survival is generally displayed at its best when people are facing challenges. Poovan et al. (2006) empirically supports this statement by using South Africa as an example which is the last country in the continent to have achieved democracy since colonialism and apartheid. They observe that even today despite people living in townships and squatter camps continue to share limited resources with their fellow community members in order to survive. This sharing is indicative of the Ubuntu value.

Spirit of solidarity

Solidarity according to Sigger et al. (2010) is closely related to survival. When individuals start to feel like members of the community a spirit of solidarity starts to grow. Community needs tend to take precedence over personal interests. One takes pride and feels responsible when helping the community (Sigger et al., 2010:13). Solidarity encourages unity and the collective effort put in by all members to accomplish difficult tasks. Family ties, ceremonies, rituals, and celebrations all emphasize oneness driven by the spirit of solidarity. Sigger et al. (2010) assert that when people live a happy life, they praise each other on achievements and gratitude on favors done. Empirical literature from African scholars such as Zvitambo (2017), Sigger et al. (2010), Nxumalo and Mncube (2019), Munica, (2013), Mashele (2012) Engelbrecht and Kasiram (2012), Martin (2013), Poovan et al. (2006), Shrivastava et al. (2014) and Molose et al. (2018) shows that the ability to successfully perform difficult tasks together is the spirit of solidarity.

The spirit of solidarity encourages a positive chain of reaction in the community where people put their heads together to solve problems, show support in times of difficulty and better communication. Hence, an African can be solely described in terms of psychological and physical properties but not in terms of personhood. An African does not live solely for himself but for others and the community at large. People are united by their shared experiences that enhance team spirit and a sense of belonging.

Compassion

The ability to sincerely empathize with one another irrespective of being related or not is compassion that differentiates people from wild animals (Mashele, 2012). Africans grow up knowing that through giving and sharing they will surely be reciprocated (Mbigi, 1997). Compassion is the need to want to assist a person in distress. It is in some sense more like love among siblings but in this case spread beyond blood relations. "Ubuntu values incorporate caring and understanding of one another" (Zvitambo, 2017:79). There seems to be a motion to erode practices of Ubuntu because of the impact they have on people's pockets, but it may not be dismissed easily that many cultural practices are underpinned by the philosophy of Ubuntu.

Poovan et al. (2006) note that Africans are socialized within a culture that cultivates helping each other, hence it is difficult to unlearn as it becomes part of one's psychological personhood. They take on responsibilities without even thinking twice as this is how many African people are raised; to extend a helping hand where it is needed. For instance, when an African graduate gets a job, they have a lot to make up for compared to their colleagues from better socio-economic backgrounds (Mzobe cited in Mhlongo, 2019:169). Mzobe (2019) further observes that African graduates have a deep economic hole to fill before they can go on with their own lives as they need to pay gratitude to all of those persons that have contributed to their success. This has colloquially been dubbed as Black Tax. In most African families, success is a multi-generational quest fueled by lifelong multi-generational sacrifices. The sacrifices made by older generations have ensured the continuity of their kinship and provide greater opportunities to the younger generation to advance themselves.

Many African scholars have described compassion as an African value that relies on brotherhood where everyone is working towards a universal goal because they have a shared vision that develops through personal understanding and caring for each other. Because there is love amongst them, a sense of belonging is then felt (Mangaliso, 2001). People express generosity out of concern and willingness to sacrifice their own self-interest to help others at the expense of their own needs.

African communities are strengthened by the interconnectedness that is among members, where people observe each other's lives and are always willing to assist. Community members see to it that no one is struggling without being assisted; in the African culture the spirit of helping is usually displayed when there is a funeral or a wedding ceremony in the community. "If there is death in someone's family, the community will spend days leading up to the funeral visiting the family of the deceased to show sympathy in their time of grieving. Sometimes it might be in silent communion, whilst others sing hymns to console and soothe the pain of loss experienced by the grieving family" (Makholwa cited in Mhlongo, 2019:96). People come out in their numbers to lend a helping hand with preparations prior the event. Visiting sick people who are not necessarily one's own relatives, adopting an orphan as one's own and assisting elderly in many ways, is truly what being African entails. Young people grow up knowing that one greets friendlily, respectfully and in a compassionate manner.

Respect and dignity

Respect and dignity will be discussed as one value of Ubuntu as they are closely related. Respect and dignity are the building blocks in the African culture and in the collective five fingers theory, they are seen as the cardinal social values (Sigger et al., 2010). Sigger et al. (2010) describe respect as objectives, unprejudiced contemplation and consideration for privileges, principles, beliefs, and norms of individuals. There is a Nguni word '*ukuhlonipha*' which means respect - a world view of Ubuntu which is centralized around this value (Poovan et al., 2006). Dignity according to Nxumalo and Mncube (2019:114) is the behavior or trait that earns or deserves

respect. They further posit that in African communities, “if one wants to achieve successful engagement with members of the community, respect and dignity are the requirements”.

Respect and dignity are important in many African communities as they are practiced when one interacts with the king and elders in the community. These values eventually lead to trust. The Constitution of South Africa, which is based on Ubuntu values, demands that the human dignity of all people should be protected (Sigger et al., 2010). It further states that it clearly supports the view that people are equal and important, apart from their gender, race, culture, and income. Zvitambo (2017:80) asserts that “respect and dignity within Ubuntu is valuing the worth of others and showing deference to others potential to contribute”. Mashele (2012) sees dignity as self-respect. People should respect themselves before anyone else, thus gaining dignity. There is a thin line between fear and respect and often these two concepts are confused with each other. Respect is earned while fear is enforced by threatening people into submission.

Maslow’s individualistic human needs theory in contrast to the Ubuntu collective theory

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a key foundation in understanding how drive and motivation are collated when discussing human behavior (Wills, 2014). According to McLeod (2018) this is a motivational theory in psychology comprising a five-tier model of human needs. Maslow identified five needs that must be satisfied by individuals, from the bottom of the hierarchy upwards. These are psychological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization needs (McLeod, 2018). Maslow’s theory is individualistic in nature. This theory suggests that individualistic behavior is liberal and a sign of independency, where people strive to achieve their most valued goals and work hard to empower themselves.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs insists that an individual need to successfully accomplish each need before moving on to other needs. The theory bluntly states that not all people can achieve the self-actualization level where an individual reaches their full potential. Self-actualization is seen as the best form of liberation. Individualists value their goals and aspirations more than their families, communities, and nations (Ahlin-Marceta, 2021). It cannot be repudiated that individualism is largely associated with egoistic tendencies, and loneliness that encourages inequality where people are obsessed with individual success. This success can sometimes be achieved at someone’s expense. The South African history -the apartheid era- is the most fitting example of achieving individualistic capitalistic desires on other people’s expenses- where the white minority accumulated a great deal of wealth and land at the disadvantage of the black majority. Consequently, South Africa has “developed into one of the most unequal societies in the world, with very high levels of poverty” (National Planning Commission, 2012:110). Similarly, Ahuja et al. (2016:02) contend that “more individualistic societies display smaller populations, greater per capita income, and greater income inequality”. In a nutshell individualism promotes capitalistic tendencies that value individual empowerment more than of communities.

Ubuntu is an African theory that ploughs togetherness and discourages Maslow’s individualistic lifestyle. Ubuntu thrives on socialism that encourages collectivism amongst people. Gustavsson (2008:02) asserts that “new generations in many Western countries seem to focus more and more on their own careers, lives and interests than in collective issues such as politics; trends that are also often labelled as tendencies towards increasing individualism”. Similarly, Ahlin-Marceta (2021) notes that although individualism is increasing globally, Western countries remain more individualistic. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory focuses solely on an individual’s capabilities and potential and provides liberty that individualists often struggle to utilize (Ahlin-Marceta, 2021). This theory encourages individual materialistic success and motivates people to become the best versions of themselves and to keep striving for the best, consequently alienating themselves from the society.

Nexus between socialistic theory of nation building and individualistic capitalistic demands

Collectivism is the main principle of socialism where group members mutually depend on each other for support, success, celebrations, comfort and for survival in general, while individualism prides itself on independency and “taking care of oneself” (Ahuja et al. 2016,03). Individualists are often not concerned with the society and other people (Ahlin-Marceta, 2021). Africans are popular for being warm and welcoming towards strangers. It is not difficult to imagine an African country being ruled based on socialism principles where people share resources, wealth, and land equally. For instance, Ubuntu is vividly traceable in the South African Law and Constitution as a guiding compass on how to effectively rule the country but is severely hindered by individualism that has presented itself in the form of corruption where people who have been appointed to power work diligently and tirelessly for their own pockets.

Gustavsson (2008) asserts that individualism is often associated with selfishness and amorality where an individual justifies their behavior. The author further notes that individualism is hugely associated with materialism and hedonism. “Individualists believe they do not have duty towards others and are striving towards one’s own self-fulfillment” (Gustavsson, 2008:4). The above sentence perfectly describes the motivation behind the scourge of corruption in South Africa where a few elites enjoy exaggerated luxuries whilst the majority struggle for essentials such as humane shelters, food, running water and superior education. The individualistic

capitalistic tendencies often resemble western teachings and lifestyle that teaches independency and the importance of oneself. In western societies children grow up knowing that they need to move out of home at a certain age and choose who they become. On the contrary, African teachings insist on the significance of family and the community at large. Sharing, selflessness, unity and caring for one another summarizes the principle of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu has been applied by indigenous Africans almost on every occasion and on every sphere of life. When there are celebrations, people come together to share each other's joy. When there has been a bereavement in the community, people visit the homestead to lend a helping hand, pray with the family and offer words of comfort. Africans also apply Ubuntu when there has been a transgression in the community. Ubuntu is intimate with societal peace-making for the sake of social cohesion and unity. Murithi (2006:30) contends that "depending on the nature of the disagreement or dispute, the conflict resolution process could take place at the level of the family, at the village level, between members of an ethnic group, or even between different ethnic nations situated in the same region". In this peace-making quest the victim and the perpetrator are usually brought together where the latter shows remorse and pleads for forgiveness that may be accepted or rejected. For instance, the South African government has taken reconciliation a step further by introducing a process termed Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD) in correctional institutions where the offender is given an opportunity to reconcile with victims of crime and asks for forgiveness. This process brings closure to the victims and eases offender's conscience when forgiveness is accepted.

Ubuntu can be successfully implemented in other spheres of governance and nation building. Murithi (2006:32) asserts that there can be "Ubuntu forms of governance; that enforce public participation, and Ubuntu economies; that emphasize fair resource distribution and thus the sharing of the earth's resources for the benefit of all". The South African constitution takes note of the significance of all people irrespective of the colour of their skin and gender as it discourages racism and sexism. If the Batho Pele (putting people first) principles were to be effectively practised at all South African governmental institutions, the excruciating laments about poor service delivery would cease. These principles envision a South Africa that is equal where resources are equally shared, and people have an active role to play in life changing policies. People would be accountable for their actions and capitalism would be abolished. Emphasis is placed on accountability because the lack of accountability has cultivated the steep rise in corruption, consequently perpetuating wealth inequality in the South African context.

CONCLUSION

This article prefaces the basic concepts and constructs the underlying theory of Ubuntu which gives it an African theoretical standing in the world of human sciences long dominated by western paradigms. It provides insight into its socialistic theoretical orientation as compared to the individualistic western understanding of the world. It is akin to socialism which permeated African societies long before the proponents of Marxism who perceived western societies moving from an individualistic, self-centred pursuit in a quest for capital accumulation to a collective society where all social actors are equal. Despite the emphasis made by western theorists for societies to pursue collectivist approaches to human development, in the 21st Century this ideal is far from fruition. The theoretical emphasis on individualism in western societies in pursuit of capitalistic ideals is a source of depersonalisation and a source of multiple social ills. The collectivist theoretical underpinning of Ubuntu provides a safety net for social actors to conformity and protects them from alienation as conceded by Marx as a social ill characteristic of western capitalistic societies. The theoretical suppositions contained in the principles of Ubuntu is contrary to Maslow's assertion that individuals must first fulfil their basic needs to be able to extend themselves to others. The theoretical thread in Ubuntu lay emphasis on the collective first before individualistic needs are met and the individual cannot be divorced from being a social actor without the family, community, and African society as a whole which provides social cohesion, social order and stability. The nexus between Ubuntu and a theory of understanding African society is unique and supersedes western theoretical notions of what it should be and is fast gaining currency within the framework of Indigenous Knowledge Systems which is peculiar to the continent.

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