

The Significance and the Role of Ubuntu Philosophy in the Nigerian Society

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Abstract: In many African countries, there are several worldviews and philosophies that inform the peoples' way of living. These worldviews and philosophies cut into every sphere of living, ranging from inter-human communications to socio-political nuances. Ultimately, these worldviews become a characteristic for identifying the people. Africa is replete with these worldviews and philosophies, however, non stands out quite as Ubuntu does. Ubuntu, which is simply described as an African philosophy that mainly emphasises on "being self through others" is a philosophy that cuts across cultures and peoples without losing its relevance. On the other hand, Nigeria is a country torn apart by diverse cultures, religions, ethnic orientations and beliefs and as such in dire need of a unifying factor. Thus, the Ubuntu philosophy is very relevant in the Nigerian society. This paper, therefore, considers the concept "Ubuntu" as it concerns Nigeria. It highlights how the Ubuntu philosophy can be applied in the different socio-political, economic and inter-relational fields in Nigeria. Being a philosophy that portrays humanism, as is evident in the statement: "I am because we are (Ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu), this paper explores the humanitarian features of Ubuntu and how its application can help foster unity in Nigeria. The paper, therefore, concludes that with Ubuntu, there is a practical solution to peaceful correlation in nation building and also inclusive humanism in Nigeria. The researcher, in a bid to achieve the primary purpose of the study, employs the expository *analytical methods in his approach*.

Keywords: Ubuntu Philosophy, Roles of Ubuntu, African Communalism, Synergies, Ethnic orientation.

THE GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the intricate roles and the importance of a standard system of socio-political and economic operation that is *stricto sensu* African – Ubuntu philosophy, its significance and the roles it can play in the Nigerian society. It is important, that for obvious reasons (Nigeria being an African community), an African philosophy is introduced, not one that is laced with Western indoctrinations but one that, while taking care of the individual, is not individualistic in nature. The Ubuntu philosophy offers this exact remedy. A philosophy that is so communalistic, it takes into account every individual. In this regard, therefore, Onwuatuegwu and Nwagu thus emphasize: What the label communalism tends to place in the minds of Africans is nothing but the idea of common spirit, a collective spirit of being together, harmoniously working for the benefit of all and sustenance of the communal life in the whole of Africa (Onwuatuegwu & Nwagu, 2021).

In line with the above understanding, Ozumba succinctly says that communalism is no other than a kind of social relationship that demonstrates one's appreciation of another in a defined community (Ozumba; 2003).

This paper thus proffers answers to the questions of the roles, significances and challenges of the Ubuntu system of African Communalism in Nigeria.

The Philosophy of Ubuntu

Desmond Tutu says “A person is a person through other persons.” It is in this light that Ubuntu can be explained as:

...the capacity in an African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring (Internet source: 2020).

Nevertheless, Desmond Tutu's definition of Ubuntu is obviously the most succinct and clearest. He thus defines Ubuntu as:

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 learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human (Internet source, 2020).

There is, therefore, no gainsaying that the Ubuntu permeates all spectra of the African worldview. Meanwhile, the Ubuntu is deeply incorporated into almost every facet of every day Africans life. Ubuntu, just as Senghor's 'Negritude', is in a way, a means to recover the values and past glories of the Africans, a kind of an avenue to a new self or rather a key to black civilisation (Okeke & Onwuatuegwu, 2020). Hence, Ubuntu is an ideology that is generally accepted and lived out by all Africans, more especially among the people of Bantu origin. More than this however, it is a philosophy that can serve as a veritable means of socio-cultural integration in Nigeria. The Ubuntu philosophy strongly holds on to community solidarity. This group solidarity is very central to the survival of African communities (Internet source: 2020).

Nelson Mandela, the onetime South Africa president describes Ubuntu Philosophy as:
Constituting a universal truth, a way of life, which underpins an open society (Internet source: 2020).

The Ubuntu philosophy implies that people are likely to maximize their performance when they are treated well. It equally demands that though people should face as well as addressing their own problems, yet it must be carefully carried out in a manner that will facilitate and empower the neighbouring communities and assist their development or improvement.

It is very obvious from the above that African society is in general, humanistically communalistic in nature. Admittedly, the African Ubuntu philosophy can significantly affect an important role in the socio-cultural performance, as well as influencing the domestic operations of any society within the context of African environment. Hence, J S Mbiti says about the Ubuntu thus:

The Ubuntu optimises the African philosophy of respect and human dignity that is fundamental to being able to transcend ethnic divisions by working together and respecting each other. People who truly practice Ubuntu are always open and make themselves available to others, they are affirming of others and do not feel threatened that others are able and good. With Ubuntu, one has a proper assurance that comes with the fundamental recognition that each individual belongs to a greater community (Internet source: 2020).

To explain further, M. O. Eze posits that:

'A person is a person through other people' strikes an affirmation of one's humanity through the recognition of an 'other' in his or her uniqueness or difference. It is a demand for a creative inter-subjective formation in which the 'other' becomes a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: we are because you are, and since you are, definitely, I am. The 'I am' is not a rigid subject, but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this otherness creation of relation and distance (Eze, 2016).

In this regard, therefore, the individual must always consider the greater good of the community as a whole in every dealing. In so doing, trust, independence and spiritualism is developed. The definition of the individual is, therefore, not individualistic, but rather community-based and oriented. Aristotle was right then when he says that citizens of a community ought to be partners and pursue a common good (Onwuatuegwu, 2020).

Significance of Ubuntu Philosophy in Nigerian Case

Nigeria in view, Ubuntu has so many significant roles to play in order to make a truly communalistic community out of the nation. This paper looks at some of them.

Positive Behaviour as a Significant Factor in Ubuntu

Positive human values, such as kindness, consideration for the others, sympathy, love and sharing are the major concerns of the rational behaviour in Ubuntu Philosophy. More so, the dignity of the human person, the virtue of respect,

taking care of every individual person and community sharing are amongst the critical values that build African communities and thus very significant. Hence, Onwuatuegwu and Nwagu maintain that in African communalism: ...both the old and the young, male and female, rich and poor, healthy and unhealthy are all human beings and hence important in ... community. The aged and the sick are shown by people around them that they are still being valued and needed. The idea of invalidity or liability of a human person is foreign...(Onwuatuegwu & Nwagu, 2021).

The Ubuntu philosophy, hence, implies that an individual person's good fortune is enhanced and multiplied by sharing in the community of persons within the local community. There is no gainsaying that this type of human behaviour value is very much needed in Nigeria. Nigeria needs a community where everyone has a positive behavior towards everyone. Where the East behaves positively towards the North and the West responds positively towards the South and vice versa.

Synergies and Competitive Advantages of Ubuntu Philosophy

African communities and Nigeria especially can build cooperation and competitive strategies that can profit them economically by allowing teamwork based on Ubuntu principles to serve as guiding principles of the country. As a community-centered (people-oriented) philosophy, Ubuntu postulates that a person's worth is dependent upon the social, spiritual and cultural criteria. It very importantly calls for a life that is based on a normative engagement with the community, where the common good of the people and the harmonious relationship is paramount. Abanuka puts it in his stylistic manner, thus:

The meaning of the individual's presence in the community comes to its highest point when the individuals realize not only that their life and death are particularly theirs, but also that they must live their life and die their death in the community. Nevertheless, meaning as is so far attained by the individual is still limited by the framework set by the community (Abanuka, 2004).

Hence, according I. N. Onwuatuegwu, it is in the community of persons that the individual person realizes himself or herself as a human person. This communalistic nature is obviously manifested through families and communities (Onwuatuegwu, 2021).

Invariably, community and communality are important prerequisites in the identification of a person as a true African and more particularly a Nigerian.

Communalism and collectivism are essential to the spirit of the African Ubuntu philosophy. Equally important in Ubuntu relationships is the aspect of working with others as a composite unit (Internet source: 2020). A spirit of solidarity simultaneously supports cooperation and competitiveness amongst the members of the nation by allowing individuals of the communities to contribute their best efforts for the betterment of the entire nation (Internet source: 2020). Thus, if every ethnic group in Nigeria were to contribute, through each one's ethnic peculiarities, to the socio-economic betterment of the nation, and each did this with so much dedication that they seek to outdo each other, the Nigerian society would improve drastically in a matter of a few years.

Conversely, however, when a nation is not intrinsically held together by all its members, the consequences can be negative or sub-optimal, essentially, it falls apart. Sub-optimality occurs because each group in the community, (say, each ethnic group in Nigeria) works towards different goals based on different value systems. This can result in dissatisfaction, national instability and set back, a lack of unity amongst members of different ethnic groups etc. With such a scenario, it would be important to try to create an environment that is conducive for nation building using the tenets and values of the Ubuntu philosophy (Internet source: 2020).

In Nigeria, synergies contribute to inter-cultural and ethnic cooperation. Bridges are built, alliances are made and the nation grows. Also it sets the nation in the right direction towards tackling the menace of ethnic bias and bigotry. If a bond of cooperation is formed among members of different ethnic groups in Nigeria this will translate into a better economy, more stable peace, security and tolerance.

African Culture and Leadership Style can be founded on the Ubuntu Philosophy Framework

It very expedient to note at this juncture that African culture is people oriented. Consequently, in this regard, therefore, people must be considered first before any other thing in the society. Invariably, when people are given priority and treated with respect in their daily efforts, they are better poised to do more to develop and be better citizens of the society. Thus, peace, security, tolerance and, in fact, the overall betterment of the society is automatically realized.

It is a truism that the government in Nigeria will take a right turns if they embrace Afrocentric Ubuntu style in management and leadership, which are systemically people centered.

This is true because inclusive performance, people centered orientation, citizen care, inclusive citizenship, integrity, safety, innovation and national cooperation, which are all embedded within the Ubuntu philosophy is what Nigerian leadership lacks.

This excerpt explains the above paragraph further:

An African Ubuntu management system recognizes the significance of group solidarity that is prevalent in African cultures, acknowledging that an African leadership style involves group and community supportiveness, sharing and cooperation. Ubuntu-based leadership dictates sharing burdens during hard times, because by doing so, suffering is also shared and diminished. What is distinctive about the Ubuntu philosophy is the premise of a short memory of hate. Africans teach children to communicate effectively, reconcile, and find ways to cleanse and let go of hatred and give the children skills to do so. The Ubuntu approach to life enables people to express continued compassion and perseverance within communities and institutions (Internet source, 2020).

To further illustrate this point, a research into the old African conflict resolution system, which is also part of the leadership structure, shows that in Africa, when there is a conflict in the society, both the offender and the one offended are reconciled through a traditional system of court. Again, as I. N. Onwuatuegwu (2020), succinctly and rightly observes: prior to making the decision on action to be done, a consensus must be achieved.

From the foregoing, it has been established that the Ubuntu Philosophy can shade new light on different sectors of the Nigerian socio-cultural, political and economic set up. It is also of paramount importance that these roles are introduced and implemented without bias. These roles are however not alien to the Nigerian set up, in that, they are African and in keeping with the Nigerian worldview. Hence, the discussion of these roles merely serves as reminders and pointer.

The Role of Ubuntu in Politics

As has been stated earlier, leadership is an important tool in every society, in the African cultural set up and more so, in Nigeria. The Nigerian political system is fraught with numerous controversies, irregularities and injustices, complications, inhumanities and at some point violence and loss of human lives. These have inevitably led to a loss of trust and integrity towards the government on the part of the governed. Achebe thus opines that; The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership....there is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character, there is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else (Achebe, 1983).

As they say, a nation divided against it cannot stand; such is the case in Nigeria. Ebelendu and Onwuatuegwu (2020), are not mistaken for saying that there is no nation without crisis, but that the crisis of Nigeria seems to be taken the lead. Years and years of constant disappointment from the governing bodies in Nigeria has led to more insecurity, more poverty, more violence, more selfishness, intolerance and in fact more of every vice that makes nations fail. In accordance with Mike Uzochukwu; "Nigeria's biggest problem is corruption" (Uzochukwu, 2015). Indeed, the Nigerian politics is the "politics of the stomach" and not "politics of issues" (Ozumba, 2010). Conversely, this situation has led to less trust, less cooperativeness, less patriotism, less tolerance and less of every virtue that leads to nation building.

Consequently, there is need for a drastic change. The Ubuntu tenets on African leadership provide a veritable solution to this problem of destructive leadership. With Ubuntu in mind, Nigerian leaders and public officers can learn the importance of honesty, good governance and integrity in office, selfless service and healthy cooperation with the governed. To bring this about, there is then the need for reeducation and re-structuring of the Nigerian political system. More individuals with the good of the community should be exclusively allowed into office and the people must possess all the power to evict from office individuals who they believe are not working for the betterment of the society. It is against this backdrop that Onwuatuegwu, I. N. (2020), opines that "lack of transparency or insufficient oversight is political suicide, as the leaders involved are marginalised by the electorate and compelled to back down".

Without good leadership, little or nothing can be achieved in any African society. Therefore, government must not be for the elite few anymore. In keeping with the Ubuntu philosophy, the people must therefore be included in the government. That is, a government where the people govern themselves put more accurately, a government where every individual member of the society has a role in the government.

The Role of Ubuntu in Religion

The role of the Ubuntu philosophy in religion in Nigeria is that of bringing together all sects and beliefs, diverse and peculiar as they all are. Nigeria is a very religious community comprising of numerous religious groups and sects. In this context, Ebelendu and Onwuatuegwu state that:

Nigeria is known as the most religious country in the world. That notwithstanding, atrocities prevail with increase in the number of churches being established on daily basis by the so-called "men of God" (Ebelendu & Onwuatuegwu, 2020).

Majorly, there are two religious groups – Christianity and Islam. Over the years these two groups have dwelt in relative peace and harmony. However in recent years there have been tremendous religious tension and intolerance that has led to series of provocations and violent attacks between these two sects. Furthermore, a number of conspiracy theories have risen to suggest that Islam have an agenda to get rid of Christianity and are in fact planning a Jihad. Whether these theories are correct or mere rumours, they have only served to deepen the rift between Christianity and Islam. All these have led to unprecedented prejudice, mistrust and disunity, all of which are against the core principles of any African community and of the Ubuntu Philosophy. Even among the Christians in Nigeria, cases of disunity and discriminations are unfortunately prevalent; there is then the need for a reintegration of the religious bodies in order to achieve a peaceful society through religious coexistence. This can be achieved through the correlation of the Ubuntu worldview with the religious worldview.

The Role of Ubuntu in Ethnic Orientation

Nigeria is the most populated country in Africa with over 190 million people and over 250 known ethnic groups. As is expected, these ethnic groups differ considerably from each other. These differences should ideally be celebrated and appreciated. However, on the contrary, these differences have brought about unwarranted discord, prejudice and division. Evidence of these are replete in stories in the national dailies where you see constant acts of injustice, violence and vandalism meted out on a particular ethnic group by another because of a perceived difference. It is a well-established fact that rivalries and hatred between groups are nothing new. Nonetheless, Ubuntu philosophy is more akin to the more peaceful nature of man. Thus, it is imperative that ethnic groups in Nigeria should embrace the Ubuntu philosophy as it is a way of living that upholds the more peaceful and tolerant traits of man. It should serve as the northern star towards reconciliation and peaceful coexistence of the very many ethnic groups in Nigeria.

If this is achieved, then the development and national stability that accompanies a peaceful society will follow almost automatically.

The Role of Ubuntu in Education

If there is any way to enshrine the Ubuntu philosophy in the hearts of Nigerians, it would be through education. Therefore, there must be a place for an Ubuntu philosophy in education in Nigeria. From an early age, students must be acquainted with the tenets of Ubuntu and its components, such that they become accustomed to the philosophy of communalism, of togetherness and mutual respect. Thus, growing up, a child does not learn to discriminate, or hate another on account of their differences but instead learns to love and support others in spite of their differences. Ubuntu philosophy, in order to achieve this, should therefore be in the student's educational curriculum right from the beginning of their formative years. Parents and teachers should also do their bests to inculcate in children the need for a society that operates under the principles of Ubuntu.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Evaluation

Ubuntu Philosophy is a near perfect perspective to assess the Nigerian worldview from. The fulcrum of this work is an approach to nation building. This nation building approach can be viewed as a conscientization because, by its nature, the philosophy grows from within a community and cannot be imposed on one.

This conscientization will engender a mental conversion that is a change of mental attitude, in the average Nigerians. Nigerian citizens are gradually and systematically losing touch with reality. With the disjointed sense of reality, people are selfishly gyrating in breakneck speed, in such a way that reality is no longer seen in a concrete and comprehensive manner. Consequently, there is a conspicuous loss of confidence which Nigerians have placed in both the culture, government and even the fellow individuals.

Everyone now looks to at the Western cultures and civilisation and considered them alone as bearers of real authentic cultural and political framework and true civilization. If this continues in Nigeria, there will be a resultant loss in authenticity and the African values that Ubuntu encapsulates. There is serious need for a kind of complementary mental re-conversion or rebirth to cleanse not just the nation but also the psyche of every Nigerian of the unpatriotic ideologies that a lack of the spirit of ubuntu presents. Unlees this step is taken, therefore, we shall remain in existential inferiority complexities and, hence, continue to experience the dominant mental laziness, greed and indiscretion that have be-deviled our nation; and Nigeria will continue in the downward spiral that we have found ourselves in.

Hence, Ubuntu principle is all about a national cry out for both the government and the people to wake up from slumber and work together as a united and unified front to combat the ills of our times. This clarion call must be encouraged and hearken to.

CONCLUSION

Ubuntu philosophy lies in the fact that, it has provided a platform for a new Nigeria, a Nigeria that integrates and transforms, a Nigeria that has been presented with a means of facing her challenges with a new, revitalized and most importantly, united vigour. Therefore, we conclude that with Ubuntu, there is a practical solution to peaceful correlation in nation building and also inclusive humanism in Nigeria.

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