Chapter Three

Whose Umntu Anyway? Ubuntu in Relation to Gender and Human Dignity: Missiological Implications

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Abstract

The concept of ubuntu has been widely explored across various academic disciplines, yet it has also been subject to misuse and commercial exploitation. It has been appropriated as the name of an open-source operating system, a soft-drink brand, and various education initiatives, among other things. Furthermore, ubuntu has been employed to justify practices that exploit hospitality and perpetuate gender binaries. This paper contends that, considering these contexts, the concept has been overcooked and has lost its taste.

Drawing on the isiXhosa expression, "*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*" (a person is a person through other people), this paper argues that ubuntu is inherently linked to the human dignity and identity of African individuals. It poses the question: To what extent is *umntu* intrinsically connected to human dignity and identity in the African context? Exploring this question unveils the missiological implications of ubuntu and sheds light on gender roles within the *umntu* framework.

Utilizing an indigenous storytelling methodology, this chapter delves into the essence of *umntu* in relation to ubuntu, while also examining the concepts of human dignity and identity within the context of gender binaries.

Introduction

The concept of ubuntu is challenging to convey accurately in Western languages as it delves into the core of human existence. In praising someone, we often say, "Yu, *u nobuntu*", meaning they embody generosity, hospitality, friendliness, care, and compassion. This sentiment reflects Archbishop Desmond Tutu's (1999) renowned quote emphasizing the interconnection of humanity: one's humanity is inextricably bound up with that of others. In isiXhosa, "*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*", and in isiZulu, "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye*" express the idea that one's humanity is defined by belonging, participating, and sharing with others. Those who embrace ubuntu are open to others, affirm their worth, and possess a sense of self-assurance derived from belonging to a greater whole. They recognise that their own well-being is intertwined with the dignity and flourishing of others. This chapter explores these concepts further through indigenous isiXhosa expressions, delving into the intricate dynamics of ubuntu and individuality within African communal life.

Methodology

This section employs indigenous storytelling as its chosen methodology. According to Chilisa (2012), 'indigenous' refers to the ways in which cultural groups perceive reality, understand knowledge, and shape their value systems, which inform the research process. This definition prompts questions about how colonised 'others' define their reality and how these realities can be studied. Indigenous research emphasises local experiences rather than relying on Western theories to define research issues. Moreover, indigenous methodology is context-sensitive, creating designs, methods, and theories relevant to local contexts and derived from indigenous knowledge.

The method of indigenous storytelling utilised in this chapter builds upon a framework I proposed elsewhere for studying pastoral care and counseling (Penxa-Matholeni 2022a). Stories hold significant importance in the lives of

black Africans, encompassing various forms such as *iingoma* (traditional songs), *umxhentso* (traditional dance), *iintsomi* (folktales; *izinganekwane* in isiZulu), *eziko* (stories shared by the fire), *ukubetha izandla* (clapping of hands), as well as the names of individuals and places and metaphors. These stories serve as valuable tools for collecting, preserving, analysing, and disseminating information, as well as facilitating socialisation. Chilisa (2012) acknowledges that indigenous languages and oral literature provide essential insights into the stories and experiences of indigenous peoples, highlighting the richness of diverse cultures and contexts. This approach does not aim to fragment knowledge but rather recognises and honours the cultural diversity present within indigenous communities (Chilisa, 2012).

Self-locating

The following statement was made by the then deputy president (and later, president) of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, on behalf of the African National Congress in Cape Town on 8 May 1996, when the ratifying of the new Constitution of South Africa:

> I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to battle, the soldiers Moshoeshoe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom. My mind and my knowledge of myself is formed by the victories that are the jewels in our African crown, the victories we earned from Isandhlwana to Khartoum, as Ethiopians and as the Ashanti of Ghana, as the Berbers of the desert .... Being part of all these people, and in the knowledge that none dare contest that assertion, I shall claim that I am an African. Today it feels good to be an African, (May 1996).

Mbeki's eloquent quotation not only celebrates the beauty, history, and diversity of the African continent but also situates the speaker within the rich tapestry of African heroines and

heroes. Chilisa (2020:198) emphasises the significance of "self-praise" or identity stories in African cultures, where individuals often articulate their self-narratives as cherished attributes in relation to their history and family lineage. This approach aligns with indigenous methodologies, emphasising interconnectedness and communal identity.

I, in turn, position myself in relation to Mbeki's text. As the granddaughter of *oMbathane, Nondzaba, Xesibe, aMandlane, oTutuse, oNomdimba, oNtlokwana ibanzana*, I am intricately connected to my mother and father's lineages, which are both extensive. The biblical reference from Hebrews 12:1 resonates deeply, illustrating the profound influence of the "great cloud of witnesses" in shaping my identity as an umXhosa woman who has experienced the enduring legacy of apartheid in South Africa. Oral historical recitations of family lineages, passed down through generations, hold immense value and serve as vital signifiers of identity (Letseka, 2012). It is from this worldview that I approach interpretation in this chapter (Penxa-Matholeni, 2022b), recognising the interconnectedness of personal history, cultural heritage, and communal identity in the African context.

Umntu in Relation to Gender: Exploring Proverbs and Metaphors

Proverbs and metaphors provide valuable insights into philosophical and theoretical frameworks rooted in community value systems, driving change and progress (Chilisa, 2020:190–191). This section examines two isiXhosa metaphors – "*ingcwaba lendoda lise ndleleni*" (the grave of a man is along the road) and "*amaqobokazana angalala endleleni yazini kunyembelekile*" (when the young maidens sleep on the road, something is at stake) – to elucidate the humanity of Africans beyond gender binaries. These metaphors encapsulate both genders within the broader scope of humanity.

The first metaphor highlights the valour of heroes willing to sacrifice their lives in battle, symbolising their commitment to noble causes for the sake of the nation.

Conversely, the second metaphor, conveying the significance of young maidens sleeping on the road, underscores the heightened stakes involved in their endeavours. This juxtaposition emphasises the essential roles of both men and women, demonstrating their harmonious coexistence and mutual support rather than competition.

Endleleni symbolises the seriousness of their shared mission, transcending gender boundaries to encompass a liminal space where all individuals – men and women alike – are united in purpose. Both metaphors emphasise vulnerability and courage, underscoring the interdependence of both groups (Penxa-Matholeni, 2021). This collective endeavour reflects the communal ethos inherent in African cultures, where individuals derive their identity and purpose from their interconnectedness within the community (Lutz 2009, cited in Mligo 2021:1).

The expression "*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*" encapsulates this interconnectedness, signifying that one's humanity is defined through relationships with others. Women and men in African contexts rely on each other's strengths, recognising the importance of collaboration in achieving common goals (Kasomo 2010:129). This communal ethos challenges patriarchal gender norms imposed by colonisation, encouraging a redefinition of gender roles within the community (Chisale 2018:6).

Endleleni serves as a metaphorical space for growth and mutual understanding, one where individuals – regardless of gender – redefine their identities and relationships. It is a place of collective transformation; all fellow travelers are invited to join the journey towards a more inclusive and equitable society. Accessing *endleleni* entails embracing risk and vulnerability, fostering self-reflection and collective growth. To use Cilliers' (2022:37) words: "Access *endleleni* (my emphasis added) at your own risk. This is a risky and fragile site. A further notice should read: Be ready to deconstruct and reconstruct yourself. Hard hats on …".

Umntu in Relation to Human Dignity and Identity

Yet those whose dignity has been disregarded or even trampled on know full well what human dignity means. Its meaning is established by the denial of it. (Huber 1996, cited in Koopman 2010)

The quote from Huber (1996) poignantly reflects the profound significance of human dignity, particularly for those who have experienced its denial or disregard. At the core of *umntu* lies an understanding of identity that is intricately intertwined with relationship – an embodiment of the principle of interconnectedness. Chirongoma et al (2008:194) assert that since ubuntu embodies humanness, its central ethical value and starting point is dignity, emphasising the intrinsic dignity of every individual by virtue of their humanity.

Within *umntu*, dignity becomes an inherent aspect of being *umntu*. Mpho Tutu van Furth, in a podcast, of Caroline Glasbergen, "New Female Leaders, (2021) further elucidates that ubuntu serves as the ethical and philosophical foundation of African life, instilling in individuals a deep awareness of their interconnectedness. Those who embody ubuntu recognise that their own humanity is diminished when others are humiliated, oppressed, or treated unjustly. This quality of ubuntu imparts resilience, enabling individuals to withstand dehumanisation and preserve their humanity.

Additionally, ubuntu acknowledges and values local wisdom, as exemplified in Setswana philosophy by the concept of botho. Botho emphasises that our humanity is measured by our capacity to respect, welcome, and empower others. Failure to uphold these principles not only dehumanises others but also undermines our own dignity (Penxa-Matholeni et al 2023). Thus, *umntu* inherently encompasses a profound respect for human dignity and an acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of all individuals within the human family.

Identity

Identity is a multi-faceted concept, deeply rooted in oral traditions and cultural practices. Ritualistic chants, riddles, songs, folktales, and parables serve as powerful expressions of cultural identity, resonating across generations and reclaiming voices silenced by centuries of colonialism and cultural imperialism (Elabor-Idemudia 2002:103).

Scholars such as Montle (2020), Banda (2018), and Kaunda et al (2018) have contributed to the discourse on African identity, offering diverse perspectives. However, challenges to these perspectives, notably by Maluleke (2020), highlight the contested nature of African identity.

In this chapter, I explore African identity through the lens of the rituals practised by amaXhosa, drawing from my personal experience as a black umXhosa woman.

For too long, narratives about us have been shaped without our input or agency (Maluleke 2019). Dube (2000, cited in Penxa-Matholeni, Boateng & Manyonganise 2020:1) poignantly captures this sentiment, emphasising the importance of narratives written by and for the community they represent.

Central to this discussion is the concept of space, which is intricately linked to African identity. The rituals of amaXhosa, particularly those surrounding childbirth and marriage, underscore the significance of space as a locus of cultural meaning. *Efukwini*, (a term denoting both a birthplace and a sanctuary for a new mother and her child) revered as a sanctified space, serves as the backdrop for significant life events, from birth to marriage and beyond. The rituals performed within these spaces not only mark individual milestones but also reinforce communal bonds and cultural continuity.

As Falola (2003:55) aptly notes, participation in communal beliefs and rituals is fundamental to human identity. Among amaXhosa, rituals such as *kwantonjane* and *ulwaluko,* accompanied by traditional songs and dances, serve

as distinctive markers of African identity. These rituals not only affirm individual identity but also affirm belonging to a larger community, shaping the collective identity of *umntu*.

European missionaries in the early 1820s misunderstood and devalued these rituals, reflecting a broader historical legacy of cultural misrepresentation and erasure. This chapter seeks to unravel these misconceptions and celebrate the richness and resilience of African cultural identity, as embodied in the rituals of amaXhosa.

Umntu in Relation to the Community: *Ngumntu Ngabantu*

Most African philosophers concur that a noteworthy element of ubuntu involves a communal and traditional lifestyle; to this end, everyone is their neighbor's keeper. Murove (2014) asserts that, if we are indeed one another's keepers, we can deduce that people can only be responsible within the context of their relationships with others. Murove (2014) further states that not many of us will ever be completely self-sufficient nor sufficient in every way.

In other words, one's humanity is caught up in or inextricably bound up with that of others. This means that, as humans, people belong together in an assembly of life. I cannot separate myself from others. For example, when one asks umXhosa, "*Ninjani*?" (How are you?) – here, 'you' is not singular but plural, even though only one person is being addressed. This notion of greeting is extended to family, extended family, livestock, agricultural land, and the like, and both the greeting and the answer focus on the wellbeing of the whole community and the land. This inherent communality affects how one tells, writes, or writes about black African stories.

The existence of a community is not a fixed or ready-made phenomenon. It is a process that must continually be cultivated by its members. Relationships should be constantly assessed, and any relationships that are oppressive should be reviewed (Manyonganise 2015:202). MW Dube

et al (2016) assessment provides the basis for reassessing ubuntu. Community is widely understood to include, in an interconnected fashion, living people, the divine powers, and the environmental community. Indeed, most African communities identify themselves with a particular animal. This totemic identification underscores the fact that the *botho/ubuntu* understanding of community includes a web of relations among entities that are not necessarily anthropocentric. Rather, the *botho/ubuntu* concept of community includes non-human denizens of the earth, (Dube 2016).

Furthermore, *umntu* in the community becomes the community. For instance, in Khayelitsha, an informal settlement in Cape Town, South Africa, during the fire season, neighbours are on the lookout to help extinguish fires observed in one another's houses; this occurs even when the owner is absent. The same applies regarding flooding during heavy rains in these informal settlements.

Chisale (2018:4), concurring on the nature of such communal relationships, notes the remarks of a community elder:

> if it happens that an elderly person's house was destroyed by a storm, and s/he is now too old to build or fix a new home for her or himself ... the community will meet, all neighbours, women and men were expected to go there and assist their fellow community member ... Its similar to when there was death, the person was not supposed to struggle to find out where food will come from, everything came from neighbours ... All neighbours did something to help, if there was death, the King's police went up the mountain and announced that there is death at so and so's family, even if you were doing something, you were expected to leave and go there. Everyone was supposed to go there, no one remained in their houses all neighbours except for children would go and help with something.

It is important to care for one another within a community, which is one big family; we are related and joined as one community. These rich African worldviews and beliefs have been dangerously misunderstood, not only by European or Western missionaries of the past but also by the local white mainstream churches that evangelise in the black townships of South Africa.

The Implications of Identity and Human Dignity in Missions

The scenarios discussed above challenge how one undertakes missions in black African communities. Mthethwa (1996, cited in Louw 2008) asserts that African religion or spirituality pervades and permeates every facet of the life of African people and cannot, therefore, be examined in isolation. Rather, they must be examined together with other factors by those who study the practice of religion and undertake missions in black African communities.

Colonial-era Christian missionaries, who saw themselves as the custodians of the Christian faith, viewed with suspicion any spirituality they did not recognise. Hence, 'saving the souls' of people was and is their most important mission; yet, in the process of 'saving souls', they fragment the lives of black Africans. Mbiti (1969, cited in Boateng 2020:39) affirms that Africans are recognised as being exceptionally religious and that they do not know how to exist without religion. The othering and misunderstanding by 'outsiders' of what makes an African an African is dangerous when missions are undertaken. Africans hold all of life dear: the humanity of each person, the dignity of each person, and the identity markers of each African.

Illustrating this misunderstanding of and disdain for African worldviews by missionaries, Manona (1991:36) demonstrates the way amaXhosa were cruelly treated by missionaries, citing the following examples: First, at Burnshill, Rev. Laing, who served the community from 1831 to 1872, at one point burnt amabhuma (initiation huts for young

men) and overturned containers of umqombothi (a traditional African drink) he found his followers consuming. Second, in Grahamstown, as late as 1939, a white clergyman threatened with excommunication boys who wanted to go to the veld for initiation. The boys defied the order and went through the full process of traditional initiation. When they returned, however, they had to make confession before they could participate in normal church activities again. This was, and still is, a display of a religion that considers itself superior. This legacy is still felt, particularly in the so-called 'born-again' churches, such as that of which a relative of mine is a member. His son could go to initiation school but cut ties with all the 'heathen' components of his culture. This meant drinking fruit juice instead of umqombothi and eliminating everything else that makes this ritual unique and marks the identity of amaXhosa. As a result, the young men in the community do not regard him as a 'proper' man. His identity has been raped; by that I mean that something sacred and special to a young umXhosa man has been violently taken away, chipped away and changed. Mndende (1998) refers to such experiences as the condemnation that forces African spirituality underground and into internal exile. For missiology to be effective in black African communities, it needs to embrace all that makes those communities who they are. African ways of knowing and being are embodied in such rituals, and Africans' dignity lies in who they are.

Conclusion

This chapter has delved into the fundamental question: How deeply is the concept of "*umntu*" intertwined with the notions of human dignity and identity within the African context? Through an exploration of isiXhosa expressions and their implications for gender, human dignity, and African identity, the essence of "*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*" has been unpacked. It has become evident that, within this framework, there exists a profound interconnectedness, devoid of hierarchical structures, as one's existence is inherently linked to that of others.

Moreover, the redefinition of African identity through the lens of amaXhosa rituals serves as a significant marker in this discourse. The implications of these insights for missiology in black African communities have been considered, emphasising the importance of embracing the entirety of these communities' experiences.

Furthermore, the elucidation of the "*endleleni*" metaphor has been instrumental. It offers a pathway toward unity, where individuals – regardless of gender or status – are set upon a migratory journey aimed at challenging prevailing norms. This liminal space, where growth and transformation occur, signifies a realm of endless possibility. It is within "*endleleni*" that the process of redefining and reconstructing oneself takes place, transcending the constraints of predefined destinations.

In essence, this chapter underscores the importance of recognising and embracing the interconnectedness of humanity, the significance of indigenous markers of identity, and the transformative potential inherent in communal journeys towards the unknown. Through such understanding, a deeper appreciation of human dignity and a more inclusive vision of African identity emerge.

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