Botho/Ubuntu:
Perspectives of Black Consciousness and Black Theology

Ramathate TH Dolamo
Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

Botho/ubuntu is a philosophy that is as old as humanity itself. In Africa and South Africa it was a philosophy and a way of life for many indigenous tribal groups. It is an African cultural belief that called on individuals to come together and to be more communal in their outlook and, thus, to look out for each other. Although the botho or ubuntu concept became popularised only after the dawn of democracy in South Africa, the concept itself has been lived out by Africans for over millennia. Colonialism, slavery and apartheid introduced materialism and individualism to local populations, which denigrated black identity and imposed on their dignity. The Black Consciousness movement and Black Theology have worked hand in hand since the middle of the 1960s to restore the human dignity of black people in South Africa.

Introduction

The contributions of Black Consciousness (BC) and Black Theology (BT) in the promotion and protection of botho/ubuntu values and principles are discussed in this article. The arrival of white people in South Africa has resulted in black people being subjected, inter alia, to historical injustices, cultural domination and religious vilification. BC and BT played an important role in identifying and analysing the problems that plagued blacks as a group in South Africa among the youth of the 1960s that resulted in the unbanning of political organisations, release of political prisoners, the return of exiles and ultimately the inception of democracy. The ubuntu for which freedom fighters fought should be lived out in the democratic dispensation and society that was born in April 1994.

Botho/Ubuntu

Definition

It is not very easy to define the concept of botho/ubuntu, because so many elements go into making a person humane. The other challenge in defining this concept is that ubuntu is not only an intrinsic concept, but it is also a philosophy that should be given substance through actions, it is something that is being worked at both internally and externally. Nonetheless, an attempt will be made in this discussion to give the term "ubuntu" some shape and form. Botho or ubuntu, in the South African context, is derived from Sesotho and Nguni languages, respectively. Tshivenda and Xitsonga languages also have derivatives of the concept. According to Shutte (2001:2), ubuntu means "humanity". This is rather confusing, as the term "humanity" can also refer to "humankind". The concept becomes clearer when he says,

> ... the concept of UBUNTU embodies an understanding of what it is to be human and what is necessary for human beings to grow and find fulfilment. It is an ethical concept and expresses a vision of what is valuable and worthwhile in life (Shutte 2001:2).

According to Broodryk (2008: 41), "ubuntu means humanness, the ideal of being human".

Ubuntu and morality

What one gathers from Shutte (2001), Broodryk (2008) and others, such as Ng'weshemi (2002); Mcunu (2004) and Bujo (2003), is that although people are born human, their humanness can either be enhanced or depreciated by the individuals themselves or by other people. It is therefore the quality of humanness that is at stake. As Bujo (2003:114) says,

> It must be recalled that African ethics does not define the person as self-realization or as ontological act: rather, it describes the person as a process of coming into existence in the reciprocal relatedness of individual and community.

Although ubuntu will be discussed in this article in the South African context, it is important to note that South Africans and Africans do not have a monopoly on "ubuntu". It is global in that, "they are values of humanity as such, and also universal" (Shutte 2001:2) and ubuntu cuts across centuries and cultures (Mkhize in Nicholson 2008:36).

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It is generally agreed that an organising principle for ubuntu is, "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*", meaning a human being is and becomes human through interactions with other humans.

Broodryk (2008: 42-45) traces "ubuntu" back to ancient Egypt, about 1500 years ago. Most beliefs of ubuntu were transferred to other parts of Africa during the cultural movement to the southern parts of the continent. He points out that that Africans from central and eastern Africa, who practiced iron-working, migrated down south and settled in present day Limpopo and Mpumalanga. About 1050 years ago, a new culture, the Leopards Kopje culture moved to Mapungubwe and, by the 16th century, various Iron Age settlements were established throughout the current Gauteng province and highveld areas.

Ubuntu has a very strong moral foundation, as evidenced by the Netchar Maat in Egypt. There were seven cardinal values: truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity, order and these and other Maatian admonitions were the bases and guidelines for correct and moral behaviour (Broodryk 2008:42-43). As Shutte (2001:2) states, ubuntu "is an ethical concept and expresses a vision of what is valuable and worthwhile in life".

Religion and culture in Africa

The relationship between religion and culture

The backbone of ubuntu has been religion and culture and the two entities have been regarded as two sides of the same coin. But this kind of relationship seems to have existed in all societies throughout the ages. We thus have a situation that compels us to ask: which came first, religion or culture? Was religion used in ancient and modern civilisations to sacrilise culture or did culture issue out of religious myths and rituals?

In Africa one cannot separate religion and culture, although one can say that without religion, culture would not be as moral as it should be. As Bujo (2003:123) says,

> As Africans see it, it is impossible to define the human person
> in purely secular or purely religious terms since he is both at
> once. Where one of these two dimensions is lacking, one can
> no longer speak of human person *qua* human person ...

Through religious rites and rituals, culture finds its moral foundation. As Mafunisa (2008:57) says, "Ubuntu can be understood as the essence of God's presence within humanity" and he continues to explain that "African traditional religion is a way of life and a search for well-being within the community in the here and now of everybody experience" (Mafunisa 2008:120).

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Chitando (2008:45-63), however, does point out that some postcolonial philosophers in Africa are challenging the notion propagated by people such as John Mbiti, that is, that religion in Africa is the basis of all ethical considerations. He gives an example of Kwesi Wiredu, a Ghanaian philosopher who seeks to separate religion and morality. For Wiredu African ethics might be called humanistic, as opposed to the supernaturalistic. This school of thought submit that religion has not been helpful to the African struggle for scientific advancement. Chitando (2008:46) suggests that a middle path between the two schools of thought is possible, "where certain ethical principles are seen as derived from religion without having to subsume all ethics under religion".

Denigration of the African religion and culture

Wherever colonialists and Christian missionaries went, the following things happened:

- The religion of the people was declared pagan and the Christian religion was imposed on them, sometimes forcefully.
- The culture of the people was declared barbaric and the people were regarded as savages and the Western culture was imposed on them. That is why Biko from the cultural point of view says, "Wherever colonisation sets in with its dominant culture it devours the native culture and leaves behind a bastardised culture" (in Stubbs 1978:46).
- Where the people resisted invasion and wars of conquest, they would be decimated.
- The people were dispossessed of their land, especially fertile portions of the land and land that was rich with mineral resources. In most cases, those people, who did not flee or were not killed, were enslaved.
- The history of the people was deliberately distorted in order to justify and rationalise the acts of conquest and domination.

In South Africa white people arrived in 1652 and Africans, welcomed them and allowed them, to establish a halfway station between Europe and India at the most southern tip of the continent where they could grow vegetables and,, when they got more comfortable, they started to keep livestock and so forth and they required more land and had to be accommodated. Missionaries later

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arrived and gave black people the Bible in "exchange" of their land. As Odendaal (2012:9) aptly puts it,

> Colonialism and conquest brought about immense changes in the African societies of southern Africa, impacting radically on their economies, cultures, thoughts, and ways of life. A crucial part in this process of incorporation and change was played by European missionary societies, particularly through the churches and schools they set up.

The Land Acts of 1913 and 1936 practically and literally stripped black people of eighty-seven percent of their land (Changuion & Steenkamp 2012:130-139, 163-175). With the rise to power of the National Party in 1948, apartheid, which legally entrenched racism in South Africa, was promulgated (Changuion & Steenkamp 2012:186-200). To make sure that blacks were permanently kept out of the 87 percent of the land that white people had given themselves and black people were contained in the 13 percent of the land given to them by whites, homelands were created, by which each of the South Africa's ethnic groups would be given some auto-nomy to govern themselves (Changuion & Steenkamp 2012:214-231). Later, these homelands would be declared by the South African government as sovereign and independent of "white" South Africa, with Transkei being the first to gain independence in 1976 (Changuion & Steenkamp 2012:232-250). Through the tricameral parliament Indians and coloureds were represented in the white South African parliament (Changuion & Steenkamp 2012:252-253).

The blacks in South Africa were not only divided according to their ethnic groupings, but also according to their ancestry as Indians/Asians and so-called coloureds. Blacks suffered an identity crisis, particularly the coloureds. Blacks were ideologically divided and weakened and psycholo-gically confused.

The National Party-led government used various strategies to suppress black resistance to racism and white domination. For example, political parties that fought for liberation such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) were banned in 1960. They went underground and formed armies of resistance, called uMkhonto we Sizwe and Poqo, respectively. The racist government of the day was relent-less in crushing the opposition forces. The 1960s to the early 1990s were particularly bad for the forces of liberation, both in exile, on Robben Island, as well as in the country. The countries, the SASO trials, consecutive states of emergency were all government's attempts at instilling fear in the black community and those whites who fought with the black liberation movements (cf. also Brotz 1977; Davenport 1987; Lodge 1983; Motsoko 1984).

Black Consciousness and Black Theology

Definition

Black Consciousness (BC) and Black Theology (BT) were initiatives under-taken by the students and youth of the 1960s as a means to resist racial domination. Some regard BC and BT as two sides of the same coin (Pityana 1972:41; Duncan 2008:116), while others regard Black Theology as the religious arm of BC (Cone 1972:28).

Briefly, BC is defined by Biko (1978:92) as follows:

> Black Consciousness is an attitude of mind and a way of life, the most positive call to emanate from the black world for a long time. Its essence is the realisation by the black man of the need to rally with his brothers around the course of their oppression – the blackness of their skin – and to operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It is based on a self-examination which has ultimately led them to believe that by speaking to run away from themselves and emulate the white man, they are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black.

Whilst Motlhabi (1972:56-57) defines BT, indicating its inseparability from BC, thus:

> Black Theology is not a new theology nor is it a proclamation of a new gospel. It is merely a re-evaluation of the gospel message, a making relevant of this message according to the situation of the people. ... Its advocates believe that Christ not only has something to do and offer to my 'soul' but to 'me' in my entire situation and condition here and now ... Its true meaning is co-extensive with suffering, and as the suffering lot of the majority in this country is 'not white'. 'Black' is rightly used, affirming that whiteness is not the only value in relation to which everything else should be considered.

Biko (1978:5) says, "Black Theology ... is a situational interpretation of Christianity" and Mpunzi (1972:188) concurs that "Black Theology is a situational theology ... of black people in South Africa".

As a philosophy and doctrine immersed in ubuntu, BC and BT, respectively, advocate and still advocate for black people a total liberation brought about by addressing their loss of identity, cultural alienation, religious denigration, socio-political oppression and exploitation.

Black Consciousness and Black Theology perspectives

- Socio-political domination

Racism seems to be a universal phenomenon. As Mzimela (1983:192) says, "Everywhere where people have been colonised, they have been economically exploited, politically oppressed, and racially discriminated against." Davenport (1987:315-338) observes that racial segregation was not merely a separation of the colonisers and the colonised, but a policy aimed at ensuring white supremacy and survival. Biko (1978:28) pushes the argument further when he says that a black person has been prepared for a subservient role in South Africa. Blacks were convinced by whites that they were inferior, they had inherent inabilities and they were a defeated and cursed people. This was the extent to which the process of dehumanisation had advanced.

As alluded to above, colonialism was introduced to South Africa in 1652, entrenched with the promulgation of apartheid in the South African Constitution in 1948. With the subsequent repression of the liberation movements that fought against white minority rule, there descended a paralysing fear over the South African society (Biko 1978:73-79; Pityana 2008:5).

The political vacuum that resulted during the 1960s was filled by the youth and students at high schools and institutions of higher learning. This movement was known as Black Consciousness and in theological seminaries the religious counterpart was the development of the Black Theology philosophy. As indicated above, the aim was to instil pride in the black community, and to mobilise them to stand up and fight for their liberation, as whites, even white liberals could not be trusted completely (Sono 1991:66-69; Biko 1978:89-91). Although white liberals may not have voted for the National Party, they still enjoyed the protection and privileges offered by the government, according to Biko (1978:23), who says, "in the ultimate analysis no white person can escape being part of the oppressor camp".

Supporters of and advocate for BC and BT were not trusted by the white community, including the white liberals (Biko 1978:26; 3-66; 89-90; Pityana 2008:6-7; Sono 1993:5-9, 66-67). But even liberation movements such as the ANC and PAC regarded with suspicion the strategies of the BCM. As the main intention of BC and BT was the political liberation of South Africa and creation of a democratic state, many people, even among themselves believed that BC and BT were time bound and therefore would be irrelevant or redundant with the dawn of democracy (Sono 1993:131).

But what was not realised was the fact that national liberation was the first and top priority for BC, though that did not mean that the other items and issues on the agenda, such as gender justice and eco-justice were not important. It was a strategic move in that other items on the agenda would be attended to after racism had been defeated; something along the lines of

"seek ye first the national liberation, and all these things would be added unto you".

Many leaders today, for example political, business and religious leaders, are products of BC and BT, and they mention how, without their background of BC and BT, they would not have become what they had become. They also believe that the values, principles and the way of life of BC and BT are still influencing the way they do business, irrespective of party political affiliation (Sono 1993:109-115; Moore 1996:14, 24). From a political point of view, BC and BT fought for the restoration of the dignity of the black person who was treated as sub-human by the racist minority government. They were fighting for the black person's ubuntu. According to BC, all human beings are equal and, according to BT, all human beings are created in the image of God. The ideal of achieving national liberation was the source of strength for BC and BT and obviously also for the other liberation movements (Biko 1978:55; Buthelezi 1972:71–75; 121-129). The end of apartheid was a must, because it was tied up with white supremacy, capitalist exploitation and deliberate oppression (Biko 1978:28). And as Halisi (1991:102) correctly asserts, "Black consciousness philosophy openly confronted the pathology of racism in the South African society and its impact on both black and white South Africans".

When white people arrived in South Africa, they also brought their culture and traditions as well as their civilisation, which they deemed as superior to that of the indigenous people. The indigenous culture was regarded as primitive, barbaric, savage and backward. Motlhabi (1972:2) encapsulate this notion rather succinctly when he says in his forward to the collection of essays on Black Theology:

> This collection of essays is clearly geared at killing the notion both within ourselves as blacks and in those who call us non-whites, that our history was a history of barbarism in which we are supposed to have lived by senseless and cruel violence alone; our religion was ignorant superstition filled with dark deeds and reeking Macbeth-like witches brews; our corporate tribal life was a foul impediment in the way of individualistic conversion; our music was unable to contain fresh content; our illiteracy was taken to be a sign of our stupidity and the emptyness of our heads of wisdom, intelligence or reason; perhaps which regarded us as little more than troops of baboons with remarkable human resemblances.

Rejection of the Anglo-Boer culture and reverence for African culture was a project at the forefront of BC and BT. Black history was depicted as a long list of defeats and failures, such history was distorted in such a way that it

was biased in favour of white people, such as the untruth that when they arrived in South Africa, there were no people here or that the indigenous African tribes arrived at the same time – whites arriving by the sea and black people across the continent from the Great Lakes area – or that blacks stole from the white people and so forth. Heroes such as Makana were regarded as trouble makers, nation builders such as King Shaka were regarded as cruel tyrants (Biko 1978:95; Khoapa 2008:77).

> These myths served to justify the dehumanisation of the black people not only in South Africa but all over the world. For Biko the destruction of these myths was a pre-condition for the psychological liberation of black people (Khoapa 2008:78)

The communal way of living was replaced by individualism and materialism. This is in contrast to the values associated with ubuntu. Ubuntu is the realisation that a person cannot be an island – *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu/motho ke motho ka batho* (Because the self exists only in relationships with others; there are as many sides to the self as there are relationships) (Shutte 2001:23). The European idea is that individuals have free choice, whereas the African one is that of a community. As Shutte (2001:26-27) explains:

> Each individual is related to the community, not as part to the whole, but as a person related to themselves. Each member of the community sees the community as themselves, as one with them in character and identity. Each individual sees every other member as another self.

In a communal culture, it is not the individual, but society or community that is the point of departure and as Ng'weshemi (2002:17) asserts, it is in group relationships that one discovers one's full personality.

The other example is that of *Kgoro* in Sesotho, which is a traditional space where people or leaders of a clan, tribe, meet under a leadership of an *Induna* (a Nguni term for a clan or tribe leader, chief or king). At such a forum, conflicts and disputes are settled; general matters and issues of the community are discussed and resolved. The role of the traditional leader is to guide the discussions in such a manner that decisions are taken on the basis of consensus (Shutte 2001:20; Motlhabi 1972:95) There is a Sesotho saying that goes *"Kgoshi ke kgoshi ka batho"*, which means that a king is a king through his subjects. The king cannot make decisions involving his subjects by himself without proper consultation.

Biko, taking South African's political history into consideration, calls Western culture, the Anglo-Boer culture, because South Africa has a history of colonialism and apartheid with the British and the Dutch. He says, "To

justify its exploitative basis the Anglo-Boer culture has at all times been directed at bestowing an inferior status to all cultural aspects of the indigenous people" (Biko 1978:41).

Biko (1978:41-46) briefly discusses some aspects of African culture that are an embodiment of *ubuntu:*

(a) African culture is centred around human beings. They are therefore "man-centred". There is in Sesotho languages a saying that goes, "Feta kgomo o sware motho", meaning that people are more important than material possessions. This value has since been adopted by the government in their "people first" principle.

(b) House visits were done not necessarily for specific reasons. "It was all part of our deep concern for each other ... Hence in all we do, we always place man first and hence all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than the individualism which is the hallmark of the capitalist approach"

(c) Private ownership of property such as land was unheard of. Land belonged to the chief or the king. The land belonged to the community and it was held in trust by the chief or king.

(d) *Letsema* (a Sesotho word) was a practice whereby groups of people would work together to assist one another in projects such as ploughing fields, harvesting and building houses et cetera.

(e) Through the process of sharing and caring, poverty was a foreign concept. Orphans and widows were taken care of through systems and mechanisms set up and devised by families and communities.

(f) Africans are closer to nature than whites. This reverence of nature and creation helped Africans to shy away from degrading the environment and furthermore, according to Biko (1978:46).

This close proximity to nature enables the emotional component in us to be so much richer in that it makes it possible for us, without any apparent difficulty to feel for people and easily identify with them in any emotional situation arising out of suffering.

As Buthelezi (Motlhabi 1972:8) says, "Africans strive for the whole-ness of life and Africans must take pride in their traditional heritage". Motlhabi (1972:59) says that BT challenges blacks to reassess their present

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socio-political situation in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He continues by saying that:

> Christ's message therefore to Black Theology means taking resolute and decisive steps to free the black people not only from estrangement to God but also from slave mentality, inferiority complex, distrust of themselves and continued dependence on other men culminating in self-hate.

• Demonisation of African religion

Pityana (1972:38) does not mince his words when he says:

> The acceptance of the Christian church, the triumph of the missionary endeavour, meant the rejection of the African customs ... The coming about of Christianity brought about a real upheaval in African norms and values, a disintegration of families and tribes and the cancerous money economy.

Indeed, when the missionaries arrived in Africa they aimed at emptying Africans of their religion and to fill them with Christianity and all means were employed to achieve their goal including bribery and physical violence. Before Christianity, blacks had their own religion and believed in one God, but missionaries rejected their religion and, in return, offered them the white conception of divinity, according to Biko.

Biko (1978:93), as rephrased by Duncan (2008:127; Biko 1978:93). Many African practices were rejected as pagan by missionaries. Even African leaders, because of their Western education and training, perpetuated Western culture as a norm. African bishops were largely ignored by the missionaries, according to Akin (1972:63). Biko (1978:56) asks the question as to why Africans were required to cast away their indigenous clothing, their customs, et cetera. As Zulu (1972:87) complains, the reading of the 19th century missionary literature,

> ... reflects an attitude of superiors dealing with inferiors when they pitied, despised, sometimes and often found enigmatic in spite of their apparent simplicity. There seems to have been little appreciation of cultural settings that could have helped proclamation of the gospel.

The rise of African indigenous churches could be attributed to rejection of African religious practices, a denigration of African culture by the missionaries and to white domination (Akin 1972:63; Zulu 1972:85-90; Ngubane

1986:71-90). When BC and BT arrived on the scene in the 1960, the loose form of the opposition against the missionary activities was given a more coherent shape and solid content and sound methodology. Buthelezi Manas (in Motlhabi 1972:30), referring to the development of BT, says that no one can "doubt the legitimacy of the quest for a theological assessment of the incarnation of the Word of God in the peculiarities of the life and thought of the black people of South Africa". As Motlhabi (1972:59) says, that BT challenges black theologians to review what has been lost historically, culturally and religiously. It challenges them to reassess their present socio-political situation in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For Biko (1978:60),

> No nation can win a battle without faith, and if our faith in our God is spoilt by our having to see Him through the eyes of the same people we are fighting against, then there obviously begins to be something wrong in that relationship.

But he was hopeful that, "In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible – a more human face" (Biko 1978:98).

Conclusion

As alluded to above, BC and BT liberation should be understood in a holistic manner that is, from a psychological, political, social, economical and religious point of view. Fighting for their ubuntu black people would also liberate white people from their bondage of greed, capitalism, superiority complex and fear of black people. In the culture of human rights, all people have inalienable rights to enjoy freedom in its totality (Mosala & Tlhagale 1986). Basic belief in our common humanity, that all humans are created in the image of God, should make us uncomfortable and angry, even when inequality among us is promoted, when tenets of botho/ubuntu are violated and when the dignity of the human person is trampled underfoot. We know that not everything in African culture and religion was good, but those elements that are liberating should be retrieved in order that our humanness can be restored; and, as culture is not static, we should accept that new influences have entered our cultures and therefore it might not be desirable or feasible to retrieve all of them. Obviously those that are good in the Western culture should be considered and those that are enslaving in African culture and religion should be let go of, as we strive to make our diversity work for us.

> True liberation of both the oppressed and the oppressors in South Africa will entail a recognition by both parties of the full

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humanity (ubuntu) of each individual, regardless of race, class or gender (Sibisi 1991:136) (parenthesis mine).

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