

Ubuhle, Ukubambisana, imvisiswano: Eyethu indlela yokuphilisana

Beauty, Service and Harmony: What is Psychology to us, indigenous people?

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1) Ubuhle- The Doers of Beautiful Things

Beauty is the central concept of my lecture today as a dedication to udadobawo whom we lost in May of 2019. Her passing left me pondering about what could have been the meaning of her name thus her life purpose. At the time of her passing I was already working here, at this university that stands on mountain top, the University that wholly belongs to the land on which it stands. The university that has called upon us to assist in its endeavours of moving towards an African University that is in service of humanity. To serve humanity is to bring the beauty of African life to this mountain. So Nomhle to me means the child who comes from doers of beautiful things. I had to, therefore, become that in my work. Reflect the beautiful deeds of my forebears. To have udadobawo in any home is the message to the children that there had been daughters in this home- what did they stand on?

In naming her Nomhle, my grandparents were bringing forth the beauty that was once experienced and asking us, the children who will be moulded by this daughter to become that beauty.

I joined the academy of learning because I wanted to show the world the beauty from which I came. I wanted to showcase the beautiful ways in

which we have known and continue to experience life. That is what a space of learning should be about. Sharing the healing parts of ourselves with one another. A person's name to us the speakers of isiXhosa, though it is used to label the life which is in the present, has lived many lives, not as departed individuals but as an experience. The naming of life form around us belongs to life. How we name communicates how we move about objects around us (names teach us how to treat each life form). This makes naming a lesson about ethics because names dictate how we should treat the phenomenon. A name comes from an experience that has lived many lives and AmaXhosa call an existence that has stood the test of time ubudala. I have explored this concept in a chapter I wrote on the epistemological value of indigenous African names, but I will expand on it today.

When I bring forth the concept of beauty, I am bringing forth the ancient in me. Communicating an important reminder well captured by tat'uDon Mattera when he says, "We have been here before" Ubudala means the life or the experience that has been. Meaning that humanity has had numerous opportunities to explore this experience and deemed it an experience from which we can draw lessons. Interestingly when that experience is being ushered into life the process is called ukudala- when an old experience is ushered anew. Ubudala, therefore, refers to both old and new as well as past and continuity. That is our understanding of human development, a life that has come from the old, into a process of

becoming old because being in life is the daily act of becoming old. I also explore this in one of my publications. The publication is titled *Childhoods Rooted in Land and I Touch on Our Understanding of Life as Belonging to the Soil*. Explaining why during various stages of our lives we need to return something belonging to us to the ground through various rites of passage as a marker that a part of us that has been here will grow back as new at another time.

This is a critical concept in the discipline of Psychology which concerns itself with the functioning of the human being. I am saying to this discipline to us the indigenous people understanding human behaviour entails understanding what the person is meant to usher into the mortal world, what gifts her/his lineage is bearing for those with whom they are in life. Because your existence should be a gift to others. When Unisa asks us to commit to serve humanity and to train our students to serve humanity- it is an ethical instruction to draw from those gifts we each came carrying. Beauty is therefore one of my gifts. Hence my approach to draw from the beauty indigenous African knowledge has to offer.

Here, I bring the knowledge I have seen and experienced in my community of Amagqunukhwebe.

A part of me therefore embodies the memory of the beauty that has passed this plane at various periods of life. With the understanding that I

am required to make it practical. To make of it what will ensure that it continues its journey.

I stand here haunted by the words of Bantu Stephen Biko when he says the imposed Western education caused indigenous children to leave school feeling shame and disdain about their backgrounds. There is no worse feeling than thinking that there is something fundamentally wrong with your home. It is for this reason that I work to showcase the fact that the representation of my background in Western literature is not how I know myself. I know that I come from beauty and wealth.

In the past five years, I have demonstrated how language is the archive of the wealth of a people. Our philosophies are stored in various forms of our languages such as proverbs, idioms, iingoma, stories and speech. This allows us easy access to the wisdom of those who came before us while simultaneously protecting the knowledge from erasure. How we name is a reflection of how we perceive the world. Naming reflects the manner in which things appear to our spirit, and their contribution in life. To turn into our languages is, therefore, a search for hints about what was being called to the fore.

2) Ukubambisana- A life of being of service to one another

I elected to entwine beauty with the concept of service in order to demonstrate the practical ways in which we become a beautiful people. I

was drawn to the connection of beauty and service by my reflection on why I joined Unisa. At the core of what attracted me to this place was Unisa's vision which reads as follows;

“Towards an African university, shaping futures in service of humanity”.

I particularly wanted to understand the meaning of being of service to humanity. As we know we cannot concisely translate the English language to African languages, but I understood that service means doing. In this case it means doing something for the benefit of others. This aligned with my understanding of self. The vision immediately translated to an endeavor to build a university that teaches isintu. Isintu is an enactment of ubuntu. The depth of this vision comes to life when communicated in an African language. Service to humanity in isiXhosa could translate to ukubalulutho eluntwini. Uluntu is a space where human life resides. The translation means being of value to life. It is a space where isintu is practiced. I know isintu to be the culture that accentuates the beauty of indigenous life. It is that which arranges human action into a living order. An order that emerges from and promotes life. It is the service assigned to us by humanity. Because isintu emerges from ubuntu, its practice is a practice of ethics. Ubuntu is an African way of being which draws from an understanding that the essence of existence is being ethical to those with whom you exist. The university commits to creating a space where what we do does not veer

from how life is lived and how people know themselves. To be of service is to understand how people know life and align your actions with that.

My understanding of being of service to humanity gets emboldened when I turn to my home language. This is because language allows us to describe life as our body senses it. What we see and how we feel about the phenomenon give us the vocabulary for the experience. The word service, since colonial times, when used in an African context is always used as a translation of a Western phenomenon. In isiXhosa inkonzo is the word used to translate service and this word is often used to refer to services related to Christianity and lately to services provided by the government. I did not find an instance where this word was used to explain a phenomenon that is indigenous. Hence, I elected to use the word ukubambisana instead of inkonzo. I wanted to depict the role of our ontological orientation on how we label phenomena. Coining service ukubambisana is to put emphasis on reciprocity as the core of service. Service to African people is an energy that is both received and given. This is the only way our service to humanity could be said to be grounded in isintu. Ukubambisana means pulling together reciprocally. Everyone doing their part to ensure continuity of life. In this sense being of service is seen as an act of re-fueling, in order to maintain functionality. But when our ontological lens is Western, we would perceive service from a materialistic angle which heirachises daily

actions. In which case service breeds related terms such as servitude, servant, and subordination. Where those with excessive material wealth are served. From an African understanding of life, ukubambisana communicates reciprocity. Professor Ramose explains the suffix ana as a philosophical denotation of mutual concern, sharing and care often rendered as reciprocity. We notice that all related concepts of isintu carry this suffix (Ukuhlalisana kakuhle, ukumelana, ukwakhana, nokuhlambana kwezandla.). We see this suffix in words that explain the many indigenous ways of living well with others. Demonstrating that reciprocity is an obligation. Living well with others moves beyond Western notions of welfare where one needs to be professionally trained to take care of others. This is an innate obligation to those who practice isintu. Welfare could be loosely defined as procedures or efforts designed to ensure basic physical and material well-being of people in need. In isiXhosa welfare is called intlalontle and ukuhlala kakuhle means to live harmoniously. A synonym of that is ukuphilisana meaning living a life of reciprocity. This refers to both sharing of space and being of healing. Isintu is an expression of our psychology. It comprises cultural practices that ensure that a reciprocal life is actualized. Throughout the course of my Associate Professorship, I have explored the various cultural practices that are an expression of reciprocity. I have explored indigenous concepts of neighbourliness that illustrate how one could be of value to humanity.

A neighbour in isiXhosa is called ummelwana. This is derived from the word ima which means stand thus ummelwana translates to ‘the one with whom I am standing. This term has numerous contexts of usage, and it is worth noting that in each context, the term means a reciprocal form of standing. In some contexts, it denotes standing together while in others it means people who withstand challenges together (ukumelana neengxaki) or a willingness to be amongst those with whom you will be able to live (ukukwazi ukumelana nabantu). This is the ethical commitment from isintu to be able to live with those around you. This brings to life the expression of umntu ngumntu ngabantu which means a person is a person through other people. This expression defines the concept of Ubuntu/Botho. It allows us to interconnect the concepts of uluntu and ubuntu. The concept of ukumelana to amaXhosa is an ethical commitment to be humane to life. This makes isintu a practicalisation of the ethics communicated by Ubuntu as the philosophy.

In my work I explore many of these practices that derive from ubuntu to illustrate how people live in reciprocity. How life is designed to be about helping one another carry the load. For example, in my exploration of indigenous marriage practices, I include the indigenous concept of ukuzalana. A communication of oneness of family relations. This term means we have given life to one another/we have birthed one another when speaking about becoming family. Other welfare practices I have explored from an indigenous perspective include ilima (pulling together

of neighbours during ploughing season) and inkomo yenqoma (known as ukusisa in siZulu, helping those in distress and obligating them to be ethical with your generosity) These welfare cultural practices ensure that ukuphilisana which is the African practice of psychology becomes feasible. From these practices we learn that ukubambisana is the practical part of being in life. It explains what is considered to be a significant contribution to life.

3) Imvisiswano/Harmony

The above elucidation of reciprocity makes for an organic interconnection of beauty, service, harmony and the reciprocal manner in which they are supposed to manifest. I perceive service as the enactment of beauty in order to make harmony manifest. Harmony in isiXhosa is referred to as imvisiswano. Imvisiswano is reciprocated energy. It is derived from the word ukuvisisana denoting a mutual understanding amongst those who share space. Ukuvisisana is an aspect of a broader concept of ukuva which is at the core of how indigenous people practice psychology. Ukuva speaks to the various ways of sensing the environment. It is an over-arching sense that informs people about how to be in life Ukuva is also central in the practice of African Psychology. When you say uziva njani? It is not just an act of being cordial. But an invitation to be of healing. This shows that African Psychology is owned and practiced by all members of the society. One's wellness is important to those around you and ensuring the wellness of

those around you is an obligation. Imvisiswano, which means a mutual consideration of feelings, is an expression of reciprocal healing. There is a mutual obligation placed on all individuals to ensure that they live in a just and mutually beneficial manner. It therefore is a way of life emanating from the principle that sees ethical behaviour as the main condition for being in life. Harmony is birthed by orderliness of life. It is the order of our actions, created by the protocols we construct (that are by no means static). Harmony comes from people being ethical with their obligations and accepting consequences of their unethical behaviour. Our understanding of life teaches us that unethical acts wound the people. Hence, we are encouraged to be of healing in order to restore harmony.

Listening is a crucial element of bringing forth harmony. When you listen, you put yourself in the position to receive others. Isintu which we spoke about in the previous section ensures the ways of listening to one another.

Another way of exploring the importance of reciprocity embedded in imvisiswano is by looking at the ways in which disharmony is communicated. In the practice of psychology by indigenous people, anxiety is referred to as umvandedwa, directly translated to that which one experiences alone. From this term we can deduce that the negativity is placed upon the lone experience of feelings. This is considered a negative state because life is understood as a shared experience. The

name serves to discourage people from a life void of reciprocity. To encourage the reciprocal sharing of feelings, isintu has devised an array of means. Greetings are one of the examples of a space where individuals are invited to pour their emotions. Indigenous people treat greetings as part of human service. In psychology greetings could be considered diagnostic tools. When you enquire about a person's health, the person is expected to pour their emotions. In isiXhosa, uziva njani (how are you feeling?) brings us to the importance of ukuva, the first step toward making invisiswano manifest.

4) Ukuphilisana: Psychology to us, the indigenous people

By exploring these three concepts (ubuhle, ukubambisana nemvisiswano) I am trying to show that we have our ways of knowing. These ways demonstrate that we live the phenomena. It becomes embedded in our practices as a way of life. Therefore, to have knowledge is to be alive. We use knowledge to navigate through life. I draw from my mentor Dr Linda James Myers when she argues that being human to people of African descent is not defined in materiality but in optimal existence that draws from the cosmos. For African people optimal functioning is not fragmented but perceived in oneness of life. An individual is understood to be born out of and into the interrelation of various aspects of beingness. This, therefore, means that psychology cannot be contrived to academic definitions but should be appreciated as

it flows within and between people, their communities and the various realms of life.

I was drawn to the work of Doctors Linda James Myres and Amos Wilson because they responded to the disharmony that existed between myself and western knowledge. I always felt that there has to be other ways of doing life, other ways of understanding the meaning of being human in the world. As such, I have put considerable effort into understanding the psychology of a people who put no value in the possession of things but are more concerned with being in life with things. We call that ukuphila in isiXhosa and the reciprocal actioning of ukuphila becomes ukuphilisana- a mutual obligation to be of life to one another. Ukuphilisana means I will honour the life within and around me because I am in it. It will always be present. The indigenous understanding of the omnipresence of life also becomes clear in the use of the term iphakade to refer to what in European knowledge is known as the universe. Iphakade is made up of two words- ukuphila (to live) ngonaphakade (forever). Meaning that the indigenous understanding of the universe is something that does not die. Iphakade will always be here, we need to find ways of being in good relations with it in order to make our existence in it harmonious. This is the core of understanding our interconnectedness. So ukuphilisana is both with other human beings as well as the other relational elements of iphakade. This relationality of being finds rootedness in the word impilo. Impilo encompasses

concepts of both health/wellness and life. The speakers of isiXhosa refer to both health and life as impilo. This concept is understood as a composite state of being alive with all aspects of your well being taken care of. Impilo is rooted in spiritual wellbeing.

Ukuphilisana means to be in life together and to be of healing to one another, The concept of ukuphilisana illustrates the doing of psychology on the daily basis. It communicates the cultural embeddedness of the practice of psychology to indigenous Africans. This is what living the phenomena means. For example, when ubuntu the philosophy obligates us to justice. Isintu makes that practical- the many ways of creating a just society are communicated in our practices. Isintu teaches us that there is no unjust act that should go uncorrected (this is communicated in the isiZulu proverb “Akukho zinyane lemvubu ladliwa zingwenya kwacweba isiziba”-you cannot kill a person’s child and expect no retaliation) Inkomo yenqoma is also an example of the practice of justice and ethics. Ukuphilisana is embedded in our daily language. Making it a part of our actions- which is our service and which is our beauty. Ubuntu is to strive to give humanity your beautiful side. It is the very act of becoming doers of beautiful things to which I alluded earlier. In isiXhosa doers of beautiful things are called abahlekazi- healers, those who came to restore harmony.

I use these three concepts, beauty, service and harmony to pose the question- what is psychology to us, the indigenous people? I use this question to illustrate that our idea of wellness is not compartmentalized. It is embedded in daily life and is dependent on everyone remaining ethical to reciprocity. I note that, the term, Psychology doesn't have a synonym in my language isiXhosa. We can either name it, or learn from the absence of the name. The absence of the name could denote the absence of the conceptual equivalence. Illustrating that we do not gaze the phenomenon with the same lens. The spiritness and relationality of African ontology makes the practice of healing the human a multifaceted endeavour. That is perhaps why there isn't that one aspect of doing life that we can singularly coin psychology. When we think of spiritness and relationality of our ontology, the concept of umoya (as explored by Professors Baloyi and Ramose) becomes crucial. Umoya is the connector of the physical and the metaphysical. It is as alive and as eternal as iphakade itself. The practical aspect of being with life is ukuphila. And because life is an interconnection you learn to live with and amongst the life forms, giving and receiving life from them. This interconnection is made to manifest by umoya. Psychology to us means a human functioning that incorporates, spirit and culture and this is captured in Ramose's (2005) perception of oneness of ubuntu where he argues that reality and knowledge are a part of one whole. This phenomenon is different from the other conceptualisation of cultural

embeddedness in psychology that simply call for the consideration of culture in making sense of human behaviour occurring outside of Western societies. Furthermore, cultural embeddedness in my work is also not conceived in the same way as found in cultural and multicultural psychology where psychologies of non-western societies are grouped together as an appendage of Euro-American Psychology. I argue that all societies' psychologies are cultural psychologies, including Euro-American psychology. They, therefore, deserve respect in the ecology of knowledge. Here I am saying, psychology to us indigenous people of this land, is not externally determined but it is part and parcel of the way of being. Every life form can develop psychological tools for survival. For people in African societies such as South Africa, these psychological tools are embedded in the way of life.

Ukuphilisana arms us with tools of how to be life to one another. To strive for harmony is not to say things will not go wrong, sometimes, but what we do when things do go wrong. It is therefore a lesson on ethics grounded in reciprocity. It teaches you to hold your end of the stick at all times.

Conclusion

I end by recommitting to producing work that nourishes and draws strength from humanity. So that the future may see an education with images of ourselves in beauty. I will always bear in mind that our bodies

bear genetic memory that we have lived longer as a thriving people than as the colonised and enslaved people.

I commit to move with the understanding that, to take on the role of a full Professor is to assume eldership and eldership is the status that is earned. I am cognizant of the fact that I may still have 20 years of active work in me but professionally I have assumed a seat among seniors. As said before, Ubudala also refers to becoming old. It is to live each day knowing that you are older than the previous. Ubudala could also be perceived as assuming seniority which could be explained as the state of being ethical with the ways of your lineage, ethical with the ways of those who fought for days such as today to be possible. It means being ethical with izinto zabantu- things that belong to life. I was named Zethu as an instruction to be ethical with izinto zethu sizwe esintsundu.

Isixhosa wants us to understand this as ukubanjiswa which means holding your purpose for others to inherit and build on. It is to live each day understanding that there will come a time when you will pass and hand your purpose over. Those coming after you must find things intact.