

Power sharing and the challenge of ubuntu ethics

Dirk Louw¹

Centre for Applied Ethics, University of Stellenbosch,
Stellenbosch, South Africa

Introduction

“I am because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am” – this is the by now familiar aphorism expressing a traditional African ethic known as ubuntu. Culture-specific versions of this aphorism include *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Nguni) and *motho ke motho ka batho babang* (Sotho), both of which could also be translated as “a person is a person through other persons”. To be human means to be through others. Any other way of being would be *irhuman* in both senses of the word, that is ‘not human’ and ‘disrespectful of or even cruel to others’. These, roughly, are the teachings – the descriptions and prescriptions – of ubuntu (Mkhize 2008:40).

Given this understanding of ubuntu, it would strictly speaking be misleading to speak of ubuntu *and* power sharing, and more correct to speak of ubuntu *as* power sharing. Ubuntu *is* power sharing; it constitutes the sharing of power. On this score, the aphorism “a person is a person through other persons” translates into “a person is a person through sharing his/her power – that is the space that allows the enactment of his/her subjectivity² – with other persons”.

In fact, in a sense the question “What is ubuntu?” already constitutes a sharing of or, more precisely, a struggle for power. This becomes apparent once the question is understood as a political act, and a paradoxical one at that: ‘political’ because by asking it “the African subject seeks [cultural authenticity and thus] freedom from a past (and present) represented by [Western] oppression and (neo)colonialism” (Praeg 2008:371), and ‘paradoxical’ because an ethic of “*interdependence* is invoked to represent [Africa’s] *independence*”, that is, “ubuntu is being re-appropriated for political ends radically at odds with what it is taken to mean” (Praeg 2008:372). The Dutch political scientist, Pieter Boele van Hensbroek (1999:201), calls this ‘bipolar thinking’, that is thinking that sets Africa (the one pole) over against the West (the other pole). Bipolar thinking blinds its participants to “facts and the diversity of ... options” (Boele van Hensbroek 1999:201). This certainly rings a bell. In a recent radio interview (cited in Jackson 2009:14) former South African president Thabo Mbeki described the power sharing deal struck in Zimbabwe as an ‘African’ solution and an illustration of why ‘African’ leaders should not listen to ‘Western’ critics, but approach matters in an ‘African’ way. Some (cf. Jackson 2009:14) may argue that this is a classic example of bipolar thinking that blinded participants to ‘facts’ (such as that president Mugabe and Zanu PF in fact lost the election in March 2008 and that they did so in spite of assaults on MDC supporters), and to alternative ‘options’ (such as pressurising president Mugabe to accept the election results). Whatever the case may be, Boele van Hensbroek (1999:200, 201) argues for a move away from “the bipolar logic that is inherent in the models of thought that have dominated African political thought in the last 150 years” towards what he calls “discursive conceptions of democracy”, which involve “a problem shift from issues situated between Africa and the West toward issues that are internal to Africa” (Boele van Hensbroek 1999:200). However, divorcing oneself from bipolar thinking may be more difficult than Boele van Hensbroek foresees. After all, in finding an authentic identity, “we proceed by comparison and negation in a way that is as inevitable as it is inadequate” (Praeg 2008:374). In this sense, so-called internal African issues are never simply internal to Africa.

Boele van Hensbroek’s call for “a problem shift toward issues that are internal to Africa” brings us back to a reflection on ubuntu. In what follows, I would like to reflect on the ethic of ubuntu in light of some of the most important problems or challenges facing Africans today. Some of these challenges exist independently of the ubuntu ethic, while others are generated by it. I hope to show that a critical and creative re-evaluation of the ubuntu ethic may aid Africans in meeting these challenges effectively.

¹ Guest Researcher, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

² Subjectivity here signifies the capacity to originate thought and action (cf. Shutte 2008:27).

Does ubuntu exist?

But, first things first: it stands to reason that my deliberations would make sense only if ubuntu in fact exists. Ubuntu means 'humanity', 'humanness' or 'humaneness'. As such, it articulates basic respect and compassion for others: caring, sharing, warmth and understanding. These are often not the first activities or attitudes that spring to mind when one reflects on Africa. On the contrary, conflicts still scar the continent and corruption, mismanagement, self-enrichment, disease and poverty seem ever present. Do Africans in fact adhere to ubuntu? This question deserves more attention than can be afforded here. However, at least four remarks seem in order.

First, to claim that ubuntu exists is not necessarily to claim that the compassion that it encapsulates obtains or obtained always and everywhere in African societies. Of course it did not and does not. Yet once one has managed to look past popular headlines, one may identify numerous, mostly unreported acts of compassion amongst Africans. To cite just one example: the relatively non-violent transition of South African society from a totalitarian state to a multi-party democracy was not merely the result of the compromises reached by politicians through negotiations. It was also – perhaps primarily – the result of the emergence of an ethos of solidarity, a commitment to peaceful co-existence amongst ordinary South Africans in spite of their differences (Van der Merwe, 1996:1). But, one may be tempted to ask, is this really an example of ubuntu? Some Africans claim that it is, while others disagree (Richardson 2008:65-83). Here, as in all other matters, the demands of interpretation cannot be avoided. Second, although one may doubt the existence of ubuntu as a fully lived reality, one can hardly deny its existence as a prominent concept, narrative or myth in Africa, and certainly Southern Africa. To call the ubuntu ethic a myth is not to deny its 'factual truth', although the word is often used in that sense. The word 'myth' as used here refers to the ubuntu ethic as an enduring story that – irrespective of its 'factual truth' – inspires morally and reveals the meaning (i.e. value, relevance or significance) of life to those who participate in it, that is, those who contribute to its telling and re-telling (Jordaan 2009). Third (or to put the first and second remarks differently), before one embarks on the denial or affirmation of the existence of something, one would do well to engage in relevant conceptual analyses. Exactly what is being denied or affirmed? In this case: exactly what does one mean by 'ubuntu' or 'exist'? (Asking whether ubuntu exists is, in this sense, actually *not* a 'first thing', as in 'first things first' - see above). Finally, despite my affirmation of the existence of ubuntu, I concur with Ronald Nicolson (2008:6), who warns that "the crises in Africa do mean that we must be careful not to overstate the hold that traditional African ethics have in practice in African society".

Nicolson's warning assumes that the enhancement of traditional African ethics would curb the crises in Africa alluded to above, namely the moral crises of corruption, self-enrichment and so on, and the growing list of their effects: conflicts, mismanagement, disease, poverty and other disastrous outcomes. But, as he concedes, this is a far more complex issue. Some may, for instance, argue that these crises obtain precisely because of the hold that traditional African ethics has on Africans. "Are some aspects of traditional African culture – male hegemony, respect for elders and chiefs, the idea that a fortunate individual must share his or her fortune with the wider family in assisting them with jobs – not tantamount to sexism, gerontocracy, authoritarianism, nepotism, and the like?" (Nicolson 2008:8). Moreover, could what appears to be immoral or illegal to Western eyes not be valued differently in a traditional African context? Does, for example, "receiving gifts by ruling politicians amount to corruption, or is [it] merely part of African respect for those in authority ...?" (Nicolson 2008:2). The need critically to assess traditional African ethics (including the ubuntu ethic) clearly exists. To this I shall now turn.

Agreement and solidarity

Ubuntu underscores the importance of agreement. Or, as the exponents of ubuntu regularly note, African traditional culture has an almost infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus (Louw 2001:19).³ While regular democracies involve majority rule, traditional African democracy rather operates in the form of (sometimes extremely lengthy) discussions. Mogobe Ramose observes:

The communal ethos of African culture placed a great value on solidarity, which in turn necessitates the pursuit of unanimity or consensus not only in such

³ Paragraphs 3 and 4 partially overlap Louw (2001). Overlapping parts are reprinted here with permission. Cf. also Louw (2006).

important decisions as those taken by the highest political authority of the town or state, but also decisions taken by lower assemblies such as those presided over by the heads of the clan, that is, the councillors (cited in Eze 2008:390).

Are these discussions between equals? There may be a hierarchy of speakers in the context of ubuntu dialogue in so far as some participants may be allowed to air their views first (Nicolson 2008:9) – though some authors, notably Heinz Kimmerle (1995:110), argue that no such hierarchy is assumed. Nevertheless, every person (eventually) gets an equal chance to speak until some kind of an agreement, group cohesion or consensus is reached (more about this conception of consensus later). This important aim is expressed by words like *simunye* (“we are one”, that is “unity is strength”) and slogans like “an injury to one is an injury to all” (Louw 2001:19).

However, this desire to agree, which is – at least in theory – supposed to safeguard the rights and opinions of individuals and minorities (Nicolson 2008:9), is often exploited to enforce group solidarity. Because of its extreme emphasis on community, ubuntu democracy may be abused to legitimise what Themba Sono (1994:xiii, xv) calls the constrictive nature or tyrannical custom of a derailed African culture, especially its “totalitarian communalism” which “frowns upon elevating one beyond the community”. The role of the group in African consciousness, says Sono (1994:7), could be

overwhelming, totalistic, even totalitarian. Group psychology, though parochially and narrowly based..., nonetheless pretends universality. This mentality, this psychology is stronger on belief than on reason; on sameness than on difference. Discursive rationality is overwhelmed by emotional identity, by the obsession to identify with and by the longing to conform to. To agree is more important than to disagree; conformity is cherished more than innovation. Tradition is venerated, continuity revered, change feared and difference shunned. Heresies [that is the innovative creations of intellectual African individuals, or refusal to participate in communalism] are not tolerated in such communities.

In short, although it articulates such important values as respect, human dignity and compassion, the ubuntu desire for consensus also has a potential dark side in terms of which it demands an oppressive conformity and loyalty to the group. Failure to conform may be met by harsh punitive measures (Sono, 1994:11, 17). Avoiding this ‘dark side’ poses one of the most important challenges of ubuntu as a social ethic, namely that of affirming unity while valuing diversity, of translating “I am because we are” into “we are because I am”. As such, it is the challenge of developing an emancipatory understanding of ubuntu, an understanding that would effectively meet “the essential issue of politics formulated by Hannah Arendt as ‘handling plurality’” (Boele van Hensbroek 1999:201).

Democracy and consensus

This challenge is at the centre of the still raging debate amongst African philosophers concerning the appropriateness of Western-style multi-party democracy in African societies. For example, in his plea for an African non-party polity, Kwasi Wiredu (1998:375) argues for a consensual democracy which draws on the strengths of traditional indigenous political institutions and which, as such, does not “place any one group of persons consistently in the position of a minority”. Instead it aims to accommodate the preferences of all participating individual citizens (note: not parties). In the same vein, Mogobe Ramose blames the “adversarial multi-party systems of western democratic cultures” for undermining the principle of solidarity in traditional African political culture. Not that he undervalues the importance of opposition for a democratic dispensation - on the contrary, Ramose (2002:113) points out that “traditional African political culture embodied and invited opposition in the very principle of consensus. Surely, one cannot speak of consensus where there is no opposition at all”. In fact, one has the sense that Ramose is not so much *against* multi-party democracy, as he is *for* the maintenance of the African solidarity principle, precisely because it safeguards the rights of individuals and minorities better than any majoritarian democracy could. Hence his strong emphasis on the Sepedi (Northern Sotho) saying: *Kgosi ke kgosi ka batho*, that is “the sovereignty of the King derives from and belongs to its subjects” (Eze 2008:388), or, “the King owes his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him” (Ramose 2002:121; cf. also 2002:116).

But how attainable and practicable is the solidarity or consensus at which ubuntu democracy aims? In this regard Wiredu’s (1998:380) reference to the importance of a “willingness to compromise” and to the “voluntary acquiescence of the momentary minority” is significant. This allows the community to come to a decision and follow a particular course of action, an important outcome in a world that often requires quick decisions to retain control (Nicolson 2008:9). Ubuntu democracy allows for *agreements to disagree*, Wiredu seems to claim. Note that the minority does not simply have to put up with or passively tolerate the overriding decisions of a majority. No, the minority *agrees* to disagree, which means that their constructive input is still acknowledged or recognised in communal decisions. No wonder, then, that Mfuniselwa Bhengu (1996) dares to call ubuntu the ‘essence’ of democracy, in spite of its strong emphasis on solidarity and community (and therefore, seemingly, not on plurality). As such, the ubuntu principle of agreeing to disagree both confirms and contradicts the literal meaning of consensus, namely “‘general agreement [or] the collective *unanimous* opinion of a number of persons’ – from the Latin, *consentire*” (Eze 2008:391; italics in original). Ubuntu as an effort to reach agreement or consensus should thus not be confused with outmoded and suspect cravings for (an oppressive) universal hegemonic sameness, often associated with so-called teleological or “modernistic” attempts at the final resolution of differences (cf. Van der Merwe, 1996:12; Ramose, 2002:105, 106). True, ubuntu takes plurality seriously. While it constitutes personhood *through other persons*, it appreciates the fact that “*other persons*” are so called, precisely because we can ultimately never quite stand in their shoes or completely see through their eyes. When the exponent of ubuntu reads ‘solidarity’ and ‘consensus’, he/she therefore also reads ‘alterity’, ‘autonomy’, and ‘cooperation’ (note: not ‘co-optation’) (Louw 2001:21).

Community and exclusiveness

As an ethic of compassion, so it was claimed above, true ubuntu takes plurality seriously. It is intended to ensure that all voices are heard. One would expect such an ethic to be inclusive rather than exclusive, that is, that it would include, not exclude; accommodate, not alienate. But, just how inclusive is the community that ubuntu both describes and prescribes? (Louw 2006:164). At times the impression that ubuntu is not quite meant to be a universal law of love is difficult to avoid. For example, the meaning of initiation rites in traditional African societies seems to imply that ubuntu functioned (and still functions) as a binding ethic *exclusively* within the confines of a specific clan. The blood that is spilled onto the soil through circumcision and clitoridectomy says that the initiated person “wishes to be tied to the community and people, *among whom he or she has been born as a child* [and] until the individual has gone through the operation, he [or she] is still an *outsider*” (Mbiti, cited in Ramose, 1999:88; italics added). This exclusive understanding of the community that is ubuntu resonates with the apparent potential of ubuntu to trigger ethnic clashes (Du Toit, 2000:30). It (or some version of it) also seems to underlie the way in which some black South Africans tend to cite ubuntu as *the*

definitive difference between themselves as Africans and non-Africans (including so-called 'coloureds', Asians and whites) (Shutte, 2001:15). Membership of the community that is ubuntu appears not to come easily for non-Africans or, at least, non-black Africans. As the Dutch anthropologist and intercultural philosopher, Wim van Binsbergen (2001:55-56) notes:

in Africa, *-ntu* [that is "human", as in *ubu-ntu* or "human-ness"] invokes local, autochthonous humanity, by contrast to beings who somatically and historically clearly stand out as *not* autochthonous and whose very humanity therefore may be called into question, or even denied ... part of [the struggle of White persons who identified with Blacks against the White colonial presence] ... was to be accepted, by African friends, as *mntu* [that is a human].

The advocates of ubuntu seem to be divided on this issue. Generally speaking, they all emphasise its inclusiveness. However, some proponents of ubuntu create the impression that, although the community that is ubuntu transcends the confines of a specific clan, it includes only those whose origins lie in Africa. Ramose, for example, speaks of a family atmosphere, that is "a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the different *indigenous people* of Africa" (Ramose 2002:81; italics added). While this remark underscores the fact that ubuntu does not exclusively apply within specific clans, it nevertheless seems to imply that the community that is ubuntu does not include – as Van Binsbergen (2001:55) puts it – "beings who somatically and historically clearly stand out as *not* autochthonous". Such an exclusion would contradict Johann Broodryk's explanation of the ubuntu concept of extended family. Broodryk (2002:98) points out that the community that is ubuntu "has the potential or seems to be capable of extension even beyond those related by blood, kinship or marriage to include strangers". For some, though, the African concept of community, in its fullest sense, even transcends the society of the living. Ramose, for example, refers in this regard to the "constant communication between the living and the living-dead ('ancestors')", as well as to "the triad of the living, the living-dead and the yet-to-be-born" which "forms an unbroken and infinite chain of relations" (Ramose 2002:94). "In the last resort," surmises Augustine Shutte, "humanity itself is conceived of as a family, a family that one joins at birth, but does not leave by dying. Because of this, no one is a stranger" (Shutte 2008:28; cf. also 2001:29).

That "no one [should be] a stranger" in terms of the assumed scope of the community that is ubuntu, seems important for at least two reasons. First, the potential of ubuntu to degenerate into a totalitarian communalism (see Sono's warning above) could also be understood as its tendency to exclude instead of, as one would expect of an ethic of caring and sharing, include. As an excluding ethic, a derailed ubuntu represents the fortification and preservation of a given identity through limitation and segregation. In terms of such an ethic the slogan *simunye* ('we are one') ironically signals class, cultural or ethnic purity; racism and xenophobia - phenomena with which (South) Africans are all too familiar (cf. SA still plagued by xenophobia, 2009). Second, as a traditional ethic ubuntu functioned (and still functions) in the relatively small communities of the indigenous people (to use Ramose's term) of sub-Saharan Africa. The plural, 'communities', is appropriate here, since, as even a rough demographic analysis would reveal, these people constitute anything but one monolithic society. Moreover, the population of sub-Saharan Africa (and especially Southern Africa) also includes those whose ancestral origins lie in other parts of the world (among them those whose recent ancestors have lived in Africa over several generations) and those with mixed ethnic ancestry. This begs the question: can ubuntu work beyond the confines of a small indigenous community and be applied when the community in question comprises a heterogeneous plurality of ethnicities, cultures and faiths? (Nicolson 2008:8). Healing Africa's colonial scars effectively may require a focus on the affairs or interests of its 'indigenous communities' – even of a specific indigenous community (cf. Nicolson 2008:7-8). In this regard, the ethnic or cultural undertone of ubuntu as a traditional ethic may have important heuristic value. But, be that as it may, the ethic of ubuntu can hardly "handle plurality" (to borrow Arendt's expression) if it involves the exclusion of cultures, ethnicities or identities.

Ancient wisdom in a (post-)modern world

The challenge of ubuntu ethics is in many respects the challenge of applying an ancient or pre-modern wisdom in a (post-)modern society. This society is deeply suspicious of its consensus principle, given its very different notions of solidarity. In a pre-modern sense,

solidarity often means being inextricably and exclusively imbedded in or committed to one specific group (cf. the importance of initiation rites referred to above). In a post-modern sense, though, solidarity signifies, not permanent and exclusive membership of any particular group, but rather a complex and ever changing multiplicity of partly overlapping, partly conflicting group memberships (Louw 2001:33; cf. also Eze 2008:392). As explained above, a re-evaluation of ubuntu's concept of consensus or solidarity that may befit a democratic dispensation in African polities, has already been attempted (cf. Wiredu's non-party polity). However, more work needs to be done in this regard. Boele van Hensbroek (1999:200) rightly challenges neotraditionalist African theorists to "harness indigenous cultural resources in institutionalising democratic practices". A deliberation on African communal democracy, or what he also calls palaver democracy, could, for example, involve comparison between the idea of palaver and the idea of the 'public sphere' (Boele van Hensbroek 1999:197). It may also involve the hypothesis that the ubuntu ethic dictates that individuals be given as much opportunity as possible to effect change and decide for themselves how they are governed by, for example, being allowed, as far as is practicable, to elect their public representatives directly (cf. paragraphs 4 above and 7 below). Such issues, Boele van Hensbroek claims (with some justification), are rarely explored in contemporary neotraditionalist discourse. However, as he rightly emphasises, such an exploration both requires and involves the countering of a restrictive culturalism by an emancipatory or liberating understanding of African communalism (Boele van Hensbroek 1999:192-193, 200).

However, ubuntu's understanding of consensus and solidarity may not be the only controversial aspect of its ancient wisdom in (post-)modern African polities. Its deeply religious roots may seemingly also allow attitudes and practices unbefitting constitutional democracies such as South Africa (whose constitution includes a progressive bill of rights).⁴ In his explanation of the religious worldview underlying the ubuntu ethic, Mkhize (2008:37) noted:

Ancestors act as guardians of morality. While they generally remain interested in the well-being of their offspring, they punish bad conduct by withdrawing their interest in family matters. When this happens, having been disconnected from God, the source of life, the family is thrown into a state of imbalance or disequilibrium ... Such a state of affairs requires the family to engage in acts of libation in order to restore the state of equilibrium and hence connection with God.

But, one may now rightly ask, in this context, what *exactly* would count as instances of "bad conduct", "the throwing of the family into a state of imbalance or disequilibrium", "disconnection from God", "punishment", "the withdrawal of the ancestors' interest", "acts of libation" or "the restoration of the state of equilibrium and hence connection with God"? Mkhize (2008:41) answers this question by providing a list of (apparently) noble acts or attitudes, all of which are "geared toward reconstructing, preserving and enhancing the community". The list includes respect for oneself, others and the cosmos; the maintenance of justice; empathy; and having a conscience. The absence of these acts or attitudes would, Mkhize seems to argue, constitute bad conduct. The withdrawal of the ancestors' interest and the resultant disequilibrium or disconnection from God would then serve as punishment, while engaging in or displaying the said list of acts or attitudes would qualify as acts of libation. However, in spite of his emphasis on the "lived experiences of the people in question" (Mkhize 2008:35), Mkhize fails to provide concrete examples (i.e. examples from everyday life) of these acts or attitudes. His list sounds laudable until one realises that, within the context of ubuntu as an ancient ethic, these acts and attitudes may have harboured (and, in traditional African communities, may still, harbour) "hegemonic or oppressive masculinities" (Chitando 2008:57), or may have included (and certainly, in the hinterlands of South Africa, still include) witchcraft, including dehumanising beliefs such as "that childless women are witches" (Manda 2008:133; cf. also 2008:131), or the burning of women and men (and often also their families) for being witches (Mnisi & Sithole 2007). This state of affairs clearly does not call for idyllic notions of traditional African society (Richardson 2008:79-80), but for critical and creative re-

⁴ That is 'progressive' in terms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, Africans may not unconditionally endorse the Declaration's emphasis on individual rights (cf. Nicolson 2008:9-10; Mkhize 2008:39-40, 42).

readings of the ancient ubuntu narrative. This is what Mkhize seems to aim at, though his failure to mention these atrocities may create the impression that he is “merely appropriating [ubuntu’s] bright side” (Van Binsbergen, cited in Richardson 2008:80). Nevertheless, Mkhize’s rendition of the ubuntu narrative thoroughly acknowledges what is still an important driving force for many – though not all (Chitando 2008:48-49) – Africans, namely religious beliefs.

For those who are willing to rearticulate it critically and imaginatively, the ancient wisdom that is ubuntu has a lot to offer in view of the many challenges that contemporary society confronts us with. Its communal emphasis may, for example, counter unbridled capitalism (thought by many to be the cause of the current global economic meltdown) (Mafunisa 2008:113-117; Murove 2008:90-96, 103-108). Its holistic view of healing may supplement the predominantly physical and mechanistic approach of Western medicine (Manda 2008:136-138). And, last but not least, its (little known) appreciation for retribution may serve critical assessments of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, thought by some as having meted out cheap or superficial justice (Richardson 2008:73-78). In spite of all that has already and rightly been said about the capacity of the traditional ethic of ubuntu to inspire forgiveness (Richardson 2008:67), it would nevertheless be wrong to assume that a restorative, harmonious settlement of criminal cases could *always* be reached in traditional African indigenous communities. Moreover, when such settlements failed or were dishonoured, restorative practices often gave way to retributive measures such as blood feuds between kin groups or the “taking up of spear” against the offender (i.e. killing him/her) – which was deemed to be the victim’s right amongst, for example, the Nuer of Sudan (Louw 2006:164). “As a legal category,” Van Binsbergen (2001:55) rightly claims, ubuntu “is not infinitely accommodating, not without boundaries.”

Plurality and individuality

The notions of accommodation and boundaries reintroduce the challenge raised at the outset of our assessment of ubuntu: the challenge of celebrating both diversity in unity and unity in diversity. Can ubuntu ‘handle plurality’?

Yes, I believe it can. Or, at least, its principle of agreeing to disagree is an important first step in this direction. This principle can handle plurality insofar as it inspires us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humanness so as to inform and enrich our own (Louw 2001:23). Thus understood, being a person through other persons translates into “[t]o be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognising the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form” (Van der Merwe 1996:1), or “[a] human being is a human being through (*the otherness of*) other human beings” (Van der Merwe 1996:1; italics added). This respect for or acknowledgment of otherness is vital for the survival of post-apartheid South Africa.

However, the ubuntu principle of agreeing to disagree does more. While celebrating diversity or otherness, it also keeps it in check, which is equally important. In spite of our newly founded democracy, civil or ethnic conflict cannot be ruled out. In fact, our multicultural democracy intensifies the various ethnic and socio-cultural differences. While democracy allows for legitimate claims to the institutionalisation of these differences, these claims are easily exploited for selfish political gain (Van der Merwe 1996:1).

As such, the principle of agreeing to disagree underscores ubuntu’s respect for *individuality*. But, be it noted, within the context of the ubuntu ethic, personal identity does not primarily reside in individualistic properties, but in relationships (Du Toit 2004:33). Ubuntu *defines* the individual in terms of his/her relationship with others. Individuals exist *in* their relationships with others, or, to borrow from Christian de Quincey, “we don’t form relationships, *they form us*” (cited in Forster 2007:275; italics in original). This is not to say that one’s identity is being dictated by others. Rather, as Dion Forster (2007:273) points out, in the context of the community that is ubuntu, personal identity resides in *reciprocal interconnection*: although “the community enriches, builds up, maintains and develops the individual, ... it is the individual who enriches, builds up, maintains and develops the community”. True ubuntu excludes an oppressive communalism. Instead of enveloping the African subject, so to speak, it allows him/her to grow and prosper “in a relational setting provided by ongoing contact and interaction with others” (Ndaba 1994:14). Ubuntu, claims Forster, suggests that an individual “grows more fully human, more true [sic] in [his/her] identity, through engagement with other persons” (Forster 2007:274).

Through his concept of interconnection Forster comes close to translating the well-known ubuntu maxim, “I am because we are”, into “we are because I am”. Such a translation,

I argued above (perhaps too hastily), would constitute an emancipatory understanding of ubuntu. Yet neither Forster, nor – insofar as it could be established – any other proponent of the ubuntu ethic, uses this translation. Why is that? Although I do not wish to speak on behalf of others, one may hypothesise that the exponents of ubuntu avoid the translation in question, since it creates the impression that the community (that is ‘we’) *depends on the individual*. This may be true insofar as ‘we’ signifies the sum total of other individuals. However, in the final analysis the word ‘we’, as used in classic ubuntu aphorisms, does not refer to the sum total of individuals but to the community as a *system* or, if you like, a living organism, that is a dynamic whole that is always and already more than the sum of its parts. As is the case with all living organisms, one “vital” (pun intended) quality disallows the quantification of the community that is ubuntu life. It is the life of this community, that is the *interactions* of its members (and not the action of any specific member), that determines identity as an ongoing process. Others, therefore, do not dictate the individual’s identity nor does the individual dictate the identities of others. Rather, to state it in the religious parlance of ubuntu, as human beings we participate in a *common* identity that resides in *seriti* – the power, life force or creative energy that emanates from God, in which each individual exists as a unique or distinct focus (Shutte 2008:29). This is perhaps what Ifeanyi Menkiti had in mind when he pointed out that African thought “asserts an *ontological independence* to human society, and moves from society to individuals” (cited in Shutte 2008:27; italics added); not the other way round, as in much European thought. It also seems to resonate with Leopold Senghor’s concept of “a community-based society, communal, not collectivist”. For Senghor (cited in Shutte 2008:27-28) African community does not refer to a mere collection of individuals, but to “people conspiring together, *con-spiring* in the basic Latin sense, united among themselves even to the very centre of their being”. Through this understanding of community, ubuntu philosophy exposes the I/others dichotomy as false, thereby giving a distinctly African meaning to the concept of power sharing.

Concluding remarks

In terms of the conception developed above, the community that is ubuntu constitutes an *open* society insofar as it celebrates the universal *and* the particular, sameness *and* difference, agreement *and* disagreement, tradition *and* innovation, continuity *and* change, religious belief *and* discursive rationality: a society, in short, that avoids the pitfalls that Sono rightly warns us against. This understanding of ubuntu is admittedly a rearticulation of an ancient ethic, inspired by what is perceived to be its best attributes. Its aim is not to serve as a smoke screen for the anomalies or atrocities of traditional African societies. On the contrary, the conception of ubuntu developed above was also cautioned by what is perceived to be the worst attributes of these societies. Nor is it meant as a call to return to the value orientations and practices of pre-colonial (Southern) African villages. It is, in any event, impossible to restore the ‘original’ version of ubuntu. Our accounts of ubuntu can at best be innovative reconstructions, inevitably coloured by our (post-)modern values, beliefs and biases. In this sense any attempt to answer the question, “What is ubuntu?” (read: “How was it first formulated?”), would be misguided. Although a reflection on ubuntu can hardly ignore inherited notions of it, surely the more important question has to be: “How *should* ubuntu be understood and utilised for the common good of *all* Africans, and of the world at large?” The ideal of an African Renaissance calls for critical re-readings of existing narratives of reconciliation and reintegration, including the ubuntu narrative. It does *not* call for the romanticisation of an indigenous past. Such is the challenge of ubuntu ethics.

Works consulted

- Bhengu, M J 1996. *Ubuntu: the essence of democracy*. Cape Town: Novalis.
- Boele van Hensbroek, P 1999. *Political discourses in African thought: 1860 to the present*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.
- Broodryk, J 2002. *Ubuntu: life lessons from Africa*. Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy.
- Chitando, E 2008. Religious ethics, HIV and AIDS and masculinities in Southern Africa, in Nicolson, R (ed.), *Persons in community: African ethics in a global culture*, 45-63. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Du Toit, C W 2000. Roots of violence: is a South African common good possible?, in Du Toit, C W (ed.), *Violence, truth and prophetic silence*, 15-41. Pretoria: Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa.

- Du Toit, C W 2004. Technoscience and the integrity of personhood in Africa and the West: Facing our technoscientific environment, in Du Toit, C W (ed.), *The integrity of the human person in an African context: perspectives from science and religion*, 1-46. Pretoria: Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa.
- Eze, M O 2008. What is African communitarianism? Against consensus as a regulative ideal, *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27(4), 386-399.
- Forster, D 2007. Identity in relationship: the ethics of ubuntu as an answer to the impasse of individual consciousness, in Du Toit, C W (ed.), *The impact of knowledge systems on human development in Africa*, 245-289. Pretoria: Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa.
- Jackson, N 2009 (February 18). Mbeki maak dit bitter moeilik, *Beeld* p.14.
- Jordaan, W 2009. Sonder mites kan mens nie lewe, *Beeld*. Retrieved March 12, 2009, From http://jv.news24.com/Beeld/Opinie/Rubrieke/0,,3-2085-66_2479320,00.html.
- Kimmerle, H 1995. *Mazungumzo: dialogen tussen Afrikaanse en Westerse filosofieën*. Amsterdam: Boom.
- Louw, D J 2001. Ubuntu and the challenges of multiculturalism in post-apartheid South Africa, *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy* XV(1-2), 15-36. Retrieved March 24, 2009, from *Quest* web site: http://www.quest-journal.net/access_to_volumes.htm.
- Louw, D J 2006. The African concept of ubuntu and restorative justice, in Sullivan, D & Tiftt, L (eds), *Handbook of restorative justice: a global perspective*, 161-173. New York: Routledge.
- Mafunisa, J M 2008. Ethics, African social values and the workplace, in Nicolson, R (ed.), *Persons in community: African ethics in a global culture*, 111-124. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Manda, L D 2008. Africa's healing wisdom: spiritual and ethical values of traditional African healthcare practices, in Nicolson, R (ed.), *Persons in community: African ethics in a global culture*, 125-139. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Mkhize, N 2008. Ubuntu and harmony: an African approach to morality and ethics, in Nicolson, R (ed.), *Persons in community: African ethics in a global culture*, 35-44. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Mnisi, O & Sithole, Z 2007. Witchcraft Act being finalised. *News24.com*. Retrieved March 24, 2009, from http://www.news24.com/News24/South_Africa/News/0,,2-7-1442_2109604,00.html.
- Murove, M F 2008. On African ethics and the appropriation of Western capitalism: cultural and moral constraints to the evolution of capitalism in post-colonial Africa, in Nicolson, R (ed.), *Persons in community: African ethics in a global culture*, 85-110. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Ndaba, W J 1994. *Ubuntu in comparison to Western philosophies*. Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy.
- Nicolson, R 2008. Introduction, in Nicolson, R (ed.), *Persons in community: African ethics in a global culture*, 1-13. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Praeg, L 2008. An answer to the question: What is [ubuntu]? *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27(4), 367-385.
- Ramose, M B 1999. *African philosophy through ubuntu*. Harare: Mond.
- Ramose, M B 2002. *African philosophy through ubuntu*. (Revised edition.) Harare: Mond.
- Richardson, R N 2008. Reflections on reconciliation and ubuntu, in Nicolson, R (ed.), *Persons in community: African ethics in a global culture*, 65-83. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- SA still plagued by xenophobia, 2009. *News24.com*. Retrieved May 12, 2009, from http://www.news24.com/News24/South_Africa/News/0,,2-7-1442_2514746,00.html.
- Shutte, A 2001. *Ubuntu: an ethic for a new South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Shutte, A 2008. African ethics in a globalising world, in Nicolson, R (ed.), *Persons in community: African ethics in a global culture*, 15-34. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Sono, T 1994. *Dilemmas of African intellectuals in South Africa*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.
- Van Binsbergen, W 2001. Ubuntu and the globalisation of Southern African thought and society, *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy* XV(1-2), 53-89. Retrieved March 24, 2009, from *Quest* website: http://www.quest-journal.net/access_to_volumes.htm.

- Van der Merwe, W L 1996. Philosophy and the multi-cultural context of (post)apartheid South Africa, *Ethical perspectives* 3(2), 1-15.
- Wiredu, K 1998. Democracy and consensus in African traditional politics: a plea for a non-party polity, in Coetzee, P H & Roux, A P J (eds). *Philosophy from Africa*, 374-382. Johannesburg: International Thomson.