

Shared Sociability and Humanity

A review of *C'est L'homme Qui Fait L'homme: Cul-De-Sac Ubuntu -Ism in Côte D'ivoire* by Francis B. Nyamnjoh. Mankon, Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa Research & Publishing Common Initiative Group, 2015, pp.178, ISBN: 9956-762-52-0.

by

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Introduction

This review essay will focus on *C'est l'homme qui fait l'homme: Cul-de-Sac Ubuntu -ism in Côte d'Ivoire* by Cameroonian social anthropologist, Francis B. Nyamnjoh. In terms of structure the book is organized or better split into seven chapters. The storyline follows very well everyday encounters in urban Africa and in a more broad sense directs the readers' attention to relational issues – social, economic and spatial relations. In so doing important social attributes, including the tendency to moralize, generalize and even stereotype others and situations are examined. While emphasizing “inclusivity” which is a central feature in the discourse, the author also presents Ubuntu as in a state of crisis through a number of characters, fictitious and non-fictional.

The intention of this review essay is to reflect on some broad implications of the discourse the book contributes to via a brief overview of literature that locates the meaning of Ubuntu as a philosophy of life, hence, an analysis of the theme of migration as reflected upon by Nyamnjoh and an appraisal of the applicability of discourse beyond the content and content of the book. This review will be informed by a set of fundamental questions initially raised by Thaddeus Metz: What does the word “Ubuntu” connote to different groups? How did they come to speak about it in the way they do? What functions or interests does invoking the term serve in a particular social context? How does Ubuntu compare to other value systems? (Metz 2014).

Ubuntu: A Philosophy of Social Life

Literally “Ubuntu” means “human-ness”, and is often translated as “humanity towards others”, and is used quite often in a more philosophical sense to mean a belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity (Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013). Mugumbate and Nyanguru have further showed that in Zulu language, one of South African’s indigenous languages, Ubuntu conveys and symbolizes the state of being human. A similar meaning also is conveyed in other languages such as Shona, a Zimbabwe language, where the word *hunhu* means the same thing (Sibanda 2014). The same meaning is further expressed by *ubuthosi* in Ndebele, also one of the languages spoken both in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Likewise in Botswana, the word *botho* expresses the same meaning whilst in Tanzania it is *bumuntu*. Congo, Angola, Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda use the words *bomoto*, *gimuntu*, *umunthu*, *vumuntu* and *umuntu* respectively. In this sense the author is right in arguing that “Ubuntu” is a philosophy of life that demands “inclusivity.” He dedicates a whole paragraph sampling texts from the Christian Bible that project a similar worldview. Ubuntu, like the Christian virtue of love, conveys a promise that good will be done by and to individuals by others, thereby placing Ubuntu at the same level as the Christian ethic which values respect and justice as the highest human good. It follows that Ubuntu is a direct call for recognition of the inherent humanity in the other person, a sense of shared sociability and humanity where individuals have a strong feeling of ‘we are who we are because of others’ (C'est l'homme qui fait l'homme). This understanding is not a semantic one. Writing on Bishop Tutu’s theology of Ubuntu in a book titled "*Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*" Michael Battle sees Ubuntu as an African concept recognizing that persons and groups form their identities in relation to one another. It should and ordinarily it conveys more than a fleeting linguistic connection among peoples and places divided and united in different times and situations.

McAllister (2009) observed that contemporary manifestations of Ubuntu are based on an indigenous African philosophy which informs action in daily life at the micro-level of the village and kin group thereby making it a profoundly ingrained philosophy of life. This is quite evident from debates, studies, and reports on the matter since the 1990s, especially in post-Apartheid South Africa, where Ubuntu is an invitation to a return to African roots and essential African way of life. That is, Ubuntu crystalizes a set of values and norms that define life and it is thus seen as an important and indispensable autochthonous cultural resource. What is problematic and a matter of serious debate is the assumption that Ubuntu represents a continuity between the past and the present and the relevance of the former for the latter as the basis of an alternative modernity; an ‘African renaissance’, an ideal propagated by South Africa’s former President Thabo Mbeki where Ubuntu might be a recent manifestation of the notion of an African humanism, similar to earlier notions like Ujamaa or Negritude. McAllister (2009) therefore raised a fundamental question of whether or not Ubuntu is vital for political and economic development and the construction of a contemporary African identity that contrasts with Western approaches and ideas.

The possible danger perceived by McAllister was a situation where an identity marker may be used to distinguish ‘them’ from ‘us’ and to essentialise and homogenise Africans, ignoring African diversity and promoting a superficial and erroneous stereotype. Over time the error has been attempts to define the non-African ‘other’ as lacking in Ubuntu. Samkange and Samkange (1980:77) acknowledged depravity of such reasoning arguing that “It does not follow that certain traits / attributes which are readily identifiable with Ubuntu/hunhu cannot be found among other peoples who are not of Bantu origin.” (Sibanda 2014:28). Apparently such claims are not always the claims of a marginalized minority but also of the educated, political, and academic elite described by McAllister who assume historical and spatial continuity, homogeneity, and African distinctiveness. By making such claims they seem unaware of the fact that they may be contributing to the development of hegemonic and exclusivist ideology which may not be in tandem with accelerated flows of ideas and peoples made possible by technological innovations in transportation and communication and diminishing political and ideological barriers.

Since the 1990s, in South Africa in particular, the term Ubuntu has gained further popularity that it is attached to a lot of things: Ubuntu schools, Ubuntu conferences, Ubuntu loans, Ubuntu child care, Ubuntu awards, Ubuntu counselling services and many others (Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013). Academics and researchers have been exploring the contribution of Ubuntu in business, education, healthy, philosophy and legal systems. Some of the notable applications include Ramose (1999), Teffo (1995) and Shutte (2001) who have focused on the importance of Ubuntu in African philosophy in areas such as morality/ethics, epistemology, logic and metaphysics. And also, Mbigi and Maree (1995), Goduka and Swadener (1999) and Prinsolo (1995) discuss the value of Ubuntu in business, education and healthy fraternity respectively; while Sindane (1995) use of the concept in legal systems and politics (Mawere 2012).

Some consider Ubuntu as a philosophy that could be used on a daily basis to settle disputes and conflicts. It was and some still believe that it is central to the idea of reconciliation as illustrated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s approach to post-apartheid truth and reconciliation. The underlying assumption which is yet to be proven being; individuals realize that when someone else is degraded, then they themselves are degraded. In other words, in principle, Ubuntu drives people to be compassionate. Yet, as an element of daily lived experience, it does not follow everyone would consistently propagate Ubuntu as such. Indeed, it has been pointed out that some people who are aware of it sometimes dismiss it as a post-colonial ‘Utopian’ invention and/or a ‘prophetic’ illusion crafted by the African political elites in the age of globalization (Nabudere 2005). Some of the cynics even question Ubuntu as a philosophy on the ground that it is at best a ‘Bantu’ philosophy not related to the ways of life and outlook of other ‘tribal’ groupings of Africa let alone in multicultural and multi-tribal urban centres placed far away from traditional custodians of culture. Hailey (2008) cited in McAllister questioned whether Ubuntu can also be universally applied across cultures, noting that because it is not homogenous, it may not be universally applicable. Another criticism has been on the strengths of Ubuntu values. It has been argued that some of the values may potentially weaken society.

For example, respect for authority and openness to new ideas could have been one of contributory factors to colonisation in Africa which promoted disenfranchisement, culture erosion and dependence just as the weaker tenets of Ubuntu may also be used to make Africans submissive and dependent (McAllister, 2009). Further, appealing to a shared sociability and humanity in order to resolve conflicts and contradictions, there are no real ways of really coming to grips with problems such gender bias, class difference, historical inequalities, xenophobia, just to mention some of the enduring challenges affecting the pace of socio-economic transformation of African society today. The unintended consequence has been protection of the interests of the powerful elite, and inability to resolve real problems besetting society. Therefore, one is poised to ask: What are the areas that directly respond to this challenge posed by the current interest in Ubuntu and what are the implications of discourse as presented in the book.

Nyamnjoh advances the view that the lack of ‘inclusiveness’ is one of the challenges besetting southern Africa, the entire continent, and the world at large. The challenge is presented through a fusion of fiction and scholarship reflective of reality yet theoretically informed drawing on the author’s rich ethnographic presence as he has lived and worked in southern Africa (Botswana and South Africa) for more than a decade. He has travelled throughout the region and the continent and beyond. He has researched and written on the social, economic and political transformations. Therefore he understands quite well the social, economic and political context of the region and the continent, within which Ubuntu originates, subsists and standouts as a fundamental philosophy of social life. He also is aware of the popular expectations and disillusionments posed by globalization, especially accelerated flows of capital and labour since the 1990s and the ongoing economic, political and cultural upheavals. The implications have been serious reflections on identity, citizenship and more generally politics of belonging (Nyamnjoh 2006).

The book was first published in 2015, just around the peak of what came to be known as Europe’s Migrant Crisis. Cross border migration is one of the most important subjects. Generally migration is perceived as less of a crisis when it involves a handful of migrants and when the receiving regions perceive immigrants as harbingers of opportunity. Could we say that Ubuntu requires accommodation without counting the costs, thus ignoring that there are costs both to the sending and receiving regions? An important dimension of migration (local, international or transcontinental) is that migrants always maintain close ties with people and places left behind. Some migrants achieve immeasurable success in the new places than what they could have realized in the place of origin. Many also become a source of sustenance for the family and kin left in the place of origin. No wonder that kin and friends left behind perceive relations and friends in this state as a source of livelihood. Remittances become in some cases a major source of income for families and sometimes for national economies; especially where remittance levels are high and constitute a bigger share of gross earnings and exceeding by a significant margin the locally generated incomes and/or also providing a big boost to foreign exchange earnings.

Remittances convey an act of self-giving in the service of the other, a shared sociability and humanness. Nyamnjoh locates these virtues in relation to migrants abroad who would often compare themselves to zombies in a form of witchcraft – *nyongo* – which privileges zombification of victims over instant gratification through instant and total death. Two characters, Daou and Amélie, compare themselves to zombies in similar fashion, forced by duplicitous family and friends back in Côte d'Ivoire, such as Gohou and Nastou. Like most migrants living abroad, they look like but they are not real zombies, they are capable of complaining and have opportunity of return, only to be met with disappointment and shattered dreams when they discover that efforts to support their kin and peers are not equally appreciated and reciprocated. The question becomes between the migrants and their relations back home, which could be considered as manifesting or lacking in Ubuntu. To answer this question the author draws on the experiences of Emmanuel Adebayor (a renowned Togolese international footballer and African footballer of the year for 2008).

The book is subject and open to multiple interpretations. Anthropologist and sociologist will find many interesting threads useful to their trades. They would not be wrong if some of them would attempt to appropriate the author and the discourse as their own just as many a people and linguistic-ethnic groups in southern Africa would appropriate Ubuntu as their own. Geographers, sociologists, economics and historians would find elements that talk to their trade as in the social dynamics that propel population growth and the social relations around the theme of mobility. Likewise political scientist will find useful threads that relate to everyday management of power and policy in rather intriguing ways. Therefore the book speaks to a multidisciplinary audience, especially where matters of contracts and legal rights of persons crisscrossing territorial divides are concerned and tenuous rights in land where planning standards and security of tenure is fluid and bound to contestation. Thus, in a myriad ways and words the author addresses social and economic dimensions in human interactions through which the values and tenets of Ubuntu are put to a test. Socially, the writer demonstrates how human interaction is shaped by social variables and norms that define gender, ethnicity, and class relations. Economically, Nyamnjoh pays adequate attention to the economic drivers fueling transnational livelihoods as in rising incidence of trans-continental migrations associated of late with economic migrants sometimes referred to economic refugees. This is a clear contrast to the situation in the 1980s and 1990s across many regions of Africa when a significant number of international migrations were generally forced movements of political refugees – victims of one party dictatorships, civil wars and ethnic and religious minorities in conflict, often moving into neighbouring countries where the differences between peace and war were the major determinants of the patterns of migration. Then the desire was to protect the sanctity of the fresh bone and blood from the ravages of war or environmental crises in areas where droughts, floods and pestilence remain prevalent challenges of the day today. Where war and droughts were juxtaposed with economic challenges the impact turned out to be one of general socio-economic and political despondency with long lasting effects which are of course not reflected upon in the writer's treatise but nevertheless have an import on perceptions and experiences of Ubuntu.

Spatially Nyamnjoh draws readers' attention to accelerated flows of information, money and human movements thanks to the compression of time and space aspect of human interaction. The television, mobile phone and internet allow speedy sharing of information. Mobile banking and inter-bank services allow instant transactions of money notwithstanding foreign exchange controls. The compression of these non-flexible aspects of interaction imply accelerated flows of information but also of opportunities local and global, making long range movements in search for work in the formal as well as informal sectors practically possible. Where migrants draw on primordial connections it becomes clear that globalization does not erode the pre-existing social relations rather their significance is magnified. Gahou and Dohou had over time their relations intensified as each finds in the other a helpful relation and partner, where one provides income that allows the other to engage in cultural consumption beyond what local economic conditions could provide. The other, through a stay in Europe, finds enhanced potential to accumulate wealth but instead chooses to invest in housing back home. Investing in housing back at home is assurance to the relation that the emigrant will eventually return. It is a means of showing off as much as it is also a means of ensuring a place among the kin and kinth notwithstanding the challenges that such investments may encounter the misuse of funds and abuse of trust which are serious challenges to Ubuntu.

Abuse of remittances and lack of accountability discussed by Nyamnjoh have many parallels in real life. Whereas at individual level remittances from relations and friends are misused and squandered into useless pursuits, at the national and continental level foreign aid, loans and grants are likewise misused and squandered by regimes not used to accountability. It sounds like lack of discipline at individual level is magnified into lack of openness, transparency and accountability at institutional and national levels.

Nyamnjoh offers a useful critique of Ubuntu by showing its limitations where opportunism could be masked in opportunity. If gift giving is part of Ubuntu, is receiving also a part of it, like two opposite sides of a coin? Do giving and receiving involve different sets of values? Thus, the writer points at Ubuntu in crisis, however, he also shows the way as to how the situation could be redeemed. He underscores the value of interconnectedness and the need for inclusivity by showing that if humans pride themselves with the capacity to harness nature, it is only appropriate to make human nature part of the bargain. The author also appreciates situations where an individual toiling away in a distant land might be a victim of various claims by family, friends and acquaintances who are not themselves ready to reciprocate. Adebayor's story is a pinnacle of social exploitation by relations of the successful migrant kin. Zombification is a form of social and economic exploitation of migrants by their kin left behind. Given these occurrences it is ill-defined whether relationship claims be taken seriously, and when should they be ignored. That this is a case, does it not speak volumes of the fall out of Ubuntu and of inclusion or a glorification of exclusion?

Ubuntu: Beyond Content and Context

In the final analysis it is important once again to underscore that in the book the author provides a carefully crafted fusion of fiction and non-fiction to provide a rich ethnographic analysis and representation of everyday life in Africa. Hence, the author draws on Ubuntu as an invitation to the appreciation that social life is a network of interconnected and interdependent socialites involving various relations that require constant negotiation and domesticated agency (Nyamnjoh 2002). Ubuntu stands out as an important social condition without which or the lack of which is catalyst for social challenges.

Various tragedies reflect a crisis of Ubuntu, even in societies where Ubuntu is considered to be an enduring and therefore prized virtue. The challenge as McAllister (2009) once saw it, there are beliefs and practices that contradict the ideals ascribed by Ubuntu but which are not discussed such as conflict, violence, exploitation, greed, neglect, witchcraft accusations and sorcery. Some of the well-publicized humanitarian problems in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, ethnic cleansing as seen in Great Lakes Region, political and military conflicts and postelection violence, HIV/AIDS, poverty amidst unprecedented waste of resources through corruption and ritual killings of persons with albinism are by no means isolated examples, they in many ways reflect Ubuntu in crisis. They reflect on and impact decisively on peoples' sense of collective identity and inclusiveness (Kochalumchuvattil 2010). It appears there is no short cut to addressing these challenges. Nyamnjoh challenges readers by showing that 'Ubuntu' if understood as a condition and part and parcel of human agency is work in progress; meaning that human beings become agents through others.

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