*Botho/Ubuntu : Perspectives of Black Consciousness and Black Theology*

Ramathate TH Dolam

University of South Africa, South Africa

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## Abstract

Botho/ubuntu is a philosophy that is as old as humanity itself. In South Africa, it was a philosophy and a way of life of blacks. It was an African cultural trait that rallied individuals to become communal in outlook and thereby to look out for each other. Although 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 a millennia. Colonialism, slavery and apartheid introduced materialism and individualism that denigrated the black identity and dignity. The Black Consciousness philosophy and Black Theology worked hand in hand since the middle of the nineteen sixties to restore the human dignity of black people in South Africa.

**Key words:** Botho/Ubuntu, Black Consciousness, Black Theology, religion, culture.

## 1. 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 to historical injustices, cultural domination, religious vilification et cetera. 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 nineteen sixties 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.

## 2. BOTHO/UBUNTU
## 2.1 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 problem is that ubuntu is not only an intrinsic concept but it is also extrinsic something that is being worked at, both inwardly and externally. Nonetheless, one will make an attempt at giving 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. For Shutte (2001: 2), ubuntu means "humanity". It is rather confusing as the term humanity can also refer to humankind. The concept becomes rather 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 (2001:2).

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

## 2.2 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 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". One important aspect of ubuntu is that although the article will use South Africa as its context, it should be noted that as a way of life, ubuntu is not a monopoly of South Africans or Africans. 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).

It is generally agreed that an organising principle for ubuntu is that, "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 one thousand five hundred years ago. Most beliefs of ubuntu were transferred to the other parts of Africa during the cultural movement to the southern parts of the continent. He points out that Central and Eastern people who were iron working migrated down South and settled in the present day Limpopo and Mpumalanga. About a thousand and fifty years ago, a new culture, the Leopards Kopje culture moved to Mapungubwe and by the sixteenth century hundreds 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) expresses it, ubuntu "...is an ethical concept and expresses a vision of what is valuable and worthwhile in life".

## 3. RELIGION AND CULTURE IN AFRICA
### 3.1 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 are put in a situation that compels us to ask which came first, religion or culture. Was religion used in ancient and modern civilizations 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 in Nicholson (2008: 57) says, "Ubuntu can be understood as the essence of God's presence within humanity" and continues to say 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" (in Nicholson 2008: 120). Chitando (in Nicholson 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 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 ethic might be called humanistic, as opposed to the supernaturalistic. This school of thought submit that religion has not been helpful to African struggle for scientific advancement. Chitando 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 (in Nicholson 2008: 46).

## 3.2 Denigration of the African religion and culture

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

(a) The religion of the people was declared pagan and the Christian religion was imposed on them sometimes forcefully.
(b) 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).
(c) Where the people resisted invasion and wars of conquest, they would be decimated.
(d) The people were dispossesed 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 not killed were made slaves.
(e) 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, full of ubuntu welcomed them warmly by allowing them first, to grow vegetables at the southern tip of the continent as a halfway station to India and when they got more comfortable they, second, kept livestock etc and started demanding more land that was graciously given. Missionaries later 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 and Steenkamp 2012:130-139, 163-175). With the rise to power of the Nationalist Party in 1948, Apartheid which legally entrenched racism in South Africa was promulgated (Changuion and Steenkamp 2012:186-200). To make sure that blacks were permanently kept out of the eighty-seven percent of the land that white people have given themselves and black people were contained in the thirteen 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 autonomy to govern themselves (Changuion and Steenkamp 2012:214-231). Later, these homelands would be sovereign and independent of "white" South Africa with Transkei being the first of such homelands to be independent in 1976 (Changuion and Steenkamp 2012: 232-250). Through the tricameral parliament Indians and Coloureds were represented in the white South African parliament (Changuion and 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 psychologically confused.

The Nationalist Party led government used various strategies to suppress the black resistance to racism and white domination. For example, political parties that fought for liberation such as the African National Congress (ANC), Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) were banned in 1960.But they went underground and formed armies of resistance called uMkhonto we Sizwe and Poqo respectively. The racist government of the day was relentless in crushing the opposition forces. The nineteen sixties to the early nineties 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 these whites who fought with the black liberation movements ( cf also Brotz 1977; Davenport 1987; Lodge 1983; Motsoko 1984).

## 4.  BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND BLACK THEOLOGY
## 4.1 Definition

Black Consciousness (BC) and Black Theology (BT) were initiatives for liberation by the students and youth of the nineteen sixties. They are regarded as sides of the same coin (Pityana in Motlhabi 1972:41; Duncan in du Toit 2008:116) and others regard Black Theology as the religious arm of BC (Cone in Motlhabi 1972:28).

Briefly, BC is defined by Biko in Stubbs (1978:92):

> 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 in 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 (in Stubbs 1978:5) says, "Black Theology... is a situational interpretation of Christianity" and Mpunzi (in Motlhabi1972:188) 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 explortation etc.

## 4.2 Black Consciousness and Black Theology Perspectives
### 4.2.1 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.

As Davenport (1987:315-338) observes, racial segregation was not merely a separation of the colonisers and the colonised, but a policy aimed at ensuring white supremacy and survival. Biko (in Stubbs 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 above, South Africa was exposed to colonialism since 1652 and with the entrenchment of Apartheid in the South African Constitution in 1948 and the subsequent repression of the forces of liberation against the white minority rule, there descended a paralysing fear on the South African society (Biko in Stubbs 1978:73-79;Pityana in du Toit 2008:5).

The political vacuum that resulted during the nineteen sixties 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 Black Theology. 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 would not be trusted completely (Sono 1991:66-69; Biko in Stubbs 1978:89-91). Although white liberals may not have be voted for the Nationalist Party, they still enjoyed the protection and privileges offered by the government, hence Biko in Stubbs (1978:23) says, "...in the ultimate analysis no white person can escape being part of the oppressor camp".

 BC and BT were not trusted by the white community including the white liberals (Biko in Stubbs 1978:26; Biko in Stubbs 1978:63-66; Biko in Stubbs 1978:89-90; Pityana in du Toit 2008:6-7; Sono 1993:5-9 and 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 1991:131).

But what was not realised was that the fact that national liberation was first and top priority for BC, that did not mean that the other items and issues on gender justice, 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 are products of the BC and BT, and they do mention how without their background of BC and BT they would not have become what they had become as for example political, business and religious leaders. They also believe that the BC and BT values, principles and the way of life is still influencing the way they do business irrespective of party political affiliation (Sono 1991:109-115; 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 a sub-human by the racist minority governments. 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 and hope for a national

liberation was the source of strength for BC and BT and obviously also for the other liberation movements (Biko in stubbs 1978:55; Buthelezi in Motlhabi: 1972:71–75; 121-129). Demolition of Apartheid was a must because it was tied up with white supremacy, capitalist exploitation and deliberate oppression (Biko in stubbs 1978: 28). And as Halisi correctly asserts (in Pityana and Ramphele1991: 102), "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 civilization that they deemed as superior to that of the indigenous people. The indigenous culture was regarded as primitive, barbaric, savage and backward et cetera. Motlhabi ( in 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 emptiness 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 or at best, that they arrived at the same time; whites arriving by the sea and black people through Africa's thick forests from the Great Lakes, that blacks stole from the white people et cetera. Heroes such as Makana were regarded as trouble makers, nation builders such as King Shaka were regarded as cruel tyrants (Biko in stubbs 1978: 95; Khoapa in du Toit 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 in du Toit 2008: 78)

The communal way of living has been replaced by individualism and materialism. 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.

Not the individual but society or community is a 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* (an 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 like "*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 in stubbs 1978: 41)

Biko (in Stubbs 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 like, " 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" (Biko in stubbs 1978: 42).

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

### 4.2.3  Demonisation of African religion

Pityana in (Motlhabi 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 offered them in return the white conception of divinity according to Biko.

Biko (in Stubbs 1978: 93) as rephrased by Duncan (in du Toit 2008:127, Biko in Stubbs 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 (in Motlhabi 1972:63). Biko (in Motlhabi 1972:56) asks the question as to why Africans were required to cast away their indigenous clothing, their customs et cetera. As Zulu (in Motlhabi 1972:87) complains, the reading of the nineteenth 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, denigration of African culture by the missionaries and white domination (Akin in Motlhabi 1972 63; Zulu in Motlhabi 1972: 85-90; Ngubane in Mosala and Tlhagale 1986:71-90). When BC and BT arrived on the scene in the nineteen sixties, 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 (in 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 (in Stubbs 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" (in Stubbs 1978:98).

## 5    CONCLUSION

For BC and BT liberation should be understood in a holistic manner as alluded above that is, psychologically, politically, socially, economically, religiously and otherwise. 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 and 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 dropped as we make our diversity to 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 humanity (ubuntu) of each individual, regardless of race, class or gender (Sibisi in Pityana and Ramphele 1991:136).( parenthesis mine)

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