

Chapter 1

Growing Up in a Society Practicing Ubuntu

Joseph Siloka Mukuni

Virginia Tech, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author looks back at his life as a child growing up among a Bantu-speaking society in which life is guided by Ubuntu values. Ubuntu refers to a philosophy that teaches the interconnectedness of humans and the need, therefore, for people to affirm the humanness in each other, to relate humanely with others, and to work harmoniously and cooperatively as brothers and sisters. The philosophy also teaches us to be responsible stewards of the natural and wildlife environment because human survival depends on its sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I look back at my life as a child growing up among a Bantu-speaking society in which life is guided by Ubuntu values. Ubuntu refers to a philosophy that teaches the interconnectedness of humans and the need, therefore, for people to affirm the humanness in each other, to relate humanely with others, and to work harmoniously and cooperatively as brothers and sisters. The philosophy also teaches us to be responsible stewards of the natural and wildlife environment because human survival depends on its sustainability. Socialization among the Bantu-speaking people includes learning and living the values of Ubuntu. In the chapter I share some of my experiences as a village boy among the Leya people of southern Zambia. To provide context to my story, I start by explaining who the Bantu-speaking peoples are, what Ubuntu is, and the relationship between the words Bantu and Ubuntu.

The Bantu-Speaking People

The philosophy of *Ubuntu* defines the way of life of Africa's Bantu-speaking peoples, who today number about 240 million (De Fillipo, Bostoen, & Pakendorf, 2012) and speak around 680 different languages (De Luna, 2015) derived from a common linguistic family called Bantu or -Ntu. They are found in

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many countries south of the Sahara, from Cameroon to South Africa. The Bantu-speaking people began to migrate from the borders of present-day Nigeria and Cameroon from about 3,000 years ago, going southward for many reasons, including overpopulation and search for more fertile land and favorable climatic conditions (Grollemund, Branford, Bostoen, Meade, Venditti, & Pagel, 2015; Bostoen, 2018). To grow food crops such as sorghum and millet to feed a growing population and to have good pasture and water for livestock such as goats, they needed arable land and greener pastures (Cartwright, 2019; Rocha, Jorge & Fehn, Anne-Maria, 2016). The southern and central parts of Africa appealed to them, and it helped that the people they found as they trekked farther from the Sahara were hunters and gatherers (Liu, 2019) who did not seem to have much need for arable land for them to survive. The hunters and gatherers either got assimilated through intermarriages with the Bantu-speaking peoples or moved farther away from the new arrivals.

Bostoen (2018) has alphabetically listed the countries in which the Bantu-speaking people are found as follows: 'Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, Congo-Kinshasa, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, Southern Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.'

Concept of Family among the Bantu-Speaking People

In traditional societies of the Bantu-speaking people, the primary organizational unit in a village is the family headed by a patriarch. However, some Chewa/Nyanja societies found in Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique are headed by matriarchs since they are matrilineal (Tembo, 2018). Their concept of family is broader than that of most Western societies. Family includes father, mother, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, in-laws, and everybody else related by blood or marriage. Furthermore, as Tembo (2018) has pointed out 'In this system, all brothers of the father are called "father", all sisters of the mother are called "mother", all their children "brother" and "sister". In male-speaking terms, father's sister's daughters (cross-cousins) are called cousins' (p.3). For this reason, some westerners refer to this concept as an "extended family system". To members of traditional societies, however, the system is not extended; it is simply what it is and has always been. All members of a family see themselves as one and everyone is expected to look out for everyone else, supporting one another and complementing their different talents for the good of society. The norm is that it is everyone's business to care for the elderly and the weak and to ensure that children are socialized according to the ways of the community. Every adult is duty-bound to exact discipline on all children because the children belong to the whole community, hence the popular saying 'It takes a village to raise a child'.

The concept of kinship plays an important part in Bantu-speaking African families (Opie, Shultz, Atkinson, Currie, & Mace, 2014; Lowes, 2016). Kinship determines how people trace their membership to an ethnic group and their right to inheritance. There are two dominant kinship systems in sub-Saharan Africa, i.e. patrilineal and matrilineal. In a patrilineal system, people trace their group membership to their fathers' lineage. They have a right to inherit their fathers' property or political positions. Married women are incorporated into their husbands' lineages and are no longer considered as 'belonging' to their families of origin. Marriage in a patrilineal system usually involves the relocation of the bride to join her husband's village. In matrilineal systems, on the other hand, people trace their group membership through their mothers. Children 'belong' to their mothers' people. In this system, a woman's brothers have more parental obligations to her children than the children's father. In a matrilineal system, a mar-

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