28

Chapter 3
Ubuntu Philosophy and Lived Experience:
A Case of Bakalanga People of Botswana

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is based on auto-ethnographic observations of the authors. It narrates how Ubuntu has functioned among the Bakalanga communities of Botswana using lived experiences of the authors consistent with the philosophy of Ubuntu. The chapter begins by exploring different scholars' definitions of the philosophy of Ubuntu. They unanimously define it in terms of its emphasis on the need for individuals to co-exist and support each other as members of a given community. The chapter points to the negative effect of Westernisation of Ubuntu. It therefore recommends the need for the inclusion of Ubuntu in the curriculum to ensure that it does not disappear.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is based on auto-ethnographic observations of the authors, who use their own lived experiences to offer insights into how *Ubuntu* functions in the Bakalanga communities of Botswana. This self-reflection piece of writing explores the authors' personal experiences as they grew up observing the Bakalanga people way of living in their cultural and social settings. This auto-ethnography reflects on the past mainly as practiced by Bakalanga in a predominantly rural setting and how the people's way of life is consistent with *Ubuntu* philosophy. The auto-ethnography also explores insight of what has changed today, and what could have possibly caused such change. Some explanation of what is needed to ensure that *Ubuntu* continues to be upheld in our communities and remains relevant in this modern era dominated by western culture is provided.

Defining the Philosophy of Ubuntu

Ubuntu philosophy is defined as values and practices that are perceived by people of African origin to be making people authentic human beings. Although these values and practices differ across ethnic groups, the common thread that cuts across all of them is that an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant rational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world. Viewed from the Pan-African philosophical perspective of *Ubuntu*, it is perceived as promoting the spirit of teamwork and collaboration which implies the promotion of group cohesion and support (Magubate & Chereni, p.vi). Further recognized as the African philosophy of humanism, *Ubuntu* is seen as "linking the individual to the collective through 'brotherhood' or 'sisterhood'" (Swanson, 2007, p. 55). According to Lutz (2009), the *Ubuntu* philosophy is emphatic that "in a true community, the individual does not pursue the common good instead of his or her own good, but rather pursues his or her own good through pursuing the common good" (p. 314). In other words, the ethics of a true community does not require that individual persons should sacrifice their own good to promote the good of others, but rather ask them to realise that as individuals they can accomplish their own true good only through the promotion of the good of others.

In the traditional African context, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* does not only emphasize the need for people to respect the fundamental rights of others, but also the value of sharing, co-responsibility and loyalty to the collective identity. An example of the demonstration of the practice of such values would be the symbiosis of the community members and relatives during cultural practices performed in their respective settings (Mabovula, 2011). *Ubuntu* is about the strength of the community arising from the support of the community, with emphasis on dignity and identity achievable through its tenets of mutualism, empathy, generosity as well as commitment of the community (Swanson, 2007).

In conclusion *Ubuntu* is a philosophy that locates identity and meaning making within a collective approach as opposed to an individualistic one. As a result, the individual is not independent of the collective; rather, the relationship between a person and her/his community is reciprocal, interdependent and mutually beneficial (Oviawe, 2016). Against this background, this chapter therefore, looks at the philosophy of *Ubuntu* as it applies to Bakalanga ethnic group in Botswana based on the lived experience of the authors.

Who are Bakalanga?

Botswana comprises different ethnic groups (Mhlauli, 2012), amongst them the Bakalanga who are the second largest ethnic group in Botswana, with a population estimated at 150,000 which represents eight percent of the country's total population. They are mostly found along the Zimbabwe-Botswana border in the whole of the North-East District in such villages as Sekakangwe, Masunga, Makaleng, Mapoka and Mosojane. They are also found in some parts of the Central District residing in Tutume, Sebina, Maitengwe and Nkange, to name a few villages (Bagwasi, 2012). Up until independence in 1966, Bakalanga in the North East District were a confederation that was united by their God (*Mwali*) as well as their culture and language referred to as Ikalanga. Believers of Mwali are found mainly in the north-eastern part of Botswana and western Zimbabwe (Mgadla, 2001).

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