

The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*¹

Christian B.N. Gade

Department of Philosophy and History of Ideas
Aarhus University
Jens Chr. Skous Vej 7
8000 Aarhus C
Denmark
filcbng@hum.au.dk

Abstract

In this article, I demonstrate that the term '*ubuntu*' has frequently appeared in writing since at least 1846. I also analyse changes in how *ubuntu* has been defined in written sources in the period 1846 to 2011. The analysis shows that in written sources published prior to 1950, it appears that *ubuntu* is always defined as a human quality. At different stages during the second half of the 1900s, some authors began to define *ubuntu* more broadly: definitions included *ubuntu* as African humanism, a philosophy, an ethic, and as a worldview. Furthermore, my findings indicate that it was during the period from 1993 to 1995 that the Nguni proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' (often translated as 'a person is a person through other persons') was used for the first time to describe what *ubuntu* is. Most authors today refer to the proverb when describing *ubuntu*, irrespective of whether they consider *ubuntu* to be a human quality, African humanism, a philosophy, an ethic, or a worldview.

Introduction

This article offers a historical analysis of the various ways that *ubuntu* has been defined in written sources. Such an analysis has not been conducted before. The analysis indicates that many of the present ideas about the nature of *ubuntu*, for instance, that *ubuntu* is African humanism, a philosophy, an ethic, or a worldview, first emerged in written sources during the second half of the 1900s. Furthermore, the analysis shows that *ubuntu* became an object of particular interest and consideration during the political periods of transition from white minority rule to black majority rule in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Chris Vervliet has written that '*ubuntu* is rooted in a search towards African dignity' (Vervliet 2009: 20). Of course, the search for African dignity in postcolonial Africa

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did not begin with the literature on *ubuntu* which was published during the periods of transition to black majority rule in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Prior to these transition periods, the search for African dignity was, for instance, reflected in the political thinking of such postcolonial African leaders as Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Senghor, Julius Nyerere, Obafemi Awolowo, Kenneth Kaunda, and Ahmed Sékou Touré; all of whom made a call for Africanization and attempted to formulate a foundation of politics that consists of traditional African humanist or socialist values.² Some of the narratives that were told to restore African dignity in the former colonies, which gained their independence in the late 1950s and 1960s, can be characterized as *narratives of return*, since they contain the idea that a *return* to something African (for instance traditional African socialism or humanism) is necessary in order for society to prosper. I will argue that some of the narratives that have developed in relation to *ubuntu* are also narratives of return, and that they share a number of characteristics with the narratives of return told during the early years of decolonization.

To contextualize the literature on *ubuntu*, I will begin with a section about narratives of return in postcolonial Africa. Afterwards, I will turn to explore the historical development of the written discourses on *ubuntu*, and reflect on the discursive shifts that I identify in the literature.

Narratives of Return in Postcolonial Africa

In this section, I will primarily use Julius Nyerere's ideas about *ujamaa* as an example of a narrative of return.³ Before turning to *ujamaa*, I want to share two general observations about these narratives. The first observation is that narratives of return have often been told and discussed in the context of *social transformations* where political leaders, academics, and others have attempted to identify past values that they believed should inspire politics and life in general in the future society. The second observation is that African postcolonial narratives of return have typically contained the idea that in order to create a good future, society needs to *return to something African* which does not stem from the previous period of colonial oppression but which is rather rooted in pre-colonial times. Broadly speaking, the postcolonial African narratives of return thus tend to divide history into three phases: *first*, the pre-colonial phase which, often but not always, is perceived as a 'golden age' characterized by harmony; *second*, a period of decline, which is understood to have been brought about by intruders who attempted to deprive the Africans of their resources, dignity, and culture; and *third*, a phase of recovery, where Africans, after having gained sufficient political power, attempt to restore their dignity and culture by returning to (what are claimed to

2 In a paper about social philosophy in postcolonial Africa, Kwasi Wiredu explains that: 'The leaders in question [Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Senghor, Julius Nyerere, Obafemi Awolowo, Kenneth Kaunda, and Ahmed Sékou Touré] had an equally strong sense of the importance of cultural self-identity. Colonialism had in varying degrees scored African culture. Now after independence they needed to reassert their own culture, and not just cosmetically. National reconstruction is a cultural enterprise of the highest kind. At independence the easy option was to stick by the systems in which the colonial powers left us. These were copies, imperfect copies, to be sure, of what were in place in the colonialist countries. These leaders did not go for that easy option. They understood that the colonial systems needed to be reviewed from an African standpoint' (Wiredu 2008: 332).

3 In *African Philosophy and the Quest for Autonomy: A Philosophical Investigation* (2000), Leonhard Praeg provides – among other things – a very interesting account of narratives of return, politics of return, and ethnophilosophy. My usage of the phrase 'narratives of return' is inspired by Praeg 2000, and I want to recommend this book to those who wish to consult a more detailed account of narratives of return than the one I offer in the present section.

be) traditional, humanist, or socialist values. It should be noted that in recent years, the attempt to recover African dignity has often been connected with the idea of an African Renaissance (see for instance the African Renaissance Statement of Thabo Mbeki).⁴

Now I will turn to the example of *ujamaa*. Julius Nyerere was sworn in as the president of the newly independent Republic of Tanganyika in December 1962. In April 1964, he became president of the new United Republic of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, which was renamed the United Republic of Tanzania in October 1964. He continued as president until his retirement in 1985. In the introduction to *Freedom and Socialism* (1968), he explained that throughout nearly the whole of Africa, ‘the first and most vocal demand of the people after independence was for Africanization’ (Nyerere 1968: 27). Julius Nyerere supported the call for Africanization and argued that in Tanganyika, and later also in Tanzania, Africanization should take the form of a *return* to *ujamaa*, which he described as a traditional African form of socialism. In the introduction to *Freedom and Unity* (1966), he explained why he thought that Africanization was necessary:

Years of Arab slave raiding, and later years of European domination, had caused our people to have grave doubt about their own abilities. This was no accident; any dominating group seeks to destroy the confidence of those they dominate because this helps them to maintain their position, and the oppressors in Tanganyika were no exception (Nyerere 1966: 3).

Julius Nyerere was convinced that after independence a new historical phase of recovery had begun in Tanganyika. He described this phase of recovery as a revolution: ‘It is a revolution with a purpose, and that purpose is the extension to all African citizens of the requirements on human dignity’ (Nyerere 1966: 22). Furthermore, he argued that the revolution could fulfil its purpose if society *returned* to its traditional socialism. This traditional socialism was to be re-invented as *ujamaa* which, for Julius Nyerere, represented a unique African kind of socialism that differed significantly from the European version:

European socialism was born of the Agrarian Revolution and the Industrial Revolution which followed it. The former created the “landed” and the “landless” classes in society; the later produced the modern capitalist and the industrial proletariat. These two revolutions planted the seeds of conflict within society, and not only was European socialism born of that conflict, but its apostles sanctified the conflict itself into a philosophy. Civil war was no longer looked upon as something evil, or something unfortunate, but as something good and necessary. As prayer is to Christianity or to Islam, so civil war (which they called “class war”) is to the European version of socialism – a means inseparable from the end (Nyerere 1966: 169).

According to Julius Nyerere, the true African socialist does not consider one class of men as his brethren and another as his enemies. He or she does not form an alliance with the ‘brethren’ for the extermination of the ‘non-brethren,’ but rather regards all human beings as members of an extended family. The African socialism of *ujamaa* is

⁴ <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/1998/mbek0813.htm>. Unless otherwise indicated, all the websites to which I refer in this article were accessed on 28 May 2011.

therefore not founded on class struggle, but on the harmony of the extended family. He has explained that:

“*Ujamaa*”, then, or “familyhood”, describes our socialism [*ujamaa*” is a Swahili word meaning “familyhood”]. It is opposed to capitalism, which seeks to build a happy society on the basis of the exploitation of man by man; and it is equally opposed to doctrinaire socialism which seeks to build its happy society on a philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man. We, in Africa, have no more need of being “converted” to socialism than we have of being “taught” democracy. Both are rooted in our own past – in the traditional society which produced us (Nyerere 1966: 170).

Narratives of return have also developed in other African countries which became independent in the late 1950s and 1960s. After independence in Ghana in 1957, President Kwame Nkrumah argued that politics should be inspired by the philosophy of *consciencism*, which he held to be in harmony with the original humanist principle of Africa (Nkrumah 1964: 70). He believed that the previous colonial administrators of Ghana, and their African employees who ‘became infected with European ideals’ (Nkrumah 1964: 69), had abandoned these humanist principles. Another example is postcolonial Senegal, where President Léopold Senghor argued that Senegalese socialism should be inspired by *négritude*, which he identified as the totality of traditional civilizing values of the Negro world (Senghor 1962: 20). There are therefore many variations on the narratives of return, but I will not include further examples here. My purpose has simply been to prepare the way for the argument that the present, primarily South African, call for a return to *ubuntu* displays some of the characteristics of earlier postcolonial narratives of return. I will come back to this argument later on. Presently, I will move on to explore the historical development of the written discourses on *ubuntu*.

Early Written Sources on *Ubuntu*

Gabriel Setiloane has stated that the term ‘*ubuntu*’ was first used in South African writing in an address to a conference, which was held in Durban in 1960 (see Bhengu 1996: 10), and Tom Lodge has explained that *ubuntu* was first given a systematic written exposition in the novels of Jordan Kush Ngubane who published his earliest writings in *The African Drum* magazine in the 1950s (Lodge 1999: 99). Furthermore, Wim van Binsbergen has explained that the first publication on *ubuntu* known to him is the Samkanges’ *Hunhuims or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy* (1980) (Van Binsbergen 2001: 82). Among the authors who have been writing about *ubuntu* during the last twenty years, I have not been able to find anyone who has mentioned that the term ‘*ubuntu*’ appeared in writing prior to the second half of the 1900s. Personally, I have discovered as many as 31 texts from before 1950, which contain the term ‘*ubuntu*,’ the oldest of which is from 1846.⁵ I have located the texts

5 In chronological order, the aforementioned 31 texts are: Hare *et al.* 1846: Jude 7, 8 & 16; Appleyard 1850: 106; Perrin 1855: 120; Colenso 1855: 7; Grout 1859: 398; Colenso 1859: xli; Colenso 1861: 354; Blair *et al.* 1866: 190; Roberts 1880: 107; American Bible Society 1883: 190; Yamaculo 1885: 30; Riedel 1886: 236; Grout 1893: 290; Roberts 1895: 133; Dieckmann 1902: 42; Carus 1907: 121; McLaren 1918: 332; Callaway 1925: 232-241; Prideaux 1925: 269; Callaway 1926: 395; Kirk 1929: 148; Murray 1929: xvi; Callaway 1932: 48; Barnes 1935: 46; Wilson 1936: 555; Davis *et al.* 1936: 142;

with the help of Google Books, which allows one to search the entire contents of more than ten million texts.

My findings indicate that prior to 1980, *ubuntu* was most commonly described as (and here I list the oldest descriptions first):

- ‘*Human nature*’ (Appleyard 1850: 106; Perrin 1855: 120; Colenso 1855: 7; Colenso 1861: 354; Roberts 1880: 107; Grout 1893: 290; Roberts 1895: 133; McLaren 1955: 25; Bryant 1963: 232; Callaway 1969: 22).
- ‘*Humanity*’ (Callaway 1926: 395; Wilson 1936: 555; Doke 1945: 60; Walker 1948: 220; Van Sembeek 1955: 42; McLaren 1955: 25; Malcolm 1960: 163; Doke *et al.* 1967: 54; Rodegem 1967: 129; Callaway 1969: 22; Thompson 1969: 129; Epstein 1967: 379; Pauw 1973: 89; Thompson & Butler 1975: 158 & 160; Clarke & Ngobese 1975: 34; Livingston 1979: 128).
- ‘*Humanness*’ (Egenbrecht 1962: 22; De Vries 1966: 121; Thompson & Butler 1975: 158; Samkange 1975: 96; Lissner 1976: 92; Ziervogel *et al.* 1976: 58; Krige *et al.* 1978: 152; Du Plessis 1978: 48; Biko 1979: 214).

In some texts from before 1980, *ubuntu* is also described as:

- ‘*Manhood*’ (Colenso 1861: 354; Wilson 1936: 555; Callaway 1969: 22).
- ‘*Goodness of nature*’ (Colenso 1861: 354).
- ‘*Good moral disposition*’ (Colenso 1861: 354).
- ‘*Virtue*’ (McLaren 1918: 332).
- ‘*The sense of common humanity*’ (Barnes 1935: 46).
- ‘*True humanity*’ (Callaway *et al.* 1945: 11).
- ‘*True good fellowship and sympathy in joy and in sorrow*’ (Callaway *et al.* 1945: 11).
- ‘*Reverence for human nature*’ (Callaway *et al.* 1945: 29).
- ‘*Essential humanity*’ (Shepherd & Paver 1947: 41).
- ‘*The kindly simple feeling for persons as persons*’ (Brookes 1953: 20).
- ‘*Manliness*’ (Van Sembeek 1955: 42; Callaway 1969: 22).
- ‘*Liberality*’ (Kagame 1956: 53).
- ‘*A person’s own human nature*’ (Read 1959: 149; Read 1968: 80).
- ‘*Generosity*’ (Kimenyi 1979: 75).
- ‘*Human feeling*’ (Jabavu 1960: 4).
- ‘*Humaneness*’ (Prideaux 1925: 269; Vilakazi 1962: 60; Nyembezi 1963: 47; Nyembezi 1970: 16).
- ‘*Good disposition*’ (Nyembezi 1963: 47).
- ‘*Good moral nature*’ (Nyembezi 1963: 47).
- ‘*Personhood*’ (Reader 1966: 175).
- ‘*Politeness*’ (Rodegem 1967: 129).
- ‘*Kindness*’ (Rodegem 1967: 129; Callaway 1969: 22).

Doke 1938: 135; Callaway *et al.* 1945: 11, 29 & 270; Doke 1945: 36 & 60; Shepherd & Paver 1947: 41; Walker 1948: 220.

- ‘*Real humanity*’ (Sabra Study Group of Fort Hare 1971: 121).
- ‘*Humanity (benevolence)*’ (South African Department of Bantu Education 1972a: 129).
- ‘*Personality*’ (South African Department of Bantu Education 1972b: 153).
- ‘*Human kindness*’ (Jordan 1973: 228).
- ‘*The characteristic of being truly human*’ (Pauw 1975: 117).
- ‘*Greatness of soul*’ (Thompson & Butler 1975: 213).
- ‘*A feeling of human wellbeing*’ (Clarke & Ngobese 1975: 61).
- ‘*Capacity of social self-sacrifice on behalf of others*’ (Hetherington 1978: 68).

In a number of texts from before 1980, the term ‘quality’ appears in descriptions of *ubuntu*,⁶ and in many texts *ubuntu* is evidently considered to be a very positive quality. As shown above, *ubuntu* has, for example, been described as ‘goodness of nature,’ ‘good moral disposition,’ and as ‘greatness of soul.’ Whilst some authors simply describe *ubuntu* as a ‘human quality’ (Doke 1945: 36; Calpin *et al.* 1953: 56), others emphasize that *ubuntu* is a quality connected to a specific group. More specifically, *ubuntu* is described as an ‘excellent African quality’ (Davis *et al.* 1936: 142), a quality among ‘the admirable qualities of the Bantu’ (Smith 1950: 18), and ‘an essentially Native quality’ (Southern Rhodesian Department of Native Affairs 1950: 34). My results also include authors who state that *ubuntu* is a quality that blacks possess and whites lack (Jabavu 1960: 4; Thompson & Butler 1975: 158), and an author who explains that: ‘Initiation is a ladder to humanity (*ubuntu*) and respect’ (Pauw 1973: 89).

Prior to 1980, the level of disagreement about the nature of *ubuntu* does not seem to have been as great as it is today: all of the descriptions cited above can be interpreted as descriptions of a human quality. Three things should be noted in this connection. Firstly, it should be noted that the descriptions which I have listed above are short, and that it is difficult to judge whether the authors identified *ubuntu* as a human quality, or as something else. A term such as ‘humanity’ is, for instance, ambiguous: it might refer to a human quality, but it can also refer to the members of the human race in total. Secondly, regardless whether all the authors identified *ubuntu* as a human quality, exactly how they understood the relation between being human and having the quality of *ubuntu* remains unclear. Did the different authors, for instance, believe that all humans possess the quality of *ubuntu*? And did they believe that human beings may possess the quality of *ubuntu* to different extents? Thirdly, should it be the case that the authors identify *ubuntu* as a human quality, it is unclear whether they understand the quality of *ubuntu* to be simple or complex. An author such as Godfrey Callaway, for example, provides a number of different descriptions of *ubuntu*. Does this indicate that he understood *ubuntu* to be a rather complex, multi-faceted quality?

I have located three texts from the 1970s in which *ubuntu* is identified as ‘African humanism’ (Africa Institute of South Africa 1975: 177; Breytenbach 1975: 177; Ngubane 1979: 261). The texts do not explain what African humanism is, so it is possible that their authors understood African humanism as something different from a

6 See for instance: Murray 1929: 105; Davis *et al.* 1936: 142; Doke 1945: 36; Smith 1950: 18; Southern Rhodesian Department of Native Affairs 1950: 34; Calpin *et al.* 1953: 56; Brookes 1953: 20; Van Sembeek 1955: 42; Groves 1958: 20; Jabavu 1960: 4; Callaway 1969: 22; Lissner 1976: 92; Krige *et al.* 1978: 152.

human quality. Furthermore, at one point in *An African Explains Apartheid* (1963), Jordan Kush Ngubane writes that:

Supreme virtue lay in being humane, in accepting the human being as a part of yourself, with a right to be denied nothing that you possessed. It was inhuman to drive the hungry stranger from your door, for your neighbour's sorrow was yours. This code constituted a philosophy of life, and the great Sutu-nguni family (Bantu has political connotations that the Africans resent) called it, significantly, *ubuntu* or *botho* – pronounced *butu* – the practice of being humane (Ngubane 1963: 76).

In *Conflicts of Minds* (1979), Jordan Kush Ngubane also defines *ubuntu* as 'the philosophy which the African experience translates into action' (Ngubane 1979: 113). In *African Religions: A Symposium* (1977), Newell Snow Booth explains: 'The concept of *ubuntu*, the recognition of a person as a person, is basic to the ethics of all the southern Bantu' (Booth 1977: 15). Furthermore, in *Black Villagers in an Industrial Society* (1980), Philip Mayer relates that: 'the occurrence of the same ideas through the whole spectrum of Blacks from the least educated, leaves no doubt that the main source was in African philosophy, in the concept of *ubuntu* which is associated with kindness, gentleness, humility, respect and love' (Mayer 1980: 70). The quotations above show that a few authors began using the terms 'philosophy' and 'ethic' to describe what *ubuntu* is towards the end of the period 1846 to 1980. Still, my findings indicate that after the term '*ubuntu*' first appeared in writing in 1846, more than a century passed before the first authors began to associate *ubuntu* with a philosophy or an ethic.

Ubuntu and the Creation of Zimbabwe

The first book to be written specifically on *ubuntu* is, to my knowledge, *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy* (Samkange & Samkange 1980). '*Hunhu*' is a term from the Shona languages which, according to the Samkanges, has the same meaning as the term '*ubuntu*' from the Nguni languages. The Samkanges explain that: 'the attention one human being gives to another: the kindness, courtesy, consideration and friendliness in the relationship between people; a code of behaviour, an attitude to other people and to life, is embodied in *hunhu* or *ubuntu*' (Samkange & Samkange 1980: 39). Furthermore, the Samkanges argued that *ubuntu* is something that is connected to a political philosophy or ideology, and they explicitly put this idea forward within the social context of the transition from white minority rule to black majority rule in the new Zimbabwe. They write:

This month (February 1980), Rhodesians are called upon to choose men and women of a political party that will lead them into a new era: the era of one man, one vote; black majority rule – and Zimbabwe. This is a great moment in the history of the country. The question is: What political philosophy or ideology should inspire the new Zimbabweans in this new era? Should the solution to the country's problems be based on capitalist, socialist, fascist, communist – Marxist, Leninist or Maoist – thinking? Is there a philosophy or ideology indigenous to the country that can serve its people just as well, if not better than, foreign ideologies? (Samkange & Samkange 1980: page inside front page).

With regard to this question, they explain:

It is the thesis of this book that Zimbabwe has an indigenous political philosophy which can best guide and inspire thinking in this new era of Zimbabwe. This philosophy or ideology, the authors endeavour to show, exists and can best be described as Hunhuism or Ubuntuism (Samkange & Samkange 1980: page inside front page).

The Samkanges present the notion that there exists a philosophy or ideology indigenous to Zimbabwe as a *hypothesis*, implying that this is not self-evident to everyone.

Samkange even related that:

during the abortive Geneva Constitutional Talks, I [Mr. Samkange] found myself one day talking to some very opinionated London-based perennial “O” Level students (...) When I said I am a “Hunhuist” the sneers and smiles of derision that carved their faces could have turned fresh milk sour. “What is that?” they scornfully asked (...) “Whose fault is it”, I asked, “if no one knows about the philosophy of your grandfather and mine? Is it not your fault and mine? We are the intellectuals of Zimbabwe. It is our business to distil this philosophy and set it out for the whole world to see” (Samkange & Samkange 1980: 9).

The Samkanges appear to identify Hunhuism or Ubuntuism as a philosophy or ideology about how the new Zimbabwe should be influenced by *ubuntu* (understood as a positive human quality). Furthermore, they first and foremost described Hunhuism or Ubuntuism as a *political* philosophy or ideology, which is reflected in the fact that 11 of the book’s 17 chapters (chapters 6-16) are dedicated to a description of how policy should be formulated in the new Zimbabwe in order to be consistent with Hunhuism or Ubuntuism. I will summarize some of the political implications that the Samkanges extracted from Hunhuism or Ubuntuism:

- Hunhuism or Ubuntuism dictates that there should be a Government of National Unity in the new Zimbabwe (see page 45).
- According to Hunhuism or Ubuntuism, the new Zimbabweans ought to live amicably with their neighboring states (see page 50).
- To be consistent with Hunhuism or Ubuntuism, the new Zimbabwean government should use the inhabitants’ fear of *ngozi* (aggrieved spirits) to prevent murder (see page 54).
- Hunhuism or Ubuntuism does not allow that the African idea of communal land ownership be eroded by Western ideas of private land ownership (see page 59).
- According to Hunhuism or Ubuntuism, there should be state, communal and individual property (see page 64).

By identifying *ubuntu* as something connected to the *political* philosophy of Hunhuism or Ubuntuism, the Samkanges attached political connotations to the term ‘*ubuntu*.’ Despite this politicizing interpretation, however, Hunhuism or Ubuntuism did not have a marked influence on politics in the new Zimbabwe. For example, I have been unable to find any Zimbabwean legal documents that mention Hunhuism or Ubuntuism, and a search for this philosophy on the website of the Zimbabwean government failed to produce any references.⁷ It should be noted that some have celebrated Robert Mugabe for displaying *ubuntu* politically (Tutu 1999: 36; Bhengu 1996:

⁷ The website of the Zimbabwean government can be found on <http://www.gta.gov.zw/>. The Southern African Legal Information Institute (SAFLII) provides access to Zimbabwean legal documents (please see <http://www.saflii.org/>).

29), and that Robert Mugabe has used the term ‘*ubuntu*’ himself. In a newspaper article entitled *Zimbabwe Celebrates Peace Days*, which was published in the *Zimbabwe Telegraph* on 24 June 2009, it was reported that:

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe has last week proclaimed Friday, Saturday and Sunday as peace days – during which Zimbabweans from different political persuasions are expected to encourage and promote national healing and reconciliation. Mugabe said the three days set aside for national healing offered Zimbabweans a choice to either consolidate their identity or expose themselves as a disintegrated nation. “We should realize that the desire for peace, harmony and stability is a desire for progress, national identity, prosperity and *hunhu, ubuntu*,” he said.⁸

Ubuntu and the South African Transition to Democracy

After growing internal and external pressure, and secret meetings between the apartheid government and Nelson Mandela (Mandela 1995: 611-665), President Frederik Willem de Klerk lifted the bans on the ANC and a number of other political organizations on 2 February 1990. He also declared that Nelson Mandela would be released from prison. This happened on 11 February 1990. The following Multi-Party Negotiation Process led to the ratification of the Interim Constitution on 18 November 1993 and to South Africa’s first democratic election on 27 April 1994.⁹ After the ANC won just under 63% of the votes, Nelson Mandela became president, with Frederik Willem de Klerk and Thabo Mbeki as deputies.

The Interim Constitution was intended to provide ‘a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterised by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence and development opportunities for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex’ (*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Act 200 of 1993: Epilogue after Section 251). The last quotation is from the Epilogue of the Interim Constitution, which defined the nature of the chosen ‘bridge’ away from apartheid by stating that in addressing the divisions and strife of the past, ‘there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimization’ (*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Act 200 of 1993: Epilogue after Section 251).

According to the South African Constitutional Court, which was established in 1994 by the Interim Constitution to decide on constitutional matters, the appearance of the term ‘*ubuntu*’ in the Epilogue was neither coincidental nor unimportant.¹⁰ This is very well illustrated by the following quotations from Constitutional Court cases: ‘Those who negotiated the [Interim] Constitution made a deliberate choice, preferring under-

⁸ In June 2009, the article was available at <http://www.zimtelegraph.com/?p=1816>.

⁹ The Interim Constitution was a transitional constitution: ‘One of its principal purposes was to set out the procedures for the negotiation and drafting of a “final” Constitution. Once the final Constitution was adopted, the interim Constitution fell away. But in spite of its transitional status, the interim Constitution was binding, supreme and fully justiciable’ (Van der Merwe & du Plessis 2004: 63). The final Constitution was adopted on 8 May 1996. In opposition to the Interim Constitution, the Constitution of 1996 does not contain the term ‘*ubuntu*’ (see *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Act 108 of 1996).

¹⁰ So far, there are references to *ubuntu* in 20 cases from the South African Constitutional Court. In chronological order, these cases are: *S v Makwanyane and Another*, 1995; *Azanian Peoples Organization (AZAPO) and Others v President of the Republic of South Africa and Others*, 1996; *Christian Education South Africa v Minister of Education*, 2000; *Hoffmann v South African Airways*, 2000; *Port Elizabeth*

standing over vengeance, reparation over retaliation, *ubuntu* over victimization' (*Azanian Peoples Organization (AZAPO) and Others v President of the Republic of South Africa and Others*, 1996: § 19); 'The concept "ubuntu" appears for the first time in the post-amble [another name for the Epilogue], but it is a concept that permeates the Constitution generally' (*S v Makwanyane and Another*, 1995: § 237); 'The spirit of *ubuntu*, part of a deep cultural heritage of the majority of the population, suffuses the whole constitutional order' (*Port Elizabeth Municipality v Various Occupiers*, 2004: § 37); 'Historically it [*ubuntu*] was foundational to the spirit of reconciliation and bridge-building that enabled our deeply traumatized society to overcome and transcend the divisions of the past' (*Dikoko v Mokhatla*, 2006: § 113).

It is evident from these quotations that the Constitutional Court considers *ubuntu* to be something that is important to the South African constitutional order, and that the court does not consider it to be coincidental that the term '*ubuntu*' appeared in the Epilogue. Despite this, the Constitutional Court has not explained in detail how the term came to be included in the Epilogue. As shown above, the court has stated that those who negotiated the Interim Constitution made a deliberate choice to prefer understanding, reparation and *ubuntu* over vengeance, retaliation, and victimization. But this is broad-brush information. It would be interesting to know the details about how the term '*ubuntu*' came to be incorporated. Who suggested that the term should be included? Did the negotiators discuss whether the term should be included or not? And if so, exactly how did the discussion develop? I have been unable to find any texts that answer these questions. Mfuniselwa John Bhengu, who is a Member of Parliament for Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and an acknowledged author on *ubuntu*, informed me that:

I really don't know who came up with it [the term "*ubuntu*" in the Epilogue]. All that I know is that during Codesa negotiations at Kempton Park in 1993, there were many African leaders who participated, and it could be that *ubuntu* as a spark came up during the negotiations or among those who were writing the constitution. The IFP was one of the participants at Codesa, and I am sure that, even if it didn't come from it, they (IFP) supported such a move (Bhengu, e-mail of 20 December 2009).¹¹

Municipality v Various Occupiers, 2004; *Bhe and Others v Khayelitsha Magistrate and Others*, 2004; *Shibi v Sithole and Others*, 2004; *Dikoko v Mokhatla*, 2006; *Union of Refugee Women and Others v Director, Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority and Others*, 2006; *Barkhuizen v Napier*, 2007; *S v M*, 2007; *Masetlha v President of the Republic of South Africa and Another*, 2007; *Gumede (born Shange) v President of the Republic of South Africa and Others*, 2008; *Bertie Van Zyl (Pty) Ltd and Another v Minister for Safety and Security and Others*, 2009; *Du Toit v Minister for Safety and Security and Another*, 2009; *Koyabe and Others v Minister for Home Affairs and Others*, 2009; *Joseph and Others v City of Johannesburg and Others*, 2009; *Van Vuren v Minister of Correctional Services and Others*, 2010; *Le Roux and Others v Dey*, 2011; *The Citizen 1978 (Pty) Ltd and Others v McBride*, 2011. To date, Drucilla Cornell's and Nyoko Muvangua's *uBuntu and the Law: African Ideals and Postapartheid Jurisprudence* might be the book which provides the most detailed account of the relationship between *ubuntu* and the law in South Africa (Cornell & Muvangua 2011).

¹¹ It should be noticed that according to the preamble of the *Constitution of Inkatha Freedom Party* ([1975] 2006), the IFP embraces the principles of *ubuntu*. Michael Onyebuchi Eze writes that: 'While no love was lost between the ANC government and Inkatha prior to the draft Constitution [the Interim Constitution], a possible hypothesis could be that the insertion of *ubuntu/botho* in the preamble to the draft Constitution was a possible influence or adaptation from Inkatha's Constitution. One would imagine if the eventual deletion of *ubuntu* from the final Constitution construes a further attempt by the ANC led government to distance itself from Inkatha. These are merely factious hypotheses and speculations

To support my research, Mfuniselwa John Bhengu have conducted inquiries among South African members of Parliament about who may be aware of how the term '*ubuntu*' came to be included in the Epilogue:

I have tried to ask some of them who were there [during the negotiations of the Interim Constitution] but they cannot remember how it came about (e-mail of 29 January 2010).

Considering that the Epilogue is a very important and sensitive text in the Interim Constitution, I find it surprising that no-one appears to have a clear recollection of how the term '*ubuntu*' came to be included. The Epilogue contains the negotiated agreement about how the divisions and strife of the apartheid era should be dealt with in the new democratic South Africa. Immediately after the statement that 'there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimization,' the Epilogue explains that: 'In order to advance such reconciliation and reconstruction, amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions and offences associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past' (*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Act 200 of 1993: Epilogue after Section 251). In the next sentence, the Epilogue decrees that Parliament should adopt a law to establish the mechanisms, criteria, and procedures by which amnesty should be dealt with. This was done in 1995 with the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, which established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

In the wake of the Epilogue's claim that there is 'a need for *ubuntu*,' a number of texts were published in South Africa, which sought to define what *ubuntu* is. The Interim Constitution does not define the term. My hypothesis is that it was in this context, and more precisely between 1993 and 1995, that *ubuntu* was defined for the first time as something connected to the proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.' If this hypothesis is correct, then the term '*ubuntu*' and the proverb became intimately connected within the space of just a few years. Even in 1997, Hennie Lötter stated that: '*Ubuntu* means that a person becomes a person through other persons' (Lötter 1997: 46). Similar statements are found during the 2000s: '*Ubuntu* is the short-form of a widespread isiXhosa proverb in Southern Africa: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which means "A human being is a human being only through its relationships to other human beings"' (Marx 2002: 52); 'The last term, the African traditional notion of *ubuntu*, means roughly "a person is a person through other persons"' (Holkeboer, 2004: 155); '*Ubuntu* is an African word that, literally translated, means "people are people through other people"' (Ronaldson 2005: 153); '*Ubuntu* literally translated means "I am because we are; I can only be a person through others"' (Van den Heuvel *et al.* 2006: 45).

In the following paragraphs, I will argue that Augustine Shutte's book *Philosophy for Africa* might be an important part of the reason for why *ubuntu* came to be identified as something, which is connected with the proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.' I will also argue that a comparison of the South Africa edition (1993) and the American edition (1995) of *Philosophy for Africa* suggests that the idea that *ubuntu* has a connection with the proverb developed in the period between 1993 and 1995.

To my knowledge, *Philosophy for Africa* was the first book in English to explore the identity belief embedded in the proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.' Furthermore, the book has frequently been quoted in the *ubuntu* literature. This is interesting be-

considering the adaptation of *ubuntu* as a national discourse in the overall process of reconciliation and nation building in South Africa' (Eze 2010: 103).

cause Augustine Shutte did not present *Philosophy for Africa* as a book on *ubuntu* when the first edition was published in 1993. The term ‘*ubuntu*’ was not even mentioned in the book’s index. In the 1993 edition, I have only found one sentence containing the term ‘*ubuntu*,’ and in this sentence *ubuntu* is not associated with the proverb. The sentence is: ‘The traditional African idea of the extended family as something that includes far more than parents and children is perhaps the most common and most powerful protection of the value of *ubuntu*’ (Shutte 1993: 157). What differentiates the South African and the American edition of *Philosophy for Africa* is that the American edition contains a new foreword. In this foreword, Augustine Shutte suddenly presents *Philosophy for Africa* as a book on *ubuntu*:

South Africa is world-famous for apartheid – that unique racist philosophy and system constructed over the last fifty years. Because of apartheid (which means “separateness”) another feature of South African life has been hidden from the world for all that time. But now the apartheid era has ended and our recent treasure has been revealed to the world by our president, Nelson Mandela, by public figures like Bishop Tutu and by events like the recent elections, the inauguration of the president, and the World Cup of Rugby. It is called *ubuntu* (which means “humanity”). We feel it is something of great value we can offer to the rest of the world. This is what this book is about (Shutte 1995: v).

In the foreword of the American edition, Augustine Shutte also explains why he thinks *ubuntu* is related to the proverb:

Central to my book is the conception of humanity embodied in the traditional African proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through persons). This understanding of human nature has its counterpart in the moral sphere in the idea of *ubuntu*. In English this is equivalent to humanity, understood as a moral notion referring to a general quality of character, or attitude or behaviour or way of life (Shutte 1995: vi).

According to the American foreword of *Philosophy for Africa*, *ubuntu* is therefore closely connected with the proverb: ‘This emphasis on the interpersonal quality of humanity – embodied in the expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – is at the heart of *ubuntu* and the source of many of its distinctive insights and values’ (Shutte 1995: ix).

Convinced that *ubuntu* can contribute to the struggle for a new South Africa, Augustine Shutte goes on to introduce an idea for a new project, which he calls ‘the *ubuntu* project’¹²:

In particular there is a need for critical and creative contact between the African and European traditions of understanding humanity itself, both as a reality and as a value. This conviction, developed in conversation with kindred spirits, gave rise to the idea for a new project, which I call the *ubuntu* project (Shutte 1995: vi).

Augustine Shutte explains that:

The aim of the *ubuntu* project will be to investigate the different aspects of this conception of humanity, especially those concerning moral values, the virtues appropriate to different roles and positions in life, our social practices and polit-

¹² The relationship between Augustine Shutte’s call for an *ubuntu* project and the subsequent *ubuntu* project launched by Drucilla Cornell in 2003 has, as far as I am aware, not been investigated (see <http://theubuntuproject.org/about-2/>).

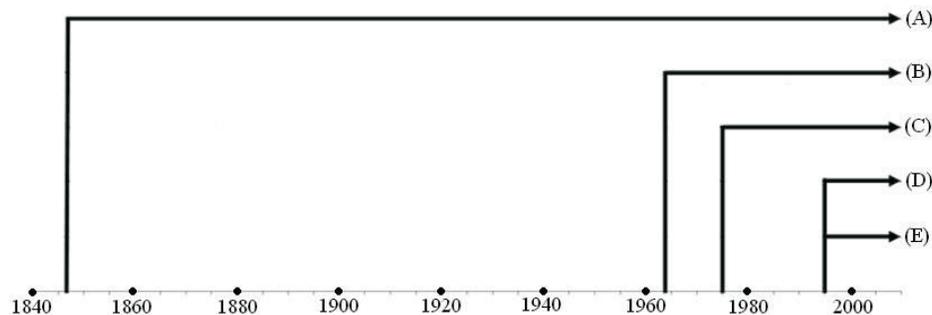
ical goals, the conception we have of human flourishing and fulfilment, and the meaning of human life and death (Shutte 1995: vi).

I will return to Augustine Shutte's *ubuntu* project towards the end of this article. Presently, I want to emphasise that as a result of Augustine Shutte connecting *ubuntu* and the proverb in the second edition of *Philosophy for Africa* but not in the first, it suggests that it may have been between 1993 and 1995 when *ubuntu* was defined for the first time as something that has a connection with the proverb. Perhaps it is therefore reasonable to assume that the following occurred in the context of the transition to democracy in South Africa:

- In 1993, Augustine Shutte increased the awareness of the proverb 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' by publishing *Philosophy for Africa*.
- In 1993, the Epilogue of the Interim Constitution was the cause of increasing discussion about the nature of *ubuntu* by stating that in addressing the divisions and strife of the past, there is 'a need for *ubuntu*.'
- During the period 1993 to 1995, Augustine Shutte developed the idea that the proverb 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' could be used to describe what *ubuntu* is. This idea spread like ripples on a pond.

The Historical Development

Diagram 1: An illustration of how *ubuntu* has been defined in written sources during different historical periods.



(A) Period in which *ubuntu* was defined as a human quality.

(B) Period in which *ubuntu* was defined as something either connected to, or identical to, a philosophy or an ethic.

- (C) Period in which *ubuntu* was defined as African humanism.
- (D) Period in which *ubuntu* was defined as a worldview.
- (E) Period in which *ubuntu* was defined as something connected to the proverb ‘*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.*’

Concerning (A)

In the section entitled ‘Early Written Sources on *Ubuntu*,’ I have shown that the term ‘*ubuntu*’ appears to, almost exclusively, refer to a human quality in texts published prior to 1980. Up to the present day, a number of authors have continued to identify *ubuntu* as a human quality, which can be illustrated with some quotes:

Mr. Nhlapo was held in very high respect by the black people of the district, and if he and his wife could go to the house of the white headmaster for dinner, then the white headmaster and his wife must be human beings, they must have the quality of *ubuntu*, which is the quality of humaneness, the quality of human beings when they are at their brightest and best (Paton 1983: 62).

Africans are a people whose identity is founded on *ubuntu*. Meaning “personhood,” *ubuntu* expresses a unique quality about a person which elevates him or her to a plane near to godliness (Suggit & Goedhals 1998: 112).

Ubuntu is an African word that speaks of humanity and its goodness. The word has the meaning of being human, of being generous and gracious. You still find this in African society, and this concept is shared with the West when people come to visit. It is the sense of human grace and honour that prevailed in Africa even prior to the arrival of the missionaries (Kolini & Holmes 2010: 70).

Concerning (B)

Towards the end of the period 1846-1980, a new idea began to emerge in writing, namely that *ubuntu* is connected to a philosophy or an ethic. Later, during the transformation of society in South Africa in the 1990s, this idea became widespread. In the context of the societal transition in South Africa, the terms ‘Hunhuism’ and ‘Ubuntuism’ were rarely used in writing, whereas expressions such as ‘*ubuntu* philosophy’ and ‘ethic of *ubuntu*’ became increasingly common. I will list some quotes from the 1990s exemplifying the use of these expressions:

In *ubuntu* philosophy a human being in the world of the living must be *umuntu* in order to give a response to the challenge of the fundamental instability of being (Ramose 1999: 64).

In another discussion, on Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, the BCC noted that they might not have much in the way of money or food, but they were able to survive because they “had God.” In a bourgeois setting, one would expect this to mean something like a spiritual or personal sense of support or comfort, but here it meant that “Maybe God has already talked to a neighbour who will have a plate ready for me when I come” (not an unusual occurrence in African society under the ethic of *ubuntu*) (Cochrane 1996: 87).

In the 2000s, a large number of authors have identified *ubuntu* as a philosophy or an ethic. Here I will only include a few illustrative quotes:

Ubuntu is a philosophy that promotes the common good of society and includes humanness as an essential element of human growth (Venter 2004: 149).

Ubuntu is a philosophy that could assist in rebuilding within and amongst different communities (Motsei 2007: 10).

Ubuntu is an ethic that developed in a context of essential interdependence and severe need (Du Toit 2004: 33).

Ubuntu is an ethic, or ideology, based on an African worldview and an interdependent anthropology (Shore 2009: 135).

Concerning (C)

As I have shown in the section entitled ‘Early Witten Sources on *Ubuntu*,’ some authors have identified *ubuntu* as ‘African humanism’ at least since 1975. I will list some examples:

As Buthelezi has noted: “There is a great deal in me which is formed by my deep affinity to African humanism – *Ubuntu/Botho* – and I find many aspects of Western industrialised societies offensive to my humanist tendencies” (Berger & Godsell 1988: 176).

Ubuntu, which she [Chikanda] sees as African Humanism, involves aid-giving, sympathy, care, sensitivity to the needs of others, respect, consideration, patience, and kindness (Prinsloo 1998: 42).

Ubuntu, as this African humanism is termed in the South African context, is part of a spiritual reconstruction aimed at filling the void of meaning and value left by the dismantled apartheid regime (Lenta 2003: 156).

That healthy atmosphere also emanated from an authentic African humanism (*ubuntu*) that pervaded the college. Africans are religious and spiritual in their daily activities and in their collectivist relationships. They have always been like that even prior to 1652 when the Wreck of the Haadem dumped the Whites in South Africa (Buthelezi 2004: 129).

Concerning (D)

In the late 1990s, a few authors began to use the term ‘worldview’ to describe what *ubuntu* is. In his famous book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Desmond Tutu wrote that:

I want to conclude this chapter [entitled “Nuremberg or national Amnesia? A third way”] by pointing out that this third way of conditional amnesty was consistent with a central feature of the African *Weltanschauung* (or worldview) – what we know as *ubuntu* in the Nguni group of languages, or *botho* in the Sotho languages (Tutu 1999: 34).

Later, during the 2000s, it became quite common for authors to identify *ubuntu* as a worldview. Again, I will include a few examples:

Confronting the past was very much about providing a new model, a new moral basis for individuals and institutions but especially for the *nation*. While the rhetoric of healing [within the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission] implied restoration, this was not restoration of the old order, apartheid, but rather of humanity and human dignity. If any old order was being appealed to in the ceremony itself, it was a version of the African humanist philosophy or worldview of *ubuntu* (McEachern 2002: 31).

Johann B. writes of the importance of *ubuntu* as a tool to reduce racist attitudes: “If all people abide by and live out the worldview of *ubuntu* which is a reference to the basic values of humanness, love, intense caring and sharing, respect and compassion South Africa and the whole global world would be freed of all forms of racism” (Ansell 2007: 318).

Concerning (E)

According to my hypothesis, *ubuntu* was identified for the first time as something connected with the proverb ‘*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*’ during the period of 1993 to 1995. Since 1995, this proverb has developed as a very important reference for describing what *ubuntu* is. In fact, most of the texts on *ubuntu* published during the 2000s, either quote the proverb or refer to the idea of the proverb that people are interconnected. I will list some illustrative quotes:

As far as traditional African values are concerned, the fundamental importance of *ubuntu* must be highlighted. *Ubuntu*, generally translated as “humanness,” expresses itself metaphorically in “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” – “people are people through people” (*Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, 1998: Vol. 1, §85).

Even though the term has become quite a fetish in post-apartheid South Africa, it is worth recalling that humanism also has distinct South African lineages, inasmuch as the Nguni term *ubuntu* refers to the fact that “people are people through other people”, (or in Zulu, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*), a principle often invoked by African humanists in South Africa in some way or other (Bangstad 2007: 49).

Ubuntu is short for an isiXhosa proverb in Southern Africa. It comes from *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*: a person is a person through their relationship to others (Swanson 2010: 147).

Towards the end of the 1990s and during the 2000s, some authors mentioned proverbs in relation to *ubuntu* that are slightly different. An example is:

Beyond starvation and the tribal atrocities you see in the news of Africa, South Africa’s unique gift to the world may well be the spirit of *ubuntu*. In Nelson Mandela’s tribal language (Xhosa), one of eleven official languages in South Africa, “*Ubuntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu*” is roughly translated as “a person is (can only be) a person through other persons” (Albion 2008: 85).

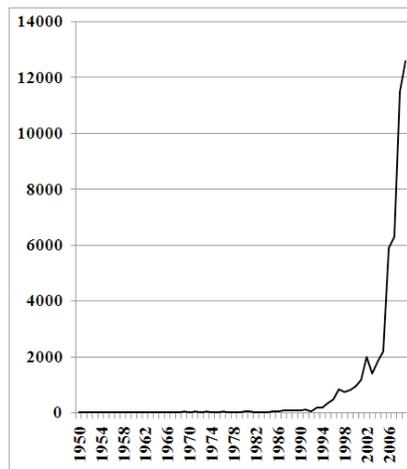
General Remarks

I consider Diagram 1 to be provisional in the sense that it might need to be adjusted in accordance with an increase in our knowledge about the ways that *ubuntu* has been defined in written sources. People may, for instance, discover written sources prior to 1846, which contain the term '*ubuntu*,' or discover references that illustrate that the term '*ubuntu*' was connected with the proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' prior to the 1993 to 1995 period. Furthermore, the illustration is not exhaustive because I only refer to the ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* which, to my knowledge, have been most common in written sources. Therefore, I do not mention that some authors have defined *ubuntu* in other ways; for example, as an ideology, or, as a way of life. Finally, it should be noted that some texts contain more than one idea about the nature of *ubuntu*. For example, the same author may describe *ubuntu* as a philosophy in some passages, and as a human quality in other passages.

Reflections on the Historical Development

I explained that, in 1993, the Epilogue of South Africa's Interim Constitution stated that in addressing the divisions and strife of the past there is 'a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimization' (*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Act 200 of 1993: Epilogue after Section 251). This constitutional reference to *ubuntu* was followed by a significant increase in the number of texts published per year containing the term '*ubuntu*.' This is illustrated in Diagram 2.

Diagram 2. Number of texts published per year containing the term '*ubuntu*' (according to Google Book search on 12 October 2010).¹³



¹³ Diagram data: 1950: 6; 1951: 2; 1952: 4; 1953: 6; 1954: 7; 1955: 5; 1956: 7; 1957: 7; 1958: 7; 1959: 5; 1960: 10; 1961: 4; 1962: 8; 1963: 9; 1964: 19; 1965: 7; 1966: 15; 1967: 30; 1968: 9; 1969: 55; 1970: 10; 1971: 36; 1972: 6; 1973: 37; 1974: 9; 1975: 29; 1976: 39; 1977: 9; 1978: 21; 1979: 24; 1980: 57; 1981: 49; 1982: 21; 1983: 28; 1984: 22; 1985: 40; 1986: 58; 1987: 70; 1988: 69; 1989: 71; 1990: 96; 1991: 114; 1992: 57; 1993: 194; 1994: 167; 1995: 358; 1996: 487; 1997: 832; 1998: 746; 1999: 807; 2000: 947; 2001: 1170; 2002: 2010; 2003: 1420; 2004: 1840; 2005: 2190; 2006: 5920; 2007: 6300; 2008: 11500; 2009: 12600.

In the section on *ubuntu* and the creation of Zimbabwe, I stated that, based on my research, the Samkanges' *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy* was the first book to be written specifically on *ubuntu*. Presently, I want to underscore that the book by the Samkanges can be read as a postcolonial narrative of return. Similarly to the books of Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, and Léopold Senghor, which I mentioned in the section on narratives of return in postcolonial Africa, Samkanges' book was written in the context of *a social transformation* where people attempted to identify the values that they thought should inspire politics and life in general in future society. Furthermore, the Samkanges' book also contains the idea that in order to create a good future, society needed to *return to something African* that did not stem from the previous period of colonial oppression but which, on the contrary, was rooted in pre-colonial times. More specifically, the Samkanges argued that the new Zimbabwe should be influenced by Hunhuism or Ubuntuism, which they identified as a *traditional* philosophy or ideology indigenous to their country.

Narratives of return also developed in the context of the social transition in South Africa. It has frequently been argued that in addressing the divisions and strife of the apartheid era, society needs to *return* to the spirit of *ubuntu* which, according to the Constitutional Court, is 'part of the deep cultural heritage of the majority of the population' (*Port Elizabeth Municipality v Various Occupiers*, 2005: § 37). The Constitutional Court has explained that: 'It was against the background of the loss of respect for human life and the inherent dignity which attaches to every person that a spontaneous call has arisen among sections of the community for a *return* [emphasis mine] to *ubuntu*' (*S v Makwanyane and Another*, 1995: § 227). Furthermore, it has often been emphasized that *ubuntu* is rooted in pre-colonial times. Christopher Roederer and Darrel Moellendorf have, for instance, stated that: 'The Nguni word *ubuntu* represents notions of universal human interdependence, solidarity and communalism which can be traced to small-scale communities in pre-colonial Africa, and which underlie virtually every indigenous African culture' (Roederer & Moellendorf 2004: 441).

In light of narratives of return developing during social transition periods, it is hardly surprising that such narratives emerged in the context of the creation of Zimbabwe, and also in the context of the transition to majority rule in South Africa. What may be more surprising is that these transition periods seem to have been an arena for the development of new ideas about the nature of *ubuntu*. My findings indicate that it was in the context of the creation of Zimbabwe that the idea that *ubuntu* is something that is connected with a specific *political* philosophy first developed. In addition, it was in the context of the South African transition to majority rule that *ubuntu* was identified as something that has a link to the proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' for the first in history.

Some may argue that *ubuntu* as a human quality implicitly contains a philosophy or an ethic which, in turn, can most succinctly be represented through the proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.' Is this what has happened: that what was implicit has become explicit, and what became explicit needed to be captured quite succinctly in an intellectual bumper sticker of sorts? In response to such a question, I recall my earlier observation that during the second half of the 1900s, some authors began to *identify* *ubuntu* as a philosophy or an ethic, which is something different from identifying *ubuntu* as a human quality, even if the human quality somehow implicitly contains a

philosophy or an ethic.¹⁴ I also want to recall that though some authors may simply understand the proverb as a concise expression of a central idea of a specific philosophy or ethic, others have gone further to make claims like: ‘*Ubuntu* is an African word that, literally translated, means “people are people through other people”’ (Ronaldson 2005: 153). Claims such as this one appear to represent a new idea about the meaning of the word ‘*ubuntu*,’ which did not exist before *ubuntu* was identified as something that has a connection with the proverb.

But, why did new ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* apparently develop in the context of the creation of Zimbabwe and in the context of the transition to majority rule in South Africa? Was the emergence of new ideas motivated by political reasons and strategic concerns? Prior to the publication of *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy*, Mr. Samkange had been an influential nationalist politician in Southern Rhodesia (which became Zimbabwe in 1980), and it may be argued that he formulated the philosophy of Hunhuism or Ubuntuism to fit his own political agenda. Furthermore, as a former professor of African history, Mr. Samkange was probably well aware that the brand ‘traditional African,’ which he used to ‘sell’ the philosophy of Hunhuism or Ubuntuism, had previously been popular in the context of decolonization. As explained by Julius Nyerere, throughout almost the whole of Africa ‘the first and most vocal demand of the people after independence was for Africanization’ (Nyerere 1968: 27). We should also ask why it was in South Africa in the 1990s that *ubuntu* was most likely defined for the first time as something connected with the proverb *umuntu ngsumentu ngabantu*. Was the connection between *ubuntu* and the proverb established and emphasized because the idea that *ubuntu* has to do with interconnectedness could be used by politicians and others as a rationale against the segregation ideas of the previous apartheid era? By connecting *ubuntu* with specific ideas about interconnectedness, these ideas might certainly gain legitimacy (or further legitimacy) among blacks, who considered *ubuntu* to be something good and deeply rooted in their culture.

I will not offer further speculations about what motives might have caused the discursive shifts in the *ubuntu* literature. Since we can never be completely sure what motives people have, we easily risk ascribing motives to people which might be foreign to them. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that it is a matter of fact that some South African politicians have taken an interest in *ubuntu*. Thabo Mbeki has, for instance, supported Augustine Shutte’s *ubuntu* project. In an e-mail correspondence about an earlier version of the present article between Augustine Shutte and I, he stated that:

The section on my work was accurate and also interesting. But you don’t mention that I then wrote a whole book about *ubuntu* and applied ethics [namely *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa* (2001)]. The book itself was a result of the Ubuntu Project which I initiated with Mbeki’s blessing after my meeting with him in Pretoria on the eve of the 1999 elections that made him president. Two members of the study group I formed were appointed by him, Melanie

14 Please assume that: A = *Ubuntu*; B = A human quality; C = A philosophy or an ethic. Now, speaking logically: If B contains C, and if nothing can both contain and be numerically identical to the same thing, then it follows that if one identifies A as B (i.e. if one claims that A is numerically identical to B), then one would be contradicting oneself by also identifying A as C. So if B contains C, and if nothing can both contain and be numerically identical to the same thing, then identifying A as C would be something different from identifying A as B since identifying A as C would contradict identifying A as B.

Verwoerd and Ebrahim Rasool. It was a very high-powered group indeed and did a lot to help me with the book. But I think I have told you all this. I am making this point because the second book became better known than the first because of the word *ubuntu*. But you are quite right: I did not use it [the word “*ubuntu*”] in the first book [i.e. the South African edition of *Philosophy for Africa*]. I can’t even remember where I first heard it! (e-mail of 21 November 2010).

Augustine Shutte had, as we have seen, already formulated the idea of the *ubuntu* project in the 1995 edition of *Philosophy for Africa*. After his meeting with Thabo Mbeki, he initiated the *ubuntu* project under the name ‘The Common Good Project.’ This name was inspired by a booklet that Augustine Shutte published concerning the 1999 General Election called ‘South Africa’s Common Good.’ In the unpublished concept paper for The Common Good Project from 2000, Augustine Shutte explained that during his meeting with Thabo Mbeki on the eve of the 1999 General Election:

He [Thabo Mbeki] spoke to us of a “moral vacuum” in South Africa that had the potential to make the country ungovernable. Crime and corruption were just the outward signs of a sickness of the soul that was a legacy of apartheid. The separateness and conflict inevitable in a multicultural society such as South Africa had been intensified by apartheid. It was however the struggle against apartheid that had brought different groups together on the basis of shared values. Now that has gone and, in spite of a fine constitution and democratic elections, South Africa is threatened with disintegration. People have lost touch with the common humanity we share. A spirit of self-interest is growing. What South Africa needs more than anything is an RDP of the spirit. Mr Mbeki asked us for help in dealing with this state of affairs (Unpublished concept paper of The Common Good Project, received in an e-mail from Augustine Shutte on 13 December 2010).

Final Remarks

I believe that this article is a worthwhile contribution to the *ubuntu* literature, at least for the reason that the article – to my knowledge – is the first text that contains a historical analysis of the ways in which *ubuntu* has been defined in written sources. In other words, I am not aware that any of this article’s historical findings about discursive shifts in the *ubuntu* literature have been presented in earlier research. To make a more nuanced evaluation about how this article may contribute to the contemporary debate about the nature and historicity of *ubuntu*, I would need to further explore the different positions of the contemporary debate. I will conclude this article at this present stage of research since a detailed discussion of the contemporary debate is beyond its scope. A more nuanced evaluation of this article’s research contribution could be the task of another article.

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