

# What is *Ubuntu*? Different Interpretations among South Africans of African Descent<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In this article, I describe and systematize the different answers to the question ‘What is *ubuntu*?’ that I have been able to identify among South Africans of African descent (SAADs). I show that it is possible to distinguish between two clusters of answers. The answers of the first cluster all define *ubuntu* as a moral quality of a person, while the answers of the second cluster all define *ubuntu* as a phenomenon (for instance a philosophy, an ethic, African humanism, or, a worldview) according to which persons are interconnected. The concept of a person is of central importance to all the answers of both clusters, which means that to understand these answers, it is decisive to raise the question of who *counts* as a person according to SAADs. I show that some SAADs define *all Homo sapiens* as persons, whereas others hold the view that only *some Homo sapiens* count as persons: only those who are black, only those who have been incorporated into personhood, or only those who behave in a morally acceptable manner.

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### Introduction

The negotiators of the South African Interim Constitution of 1993 agreed that in order to address the divisions and strife of the apartheid era in South Africa, ‘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). The Interim Constitution does not explain what *ubuntu* is, but according to the South African Constitutional Court, which was established to adjudicate in constitutional matters, the spirit of *ubuntu* is something that is ‘part of the deep cultural heritage of the majority of the population’ (*Port Elizabeth Municipality v Various Occupiers*, 2005: § 37). The Court also explains 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 to *ubuntu*’ (*S v Makwanyane and Another*, 1995: § 227).

So what is the nature of this something called ‘*ubuntu*’ that, according to the quotations above, is needed to address the divisions and strife of the apartheid era, is somehow part of the cultural heritage of the majority of the population, and is called for among sections of the community? A number of scholars have explained what they personally, or, what different influential figures such as Desmond Tutu, believe that *ubuntu* is. But to my knowledge, no one has yet embarked on the task of mapping out the entire landscape of different ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* that are found among South Africans of African descent (SAADs). The task of drawing such a map may, in *some* but not all dimensions, be compared to the task of an explorer who wants to make a map of a geographical area that is only familiar to other travelers in parts, and that has never been mapped out in its entirety before. The first map that is created of such an area might lack detail, and the map is likely to be improved by others later on. In this sense, it is unsatisfactory to be the first to draw a map of such an area. In another sense, it is quite satisfactory, since the first map may help other explorers to make better maps of the area in the future. The first map may also be of interest to travelers who have hitherto only taken an interest in some parts of the area, and who may be surprised to find that the landscape looks different in other parts.

In this article, I embark on the project of mapping out the landscape of different ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* that are found among SAADs. I hope that other scholars will later join in on the project to make the map more detailed. I will begin by offering some reflections on why I have chosen to focus on the SAADs group. Subsequently, I will explore what SAADs believe is the nature of *ubuntu*, and also how they understand the concept of a person, since this concept is of central importance to the understanding of *ubuntu*. During my exploration, I will include quotations from written sources and also from interviews that I conducted in South Africa from 2008 to 2010. I will then present some reflections on the ethical legitimacy of the identified understandings of the nature of *ubuntu*, before I finally offer some reflections on data collection.

### Why Focus on the SAADs Group?

My choice to focus on how SAADs understand *ubuntu* may call for an explanation. Why only include Africans in the investigation group, and why limit the investigation group even further to Africans from South Africa?

*Why Only Include Africans in the Investigation Group?*

*Ubuntu* is generally held to stem from, and to be deeply rooted in, African indigenous cultures. According to Christopher Roederer and Darren Moellendorf for example, '(t)he 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). But though *ubuntu* is generally held to stem from African indigenous culture, the academic discussion on *ubuntu* has been deeply influenced by works by non-Africans; understood as people who are not of African descent. In fact, as I will explain later in this article, my research even indicates that before the 1950s, all written sources mentioning *ubuntu* were authored by people of European descent. Similarly, much of the recent literature on *ubuntu* has been authored by non-Africans. This is, for example, reflected in the publications of the *South African Journal of Philosophy*, which is a leading journal on *ubuntu*: to date 22 articles from this journal contain the term '*ubuntu*', but only four of these are authored by Africans.<sup>2</sup> The many texts in which *ubuntu* is described and interpreted by non-Africans scholars makes it important not to lose sight of how *ubuntu* is understood by *the Africans themselves*. In this sense, the extensive literature on *ubuntu* by non-African scholars is what motivates me to investigate exclusively how *ubuntu* is understood by Africans.

*Why Limit the Investigation Group to Africans from South Africa?*

It is a common claim in the literature that even though '*ubuntu*' is an Nguni term, terms with similar meanings are found in African languages all over sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>3</sup> Nkonko Mudipanu Kamwangamalu lists the following terms as examples: '*umundu*' (in Kikuyu, Kenya), '*umuntu*' (in Kimeru, Kenya), '*bumuntu*' (in kiSukuma and kiHaya, Tanzania), '*vumuntu*' (in shiTsonga and shiTswa, Mozambique), '*bomoto*' (in Bobangi, Democratic Republic of Congo), and '*gimuntu*' (in kiKongo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and in giKwese, Angola) (Kamwangamalu 1999: 25). If we accept the premise that these terms have the same meaning as '*ubuntu*', then these examples serve to support the claim that the basic idea of *ubuntu* is shared by many indigenous peoples in sub-Saharan Africa under different names.

However, there are at least two problems connected with the idea that the aforementioned terms have the same meaning as '*ubuntu*'. *Firstly*, the precise meaning people *de facto* ascribe to the listed terms has not been sufficiently investigated. Do the people who speak Kikuyu, for instance, agree on what the term '*umundu*' means? And have the meanings of the different terms developed in the course of history?

2 In chronological order, the 22 articles are (note that the names of the African authors are italicized): Teffo 1996; Allen 2001; Graaff 2001; Ramose 2003; Du Toit 2003; Van den Berg 2003; Bewaji & Ramose 2003; Bamford 2007; Metz 2007a; Wood 2007; Ramose 2007; Farland 2007; Van Niekerk 2007; Metz 2007b; Janz 2008; Krog 2008; Praeg 2008; Eze 2008; Van Niekerk 2008; Du Toit 2008; Gade 2011; Praeg 2011.

3 The Nguni languages are spoken in the southern part of Africa. Lutz Marten explains: 'The Nguni group (S40) is divided into Zunda varieties and Tekela varieties. Among the Zunda varieties are Xhosa, Zulu, and Zimbabwean Ndebele. Xhosa includes a number of different varieties. Zulu, with around 10.7 million speakers, and Xhosa, with around 7.2 million speakers, are official languages of South Africa. Zimbabwean Ndebele has official status in Zimbabwe. The Tekela varieties include Swati, South African Ndebele, and the smaller languages Phuthi and Lala (Lala-Bisa). Swati has around 1.6 million speakers and is an official language both in Swaziland and South Africa. The southern variety of South African Ndebele is an official language in South Africa, spoken by around 0.6 million speakers' (Marten 2006: 596).

Could some of these terms have taken on nuances of meaning that have not been taken on by the other terms? I think it would be wise to investigate what meaning people *de facto* ascribe to the listed terms more thoroughly before concluding that they all have the same meaning.

*Secondly*, there is no agreement on what ‘ubuntu’ itself means. Therefore, the meaning that some people ascribe to a term such as ‘umundu’ may be similar to the meaning that some people ascribe to ‘ubuntu’, and different from the meaning that others ascribe to this term. My previous research suggests that ‘ubuntu’ is a dynamic term that has taken on new meanings at different point in history, probably under the influence of changing social and political circumstances (Gade 2011). It appears, for example, to have been in the context of the South African transition process in the 1990s that the term ‘ubuntu’ became connected to the Nguni proverb ‘umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu’ (often translated as ‘a person is a person through other persons’) for the first time in history. In the context of the South African transition process, people began to make claims such as: ‘Ubuntu means that a person becomes a person through other persons’ (Lötter 1997: 46). This particular *new* idea, that *ubuntu* means that people are interconnected, may have developed because it could be used as an argument against the segregation ideology of the previous apartheid regime (Gade 2011: 321).

Whether or not the meaning that is ascribed to ‘ubuntu’ in some parts of southern Africa is identical to the meaning of some of the terms listed by Nkonko Mudipanu Kamwangamalu is beyond the scope of this article. I will only investigate how *ubuntu* is understood by Africans from South Africa. My decision to focus on how *ubuntu* is understood by Africans *from South Africa* is motivated by the fact that South Africa is the only country in the world where the legal authorities claim that *ubuntu* is foundational to the constitutional order. The South African Constitutional Court explains, for instance, that ‘(t)he 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).

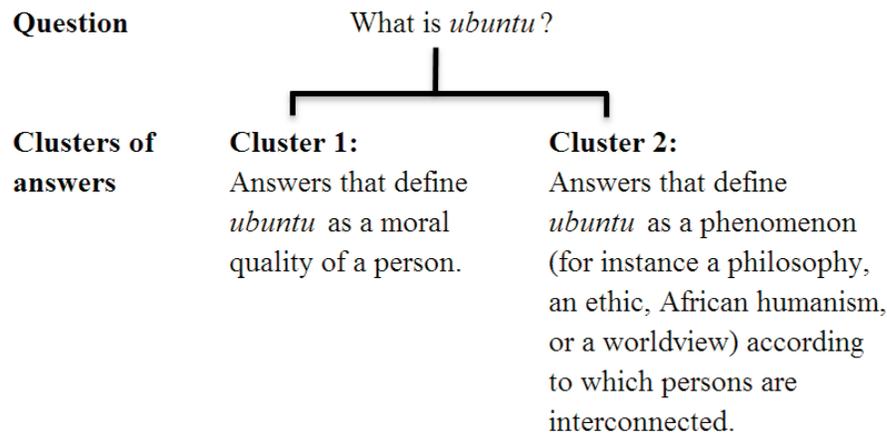
Before I turn to explore how *ubuntu* is understood by SAADs, I want to underscore that the SAADs group is not an island unto itself. It is very likely that the way *ubuntu* is understood by members of the SAADs group is influenced by both the way *ubuntu* has been described by Africans from other African countries and by non-Africans. My previous research indicates, for instance, that Augustine Shutte, a South African of British descent, was the first to formulate the idea that there is a connection between *ubuntu* and the proverb ‘umuntu ngununtu ngabantu’ (Gade 2011: 313-315). As will be shown later, this idea is presently also found among members of the SAADs group.

### **What is Ubuntu According to SAADs?**

I have found that amongst SAADs, it is possible to make an analytical distinction between two clusters of answers to the question ‘What is *ubuntu*?’. Even though there are internal variations across the answers that are part of the same cluster, they have at least one feature in common: the answers of the first cluster all define *ubuntu* as a moral quality of a person, while the answers of the second cluster all define *ubuntu* as a phenomenon (for instance a philosophy, an ethic, African humanism, or a worldview) according to which persons are interconnected. It should be noted that the members of the SAADs group are not always consistent in the way they describe

*ubuntu*; the same person might sometimes provide answers to the question ‘What is *ubuntu*?’ that fall within Cluster 1, and at other times provide answers to the question that fall within Cluster 2. The distinction between the two clusters of answers is illustrated in Diagram 1.

**Diagram 1:** Answers to the question ‘What is *ubuntu*?’ found among SAADs.



#### *The Answers in Cluster 1*

In the article, ‘The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’ (Gade 2011), I offer a historical analysis of the various ways that *ubuntu* has been defined in written sources. The analysis shows that the term ‘*ubuntu*’ has been appearing in written sources since at least 1846, and that in written sources published prior to the 1960s, *ubuntu* always seems to be defined as a human quality (Gade 2011: 306-309). More specifically, all the descriptions of *ubuntu* that I have been able to find in texts from before the 1960s can be interpreted as descriptions of a *moral quality* of a human being/person.

Before the 1950s, all written sources mentioning *ubuntu* were, according to my research, authored by people of European descent. To my knowledge, Alexis Kagame, a Rwandese historian, philosopher, and Catholic priest from the Tutsi group, was the first African to publish a text containing the term ‘*ubuntu*’. In this text, entitled *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l’etre (The Bantu-Rwandan Philosophy of Being)*, ‘*ubuntu*’ is translated as ‘*libéralité*’ (liberality) (Kagame 1956: 53). Between 1957 and 1960, Archibald Campbell Jordan, a Xhosa novelist and teacher, wrote a series of articles under the rubric ‘Towards an African Literature’ for the magazine *Africa South*. A.C. Jordan’s articles were republished in the book *Towards an African Literature* (1973). His article entitled ‘Literary Stabilization’, originally from the October-December 1957 issue of *Africa South*, and Chapter 6 of *Towards an African Literature*, may be the first text authored by a *South African* of African descent that contains the term ‘*ubuntu*’. Referring to an 1864 essay of Tiyo Soga entitled ‘Amakhoiwa Namaqaba’ (The Believers and the Pagans), A.C. Jordan explains that:

The essay on 'The Believers and the Pagans' also shows that the gulf is widening between the converted and the pagan. The converted has lost *ubuntu* (generosity, respect for man irrespective of position). The pagan can no longer expect hospitality amongst the Christians (Jordan 1973: 55).

Even though A.C. Jordan uses the term '*ubuntu*' in his interpretation of Tiyo Soga's essay, the term does not occur in 'Amakhoiwa Namaqaba' (1864). My research shows that our primary sources with respect to how SAADs understand *ubuntu* are limited to texts authored by SAADs from the period 1957-2012, in addition to recent oral testimonies (preserved in recordings, video clips, etc.) where SAADs explain what *ubuntu* is. Secondly, we have a number of texts from the period 1846-2012 where people who are not SAADs describe *ubuntu*. While these descriptions may be intended to reflect indigenous understandings of *ubuntu*, they remain secondary sources with respect to how *ubuntu* is understood by SAADs. All the quotes in the remainder of this article are, unless otherwise indicated, from members of the SAADs group.

My collection of written sources and oral testimonies shows that according to a number of SAADs, *ubuntu* is a moral quality of a person. To some SAADs, this moral quality is so positive that the very possession of it is praiseworthy. Desmond Tutu writes that: 'When we want to give high praise to someone we say, '*Yu, u nobuntu*'; 'Hey, he or she has *ubuntu*'' (Tutu 1999: 34). Mfuniselwa John Bhengu, an acknowledged author on *ubuntu* and until recently a member of parliament from Inkatha Freedom Party, also describes *ubuntu* as a kind of 'soul force':

Ghandi gave India the spiritual concept of 'soul force' (*satyagraha*), a capacity to sustain and transcend physical discomfort in a triumph of concentration and restraint. Why should we Africans not give South Africa that 'soul force' (*ubuntu*) (Bhengu 1996: 19).

During an interview, Mfuniselwa John Bhengu also told me that *ubuntu* is a kind of divine element:

There is God in a human being. That is why even at your home when your parents are not around, and you try to steal, something says to you: 'Ah... don't, don't!' And then sometimes you say: 'Hey... I mustn't!' Nyerere [the first president of Tanzania] refers to it as a spark saying 'Please don't do'. That is *ubuntu* (interview on 17 December 2009).

Some SAADs argue that empathy is an essential aspect of *ubuntu*. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, who was a member of the Human Rights Violations Committee of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), explained that:

Its essence is about the capacity for empathy with another person. You see, that is the essence of *ubuntu*: that capacity which I think is something we ought to have as human beings, and which is present in all of us, that capacity to connect with another human being, to be touched, to be moved by another human being. That is *ubuntu*. If I walk down the street, and I see someone... I can see something in his face that says that this person is going through a difficult moment. I do not have time but I turn to him and say: 'How are you today?' That is *ubuntu* because I am connecting to how he seems to be feeling at the moment, and I am reaching out, and I am acknowledging that I see his pain and

want to leave him with some kindness as I walk past him (interview on 27 August 2008).

Another example of how the moral quality of *ubuntu* can be expressed in behavior is provided by Cecil Mlanjeni, who was a victim of gross human rights violations during apartheid. He said:

What I can do to explain *ubuntu* to you is to give an example: I met you, I don't know you. Maybe you are stuck. Sometimes you don't even know the road. I have to show you the road or otherwise take you to where you want to go, and I have to take care of you in such a manner that you feel comfortable. Maybe you are lost in an area that you don't know; for instance you are in our areas. You don't know our areas but we come to you and assist you and secure you, so that you feel comfortable. If I don't have transport to take you somewhere, then I have to ask somebody to take you. That is the soul of *ubuntu* in practice (interview on 5 November 2008).

Some SAADs depict *ubuntu* as a rather complex, multi-faceted quality. Desmond Tutu writes, for example, that if persons possess *ubuntu* it means that they are 'generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate' (Tutu 1999: 34).

One aspect of the moral quality of *ubuntu* is often said to be the capacity to forgive. Before quoting Cecilia Hlokofa on the subject of *ubuntu* and forgiveness, I want to draw attention to the fact that Cecilia Hlokofa suffered greatly during apartheid, and that perhaps one might not expect that she would be open to the idea of forgiveness. Below Cecilia Hlokofa tells about her testimony to the TRC:

[Gade] Could you tell me a little about what human rights violations it was that formed the background for your statement to the TRC?

[Hlokofa] The statement was about the way my husband was killed and my arm was broken in Crossroads [township area near Cape Town International Airport]. It was early in the morning on a Sunday when the loud hailer said that all the men should attend a meeting. The people went there only to listen to what it was about. That was when they were attacked. They were beaten and shot at, so everybody was running around; it was a hell of a chaos. My husband was shot to death. Everyone was running around the area, and I was caught by these people. I was beaten, and they broke my arm. Most people died in that incident, and we don't know why people were called in (interview on 5 November 2008).

After telling about the incident, Cecilia Hlokofa said:

I can describe *ubuntu* in a manner of an example perhaps. If you did something wrong to me, let me not have a 'Drat on you!'. I must just give you an apology even though you do not come to me and give an apology. Even if you did a nasty thing, I have to be calm to you and be apologetic. So that is how I can explain *ubuntu*.

A person from the Khulumani Support Group translated what Cecilia Hlokofa said in isiXhosa into English, and just after the statement above, the translator attempted to elaborate on what Cecilia Hlokofa meant: 'You have to forgive! Whatever you did to me, let me forgive you – that would be *ubuntu*'. Cecilia Hlokofa confirmed this interpretation. Speaking about Nelson Mandela, Khoza Mgojo, a former TRC commis-

sioner who has also served as President of the South African Council of Churches, said that:

[Mgojo] In most places, you can't have a person who suffered like that, like Mandela, doing that thing [forgiving former enemies]. But the *ubuntu* was pushing him. If you have this [*ubuntu*], then you must forgive, but not forget. You must forgive, but not forget because if you forget, you will repeat the same thing. You see?

[Gade] Just for me to understand it... It is a very interesting link you make between *ubuntu* and forgiveness. So you think that if people have *ubuntu*, then they are likely...

[Mgojo] They *must* forgive, especially when people are religious people. How many times does God forgive us? In fact we should be punished every time by God, but God forgives us because of this godliness which has to boost what we call '*ubuntu*' (interview on 17 November 2008).

Dumisa Ntsebeza, the TRC commissioner who led the Investigative Unit that sought to uncover the truth about gross human rights violations during apartheid, connected *ubuntu* and forgiveness by means of another example:

[Ntsebeza] So we investigated [the killing of the Gugulethu Seven] and everything that I just told you: the planning, the heading from Pretoria, the Vlakplass involvement, Eugene de Kock's involvement; all of that came out in an investigation, a special investigation that was conducted by the Western Cape branch of the Investigative Unit. So what had been perpetuated from 1986 in the media and South African history as having been a terrorist attack which was foiled by the police was shown in fact for what it really was. And it brought a lot of trauma to the victims, to those mothers, because for all those years until 1997-1998 when we exposed the evil of what had happened, how their children had been lured into a death trap... [Sentence not finished].

When we revealed all of that, the mothers started to be more traumatized, but in some very strange way they were able to relate to the revelation of the truth. They had this catharsis that was brought about by the knowledge that their sons were actually murdered, rather than they were killed as they were attempting... [to conduct a terrorist attack]. So there was a shift of the morality of the kill, of the event.

Now, when one of the killers applied for amnesty, we made an arrangement after he had testified for him to meet a group of the mothers. We arranged a private session. It was remarkable what happened there! This guy was open, he did not pretend to justify, he was asking for them to find it in their hearts to forgive him if they could ever do that. And one of the mothers was very remarkable in the way that she dealt with this. She said: 'Look, there is nothing we can do now about the people who died. But one thing that causes us to feel released and liberated is the fact that you are sitting here. You are somebody and some other woman's child. You are sitting here, and you are telling how you slaughtered our children, and the mere fact that you have now found the courage to

come and talk to us... Whatever happens to your amnesty application, we have forgiven you'. This is a very dramatic example.

[Gade] So you think that the mother who was able to forgive had *ubuntu*?

[Ntsebeza] Yes! (interview on 24 November 2008).

### *The Answers in Cluster 2*

My analysis of the historical development of the written discourses on *ubuntu* (Gade 2011) suggests that after the term '*ubuntu*' appeared in writing in 1846, more than a century passed before the first authors began to define *ubuntu* more broadly than simply as a human quality. If I am correct, then it was not until the second half of the 1900s that *ubuntu* began to be defined as a philosophy, an ethic, African humanism, and as a worldview in written sources. Furthermore, my historical findings indicate that it was in the period from 1993 to 1995 that the Nguni proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' was used for the first time to describe what *ubuntu* is.

In recent years some SAADs have used the proverb to explain what *ubuntu* is (e.g. Bhengu 1996: 6; Tshoose 2009: 14). Furthermore, there are also members of the SAADs group who define *ubuntu* as a philosophy, an ethic, African humanism, or as a worldview. This can be illustrated with some quotes:

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

It [*ubuntu*] is a social ethic, a unifying vision enshrined in the Zulu maxim '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye*' ('one is a person through others') (Makgoba 1999: 153).

That healthy atmosphere also emanated from the authentic African humanism (*ubuntu*) that pervaded the college (Buthelezi 2004: 129).

*Ubuntu* stresses the importance of community, solidarity, caring, and sharing. This worldview [*ubuntu*] advocates a profound sense of interdependence and emphasizes that our true human potential can only be realized in partnership with others (Ngcoya 2009: 1).

SAADs do not always explain the nature of the philosophy, the ethic, the African humanism, or the worldview that they define as *ubuntu*. But when they do offer explanations, it usually becomes clear that *ubuntu* is understood as a phenomenon according to which persons are interconnected. For example, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the leader of Inkatha Freedom Party, told me that he believes that '*ubuntu*' can best be translated as 'humanism', and that *ubuntu* is related to interconnectedness:

*Ubuntu* is that I am what I am because of you. President Kaunda of Zambia wrote a book on [African] humanism. It is the nearest English equivalent to that. I think that 'humanism' is the nearest translation of what *ubuntu* is (interview on 16 December 2009).

Bongani Finca, a former TRC commissioner, elaborated the idea that *ubuntu* is about interconnectedness in greater detail. He simply defined *ubuntu* as the fact that persons are what they are because of other persons:

You are what you are because of other people. We don't live in isolation, we live in a community. That sense of community is what makes you who you are, and if that community becomes broken, then you yourselves also become broken. And the restoration of that community, the healing of that community, cannot happen unless you contribute to the healing of it in a broader sense. Basically that is it. *Ubuntu* is that I am because of others, in relationships with others. I am not an island of myself, I am part of the community, I am part of the greater group (interview on 26 November 2008).

Khoza Mgojo also described *ubuntu* as something that has to do with interconnectedness, and he made a link between *ubuntu* and the idea of collective shame:

With us it is you, family, clan and nation. The tying factor is called *ubuntu*. What injures me is injuring you, what injures us is injuring our clan, what is injuring our clan is injuring the whole community and the nation. That is *ubuntu*. You cannot live as an individual. That is why, when you are doing a wrong thing, you are putting shame on the whole group (interview on 17 November 2008).

Likewise speaking in terms of interconnectedness, Desmond Tutu refers to *ubuntu* as a phenomenon that implies the humanity of the perpetrator of apartheid's atrocities was caught up in that of his victim:

*Ubuntu* means that in a real sense even the supporters of apartheid were victims of the vicious system which they implemented and which they supported so enthusiastically. Our humanity was intertwined. The humanity of the perpetrator of apartheid's atrocities was caught up and bound up in that of his victim whether he liked it or not. In the process of dehumanizing another, in inflicting untold harm and suffering, the perpetrator was inexorably being dehumanized as well (Tutu 1999: 35).

Furthermore, Bongani Finca explained that crime first and foremost is a bad thing because it has negative effects on the harmony of the community, and that according to *ubuntu* it is more important to restore communal harmony than to secure punishment:

Instead of pursuing punishment, you are more interested in restoring relationships. That is fundamental to *ubuntu* because *ubuntu* does not focus on what has been done to you, *ubuntu* focuses on how we can be restored together as a community, so that we can heal together. *Ubuntu* does not only concentrate on the pain that has been caused to me, but also recognizes the damage that has been done to you. In the course of what you are doing to me, you are also hurting yourself (interview on 26 November 2008).

Bongani Finca also explained that:

*Ubuntu* wants that in the process of me being restored, you must also be restored because we can only be fully human when we are human together. You must heal, and I must assist you to heal, as much as I must heal, and you must assist me to heal (interview on 26 November 2008).

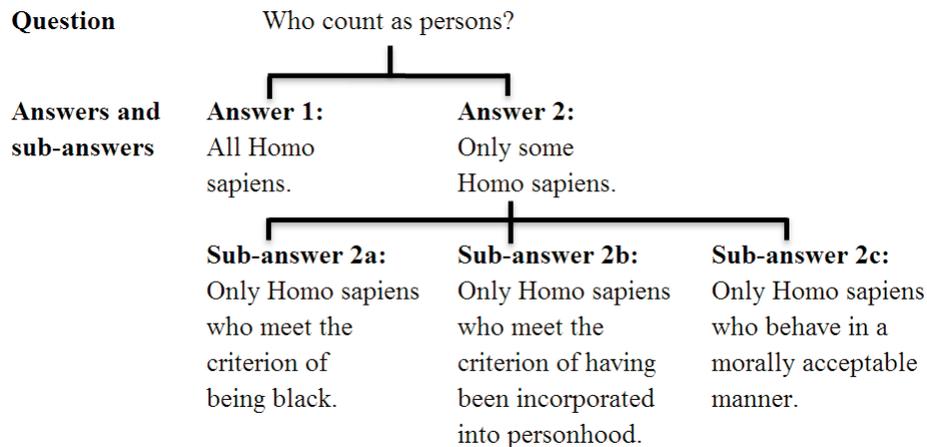
### Who Count as Persons According to SAADs?

The concept of a person is of central importance in relation to how SAADs understand *ubuntu*. To be more explicit:

- In the answers in Cluster 1, *ubuntu* is defined as a moral quality of a person. The moral quality of a person is, logically speaking, something only a person can possess, so if you are not a person, then you are not a possible subject of this moral quality.
- In the answers in Cluster 2, *ubuntu* is defined as a phenomenon (for instance a philosophy, an ethic, African humanism, or a worldview) according to which *persons are interconnected*. If you are not a person, then you are not part of the interconnectedness between persons.

I will now turn to explore how SAADs answer the question ‘Who count as persons?’. My research shows that some SAADs believe that *all Homo sapiens* are persons, whereas others hold the view that only *some Homo sapiens* count as persons: only those who are black, only those who have been incorporated into personhood, or only those who behave in a morally acceptable manner. In other words, being black, having been incorporated into personhood, or behaving in a morally acceptable manner are seen as *necessary conditions* for being a person. The different answers to the question ‘Who counts as a person?’ are illustrated in Diagram 2. It should be noted that Answer 1 and 2 are logically incompatible, whereas Sub-answers 2a, 2b, and 2c may be combined without contradicting each other.

**Diagram 2:** Answers and sub-answers to the question ‘Who count as persons?’ found among SAADs.



*Answer 1*

In his book, *Ubuntu: The Essence of Democracy*, Mfuniselwa John Bhengu supports the idea that all *Homo sapiens* are persons. He writes that:

A primary characteristic of African 'being' is its inclusiveness. African theology declares that *umuntu* [the Nguni term 'umuntu' is commonly translated as 'person'] is a dynamic concept: it means *all* humans not only African humans (Bhengu 1996: 50).

Bhekithemba Mchunu, a prince of the Zulu Royal House and an *induna* (advisor) of traditional leaders in KwaZulu-Natal, underscored that 'we are all *abantu*' [pl. of 'umuntu', meaning 'persons'], and he even specified that 'it [the term 'umuntu'] does not only refer to somebody who is black, somebody who has undergone rituals' (interview on 13 December 2009). Furthermore, Kgereshi Peter Mokwena from the Western Cape Department of Cultural Affairs & Sport writes that:

'*Umuntu*' (nguni) refers to a human being no matter their color, linguistic affinity, political affiliation and even ethnic background. A white man or woman is as such *umuntu/motho* ['*motho*' is a term from the Sesotho language], hence we say '*Amuntu o mhlophe*' in isiZulu which means 'a white person'. We say it in this manner due to the fact that a white person or any human being for that matter is primarily *umuntu/motho* (human) by their nature, before being defined in racial or ethnic terms (e-mail of 2 September 2009).

Mumsy Ngcobo from the Gauteng Department of Sports, Arts, Culture & Recreation also explains that:

*Umuntu* is a person whether Mlungu, Indian or any living person. But *ubuntu* is something very much different. You can be *umuntu omhlophe* (white person) *umuntu omnyama* (black person) *ongenabantu* (a human being irrespective of colour without humanity). Therefore humanity is within an individual. Some human beings do have *ubuntu* some don't. That's why we talk of heartless, self-centered people etc. (e-mail of 1 September 2009).

*Answer 2*

I will now examine the idea that only *Homo sapiens* who meet the criterion of being black, of having been incorporated into personhood, or of behaving in a morally acceptable manner count as persons.

*Sub-answer 2a*

To my knowledge, *Humhuims or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy* (1980) was the first book to be written specifically on *ubuntu*. In this book, Mr. and Mrs. Samkange write that '(w)hen one sees two people, one white and the other black, coming along, we say: '*Hona munhu uyo ari kufamba murungu* [chiShona]', or in isiNdebele [one of the Nguni languages], '*Nanguyana umuntu ohamba lo mlungu*'. (Samkange & Samkange 1980: 38). This means 'There is a *munhu/umuntu* [person] walking with a white man'. The Samkanges explain why people say so:

Now, is there a sense in which we can say that a white man lacks something which we always identify in an African? Yes, black Americans, for instance, identify something they call 'soul' as being almost exclusively among black

folk. What is this thing they call soul? It is indefinable, yet identifiable among black people (Samkange & Samkange 1980: 38).

The Samkanges were Zimbabweans, but the idea that only blacks are persons can, apparently, also be found among SAADs. Aninka Claassens worked as a Trac fieldworker in South African rural areas, and in 1986 she published a short article in the journal *The Black Sash*. In this article, she explained how SAADs, in her experience, understood the concept of *abantu*:

*'Abantu'* sometimes has another meaning, which is 'black people', white people not being included. It is necessary to specify who is in the world before one can continue to call everyone there *'abantu'*. Otherwise when you mention that one of these *abantu* is called Oliver Twist people look skeptical – *abantu* don't have names like that. It's sad really to have to say *'abantu nabaMhlope'*, 'people and whites'; particularly when the word *'abantu'* is a personification of the quality *ubuntu* – meaning human behavior, compassion, humanity. It is however not all that surprising – whites have used the word 'Bantu' to mean 'black people' and there has been a terrible shortage of *ubuntu* in white people's behavior towards black (Claassens 1986: 18).

The existence of the idea that only blacks are persons has been confirmed by some members of the SAADs group. In a speech about the proud legacy of Nelson Mandela held at a symposium organized by the Department of Education in Port Elizabeth, Fred Khumalo, an award-winning columnist and the Insight & Opinion Editor of the Sunday Times, said that:

Now, I was born and bred in KwaZulu Natal, grew up in a tiny township called Mpumalanga in the midlands area. Thanks to the tales of valor that we listened to from our grandmothers, all the heroes that we were told of were Zulu. My world view revolved around *abantu* (human beings, meaning black people) and *abelungu* (whites). There was no rancor in our attitude towards whites, but they were simply not *abantu*. My world view – and I suppose that I speak on behalf of many of my peers – was that narrow (Khumalo 2008: 1).

My informers have provided some interesting explanations for the development of the idea that only blacks are persons. According to Thabo Sebogodi from the Gauteng Department of Sports, Arts, Culture & Recreation, the reason some Africans have been saying that whites are not persons must be located in the history of racial oppression. He writes that:

The reason African were saying *'makgoa ga se batho'* ('whites are not human') are recorded in our history of oppression as South Africans and Africans in general. We (as Africans) could not just believe that human beings were capable of treating others in the manner that Africans were treated (e-mail of 2 September 2009).

Mangosuthu Buthelezi provided another explanation:

You know what, that [idea] was caused by the apartheid regime. Because the apartheid regime – at one time they called us 'Bantu' as if it refers to black people only. The word *'abantu'* in fact refers to people [all Homo sapiens]. It was an official designation of black people that one was *abantu* which is a plural of *umuntu*. It was awkward because if you were a black sergeant in the police,

they would not say ‘sergeant so and so’, they would say ‘Bantu sergeant so and so’. That confusion was caused by that (interview on 16 December 2009).

*Sub-answer 2b*

In his acknowledged book, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, Magobe Ramose explains that in traditional African thought, a *Homo sapiens* is not a person by birth, but is incorporated into personhood:

In order to be a person the human individual must, according to traditional African thought, go through various community prescribed stages, and be part of certain ceremonies and rituals. Only at the completion of all prescribed stages does the human individual acquire the status of a person. Prior to this the individual is regarded as ‘it’ to show that he or she is not yet incorporated into the body of persons. In traditional African thought personhood is, therefore, acquired and not merely established by virtue of the fact of being human (Ramose 1999: 81).

To support this interpretation, Magobe Ramose refers to the work of Ifeanyi Menkiti, an acknowledged Nigerian philosopher. In the famous article, ‘Persons and Community in African Traditional Thought’, Ifeanyi Menkiti explains that:

Without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere danglers to whom the description ‘person’ does not fully apply. For personhood is something which has to be achieved, and it is not given simply because one is born of human seed (Menkiti 1984: 172; quoted in Ramose 1999: 82).

In contemporary African philosophy, the conception of a person that is described by Magobe Ramose in his book on *ubuntu* is sometimes referred to as ‘the normative conception of a person’ (see Menkiti 2004). Kwasi Wiredu offers insight as to how this conception has developed in the literature:

A person is not just a certain biological entity with a certain psycho-physical endowment, but, rather, a being of this kind who has shown a basic willingness and ability to fulfill his or her obligations in the community. Personhood, on this showing, is something of an achievement. It is only comparatively recently that attention has been called, in contemporary African philosophy, to this normative character of the traditional African concept of a person. In anthropology, however, Meyer Fortes, in the 1940s, noted ([Fortes] 1987) the normative dimensions of the concept of a person among the Tallensi of Northern Ghana and other African peoples. In contemporary African philosophy the *locus classicus* of the normative conception of a person is Ifeanyi Menkiti’s ‘Persons and Community in African Traditional Thought’ (1984) (Wiredu 2004: 17).

*Sub-answer 2c*

Some SAADs believe that *Homo sapiens* can demonstrate that they are *not* persons by the way they behave. This belief does, likewise, represent a normative conception of a person; a conception according to which the status of being a person depends on a normative evaluation of behavior. As Mangosuthu Buthelezi has said, ‘If a person behaves in a way which is not consonant with expected human behavior, then we say that he is no longer *umuntu* because he has not got *ubuntu*. So you sort of classify him as an ani-

mal' (interview on 16 December 2009). In line with this statement, Mfuniselwa John Bhengu explained:

The moment you go outside the boundaries of *ubuntu*, you actually begin to be labeled as an animal [by the community] – *kintu* [animal] as opposed to *ubuntu*. Once you are at this level, even your community, they just reject and repel [you] (interview on 17 December 2009).

Bhekithemba Mchunu went into further detail talking about the area in KwaZulu Natal where he is an *induna*:

[Mchunu] He [the murderer or the rapist] is not considered to be a human being *at all* by the way that he is behaving towards other people.

[Gade] So that is actually an example where not everybody is considered to be *abantu*?

[Mchunu] Exactly, the community will say – they even say it: You are not a human being. You do not deserve to be with us. They would say that. Even today, such cases do happen. They [the community members] can go to the extent where they kill a person. We have had some cases where a person is stoned, where a person is killed.

[Gade] Even today?

[Mchunu] Even today, it does happen.

[Gade] Because they are not considered to be persons?

[Mchunu] In rape cases where a person is found raping somebody, or killing somebody... If you are not there as a traditional leader to calm them down, people will take the law into their own hands. They would kill that person for the sake of protecting *ubuntu* because that person has lost humanity. He is no longer a person. He is regarded as an animal because what he is doing is not accepted (interview on 13 December 2009).

### Some Reflections

In the preceding discussion, I have shown that among SAADs it is possible to find both an *inclusive* and different *exclusive* conceptions of a person. According to the *inclusive* conception, all *Homo sapiens* are persons, whereas according to the *exclusive* conceptions, only some *Homo sapiens* count as persons. I will use the different conceptions of a person as a background for distinguishing between *inclusive* and *exclusive* ideas about the nature of *ubuntu*:

- *Inclusive ideas about the nature of ubuntu*: Ideas according to which *ubuntu* is (a) a moral quality of a person that may potentially be possessed by *all Homo sapiens* since *all Homo sapiens* are persons, or (b) a phenomenon according to which persons, understood as *all Homo sapiens*, are interconnected.
- *Exclusive ideas about the nature of ubuntu*: Ideas according to which *ubuntu* is (a) a moral quality of a person that may only be possessed by *some Homo sapiens* since only *some Homo sapiens* are persons, or (b) a phenomenon according to which persons, understood as *some Homo sapiens*, are interconnected.

Based on my research, it is not possible to justify any quantitative claims about the extent of either inclusive or exclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu*. My point is simply that there are *some* SAADs who have inclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu*, and *some* SAADs who have exclusive ideas. When I first discovered exclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* among members of the SAADs group, my immediate reaction was to consider these ideas as ethically illegitimate. But maybe this conclusion was too hasty. I will now present some possible positions on the ethical legitimacy of the different ideas about the nature of *ubuntu*.

#### *Reflections on Ethical Legitimacy*

Individuals with a deontological mindset may believe that people have an *ethical obligation* to consider and treat all *Homo sapiens* as persons, and that this obligation is valid under all social and political circumstances. From this point of view, the exclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* will *always* be ethically illegitimate since they are based on the view that only *some Homo sapiens* count as persons. It should also be noted that exclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* underpin group segregation; more specifically, segregation between those who are part of the ‘community of *persons*’ and those who are not. This distinction devaluates those who are not part of the ‘community of *persons*’ since they are not considered to be possible subjects of the positive moral quality of *ubuntu*.

Individuals who tend to a consequentialist way of thinking may believe that the different idea about the nature of *ubuntu* are ethically legitimate in contexts where they have good consequences, and ethically illegitimate in contexts where they have bad consequences. What consequences do the different ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* have in post-apartheid South Africa? The *inclusive ideas* could be interpreted to mean that all South Africans - even the worst apartheid perpetrators - might potentially (in the future) be subjects of the moral quality of *ubuntu*, and that all South Africans, irrespective of what they have done in the past, are part and parcel of the interconnectedness between persons. It would, I think, be reasonable to argue that such views underpin the national reconciliation policy in South Africa. The *exclusive ideas* could, on the other hand, be interpreted to mean that there are groups in South Africa whose members will never be able to possess the positive moral quality of *ubuntu*, and whose members will never be part of the interconnectedness between persons, simply because they are not persons. Such views may become sources of renewed conflict and group segregation. Consequentialists who consider the ideological underpinning of the national reconciliation policy as a good consequence and renewed conflicts and group segregation as a bad consequence might therefore, on that basis, argue that in post-apartheid South Africa, the inclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* are ethically legitimate in opposition to the exclusive ones.

Lovemore Mbigi states that ‘the heart and soul of *ubuntu* is the solidarity principle, group conformity and care in the face of survival challenges, based on unconditional group compassion, respect, dignity, trust, openness and cooperation’ (quoted in Swanepoel 2008: 360). Faced with severe survival challenges, exclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* may increase the chance of group survival. If a group is severely threatened, the group is likely to stand stronger if its members have a strong sense of group identity and compassion. Group identity and compassion could be strengthened by exclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* if such ideas are taken to imply that the members of the group have a *unique* bound of interconnectedness, or are bound together by the *exclusive* possession of the positive moral quality of *ubuntu*. From a

consequentialist point of view, it may be argued that in a situation where a (morally good) group is threatened, exclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* are legitimate if they increase the chance of group survival. It may even be argued that in such a situation, inclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* might be problematic to the extent that they might hinder group members from fighting back against those who threaten the group. The inclusive *ubuntu* idea that we are *all* 'brothers', even with those who threaten us, could have this pacifying effect.

As I have attempted to show, whether or not people believe that the ethical legitimacy of the different ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* is relative to social and political contexts may depend on their ethical orientation. Those who have a deontological mindset may believe that exclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* are always ethically illegitimate, whereas those who tend towards a more consequentialist way of thinking may find that exclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* could be legitimate in some contexts. Philosophers have been debating whether deontological ethical positions are preferable to consequentialist ones (and vice versa) for centuries. I will abstain from entering into that debate and only underscore that it would make good sense to argue that in post-apartheid South Africa, exclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* are ethically illegitimate both from a deontological and a consequentialist point of view.

#### *Reflections on Data Collection*

The findings that have been presented in this article are informed by a research process through which I have actively tried to uncover different ideas about what *ubuntu* is instead of seeking consensus. To increase the possibility of discovering different ideas about the nature of *ubuntu*, I have attempted to draw on informants from the SAADs group with diverse backgrounds. The underlying rationale is simple: just as the fisherman who tries to catch different types of fish would probably increase his chances of doing so by throwing his net into different waters, the researcher who tries to find different ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* would probably increase the chance of doing so by getting informants with diverse backgrounds.

In addition to a number of authors of texts on *ubuntu*, my informants include more than fifty members of the SAADs group who have informed me about *ubuntu* in qualitative interviews, conversations and e-mail correspondence. My first research stay in South Africa was from August to December 2008 where I was affiliated with the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in Cape Town. Because of my affiliation with the IJR, I was afforded an opportunity to discuss *ubuntu* with members of the Khulumani Support Group in Cape Town. Furthermore, I traveled around Western Cape, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu Natal, and Gauteng, where I conducted interviews with former TRC commissioners and committee members. My second research stay was from November 2009 to December 2010. During this stay I spend most of my time in KwaZulu Natal as a guest of Prince Velekhaya Shange from the Zulu Royal House. Prince Velekhaya Shange kindly introduced me to a number of people from the Royal House, and arranged for me to speak with traditional Zulu leaders and politicians. During the periods where I have been in Denmark (my country of origin), I have used e-mail correspondence as a mean to collect data on how SAADs understand *ubuntu*. My e-mail dialogues have primarily been with South African academics, and people who work in South African government departments.

When I began to research on *ubuntu*, I thought that *all* SAADs were of the opinion that *ubuntu* is an indigenous philosophy about how persons, understood as *all Homo sapiens*, are interconnected. However, as a consequence of my active search for different ideas about the nature of *ubuntu*, I *gradually* arrived at the findings that I have presented in this article. But even if I continued my search for different ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* for a lifetime, I would only get in contact with a small fraction of the SAADs group. There might *of course* be members of the SAADs group who have ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* that I have not been able to identify. If this is the case, it would mean that my map of how SAADs understand *ubuntu* lacks detail, but not that my findings are invalid. I have succeeded in identifying a number of different ideas about the nature of *ubuntu*, and these ideas do exist, irrespective of whether it would be possible to find additional ideas.

### Final Remarks

As noted in the introduction, I am not aware that other scholars are engaged in the project of mapping out the entire landscape of different ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* that are found among members of the SAADs group. Accordingly, I hope that my map will be of interest to many people, and that it will be used as a background for developing more detailed maps. Some of the findings that I have presented may come as a surprise to people who have only taken an interest in some parts of the *ubuntu* landscape. Some may be surprised to find that in addition to inclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu*, there are also exclusive ideas. The existence of exclusive ideas suggests that people should be careful not to over-romanticize SAADs' understanding of *ubuntu*. Both from a deontological and a consequentiatist point of view it would, as I have emphasized, make good sense to argue that in post-apartheid South Africa SAADs' exclusive ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* are ethically illegitimate.

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