

## **Quick Visit to Zimbabwe: Are Ubuntu and Omoluabi Spirits Still Relevant for Africa?**

**By \*Babafemi A. Badejo, Ph.D**

I had titled the first part of my Zimbabwe experience as: “Quick Visit to Zimbabwe: My Case for the Rekindling of the Ubuntu Spirit in Africa”. I got diverse reactions, including on the meaning of Ubuntu. Before writing on the final version of my memorable short stay in Zimbabwe that will be located within a rich history and beautiful nature, I decided to share an interesting exchange that arose from my first write-up, including using the opportunity to explain a bit on the meaning of Ubuntu.

For Madiba Nelson Mandela, Ubuntu represents “the profound sense that we are human only through the humanity of others; that if we are to accomplish anything in this world, it will in equal measure be due to the work and achievements of others”. In effect, individualism that is much cherished in some cultures as the natural state of the human being is not necessarily so.

Some authors have defined Ubuntu more broadly by suggesting that it is African humanism, a philosophy, an ethic and as a worldview. Desmond Tutu, loosely defined Ubuntu as “I participate, I share”. He drew on the principles of Ubuntu to guide South Africa’s reconciliatory approach to apartheid-era crimes. For Tutu, “We are different so that we can know our need for one another, for no one is ultimately self-sufficient ... The completely self-sufficient person would be sub-human”.

A good illustration of Ubuntu was related in a piece I once read. A group of children were running in a race. A number of them were neck and neck when they noticed that one of them was far beyond. They all stopped, went back for the slower child and all ran happily together at her pace. Asked why they did that, they pointed out that happiness shared is far better than one person running to capture a prize.

Aside from other reactions on different aspects of my story on getting a visa to Zimbabwe with a Nigerian passport, the reaction from a good friend to the first account on my visit cryptically elaborates on the word Ubuntu and much more. Unlike many who, in their reactions, felt pity for me with one promising to raise my experience with officials, I feel I should share the detailed exchange I had with Prof. Peter Fogam of the University of Lagos, Lagos (Unilag), to elicit, if possible, a wider debate on Ubuntu, especially as to if such a concept is still relevant in Africa.

As I completed my Ph.D in Political Science at the University of California, Los Angeles, (UCLA), I had to drag a fraudulent Iranian to a small claims court. He hired the services of a lawyer. I felt I did not need one, after all I was a freshly minted Doctor of Philosophy. The lawyer made mincemeat of me before the Judge. I still won, though on paper, I received a restitution that was much less than I had expected. I guess the Judge was convinced of the fact that I had been defrauded in spite of the Lawyer meeting most of my arguments with “hearsay” objections and the Judge agreeing with him, most of the time. American Courts are not like their Nigerian counterparts. The situation is a little more relaxed, almost like in Judge Judy’s court. There are no intimidating colonial wigs in the hot African sun, for instance. Fela Anikulapo Kuti captured the situation best in his song: “Gentleman”, wherein he derided the African colonial mentality of suit and tie in the stifling African heat on an average day.

I asked the Judge the meaning of hearsay. He responded in English that did not make sense to me. I looked and felt daft. But he ruled in my favour as he seemed to have decided not to allow technicalities to obstruct justice. However, the Lawyer insisted on some stupid monthly payment arrangement that I did not have the capacity to oppose. In fact, I was never paid. With this experience, I realised I was not learned as Lawyers readily claim to be. This was a major push for me. I went back to school to read law.

Prof. Fogam and I come a long way, he was, (with late Prof. Adedokun Adeyemi, Prof. Yemi Osinbajo, and many others), my teacher in the pursuit of a Bachelors in Law at Unilag. Graduating with flying colours as they say in English, I proceeded to the Nigerian Law School and was called to the Nigerian Bar over 32 years ago. In addition, Prof. Fogam Ms. Bella Okagbue and Prof. Osinbajo accompanied Prof. Adeyemi to Somalia as part of the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM II). In effect, we were co-sojourners for almost two years during UNOSOM II's search for the peace that continues to elude Somalia in the large part.

The depth of the exchange between Prof. Fogam and I on Pan-Africanism, I thought, requires further discussions, including by others, not only on "Ubuntu" but many philosophical and practical issues that should be useful for an African Renaissance, if anything like that is still possible.

As a fine lawyer should, Prof. Fogam, started by challenging my use of the word – rekindle – in my title that is restated above. He indicated that he was having two concerns on my write-up. He wrote: "First the word 'rekindle' means revive. That presupposes that the spirit of Ubuntu had existed before within African countries. With respect sir, that is erroneous. African colonial history teaches us that there was nothing in common with the colonial territories that needed or needs to be "rekindled". This is even more so (and that is my second point) when you invoke the spirit of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a term of South African origin meaning "I am because we are " and translates in real life to mean "humanity towards others". Our colonial history was just the opposite Nigerians v Ghanaians; Congolese v Cameroonians; Senegalese v Gambians etc etc. where was the "humanity" that you are advocating for it to be 'rekindled'?"

Prof. Fogam felt we should discuss further on another day. Definitely, those days, when I was young and everything, including our humanity had not become commercialised and the emphasis was being an "*Omoluabi*", this could be a basis for several radio/television dialogues to exchange knowledge, educate, and build towards policies that could ameliorate the African situation. Memories of student sponsored educational exchanges at Universities remain very fresh. The public spirited lecturers included names like fast talking sense personalities like: Dr. Tai Solarin, Dr. Bala Usman, Dr. Opeyemi Ola, Prof. Bade Onimode, Comrade Ola Oni, Dr. Akin Oyebode, Edwin Madunagu, Obarogie Ohonbamu, Funsho Akingbade, Alao Aka Bashorin, Comrade Hassan Sunmonu, and of course, Gani Fawehinmi etc. They educated Nigerians at large on platforms provided by students and broadcasted by public and private media dedicated to a better Nigeria as opposed to today's profits-oriented media houses ready to collect advertisements and "brown envelopes" from exploitative interests. In fact, a roundtable or seminar could be a major avenue for additional knowledge-sharing on the major poser by Prof. Fogam.

My response to my friend was to pose a number of questions: "What made Nigeria to be concerned about apartheid in South Africa? What made me happy to part with my one-month salary happily as part of support towards decolonisation and eradication of apartheid in Southern Africa? What made me take my 3-year-old daughter to demonstrate in front of Bank of America every Saturday morning while at UCLA with many other peoples of African descent, pushing for American divestment from South Africa? Tanzania and Zambia sacrificed so much with human and material payments. I concluded that we may not have had enough of the spirit of Ubuntu. But we can surely rekindle that little that is dying or wake up the dead.

His response was very apt. He wrote: We must not upgrade individual sympathies like you displayed to the spirit of non-existent humanity within us. After all, Ghanaians chased out Nigerians and vice-versa from their countries; even the South Africans that you risked your life and that of your daughter in the protests supporting them, see what they are doing to Nigerians and other nationals in their country today. Prof. why would you have to take a flight round Southern Africa before getting to Harare, why should it

take you so long for a sister country to give you a visa let alone the treatment at airports. “Humanity” implies the quality of being humane; kindness; benevolence. This was killed in us collectively. We look at each other with utter contempt and suspicion and one is worse off if you carry a Nigerian passport”.

My immediate response to these weighty points from my friend was to acknowledge that he had raised valid points. However, I suggested that we can try to build if not rebuild our humanity. How we could set about realising such conviction of mine I am unable to articulate in this piece. I hope we all can help towards such an effort.

In sharing my exchange with Prof. Fogam, I brought up the Yoruba term Omoluabi, that emphasises a human role model that empathises with others in society and an epitome of good character. Such excellent character in society is based on integrity and hard work. No short-cuts that refuse to care about what is left for others in society. It is the opposite of the egoistic self that the dog-eat-dog of Western competition orientation has foisted on us. Corruption is an anathema for an Omoluabi just as it is for Ubuntu. It is certain that corruption kills and eschews Ubuntu and Omoluabi, since a most crucial value for Omoluabi – integrity – is necessarily absent when corruption reins. Corruption is sadistic for it destroys much of the lives of many in society even if the egoistic conscience-less individual appears to be happy.

Madiba Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s views on Ubuntu are useful for the clarification on the term. Of course, such attempt to explain further on the concept of Ubuntu should raise questions on the relevance of Ubuntu and Omoluabi to today’s Africa, which is throwing away virtues, values and cultures of Africa in the pursuit of foreign values and norms being presented as natural for all of mankind. On Omoluabi, my son once asked me if he should preach about the significance of being an Omoluabi in society to a kidnapper facing him with an AK-47?

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