

Ubuntu – Curating the archive

Edited by Leonhard Praeg and Siphokazi Magadla

Scottsville: UKZ Press, 2012. 231 pp.

ISBN 978-1-86914-265-0



The book grapples with a very complex yet contextually relevant subject in South Africa's fledging democracy. The volume deals with both the practical and theoretical aspects of the concept of Ubuntu and how it relates to the country's transition narrative as well as to the broader continental postcolonial emancipatory context. As South Africa navigates its transition and transformation landscape, especially after twenty years of democracy that, many observers argue, have yielded very little economic and political progress, the character and content of this transition remain a central question in development debates. This book will benefit scholars pursuing intellectual and philosophical inquiry as well as practitioners grappling with how to interpret Ubuntu in everyday life. Students studying social sciences and humanities will also benefit enormously from this book.

In setting the scene for this important national dialogue in the book, Leonhard Praeg draws a parallel between the culmination of the 2012 Thinking Africa colloquium whose proceedings comprise the different chapters of this book, and the first commemoration of the Marikana massacre. This comparison is made to put to rest the almost two-decade held view that South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994 was founded on the principles of Ubuntu. Marikana, in this context, and I suppose a number of other state-sponsored violent and even fatal police responses to civil protest, suggests that if the country's transition foundation was built on the principles of Ubuntu, then such an understanding of Ubuntu will have been narrowly and selectively defined. Praeg argues that Marikana can be equated to an apocalypse of the new South Africa, an undoing of the imagery of 'rainbowism' and the claim that 1994 represented the best that a nation can become.

Positing Ubuntu within the context of an unravelling political fabric in South Africa is important to the reader for two reasons. Firstly, it provides the reader with a social and political context within which to explore and engage Ubuntu as a subject, thereby making it easier to relate the discussion and concepts explored in the book to contemporary real life problems in our society. Secondly, it allows the reader to use a historical praxis to explore the evolution and genealogy of what could be loosely defined as African humanism (or Ubuntu as the authors' content) and how such has/should have or continues to shape the country and continent's development trajectory.

The different authors in the book deal extensively with the definitional and genealogical aspects of the concept Ubuntu and how it applies to and should be interpreted in the development context today. Lewis R. Gordon explores how Ubuntu can be explored within and outside the boundaries of 'modernity' and as part of a different modernity in itself. By posing the question whether by tradition we refer to a presumption of the pre-modern temporal location whereby indigenous peoples had to cease to think, live and be creative on contact with the 'outside' colonial empire,

Gordon raises an important point towards understanding tradition as both a product of continuous social and political contestations and further, that which is embedded in an iterative negation and affirmation of competing value systems and moral judgements.

Other articles in the book provide an equally fascinating dialogue and navigation of Ubuntu. Ama Biney borrows from Achille Mbembe's notion of the African postcolonial state as 'schizophrenic', that is, uncertain of its identity due to it being embedded in the coloniality of power and control, while at the same time pursuing or trying to appease an afro-centric agenda. This paradox, according to Biney, leads to some identity and ideological confusion on the part of the postcolonial state, including how it defines and shapes its value and moral systems. Ubuntu becomes orphaned in this contestation. Biney also explores the different African humanist narratives as espoused by Nyerere, Nkrumah and other leading African philosophers and political activists to demonstrate the pragmatist genealogy of Ubuntu in the African polity. A much more plausible question that Biney asks is whether Ubuntu and the African humanist discourse is compatible with the dominant neoliberal, imperialist and capitalist mode of production, whether the rubric of human rights and rights-based discourses are themselves an amenity to the exploitative global capitalist order than it is a framework for genuine fairness and equality in society? The primary question for Biney is whether the Western constructed human rights discourse can be reconciled with African humanism, and if so, what would be the point of reference and departure? This is an important consideration in any emancipatory development debate today.

Ilze Keevy locates the discussion in South Africa's constitutional framework, problematizing what she terms a utopian take on African customary law and its conflict with some of the basic human rights tenets in the country's current legal and legislative dispensation. Ramose argues for an approach that affirms marginalised and excluded African peoples' epistemological location (afro-centricity) as a basis for political engagement and dialogue in the post-apartheid period. Shivji explores Nyerere's political philosophy of '*ujamaa na kujitegemea*' and how it was interpreted during Nyerere's tenure in Tanzania to draw lessons and parallels to curate Ubuntu and its various archives in today's development discourse.

In the final analysis, the broader argument pursued by the different authors in the book is that Ubuntu cannot be simply defined in a narrow identitarian and nationalist matrix embedded in liberal constitutionalism outside the material, spiritual and economic conditions that people find themselves in. Historical accounts and analysis point to Ubuntu and African humanism in general as not just a philosophy but a pragmatic approach to human relations. It is, however, important to consider and carefully interrogate the complex colonial encounter, and the different power contestations thereof, in finding the balance between history and the development context today. Ubuntu needs to be defined and interpreted within the margins of power relations, as an emancipatory tool and in concert with the socio-economic, political, cultural and afro-centric epistemological conditions of our society if it were to be of any currency and urgency to South Africa and the African region's development path.

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