

Ubuntu Values Individuals: An Analysis of Eulogies of Mandela

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Summary

It has been said that the quintessentially African moral philosophy of *ubuntu* values community over individuals. We argue that *ubuntu* values community to the extent that community enables individuals to be the most that they can be. In substantiation of this view, we also contend that *ubuntu* values recognition of individuals. To develop this view, we present a creative and critical review of existing literature on *ubuntu* coupled with a close reading of eulogies of Mandela published in the mainstream English-language South African newspapers following his death.

Opsomming

Daar word gesê dat *ubuntu*, die morele filosofie eie aan Afrika, die gemeenskap bo die individu stel. Ons voer aan dat *ubuntu* waarde aan die gemeenskap heg in dié mate wat dit individue in staat stel om hul volle potensiaal te bereik. Ter staving van hierdie siening voer ons ook aan dat *ubuntu* waarde heg aan die erkenning van individue. Om hierdie siening uit te bou, bied ons 'n kreatiewe en kritiese hersiening van bestaande *ubuntu*-literatuur tesame met 'n noukeurige blik op die huldeblyke aan Mandela wat ná sy dood in Engelse hoofstroomkoerante in Suid-Afrika gepubliseer is.

Introduction

Nelson Mandela is widely recognised as a paragon of *ubuntu*. The President of America, Barack Obama, captured this global sentiment with regard to Mandela when he said the following about *ubuntu* and Mandela at the late President's official memorial service:

... Mandela understood the ties that bind the human spirit. There is a word in South Africa, 'Ubuntu' that describes his greatest gift – his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that are invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us.

(Obama 2013)

In Obama's view, Mandela epitomises an individual who has internalised the values of *ubuntu* and has thereby learnt to follow his moral compass. In the Obama view, Mandela is heralded for demonstrating that *ubuntu* says individuals and communities can be the most they can be through becoming people who care for and give themselves to others. We argue that *ubuntu* values community to the extent that community enables individuals to be the most that they can be.

We develop and support the above thinking with a review of existing literature on *ubuntu* and a close reading of eulogies of Mandela published following his death. In short, as we seek to know what can be learnt about *ubuntu* from the way Mandela is eulogised, we contemplate how Mandela displayed qualities that enhance an understanding of *ubuntu* that is consistent with the argument that *ubuntu* values the individual.

The strategy of speaking of *ubuntu* with specific focus to how an African individual is eulogised is significant in the light of the observation that by and large research on Africans has not managed to say much about who Africans are, even though it may say much about what Africans are not (Mbembe 2001). It is also significant because Africans have too often been presented as somehow lacking in moral excellence (Mbembe 2001; Mudimbe 1988).

It is worth noting that in the fight against apartheid, deliberate choices were made by the ANC in exile to build up the name and myth of Mandela, the individual. These efforts, together with subsequent work to build Mandela up as an icon, around whom the post-apartheid nation of South Africa could rally, ensure that what people say of Mandela is difficult to separate from the myths about him. This article is not concerned with disentangling how, as Moshoeshe Monare (2013: 16) says, myths of Mandela are enmeshed with values and ideals that have formed around him. Although one can identify vital moral themes in the values and ideals praised by people as they eulogise Mandela, these may or may not fully or most accurately speak of who Mandela was. In this regard, this article stands in contrast to Slavoj Žižek's (2013) sentiment that the views expressed by people who eulogise Mandela are as meaningless as the unsystematic signs that Thamsanqa Jantjies made up in his schizophrenic performance at Mandela's official memorial service¹.

We proceed by presenting a critical and credible conception of *ubuntu* as a moral philosophy that values enabling individuals – in community with others – to attain to the good, the beautiful and the great. We then make three assertions that talk to the idea that Mandela is heralded as a paragon of *ubuntu*, not only for the way in which he fought for the welfare of the community but also through the ways in which he is recognised and praised for being not only a reconciler and harmoniser, but also a strong individual who took on battles

1. Jantjies was hired as a sign language interpreter during the official Mandela memorial service. After complaints from the audience it was established that Jantjies suffers from schizophrenia and that he was not a qualified sign language interpreter but simply made signs up as he went along.

in ways that sometimes went against the collective. We do this to critically extend a scholarly understanding of *ubuntu*, supporting the view that *ubuntu* is consistent with valuing communities that grant worth and recognition to individuals.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a word in the Nguni languages that can be cautiously translated as “humanness”. It is widely used to name an African moral philosophy that speaks of how individuals should live with others in ways that humanise individuals through their engagements with communities and others.

If *ubuntu* is defined as an African philosophy, it counts to know which people are considered to be African (Janz 2009; Mudimbe 1988). Among others, it is worth noting that:

- Africanness is not merely, directly or simply a fact of physical geographical location.
- Africanness is an invented and contested form of identity/ representation. It is intricately tied to colonial, anticolonial and postcolonial histories with consequences for how people know and act out being African.
- To a significant degree Africanness is defined by nationalist struggles of Africans in the face of colonial and apartheid rule (Chipkin 2007).
- However one defines them, Africans have changed over time, and given claims that preceding generations were better than those that succeeded them, there are questions to ask about whether we should privilege Africans of earlier eras over others. This concern is particularly salient given the ways in which Africans seemingly privilege and valorise elders and ancestors.

It is not the concern of this article to exhaust or finalise the debate about who Africans are.

Within, and notwithstanding, the uncertainty that emerges from not being able to say quite who Africans are, we are interested in thinking about what *ubuntu* says about how Africans understand how a human life can be lived meaningfully or excellently. In significant part this is because, beyond the definitional problem of who Africans are, it is widely accepted that *ubuntu* has been given practical expression in the practices of African people. The texts, conversations, conventions and norms that define African practices can be interpreted in ways that reveal what Africans find to be morally valuable. It is important to note that we readily acknowledge facets of uncertainty that emerge from recognising the social construction of Africanness and of realities in general. For example, we recognise that saying that the moral philosophy of *ubuntu* emerges in the practices of African people is tantamount to saying that the good is culturally relative, unstable, arbitrary, and mutable by contingent factors. From a conservative standpoint, this

interpretation may appear to undermine the notion that *ubuntu* values community and elders. For conservatives, *ubuntu* holds that freedom of expression should be limited to views that benefit the community or to views that are sanctioned by the elders.

However, it is a gross simplification of complex moral concerns to claim that we should start with either individuals or with communities, or that we can value individuals over communication (or vice versa). Contexts, issues, problems, collective enactments, decisions, and excellence have meanings that are related to the biographically determined perspectives of individuals. The contexts in which people live are not merely physical; they are composed of whole systems of relations – that may include cultural and psychological – within which individuals find themselves.

It makes sense for scholars to take into account the unique biographically situated ways in which African individuals in their multitudes of situations choose how to relate to others. These probes will no doubt show that Africans live and elaborate excellence, goodness, and virtue in complicated contexts. For Africans, as for other people, the good arises in all too human situations in which morally right actions are fraught with risk; goodness is fragile, right action is contested, and choices often appear to be between incommensurable goods. It is therefore appropriate that Africans value heterogeneity (Wilson 1999) or the facilitated participation of diverse voices that may even clash (Bourdillon 1976; Kenyatta 1953; Gyekye 1996; Woodman 2011; Wilson 1999).

Having said that good is identified by individuals in contexts, and that individuals and communities complexly implicate each other, it is worth asking what actions are right under *ubuntu*.

Following a philosophical method that seeks to identify uncontested values held by Africans and to compare and even enhance these with reference to universally acknowledged notions of the good, Metz (2007: 338) comes to the provisional view that *ubuntu* teaches that “an action is right just insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on good-will; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will”. In developing this view, Metz makes the following observations:

- *Ubuntu* values shared identity by means of which people are able to coordinate their actions to achieve desired ends.
- *Ubuntu* entails goodwill between and among people so that solidarity may enable them to achieve viable communities in which people with different identities may come together to form a “we” that is based on caring for one another.
- To bring together the valuing of social identity with the solidarity and goodwill of community, Metz is willing to say that individuals should sacrifice much (Metz 2007: 337), without thereby claiming that *ubuntu* abhors differences between people. One way in which Metz does this is by recognising that

individuals seek to build meaningful identities for themselves in ways that produce shared identity.

Some caution is required around Metz (2007: 338) view that *ubuntu* says that “an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will”. It is surely credible to argue that *ubuntu* does not teach that division and other markers of difference between people should be denied. Such denial of difference would make a mockery of the uniqueness of individual human experience; it would deny the unique identities of individuals, and so it would deny the involvement of human beings with diverse and contingent social identities, which is fundamental to the human community. To be precise, it would vitiate the authenticity with which one should relate to others as oneself, with one’s unique identity. It would therefore make it non-viable for individuals to take action that is right in the way that Metz (2007: 338) sense. The goodwill of human beings arises from lived-perspectives, so that denial of individual uniqueness and difference would amount to denial of the possibility of human goodwill. At the same time, shared identity is not something that can be promoted where individual identities are denied.

When Africans say that *ubuntu* involves valuing harmonious relationships, it is not to say that communities should deny that Africans are different and diverse. The fact is that Africans, in pursuit of harmony, prize heterogeneous strategies that enable individuals to express their voices (Wilson 1999) and views (Seleoane 2001) in community.

In the complicated contexts in which we find ourselves, for human beings the good is impossible to fully know; human knowledge is partial and incomplete and the truth and the good are fragile and contested. It is reasonable to take the view that the advancement of freedom of expression enables good and bad practices to be distinguished, with possible consequences for how the good may be achieved. Furthermore, freedom of expression has been closely associated with the possibility of attaining development, because it is a measure of the options and capabilities that people have to make a difference (Sen 2010). Freedom of expression is also a measure of extent to which people have the requisite variety of ways in which to meet ever new challenges without entering into crisis.

Africans have historically valued freedom of expression. For example:

- Documents produced by African freedom fighters do not show any intent to limit freedom of expression (Seleoane 2001).
- African communities have traditionally valued consensus and the inclusion of a wide variety of views through the process of *lekgotla*.
- Traditional African systems of living justice, for example, show that freedom of expression was granted to the widest range of people in order to advance the good.

(Bourdillon 1976; Kenyatta 1953; Gyekye 1996; Woodman 2011)

- The unique individual voice is valued in the heterogeneous music ideal by which Africans bring together clashing timbres in ways that highlight distinct individual voices.

(Wilson 1999)

It is unlikely, if one concedes that Africans value freedom of expression, that African conceptions of harmony involve marshalling people to uncomplicated following of communally sanctioned views. A more likely view is that when Africans say they pursue harmony, this is another way of saying that they value justice. This point is well made when one considers that the African system of living justice has been noted for the ways in which it searches for the (re)establishment of harmony to the extent that this equates to the advancement of justice, not merely to the acting out of the law (Woodman 2011).

In the light of the above considerations, U1 below is a modification to Metz (2007: 338) reading of *ubuntu*:

Ubuntu teaches that an action is right just insofar as it promotes the advancement of the welfare of a community, so long as this advancement is grounded on good-will or the search for justice. At the same time, an act is wrong to the extent that it tends to vitiate 1) the pursuit of justice, 2) the advancement of the welfare of the community, in ways that 3) involve acts of ill will.

As a working definition, U1 appears reasonable given that people do not form communities with those who have to vitiate their searches for justice, or people who foster discord where there is goodwill.

One can take it as a given that where ill will characterises how people meet each other, people are fundamentally separated from each other. Here, the altruism required for establishment of community is unattainable. The idea of community invokes the act of communing. It involves the work of individuals coming together voluntarily, using and establishing what Tomasello (2009) calls a “we orientation”.

While saying that Africans value collective lives, one needs not agree with those who claim *ubuntu* teaches that a person’s worth increases to the extent that he or she relates with more people (Metz & Gaie 2010). It rather seems reasonable to say that the act of communing with others is itself only valuable to the extent that this promotes the just advancement of the welfare of a community, as long as this advancement is grounded on goodwill or the search for justice. At the same time, the act of banding together with others is wrong to the extent that it tends to vitiate the pursuit of justice and the advancement of the welfare of the community. An act is also wrong if it involves acts of ill will.

There are no direct or necessary utility gains that accrue to individuals or communities simply because they relate to more people. Indeed, in some

instances there may be gains for communities and individuals when individuals choose to refuse to bow to the demands of society at large. For example, in science it is well known that revolutionaries do go against what their communities regard as true in ways that can advance their reputations and their science community's reputations.

There is merit in saying that Nelson Mandela, in solitary confinement for the just cause of advancing the welfare of oppressed peoples in South Africa, was acting in the spirit of *ubuntu*. Mandela in solitary confinement should be raised high above those furthering the interests of apartheid; precisely because of the injustice, the harm to the welfare of people and the ill will of apartheid, the perpetrators of this system of gross human rights abuse were diminished by their actions. We can say this even if many took the side of the jailers while Mandela was in solitary confinement.

The major challenge to the position we are adopting is one that says that Africans are essentially communalists. Polycarp Ikuenobe (2006: 3) finds that African moral philosophy addresses "the fundamental question, 'what ought *we* to do?' as opposed to 'what ought *I* to do?' or 'how ought *we* to behave?' and 'how ought *I* to behave in the context of how ought *we* to behave?'" For him Africans are distinguished from Westerners in the ways in which they eschew individualist orientations in favour of communal orientations. This view has been questioned by some scholars who note that it is unhelpful to approach Africans as exceptions who cannot be addressed as moral individuals (Diagne 2009; Eze 2008; Gyekye 1996). Moral individuals have perspectives from which they approach moral issues and choices that make them morally responsible. Collectives merely acquire moral accountability as a second-order quality that traces patterns of organisational or social perspectives and choices that coorienting individual moral actors make sense of and enact.

A fruitful alternative to the view that Africans are communalists says the challenge of understanding African realities is interwoven with the challenge of understanding how individual Africans find themselves in the world. Understanding how Africans live in the world requires appreciating their perspectives, choices, freedoms, and constraints; it requires understanding the embodiedness of their agency. The agency of individuals is embodied in the sense that it is informed by temporal, structural, environmental, resource, social-cultural, and other such drivers or constraints of action (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 970). To recognise the limits of human agency in a just and fair manner, one needs to take into account the ways in which agency is embodied. The idea of agency as embodied calls to mind the ways in which people are variously implicated, cooriented, connected and involved in realities that are fundamentally social. The embodiedness of human agency speaks of the responsibility that individuals have for others in the world, for as *ubuntu* shows, a person is a person in the ways that he or she meets others.

Considering the above, U2 below is a working definition of *ubuntu* that seems more descriptively accurate than U1, which was mentioned earlier:

Ubuntu teaches that an action is right just insofar as it promotes the just advancement of the welfare of a community, so long as this advancement is grounded on goodwill or the search for justice of individuals whose agency is granted to be embodied. At the same time, an act is wrong to the extent that it tends to vitiate 1) the pursuit of justice, 2) the advancement of the welfare of the community, in ways that 3) involve acts of ill will.

This understanding of *ubuntu* is consistent with a “we orientation” and should humanise Africans. To this end, over and against the history of racial “othering” that limits the articulation of African moral experiences (Mbembe 2001: 11, Mudimbe 1988), it is necessary to state foundational observations concerning Africans:

- Africans show agency when they coorient in ways that establish community membership, informing how excellence, and the good and virtuous are identified.
- Africans are motivated – at least partially for utilitarian reasons – to engage in enactment practices that enact community life with its strong claims to increased and sustained productivity, seeking to maximise goods while minimising harms. We recognise that collective action reduces what Coase (1960) calls transaction costs and that human cultural evolution and the cooperation associated with it dramatically increase and extend human productivity (Tomasello 2009).
- As Rawls (1971) eloquently says, all unencumbered or unbiased people can be expected – in an “original position” – to elect to establish societies that enable everyone to have fair opportunities to take part in productive work, to express themselves freely in a participatory democracy, and to share fairly in the fruits of labour. That is to say that people elect to establish democracy that affords them the best chances of being capacitated to be the most they can be. Indeed, there is evidence that African peoples would also seek to establish such societies. Early ethnographic research, for example, suggests that pre-colonial African societies seek to distribute, use and share the means of production in ways that ensure that everyone can be the most that they can be (Kenyatta 1953).

These observations are foundational observations about human beings in the world. They are a viable basis for expressing the view that Africans value cooperation with others, without claiming that this is not a universal value. Indeed, it is reasonable that Africans seek community membership to the extent that their sense-making interpretations and enactments suggest there are utilitarian benefits to be derived from this. This is significant if we are to fundamentally challenge racist assertions that African moral lives are not based on a rational foundation – but that is a debate in another context. They are significant if we are to see in the praise of Mandela possibilities for

drawing out important lessons towards speaking well of *who* African individuals are by showing appreciation for their moral concerns and values.

Consistent with U2, *ubuntu* values the utility of human agency by means of which people can cooperate to enhance and sustain productivity so that individuals can be more than they would otherwise be. It does not value either harmony or community for their own sake. Africans seek and praise individuals who achieve the most that they can achieve. They praise children as they grow into the adulthood by means of which they may produce plentiful goods, services and even children, according to the unique potentials of each individual.

According to U2, *ubuntu* is interested in the promotion, maintenance and restoration of justice because this is associated with the welfare of society. On this view, African systems of living justice strive towards possible societies in which everyone is enabled to attain the greatest welfare possible. This requires that the pursuit of justice is informed by goodwill rather than being driven to merely follow extant laws (Woodman 2011).

U2 also presents us with the view that acts, such as those that are associated with apartheid, are wrong to the extent that they tend to vitiate 1) the pursuit of justice, 2) the advancement of the welfare of the community, in ways that 3) involve acts of ill will. It is accordingly right that someone who values what *ubuntu* stands for should fight for the end of apartheid – as Mandela did.

Consistent with U2, the just fight against apartheid should be prosecuted in such a way that violence is a last resort and harm is minimised. It should be prosecuted in such a way that peace that guarantees the advancement of justice and the collective welfare is embraced at every opportunity. Mandela can be praised for having done all these things.

The question to ask is how his expression of the values of *ubuntu* is to be appreciated, recognised, and dignified. That is to say that those who fete Mandela as a great person need to ask how this accords with a conception of *ubuntu* that says individuals should not be valued except to the extent that this furthers collective gains. How does a collectivist orientation give rise to a person who is praised for being such an exceptional individual?

How can we better understand the idea of *ubuntu* through the study of Mandela, the man that epitomises *ubuntu* through his sacrifices for the nation, while at the same time being praised for his unique individual traits? Through a close reading of eulogies of Mandela published in the mainstream English-language newspapers following Mandela's death in December 2013, the following section will talk about Mandela in ways that are consistent with thinking that *ubuntu* recognises the individual while valuing collectives.

Considering Mandela

There is much to learn about *ubuntu* from thinking about former President

Nelson Mandela. Through recognition of the ways in which Mandela is widely recognised as a person who recognised and valued others, *ubuntu* is shown to be commensurate with valuing the building of communities that enable individuals to become the most they can be. Mandela is shown to be an individual who did not simply follow communal norms. That is to say, he was not just a reconciler and harmoniser but also a troublemaker who took tough stances and refused to conform to institutionalised injustice simply because it was the established norm. In doing so we claim that this reflects the possibility of *ubuntu* valuing the individual qua individual. Consistent with the above observations, we address how Mandela is shown to be valued as a great individual for building communities which act in goodwill to destroy regimes of ill will (associated with apartheid) that limit the abilities of oppressed individuals to become the most they can be.

That Mandela is a recognised individual is hard to contest. In popular conceptions, Mandela single-handedly overcame apartheid in the history of South Africa. This popular understanding is captured in the claim that “it is safe to say that this is one of those cases where one individual changes the path of history ...” (Dorfman 2013 *City Press* p. 9). The spirit of and admiration for Mandela is also evident in the following statement:

How should we honour this man, who has been variously described as a hero; a colossus; a titan; a giant; a the president of the world; an icon; the embodiment of courage; an individual whose message is universal; a champion of human dignity; and a man who belongs to the ages? We should ... each commit to grab a piece of him to keep. That piece may be his honesty, his integrity, his courage, his humility, his wisdom, his diligence, his morality, his forthrightness, his humanness ... that made Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela arguably the greatest human being of modern times.

(Makhanya 2013 *City Press* p. 33)

The significance of Mandela is often discussed with reference to the notion of following and leading in ways that indicate that Mandela is praised for his individual leadership traits as much as for how these were made common property. According to Netshitenzhe:

The attribute of great leadership is the ability at once to follow and to inspire. Its attendant punishment is the loss of the private self: becoming, often by default and sometimes by design, common property.

(Netshitenzhe 2013 *Sunday Independent* p. 15)

Netshitenzhe continues:

He was a great leader because he was a great follower. It does not diminish his stature to reveal that the greatest of his speeches – including the one at the Rivonia Trial – were the product of collective effort.

(Netshitenzhe 2013 *Sunday Independent* p. 15)

It is particularly remarkable for a person to be authentically unique when that person is black in a context in which for blacks humanity has been denied, oppressed and set in apartheid. Mandela's uniqueness is also striking when one recalls that he epitomises *ubuntu*, which some have found to undermine individual uniqueness in order to advance the collective. Indeed, Mandela seemed to value having, and developing the esteem of others. He is recognised as an individual who recognised others. Mwete notes:

This is one of his famous quotes that touched me: "It's better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership."

(Mwete 2013 *Sunday Sun* p. 32)

The observation that Mandela gave up much for the collective has been associated with the notion that Mandela was selfless. Mandela is described as a person who was always:

... the first to remind us that no individual is greater than the collective, he believed that only through collective effort could the struggle be advanced, and only through democratic debate could effective policies and programmes be developed. He was prepared to be wrong, and he was prepared to concede to the view of the majority.

(Ramaphosa 2013 *City Press* p. 16)

Mandela's striving to be valued by other people attests to how he valued both himself and those by whom he sought to be valued. His personal greatness is a testament to the ways in which he worked to establish conditions in which he and others could be recognised, dignified and valued. A journalist wrote about how President Mandela embraced her eagerness to challenge, interrupt and question him and showed that he was keen to respect and recognise the views and questions of others:

Afterwards Mandela shook my hand. "You are a tough," he said "but I liked your questions. Don't stop asking those questions" [Speaking to a young journalist, Devi Govender, who had interrupted him at a press conference].

(Govender 2013 *Sunday Times Extra* p. 14)

In all this, Mandela did not lose his individuality – he used it to pursue a form of society that would enable him and others to be the most they can be. As such Mandela is valued as an individual who enabled others to be more than they would otherwise have been. Sometimes in very tangible ways, the headline, "Mandela, a magnate for foreign investment and capital" captures how, for those involved in business in South Africa, Mandela's life had a

perceived material utility – he was perceived as having impacted positively on their financial bottom lines (Masote 2013 *City Press* p. 1).

To seek his own freedom and the freedom of others, Mandela had to be hard enough to give up gains in wealth and happiness that his family could otherwise have enjoyed. To wash away his terrible choices is to somehow deny the personal sacrifices he made so that “to sanctify Madiba is to detract from the scope and magnitude of his achievements” (Bauer 2013 *City Press* p. 37).

However, there is a counter narrative to the praise given to Mandela as a unique individual who enabled others. Ndlovu writes:

The most radical saw him as the man who gave himself proxy to decide, on behalf of the black nation, that it could simply forgive white South Africa for its creation and continued support – through democratic processes – of a dehumanising system.

(Ndlovu 2013 *City Press* p. 20)

This shows that as much as Mandela valued the collective as much as the individual, he also exercised leadership in ways that point to a strong belief in exercising individual will. In doing so, he also made tough individual choices of sacrifice, Kuzwayo says:

Mandela was South Africa “at its best” if this means that “He was selfless like the thousands who laid down their lives for no financial gain. [For the fact is that his] children may well accuse him of being a stereotypical black father, namely absent and cruel.

(Kuzwayo 2013 *City Press* p. 2)

To better understand Mandela as an individual that enabled individuals to be the best they could be or the individual who took it upon himself to decide what this betterment would entail it is worth setting out the ways in which Mandela has been praised for not only being a reconciler and harmoniser but also a troublemaker who sometimes went against the collective.

Mandela is remembered as a reconciler and harmoniser. After his release from prison and in his first public appearances Mandela set the scene for his role as a reconciler of a divided nation, reaching out to his former jailers, the leaders of the National Party. In an attempt to show the nation a way forward for reconciliation, Mandela had tea with the widow of chief architect of apartheid, former President and leader of the National Party, Hendrik Verwoerd. Mandela also reached out to President De Klerk, calling him a man of integrity. Makhanya writes: “This declaration of trust served a dual purpose. It armed De Klerk in the white community and enabled him on the road towards a new South Africa” (Makhanya 2013 *City Press* p. 33).

For many black people, this was an unexpected side of the leader they had imagined and cherished through his long term of imprisonment. However, the

trouble-maker was always there. Taylor talks about this side of Mandela – less quoted in the eulogies first printed after his death – being the perceivably less saintly side of the individual:

Mandela was also cunning, iron-willed, bull-headed, contemptuous – and more embittered than he let on. He needed all of his traits – soft and hard – to engineer a political miracle: persuading a sitting government to negotiate its own abdication

(Taylor 2013 *Sunday Independent* p. 18)

As much as Mandela is recognised as a leader who valued reconciliation and harmony, he was also a man who spoke out, took on battles, and even caused discord. Tissong also talks about the two sides to Mandela:

While many know Mandela as a soft, understanding and conciliatory person, those close to him got to know the toughness behind the smile. I was privileged to experience both sides of him.

(Tissong 2013 *Sowetan Sunday World* p. 9)

Therefore, as much as Mandela is recognised for being reconciliatory and a unifier who recognised the importance of the collective and the views of the collective, he never let the collective will or view suppress his individual views or standpoints. This made him a builder of goodwill and destroyer of ill will.

Mandela the builder of goodwill and destroyer of ill will can be best summarised as follows:

It would be a travesty to talk about the life and times of Mandela without mentioning his outrage at the apartheid regime, and also how that influenced his radicalism. He was very radical as a member of the ANC Youth League. He was also instrumental in the ANC's decision to embark on an armed struggle against the apartheid regime. (Mathekga 2013 *Sunday Sun* p. 12).

Also, as Makhanya writes:

The man who told the masses to “take your guns, your knives, your pangas and throw them into the sea”. He spoke of reaching out to De Klerk, to Mangosuthu Buthelezi. This was not the man we had had in mind when we sang the songs about Mandela telling us to arm ourselves. Disappointment and disgruntlement followed in later months and years as Mandela took positions that had his supporters discretely questioning whether FW De Klerk had pulled a fast one on us and released a Fong Kong version of the Mandela we had waited for.

(Makhanya 2013 *City Press* p. 33)

Therefore, it is important to see that even Mandela's conciliatory and reconciliatory moves were underpinned by a tough willingness and ability to

fight ill will and build goodwill. Mandela is described as harmoniser who had “A fighter’s instinct ...”, and who in the 1950s combined attributes of a “dashing young lawyer ... growing activist ... with [those of a] the disciplined boxer” (Comments from captions to photos of Mandela boxing and as a young well-dressed lawyer. *Sunday Sun* 2013 p. 11).

While the idea of Mandela the reconciler is firmly established in the popular understanding of Mandela as a statesman, the fighter who exercised his individual autonomy is less established.

Conclusion

Mandela is known to have sought to construct a new nation of South Africa in which everyone could belong. This is quite clearly consistent with the view that *ubuntu* values community and harmony. For this, Mandela is recognised and valued as an individual. Those who eulogise him say there is no one like him and they say that this makes him Africa’s greatest son. At the same time, he epitomises *ubuntu* in action because of the ways in which he served to advance national welfare.

Mandela’s moral excellence may be seen in terms of how he was able to exercise his individual choice within severely constraining circumstances. This can be seen in how he ventured forth as a son and worked as a father towards a new democratic constitutional order in which the welfare of everyone can be advanced without bias, fear or favour. Much of this moral greatness can be read in terms of how Mandela sacrificed aspects of himself while fulfilling himself, in order to advance collective gains. If Mandela shows that there is no dichotomy separating individuals from collective sacrifices and gains, he also shows that *ubuntu* cannot value the collective without valuing the individuals who compose it.

It can be understood from the above sections that *ubuntu* drives us to value a person’s contributions – on utilitarian grounds – that measure gains to the collective welfare that can be associated with the way a person lives his or her life. If this is the case, we may have to regularly revisit Mandela’s moral excellence as time and tide increase or decrease the welfare of people in South Africa. This would surely lead to strange inconsistencies in how we recognise the good related to Mandela. It is therefore very important to note that *ubuntu* also gives deontological value to persons *qua* persons without thereby denying that Africans also value utilitarian welfare gains. In this way, *ubuntu* charges people to face the paradox of how to value oneself and/or others *qua* individuals while seeking gains for the collective welfare.

The democratic South Africa that Mandela helped design is founded on notions of individual freedom and dignity. This suggests that Mandela, the founding father of post-apartheid South Africa and paragon of *ubuntu*, approached nation-building in ways that are consistent with liberal democratic

values. Editor of *City Press*, Ferial Haffajee (2013: 25), says that when Nelson Mandela took over South Africa it was “a shadow then of the lovely country it has become. This is the work of democratic design, not an accident”. For her, Mandela is the founding architect and cornerstone builder of the liberal constitutional state in which South Africans live today.

It is challenging to regard Mandela as an excellent model of *ubuntu* in action, and to see him as the architect and builder of a liberal democratic constitutional state. It should drive scholars to reconsider the view that *ubuntu* is a collectivist or communal orientation that does not put much stock in the claims of individuals to dignity and community unless this accords with the demands of advancing community welfare. It should also force scholars to rethink the concomitant view that *ubuntu* does not value questions of individual dignity and freedom. In part this entails taking more seriously the work of scholars such as Menkiti (2002), who have argued that *ubuntu* is consistent with liberal democratic, or Eze who has argued against the idea that Africans do not have individual perspectives (Eze 2008). But more substantially, it should involve rethinking the need to persist with Manicheanisms that insistently pose Africans as collectivists and Westerners as individualists. Such Manichean thought, as Fanon (1986) has shown, is fundamental to a way of seeing Africans that negatively relies on comparing them with Westerners with the consequence that authentic African being is undermined.

A close reading of the eulogies of Mandela can enable scholars to let go of the constraining notion that Africans should be understood as members of collectives first, even to the extent of denying their unique individuality and right to exercise voice. They indicate that it is normal and even desirable to praise excellent African individual experiences and practices, which undoubtedly arise in relations with others. Doing this may, for example, make it less likely that individuals who rise to positions of leadership can claim to be “big men and women” who are uniquely worthy of honour. This goes against the crushing orthodoxy of seeing Africans as first and foremost collective beings for whom questions of individual worth and value are problematic.

Readings such as this one can free scholarship to speak freely of how Africans give value to the world in their various biographically given situations. This will surely enable scholarship on Africa to seek and express experiences from the conceptual schema of the Africans who, as individuals, live their situations with moral concerns and values. Ultimately, the reading shows that *ubuntu* is consistent with valuing the individual, and with valuing communities that enable the individual to be the most he or she can be.

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