

This article looks at the traditions of the Ubuntu culture which is a broad culture that spans eastern and southern Africa. Of course there are variations within that but it gives an overview of traditional culture in Zambia. As international partners work together the Zambian author, Chiku Malunga (2006), calls for new ideas to be grafted onto existing indigenous cultures, rather than simply uprooting them and transplanting foreign models. He also believes that to promote ongoing behavioural change in leaders, it is essential to tap into the energy, commitment and authenticity that reside within the culture concerned.

As you read the article, think about how the values of Ubuntu can be used to promote kingdom values, and which western values may destroy this opportunity to promote culturally relevant kingdom values. We have also added some questions at the end

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<http://www.intrac.org/pages/PraxisNote25.html>

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African Culture of 'Ubuntu'

African cultural heritage, passed on from generation to generation, has been a source of guidance for communities in times of peace, uncertainty, birth, life and death. At its best it has been the basis for identity, respect and self confidence. It has enabled us to live in harmony with our physical, social and spiritual environment. It provides our foundation for leadership, problem solving, decision making and hope for the future. This article is written from an Eastern, Central and Southern African Bantu perspective that can be summed up by a concept known as ubuntu. Ubuntu is a cultural world-view that captures the essence of what it means to be human.

Ubuntu is built on five interrelated principles:

- sharing and collective ownership of opportunities, responsibilities and challenges;
- the importance of people and relationships over things;
- participatory decision making and leadership;
- patriotism;
- reconciliation as a goal of conflict management.

The positive elements of these principles will be discussed in turn. This is not to say that there are no negative elements of ubuntu. Some of these negative elements arise from the fact that ubuntu principles were mainly practised at a village or community level in a very stable and predictable environment. Part of the challenge that this 'African model' is facing today is that it has failed to change with the times and transcend this stable and predictable context. This has resulted in certain 'shadows' being cast over the current practise of ubuntu values, such as:

- loyalty to kinship may develop into tribalism;
- the belief in chiefs and kings ruling for life could lead to leaders not respecting term limits in office;
- fear of unpredictable futures may motivate leaders to try to accumulate as much wealth as possible, or succumb to corruption while in office;
- values attached to relationships at the expense of personal progress may often lead to wasteful expenditures on, for example, births, weddings, initiation ceremonies and burials;

- the value of respect for elders may lead to a blind loyalty to old ideas that may have stopped working;
- the desire for 'continuity or survival of the village or clan' may undermine the need for radical change in response to rapidly changing task environments.

To compound these problems, the trend towards globalisation implicitly foregrounds Northern values and can give the sense that indigenous values and practices are somehow inferior. The low self-esteem that results from this has caused many people in the South to abandon their own values and embrace those from the North. In the past, this was reinforced by missionaries who branded indigenous practices as evil and backward. The lack of a culture of documentation and reading is another challenge. In many parts of Africa, culture is passed orally from generation to generation. However, with increasing external pressures and influences, this oral process is becoming diluted over the course of time, but is seemingly not being replaced with a culture of documentation. Much of what is written about African cultures and leadership is from a Eurocentric view which casts much of the African culture and leadership in negative light. Unfortunately, in the past, the negative aspects of ubuntu have been overemphasised with the effect of 'throwing away the bath water together with the baby'; that is, throwing the good out with the bad. To redress this imbalance, in the following sections, I have chosen to explore the positive aspects of the five principles of ubuntu and how they were applied in the past.

1. Sharing and collective ownership of opportunities, responsibilities and challenges

"Your friend's child is your own child"

Most indigenous African societies believed in taking collective responsibility. Children were seen as children of the community rather than belonging to their parents only. Discipline could be meted by any adult member of the community. Children were taught to respect all adults the same way they respected their parents. Clan households collectively met responsibilities such as school fees and other expenses for the children. When a visitor came to the community, they were a visitor for the whole community and not only the household. Members of the community would take responsibility for the visitor. They would be expected to make contributions for the visitor's upkeep or take it in turns to feed them. When a member of the community got sick, the whole community was affected. The members of the community would be expected to help in things like taking care of the children of the sick person or help them with gardening work. When a person died, the funeral was a community funeral.

Cooperation in work and life were encouraged, with real progress was believed to be that which could benefit all. Those in privileged positions took it as their responsibility to help the less privileged to rise to positions of privilege as well, living by the saying that 'a lit candle loses nothing by lighting another candle'. They were therefore not expected to be jealous of others rising to positions of privilege as well. While encouraging collaboration, each person was expected to contribute towards the well-being of the clan, according to his or her age, knowledge, skills and experience. No one was expected to be a parasite. Only the very young, the old and the sick were exempted. They believed that problems were better solved by working together on the assumption that: 'united, the ants can take a dead elephant to their cave'.

2. The importance of people and relationships over things

“Kinship is like a bone, it does not decay”

In indigenous African communities relationships were given very high priority. Uncles were ranked the same as fathers. Aunts were mothers. Cousins were brothers and sisters. All adults were treated as one’s parents. When one married someone from another clan, one did not marry just the individual but the whole clan. When this happened, every member of each clan became a relative of every member of the other clan. This also implied mutual responsibilities: the weddings, funerals, births, problems and celebrations of one clan belonged to the other as well. Relationships were characterised by respect, especially by the young to the old. Children were taught that “what old men and women saw while seated, they could not see even when standing on their toes”. They were taught that children who respected their parents would learn many things without parents having to teach them. The closeness of family or clan was the beginning of African education. Family relationships were also informed by shared responsibilities, such that when a parent died, children would be automatically adopted by the family members and treated as one’s own children. The cohort that went through initiation ceremonies together became brothers and sisters for life — as strong a bond as a blood relationship. A school today rarely produces such an effect on classmates.

3. Participatory decision making and leadership

At first glance, indigenous African leadership appears automatic and autocratic, and although some were born in the royal lineage, the approval of the people was critical for the legitimacy of a newly elected leader. The accountability of leaders was reinforced because there were many possible candidates for leadership, so strict criteria were applied to determine who would emerge as a leader. This decision was often subject to the approval of the people.

To emerge as a leader candidates had to show competence in:

- understanding people and human nature;
- understanding human relationships, conflicts and how to manage them;
- diplomacy and relationships with other kingdoms;
- the art of war;
- strategic thinking; and
- kingdom secrets and how to guard them.

African leadership was much more participatory than appears from the outside. Nelson Mandela (1994:20) describes the profound influence that the democratic decision-making processes of the Thembu people (of which his grandfather was chief) had on him:

“Everyone who wanted to speak could do so. It was democracy in its purest sense. There may have been a hierarchy of importance amongst the speakers, but everyone was heard ... Only at the end of the meeting as the sun was setting would the regent speak. His purpose was to sum up what had been said and form some consensus among the diverse opinions. But no conclusion was forced on those who disagreed.”

While the king was the most visible leader and the indigenous custodian of power, auxiliary authorities — often people of highly respected religious or elder status —

continually advised the king in roles that promoted democracy in the kingdom. Tangwa (1998:2) observed that while the king generally appeared very powerful from outside, he or she was nevertheless subject to very strict control, not only by means of taboos, but also from institutions and personalities whose main occupation was the protection and safeguarding of the people, the ancestors, the land and the unborn. Indigenous leadership, therefore, was not comprised solely of the authority of the ruler, but was influenced by queen mothers, godfathers, councils, secret societies, mystics, rituals, ceremonies, rules and citizens. The king's decisions and policies were continually subject to review by others.

Among the Bantus, a council of elders often played a key governance role in the kingdom in the following ways:

- Custodianship of the kingdom. The elders were concerned with the welfare of the land, the living, the ancestors and the unborn. Individual chiefs or kings could come and go but the council was a permanent structure.
- Advising the king. The king would use the council as a sounding board for his ideas and critical issues facing the kingdom. For example, on the occasion of identifying his or her successor, the chief would propose the name to the council who would discuss the issue and give their feedback.
- Managing conflicts and disputes on behalf of the king in courts. The chief only listened while the council dealt with the cases. After a case was concluded, the council would meet with the king or queen to give them their view. The chief would examine it against what s/he had heard. They then would come up with a joint stand and the chief would announce the judgement.
- Managing the transition from one king to the next. The council had to approve an identified candidate and mentor and coach them. If the king suddenly died, the council managed the transition to the next king by putting in place an interim ruler while initiating a process to identify the permanent ruler.
- Installing and dethroning kings. The council had the power with the mandate of the people to dethrone a king or queen whom they felt 'had gone astray' or was leading the kingdom astray. They would ask the king to resign, or they would ask him or her to voluntarily 'drink poison' to make way for a new king. This was a rare occurrence, however, because the selection process for the king ensured, as far as possible, the prevention of such eventualities.
- Proposing new laws and changing laws that had become obsolete. Officially, the chief was accountable to the gods through the council. The king could only overrule the proposals of the council if he sensed that the council was in error. When this happened, the king had to give adequate explanation for his decision in order to convince the council, and this had to be accepted by the wider population.

4. Patriotism

"a river that forgets its source will soon dry up"

The kingdom came first in all decisions, before any personal interest. The reign of a particular king, however loved or hated, was never more important than the endurance of the kingdom itself. In some kingdoms, when the ruler was perceived to be a political liability, or if their continued reign was considered dangerous to the survival of the kingdom, he or she could be quietly executed or even asked to 'voluntarily' drink poison. All the people had an understanding of the need for a common bond of security; they

would not allow anything to endanger the security of the clan. People within the clan could disagree and quarrel, but people outside the clan were not allowed to take advantage through collusion with the disgruntled members. There was great emphasis on pride in one's clan. Each child was taught their origins, their family history and they were encouraged to know and visit all members of the extended family, even those that were staying far away. People were continually reminded to respect their origins and identity by sending remittances and not abandoning their cultural values and practices, irrespective of where they were.

5. Reconciliation as a goal of conflict management and resolution

Principles of conflict management emphasised the values of trust, fairness and reconciliation. This was closely linked with the importance of relationships. Conflict mediation and maintenance of relationships was a critical role of the chief and the council. In conflict management, the council members arrived at decisions through consensus, though the judgement was made by the chief after listening to the position taken by the council. The people were duty-bound to attend court hearings and to ensure laws were upheld. As a result of this collective responsibility, everyone had a right to question in an open court. The concept of openness was an important value, implicit in which was the belief that no one should be punished for anything correctly said in an open forum.

Conflict was managed systematically through a hierarchy of levels. Smaller conflicts were resolved at family or household levels and preceded to higher levels through appeal if some parties were not satisfied with the outcome. At family or household levels, clan leaders were responsible for resolving conflict. At the higher levels, different levels of representatives of the king were responsible. The gravity or seriousness of the conflict determined the level at which it would be dealt with. Only very big cases would therefore reach the king's or the queen's court. The goal of all conflict mediation was reconciliation and relationship building. The notion of ubuntu emphasised the importance of peacemaking through principles of reciprocity, inclusively and a sense of shared destiny between people. It provided a value system for giving and receiving forgiveness.

The principles of ubuntu do not belong only to a romantic past. In most of both rural and urban Africa, one can observe the application of ubuntu values and principles during activities requiring collective effort like celebrating births and marriages and managing funerals. I remember in a recent workshop a lady asking me, "why am I a different person at my place of work and at my home — I am an African at home but I feel like I am somebody else at the office?" What she meant was that she felt more connected to ubuntu values and principles at home and the community in which she lived, but was at a loss for how to apply the same values at her place of work. The challenge is not so much the loss of ubuntu values, but how to apply them in organisations and modern leadership development.

Learning to be Leaders in Ubuntu Culture

Leadership development emphasised the importance of the communal benefit. The method for developing leadership was through education. Professor Michongwe (2005 personal communication) defined African education as the ability to use what one has collected through a learning process to develop oneself and one's community or country. He noted that modern education, including most leadership development initiatives, emphasises developing oneself and not one's community or country. If leadership development is to be effective, it must be aimed at developing individuals and their

organisations. Many such programmes, packaged as leadership training courses, are rarely transferred from the individual to the organisation.

Indigenous educational systems in pre-colonial Africa were aimed at passing on to the young the accumulated knowledge to enable them to play adult roles and so ensure the survival of their offspring, and the continuity of the community. The older generation passed on to the young the knowledge, the skills, the mode of behaviour and the beliefs they should have for playing their social roles in adult life. The young were taught how to cope with their environment; how to farm or hunt; fish or prepare food; build a house or run a home. They were taught the language and manners, and generally the culture of the community. The methods were informal, with the young learning by participating in activities alongside their elders, as well as by listening, by watching, by doing. They recognised that the ways the young would fulfil their social roles would depend on the sort of persons they became. So they were taught the community's standards of conduct based on their shared values. Above all, they were taught that their behaviour was a matter of concern for all their kinsfolk to whom how they behaved and what they did would bring honour or dishonour. In different ways and situations, the young learnt what the community regarded as good and what it regarded as evil, and caught the community's concept of the good life. This was training in citizenship. The greatest concern was shown about the sort of persons the young would become, and the life they would lead as members of the community.

Though indigenous Africa had many cultures, they all appear to have emphasised as the summum bonum a social sensitivity which made one lose oneself in the group: the kinsfolk were, and lived as, members of one another. It was the goal of education to inculcate this sense of belonging. The solidarity of the small, homogeneous group of kinsfolk; the close-knit organisation of the village, chiefdom or tribe; the rituals by which their sense of belonging was constantly renewed: all of these were reinforced. Indigenous education sought to produce men and women who were not self-centred; who put the interest of the group above their personal interest; who dutifully fulfilled obligations hallowed and approved by tradition out of reverence for their ancestors, gods and the unknown universe of spirits and forces. There was always the awareness that human life was the greatest value, and an increase in the number and quality of the members of the community the greatest blessing the gods could confer on the living.

Indigenous education also drew strongly on the spiritual dimension, which pervaded all activities and all relationships. Education inculcated a religious attitude to life, manifested in a reverence towards nature and the unknown universe. The indigenous education system used a variety of methods including work and play and religious rite; through song and dance and folklore and proverbs; through customary services received or given within the all-embracing network of family and kinship ties. The practical approach to education emphasised the importance of experiential learning as a way of dealing with new problems. They believed that "a person is taller than any mountain that he or she has climbed" and that "a bird that has flown over a sea cannot be afraid of a river". In most African schools, the modern school teaches skills (cognitive domain), but not the affective domain (the domain of values). The little teaching concerning the affective domain that exists is foreign and without much relevance to the context of the learner. As one of the women interviewed said: "When our children come back from school, they have been turned to foreigners. They cannot understand why we ask them to kneel before their parents. They cannot understand why we tell them not to go to their parents' bedrooms. We believe that one week at an initiation ceremony is worth ten years at a primary school as far as the developing of values is concerned."

Questions

How might each of these cultural traits affect how a person from the Ubuntu culture practices Christianity? What parts of Christianity do you think it would be easier for an Ubuntu to embrace and practice?

Think of your own culture. What parts of Christianity do you think it is easier for you to embrace and practice?

What western cultural values may hinder your ability to share the Gospel with people from an Ubuntu culture? How may you want to change the *form* of your message so that the *content* of your message gets across?

How should the Ubuntu view of leadership change either your leadership style, or how you let Zambians lead you, during your stay?

The article mentions a priority of “people over things”. How can you show a concern for people, instead of just the “things” you are doing?

How can you open yourself up to seeing Christianity through a different lens while you are in Zambia?