

Hunhu/Ubuntu: A sustainable approach to endogenous development, bio-cultural diversity and protection of the environment in Africa

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Introduction

A people's worldview and notion of development, purpose of development, ethics of development and aesthetics of development, have been used and are still used by the indigenous civilizations of Africa as approaches to endogenous development, bio-cultural diversity, protection of the environment, and preservation of the ecosystem. These claims are demonstrated with examples in this chapter. Southern Africa is used as a special reference in explaining the African worldview and values of Hunhu/Ubuntu that inform the human development practices of the original peoples of Africa.

African worldview

Indigenous peoples of Africa share a common religion, philosophy of life and culture. They have the same concept of god and view of the universe. Their understanding of the meaning of life and death is the same. They structure their societies in similar ways. Researchers attest to this:

History and archeology show that there has been in Africa a civilization which extended from Egypt to Angola from Timbuctu to Zimbabwe. This civilization consisted of a complex of cultures which in their structure showed a marvelous formal and thematic uniformity to be observed in their literature and mythologies. (Mabona, quoted in Carruthers, 1984)

Herbert Wendt in Jackson (1970) observes the following about Zimbabwean culture:

The dynasty of the 'Rulers of the Mines' was a Negro one... [I]ts culture, customs and civilization clearly [resemble those of Egypt]. Worship of the sun and moon, marriage between royal brothers and sisters, the princesses' complete freedom in love, the sacrifice of first fruits – these are only a few parallels between Egypt and the Shona kingdom... The connections between the Nile and the Zambezi are so striking, between the land of Punt and the mining area of the later Zimbabwe, are so numerous that it is difficult to discount the former existence of Egyptian contacts with South Africa.

Religion, worldview, culture and philosophy of life, mean the same thing in African classical thought and are the sources of human development principles that

enable an African people to coexist with nature and have harmony with all things in the universe. For 'Our world is not the only one' (Kunene, 1981) in the African worldview:

There are other worlds in the Universe. Some are at the stage of completion, some at the stage of unfolding and some at the stage of annihilation. Each is complete and sufficient in itself. All have their moons and suns. These can be seen or felt although they are far away. They influence our world and our lives as individuals and society. We must, therefore, live in harmony and peace with them.

The emphasis is on coexistence. The principles upon which it is built are harmony, peace, balance, love and justice. Violation of any principle will unleash chaos, disorder and conflict among things in the universe. This is stressed in the 42 principles of human conduct called the Declarations of Ma'at. They were developed in KMT (present day Egypt). KMT is pronounced, Kemet, in Egyptian hieroglyphics. It means 'Land of the Blacks' and it is the name Africans called their land prior to Greek occupation in 332 BC.

The words *Kintu*, *Kuntu*, *uMuntu*, *Munhu*, *uBuntu* and *Hunhu* also mean black people and their values. The words *Bantu*, *Vanhu*, *Abantu* are plurals. They all mean black people collectively. The name Egypt is used by Europeans for KMT. It is a corruption of *Hi-ka-pta*, the name of one of the temples at Memphis in KMT, which means Temple-of-the-Ka-of-Ptah. Hikapta became Aiguptos in Greek. It was Anglicized to Egypt by the English (see Browder, 1992).

As Finch (1998) points out

The peopling of the Nile Valley from the Africa's Great Lakes region must have occurred over and again in waves. The population wave from the Great Lakes directly ancestral to the historical Nile Valley peoples probably began to settle north of the second cataract no later than 15,000 years ago. This settlement did not preempt later migrations, of course, but most of these probably came in from the west, that is from the Sahara... about 10,000 years ago.

The indigenous people of Africa are, indeed, one. They have a common culture, worldview, history, religion, ancestry and philosophy of life. The principles their ancestors produced can be found in *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*, so-called *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* by Europeans. James Wasserman's *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day* (1994) is an example.

The principles below are taken from Bill Joyner's poster entitled *The 42 Principles of Ma'at* (1991).²⁰ They have been correlated with Gabriel Bandele's poster entitled *42 Declarations of Ma'at* (n.d.). They have been reorganized to help the reader

²⁰ Other sources of classical teachings from Africa are *Odu Ifa: The Ethical Teachings* by Maulana Karenga (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1999), *Metu Neter Vol. I: the Great Oracle of Tehuti and the Egyptian System of Spiritual Cultivation* by Ra Un Nefer Amen (Brooklyn: Khamit Corp, 1990), *Let the Ancestors Speak: Removing the Veil of Mysticism from Medu Netcher Vol. I/A Guide to the Grammar of the Language of Kemet* by Ankh Mi Ra (Temple Hills: JOM International Inc., 1995), *The Genuine Shona: Survival Values of an African Culture* by Michael Gelfand (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1973), *Self-Healing Power and Therapy: Old Teachings from Africa* by Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1991), *The Teachings of Ptah Hotep: The Oldest Book in the World* by Asa G. Hilliard III, Larry Williams and Nia Damali (Atlanta: Blackwood Press, 1987) and *The Ancient Egyptian Philosophers: Ancient African Voices from Imhotep to Akhenaten* by Molefi Kete Asante (Chicago: African American Images, 2000).

conceptualize them clearly as 'ethical teachings of moral conduct' in the human development process.

Declarations of Ma'at (Hunhu/Ubuntu)

1. I have not done iniquity [injustice or sin]
2. I have not stolen
3. I have not stolen food
4. I have not wasted food
5. I have not taken food from a child
6. I have not robbed with violence
7. I have not robbed or disrespected the deceased
8. I have not robbed God
9. I have not swindled offerings
10. I have not stolen anyone's land
11. I have not laid waste to the land
12. I have not polluted the earth
13. I have not polluted the water
14. I have not polluted myself
15. I have not committed sin against my own purity
16. I have not done that which is abominable
17. I have not cursed
18. I have not cursed God
19. I have not vexed God
20. I have not spoken lies
21. I have not multiplied my words exceedingly
22. I have not spoken scornfully or behaved with arrogance
23. I have not acted deceitfully or guilefully
24. I have not acted with insolence
25. I have not avenged myself or burned with rage
26. I have not judged hastily or falsely accused anyone
27. I have not been angry or wrathful without a just cause
28. I have not worked evil
29. I have not worked grief
30. I have not worked treason
31. I have not made anyone to suffer pain
32. I have not caused anyone to shed tears
33. I have not stirred up strife or caused terror
34. I have done no murder or bid anyone to slay on my behalf
35. I have not closed my ears to the words of right and truth
36. I have not lusted for or seduced any man's wife
37. I have not committed fornication or lain with others of my same sex
38. I have not envied or craved for that which belongs to another
39. I have not been an eavesdropper
40. I have not overstepped my boundaries of concern
41. I have not put myself on a pedestal
42. I have not evilly slaughtered the animals

Ma'at is a figurative or metaphoric expression of the Divine Principles of Truth, Justice, Peace, Righteousness, Love, Balance and Order in African classical thought. The Declarations of Ma'at are a practical guide towards moral and spiritual excellence. People who attain them in their lives achieve material and spiritual balance in their development as human beings. They become truly human or *vanhu* in Shona, *abantu* in Zulu.

The spiritual content of one's personality is the truly human. It is moral and ethical. It is the ability to distinguish right from wrong and do what is right and reject what is wrong. It is also aesthetical. It aspires towards the beautiful and abhors the ugly in life. The essential function of the spiritual in human development is to restrain instinctual dictates in one's biological being and control undue love for base pleasures and mere accumulation of material things and wealth.

Hunhu/ubuntu is the ability to control overpowering urges in one's physical being. The *nhu* in *hu-nhu* or *ntu* in *ubu-ntu* refers to one's physical existence as a *thing* with no values attached. *Hu-* and *ubu-* indicate *values*. People who lack *hu-* or *ubu-* attached to them are mere *-nhus/-ntus*, or *things*. '*Havana hunhu*', in Shona: they lack human content. "*Imhuka dze vanhu*", in Shona: they are mere animals.

Hunhu/ubuntu tempers human development and transforms human behaviour from mere instinctual action into conscious spiritual action imbued with the values of moral and ethical purpose outlined in the teachings of African ancestors and Declarations of Ma'at.

The African notion of development

'Development' in African worldview is defined as a 'creative process'. Its purpose is to 'uplift the human community' and 'enrich the cosmos'. Each element that takes part in the development process and joins the Creator in fulfilling the Grand Plan for the universe is regarded as 'a creative force', 'a creative experience', 'a creative existence', or 'a level of consciousness'. This is 'the creative purpose of life' and the reason for each people or person to exist. Mazisi Kunene explains this in his introduction to his epic poem, *Anthem of the Decades* (1981):

The various areas of creative existence from the gods to the Ancestors represent an enrichment of the cosmos. Each experience and level of consciousness is evolving towards the Great and Ultimate Consciousness, the Creator. All the gods and the species of the universe are agents fulfilling this creative purpose of life.

Spiritual and material development

There are two ways to measure 'human development', 'civilization' or 'culture' in African worldview. One is material development. The other is spiritual development. Both are complementary, not antagonistic. They are mutual, not hostile. They are inseparable, like Siamese twins. The challenge is to balance and harmonize them.

Spiritual development is philosophical or ideological. It deals with the production of values that bind a people together as a civilization, culture or creative force. Values are moral, ethical and aesthetical. They permeate every practice in indigenous African life. These include marriage, birth, death, upbringing, economics and politics. They give a people pride in doing what is right and rejecting what is wrong. They are depicted through art or symbol. They are celebrated through ritual, song and dance.

Material development is economic. It deals with the making of tools for producing goods to enhance human life and enrich the environment. It involves the use of science and technology. These are for carrying out experiments, innovations, inventions and discoveries. Technology and material development can enhance or destroy life and the environment, depending on the worldview and values of a people concerned.

The African worldview sees material development alone as inadequate. The same applies to spiritual development per se. As Kunene (1982) says: 'A people may attain high spiritual development and still perish for lack of material goods necessary for them to survive. On the other hand, a people who are highly developed technically may still perish for lack of morality'.

Kunene (1982) further observes that:

A highly ethically advanced society need not necessarily be technologically advanced. On the other hand, a technologically advanced society does not automatically possess a high ethical level. Technological advancement tends to barbarize society, since it implies a high degree of competitiveness for resources. The tools for modeling man's material environment do not necessarily improve the ethical quality of society. One of the commonly stated ethical judgments in Zulu is: '*Banako konke kodwa yizinja.*' They have everything, but they are dogs. This is a serious indictment against the violators of the social ethic.

Ngugi (1981) cites the US as an example:

America has reached hitherto undreamt of heights in the conquest of nature through a fantastic development of instruments of labour (technology). But America today is a man-eats-man society. In the realm of social nature, America is still in a state of social cannibalism. It eats its own children and the children of other lands especially of Africa, Latin America and Asia. This is true of what has been called western civilization on the whole.

Ngugi (1981) goes on to cite Africa by way of contrast:

Some African civilizations had not developed the conquest of nature to a very high degree; but they had developed to a high degree their control of social nature. True human development strives to ensure adequate clothing, shelter and food for everyone. It creates a society in which the benefits of modern science are made available to all. It eliminates social cannibalism and elevates social cohesiveness as the highest ideal.

In this regard, Kunene (1982) has said:

The complexity of human relations, their cosmic significance and continuity become a much greater criterion of human intellect and history than the faculty that is developed as a result of man's confrontation with his material environment. From this viewpoint, the earliest act of civilization was not the creation of a tool but the establishment of a cooperative, interactive, human

community. When human community began to modify its material environment to make life better for succeeding generations, then it began the second most important act of civilization: that of providing for communities beyond its own immediate circumstance.

Spiritual environment

The African worldview states that although the ancestors are dead, they remain human and continue to exist among human beings and take part in human affairs and influence human destiny. Birago Diop captures this quite well in his poem in Kofi Asare Opoku's book, *West African Traditional Religion* (1978):

*Those who are dead are never gone:
they are there in the thickening shadow,
The dead are not under the earth;
they are in the tree that rustles,
they are in the wood that groans,
they are in the water that runs,
they are in the hut, they are in the crowd,
the dead are not dead.*

*Those who are dead are never gone:
they are in the breast of the woman
they are in the child who is wailing
and in the firebrand that flames.*

*The dead are not under the earth:
they are in the fire that is dying,
they are in the grasses that weep
they are in the whimpering rocks,
they are in the forest, they are in the house,
the dead are not dead.*

The environment as the abode of the ancestors is sacred in African worldview and the destruction of nature is forbidden in Declarations of Ma'at and hunhu/ubuntu. If the environment is destroyed, the ecosystem will be disturbed. The elements will rage. There will be no mountains or forests to restrain them. The winds will roar and the clouds will disappear. The sun will scorch the earth and rivers will dry up. There will be no rain and the desserts will set in. The ancestors and cosmic forces will desert the land and go to other areas where they can find abode and carry on with their respective functions there.

As Opoku (1978) explains:

the trees, rivers or stones are not to be confused with the spirits that dwell in them. The [ancestors or] spirits have unlimited mobility.... They are ... not confined to the palpable objects ... in which they reside. They can come and go as they like from their places of abode. It is not as the hymn says [in Western

thought that]: 'The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone.' It is not to wood or stone, but the spirit that dwells in the wood and stone that reverence is given.

The other point to explain is that the ancestors, spirits and elements are personified as cosmic forces. Personification is an aid to conceptualization and clarification of thought in African knowledge systems. According to Opoku (1978):

Some are gods of war, fertility, epidemics, nation building, agriculture and various other spheres of human life. Some are spirits of nature while others are glorified heroes of the past. Whatever identity is assigned to them, the important fact is that they remain spirits or elements which have influence on human life and ... have to be reckoned with by humanity as an integral part of its existence and survival.

Thus, as Mukanya (1997) says, before venturing out into the world and tampering with the environment, the elders must give permission and perform appropriate rituals to carry out functions such as clearing the forests for farming, catching fish from the lakes for food or hunting animals for meat. Roy Sesana, the leader of the San Organization of the First People of the Kalahari in Botswana, who are fighting to reclaim their ancestral homeland, describes how the San identify with their environment and respect the animals they hunt and become one with them physically, spiritually and emotionally. His explanation should assist in understanding the significance of rock paintings in Africa that depict the hunter as half animal/half human, which has been interpreted as shamanism in Western speculative thought (Sesana, 2006):

I grew up a hunter. All our boys and men are hunters. Hunting is going and talking to the animals. You don't steal. You go and ask. You set up a trap or go with bow or spear. It can take days. You track the antelope. He knows you are there. He knows he has to give you his strength. But he runs and you have to run. As you run you become like him. It can last hours and exhaust you both. You talk to him and look into his eyes. And then he knows he must give you his strength so your children can live. The antelope are not our slaves, they do not wear bells on their necks and they can run faster than the lazy cow. We run through life together.

The adoption of totems in African worldview such as the leopard, lion, elephant, crocodile, hippo, fish, python or eagle is to prevent people from destroying animals or flora and fauna they identify with as totems. Killing anything adopted as a totem becomes an offence. Another example of African people blending with nature and preserving the environment is classical architecture.

Architecture and the environment

In his book, *The Star of Deep Beginnings: the Genesis of African Science and Technology* (2001) Finch describes how African technology, science and architecture adapts to nature rather than disrupts it, is inspired by nature rather than conspires against it, and derives from nature rather than destroy it. An extensive quote of his insights is instructive:

It has been much commented upon but poorly appreciated how much African architecture derives from its environment. In the Nile Valley, for example, the traveler may visit the monumental sites repeatedly for years before it dawns on him that those peerless builders drew their inspiration from nature.... This truth is brought home with startling clarity when flying over the desert just west of the Nile at Abu Simbel, where all the classic Nile Valley architectural styles repose stolidly in the landforms and rockscapes dotting that locality, etched into these geometrical shapes by the master hand of nature.

The civilizations and cultures of antiquity never lost their awe of nature, and the idea of 'imposing' the will of man upon her was beyond conception. Thus, the edifices erected by the superlative Nile Valley architects of antiquity seem not merely to blend with the landscape but to emerge from it. The builders took extraordinary pains not to distort the landscape in any way; the material form of civilization was subsumed by nature....

Moreover, it was possible as recently as a century ago to wander all over the Valley of the Kings without ever suspecting that one was surrounded by 62 extensive tombs. The tombs of the Nubian nobles at Aswan are, likewise, not immediately apparent to the eye unless one knows what one is looking for.

Similarly, the massive stone walls forming the perimeter around the hill enclosures at Great Zimbabwe site incorporate the huge boulders and granite outcrops that dot the region. Indeed, some enclosures conform so closely to the surrounding rockscapes as to be indistinguishable from them when viewed from afar....

Also, the architecture is intrinsically of the place and this may offer a clue to the elliptical building style. Particularly on the Hill Complex, the ingenious manner in which walls were carried over the boulders to incorporate them into the wall shows how the architecture was adapted to local environmental conditions instead of being imposed upon the landscape. The kind of living space that flowed from the building style bonded the inhabitants to the land, the ecology, and nature.

Homes and the cosmos

In the same way that classical architecture is inspired by the local environment and is built in conformity with it, the African idea of a 'house' is inspired by the view of the universe as the 'dome of existence'. The Zulu house is a good example to illustrate this.

The outside shape (Kunene, 1981) is circular like the universe and earth. The inside is divided into four curvatures like the cardinal points of the universe and earth. The western part, *umsamo*, is the altar for the ancestors where food and water are stored. The eastern section is the region of the rising sun. The southern zone on the right from inside the house is the female region and the northern area is the male region.

The center of the house is the fireplace. It resembles the navel or placenta. The main beam, *insika*, is the umbilical cord. It connects the living to the universe as the source of life in the same way the baby is connected to the mother in the womb for

sustenance through the umbilical cord. The conical tower at the center of the Great Enclosure at Great Zimbabwe, the obelisks of ancient Africa and the Tower of the Eternal Flame at the Zimbabwe National Heroes Acre express the same concept. They can be interpreted as phalluses and the fireplace as the womb for procreation, continuity and survival.

Immediately outside the door is a shelter of reeds. It symbolizes man's place of origin. Such reeds are also placed in front of the house where there is a newly-born infant. Surrounding the house or houses is always a fence, *uthango*. It symbolizes the family's boundary and horizon of existence.

Inside the fence is the cattlefold. It is the family's Second World. It resembles the sun, moon and stars. They are the earth's Second World. They influence human destiny in the same way cattle influence family destiny as wealth. Without the sun, moon and stars there would be no day, night, summer, winter, spring or autumn. Similarly, without cattle as wealth, there would be no life, family survival or continuity.

The whole setting of the family or home is a microcosm of the universe. It derives from the concept that (Kunene 1981):

the largest entity contains within itself the smallest units which are themselves replicas of the aggregate of things. This means that our world is conceptually duplicated not only in all minute organisms but also in all cosmic-scale phenomena. All things are derived from a single potential of growth... [God is] The many who is one.

Unity in diversity

The African concept of 'unity in diversity' is derived from the same idea of God (Kunene, 1981) as 'The many who is one', or of the universe as 'the largest entity containing the smallest units which are themselves replicas of the Cosmos'. Sekoni affirms this in *The Interpreters* by Wole Soyinka (1965):

*In the dome of the Cosmos,
There is complete unity of Life
Life is like the godhead
The plurality of its manifestations is only an illusion
The godhead is one
So is life, or death
Both are contained in the single dome of existence.*

Ngugi describes unity in diversity in the same way in his book, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993). In a chapter entitled 'Creating Space for a Hundred Flowers to Bloom: The Wealth of a Common Global Culture', he cites the example of different global languages, literatures and arts participating towards the realization of a common global culture:

All great national literatures have rooted themselves in the cultures and languages of the peasantry. The Homeric Iliad and Odyssey... were rooted in the legends and stories that everybody knew. The Russian writers of the nineteenth century rooted their work in the culture of the peasantry. The

Kalevala, the founding text of modern Finnish literature and language, was rooted in the folklore of the peasantry.

The oral tradition will then be the basis of the new tradition in African literature. African languages must not be afraid of also borrowing from the best in world culture. All dynamic cultures of the world have borrowed from other cultures in a process of mutual fertilization.

African languages will borrow from one another; they will borrow from their classical heritages; they will borrow from the world, the Caribbean, Afroamerica, Latin America, and from the Asian and European worlds. In this, the new writing in African languages will do the opposite of the Europhone practice. Instead of being appropriated by the world, it will appropriate the world, and one hopes, on terms of equal exchange, at the very least, on its own terms and needs.

The languages and literatures of Asia, Africa and South America, the literatures of the peoples of non-European stock but who are now part of the economic, political and cultural reality of the West, are all creating space for a hundred flowers to bloom on a global scale. The organizations of cultural studies and human development all over the world should reflect this multi-coloured reality of the human creative stream. The continued domination of the world by a handful of European languages and literatures can only make the world poorer, not richer.

African worldview and praxis

A skeptical reader may ask: 'Is this paper not too positive or romantic about the African worldview?'. An open-minded reading would be able to discern that there is nothing romantic or abstract about the African worldview as described in this chapter. The view that our world is not the only one has been proved by science. The philosophy of coexistence that comes out of it has been shown to be pragmatic and achievable. Examples of classical architecture and concept of home have been given to demonstrate this.

Nothing in the 42 principles of Ma'at can be considered higher than attainable. Examples can also be given here to illustrate this. A Portuguese archivist, Antonio Bocarro, observed the following about ideal rule in classical Zimbabwe (cited in Walker, 1999):

[The Mutapa] shows great charity to the blind and maimed, for these are called the king's poor, and have land and revenues for their subsistence, and when they wish to pass through the kingdoms, wherever they come food and drinks are given to them at the public cost as long as they remain there, and when they leave that place to go to another they are provided with what is necessary for their journey, and a guide, and some one to carry their wallet to the next village. In every place where they come there is the same obligation, under penalty that those who fail therein shall be punished by the king.

Ibn Battuta spent a year in ancient Mali and noticed the following about values of hunhu/ubuntu there (Asante Molefi, 1994):

The Malians possess some admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people. The Sultan shows no mercy to anyone who is guilty of the least act of malice. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveler nor inhabitant in it has to fear robbers or men of violence. They do not confiscate the property of any Arab who dies in their country, even if it were of great wealth. On the contrary they give it into the charge of some trustworthy person among the Arabs until the rightful heir takes possession of it.

Africans endeavour to live their lives in accordance with their worldview and values even under domination by colonialism and global institutions put in place by America and Europe. These are capitalist. Their approach to development is materialism. Hence the exploitation and impoverishment of African people and degradation of the environment in the name of progress. These are anathema to African worldview and values of hunhu/ubuntu as practiced by models of governments cited above.

Conclusion

Sustainable approaches to human development cannot be achieved by using notions of development borrowed from outside. These are meant to suit the needs of their people and their environment. The dangers of using them are enormous. Those who made them have to be relied upon for advice, skills training and supply of equipment on regular bases. This consumes money and puts nations in debt. It compromises peoples' sovereignty and leaves them open to blackmail and plunder.

The Shona say *Moyo chenai jaya kufura mwana wemvana madzihwa?*: 'What generosity can it be when a young man volunteers to wipe mucus from the nose of a single mother's baby?'. The answer is: 'He is after the mother, through the child'. The Zulu also say *Ingwe idhla ngamabala*: 'A tiger devours by its colours!'. Experience has taught the Shona that *Badza roumwe harina ndima*: 'A borrowed hoe cannot do much'. The conclusion they have reached is that *Mudzimu weshiri uri mudendere*: 'A bird's soul is in the nest', that is, 'Local talent is the source of endogenous development'.

Those who refer to African worldview and notion of development as romantic are inattentive to the careful use of language in human development communication discourse. The other terms used are tradition, custom, ethnicity and tribe. These are stereotypes. They do not describe the practice on the ground. There are two worldviews in Africa today. One is European, the other African. Both are approaches to human development. Both are in current practice. They are antagonistic and in perpetual conflict.

European values originate from outside. They are exogenous and imposed. African values originate from African soil. They are endogenous and based on local talent. To call one modern and the other traditional is Eurocentric and patronizing. (see So, 1990). If both are in practice, both are modern and current. It is a matter of relevance and freedom of choice.

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