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Xenophobia and the end of ontological ubuntu

A central notion of Ubuntu depicts it as a philosophy unique to African affinity and views Africans as communalistic and Westerners as individualistic. Given the reality of xenophobic practices, this paper advances arguments that question this thesis, arguing that the basis for such peculiarity does not inhere in Ubuntu as a distinctive African philosophy; rather it is reflective of the stage of development on each side of the divide. Pursuant of this argument, the paper distinguishes between ontological and axiological Ubuntu. While ontological Ubuntu (OU) refers to, among other constructs, the 'authentic mode of being African', axiological Ubuntu (AU) is a prescriptive moral ideal to which all humanity *ought* to aspire in an era of modernity. Using the method of critical analysis, the paper submits that xenophobia and other forms of socio-political exclusions greatly contradict the central tenets or humanism of OU and render it untenable in modern times. Conversely, AU is reflective of modernity with its emphasis on individualistic modes of production. Modernity has come to stay and Africa must approach it, not by OU or a 'narrative of return' to a philosophy uniquely African, but by AU, an ethical theory that must guide our pursuit of a humane society not just as Africans, but as human beings. To this end, and contrary to the argument that Ubuntu has 'reached its end' in its entirety, the paper concludes that something is left of it, though not uniquely African.

Keywords: African philosophy, African communalism, Ubuntu, Western individualism, xenophobia.

Introduction

Scepticism about the existence of African philosophy drove African thinkers into a frenzy of epistemological polemics on not just the existence of such a philosophy, but of what it consists. This epistemic labour led to, among other things, the presentation of communalism (Ubuntu) as a distinctive African philosophy, which places a premium on communal interdependence and sets it and Africa apart from European cum Western variants where the premium is on the individual (Ikuenobe 2006; Aborisade 2016; Odigie-Osazuwa 2018; Lutz 2009). This philosophy is most succinctly couched in Mbiti's schema: "I am because we are, and because we are therefore I am" (1970: 141). In this paper, I argue that communalism is not uniquely African and that the prevalence of xenophobia on the continent contradicts it as a defining ontology of the African. Before we delve into these arguments, however, it is expedient to clarify some cognate concepts (communalism, collectivism, socialism, individualism and capitalism) and highlight the context of their usage in the ensuing discussion.

Communalism is a term for wide-ranging theories and practices that seek to establish the foundations of political, economic, social and religious relationships based on community such as family, kinship, race, nation, ancestry, etc. According to Edwin Smith, as cited by Gyekye (1987: 209), "the Africans have hitherto lived in the collective stage; the community has been the unit, every individual interest has been subordinated to the general welfare". In modern times, communalism has found varying degrees of expression in theories such as collectivism and socialism, both of which emphasise some levels of public ownership and control of at least the major means of production (Ball and Richard 2019). In these systems, the individual is perceived as subordinate to the community. However, such community attachment, contrary to arguments by some Western and African scholars like Sidney Lewis Gulick, Terence Jackson and Kwame Gyekye, is not antithetical to the individual nor does it subsume her. Rather, it creates the priority of duty, which is for the fundamental goal of building a community that provides the material conditions for actualising individuals' substantive rights and well-being. In essence, collectivity does not deprive the community member of individuality, rather individuality is realised in the collective (Ikuenobe 2018; Ngedu and Ojoma 2017: 57).

Notwithstanding this, the collectivism inherent in communalism can be contrasted with individualism, which emphasises the rights and interests of the individual over those of the community, particularly in a capitalist system. Capitalism is characterised by the private ownership of capital goods and means of production. It is the dominant economic system in modern times since the end of feudalism. In *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of*

Nations (1776), Adam Smith argued that economic decisions should be left to the free play of self-regulating market forces (see Boettke and Robert 2022). This thought forms the ideological foundation of classical capitalism, which prioritises the individual on the ownership of means of production along with the free markets' distribution of income.

In this article, communalism or, as we shall see in the next section, ubuntu, is adopted not as identical, but as a form of collectivism and socialism. This is because the principles of mutual welfarism and shared ownership are intelligible within these systems. However, socialism is a higher and more advanced form of communalism. More specifically, although African socialism (with roots in African communalism) has some similarities with European and Marxist socialism, especially in resolving socio-economic problems through state control of markets and the means of production, it is different in many respects. For instance, post-independent African leaders who attempted socialist governments in Senegal and Tanzania did not completely reproduce Marxist-Leninist socialist ideas. Rather, "they developed new, African versions of socialism that supported some traditional structures while proclaiming that their societies were – and always had been – classless" (Thompson 2020).

Protagonists of African communalism (Ubuntu) not only present it as a social-ordering ideal peculiar to Africa, but they also see it as an ontologically transformative force that could reinvigorate socialism on the continent. However, unlike Confucianism, which is similar and has greatly influenced socio-political and economic behaviours in the Asian world, it is very difficult to decipher aspects of the African life where Ubuntu (ontological) has been of tremendous influence. On the contrary, communal attachments have formed the basis for xenophobic killings, ethnic cleansings, political exclusions, nepotism and violent clashes across Africa. How communal are African societies with one another? Or, how far can we stretch notions of Ubuntu to include supposed outsiders?

To answer these questions, the paper distinguishes between ontological and axiological Ubuntu, arguing that none of these variants is unique to Africa. Ontological Ubuntu (OU) refers to the 'authentic mode of being African' or 'being-in-community' that is mostly tenable in rural, agrarian or pre-modern societies where the mode of production is communalistic. Besides its pre-modern nature, the paper submits that xenophobia and other forms of socio-political exclusions greatly contradict the principal canons of OU. Conversely, axiological Ubuntu (AU) is a prescriptive moral ideal to which all humanity aspires in an era of modernity with an emphasis on individualistic modes of production. Modernity has come to stay and Africa must approach it not by OU or a 'narrative of return' to a philosophy uniquely African, but by AU as a guide to the pursuance of a humane society

for Africa and the world in general. Armed with this distinction, the paper then rejects Matolino and Kwindigwi's (2013) argument that Ubuntu has 'reached its end'. I contend that something is left of it, though not uniquely African. Thus, besides the introduction and conclusion, the paper proceeds by conceptualising xenophobia and Ubuntu in section one with an attempt at constructing an alternative understanding of Thaddeus Metz's (2007) schema of the latter. The second section advances arguments for rejecting the thesis that Ubuntu is unique to Africa. Section three highlights several contradictions to the essential canons of OU, while section four argues that it is this aspect of Ubuntu (OU) that has ended.

Conceptualising xenophobia and Ubuntu

The term xenophobia derives from two Greek words: 'xenos' meaning a guest, stranger or foreigner and 'phobos' (phobia), meaning fear, dislike, aversion or horror (Hussein and Hitomi 2013). Combined, both words convey an intense dislike or fear of strangers or foreigners. This fear is not of the outgroup themselves, rather it is often a fear over competition for resources or threat to the socio-economic livelihood of the host citizens. To this end, xenophobia "describes attitudes, prejudices and behaviours that reject, exclude and often vilify people based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity" (Pillay 2017: 7-8). There are two basic types of xenophobia, namely political and social. While political xenophobia is state-sponsored and often non-violent, social xenophobia is more prone to violence and is carried out by citizens of the host community. These distinctions notwithstanding, xenophobia across Africa is basically triggered by economic uncertainties, especially competition over scarce resources like jobs. Later in this article, we shall see how these xenophobic outlooks contradict the tenets of ubuntu and render it untenable.

Like Ujamaa, Consciencism, Négritude, etc., Ubuntu is a variant of African communalism and socialism. It is a Nguni term with phonological variants in many Southern African languages such as *umundu* in Kikuyu, *imuntu* in Kimeru, *bumuntu* in kiSukuma, *vumuntu* in ShiTsonga, *bomoto* in Bobangi, and *gimuntu* in kiKongo (McDonald 2010: 141; Metz 2011: 533). As a philosophical concept, Ubuntu does not have a direct English translation. However, it has been more popularly construed as 'humaneness' or 'being a human', although this is more a characteristic feature than a definition. Martin Prozesky (2003: 5-6) identified 10 such characteristics of Ubuntu viz gentleness, humaneness, hospitality, empathy, deep kindness, friendliness, generosity, vulnerability, toughness and compassion. These features abound in Desmond Tutu's (1999: 31) attempt at conceptualising Ubuntu. For him:

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, “*Yu, u nobuntu*”; “Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*.” Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours.”

The difficulty of an English equivalent notwithstanding, Ubuntu expresses the philosophical notion of what defines being human. The phrase ‘*umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu*’ means ‘a person is a person through other persons’ or that personhood is attained only by recognising the humanity in others and establishing humane relations with them as a consequence. It underscores the idea that one’s existence is premised on being a community member – *I am because we are or I am because you are*. Shutte (2001: 30) buttresses this point by arguing that “our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human. And this means entering more and more deeply into the community with others.” Thus, those with much Ubuntu are considered moral, whereas those without it are often termed immoral. Hence, according to Ramose (2002: 40), Ubuntu is ‘foundational to African philosophy’.

Considered a traditional ethical theory, Ubuntu is a virtue ethics parallel to Platonian and Aristotelian variants typified in caring, hospitality, selflessness, the common good, patience, mutual sympathy, empathy, goodness, kindness, etc. Following criticisms that Ubuntu is vague and means almost anything depending on the whims and caprices of the interpreter, Metz (2007: 328–34) attempts a philosophical precision of the concept by evaluating six probable theoretical interpretations:

- U1: An action is right just insofar as it respects a person’s dignity; an act is wrong to the extent that it degrades humanity.
- U2: An action is right just insofar as it promotes the well-being of others; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to enhance the welfare of one’s fellows.
- U3: An action is right just insofar as it promotes the well-being of others without violating their rights; an act is wrong to the extent that it either violates rights or fails to enhance the welfare of one’s fellows without violating rights.
- U4: An action is right just insofar as it positively relates to others and thereby realizes oneself; an act is wrong to the extent that it does not perfect one’s valuable nature as a social being.

- U5: An action is right just insofar as it is in solidarity with groups whose survival is threatened; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to support a vulnerable community.
- U6: An action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community.

Metz rejects U1–U5, accepting only U6 as “the most promising theoretical formation of an African ethic to be found in the literature” (2007: 334). But U4 appears a good delineation in that the individual is not lost pursuant to good relation to others. Metz recognises this, arguing that U4 is perhaps the most dominant interpretation to be found in African ethics and literature. Such interpretations are proffered with the hope of circumventing the charge that a philosophy that prioritises the community is very likely to subsume or violate the right of the individual. This is because it “advocates that individual interest be subordinated to that of the community when the two conflict” (Ogbujah 2007: 25). Good examples abound in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, ranging from the treatment of Ikemefuna and his eventual death to the conversation between Okonkwo and Obierika about their inability to tap palm wine following their prohibition to do so because of their *Ozo* titles. Okonkwo’s acceptance of the prohibition by asserting that “the law of the land must be obeyed” (1994: 67) clearly shows how individual interests can be subordinated within communalism. Defenders of African communalism like Kwame Gyekye (1996: 32) argue that the good of the individual is not subsumed under the good of the community. Using an Akan proverb, he asserts that:

“The clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which would be seen to stand individually when closely approached.” [...] The proverb stresses the social reality of the individual; it expresses the idea that the individual has a separate identity and that, like the tree, some of whose branches may touch other trees, the individual is separately rooted and is not completely absorbed by the cluster. That is, communality does not obliterate or squeeze out individuality.

It is arguable whether this defence succeeds. Nevertheless, Metz insists that U4 roots ethics in the good of the agent while U6 roots it in the good of other persons. On this premise, therefore, the latter more appropriately captures the essence of ‘a person is a person through other persons’.

It is also likely that Metz, in rejecting U4, was weary of the individualism in modern European philosophy – the idea that one person’s good is detached from another’s. According to Lutz (2009: 316), while this is correct within mainstream European philosophy, the reverse is true of ancient and mediaeval moral philosophy because, here, ‘the common good is my good’. This is clear in

Aristotle's ethics and assertion that "the excellent person is related to his friends in the same way as he is related to himself since a friend is another himself". This is not distinct from the underlying explications of Ubuntu, where individuals attain humanity or personhood only through interpersonal relationships that uphold the humanity of others. It, therefore, follows that this underlying philosophy can be interpreted in a manner that U4 and U6 are true: "the actions that produce harmony, reduce discord and develop community are simultaneously the actions that perfect one's valuable nature as a social being" (Lutz 2009: 316). If this is granted, and given that protagonists of Ubuntu argue that the individual is not lost because of communal goals, it then follows that any acceptable theorisation of Ubuntu must balance the good of the group as well as that of the individual. None of Metz's schema seems to incorporate this. Thus, a seventh definition is required:

U7: An action is right just insofar as it positively promotes interpersonal relationships and realises oneself; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community and perfect one's nature as a community member.

This definition simply holds that a realisation of good interpersonal relationships with other members of the community is pivotal to the development or realisation of the community and oneself. It is a recognition of the humanity of/in others through which the individual's human beingness is realised – *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. Defenders of African communalism hold that the individual is never subsumed under the community. If this is the case, then this definition, not Metz's, more succinctly captures the true connotation of Ubuntu in that, at least, this is what most advocates and extant literature on Ubuntu intend. But the reality is that under the community, the individual, as shown in the cases of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo and Obierika, may be, indeed, lost or trampled upon.

Given the foregoing, I agree with Táíwò's (2016) distinction between metaphysical/ontological and axiological communalism. Ontological communalism refers to *how* and *what* humans are in the world in relation to *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. It validates the essence of being human as essentially rooted in being in communion with others. "A human being who is outside of this communion/community will, *ex definitione*, be a non-human" (Táíwò 2016: 82). Achebe (1994: 121) corroborates this argument in the manner in which Okonkwo reacted to his banishment. Here it is clear that an individual who lives outside his community will be like 'a fish cast out of water on to a dry sandy beach, panting and struggling to survive'. Many apologetics of African communalism subscribe to this 'being-in-community' thesis as the quintessential way of being African. This 'being-in-community' is Ontological Ubuntu (OU).

Axiological communalism, on the other hand, submits that communalism provides a yardstick with which to measure the desirability of social phenomena,

practices and human behaviours to determine how well or ill they reflect, advance, or embody communal values and its tenets. “When they reflect well, they are good, when not, they are bad” (Táíwò 2016: 83). In this reading, argues Táíwò, the axiological thesis becomes a value theory or a moral ideal describing the *oughtness* of actions and social institutions. This thesis is axiological Ubuntu (AU). An African scholar who construes Ubuntu essentially as an ethical or axiological theory is Thaddeus Metz (see Metz 2007, 2010, 2011).

On the uniqueness of Ubuntu to Africa

Many advocates of Ubuntu, essentially its ontological or ‘being-in-community’ variant, often interpret it as a unique philosophy exclusive to Africa (Ramosé 2002, Odigie-Osazuwa 2018). Such apologetics often proffer a narrative that paints a gloomy picture of a monolithic West to affirm Africa as radically different. For instance, Ntumba (1985), as cited by Kimmerle (2006: 6), attempts such demarcation in arguing that African philosophy is a philosophy of ‘We’ and Western philosophy is a philosophy of ‘I’. This means that, while Western philosophy is ‘persona-centric’ and can be summarised by Descartes’ *Cogito ergo sum* – “I think therefore I am,” Ubuntu ‘is communo-centric’ in the sense of Pobee’s dictum: *Cognatus ergo sum* – “I am related by blood, therefore I exist” (cited in Mangena 2022). Ramosé is arguably the most assertive on this point by criticising African scholars’ attempts to establish a universal synthesis of European and African thoughts. To this, Ramosé argues that any move to dissolve “the specificity of Ubuntu into abstract “universality” is to deny its right to be different. It is to accord undue primacy to the universal over the particular” (cited in McDonald 2010: 141). These arguments convinced many scholars who aptly believe that Ubuntu is a unique African export or ‘gift to the Western world’ (Battle 2009).

There is no denying whether Ubuntu as a philosophy can be associated with Africa. However, the problem at issue is the claim that it is uniquely African. This argument can only stand where it can be shown that the central features often associated with African communalism, specifically as highlighted in Prozesky’s (2003) 10 characteristics of Ubuntu above, are absent in the philosophical history of the so-called individualistic West. Broodryk (1996: 31) affirms this position in his assertion that if ‘unique’ entails “unusual, incomparable or extra-ordinary, then Ubuntuism is not unique to one culture, for all people have this magic gift, or sadly lack it”. This is because the extolled features of Ubuntu inhere in several philosophies and practices across the world, from Buddhism, Confucianism, traditional European philosophy to communitarianism. Thus:

We can affirm communalism of much of the human race and various societies at different times in the past whether in Europe, Asia, Africa, or North and South America... The Greeks worshipped mountains, found gods everywhere, and insisted that a being-out-of-community must be a god or a beast. They also held that the group is prior to the individual (Táíwò 2016: 91).

Ubuntu is, therefore, not unique. Its tenets of profound humanist concern are not exclusive to the continent, they are universal values also prominent in Western and Asian thoughts. Regarding the 'We/I' bifurcation, Kimmerle (2006: 6) argues that such dichotomisation is too simplistic because the 'I' or 'the person' is becoming increasingly important in African ontology, just as the 'We' philosophy is not impossible in the West given the strong emergence of communitarianism as a philosophical stream. Thus, concerning South Africa and scholars like Ramose, who refuse to grant universality to Ubuntu, Ramphela (1995) admonishes that:

Ubuntu as a philosophical approach to social relationships must stand alongside other approaches and be judged on the value it can add to better human relations in our complex society... The refusal to acknowledge the similarity between ubuntu and other humanistic philosophical approaches is in part a reflection of the parochialism of South Africans and a refusal to learn from others. ... We have to have the humility to acknowledge that we are not inventing unique problems in this country, nor are we likely to invent entirely new solutions (cited in Erislin and Horsthemke 2004: 548).

The foregoing ratifies the claim that Ubuntu is not unique. Human beings are generally communal and not individualistic, which explains why all traditional cultures are communal at the early stages. Differentiations set in as a result of socio-economic advancements. Asian philosophies such as Buddhism and Confucianism have similarities with African traditional philosophy, the same is true of the traditional philosophies of the West, especially Plato's and Aristotle's. Like Ubuntu, Confucianism emphasises interdependence with the centrality of the family institution. According to Lutz (2009: 320), Confucian ethics is virtue ethics, with emphasis on virtues such as *ren* (humaneness, Ubuntu), *zhong* (loyalty), *xiao* (filial piety), *xin* (good faith), *shan* (goodness), *yi* (rightness), etc., which are the elements of human relationships that form the basis of the moral community.

Similarly, traditional European philosophy, particularly the Platonic and Aristotelian variants, emphasises the development of and adherence to certain virtues. The individual is a communal being or, in Aristotle's words, a political animal, which makes living in community a normal and natural phenomenon. The moral dimension of these philosophies requires the community member to

acquire certain excellent habits and character traits such as justice, moderation, courage, wisdom, etc. This moralism dominated European ethics until the time of Hobbes who was among the early-modern European philosophers to reject the Platonic/Aristotelian communitarian moralism for individualism. To this end, I agree with Lutz's (2009: 321) argument that "if one compares traditional African philosophy (We/I) with *modern* European philosophy, the contrast is, indeed, striking. If, however, one compares traditional African philosophy with *traditional* European (and Asian) philosophy, the differences diminish."

It, thus, follows that even though it can be granted that some features of Ubuntu are uniquely African, its essential features (humaneness, hospitality, empathy, kindness, etc.) are not. If they were, then it would mean that only Africans can exemplify such acts. On the contrary, these, as I have shown, are rooted in human nature and common to the entirety of the human race. It is not unusual for a Nigerian to be naturally drawn to or enthusiastically associate with other Nigerians in a foreign land, in like manner as an Italian or, more generally, European. That, in essence, is the communal spirit. Thus, communalism or Ubuntu is a doctrine that resonates universally. Therefore, according to Negedu and Ojomah (2018: 63-4), rather than talk of African communalism or its uniqueness, we should be talking of communalism in Africa for while the former suggests that it is uniquely African the latter shows that it is evident in other societies and among other races.

Xenophobia and Ubuntu contradictions

The polemical rhetoric on Ubuntu as a transformative ontological philosophy in Africa rings hollow in the face of certain inherent contradictions. Ubuntu, essentially in its ontological rendering, has not played significant roles in shaping the socio-political and economic activities on the African continent. If anything, it has achieved the opposite. African nations have bled on countless occasions despite claims to communalism. The overwhelming incidences of xenophobia, autocratic rulership, genocide, corruption, indigene/settler crises, ethnic cleansing and other forms of socio-political exclusions greatly contradict the principal tenets or humanism of OU. Worried by this inconsistency between Ubuntu claims and socio-political realities in Africa, Kanwangamalu (1999) wondered how Africa, "a continent that has produced innumerable monsters and dictators, have humanistic pretensions" (cited in McDonald 2010: 142). Intense competition for power and resources often culminates in violent conflicts in post-colonial Africa. According to Vaughan (1994: 420), the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970, the inter-ethnic conflicts between the Hutu and Tutsi in Burundi and the religious confrontations in Sudan are a few examples of communal conflicts (antithesis) in post-colonial Africa.

Many African countries valorise varying forms of ethnic engineering that are antithetical to OU. Such ethnic engineering inheres in socio-political exclusions that have dehumanised and marginalised certain groups of people across the continent. This partly explains why Makgoba (1996: 23) rejects the claim that, as a philosophy, Ubuntu “is the invisible force uniting Africans Worldwide” because it is difficult to see, in practice, how it accommodates other cultures or outgroup members. This challenge of inclusiveness is true of the recurrent indigene/settler skirmishes that have ravaged many states in Nigeria, especially Plateau state. The crisis mostly centres on who gets or controls what resources. The indigenes feel total and complete control is theirs, while the settlers or ‘outsiders’ often feel they have lived and paid their dues in such a community long enough to claim certain accruable benefits. Construed as outsiders or enemies, such settlers are never assimilated into the community, no matter how long they stay or may have stayed.

This persistent unease between insiders and outsiders is glaring when viewed in relation to frequent outbursts of xenophobic tensions across Africa. As earlier conceptualised, Ghana and Nigeria are examples of countries on the continent that have exhibited political xenophobia. Upon becoming Ghanaian Prime Minister in 1969, Kofi Busia introduced the Aliens Compliance Order (the Aliens Order), which was aimed at expelling undocumented foreigners. The order mandated foreigners without work permits to get them within two weeks or leave the country (Oni and Okunade 2018: 40). This action was triggered by the perception that the widespread unemployment in Ghana was caused by the high presence of foreigners from West African states such as Burkina Faso, Togo, Nigeria and Côte d’Ivoire. Aside from this order, there was also the ‘Ghanaian Business Promotion’ (GBP) aimed at protecting and preserving certain businesses for Ghanaians. Foreign nationals were restricted in the kinds of business they could engage in and had to meet certain conditions (e.g. provision of capital) before they could expand their businesses. These policies led to the ejection of between 900 000 to 1 200 000 non-indigenes from Ghana, more than half of whom were Nigerians. This move was celebrated with the belief that it would guarantee job security for Ghanaians (Oni and Okunade 2018: 41).

Similarly, Nigeria’s oil boom in the 1970s and early 1980s made it a new haven for migrants, mainly Ghanaians who took up menial jobs and occupied the small and medium enterprises sector in Nigeria. However, the gross mismanagement of the oil wealth coupled with a declining economy as exemplified in mass unemployment, galloping inflation, very high debt burden, etc., precipitated xenophobic antipathy towards foreigners by Nigerians, predominantly Ghanaians as typified in the popular phrase ‘Ghana-must-go’. President Shagari blamed widespread unemployment and crimes on foreigners in Nigeria and subsequently

ejected them by 1983. Since this was an election year, “Nigerian politicians hoped the expulsion would prove popular” (Oni and Okunade 2018: 44). Consequently, over two million foreigners were expelled from Nigeria with more than half of them being Ghanaians. Another round of expulsion was carried out in 1985; this time about 300 000 Ghanaians were affected. Even though these expulsions were premised on the socio-economic woes of Nigeria at the time, Oni and Okunade (2018: 44) believe that these were retaliatory moves, given similar action by Ghana in 1969.

Social xenophobia has become a recurrent uprising in South Africa in recent times. It is denoted by several derogatory ascriptions such as *makwerekwere* (black immigrants with a different language and phonetic sounds) and *legrigamba* (magrigamba, plural), referring to West African men who arrived in South Africa with nothing but are leaving after a short while with wealth and valuables. The first attacks date back to January 1995, few years after the end of apartheid. It involved weeks of physical assault on nationals from Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique living in the Alexandra Township. Undocumented migrants were identified by armed gangs and handed over to the police in a bid to rid the township of foreigners. The next major episode was in May 2008, where 62 people were killed, 21 of whom were South Africans (Pillay 2017: 7). The Zulu King, Goodwill Zwelithini KaBhekuzulu, incited another wave of xenophobic attacks in 2015 following the death of a teenage South African at the hands of a Somali. The rhetoric that foreigners were stealing jobs and committing crimes, which underscored the 2008 attacks, resonated. These attacks led to seven deaths and the displacement of thousands of foreigners (Essa 2015). A more recent attack, tagged “Operation Dudula” in Soweto, called on non-nationals to leave South Africa by June 16, 2021 (Sahara Reporters 2021). Notwithstanding the South African government’s adoption of a National Action Plan (NAP) in March 2019 to combat xenophobia and related intolerance among the police, government officials and members of the public, xenophobic atrocities have continued unabated.

A 2020 Human Rights Watch report on xenophobic incidents, one year after the government adopted NAP, found that there has been large scale relentless killings, severe injuries, forced displacements, destruction of businesses as well as barriers to justice and basic services. Drivers of the problems include indifference, denial and tacit approval of xenophobic actions by government and law enforcement authorities and systemic barriers and difficulty in renewing or acquiring documents for legal status and access to health and educational services. According to the report, “mobs of angry rioters throughout South Africa have attacked and harassed non-nationals, blaming them for unemployment, crime, neglect by the government, among other things” (Human Rights Watch 2020: 2). These attacks undoubtedly contradict OU’s claim that a person is ‘a

person through other persons'. Rather, they affirm U5 in Metz's construct of ubuntu as highlighted above: "An action is right just insofar as it is in solidarity with groups whose survival is threatened..." Although this has been rejected as a proper delineation of ubuntu, the realities of xenophobia and attitudes of xenophobic sympathizers in Africa suggest otherwise.

The Death of Ontological Ubuntu

Every xenophobic attack is an affirmation of the phrase 'not one of us' and the entrenchment of exclusivist identities. This leads to the question: how far can we stretch the notion of African communalism to include other Africans or people considered as outsiders? The answer is 'not very far'. Not far beyond the nuclear or extended family. Even this, too, is suspect because there are countless instances where family members fight and kill over scarce resources like land, inheritances and other properties. I am not arguing that communalism must be devoid of conflict or disagreement. We can tussle and disagree and still be communalistic, however, such communalism cannot be said to be ontological in the sense of 'a person is a person through other persons'. It means the 'I am because we are' hardly defines the African nor does it play any significant role in the socio-political and economic orderings of life in African societies today. Ubuntu is readily reckoned with where there is nothing at stake or a scarce resource to be shared. Where there are such scrambles, as earlier highlighted in the factors that drive xenophobia, the communal ties that bind easily give way. A people whose humanistic philosophy is constantly threatened by scarce resources cannot be said to be ontologically communalistic. To this end, it follows that what is left of Ubuntu is its axiological appeal as a normative theory that *ought* to guide our actions not just as Africans, but as humans in general.

In the article titled *The end of Ubuntu*, Bernard Matolino and Wenceslaus Kwindigwi argue that current realities in Africa, especially South Africa, invalidate justification of any appeal to Ubuntu as a unique and defining African philosophy. For them, political elites invoke Ubuntu as a 'narrative of return' to a pre-colonial moralism whereby Africans lived harmoniously before the European conquest. They further note, rightly, that similar narratives of return, such as those of Kwame Nkrumah (consciencism), Leopold Senghor (Negritude) and Julius Nyerere (Ujamaa), have yielded calamitous socio-political and economic consequences (Matolino & Kwindigwi 2013: 198). Since there is nothing essentially promising about Ubuntu in modern times, and since Ubuntu "communities are notorious for their dislike for outsiders" and place high values "on blood relations in recognising the other", Matolino and Kwindigwi conclude that Ubuntu in the "academe and political circles has reached its end" (2013: 204). Although I agree with Matolino

and Kwindingwi on many fronts, specifically on the point that Ubuntu's features are neither unique nor indigenous to Africa (203-4), I find their conclusion regarding the bankruptcy of Ubuntu as a moral philosophy quite unconvincing. The reason for rejecting their thesis is that Ubuntu is both a metaphysical and ethical theory. Their failure to make this distinction renders their conclusion problematic. In fact, for them, Ubuntu is essentially an ethical theory:

Ubuntu, as an ethical theory that is taken to be natural to the people of sub-Saharan Africa, we argue, can only be fully realised in a naturalistic and traditionalistic context of those people. However, such a natural habitat that would favour the chances of ubuntu has largely disappeared because of the irreversible effects of factors such as industrialisation and modernity. The disappearance of such natural and favourable conditions renders ubuntu obsolete. It is obsolete because the context in which its values could be recognised is now extinct. We are of the view that for these values to be realised they have to be embedded in the strictures of communalism (2013: 203).

The effects of modernity and disappearance of the favourable conditions for Ubuntu to thrive are not sufficient conditions to reject Ubuntu as an 'ethical theory', rather they are the necessary conditions for its appeal. This assertion is clearer when we examine what Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013: 199), like Prozesky (2003), highlighted as the core values of Ubuntu. For them, "Ubuntu rests on some core values such as humaneness, caring, sharing, respect and compassion". These are more analogous to AU than OU. Nevertheless, if these are essentially the constituents of Ubuntu, then there is nothing that precludes modern Africans and, indeed, human beings in general, from exemplifying them. That is, people the world over can genuinely be humane, empathetic, respectful and compassionate while, at the same time, being kind and generous towards others. Thus, if this is granted as the core values of Ubuntu, at least as claimed by Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013), then they are by no means only tenable in pre-colonial Africa; they are present and still relevant today. In essence, Ubuntu as an ethical theory has not ended. In what follows, I shall be arguing that it is ontological Ubuntu (OU) that has reached its end.

It is true, as most African intellectuals are wont to argue, that Africans are generally more communalistic and less individualistic than the Westerners. Notwithstanding, this paper has argued that the basis for this does not inhere in Ubuntuism as a distinctively unique African philosophy, rather it is simply a reflection of the stage of development on each side of the divide. Lutz's (2009) assertion that African communalistic philosophy is only comparable with traditional European and Asian philosophies has one crucial implication – *Africa*

is behind. This is because individualistic/communalistic philosophies are tied to modes of production. Communalistic modes of production emphasise collective ownership of the means of production, which is a natural mode of production for most rural and peasant societies. Here, members of the community take turns to cultivate a member's farmland (what the Idoma people of Benue State call *Oluma*) or tap one's palm tree with a date set aside for free consumption of palm wine. In politics, the mode reflects in consensus democracy, which Wiredu and other African scholars characteristically argued for in the one-party system debate. Some of these practices may have been effective in small-scale societies; they are less likely to work in today's complex and constantly evolving African societies. Direct democracy worked in traditional Greece and African societies, it is not possible today. Similarly, banishment and ostracism (with the people refraining from selling to someone who has flouted the community's law) are intelligible and could be situated in the social ordering of lives in smaller communities in the past; the same cannot be said of these practices today. If a community vendor would not sell to such individuals, an online shop owner would gladly fill the void. The failure of attempts at Ujamaa and other forms of African socialism or narratives of return is also a testament to futile efforts to implant a traditional mode of production on a modern society where individuality is mounting.

Evidence abounds that shows that many urban cities in Africa have lost the 'community' character. The mode of production has changed or is changing, as are the architectural designs of houses and living conditions. In the past, the focus was on extended or multi-generational families living together in a compound. Today, however, most modern houses in African cities are designed for immediate family members with either a 'Boys Quarters' or visitors' room for non-family members, which are often detached from the main building. This means that African architectural designs today owe very little to communalism (being-in-community) as its attendant values; it is one in which everyone is beginning to mind his or her own business, where neighbours or people living in the same estate hardly know themselves or have their paths crossing. The contention here is that people become isolated from each other as a consequence of living and working conditions, which make the strict adherence to being-in-community highly untenable. Some might argue that collegiality in the workplace replaces being-in-community. While it cannot be denied that businesses thrive on collegiality, it is not ontologically the same as being-in-community because while the former pertains to AU, the latter belongs to OU. That is, collegiality falls within the purview of AU as a prescriptive good, which this paper advocates. The increasing effects of globalisation along with shrinking borders means that the ontological walls of community are constantly disappearing and what sustains people, not just Africans, is AU, not OU. Apart from architectural individualism,

Negedu and Ojoma (2018: 54) have also argued for political individualism on the continent. For them, the communal character of African states is questionable given that the form of democracy in practice “tends towards the individual and provides little room for socialism”. A key example here is the repatriation of resources across many African nations, which limits the engagement of larger siblinghood thereby creating “an antithetical form of traditional communalism”.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the frequency of xenophobia and other socio-political exclusions in present-day Africa contradict the central tenets of OU. Thus, the constant resort to OU as a transformatively distinct philosophy capable of restoring Africans to ontological wholeness is wishful and misplaced because, compared to similar philosophies, it is difficult to unearth aspects of the African society today where this has been of profound influence. With a few exceptions, most people or rulers' actions on the continent are motivated by self-interest; the community is secondary, not primary as construed by OU. And there is nothing untoward in this given that this too is dictated by the dynamic nature of human society. The point to note, however, is that in pursuing self-goals, the rights and goals of others are not trampled upon. This is the sense in which the U7 notion of Ubuntu as an axiological construct becomes germane. Violent xenophobic uprisings have shown that OU's values are inelastic to accommodate even Africans of varying communities. Also, such values are mainly realisable in traditional, small-scale communities where the collective ownership of production means is unproblematic. Given failed attempts at socialism on the continent, it follows that the same mode of production cannot be effective for a complexly modern African society. Similarly, if you apply the individualistic mode of production to rural or agrarian society, its communalistic (ontological) character would, over time, disappear thereby giving impetus to AU. At this stage, recourse to Ubuntu would not be based on its uniqueness to Africa, but on its potential to deliver the best possible human society as a whole; modernity has come to stay, and Africa must engage it via axiological Ubuntu, not ontological Ubuntu, for the latter is dead.

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