

# When the hyena wears darkness: ubuntu as a barrier in the fight against hiv/aids

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## Abstract

This paper argues that the African ethic of *ubuntu* can be a set-back in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The paper argues that some cultural practices that are blamed for contributing to the high rate of HIV infection in African communities are still used in the present day because they are seen as having elements of *ubuntu*. Using Metz's theory of *ubuntu*, I will show how such practices are deemed as having elements of *ubuntu*. I have used the controversial story of Eric Aniva, an HIV positive man from Malawi, who shocked the world with his confessions that he slept with more than 100 women and girls in a cultural sexual cleansing ritual called *fisi*, in order to show how some cultural practices are used in the name *ubuntu* even though they put lives at risk for contracting HIV/AIDS. As a solution, I argue that the anti-HIV-AIDS organisation ought to develop better approaches to fighting the practices. I argue that these approaches should appreciate the people's conception of such practices.

**Key Words:** Ubuntu, *Fisi*, HIV/AIDS

## Introduction

According to the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV and AIDS [UNAIDS] 2017 report, East and Southern Africa is the region that is hardest hit by HIV. It is home to 6.2% of the world's population but has 19.4 million people living with HIV, over 50% of the total number of people living with HIV in the world. In 2016, there were 790,000 new HIV infections, 43% of the global total.

UNAIDS also reports that the Southern African region, accounted for one third of the region's new infections in 2016, with another 50% occurring in eight countries: Mozambique, Kenya, Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Ethiopia. These differences between the epidemiology of AIDS cases in Africa and that in Western societies have prompted speculation regarding risk factors that may be unique to Africa. Because of the age and sex distribution of AIDS cases in Africa, emphasis has been placed on sexual transmission of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) [Hrdy 1987].

Researchers have been looking for things to blame, and identified African cultural practices as culprits. The logical consequence of this was to fight against African cultures and sexualities. Since then, many anthropologists have reacted against this viewpoint by stressing the important role of socio-economic conditions, as well as the danger of infection within the modern medical system itself. The cultural practices that have been the subject of many researches focusing on HIV/AIDS prevention, include, sexual norms, early marriage and coital debut, gender relations and norms, widow inheritance and sexual cleansing rituals as well as blood-letting rites such as male circumcision and female genital mutilation.

Further, researchers have also implicated widow inheritance in the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Africa because it encourages the formation of extended sexual networks [Nyindo 2005]. In a study in rural Uganda, over two-thirds of respondents reported the existence of widow inheritance in their communities, though less than a third supported the practice. In other cultural settings, sexual contact with a widow is encouraged through sexual cleansing rituals, in which penetrative intercourse is thought to chase away the spirit of the deceased and thereby prevent misfortune amongst the living. Through this sexual cleansing, widows believed to be tainted by death are ritually accepted back into the community and cleansed of evil.

In Malawi, the cultural practices that have been the target of the anti-HIV/AIDS organizations include; arranged marriages, *fisi* system, wife or husband inheritance, bonus wives, polygamy and the exchange of wives [Kamowa and Kamwendo 1999]. This paper has chosen the *fisi* cultural practices because of the controversies they have been attracting in Malawi and the amount of blame levelled against them.

In Malawi, *fisi* (hyena) is a traditional title given to a man hired by communities in several remote parts of its southern districts, mainly Nsanje and Chikwawa, to provide what is called

sexual "cleansing". The word *fisi* means the man whose duty is to cleanse women through sexual interactions. But the word is also used to mean the sexual act of sexual cleansing itself. According to Clement Bisai [cited in Kamlogera 2007], among the Sena tribe of the Lower Shire of Malawi, people look up to *fisi* on a number of occasions. For example, if a man dies, his wife is required by tradition to sleep with *fisi*; if a man dies by accident or suicide; after abortion or still birth or if a baby comes out first with legs and not headlong during delivery; when a house catches fire. In addition to these roles, the *fisi* are also hired to cleanse teenage girls, after their first menstruation, to mark their passage from childhood to womanhood. It is common practice in some parts of Malawi for a bereaved widow to have sex with a man for three to four nights. Often the man would be the deceased's brother, but in some cases someone from outside the immediate family, would be hired to perform the act. According to custom, sex with the hyena must never be protected with the use of condoms. But they say a hyena is hand-picked for his good morals [see the Malawi Human rights report, 2002].

Even though the practice is widely condemned by people in some parts of the southern regions of Malawi, many are still practicing *fisi* as exposed by Eric Aniva. Hence, in respect of the fact that the *fisi* is still practiced in Malawi, this paper argues that the cultural practice is liked for its aspects of *ubuntu/umunthu*. While the practice can be seen as evil in this age of HIV/AIDS, the people see it as a moral good that helps harmonize the community and promotes welfare. Now, the problem is that if some African communities see the cultural practices such as *fisi* as morally acceptable acts of *ubuntu* this will pose challenges to the campaign against HIV/AIDS. This is because the people will always be resistant to stopping the practices, even though they are fully aware of the fact that the practices expose them to the risk of HIV/AIDS infection.

This paper therefore argues that the African ethic of *ubuntu* can be a set-back in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The paper argues that some cultural practices that are blamed for contributing to the high rate of HIV infection in African communities are still used in this age because they are seen as having elements of *ubuntu*. Using Metz's theory of *ubuntu*, I will show how such practices are deemed to have elements of *ubuntu*. I have used the controversial story of Eric Aniva, an HIV positive man from Malawi, who shocked the world with his confessions that he slept with more than 100 women and girls in a cultural sexual cleansing ritual called *fisi*, in order to show how some cultural practices are used in the name *ubuntu* even though they put lives at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. As a solution, I argue that the anti-HIV-AIDS organisation ought to develop better approaches to fighting the practices. I argue that these approaches should appreciate the people's conception of such practices. Hence, in section 2, I present Metz's theory of *ubuntu* in order to show why some cultural practices are regarded as acts of *ubuntu* and can therefore not easily be stopped. In section 3, I present in detail the story of *fisi* as a representative of cultural practices associated with the spread of HIV. In section 4, I will use Metz's theory in order understand why *fisi* and related practices are regarded as *ubuntu*.

## Metz's Theory of Ubuntu

Metz's 2007 article 'Towards an African Moral Theory' attempted to provide a normative ethical theory on which actions in most parts of Southern Africa are judged as right or wrong. Metz attempted to discover principles on which the African moral theory of *ubuntu* is based in comparison to the Western ethical theories such as Utilitarianism. Thus Metz's theory established the logical grounds on which an action is seen as depicting *ubuntu/umunthu* or not and he also attempted to provide a judicious review of the competing moral theories of African *ubuntu* ethics, examined their weaknesses and synthesised them to produce one normative theory. Thus, if one wants to discuss African *ubuntu* ethics, Metz's theory could be one of the useful theories that can help in understanding the African Ubuntu ethics. Hence, I have used Metz's theory in order to examine how the cultural practice of *fisi* depicts *ubuntu/umunthu*. Using Metz, I will argue that the *fisi* cultural practice, meets most of the grounds that qualify an action as an act of *ubuntu/umunthu*.

The primary principle in Metz's theory of Ubuntu is that an action is right insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on good-will; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will. Metz developed this principle after analyzing six various competing theoretical interpretations of Ubuntu that tend to explain the moral grounds for judging an action as right or wrong in Africa ethics. Metz's principle was developed in the light of the weaknesses found in the six theoretical interpretations of Ubuntu. The most important of these was that: *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 noted that there are many respects in which the fundamental requirement to promote harmony and to prevent discord could need clarification and specifications. Metz then started developing this theory by clarifying and specifying the meanings and implications of the term 'harmony'. Metz [2007:333] argued that "harmony" essentially involves a common sense of self, which includes at least the following distinct conditions: the first, a given individual conceives of herself as part of a group. She refers to herself in the first person plural, including herself in a "we." Second, the group that you consider yourself to be a member of also considers you to be a member of it. So, others in the "we" you refer to also include you in their "we." For example, you can hardly claim to share identity with the Chewa people merely on the basis of saying things like, "We Chewas need to stick together." Self-described Chewas must also consider you Chewa. Third, people share identity when they have common goals, if not also the same motives or reasons that underlie them. It is logically possible to be part of a group that does not do anything, but the relevant sort of group under consideration here is one that has some projects. Finally, shared identity also means that people in a group coordinate their activities in order to realize their ends, even if they do not use the same means or make the same amount of effort. In this case, families, clubs, churches, schools, firms and nations are instances of shared identity. The greater the common sense of self the more people think of themselves in terms of their group membership; the more goals they share the higher they rank

these goals ; the more they share the same reasons for adopting these goals ; and the more they will sacrifice to achieve these goals .

Metz also gave ‘good-will’ as another fundamental aspect of harmony which has some moral implications. Metz [2007: 334] argued that another thing that “harmony” might mean is a certain caring or supportive relationship. This means that one has a relationship of good-will insofar as one wishes another person well; believes that another person is worthy of help; aims to help another person; acts so as to help another person; acts for the other’s sake; and, finally, feels good upon the knowledge that another person has benefited and feels bad upon learning she has been harmed. Metz further argued that, the examples of good-will include nursing, teaching and charity work. Metz went on to argue that, good-will and shared identity are logically distinct types of relationships. First, there are cases of shared identity without good-will. Conversely, there can be cases of good-will without shared identity. To explain this case where one can have good-will without shared identity, Metz [2007: 335] gave an example of a story of two people who do not know each other, who are in different rooms and who are unable to communicate. When person A presses a button in his room, he thereby benefits person B (perhaps B has brought a tasty meal or learns that money has been deposited into his bank account), and, likewise, when B presses his button, A benefits. Imagine that A learns of the beneficial effects on B, but that B does not know they come from A; and suppose B knows how his button pressing affects A, but A does not know that B is responsible for his good fortune. Finally, imagine both parties press their buttons repeatedly. Metz argues that this case is an instant case of solidarity without identity, of anonymous do-gooding. That the parties care for each other, but the parties neither think of themselves as a “we” nor coordinate their behavior to achieve common ends.

In this case, Metz wanted to say that some acts of good-will without shared identity have more moral value on the face of it than does shared identity without good-will. This means that if we had to choose between promoting relationships of solidarity or identity, solidarity would usually win. However, Metz thinks that, we often need not choose between them because the most attractive sort of harmonious relationship to promote is surely one that includes both. Metz [2007: 335] argued that while good-will without shared identity is morally more valuable than the converse, it is better still with shared identity. Thus a condition in which individuals anonymously help each other is less desirable than mutually recognizing members of a group who care for one another. To be close or part of the whole is reasonably understood as sharing an identity, whereas to be sympathetic or realize the well-being of others is to have good-will. The combination of the two conditions is what Metz thinks is the most attractive conception of harmony- or a broad sense of “love.”

From the descriptions above on shared identity and good-will as contributing to harmony, Metz went on to enrich U6. Recall that U6 says that: *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 enriched the above by saying that: *An action is right just insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on good-will; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will.*

Metz [2007: 338] also argued that the shared identity condition of harmony naturally accounts for the remaining intuitions regarding the private life-world of culture and family. This means that upholding traditions and participating in rituals is one important way to identify with others, in other words, to think of oneself as a member of a group and to engage in joint projects. And creating new human beings enables one to expand the range of a common sense of self, to enlarge the scope of “we.”

In conclusion, after analyzing some of the aspects of his proposed theory, Metz argued that the most justified normative theory of right action that has an African pedigree is the requirement to produce harmony and to reduce discord, where harmony is a matter of identity and solidarity. Given Metz’s theory of *ubuntu* as presented above, I will argue in the following section that the *fisi* culture is seen as the morally right action of *ubuntu* and hence people find enough reasons to uphold to it even though they are aware of the fact that the practice exposes them to risk of HIV infection.

## The story of Eric Aniva

In July 2016, Eric Aniva of Malawi’s southern district of Nsanje, Chiphwephwe Village, was all over in the major world media after the British Broadcasting Corporation’s (BBC) reporter, Ed Butler, reported his *fisi* scandal. The story caused much sensation and was later picked up by almost all the major world news outlets such as: The Washington Post, The Independent, CNN, Daily Star, Daily Mail and The Guardian, et cetera.

Butler, in his story titled, “The man hired to have sex with children”, published on BBC’s website on 21 July, 2016, described Aniva as the pre-eminent *fisi* “hyena” in his village. Aniva, who was 45 years-old at the time, thus became the subject of a BBC feature on various sexual cleansing practices in Malawi. The BBC broadcast the 27-minute radio report entitled ‘Stealing Innocence’ in Malawi and featured Aniva bragging about being paid to sleep with more than 100 young girls and women. Aniva revealed in the interview that most of the women he slept with were school-going girls as young as 12 or 13, but said he preferred the older women. Aniva also revealed that the girls found pleasure in having him as their hyena and were actually proud of him as a real man who knew how to please a woman. Aniva also revealed to Butler in the same interview that he was one of the 10 hyenas in this community, and that every village in Nsanje district had plenty of them. He said that the hyenas were paid between \$4 and \$7 (£3 to £5) each time. In the story, Butler also had a conversation with some women named: Fagisi, Chrissie and Phelia- women in their 50s and custodians of the initiation traditions in their village. The job of these women was to organise the adolescent girls into camps each year,

teaching them about their duties as wives and how to please a man sexually. The "sexual cleansing" with the hyena was the final stage of this process, arranged voluntarily by the girl's parents. These women told Butler that this practice was necessary "to avoid infection with their parents or the rest of the community". The women further told Butler that it was their duty to train the girls in a good manner in the village, so that they did not go astray and that they were good wives so that the husband would be satisfied.

Aniva's revelations led to his arrest on 26 July, 2016 on the orders of the country's president, Arthur Peter Mutharika. Mutharika was angered by the Aniva's revelations. He said that Peter Mutharika said that, "since the accused, [Eric Aniva] said he does not use protection in "his evil acts", he should be investigated for exposing girls to HIV and "further be charged accordingly" [The Guardian]. Mutharika further ordered the police to investigate all men and parents involved in what he called 'a shocking malpractice' (ibid). Aniva was summoned to the Nsanje District Commissioner, Gift Lapozo's offices where he was questioned on the truth of the story published by the BBC. At this government office, Aniva confessed that he had been in the act since the 1980s but he was not the only *fisi* in his area but there are another 10 accomplices in his village (Nyasatimes). According to the Nyasatimes, the other hyenas fled into caves after learning of the arrest of their fellow *fisi* [Nyasatimes]. The most saddening thing in the story was the fact that Aniva, revealed that he was diagnosed HIV positive and the possibility existed that that he had infected some of his clients with HIV.

Aniva's revelations received wild condemnation worldwide such that some people, including his countrymen, even wished that he be executed through hanging or even crucifixion for doing such a horrible thing of infecting innocent girls with the virus [see the comments that followed the *Nyasatimes* story published on 22 November titled "Malawi 'hyena man' Aniva jailed for two years over sex cleansing ritual: Lawyer Goba says to appeal on 'material error in law one-two-many'"]. The result of this world-wide condemnation was that Aniva was sentenced to a two-year jail term by Nsanje Senior Resident Magistrate, Innocent Nebbie. He was convicted for engaging in a harmful cultural and traditional practice, under Section Five of Malawi's Gender Equality Act. He became the first Malawian to be sentenced to such a long jail sentence on matters related to engaging in harmful cultural practices. Aniva served his sentence and was realised from prison in December, 2017.

The twist to the story of Aniva was that, after his arrest, out of the hundred women with whom he had had sex with, none came forward to testify against him. Instead, he was tried for "harmful cultural practice" under section five of Malawi's Gender Equality Act, for having sex with new widows. Only two women testified against him after being dragged to the court. That scenario where the women refused to testify against Aniva, is key to opening a critical conversation about the reasons why people are not ready to abandon their culture even if those cultures expose them to the danger of HIV infection. One could be tempted to think that these women regarded Aniva as some sort of community saviour and hero. Thus it is important to understand why these women wanted to protect Aniva.

Before we go to the next section, I would like to say that the mass anger that the Aniva affair caused in the public imagination, can be attributed to fear and not sincere anger against the cultural practice. I think that this is the type of rational fear that is associated with the idea of the mass infection of HIV that one person caused- that people supposed that Aniva had infected all the women with whom he had sex with HIV. With this idea of the mass infection of a disease caused by one person, all the moral values of *fisi* as an act of ubuntu were not put into consideration by the Western media. I also think that it is these rational fears, fuelled by the anti-HIV/AIDS organisations that made some Malawians speak against the practice and portray it negatively to the whole world. For example, after the Aniva affair became a public moral issue and caused debates, one of the women in Malawi, Natasha Annie Tonthola, a former representative of the Africa's Big Brother show, came out in public and contacted the BBC to explain her fight against the Malawi *fisi* culture. She explained how, as a 13-year-old girl, she encountered the *fisi* during her initiation ceremony in Mulanje district of southern Malawi. Tonthola told the BBC that she was forced into the act and was told that was the only way to become a woman [BBC 2016].

I also think that the phenomenon of *fisi* and the campaigns against it are only a matter of a collusion of historical circumstances provided by the new HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns on one hand, and the old campaigns against African cultures that were fanned by the Western institutions on the other hand. I also think that the Aniva affair provided the window for the Western world to justify their case of why they have been fighting for so long for the elimination of some African cultures. For the first time in Malawi, the Western world had what looked like a legitimate case against the African cultural practices related to sexuality as the issue was widely condemned. That is the issue which really caused fear, as even the Malawi President Mutharika felt under international pressure. So when the issue went public after the BBC's story, he immediately ordered the arrest and prosecution of Aniva, even though he knew quite well that *fisi* culture had been practiced among the Sena tribe of the Lower Shire<sup>12</sup> for a long time.

On the part of the president this could have been a desperate attempt at disassociating his country from what the Western world regarded 'a cultural public scandal'. Though, the practice was outlawed in the country, it was common knowledge that the *fisi* (human hyena), like the bush hyena, plied his hunting trade in a way that was enigmatic and therefore elusive. So it was clear to the Malawi president that the *afisi*, despite being outlawed, are still plying their trade in the dark- they wear the darkness and it is so difficult to catch one. Aniva was only caught after his own revelations that were made in excitement as a result of the alluring questions of a journalist. But the possibility is that Aniva, could be a small *fisi*- one that has preyed on a few and that there could be a master *fisi*. Later, after Aniva's own revelations, the matter was blown out of all proportion as not a question of people and their culture- but rather as a question of some people being portrayed as barriers to the HIV/AIDS campaigns. In addition, the Aniva

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<sup>12</sup> The Lower Shire is the name given to the region lying at the southern tip of Malawi along the Shire River. The region covers Nsanje and Chikwawa districts. The region is mostly occupied by the Sena and Mang'anja tribe among which the traditional cultural practice of *fisi* was institutionalised as a sexual cleansing ritual.



affair provided a normative explanation of the Western interventions in fighting all the cultural practices that were regarded as barriers in the HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns. In the broad sense, this was the politicisation of a peoples' culture as being responsible for the high infection rate of AIDS in this region of sub-Saharan Africa.

## *Fisi as ubuntu*

Aniva's story above could be revealing of the bigger picture as to why some Africans are resistant to abandoning their culture in this age of battle against HIV/AIDS. In this section, using Metz's theory of Ubuntu, I argue that the *fisi* culture as well as some other African cultural practices, given in section 2, are seen as integral to the existence of the community by promoting the well-being of people and are believed to be acts of motivated *umunthu/ubuntu*. Some of the questions that his analysis intend to answer are: Is the cultural practice of *fisi* an *Ubuntu act*- is it conducted for the common good of the community? Is it necessary in promoting harmonious relations in the community? Is the people's resistance to stopping the practice an indication of its necessity in the African communities?

In Metz's postulation of *ubuntu*, we have seen that there are major issues arising out of this phrase which are the promotion of harmony and solidarity; self-realisation and identity and also co-existence. Metz found that the goal of achieving harmony is defined by two aspects which are 'shared identity' and 'good-will'. In this section, I will attempt to analyze the implications of these two aspects in understanding the *fisi* culture as a right action and therefore an act of *ubuntu*. I argue that Aniva's practice was only an expression of this *ubuntu* ethic and was a real attempt at becoming a real person, which is a matter of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them. Metz [2010] has also argued that all self-regarding activities are ruled out of *ubuntu* ethics. And here we may pose a question of whether the practice of *fisi* is a self-regarding activity. An act which is self-regarding is done just for the sake of the self. For example, if one harms others, e.g. by being exploitive, deceptive or unfaithful in order to enrich oneself, or even if one is merely indifferent to others and fails to share oneself with them, then one is said to be lacking *ubuntu*, which literally means lacking personhood or humanness. This can mean that the men capable of being a *fisi* in the communities will be regarded as lacking *ubuntu* if they refuse to offer their services in times of need.

It should be noted that the *fisi* services are also grounded on respecting individual rights and on consent from the participant- that is the *fisi* does not rape women but goes to help them with their problems. It is also important to note that the provision of *fisi* services is regarded as a moral obligation- being concerned with and sympathetic towards one's problem or needs. This entails that the *fisi* thinks of himself as being bound up with others-or being part of the community and sharing in its problems and happiness. Another way to understand the morality of *fisi* cultural practice is it to understand the African familial relationships or in other words,

the extended family. Eliojo [2014], clearly explains this idea of familial relationships which can be applied to the practice of *fisi* as an act *ubuntu*. He says that in an extended family:

*Your husband is our husband/ your wife is our wife*  
*Your daughter is our daughter/ your son is our son*  
*Your father is our father/your mother is our mother*

This form of the extended family relationships justifies the place and acceptability of *fisi* in the African communities. This means, for example that, in a case where a husband is seen to be sterile, and makes use of the services of the *fisi*; the *fisi* would become temporarily the husband of someone's wife without the real husband lodging a complaint with the village's chief because 'Your husband is our husband'. Further, this act of *fisi* as a form of Afro-communitarianism can be explained as an act of *ubuntu*-humanness because it intended to achieve solidarity and it involves an empathetic awareness of the other's condition and a sympathetic emotional reaction to this awareness. The actions are not merely beneficial but are believed to be a way to improve the other's state, but also are ones done consequent to certain motives, say, for the sake of making the other better off or even a better person psychologically. For example, it was also interesting that after Aniva's arrest, out of the hundred women he had sex with; none came forward to testify against him. Instead, he was tried for "harmful cultural practice" under section five of Malawi's Gender Equality Act, for having sex with new widows. Only two women testified against him after being dragged into courts.

According to Metz, to seek harmony or community with others is not merely the notion of doing whatever a majority of people in society want or of adhering to the norms of one's group, which are influential forms of relativism and communitarianism in the West. Instead, developing or respecting community (harmony) is an objectively desirable kind of interaction that should instead guide what majorities want or implement norms which are dominant. Metz [2007], however, clarified that this sketch of an Afro-communitarian moral perspective should not be taken to represent anthropologically the beliefs of Africans about the right way to live. It is, rather, a theoretical reconstruction of beliefs that are recurrent among many peoples in sub-Saharan Africa and particularly in southern Africa. However, Metz suggested that this Afro-communitarian principle, which prescribes prizing friendly relationships, should be attractive to a much wider audience. Metz pointed out that there are two recurrent themes in typical African discussion of the nature of community or harmony.

First, in Ubuntu ethics as given by Metz, there is the idea that one has a moral obligation to be concerned for the good of others, in terms of both one's sympathetic emotional reactions towards other people and one's helpful behaviour towards them. In short, one has a duty to exhibit solidarity with others. In this regard, the obligations of the *fisi* in an African community could be seen as being an act of solidarity with the community's needs and beliefs. This means the *fisi* is a concerned party of the plight of the widow who is regarded as unclean in the society. Thus, he is sympathetically connected to the widow and goes to help upon the endorsement of the village's elders. Second, there is the idea that one has a moral obligation to think of oneself as bound up with others, that is, to define oneself as a member of a common group and to

participate in its practices. One also has a duty to identify with others. Here it implies that the man who plays the roles of the *fisi* is not seen as doing a personal task, rather he is bound by the community to perform those roles. In other words, he is only a representative of his community and hence he does his designated work on behalf of the community.

In the same regard, Metz described community or harmony as the combination of both solidarity and identity. This means that every member of the community is expected to consider him or herself as an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all. Metz [2010] calls 'identity', a concept synonymous with *ubuntu*. This is a matter of being close, belonging and participating as well as, experiencing life bound up with others, and considering oneself a part of the group. On the other hand, one finds reference to being sympathetic, being committed to others, responding to others' needs, and acting for others' good. In this respect, harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group. Hence, as Gyeke [1998:16] also argued, the fundamental meaning of community is the sharing of an overall way of life, inspired by the notion of the 'common good'. In our situation, the 'common good' would mean the need to put members of the community, the widow who is regarded as unclean and is seen as outcast by the community into harmony with the rest.

Agreeing with Metz, Shutte [2001] noted that the extended family is probably the most common, and also the most fundamental expression of the African idea of community. The importance of this idea for ethics is that the family is something that is valued for its own sake. The community which is inclusive of the unclean widows is seen as a family. Hence, if anything bad happens to one person the whole community feels that it is sharing in the same plight. This is what it also meant by the common phrase in *ubuntu* ethics, which says 'a person is a person through other persons'. According to Metz, the interpretation of this phrase rooted in sub-Saharan ethical traditions, particularly those in southern Africa, and prima facie attractive as a basic moral primary principle. A person in the *ubuntu* worldview is the basis, centre and end of everything; all other things only make sense in relation to persons. Regardless of their social status, gender or race, persons are recognized, accepted, valued and respected for their own sake. Biko [1971], agrees with this position of a person when he said that a person is the cornerstone of society. Biko further noted that a person is valuable in himself or herself, not just his welfare, not his material well-being but just man himself with all his ramifications.

In African communities, anything that undermines, hurts, threatens and destroys human beings is not accommodated in this way of life but is frowned upon since it affects the very foundation of society: the human person. A person is not a thing or a number but something more valuable than these. Whether a person is known or not, it is expected that he or she should be accorded respect. Respect for a person, which is accompanied by acceptable good behaviour, is the very basis of the notion of *ubuntu*. This is evident in the way people relate, talk and show courtesy to each other. This stems from the fact that people are recognized and regarded as equals. Every individual in African society values being recognized and treated as an equal and with respect. This need for respect for persons becomes evident when one undermines or ill-treats another person. Others can intervene by simply asserting and reminding the perpetrator that the victim

is a person. If the perpetrator has a conscience, he or she will immediately refrain from such adverse actions. From this it is discernible that people are conscious of the fact that they have a common humanity, which has a certain dignity, integrity and value that needs to be acknowledged, respected and valued; and that no one is either superior or inferior in humanity. The acts of *fisi*, therefore are not seen to mean to cause harm or to threaten the life of the other person. This is because every person is treated with dignity. Hence, among the people that practice *fisi*, it is wrong to define *fisi* as an act of ill-will.

A human person is a person irrespective of his or her status in life. The importance of one's worth as a human being is always considered to be as important as another person's worth. *Ubuntu* is averse to things that are harmful to a human person. Its fertile ground is mostly found in respect and honour for other persons. What has been argued here so far, points to the need for mutual respect- what is important is not just the individual but the human worth of any individual. According to Biko [1971], Africans also believe in the inherent goodness of man. Man is to be celebrated for himself. Africans also regard their living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act to make them a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life.

A person constitutes the basis from which *ubuntu* can be developed and understood. A person is understood to be the basis of all ethical actions. For those people who do not see anything uniquely African in *ubuntu*, it may be because *ubuntu* is a cultural ethos, a spirituality, which is not necessarily better, or superior, or for that matter inferior to those of other people, but from which others can learn and improve their understanding of one another. In this regard *fisi* can be seen as a practice that is constitutive of *ubuntu* because it largely deals with the actor of *fisi* as a moral agent- a being compassionate towards the problems of others. Mkhize [2008] has argued that "personhood should be defined in relation to the community- a sense of community exists if people are mutually responsive to one another's needs. He further argues that one attains the complements associated with full or mature selfhood through participation in a community of similarly constituted selves- that to be a person is to belong and to participate". This kind of construction of *ubuntu* ethics of about what it is to commune or to live harmoniously with others, suggests two recurrent themes of 'identity' and 'solidarity' which Metz earlier developed. Augustine Shutte [2001 cited in Metz 2010: 30], one of the first professional philosophers to seriously engage with *ubuntu*, says that, 'our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human. And this means entering more and more deeply into community with others'. So here it means that the *fisi* aims to help the unclean widow to retain her full humanness and hence it can be argued that the act is not intended for personal fulfilment- it is not a selfish act.

The other aspect, in which Metz describes a positive relationship with others, namely, in strictly communal terms, is that one is not to positively relate to others fundamentally by giving them what they deserve or respecting individual rights grounded on consent. Instead, the proper way to relate to others, for one large part of sub-Saharan thinking, is to seek out community or to live in harmony with them [Mkhize 2008: 38-41]). In the same way, the *fisi* does not regard the

consent or the individual rights of the widow or the girls having their debut sex to be necessary because he regards his work as a communal service in which himself and his client have no say, apart from doing the will of the community. Here we should note that the adherence to acceptable behaviour patterns helps in the maintenance of fellowship, oneness and identity. Moreover, it points to the interdependence that exists among people. This is so because biological, socio-economic and cultural factors put some constraints on the autonomy of a person. In the Western view an autonomous person acts freely by definition. He acts freely only if he has good reasons for what he does. He has good reasons, only if he acts in his ultimate interests. His ultimate interests derive from what he essentially is. What he essentially is depends on what is essential to his being that particular person.

From the explanation above, one discovers a type of autonomy that is understood in an absolutist and almost exclusivist sense. In this sense, an autonomous person is completely independent, acts for his or her own interest and trusts his or her own judgment. In the context of *ubuntu*, on the other hand, one's autonomy is understood and practised in relation to the community; in that it is tied to the role the community has assigned to the individual. That *ubuntu* is strongly based on the collective. This will mean that the *fisi* is not independent- his practices are understood in relation to the community. This is why as we have seen above, others argued that it is wrong to blame Aniva as an individual, rather it is the community in which Aniva lived that should be blamed. Moreover, we are saying that an autonomous person acts for his or her own interests and trusts his or her own judgements. In the case of Aniva, it is clear that he did not act out of his own interest. Hence, if Aniva were to be judged fairly, he was not supposed to stand in the court of law alone but it was the whole community that was to be convicted. The *fisi*'s sexual roles are encouraged and motivated by the community and not the person as such. The cultural community encourages people to seek harmony with others and to be anti-egoistic seeking their own good without regard for self, or to the detriment of other persons and the community. Hence, *ubuntu* promotes the spirit that one should live for others; it further proves that all persons form a single person, not as parts form a whole, but as friends draw their life and character from the spirit of a common friend.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the African cultural communities that are resistant to stopping *fisi* and related practices, do so because they believe that the practices are done with good-will for the common good of the community by promoting harmony and welfare of the community. I have also argued that *ubuntu* as an Afro-communitarian philosophy is at the core of African life and hence any practice that manifests *ubuntu*- cannot be abandoned without sufficient reasons. I have found that practices that are associated with the ubuntu African ethos are seen as morally right even if the practice exposes them to the risk of HIV/AIDS infection. In this way, the people regard their culture as having socio-metaphysical moral value.

Nevertheless, I have acknowledged the fact that some of the African cultural practices such as *fisi* are risky and expose the people to HIV/AIDS infection. However, I have emphasized that it not easy to detach the people from their culture, particularly if the culture is seen as exhibiting *ubuntu*- done on good-will for the welfare of the community. As such, I have suggested that the anti-AIDS organisations should tread cautiously; engage with the people- learn their values and enter with them into a critical conversation on the value of their culture and the need to prevent themselves from contracting HIV/AIDS.

From the above argument we can conclude that when the human hyenas wear the mantle of darkness<sup>13</sup> quietly and routinely, in some African communities, the communities do not see them as coming to destroy, to kill or to deliberately spread the HIV. But they are seen by the people as involved in a mission of good-will and peace; their aim is to promote harmony, solidarity and to cleanse the communities of all factors that hinder the inner peace of the people. That's the *afisi* are the agents of *ubuntu*. Thus the case of Aniva above presents us with an opportunity in this age of HIV/AIDS, to initiate a critical conversation- the people's cultural rights vis-à-vis the response to HIV/AIDS. Further, recognising that Aniva's act led to the division of opinion even among Malawians themselves, the *fisi* affair provides a window to begin a serious enquiry on why people are not resistant to stopping the practice. The Aniva affair is thus bigger than what it appeared- as the reactions to the story by the international community depicted the silent struggle that is there between the intervention to fighting HIV/AIDS and the moral-metaphysical value of a people's culture. The mass anger that characterised the reactions to Aniva's affair, therefore, was in other words, the 'inevitable' cultural response to the disease in many parts of the sub-Saharan Africa. It would t appear that the international response to HIV/AIDS in this part of Africa includes a witch-hunting project of the people's culture [Chigozi and Ekechukwu 2015].

I now conclude this paper by clarifying and restating that this article is not claiming that African cultural practices such as *fisi* have no role in the spread of HIV/AIDS. Rather the article helps to open a critical conversation between the metaphysical value of cultural practices and what the HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns are demanding from the African culture. Here I mean to say that HIV/AIDS interventions are important but at the same time but they need to develop better approaches in fighting cultural practices such as *fisi* considering that the practices are seen as promoting *ubuntu*. However, we have seen that in the course of exhibiting *ubuntu*, Aniva was largely portrayed as a villain- a subject of fascination representing an evil culture- a naked figure and an actor in an episode of 'mass sexual scandal'. But that portrait, attractive as it may look, could be inaccurate, because the *fisi* culture was not seen as an agent of *ubuntu*. Hence, the anti-HIV/AIDS, should first appreciate how such practices are regarded in the African cultural communities before they develop approaches to fighting the practices.

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<sup>13</sup> Steve Chimombo, who was a Professor of English at Chancellor College of the University of Malawi, had from the 1990s published a series of fiction-novelettes in which the main theme was the elimination of the cultural practice of *fisi* in African societies. He published these series under the title, "The Hyena wears darkness. Chimombo through various characters, promoted the case against these cultural practices, arguing that they aid in spreading HIV/AIDS (Chimombo, 2006, pp. 62-63). While Chimombo had a strong case for the elimination of this *fisi* cultural practice, but as I have already argued, he missed and did not tackle the *ubuntu* aspect of the practice.

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