



## Human Dignity, Development and Democracy in Contemporary Africa

---

**Isaac Mutelo, PHD and Donald Kateguru, BA**

Beyond the Euphoria: Examining the Unfulfilled Promises of Independence in Africa and Pathways for Renewal in the Contemporary Era

---

**Mutelo Edema Philip, PhD and Malachy Igwilo, PhD**

Making Development Work: Philosophy and the Challenge of Relevance in Africa; the Imperatives of a Sustainable Philosophy

---

**Tawanda Mbewe, MA**

Ensuring Equitable Access to Reproductive Health and Assisted Reproduction for Women with Fertility Challenges: Towards a More Just and Health-Equitable Zimbabwe

---

**Mofolo Felix, MA and Telma Shiri, BA (Hons) ECD**

The Intersection Between Kantian Human Dignity and Ubuntu/Hunhu: A Critical Engagement with Oliver Sensen's Perspective

---

**Gaudencia Mudada, MA**

Gullible Legitimation of Poverty through Prophetism: The Case of Zimbabwe

**Physical Address:**

Domuni-Press, 1 Impasse Lacordaire, 31078 Toulouse Cedex 4, France

**Office in Africa:**

5 Leinster Road, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg, 3201, South Africa

**Postal Address:**

P.O. Box 100 150, Scottsville, 3209 KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

**Email:** JOCAP@domuni.eu

**Fax:** + 27 33 345 2246

**Tel:** +33(0) 5 31 61 35 15 (France), +27 33 345 2241 (Southern Africa)

**Publishing Director:** Marie Monnet,

Rector of Domuni Universitas

**Editor:** Dr. Isaac Mutelo,

Director of Quality Assurance

Arrupe Jesuit University, Harare, Zimbabwe (email: isaac.mutelo@aju.ac.zw)

**Editorial adviser:**

Professor Bernard Matolino,

University of KwaZulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

**General Administration:**

Moses Chanda, Dr. Isaac Mutelo and Guide Marambanyika

**Layout & Design:**

DOMUNI-PRESS (Caterina Erando)

**International Editorial Board:**

Professor Joseph C. A Agbakoba,  
University of Nigeria (Nigeria)

Professor Kwame Anthony Appiah,  
New York University (New York)

Professor Simon Beck,  
University of the Western Cape (South Africa)

Professor Philippe Denis,  
University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa)

Professor Barry Hallen,  
Director of Southern Crossroads Academic (United States of America)

Professor Bruce Janz,  
University of Central Florida (Florida)

Professor Dismas A. Masolo,  
University of Louisville (Kentucky)

Professor Bernard Matolino,  
University of KwaZulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Rev. Fr. Stanslaus Muyebe,  
Justice and Peace Promoter, Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (South Africa)

Rev. Fr. Myke Mwale,  
Provincial of the Dominican Vice Province of Southern Africa (South Africa)

Professor J. Obi Oguejiofor,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University (Nigeria)

Professor Mogobe Ramose,  
Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (South Africa)

*The distinguishing mark of this journal is its interest in the formulation and presentation of African philosophy in a contemporary form that directs the field into the future. The journal is interested in contributions that specifically link philosophy to the contemporary needs of Africa (from philosophy) as well as contributions that are imaginative in their attempt at shaping African philosophical discourse beyond affirmations of its existence. The journal is published three times a year and is a peer-to-peer review.*

*Vol. 6, No. 2, 2025  
Published by Domuni Press*



# Contents

## **Beyond the Euphoria: Examining the Unfulfilled Promises of Independence in Africa and Pathways for**

<b>Renewal in the Contemporary Era</b>	<b>8</b>
Abstract	8
Introduction	8
The Euphoria of Independence	9
Disillusionment after Independence	11
Addressing the Challenges	12
Conclusion	13
References	14

## **Making Development Work: Philosophy and the Challenge of Relevance in Africa; the Imperatives of a**

<b>Sustainable Philosophy</b>	<b>16</b>
Abstract	16
Introduction	16
Philosophy in Africa: The Journey so far	17
The Crisis of Development in Africa	19
African Philosophy as Sustainable Philosophy	21
The Imperatives of Sustainable Philosophy	23
Conclusion	24
References	25

## **Ensuring Equitable Access to Reproductive Health and Assisted Reproduction for Women with Fertility**

<b>Challenges: Towards a More Just and Health-Equitable Zimbabwe</b>	<b>26</b>
Abstract	26
Introduction	26
Women and Infertility in Zimbabwe	27
Reproductive Justice and the Zimbabwean Value System	28
The Concept of Motherhood in Zimbabwe	31
Conclusion	31
References	32

## **The Intersection Between Kantian Human Dignity and Ubuntu/Hunhu: A Critical Engagement with Oliver**

<b>Sensen's Perspective</b>	<b>34</b>
Abstract	34
Introduction	34
General understanding of the Kantian concept of dignity	35
Oliver Sensen's understanding of Human Dignity	37
Reflections on Oliver Sensen's Views	40
General Discourse of Ubuntu / Hunhu Worldview	41
Four Philosophical Approaches to Ubuntu as A Moral Theory	41
Sensen's Relational Dignity Meets Ubuntu: A Philosophical Dialogue	43
Sensen's Relational Dignity and African Ethics: Points of Convergence	44
Conclusion	44
References	46

## **Gullible Legitimation of Poverty through Prophetism: The Case of Zimbabwe**

Abstract	48
Introduction	48
Religion and Politics:	
The Interface	48
Political Violence and Elections	51
The Church's Response	52
Periphery Prophets	52
Prophets and Human Development	53
Prophetism and Democracy	53
Conclusion	55
References	56

# Beyond the Euphoria: Examining the Unfulfilled Promises of Independence in Africa and Pathways for Renewal in the Contemporary Era

**Isaac Mutelo, PhD**

Lecturer and Director of Quality Assurance/Research, Innovation and Industrialisation,  
Arrupe Jesuit University (Harare, Zimbabwe)

**Donald Kateguru, BA**

BTH Student, St Joseph's Theological Institute (Cedara, South Africa)

## Abstract

The attainment of independence across Africa from the 1950s onwards generated widespread euphoria, hope, and expectations for democratic governance, constitutionalism, economic transformation, and social progress. Drawing on historical and contemporary analyses, this paper examines why these expectations were largely unfulfilled in many post-independence African states. It revisits the independence euphoria, emphasising how nationalist movements envisioned political freedom, self-determination, and the establishment of accountable and democratic institutions. The paper also analyses the factors that undermined these aspirations, including institutional foundations, the adoption of constitutions without constitutionalism, authoritarian consolidation, corruption, ethnic tensions, and pervasive governance failures. While proposing pathways for renewal in the contemporary era, this paper argues that revitalising the original ideals of independence requires strengthening constitutionalism, promoting good governance and accountability, enhancing the notion of separation of powers, combating corruption, fostering inclusive socio-economic development, and deepening regional and international cooperation.

(Image credit:  
Keystone/Getty Images)

## Introduction

Euphoria of independence entails the high expectations, optimism and hope which citizens had during the decolonisation period when African countries were becoming independent and indigenous democratic governments were taking over power from colonial masters. However, the wave of decolonisation, which was accompanied by euphoria and hope for good democratic governance and constitutionalism from the 1950s onwards, was negated when most African leaders became authoritarians like their colonial masters by the 1960s. Examples from countries such as Zimbabwe, Zambia, Zaire (DRC), Rwanda, and So-

malia are employed to illustrate how democratic promises quickly gave way to repression, maladministration, economic decline, and conflict. Thus, the first part of this paper explores the euphoria of independence, whereas the second part examines why African countries have failed to meet the expectations of citizens. The paper notes that although promises of independence were significantly compromised, Africa's political, economic, and social transformation remains possible if reforms are guided by constitutional values, resilient and independent institutions, and collective regional commitment.



## The Euphoria of Independence

In pre-colonial Africa, independent African kingdoms and empires such as the Shona in Southern Africa, Shonghai in West Africa and the Ashanti Empire in Ghana were generally governed by Kings and Queens and their councils through centralised and pyramidal structures of authority [Sesay 2014]. They were also systems of governance, such as the Igbos in Eastern Nigeria and the Massai in Kenya, with well-organised administrative structures but a less centralised ruling elite. Thus, in the pre-colonial era, African societies were independent and governed themselves. Between the 19th and

20th centuries, European imperial powers conquered Africa, thereby subjecting Africans to their rule [Parker 2007]. Stephen Ocheni and Basil Nwankwo [2012:48] define colonialism as 'the direct and overall domination of one country by another based on state power being in the hands of a foreign power'. For example, when Britain colonised Nigeria between 1900 and 1960, it managed to politically dominate the country from different perspectives.

In countries such as Nigeria, Zaire and Sudan, colonialism brought 'disarticulation of African eco-

nomy, education, trade, market, transport and currency institution' [Ocheni & Nwankwo 2012:48]. Colonisers racially discriminated against black Africans, displaced them from their traditional lands and relied on them for cheap labour in colonial mines and plantations. In the words of Princewill Dimkpa [2015], 'Africans suffered from unfair taxation, cultural confusion, and expropriation of land, exploitation of labour and the loss of their mineral wealth to Europeans'. Due to the oppression, racial segregation, and the dehumanising conditions which black Africans were subjected to under colonial

rule, by the late 1940s, independence movements advocating for democratic rule and self-determination became stronger. Thus, the decolonisation period witnessed increased resistance against colonial rule in support of nationalism and independence. In some countries, such as Kenya, Algeria, Congo, and Angola, the decolonisation process involved violence, widespread arrests and detentions, and political turmoil and revolts.

Due to increased resistance and insistence on the need for change, colonial powers began to retreat and surrender power to African governments from the 1950s onwards. According to Roland Oliver and Anthony Atmore, when the then British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, was concluding his 1960 African tour, he delivered the famous ‘winds of change’ speech to the South African Parliament in Cape Town, saying:

**“We have seen the awakening of national consciousness in people who have for centuries lived in dependence on some other power...the wind of change is blowing through the continent, and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact.”**  
[Oliver & Atmore 2005:271]

For example, following riots and revolts against colonial rule, Morocco, Tunisia, and Sudan regained their independence in 1956. A year later, in 1957, Ghana attained its independence from colonial rule. Thus, between the 1950s and the 1960s, most African countries attained their independence.

However, the struggle against colonial rule and the eventual attainment of independence was generally associated with euphoria, renewed hope and expectation for genuine democratic governance and constitutionalism in African countries. As Sankalp Gurjar [1960] puts it, ‘as the wave of independence swept through the continent, it was widely believed that a new era of hope and optimism awaited the people of Africa.’ Economically, the hope was that African countries would be transformed into modern industrial economies to compete with the West, ‘programs, policies or activities that seek to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for a community’ [British Columbia 2024] would be implemented and that endemic challenges such as poverty, unemployment and inequalities would be resolved. In fact, the position of Africa on the international market was optimistic, with the prices of cash crops and minerals produced in Africa increasing by 1960.

Moreover, since most African states were quick to declare themselves “democratic” and promulgate constitutions, the hope was that they would build strong democratic institutions, promote plural politics, unity and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms. Furthermore, the hope was that the governments would uphold the essentials of constitutionalism such as popular sovereignty, the supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law, political democracy, representative limited government, separation of powers, police governed by law and judicial control and an independent judiciary in the process of limiting and restricting government power [Lawjure 2024]. Finally, the hope was also that indigenous governments would practice good governance through accountability and transparency strategies, adequate civil society participation, strict adherence to democratic principles and values, and the promotion of sustainable development. Most first African presidents, including Zambia’s Kenneth Kaunda, Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, and Malawi’s Hastings Banda, captured the euphoria, expectations and hope for a better Africa in their independence speeches.

## Disillusionment after Independence

Although independence was attached to hope and expectation for a better Africa, most democratic indigenous governments in countries such as Zambia, Sudan and the then Zaire failed to meet the expectations of citizens soon after independence. In fact, in some cases, the so-called democratic governments became even more oppressive and detached from the ordinary lives of the citizens than colonial masters. African governments ‘had inherited systems which they had fought hard to topple and change, only for them to now find them useful as tools of repression and oppression’ [Golooba-Mutebi 2021]. For example, Zimbabwe gained its independence in 1980 in the midst of euphoria and high expectations after a long period of violent encounters and resistance against British rule. At independence, former President Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) as the ruling party made the ‘promise of significant change, articulated in socialist language, in which the country would transform the structures inherited from colonialism and over a decade of UDI to improve living conditions for the majority population’ [Danse-reau 2000:151]. In less than three years, Robert Mugabe and his government began tolerating political corruption and exhibiting authoritarian practices. Twenty years later, in 2000, 80% of the population lived under the poverty datum line, increasing strikes and demonstrations reflected the dissatisfaction of the citizens, elections were being marked by violence and intimidation, and the very basic tenets of constitutionalism became blurred [Danse-reau 2000:151-152].

Similarly, instead of engaging in the process of democratisation and democratic consolidation, Kenneth Kaunda’s government in Zambia was characterised by unconstitutional and undemocratic elements such as one-party rule, corruption, assassinations and disappearances of political opponents, human rights abuses, and lack of respect for the rule of law [Mushingeh 1993:100-102]. Thus, African democracies failed to achieve the ambitious objectives and goals they set for themselves, which included ‘democratisation of politics and respect for civil liberties; fighting disease, poverty, and ignorance, which meant building functioning health and education systems and promoting prosperity; promoting national unity and ending all forms of marginalisation’ [Golooba-Mutebi 2021]. This demonstrates that the independence euphoria was short-lived due to the descent into authoritarianism and/or dictatorship in countries such as Zaire, one-party regimes in countries such as Zambia and Malawi, ethnic divisions in countries such as Ruanda and Burundi and endemic civil wars in countries such as Somalia, which became prevalent mainly between the 1960s and 1980s.

Having explored how the euphoria of independence in most African countries was short-lived, the main question concerns why post-colonial governments failed to meet the expectations of citizens. Several reasons can be cited on why there has been dichotomy between the independence euphoria and the disappointing outcome. Firstly, the failure of post-colonial governments to meet the expectations of citizens can be partly attributed to the legacy of colonialism itself. This is partly

because indigenous governments inherited political and socio-economic systems and dynamics that affected the process of democratic consolidation, governance and development. For example, in his article, African Economic Development and Colonial Legacies, Gareth Austin [2010:11] argues that ‘colonial rule and African actions during the colonial period affected the resources and institutional settings for subsequent economic development south of the Sahara’. Because colonialism did not promote political development, transparency and accountability and respect for the rights of the indigenous people, the same trend seems to have been somehow adopted by some post-independence governments. Moreover, post-independence governments in countries such as Zaire, Sudan and Ruanda inherited weak institutions, including a lack of plural politics and undemocratic elements, which then enabled them to easily consolidate their power.

Secondly, post-independence governments adopted constitutions without paying attention to constitutionalism. In his article entitled Constitution without Constitutionalism: Interrogating the African Experience, Aborisade Olasunkanmi [2018:272] argue that most post-colonial countries in Africa had constitutions which were devoid of constitutionalism because although they successfully drafted constitutions, they did not practically apply the basic features of constitutionalism, such as respect for the rule of law, separation of powers, and respect for fundamental rights, among others. In fact, ‘the so-called constitutions were instruments for terrorising the poor and the weak, legitima-

## Addressing the Challenges

ting corruption and privatisation of the state, and rationalising the suffocating of civil society and subservient relationships with imperialism' [Olasunkanmi 2018:272]. Through their inability to apply the basic tenets of constitutionalism, African leaders such as Kenneth Kaunda, Mobutu Sese Seko and Hastings Kamuzu Banda failed to meet the expectations of citizens by making the euphoria of independence a reality.

Moreover, the inability to create strong democratic institutions and implement good governance strategies led to maladministration, corruption, and a lack of transparency and accountability, which, in the long term, eroded public trust in these governments. For example, political instability and ethnic conflicts affected development and the consolidation of democracy in countries such as Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan. Similarly, in the Rwandan Genocide, 'the attempted extermination of the Tutsi by the Hutu people resulted in 800,000 deaths, the majority being Tutsi' [Scholar Blog]. In such countries, the inability of post-independence governments to instil unity, promote integration and the common good through social, economic and political transformation eroded the citizens' independence euphoria.

Having discussed why the euphoria of independence in most African countries has failed to meet the expectations of citizens, it is important to examine how this can be addressed today. Firstly, it is important for African countries to consistently pursue the original goals and objectives which in the first place instilled the euphoria of independence, which include self-reliance and robust economic development programmes and strategies [Golooba-Mutebi 2021]. At independence, several presidents insisted on the need for Africa to embark on initiatives and governance strategies that would promote sustainable economic development and self-reliance. For example, Zimbabwe has excellent human capital and abundant natural and mineral resources, which, when properly managed, can lead to the country's development and economic transformation. However, the need for self-reliance and robust economic changes requires good governance. The United Nations, the African Union and other regional and international institutions have indicated that good governance is crucial for development and social, economic and political transformation in Africa.

For example, it is poor governance that led to the economic crisis in Zimbabwe in 2008. As Kłosowicz [2009] has argued, 'in so-called dysfunctional states, bad governance can damage an already weak country's economy.' The same observation was made by Nobel Laureate Chinua Achebe, who, with reference to Nigeria, 'The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate

or water or air or anything else' [Mail and Guardian 2020]. As a way of improving governance in Africa, current governments might have to make institutions such as the judiciary that are vital for good governance more effective, enhance transparency and accountability, encourage plural politics and active involvement of the public in decision-making processes, and enforce inclusive governance by fighting against inequalities and poverty.

Thirdly, there is a need for political leaders in Africa to ensure that their political systems meet the standards of constitutionalism so that the constitution as the higher law may practically establish and limit government power, thereby promoting and protecting fundamental rights and freedoms. The inability of most African countries to adhere to the tenets of constitutionalism has made Africa a theatre of massive human rights abuses, crimes against humanity, genocide, and the den of oppressive and authoritarian regimes. Thus, there is a need to deal with the challenges by adhering to constitutional principles and values in Africa through strengthening constitutional frameworks and key democratic institutions, guaranteeing judicial independence, and creating an environment in which the media and civil society can operate freely, among others. As African countries move towards a constitution with constitutionalism, 'the government and its agencies should take action on reported cases of acts of indiscipline, corrupt government officials, political fanaticism, lack of concern for people's welfare, conflicting rules and regulations and poor management of resources' [Olasunkanmi 2018].

## Conclusion

This paper explored the euphoria of independence in Africa, why African countries have failed to meet the expectations of citizens and ways in which this can be addressed today. Apparently, the independence euphoria which accompanied the period of decolonisation, when African countries were attaining their independence, did not last because the indigenous governments did not practice good governance and constitutionalism, and that development was never fully realised. Moving forward, there is a need to address these challenges while ensuring regional and international cooperation. Resolving the challenges will accelerate the economic, political, and social transformation of Africa while addressing other issues such as political instability, ethnic conflicts and impunity.

Finally, there is a need for regional and international cooperation. For example, one wonders why Southern African countries such as Botswana and South Africa are undergoing development, whereas Zimbabwe and Malawi have remained stagnant. Similarly, one wonders why Nigeria's GDP amounted to nearly \$477.4 billion in 2022, whereas Malawi reached only \$13.16 billion in 2022, which the Malawian government actually regarded as a milestone [Réaction Africanews 2024]. Clearly, there is a need for countries to work together and promote coope-

ration through regional blocs such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), continental bodies such as the African Union and international bodies such as the United Nations. For example, strengthening regional integration, cooperation and collaboration among SADC countries can facilitate mutual development, assist in the consolidation of democracy, and monitor constitutionalism through effective democratisation processes in the region.

Rosemary Anieze, wearing the sash of "Miss Independence," is popular as she parades outside the National Stadium in Lagos, Sept. 28, 1960, after winning the title from 15 other contestants in Nigeria. © AP Photo



## References

- ABDULLAH, T., 2023. Zimbabwe's Wealth: Opportunities and Future Potential, URL = <https://www.ankasam.org/zimbabwe-wealth-opportunities-and-future-potential/?lang=en>
- ABORISADE, O., 2018. Constitution without constitutionalism: Interrogating the African experience, URL = <https://medcraveonline.com/AHOAJ/constitution-without-constitutionalism-interrogating-the-africa-experience.html>
- AUSTIN, G., 2010. African Economic Development and Colonial Legacies, *International Development Policy / Revue internationale de politique de développement* 1: 11–32.
- BRITISH COLUMBIA, 2024. What is Economic Development?, URL = <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/employment-business/economic-development/plan-and-measure/economic-development-basics>
- DANSEREAU, S., 2000. Zimbabwe: Independence and beyond / Introduction: Le Zimbabwe: au-delà de l'indépendance, *Labour, Capital and Society / Travail, capital et société* 33(2): 151–161.
- DIMKPA, P., 2015. Colonialism, Independence and Underdevelopment in Africa: The Pre-eminence and Blame Game, URL = <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1386410/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- GOLOOBA-MUTEBI, F., 2021. Reflections on African Liberation Movements, URL = <https://panafricanreview.com/reflections-on-african-liberation-movements/>
- GURJAR, S., (Year not provided). 1960 and African Independence: Revisiting the 'Year of Africa', URL = [https://icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls\\_id=4538&lid=3405](https://icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=4538&lid=3405)
- KŁOSOWICZ, R., 2018. The problem of bad governance as a determinant of state dysfunctionality in Sub-Saharan Africa, *Politeja* 15(5/56): 9–22.
- LAWJURE, 2024. Constitutionalism and its features, URL = <https://www.lawjure.com/constitutionalism-its-features/>
- MAIL & GUARDIAN, 2020. A failure of leadership in Nigeria, URL = <https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/opinion/2020-10-23-editorial-a-failure-of-leadership-in-nigeria/>
- MUSHINGEH, C., 1993. The evolution of one-party rule in Zambia, 1964–1972, *Transafrican Journal of History* 22: 100–121.
- OCHENI, S. and NWANKWO, B. C., 2012. Analysis of colonialism and its impact in Africa, *Cross-Cultural Communication* 8(3): 46–54.
- OLIVER, R. and ATMORE A., 2005. *Africa since 1800*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PARKER, J. and RATHBONE R., 2007. *African History: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- RÉDACTION AFRICANEWS, 2024. Here are the richest countries in Africa, URL = <https://www.africanews.com/2023/12/08/here-are-the-richest-countries-in-africa/>
- SCHOLAR BLOG. Violence in Twentieth Century Africa: Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict, URL = <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/violenceinafrica/wiki-round-2-causes-of-conflict/ethnicity-and-ethnic-conflict/>
- SESAY, A., 2014. African governance systems in the pre- and post-independence periods: Enduring lessons and opportunities for youth in Africa (Discussion paper), Mandela Institute for Development Studies. [https://www.minds-africa.org/Downloads/Youth%20Dialogue%202014%20Research%20papers/4\\_Prof%20Sesay\\_Governance%20Systems%20in%20Africa\\_Final%20Report.pdf](https://www.minds-africa.org/Downloads/Youth%20Dialogue%202014%20Research%20papers/4_Prof%20Sesay_Governance%20Systems%20in%20Africa_Final%20Report.pdf)



# Making Development Work: Philosophy and the Challenge of Relevance in Africa; the Imperatives of a Sustainable Philosophy

**Edema Philip, PhD**

Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Augustine University (Lagos State, Nigeria)

**Malachy Igwilo, PhD**

Bells University of Technology (Ogun State, Nigeria)

## Abstract

African philosophy, having emerged from the shackles of a debilitating debate as to the fact very fact of its existence, needs to make itself relevant to the current predicaments of the continent. There is now an urgent need for African philosophers to distance themselves from the blame game syndrome (blaming the white man for all African problems) and focus on a thoroughgoing philosophy that will contribute concretely to the search for the solution of Africa's many problems. Blaming the white man deprives Africa of the mental and intellectual energy required for dealing with the task at hand, while making philosophy appear irrelevant on the continent. This paper, using the philosophical tools of analysis and criticism, submits that African philosophers need to do more to remain relevant in the current search for development in Africa, rather than expending energy on fleeting pursuits such as blaming the white man. It is the position of this paper that African philosophy should be transformed to become a sustainable philosophy. A sustainable philosophy is a philosophy that will deal with current problems while keeping an eye on the protection of a possible future generation. It is only when we philosophise in a sustainable way that African philosophy becomes relevant in the development debate on the continent.

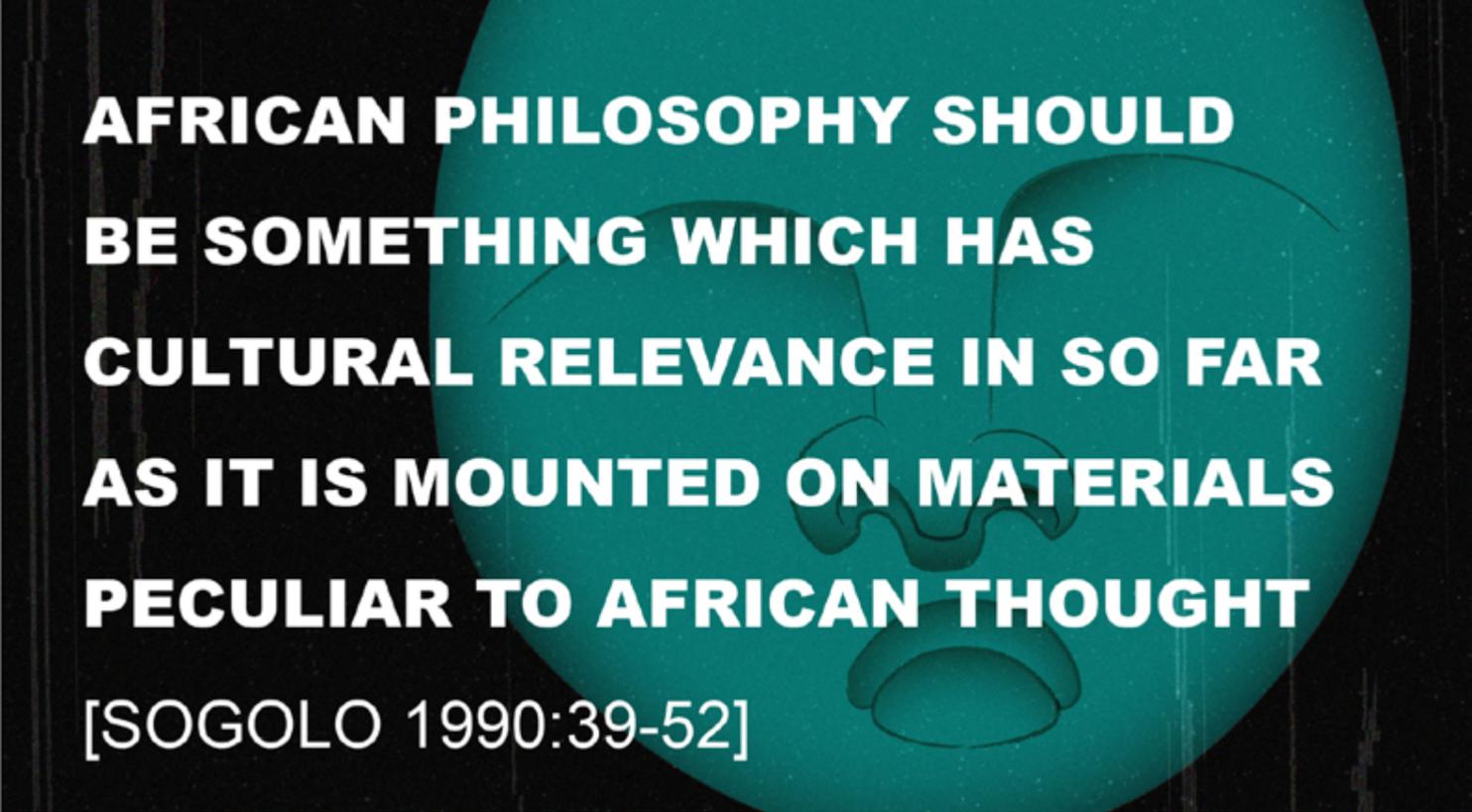
**Keywords:** Africa, Development, Philosophy, Relevance, Sustainable

## Introduction

Philosophy in Africa has come a long way. There is no doubt that we have recovered from that very taxing debate as to what African philosophy is. If we accept that we in this part of the world can indeed philosophise, then we can stand up to show the fruits of this philosophising. The best place to show this is in formulating sustainable principles that we can use to salvage the African predicament. There is no doubt in our minds today that for us to be relevant, we must engage society and make life better than it is now. Time has

passed when philosophy in Africa was limited to an escape to the ivory tower, where we go to split hairs and engage in musings that will ensure our promotion in our various academic careers. Yes, those are necessary, but we can no longer limit ourselves to that. When we look at philosophical heritage elsewhere, especially in the West, we see that indeed philosophy is the most viable tool for development. In the West, the history of philosophy we read has always been about how to make life better by understanding the

meaning of reality and the way it affects us. At the beginning of Western philosophy, Thales posited that the stuff of reality is water. He was philosophising from his environment. Others followed in his footsteps to posit other ideas. But most importantly, they were all philosophising from their environment for a better understanding and for the betterment of life. The time has come for practitioners of philosophy in Africa to philosophise from their environment and change it through a sustainable philosophy.



**AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY SHOULD  
BE SOMETHING WHICH HAS  
CULTURAL RELEVANCE IN SO FAR  
AS IT IS MOUNTED ON MATERIALS  
PECULIAR TO AFRICAN THOUGHT**  
[SOGOLO 1990:39-52]

## Philosophy in Africa: The Journey so far

It has indeed become a very large area of discourse to delve into the debate about the manner of philosophy in Africa. We have been shocked and sometimes given our nod to the trends of the debate concerning philosophy in Africa. If you are trained in the West and are in Bodunrin's camp, that is the camp that rejects ethno-philosophy, you will most likely suggest that there is yet no such thing as African philosophy since the world views we call philosophy are not critical enough for us to term them philosophical rumination [Bodunrin 1981:161-179]. If you are in the other camp, the camp that is for ethno-philosophy, which Godwin Sogolo is sympathetic with when he said that 'African philosophy should be something which has cultural relevance in so far as it is mounted on materials peculiar to African thought [Sogolo 1990:39-52].

Its preliminary stage may be some descriptive accounts of the raw ingredients of thoughts, beliefs, folk wisdom, worldviews, etc,

which, though necessary, are no more than rudiments yielding philosophical questions. Such questions may bear relation to, but are not lifted from, other philosophical traditions. It is, therefore, an orientation that puts one foot ahead of ethno philosophy and the other beside professionalism by way of domestication; then you are indeed participating in African philosophy, or you are participating in philosophy in Africa. The distinction I make here may easily rekindle the old debate. Is it African philosophy or is it philosophy in Africa? Whichever way you look at it, both can suffice. If you think you are an African philosopher, then you must agree that those defining characteristics of philosophy, viz, criticality, systematicity, logicity, argumentation, depth, must be present in all you do by way of thinking or writing. The same goes for if you say that you are merely doing philosophy in Africa. We must all bear in mind that we are all engaged in some philosophy, full stop. It is the realisation of this that has

increasingly defined, permit me, African philosophy. People have already gone beyond these trappings of self-definition and are now facing the real task at hand. Some have even chronicled the history of African philosophy. For instance, Oguejiofor has insisted that philosophy has been on in Africa even when the self-defining debates were going on [Oguejiofor 2006:1]. If this is the case, then we can firmly establish a historiography of African philosophy. This means that we are already accumulating defining ideas that shape the way we live. The most striking thing to note is that philosophy arises in wonder everywhere. In the West, where we all get our backbone from, this appeal to wonder was most aptly represented in Thales, Anaximenes and Anaximander and other pre-Socratic philosophers.

Thales of Ionia, for instance, thought that the substance from which every reality is made is water. He must have been influenced by the fact that Asia Minor is

surrounded by a large water body, and this got him thinking. Although we cannot know what other things lead to his conclusions, the presence of water is instructive. This kind of thinking may not be elicited in someone living in the Sahara Desert. A look at the whole history of philosophy will show that there are mostly environmental factors inherent in the way each philosopher philosophises and in the kind of change he wishes to see, both at the level of solving existential problems or seeking meaning in the many concepts that arise in life. In the same vein, African worldviews and environment are enough to start wonderment in Africans and elicit some form of desire for change, both at the level of solving existential problems and clarifying meanings. There are now many works that point to this. For instance, Pieter Boele van Hensbrock's book, *Political Discourses in African Thought: 1860 to the Present*, not only showed the trajectories of thought that permeates African life, it shows how these thoughts have translated into concrete understanding of the way life is led in Africa while departing from the usual misunderstanding of African political philosophy as the thoughts of African nationalist leaders [Hensbrock 1999:22]. Also, the book *African Philosophy down the Ages* by Francis Ogunmodede further exposed the profound presence of African philosophical thoughts in all aspects of life in Africa [Ogunmodede 2004:5].

The point this paper is making is that 'African philosophers, therefore, like their western counterparts, are in the best tradition of Plato see philosophy as a way of

life and not some fleeting preoccupation' [Oguiejofofor 2006:2]. This way of life is defined by the fact that we are the least developed in the world in terms of the human condition. There are more AIDS related deaths than anywhere else, there is starvation going on in many lands, renowned economic principles are not working here, we have one of the most pervasive cultures of corruption, we respect human life the least, we are the most that is bogged down with supernaturalism, we are the most that grapples with unnecessary wars and many other evils. The philosopher in this situation is particularly on an endless quest. The philosopher asks herself pertinent questions. How come my philosophising has not been able to formulate a theoretical framework for the assuaging of these mammoth problems? Why is philosophy still barely known in academia? Why hasn't philosophy informed governance in Africa? These questions are definitely begging for answers since there ought to be concrete fruits of philosophy wherever it is claimed to be practised. We see evidence of philosophical practice in the West. Throughout their history of thought, it is philosophy that is always there to provide the necessary benchmark for discourse and development. What then is African philosophy doing to position itself for this kind of task? If the present crop of philosophers in Africa abandons the task of philosophising to change the African situation, philosophy will remain irrelevant on the continent. The philosophers on this continent must show how serious he is by contributing their intellectual capital in the search for development on the continent.

## The Crisis of Development in Africa

'The "development" obituary has been written, if not already read. The valorisation of international development is today justifiably replaced with the pillorization of so-called development. In fact, it does not require any great sense of intellectual imagination to accede that international development, as we have all come to know and understand, has met with disappointment in Africa. Today, the euphoria of international development has worn thin in the minds of many local people [Dei 1998:335]. We hear all the time that governments are making an effort to bring development home to us. We see international financial institutions budget and wire money to Africa for development purposes, yet we have all been disappointed by how this has paid off. We have fared badly in almost all aspects of development. In the midst of this, there is still doom spelt out by new economic figures coming out from the continent. African governments themselves have become impatient with themselves in the midst of the lack of progress that is seen everywhere in Africa. They have gathered many times to create avenues for solutions to the problems. But the more they create avenues for solution, the more they discover that it is never working in the real sense of the word, despite the rhetoric to the contrary. According to Claude Ake, all this bickering and disputes concerning development in Africa create the impression that development has failed in Africa.

Ake insisted that the talk that development has failed in Africa is misleading. The correct thing is that development has never been on the agenda in the first place [Ake 1995:1]. If we take this seriously, we could see that Ake

is indeed correct in suggesting such. Otherwise, how could development work in the presence of the rot that has become our way of life? Economists have submitted that one of the driving forces of development is human capital [Schultz 1961; Denison 1962:1-12]. But in Africa, our human capital remains at a very minimal level, and yet these same economists, especially those at the international financial institutions, pump in money with the view to achieving development on the continent. One wonders, what human capital will pilot such monies for development? The state of the universities where we hope to get the human capital from has become a huge exercise in deception. In Nigeria, for instance, the universities are so much decayed that intellectuals now engage in various religious fundamentalism. Many have chosen the pulpit in favour of the academy. The government have no way of monitoring what is going on the ground, even though it releases money to finance this decay. The National University Commission of Nigeria, established to have an oversight on the universities, have become a place where fantasy plays a huge part in national development. It is important to note that members of this commission are academics who are expected to think better than the politicians in Abuja. Why are they merely fantasising?

On another note, African economic conditions are traceable to negative globalisation. Our equation in the international market is not something that can bring hope to this suffering continent. We are not able to export much to the world. But the world can export to Africa and even dump in Africa. According to Gerry Helleiner,

an economic analyst, primarily from the World Bank but also including some from the UN's Economic Commission for Africa and the independent African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), he dared to ask: 'Can Africa Claim the 21st Century?' While they laid out a formidable array of requirements that might make it possible to answer 'yes,' they certainly did not answer 'no' [Helleiner 2002:531]. This seems to show that Africa is on everyone's agenda, but no one is willing to go the whole hog to change the continent. Helleiner again suggested that 'modest improvements in market access for African exports in Europe and North America have materialised, but Africans' prime concerns about the international trading machinery were peremptorily brushed aside in the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) Doha meeting in November 2001 and thereafter' [Helleiner 2002:538]. This drives the point home further that there is an urge to debate Africa in the international arena. People need to be seen to show compassion for Africa in the midst of this gloom, but no one will participate in the serious, muddy business of getting things done the right way. What has increasingly characterised African debate is quick-fix solutions that will arise and fall as if that is what the problem is. Look at the disgrace that has become NEPAD. 'Despite much positive hype in some G8 capitals (not including Washington), it does not now look like it is going anywhere very significant in dealing with the extent of Africa's current problems' [Helleiner 2002:542]. NEPAD has come to represent the absentmindedness that characterises the handling of African economies. The World

Bank, for instance, does not have a deep and proactive engagement in Africa. Its activities remain parochially peripheral. This is seen in the analysis it gives to various projects and how it releases money to corrupt regimes and rogue regimes to create the impression of working very hard for the economy. Despite this, the African governments are tied to listening to them even though the Bank's decisions are usually reached without adequate consultation with all the interested parties [Riddell 1995:262].

All these seem to support Ake's position that development is never on the agenda; otherwise, if it were, why all this foot-dragging

concerning Africa? Many other aspects of development are not really dependent on what other people can do for Africa or what the world thinks about Africa. These other aspects depend on the worldviews that are African and that shape the general lifestyles of Africans. This brings the cultural dimension of development to focus. There is a clear connection between the cultural system of Africa and development. African culture has not been fine-tuned to better face the present predicament on the continent. This means that the indigenous attitudes should be worked on for the better. According to Ake again, 'building on the indigenous is the necessary condition for the self-reliant de-

velopment to which there is now no alternative' [Ake 1993:19]. If this is the case, then our culture will have to come into focus since there are many aspects of our culture that have indeed made it impossible to pursue development. For instance, Africans are prone to supernaturalism, and we see this in their many utterances concerning God and other discarnate entities. This in itself predisposes us towards a life of abandonment to some supernatural expectation. Christianity has become one of the most visible religions in Africa and has also contributed to the abandonment of development values among Africans. Apart from supernaturalism, there is an onslaught of Western entertainment stre-

aming into Africa, corrupting our youth. Take football, for instance. The level of mental activity that goes on among the young people of Nigeria, as it concerns football news, is alarming to say the least. School children have abandoned the memorisation of mathematical formulae, the accumulation of information in literature and the knowledge of science in favour of memorising the names of all the footballers playing in Europe and their status in the general FIFA rating. This leaves much to be desired. If this football craze continues to define our culture, then we will have nothing to complain about when we have no energy left to tackle more serious development problems. Those who claim to be friends of Africa are watching from the sidelines and are doing nothing to bring the youth back on the track of personal development, instead of being mere spectators of Western pastime.

There are many things that are contributing to the development crises of Africa. Like we have pointed out, they include economic, intellectual, social and cultural. But what are we going to do to salvage the situation? Many people have suggested that we should liberalise our economies to stimulate change. But such changes must come when we have properly equipped people to pilot the change. There has also been advice about modernisation, which means, among other things, reshaping our culture and lifestyle to suit the temper in today's world. This too has some flaws. How can we modernise when moder-

nisation has continued to mean westernisation? We know that westernisation will simply destroy our unique sense of being. In the midst of all this confusion, this crisis of development, Philosophy must take its rightful position to tackle the present problem in order to be relevant. We need to establish this as a fact since philosophy has the critical tool to move society forward.

This is important as Hannah Arendt said that important pursuits like this will provide us 'some assurance that our deeds of today will not disappear into thin air, but rather like the strong permanent wall of a city, the polis, our heroic deeds will have its day in court, to be remembered, recounted and celebrated by those yet unborn' [Arendt 1958: 197-198]. To abandon this task of searching for a solution to the present human suffering in Africa will be to abandon our call, thereby limiting philosophy to 'mere mental flexing'. Such philosophising is not tenable in the present situation in Africa. The tendency for African philosophers to escape to academia to split heads over irrelevant philosophical debate is clear and present, since there are factors that have militated against serious intellectual pursuits on the African continent. Supernaturalism, authoritarianism, lack of hope in human reason and capability are some of the factors that can discourage African philosophers from giving up hope for change and retreat to the university in search of solace and academic titles. This is not to talk of the fact that

philosophy in Africa is not taken seriously since, according to Udo Etuk, the recent sentiment concerning philosophy is that there is a need 'to clothe, feed, house and provide medical care for our teeming populations first, and then people who want to philosophise can do so. So, the priority in the area of education is not for people who will split hairs over words and concepts and theorise about lofty ideals-the popular image of the philosopher-but for the training of agriculturalists, technicians, doctors, engineers and others who can contribute much more tangibly to the development process' [Etuk 1987:29].

In the face of this, African philosophers can emphatically make themselves known by philosophising sustainably. A sustainable philosophy is a philosophy that puts the present into concrete consideration while establishing firm stances for the future. In other words, sustainable philosophy should be used to provide the theoretical framework for the urgent development needs of Africa. Sustainable philosophy is possible when we look brilliantly at the historical landscape of Western philosophy. We could see from this brilliant look that the whole developmental history of the West arises from its philosophical enterprise. Be it technology, science, arts, music, or other life forms, all could be traced to one philosophical idea or another. This kind of thinking can surely be replicated in Africa, especially now that the tools for this are readily available. **African Philosophy as Su-**



A Busy Street in Lagos, Nigeria  
Photo by Muhammad-Taha Ibrahim on Unsplash

## Stainable Philosophy

African philosophy, having emerged from the debilitating debate concerning its very existence, can now carve a niche for itself. This debate started in the first place when the racist philosophy of Hegel and Levy Bruhl, and others, motivated some scholars into making an academic career out of the falsehood that Africans do not have a philosophy. However, many contemporary African scholars have repeatedly debunked such claims by attesting to the existence of African philosophy. For instance, according to G. Salemohamed, while responding to the accusation by Bodunrin [1981:170] that ‘there is one universal philosophy as seen in the west and African cultures have no philosophical content, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and continental philosophers writing today, for whom philosophy is metaphysics, European, ultimately Greek and even founded in the Greek language, would agree with him that autochthonous African thought-systems are not philosophical. They would not agree with him as to the criteria he advances for judging whether something is philosophical or not. Nor would they, by virtue of the definition they give to philosophy (European, etc.), agree with the characteristics he assigns to it-e.g., that philosophical ideas are relevant to all men. Some would even argue that in purporting to be of universal relevance, (Western) philosophy is a sub-class of ideology and myth, both these being defined restrictively as the universalisation of what is particular-particular, that is, to a culture’ [Salemohamed 1983: 535]. If this is the case, African philosophy must be on the same status as Western philosophy. In the same vein, V. Mudimbe submits that African philo-

sophy is already very alive and its trajectories are already seen in the history of human thought [Mudimbe 1983:222].

If there is an established African philosophy, its concrete benefits ought to be manifest in the human activities in Africa. It ought to define our various approaches to life and provide us with the critical tool for assuaging problems in Africa. Following this, conceptualising African philosophy as sustainable philosophy becomes an imperative since such philosophy can provide the critical and theoretical framework for the development challenges facing Africa. It is only through this way can African philosophy be most relevant. Seeking such a philosophy is what makes this paper worthwhile. The central thesis of the study is that the present state of African philosophy is not adequate for the development challenges facing the continent. However, a brief clarification of the concept of African philosophy will be appropriate here. African philosophy is here understood as the body of thought that is represented in the various scholars writing on the continent of Africa. Many of them are not even on the continent itself but are in the Diaspora, in which case their work is now part of what is called Africana studies in the various universities of the world, especially the United States. African philosophy also includes those components that are found in ethno-philosophy as it is seen in Africa. It is believed in this work that philosophy is first and foremost ethno-philosophy before it moves on from there to a more profound representation of philosophy [Oraegunam 2006:6].

However, a generally acceptable definition of African philosophy is not possible, just as in Western philosophy, as there are as many definitions as there are African philosophers. But African philosophy has the critical, analytical, systematic, and conceptual contents seen in Western philosophy. The present work defines it, though, as the body of thought that represents the African worldview, a worldview that is peculiar to Africans, given their unique position in life. This position may be defined as their black skin (black blood), geography, mentality, religious worldviews, African ancestry, and their history. This establishes an epistemic privilege for the African, placing him in a position to view reality differently from the rest of the world.

This African philosophy has been mortgaged in many respects in the analysis of the ‘blame theory’. The blame theory centres on the blaming of all African woes on the African cultural contact with a corrupting Western culture. The white man, with his disease, religion, decadent and lopsided science, and immoralities, has made the African depart from his primordial position in search of the fleeting fancy of trying to be the white man. This has created an ontological mediocrity. We are neither Africans anymore nor whites. A monster has been created as ugly as Fanon’s white mask-black skin. Analysis of this has permeated many works of African philosophy without seeking to return Africa to her honour.

This study, with the benefit of hindsight on the effects of Western philosophy on Western development, submits that concrete steps need to be taken to help

## The Imperatives of Sustainable Philosophy

bring about a graceful human existence in Africa. This philosophy equipped for has been termed sustainable philosophy. It is sustainable because it is not only preoccupied with the present problems of poverty, dehumanization, injustice, civil wars, environmental degradation, governmental irresponsibility, corrupting religious values, faulty education, emotionalism, international hypocrisy, it is also preoccupied with the present wildcat mining, deforestation, water poisoning, desecration of farm lands, adoption of western children-hatred that is devastating Africa. These are both present and future problems that not only affect Africa now, but also compromise the prospects of a future generation.

Sustainable philosophy uses the tools available to philosophy (analysis, criticism, systematic thinking, and logic) to look at the peculiar nature of Africa to provide alternative ways of thinking that will advance the human condition in Africa. These alternative ways must include, open and critical education that sharpens the intellect better situating it for the common good, education with the indigenous scientific thinking, respect for the capability of the human person, establishment of alternative governance models for Africa different from the corrupting colonial legacies, recovery of the African identity on the issues of morality, religion and family, and many other elements. It is only when we adopt such a sustainable philosophy that we will better position ourselves to occupy a rightful position in the committee of nations.

Having said all of this, it is important to, in fact, move ahead to philosophise sustainably. It is believed that with a sustainable philosophy in place in Africa, the numerous well-thought-out development programs in Africa will start to yield fruit. ‘Philosophy is usually thought of primarily as a doctrinal or intellectual or verbal construct - an inclusive or architectonic structure of thought and expression, formulated and defended by schools and successions of schools in controversial opposition. That structure of rigour and precision in thought and expression usually has little connection with philosophy conceived as an order and quality of individual or communal life’ [Mckeeon 1981:419]. It is time we make this connection by merging this critical enterprise with making life better. We have to conceive of philosophy that is centred on man as the full beneficiary. This portends humanism, a humanism that is based on an understanding that human nature is multifaceted and therefore should be taken as a whole in order to make it work for man. We can no longer see development as a one-sided economic and material enterprise; rather, we must see it as a collection of human consciousness.

Based on this, the call for a sustainable philosophy acquires integral clarity when we consider two contemporary trajectories that demonstrate how philosophy can become a practical instrument for Africa’s regeneration and development. The first is the *Ubuntu* paradigm, the second, the new orientation of *African eco-ethics*. Both reveal the possibility of transforming metaphysical reflection into cultural praxis, thereby situating philosophy at the centre

of human and ecological renewal. *Ubuntu*, which holds that “a person is a person through other persons,” has evolved from a moral aphorism into a philosophical system of relational sustainability. It conceives of the human being not as an isolated substance but as a node within a web of communal existence. In this sense, Ubuntu offers an ontological grammar of interdependence that directly resists the atomistic subjectivity bequeathed by Western modernity. Recent African philosophers have deepened this interpretation, showing that Ubuntu provides a holistic foundation for sustainable development because it fuses social, moral, and ecological equilibrium within a single moral horizon [Ewuoso & Hall 2021:111; Metz 2022:87]. This insight is not confined to theory. It has found expression in reformist experiments in governance and community education across the continent. In South Africa and Kenya, Ubuntu-inspired ethics are being invoked to reconstruct postcolonial patterns of leadership and participatory citizenship, where human dignity and communal solidarity are taken as criteria of policy [Moekelsi 2023:5]. Through these initiatives, sustainability is no longer a technical slogan managed by bureaucrats but a living moral consciousness that obliges the community to preserve itself and its environment. Ubuntu thus becomes a sustainable philosophy because it links self-realisation with collective flourishing, turning relational existence into a moral infrastructure for enduring development.

A complementary current of sustainable philosophy is found in the field of African eco-ethics, which reinterprets traditional cosmolo-

gies as resources for addressing modern crises of environmental degradation. Contemporary African philosophers such as Workineh Kelbessa and Edwin Etieyibo have articulated an environmental philosophy that is at once indigenous and globally resonant. They remind us that in the African world, the moral order extends beyond human society to encompass the entire cosmos, the animals, the forests, the rivers, and the invisible presences that sustain life. Workineh Kelbessa's studies of Oromo ecological traditions reveal a profound ethic of respect for the land, where rituals of purification, communal land ownership, and intergenerational stewardship operate as philosophical expressions of harmony between humanity and nature [Workineh 2018:27; Workineh 2022:54]. Etieyibo, on his part, interprets environmental justice within African philosophy as the duty of reciprocity between the human and the natural order, where care for the earth is inseparable from the moral self-care of communities [Etieyibo 2017: 63]. These perspectives have transcended academic discourse to influence local initiatives in environmental education and community-based conservation, especially in Nigeria, Ghana, and Ethiopia. What emerges is not merely a call for ecological protection but a reconstitution of African being itself, a recovery of the cosmic communion that colonial modernity fractured.

Both Ubuntu and African eco-ethics demonstrate that sustainable philosophy is not a borrowed category from Western sustainability studies but a reawakening of the moral and metaphysical energies already latent within African thought. They show that development, when rooted in African humanism and ecological reverence, becomes a holistic project of restoring balance between self and other, culture and nature, the present and the future. As Ndwakhulu Tshishonga [2021:47] argued, the path toward African sustainability must be humanistic, relational, and ecological at once. This triadic structure defines the moral vocation of philosophy in Africa today. Sustainable philosophy, therefore, is not another academic abstraction but a mode of thought that merges critical reason with ethical renewal and practical governance. It is through such a philosophy that Africa can reconstruct its moral foundations, reinvigorate its developmental imagination, and guarantee a future in which life, human and non-human alike, can endure in dignity. To refuse this task is to resign Africa to the logic of dependency and decay, and to embrace it is to recover the creative breath of African thought as a living force in the destiny of the world.

## Conclusion

It was submitted in this paper that development is something that touches all aspects of life within a society, and it depends on each society's way of looking at reality. Development is also not something that is handed down from top down, as the World Bank and others have attempted. It should therefore be pointed out that the initiative of the people matters a lot in development. If development is to be achieved in Africa, then it has to be something Africans have to pursue from their own perspective without waiting for others to think for them. This means that we have to pursue development through the help of a sustainable philosophy, a philosophy that will ensure that our peculiar condition is taken into consideration and also seek the good of the generations yet unborn.



Edwin Etieyibo and Workineh Kelbessa

## References

- AKE, C., 1993. Building on the Indigenous, in Pierre Fruhling, ed., *Recovery in Africa*. Stockholm: Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 19–30.
- AKE, C., 1995. *Democracy and Development in Africa*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.
- ARENDT, H., 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- BODUNRIN, P., 1981. The Question of African Philosophy, *Philosophy* 56/216: 161–179.
- DEI, G. S., 1998. Interrogating African Development and the Diasporan Reality, *Journal of Black Studies* 29/2: 335–360.
- DENISON, E., 1962. *Sources of Economic Growth in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Committee for Economic Development.
- ETIEYIBO, E., 2017. *Environmental Ethics in African Philosophy: A Reinterpretation of Anthropocentrism*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- EWUOSO, C. and HALL, S., 2021. Ubuntu and the Social Ethics of Health in Africa, *Developing World Bioethics* 21/3: 109–118.
- GERRY, H., 2002. Marginalisation and/or Participation: Africa in Today's Global Economy, *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 36/3: 401–423.
- VAN HENSBRÖCK, P. B., 1999. *African Political Philosophy 1860 to 1995: An Inquiry into Three Families of Discourse*. Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- LETSEKA, M., 2023. Revisiting Ubuntu for Sustainable Development in Africa, *Journal of African Ethics* 4/1: 1–15.
- MCKEON, R., 1981. Philosophy as an Agent of Civilisation, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 41/4: 407–439.
- METZ, T., 2022. Recent Developments in Ubuntu Ethics, *Philosophical Papers* 51/2: 80–94.
- MUDIMBE, V.-Y., 1983. African Philosophy as an Ideological Practice: The Case of French-Speaking Africa, *African Studies Review* 26/3–4: 221–238.
- NDWAKHULU, T., 2021. Ubuntu and Sustainable Development in Africa: A Critical Reflection, *African Journal of Public Affairs* 13/1: 42–58.
- OGUEJIOFOR, J., 2006. *Historiography of African Philosophy: The Journey So Far*, Paper presented at the Conference of the Nigerian Philosophical Association, 26–28 October.
- OGUNMODEDE, F., 2004. *African Philosophy Down the Ages*. Ibadan: Hope Publications.
- ORAEGUNAM, K., 2006. In Defence of Ethno Philosophy, Paper presented at the Nigerian Philosophical Association Conference, University of Ibadan, 26–28 October.
- RIDDELL, B., 1995. The World Bank Speaks to Africa Yet Again, *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 29/2: 279–308.
- SALEMOHAMED, G., 1983. African Philosophy, *Philosophy* 58/226: 535–538.
- SOGOLO, G., 1990. Options in African Philosophy, *Philosophy* 65/251: 39–52.
- UDO, E., 1987. Philosophy in a Developing Country, *Philosophy* 62/239: 29–39.
- WORKINEH, K., 2018. African Environmental Ethics, Indigenous Knowledge, and Environmental Conservation, *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 19/1: 25–34.
- WORKINEH, K., 2022. *Indigenous and Modern Environmental Ethics in Africa*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press.

# Ensuring Equitable Access to Reproductive Health and Assisted Reproduction for Women with Fertility Challenges: Towards a More Just and Health-Equitable Zimbabwe

**Tawanda Mbewe, MA**

Lecturer and PhD Candidate, University of Zimbabwe (Harare, Zimbabwe)

## Abstract

Even though access to reproductive health is a fundamental aspect of social justice, women in Zimbabwe continue to bear the pain and effects of fertility challenges. This normally takes a toll on their health and well-being. The struggle for women is well-documented, but the plight of women with fertility challenges has not been given adequate attention. Access to health care has been a perennial challenge in Zimbabwe, but the ordeal of women with fertility challenges is further compounded. Societal perception of fertility challenges has made it difficult for those with fertility challenges, and most of the brunt has been on women. Developments in medicine through assisted reproduction have been a relief to such couples, but access to such technologies has been minimal in Zimbabwe. The paper argues that reproductive health is a key aspect of social justice. Women in Africa should enjoy their reproductive rights, health equity, and bodily autonomy so that they are spared from social pressure associated with fertility challenges. The work will highlight the fate of women with infertility in Africa and how access to reproductive health can be a panacea to issues of social injustices suffered by such women. The paper also highlights ways in which these assisted reproductive technologies can be adopted and adapted to effectively address fertility challenges in Africa.

**Keywords:** Social Justice, Reproductive Health, Health Equity

## Introduction

Efforts to mitigate social injustices against women have been a welcome development, and Africa is making strides in prioritising the elevation of the status of women. Despite this positive and welcome initiative, there remain areas of concern as far as women's issues are concerned. Reproductive rights remain an area that still needs adequate attention if the women's empowerment discourse is to be a success story in Zimbabwe. Fertility challenges have remained a thorn in the flesh of women who usually suffer the most. Africa, being a traditionally patriarchal society, tends to treat men and women differently, and

this is certainly a miscarriage of reproductive justice. This paper explores how the response to fertility challenges has become a serious reproductive rights issue in Sub-Saharan Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular. Access to reproductive healthcare has not been given the due attention it requires, and this has led to serious reproductive injustices. This paper traces the place and value of fertility treatment in the African setup and argues that a typically African value system recognizes and place value on the importance and central role of motherhood and procreative ability, that on its own is a sign that Africans place a

lot of value of reproductive justice and should be used as a basis for advocating for reproductive rights for women in Zimbabwe. This should be used as a justification for demanding changes in healthcare policies and an advocacy for reproductive justice for women in Zimbabwe, thereby striving towards health equity and reproductive justice.

## Women and Infertility in Zimbabwe

Infertility is a global challenge that affects a substantial number of people around the globe. According to WHO data, more than 180 million couples in developing countries suffer from primary or secondary infertility. Dyer et al [1657-2020] rightly acknowledge that infertility is a major reproductive health problem in Africa. For Ombelet [258-2011], Infertility care is probably the most neglected and underestimated health care issue in developing countries, and Zimbabwe is no exception to this. Again, it's a healthy problem that usually affects men and women disproportionately. Attitudes towards people with fertility chal-

lenges, especially women with fertility problems, are an area that still needs serious attention. For Maponya [2021:36], marriage is considered a duty in African traditional communities, procreation is what completes and validates it, and without children, a marriage is considered incomplete. In a way, fertility, pregnancy, birth, and child rearing are cultural achievements. In most Zimbabwean societies, motherhood is essential to validating one's heterosexuality and gaining stature, and females without a child are marginalised and unrecognised. Such is the plight of women who face fertility challenges in Zimbabwe.

The Report of the Commission on Women's Health in the African Region [2002:35] notes that Infertility is a major public health problem in the African Region, as failure to conceive often generates frustration and emotional stress as well as a sensation of guilt and resentment; infertility may even lead to divorce. Another most important point noted by the report is that despite the impressive roll call of conventions and initiatives, the good intentions have often failed to result in change. The present work intends to work on bringing the desired change for women with fertility challenges in Zimbabwe. .



Système reproducteur  
féminin mise à plat  
©pikisuperstar on Freepik

## Reproductive Justice and the Zimbabwean Value System

This paper seeks to critically examine the framework of reproductive justice and see how it can yield insights and apply to the Zimbabwean value system. The concept of justice is essential for a thriving society. For Rawls, justice is the first virtue of social institutions. Rawls believed that a just society is one where institutions are designed and operated in a way that respects and upholds justice [Bentley 1972:67]. Reproductive justice is a term that was developed by black American women, and they developed its framework in 1994. The paper argues that the framework has the potential to unlock some of the treasures hidden in the Zimbabwean value system and can therefore be used to propose and advance a good justification for the advocacy of reproductive health rights for African women and Zimbabwean women in particular. In the same vein, it can also be used to bring out some of the shortcomings in the value system that might give room for moral progress. According to Perrit and Eugene [2022:02], the framework of reproductive justice holds that decision-making about sexual and reproductive health is shaped by both the conditions of one's community and the context of their life. The reproductive justice framework is anchored on four core tenets, namely:

1. Every person is endowed with the human right to have children
2. to not have children;
3. to parent the children one has in safe, sustainable communities;
4. bodily autonomy

The present effort argues that since this framework was advanced in an American setup, it relates well to the African and Zimbabwean context and setup. The

four core tenets of the framework fit perfectly in the Zimbabwean setup and worldview, save for the second one. Let's briefly consider the first two pillars and relate them to the Zimbabwean value system so that we can justify the need to advocate for reproductive justice in Zimbabwe.

### *The Right to Have Children*

The main pillar of the framework is the idea that having children is a right that every person is entitled to. It's a right that we usually take for granted when everything is equal. It's usually a typical African conception of marriage that it must lead to procreation. Fertility challenges usually make it difficult for one to enjoy the right to have children. In the traditional Zimbabwe setup, several interventions were put in place to alleviate infertility challenges. All these interventions point to a societal desire for persons with fertility challenges to enjoy the right to have children. With advances in technology, it has become imperative for people to find it easier than before to enjoy the right to have children. Access to these reproductive technologies has been very minimal, and more still needs to be done in this respect.

The issue of access to assisted reproductive technologies in Zimbabwe can be considered a social justice challenge that calls for addressing the imbalance. Due to the high costs of assisted reproduction in Zimbabwe, a large number of women with fertility challenges are finding it difficult to access fertility treatment. This is against the traditional approach to addressing the challenge. Previously, fertility issues were communal and family issues, and

it was the duty of the community and family to address the anomaly. Recent interventions have changed everything, and it's now an individual issue, coupled with poverty; the individual is now left more vulnerable. It is hoped that the social justice framework, when it's properly applied to the plight of women facing fertility challenges, can indeed reshape perceptions and attitudes towards the challenge. So, the argument is that reproductive health and fertility treatment should be treated as a social justice issue. Social justice discourse has to strongly highlight the plight of such women. Zimbabwean women with fertility challenges ought to be given special treatment, as this has always been part of our traditional value system to treat them as such.

### *The Right Not to Have Children*

The second pillar of the reproductive justice framework has to do with the right not to have children. The framework also recognises the right not to have children. It entails that not having children is a choice that people must exercise. This right is based on the assumption that a right to have also entails a right not to have. It has to be admitted that this one is not a popular idea in Africa, and Zimbabwe in particular. This idea hinges on the Western idea of individual liberty, which entails that even when it comes to reproduction, the individual ought to determine their reproductive health decisions. In a typical African setup, the society or community normally precedes the individual. This is not to say that the individual is not important, but to some extent, society normally determines the good for the individuals. Thus, for Mbiti [1969:174] marriage is 'the

point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and yet to be born.' Here, marriage is conceptualised as the foundation of African communities; a bedrock that sees both the formation and the continuation of the existence of African people.

Reproduction is regarded as a duty that one owes to society. For Fortes [1978:23], 'the achievement of parenthood is regarded as a sine qua non for the attainment of the full development as a complete person to which all aspire'. According to Sande and Matwaya [2002:48], children are regarded as sacred gifts from Mwari (Shona Supreme Being); hence, both men and women have a moral duty to perpetuate progeny. Failure to per-

form the duty is not usually tolerated by society. Zimbabwe, like other African societies. To decide not to have children is plainly regarded as neglecting one's duty of ensuring the perpetuation of the clan. In some cases, it is regarded as an act of selfishness that goes against the principle of the common good. In such cases, an individual will be regarded as seeking to further their own interests at the expense of societal interests. It has to be noted that the idea of pushing for the common good normally results in the violation of individual rights. In the case of women with fertility challenges, this conception normally exposes them and puts them under a lot of societal pressure. There is a need to strike a balance between societal

expectations and individual rights. Recognising the right not to have children makes life easier even for those with fertility challenges, as it can be viewed as a choice.

### *Patriarchy and Reproductive Violence*

Biological, medical, and socio-cultural variables can all have an impact on infertility. Patriarchy as a socio-cultural system greatly shapes societal response and shapes attitudes towards infertility. The Zimbabwean society, like other black societies, is pronatalist in nature and motherhood under patriarchy is compulsory [Robert 1993:20], where patriarchy is a social system characterised by relations of power and authority of men over women [Inhorn 1996:36]. The nature and character of patriarchy usually manifest their ugly side when it comes to fertility challenges. The situation of infertile couples is under no circumstances ameliorated. Due to its nature, women are usually at the receiving end even though men are not spared from the catastrophic expectation of the system. Man is, however, better placed as it is a system that normally favours them. For Srishti [2023:63], as a social system, patriarchy perpetuates gender inequalities and power imbalances between men and women. Malhotra [2023:46] notes that a major factor here is that women bear children for the patriline they marry into. In the majority of cases, when the man is infertile, the woman is encouraged to have children for him either by a close relative or, in some cases, any other man of her choice, especially in situations where the infertility of the male gender is to be kept secret. But in a situation where the woman is infertile, the husband



is permitted by culture and tradition to marry another woman who would give him children [Kenneth 2020:15]. The commonly mentioned justification for these tendencies is how the marriage setup is designed in the African setup.

### **Payment of Bride Price**

Most of the challenges and inequalities faced by women have been associated with the payment of brideprice. In the Zimbabwean setup, like in most African societies, males are supposed to pay brideprice, which is locally referred to as lobola/roora. Goody and Tambiah [1973:76] describe bridewealth, sometimes used interchangeably with marriage payment or brideprice, as prestations, gifts/goods and services that are transferred from the groom's kin to the bride's family. Traditionally, brideprice was a way of solidifying the union between the two families, as well as to give legitimacy to the union. But recent developments have led to the commercialisation of the whole thing. Scholars have often debated whether this practice is still relevant in today's society. Of interest to this work is the link between the payment of the bride price and its impact on women's reproductive health and wellbeing.

After payment of the bride price, the couple is expected to bear children. In fact, the belief is that a woman is supposed to bear children for a man who has paid the bride price for her. This compounds the plight of couples who experience fertility challenges. In such a scenario, the woman would have failed to live up to societal expectations. In more severe cases, the groom may even file for divorce and claim back their bride price. Horne et al [2013:46] note that although the basis of a legi-

mate marriage arguably brings dignity and respect to women and men and their offspring, the payment of bride wealth is frequently perceived and portrayed as the bane of women in most patrilineal societies. Women who face fertility challenges are usually under pressure and suffer a lot due to this patriarchal practice.

Some scholars have argued for the abolition of the practice to ensure that women are empowered, but other scholars are of the view that this may actually worsen the woman's position in a marriage setup. This present project takes a middle approach between these two extremes. The practice must be practised and stick to its intended traditional purpose, and avoid commercialising it. It should be done in a way that commodifies women. If women's reproductive health is to be prioritised, there is a need to avoid turning them into commodities that can be bought or sold. People should stop putting a price tag on women, but they just have to respect the reproductive role played by women. By doing so, women will not bear the brunt of fertility challenges. In any case, reproductive justice demands that reproductive health care be easily accessible to such women. The

Zimbabwean government and healthcare providers have to take seriously the plight of women with fertility challenges.

### **Polygamy**

Due to the patriarchal nature of the Zimbabwean society, men are also allowed to marry more than one wife and not the other way round. In the case of a couple facing fertility challenges, it also means that a man can marry a second woman to try and bear children. Again, this has a bearing on the well-being of the concerned women. The situation is even worse if the second wife manages to conceive. The logical conclusion would be that it was the woman's fault. Women are not accorded such a chance, so it is the position of this paper that such a situation can only be salvaged by giving women more affordable and easily accessible reproductive health services. Assisted reproduction becomes a tool that can be used to ensure that justice is served for women. Rawls' second principles of justice. It's a tool that can be used to restore women's dignity, as it normally deals with different kinds of fertility challenges. Even if it is a problem with the man, several options are available to salvage the situation.



## **The Concept of Motherhood in Zimbabwe**

Closely linked and tied to fertility/infertility is the concept of motherhood. Parry [2005:340] described it within a pronatalist society as follows: 'Motherhood is considered the defining element of true womanhood.' In Zimbabwe, being a purely pronatalist society, the status of childless women has not been a good one, as they fail to live up to societal expectations and aspirations. Bell [2019:635] argues that women usually preserve their womanhood through reliance on essentialist notions of gender. This is in line with McFadden [1994:40], who notes that in most African societies (Zimbabwe included), motherhood is essential to validating one's heterosexuality and gaining stature, and females without a child are marginalised and unrecognised. In Zimbabwe, like most developing societies, especially having children may be the key to women achieving adult status and gaining acceptance in the Community [Hollos 2023:47]. According to Sundby and Jacobus [2001:44], in southern Africa, the birth of children gives a woman the right to share in her husband's property and wealth. In Yoruba culture, the adult woman's role depends on motherhood because children are essential to the

continuation of lineages [Pearce 1999:34]. In Zimbabwe, infertility can be a source of poverty for women [Feldman-Savelsberg 2002]. Because fertility is so central to women's identities in developing countries, women and men with fertility problems may resist labelling themselves infertile [Barden-O'Fallon 2005].

The link between fertility and motherhood poses challenges for women facing fertility issues, as they are often perceived as socially inferior. They are treated as subhumans who are not entitled to the full rights and privileges enjoyed by other women with children. This societal expectation for motherhood is enough justification for championing access to reproductive health and assisted reproduction for women with fertility challenges. Access to assisted reproduction techniques such as IVF will ensure that the societal expectation for motherhood is achievable. This is good for the well-being of women with fertility challenges, as they can also live according to societal aspirations and can be regarded as full members of the community. The idea of reproductive is rooted in the Zimbabwean conception of motherhood.

## **Conclusion**

Access to reproductive technology, and in vitro fertilisation (IVF) in particular, can substantially benefit people's well-being in Zimbabwe. Dealing with challenges associated with infertility is, in a way, a step towards the realisation of the Sustainable Goals, as they are integrated goals. In this regard, it is imperative for governments, especially the Zimbabwean government, to come up with appropriate policy infrastructure to effectively deal with the challenges associated with infertility. By doing so this makes the development goal number 5 a reality as this will go a long way in ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences [Whitford & Lois Gonzalez 1995:30]. This paper has demonstrated the link between the reproductive framework and the Zimbabwean cultural and reproductive worldview. This sets a strong justification for reproductive justice for women in Zimbabwe, as it is something that resonates with our cultural and moral reasoning. Reproductive justice ensures that Zimbabwean values premised on the philosophy of ubuntu/hunhu are realised. Ubuntu/hunhu philosophy ensures the common good, including women with fertility challenges. The philosophy promotes equity and justice in the distribution of reproductive health and access to assisted reproduction. In this regard, the paper calls for a health policy that upholds the rights of women that are premised and rooted in our cultural values. This ensures justice and dignity for women when it comes to reproductive matters.

## References

- BELL, A. V., 2019. "I'm not really 100% a woman if I can't have a kid": Infertility and the intersection of gender, identity, and the body, *Gender & Society* 33(4): 629–651.
- BENTLEY, D. J., 1973. John Rawls: A Theory of Justice, *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 121: 1070–1078.
- DYER, S. J., ABRAHAMS, N., HOFFMAN, M. and VAN DER SPUY, Z. M., 2002. Infertility in South Africa: women's reproductive health knowledge and treatment-seeking behaviour for involuntary childlessness, *Human Reproduction* 17(6): 1657–1662.
- FORTES, M., 1978. Parenthood, marriage and fertility in West Africa, *Journal of Development Studies* 14(4): 121–149.
- HOLLOS, M., 2003. Profiles of infertility in southern Nigeria: women's voices from Amakiri, *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 7(2): 46–56.
- INHORN, M. C., 1996. *Infertility and Patriarchy: The Cultural Politics of Gender and Family Life in Egypt*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- MALHOTRA, A., VANNEMAN, R. and KISHOR, S., 1995. Fertility, dimensions of patriarchy, and development in India, *Population and Development Review*.
- MAPONYA, D. T., 2021. The African woman's plight of reproduction: A philosophical analysis of marriage, procreation and womanhood, *Agenda* 35(3): 82–91.
- MBITI, J. S., 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann; New York: Praeger.
- McFADDEN, P., 1994. Motherhood as a choice, *Southern Africa Political & Economic Monthly* 7(9): 40–41.
- OKWUOSA, I. K., 2020. An Ethical Evaluation of Traditional Surrogacy in Igbo Culture, South East Nigeria, *Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS)* 3(2): 13–24.
- OMBELET, W., 2011. Global access to infertility care in developing countries: a case of human rights, equity and social justice, *Facts, Views & Vision in ObGyn* 3(4): 257.
- PARRY, D. C., 2005. Work, leisure, and support groups: An examination of the ways women with infertility respond to pronatalist ideology, *Sex Roles* 53(5): 337–346.
- ROBERTS, D. E., 1993. Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood, *American University Journal of Gender and Law* 1: 11–38.
- SANDE, N. and TAKAWIRA-MATWAYA, Y. W., 2022. Assisted reproductive technologies, infertility and women in Zimbabwe, in *Religion, Women's Health Rights, and Sustainable Development in Zimbabwe: Volume 2*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 33–50.
- SHRISHTI, R. P., 2023. Infertility and patriarchy in India: Causes and Consequences, *International Journal of Health Sciences & Research* 13: 353.
- WHITEFORD, L. M. and GONZALEZ, L., 1995. Stigma: the hidden burden of infertility, *Social Science & Medicine* 40(1): 27–36.
- WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION, Regional Office for Africa. 2012. *Addressing the Challenge of Women's Health in Africa: Report of the Commission on Women's Health in the African Region*. Brazzaville: WHO Regional Office for Africa.



# The Intersection Between Kantian Human Dignity and Ubuntu/Hunhu: A Critical Engagement with Oliver Sensen's Perspective

**Mofolo Felix, MA**

Postgraduate Student, Arrupe Jesuit University (Harare, Zimbabwe)

**Telma Shiri, BA (Hons) ECD**

Educator, Mberengwa Primary School (Midlands Province, Zimbabwe)

## Abstract

Human dignity is a central concept in moral, legal, and political discourse, often invoked as the foundation of rights and ethical treatment. Traditional interpretations of Kantian dignity emphasise its intrinsic worth, tied to rational autonomy. However, Oliver Sensen offers a nuanced view, contending that, for Kant, dignity should be understood as a relational property, arising from our moral relations rather than from internal capacities. Sensen argues that human dignity, in the Kantian sense, is not a quality possessed in degrees or based on individual traits, but is rooted in the moral status rational beings hold by virtue of their autonomy. Particularly, Sensen's conception of human dignity resonates with the classical understanding of Hunhu/Ubuntu in an African Ethical context. Ubuntu, a Southern African philosophical tradition, centres on the idea of personhood as inherently relational. It upholds values of mutual respect, shared responsibility, and ethical living within the community. In this worldview, human dignity is not a solitary possession but a quality nurtured through meaningful relationships, moral behaviour, and the recognition of each person's humanity. The guiding principle, 'I am because we are', captures this ethic, affirming that dignity flourishes through collective care and moral solidarity. It is therefore the aim of this paper to examine the relationship between Sensen's relational reading and Ubuntu in the African context. The paper will also consider the relevance of Sensen's understanding to contemporary African societies while looking at the significance of human dignity in contemporary moral thought.

**Keywords:** Human dignity, Ubuntu/ Hunhu, autonomy, human person, respect, value.

## Introduction

In the first place, there is a controversial debate on Kant's conception of human dignity, which is dominated by arguments based on human dignity and the rationale of respecting a human person. The genesis of the debate stems from an isolated understanding of the Kantian definition of dignity in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). Kant's statement to 'treat oneself and others never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end' means that whether someone is a man or woman, black

or white, rich or poor, he or she ought to be respected [Wood 2005:51]. One's acts or status, or position, should not determine respect or not. But punishment can be used as a tool to solicit and remind the murderer or a rapist of their moral obligation.

However, Kant's justification for respecting others is being read and understood differently. From such different interpretations and understanding, two schools of thought emerge: firstly, the most popular or common reading, as

attributed to scholars such as Paul Guyer, Herbert James Paton, Mary Gregor, Thomas E. Hill Jr, Allen W Wood, John Ladd, and Jerome B. Schneewind. The other school of thought is the traditional reading, which was pioneered by Oliver Sensen. Our stand is that the traditional understanding attempts to clearly and holistically understand Kant's argument on human dignity and views. Nevertheless, Oliver Sensen, a contemporary African moral philosopher, holds a different view that Kantian human dignity does not rest on ra-



Oliver Sensen

## General understanding of the Kantian concept of dignity

tionality rather it's based on relationality. Thus, human dignity is not innate rather acquired because of human interaction between and among people. These sentiments are shared by the *Umnthu/Hunhu* African moral tradition. Before examining the points of convergence, the paper first outlines the foundational principles of Kant's concept of dignity.

In Kantian literature, there is a famous statement, 'the condition under which something alone can be an end in itself does not have merely a relative worth, i.e., a price, but rather an inner worth' [Wood 2005, 53]. This statement is popularly read as, dignity entails the human values that are the fountain of human rights and moral obligation to do what is right. Paul Guyer, for example, understands that Kant defines dignity as an absolute or intrinsic, or inner value that all human beings possess. The foundation of human

dignity is rationality and the autonomous nature of human beings [Wood 2005]. Guyer added that, when Kant says treating humanity as an end in itself, it means 'treating each human being as an autonomous agent capable of setting his or her ends both freely and yet in harmony with others' [Wood 2005:207]. Though we are moral and transcendental subjects, capable of legislating our means, hence becoming individualistic, we need to respect, protect, and preserve other people.

In the same vein, Jones [1995] argued that right is before good and right is before duty. That is, the goodness of a human being is determined by morally good behaviour or virtuous practice. We do good not because it is our human nature, but because we have a moral obligation to act that way. They are those moral acts that give a person a moral duty to do what respects humanity. Since a human being is an end in themselves, he/she ought to be treated not merely as a means but as an end in themselves [Wood 2005]. In other words, violations of hu-

man rights and immoral acts such as abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, wars, use of nuclear weapons are wrong because humanity is not valued but rather degraded. Humanity is used merely as a means to justify egoistic ends. Hence, Kant is popularly regarded as a value realist and a philosophical defender par excellence of the rights of persons and their equality [Ladd: xv]. Let us get someone who understands the concept of value (dignity) differently from the classical interpretation of the dignity concept, Oliver Sensen.



## Oliver Sensen's understanding of Human Dignity

Oliver Sensen denies [2015:311] the contemporary understanding of human dignity. Sensen argued that, 'in the Kantian literature, there are few reflections on the ontological nature of this value'. Such a common or contemporary conception of dignity suggests that human dignity does not have an ontological value and is a non-relational property. In other words, the common understanding of dignity misunderstands Kant's conception of human dignity. Then, Sensen [2009] elucidates that a different account emerges if one takes into account all passages in which Kant uses the term dignity. That's the contemporary understanding of Kantian dignity originates from isolated readings of Kant's works and passages on dignity, a price, and humanity. It leaves many unresolved and unrestored gaps. So, if contemporary scholars understand the context, content, and link the passage(s), a new, different view emerges altogether. For instance, according to Wood,

**“The practical necessity of acting in accordance with this principle, i.e., duty, does not rest at all on feelings, impulses, or inclinations, but merely on the relation of rational beings to one another, in which the will of one rational being must always at the same time be considered as universally legislative, because otherwise the rational being could not think of the other rational beings as ends in themselves. Reason thus refers every maxim of the will as universally legislative to every other will and also to every action toward itself, and this not for the sake of any other practical motive or future advantage, but from the idea of**

**the dignity of a rational being that obeys no law except that which at the same time it gives itself.”** [Wood 2005:52]

This passage links autonomy, morality, and dignity. A morally good person stands for the Formula of Autonomy since it belongs to his or her dignity. Inclinations or selfish behaviours do not presuppose his acts. He or she obeys the law that one legislates for oneself. In other words, human dignity entails being a morally good-willed agent.

In addition, Kant's conception of human dignity and his justification to treat oneself and others can be read in very different ways [Sensen 2009]. The common interpretation of Kantian human dignity error to claim that the ground of human dignity is rationality and autonomy. Respect for humanity is not grounded in the value of human dignity; rather, it is more than that. Sensen [2013] argues that Kant does not have such a conception of value as referring to a metaphysical feature of being precious. He does not conceive of value statements that express that one ought to value something, but that value statements are a different way of saying what reason cognises as necessary: 'which reason independently of inclination cognises as practically necessary' [Wood 2009:29]. It figures out what human rationally conceives as good, but Kant does not ground morality on any value. He does not ground it on dignity and price. Rather, Kant uses an older (archaic) paradigm of dignity in which the term 'dignity' expresses sublimity, elevation, or that something is raised above or has a relational value property.

Sensen [2013] discovered three paradigms on the understanding of Kant's conception of human dignity. These paradigms are: archaic paradigm, traditional paradigm, and contemporary paradigm. The archaic paradigm is equivalent to the Stoic understanding of dignity. The archaic paradigm understanding of dignity is based on the ancient Roman use of the word *dignitas*. According to Griffin [2017:309], *dignitas* implies 'superiority over other orders'. Historically, *Dignitas* is the political concept that depicts high office or rank or position, such as being a king, a president or a minister. Sensen [2009] states that dignity is sublimity, which means an elevation or the highest elevation of something over something else. Dignity is rising above something, but the raised thing depends on which context the term might be used. For instance, in the Catholic church, the highest rank is the papacy. A pope has many benefits compared to cardinals, bishops, and others. Despite such privileges, a pope is expected to portray specific kinds of behaviours; otherwise, he may lose the position. So, he ought to rule the church according to canon. So, as the papacy is a high-ranking office, dignity is not an absolute value human beings possess, but one's elevation above other beings.

The second paradigm is traditional. According to Sensen [2009], the traditional paradigm originates from an archaic paradigm that all human beings have an elevated position because of a capacity to reason. Rationality differentiates human beings from animals. This entails that human beings are superior to other beings because of their possession of reason. That's, to be human is to use one's reason

appropriately. In addition, a human being has an obligation not to violate the rights of other beings; otherwise, he or she will no longer be a human being but an animal. The last paradigm is called contemporary, which denies that dignity has a relational value property [Sensen 2013]. This paradigm denies the archaic paradigm based on elevation but agrees with the traditional paradigm that human beings are absolutely incomparably and valuable or priceless. It also upholds the principle that good is before right and right to virtue. The goodness of a human being is determined by morality and morally good behaviour.

Sensen [2009] is convinced that Kant was influenced by the Stoic or archaic paradigm and the traditional paradigm. It means that human dignity entails having a role over nature by virtue of being an autonomous being. Human beings have a particular or unique privilege or right over any other animate or inanimate beings. So, what is raised above or elevated in the *Groundwork* when Kant writes ‘that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself does not have merely a relative worth, i.e., a price, but rather an inner worth’, is morality [Wood 2005:53]. Kant does not mean that human dignity is an absolute inner value as a condition to respect or honour humanity. Rather, by virtue of being human, human beings are raised

above any other beings. Human beings are free to make choices and decisions about their goals and lives. For instance, no matter how much an animal is trained or conditioned, it cannot choose a state of life, position, or have a vision. Only a human being has that capacity and disposition due to rationality and freedom.

Further, there are two stages of dignity, which are: the initial stage, where one possesses reason or freedom, and the last stage, which is the proper use of these autonomous and rational capacities [Sensen 2013]. Human duty is the proper use of one’s reason or freedom through decision-making, reflection, and contemplation. There is a distinction between his Kantian interpretation and that of the contemporary paradigm. Firstly, on relational value property, he holds that dignity has a relational value property. It means that a human being is elevated or raised above other beings by virtue of a capacity and disposition of autonomy and rationality. However, to say that something is elevated does not necessitate invoking a value property or any normative implication [Sensen 2009]. For a being to have a normative implication, we need to further the argument.

Sensen [2013] holds that dignity is connected to duties, not rights. To justify these duties, human beings need to use the principle of rights,

the categorical imperative. Thus, a foundation of respect is not human nature, but morality. Sensen conceptualises that a categorical imperative is ‘the law of morality for how such an absolute command ... to ...act only in accordance with that maxim through which everyone can at the same time will that it become a universal law’ [Wood 2005:123]. We don’t have to universalise for fear of looking stupid or backward. One’s maxim could be internally consistent, although one would not want others to act on these maxims as well, one could be a well-functioning scoundrel (crook). A method of determining how moral an action is by testing its consistency without any contradiction. Hence, the categorical imperative compels an agent to treat others not merely as a means toward personal ends but rather as an end in themselves. To treat others as ends in themselves entails taking into account one’s feelings, needs, interests, or possessions; hence, it becomes a universal or moral law applicable to anyone in a similar situation, circumstance, condition, or space or time.

A categorical imperative is based on a priori or pure reason. That is, it is a transcendental command that is not borrowed from experience, acquired in the process of testing the consistency. The morality of that act is not judged by the consequences or results, or the fruits it shall produce. Morality

could be defined as acting from duty and for its sake. It means acting without any inclinations, law, expectations, desires, selfish reasons, no incentives, or common good or altruism, rather rationally. Duty is commitment, not affection, but also constraint. That is, an agent’s duty is to be virtuous [Wood 2005]. Sensen understands Kant’s view that the moral law to act from duty is necessary not to be a good and well-behaved person, but to be a person with virtues. The moral law is for perfect rational beings who are not influenced by inclinations and desires. However, we are both rational beings with inclinations.

The *ought* expression expresses what a human being wholly governed by reason would naturally do [Kant 2002:102]. What one ought to do is the morally right action merely out of respect for the moral law: ‘What is essential to any moral worth of action is that the moral law determines the will immediately and not mediated by an end’ [Kant 2002:102]. Humanity as an end in itself is not something that is the end given by reason; rather, a human being exists as an end in oneself (Wood 45). ‘End in itself’ is not primarily or in the first instance a normative notion, but what characterises humanity.

The concept, morality, or moral law is before good, and it is understood as Kant’s morality on a direct command of pure reason (a priori). According to Kant, ‘pure reason... gives (to the human being) a universal law which we call the moral law’ [Kant 2002:46]. This entails that moral law is a priori because of its necessity and universality, as Kant states that, ‘this principle of humanity... is not borrowed from experience... because of its universality...so that the principle must arise from pure reason’ [Wood 2005:49]. The imperative to respect others needs to be a priori too. Hence, if one is prompted to reason morally, one’s reason ‘with complete spontaneity... makes its own order according to ideas... according to which it even declares actions to be necessary’ [Kant 2002:128].

However, according to Sensen, Kant does not claim to spell out the mechanism of how and why reason prescribes this a priori law; ‘all human insight is at an end as soon as we have arrived at basic powers or basic faculties’ [Kant 2002:65]. But one can identify that it is based on reasoning and not a command of sensibility to necessarily be consistent or strictly universal. Kant said, ‘we can become aware of pure practical laws just as we are aware of pure theoretical principles, by attending to the necessity with which reason prescribes them to us’ [Kant 2002:43]. For example, if

you are tempted to give false witness in a court, human reason has a capacity to inform you that the act is morally wrong. However, we cannot control our will and the moral law that describes how this will necessarily function. In so doing, universality leads to an ideal of the kingdom of ends.

In the kingdom of ends, all human beings treat themselves and others as ends but also as subject to its laws [Wood 2005]. In other words, individuals in the realm of ends act not in accordance with inclinations but rather in accordance with their rational nature and from duty. This is possible under the obligation of the supreme principle of morality, the categorical imperative. For example, serving a man who murdered your mother in a flat that is caught on fire is morally permissible. Acting out of goodwill because it is intrinsically good and not because of its consequences or desired ends, but summoning up all means insofar as they are in our control [Wood 2005]. Hence, by serving the criminal, the goodwill shall shine like a jewel. After a thorough examination of Oliver Sensen’s perspectives, one may ask: What insights do his reflections offer us? The following section engages this question with a critical response, unpacking the implications and contributions of his thought.

## Reflections on Oliver Sensen's Views

We have found Sensen's interpretation and understanding very ideal to the respect of human rights in our contemporary world. In many countries and the world at large, the respect of human rights is grounded on the common understanding of Kant's human dignity. Human beings ought not to violate or abuse human rights because human beings are intrinsically dignified and equal [UN, Preamble]. It states that, to have a free, just, and peaceful world, human rights must be protected and not violated. However, there are many cases of human rights violations which includes, including human trafficking, rape, child forced marriages, civil wars, discrimination, racism, nepotism, and many more. Most probably, the problem is that few people are aware of the pure moral law (categorical imperative) which compels them to act morally. That they may not know that they ought to respect themselves and others because it is necessary and universal to be moral. This is what Sensen is advocating, that dignity is not within anyone, rather it is transcendental, but it depends on us to recognise and discover through the respect of others.

Further, Sensen's understanding promotes a synthetic analysis of philosophy; it emphasises the importance of context, content, and connection of passages and linkages of Kantian works. Munzel [1999:204] shared the view that the context and content of passages are paramount when reading or studying Kant. No wonder,

Mary J Gregor [1996] argued that when a teacher has only Groundwork to teach, he or she should insist that Kant did not mean what the text seems to say. However, one's students may conclude that one is merely giving his or her interpretation of Kant's theory. In the same vein, Boron and Schneewind shared the view that Groundwork is just a foundation; hence, reading it alone without other works is prone to error [Kant 95]. Therefore, when reading and studying Kant, the reader ought to understand the context, content, and connection of passages and texts. A different understanding emerges when one avoids interpreting Kant from a single or a few passages.

In addition, Sensen's interpretation reasonably compels man to act from duty and for its sake. This interpretation attempts to solve a dilemma of the rights of disabled people, infants, or unborn babies. Hence, dignity is the realisation and recognition of one's duty to respect everyone regardless of state. Sensen would then argue that the state and nature of a human being should not be a basis for moral debates. However, Sensen seems to state that human rational and autonomous natures compel man to do moral acts. Sensen thinks that reason issues its precepts unremittingly without thereby promising anything to the inclination [Todd 2002]. But the fact of being rational does not necessitate reasoning properly or having freedom to choose and do what is right. There are many cases in the con-

temporary world of inhumane or immoral acts caused by so-called rational and free beings. Some individuals justify their acts with valid and intelligible arguments, for instance, abortion due to ectopic pregnancy. Thus, his understanding requires more redefinition or modification, for example, on the connection between morality and duties, especially the duty to respect others, and Kant's conception of Humanity as ends in themselves.

At the heart of this discussion lies a compelling insight: the prevailing essentialist interpretation of Kant, where dignity is seen as an inherent value grounded in rational autonomy, is reimagined through Oliver Sensen's relational lens. Rather than viewing dignity as a fixed, metaphysical trait, Sensen presents it as a moral status bestowed through ethical relationships. Dignity, in this sense, is not something one possesses in isolation, but something realised through mutual recognition and moral engagement. It arises when rational agents treat one another as ends in themselves, guided by duty and the moral law. Thus, the depth of one's dignity is shaped by the quality of one's moral relations. This emphasis on relationality resonates profoundly with African moral philosophical thought, particularly the ethos of Ubuntu in Ndebele or Hunhu in Shona. Before delving into this intersection, we first explore the general concept of Ubuntu as articulated in existing literature.

## General Discourse of Ubuntu / Hunhu Worldview

This paper will treat the terms *Ubuntu* (Zulu/Xhosa) or *Botho* (Sesotho), and *Hunhu* (Shona) as synonymous. The concept of Ubuntu is generally understood as the collection of moral values rooted in African folk traditions [Niekerk 2013]. Some of the *Ubuntu* values include human dignity, human life, obedience, hospitality, solidarity, interde-

pendence, caring, compassion, kindness, humility, empathy, friendliness, generosity, vulnerability, toughness in decision-making and communalism [Prozesky 2005; Molefi et al 2014]. *Ubuntu* promotes the practice of these values for the benefit of both individuals and the community. Those who do not adhere to these values are termed *chinyama* (an

animal), while those who do are called *Ubuntu* (a moral person). Therefore, it is both communally accepted and expected to be an Ubuntu rather than a *chinyama* [Mofolo 2024:40]. Having briefly discussed these concepts, it is right and just to brainstorm four philosophical approaches to *Ubuntu* as a moral theory.

## Four Philosophical Approaches to Ubuntu as A Moral Theory

Scholars claim that *Ubuntu* is more than just a moral belief in the public discourse; they assert that it is 'an action-guiding moral theory' [Niekerk 2013]. This means that *Hunhu* describes and prescribes principles for actions in particular situations. To understand these principles, scholars employ philosophical approaches when studying *Ubuntu*, including Ethnophilosophy, Supernaturalism, Constructivism, and the Analytical approach.

### Ethnophilosophy

Ethnophilosophy can be understood as a philosophy that is defined by mythologies, values, and other culturally structured and accepted methods through which people interpret and explain their experiences, often shared informally and passed down orally without methodical or critical examination [Ikuenobe 2004]. It implies that ethnophilosophy emerges from studying ethnic society and their traditions or customs. Usually, it is conducted by cultural anthropologists without applying systematic and critical analysis.

In the context of *Ubuntu*, ethnophilosophy focuses on understanding *Ubuntu* based on in-

igenous African human lived experiences, traditions, and worldviews. Ethnophilosophers such as Mogobe B. Ramose, Michael O. Eze, Johan Broodryk, and Mnyaka Mluleki, aim to return to the pre-colonial period when *Ubuntu* values were authentically lived and determined people's thoughts and words [Broodryk 2002].

Ethnophilosophy asserts that its claims cannot be criticised, investigated, verified or interrogated further, because a more detailed explanation would highlight something representationally or metaphorically akin to *Ubuntu*, yet discrete from African tradition [Niekerk 2013]. Likewise, ambiguities and vagueness associated with *Hunhu* are seen as stretched metaphors or errors incoherent and inconsistent with *Ubuntu*. Besides, *Ubuntu* is justified by referring to traditional or cultural slogans and maxims, for example, the IsiZulu maxim *muntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which translates to 'a person is a person because of or through others,' highlights the importance of shared identity and interconnectedness among people [Tutu 1999]. However, some philosophers criticise this approach for lacking methodological and critical rigour, overemphasising

tradition, and lacking spiritual reference to African ethics [Imafidon et al. 2022]. Consequently, other philosophers resort to or turn to supernaturalism.

### Supernaturalism

Yvonne Patricia Chireau [2014] holds that supernaturalism entails various methods humans have employed to engage with the unseen forces of the invisible realm, including the entities that might act as intermediaries in these interactions. The supernaturalist approach to *Ubuntu* involves understanding it through 'spiritism [that beyond the physical world, there exists a spirit world that can be accessed through mediums] and Christian philosophical framework' [Niekerk 2014:34]. For instance, Bewaji and Ramose [2016:399] argue that 'Africans are in all things religious'. In the moral context, they invoke the divine entities to legitimise any action. In that way, immorality is considered abominable before God and lesser deities or gods [Wiredu 1990]. Therefore, a 'good life in a traditional African society is attained through close ties with religion, God, the ancestors and other humans' [Magesa 1997:99]. In so doing, *Ubuntu*

*tu* fosters harmony between the physical and the spiritual worlds. However, some philosophers criticise the supernaturalist approach for being ambiguous, vague, and lacking dialectical rigour [Spiegelberg 1951]. In response to these criticisms, some philosophers have turned to constructivism as an alternative approach to studying *Ubuntu*.

### **Constructivism**

Richard Fox [2002:23] describes constructivism as ‘a metaphor for learning, likening the acquisition of knowledge to a process of building’. This means that a constructivist approach incorporates new knowledge into existing schemas. In this context of *Ubuntu*, constructivism views the *Ubuntu* initiative not as a review of existing value claims as a system, but rather as employing the language of *Ubuntu* to create a platform for discussing and forming a new, socially constructed value system [Niekerk 2014]. This approach encourages negotiations and dialogue. For example, Cornell and Nyoko advocate for a jurisprudence that embraces both Kantian dignity and *Ubuntu* [Cornell & Nyoko 2011]. No wonder Justice Yvonne Mokgoro suggests that African values from black-Africa can contribute to avoiding the death penalty, which she views as vengeance and incompatible with *Ubuntu* [Mokgoro 1998]. Hence, Mokgoro promotes reconciliation, social harmony, and friendliness. However, this approach is also criticised for lacking critical analysis, being

ambiguous, and overemphasising social context [Osborne 2014]. Alternatively, these philosophers adopt the analytical approach.

### **Analytical Approach**

To analyse is to study something systematically and thoroughly by clarifying and interpreting it [Merriam-Webster Dictionary]. The analytical approach critically evaluates the concept of *Ubuntu*, and it identifies and resolves the fallacies of other philosophical approaches. These fallacies include, firstly, that the ethnophilosophical approach is unanimistic. Unanimism is an “illusion that all men and women in societies speak with one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental issues” [Hountondji 1996]. In addition, immunity to criticism in ethnophilosophy is a political move that should not sway *Ubuntu* scholars [Niekerk 2013].

Secondly, the supernaturalistic approach is spiritistic. It makes the belief that a truly African philosophical viewpoint must inherently include references to spirits, deities, ancestors, or other metaphysical beings [Niekerk 2013]. Thirdly, the constructivist approach treats philosophical theories as elements of cultural traditions, rather than inventions of single authors or philosophers [Niekerk 2013]. Additionally, appealing to written works cannot resolve *Ubuntu* ambiguities, but rather reproduces them [Niekerk 2013]. Hence, the method of addressing these errors is solved in an analytical way that

gives the best, most elegant version of *Ubuntu* as a moral theory. Thaddeus Metz is a prominent figure in this approach. In his Relational Moral Theory, Metz would understand *Ubuntu* as ‘a function of communal relationship, a way that individuals can and should interact’ [2022: 2]. This means that *Ubuntu* values friendliness, and people ought to honour friendliness. Thus, the foundation of *Ubuntu* is not the actual relationship as the ultimate end or highest good, but the capacity to execute and maintain such relationships [Mofolo 2025:35]. At this point, we turn to examine how Oliver Sensen’s interpretation of Kantian human dignity aligns with or echoes the principles of *Ubuntu* within African philosophical discourse.

## **Sensen’s Relational Dignity Meets Ubuntu: A Philosophical Dialogue**

Oliver Sensen’s relational conception of dignity resonates well with and can be deepened by the African ethic of *Ubuntu*. In the first place, Sensen views human dignity not as an intrinsic metaphysical property possessed by individuals, but as a status conferred through moral relations. It emerges when rational beings treat each other as ends in themselves, guided by duty and the moral law. In the same vein, *Ubuntu* entails that dignity is not self-contained but realised through communal recognition, mutual care, and ethical interdependence. Thus, although both reject atomistic individualism, Sensen’s Kantian dignity becomes visible in moral relations. Also, it insists that personhood and worth are constituted through community. That is to say, in both, dignity is relationally activated, not individually owned or possessed.

Secondly, Sensen [2013] states that respect arises from the categorical imperative, the duty to treat others as ends, not means. This duty is grounded in reason, not emotion or utility. In the same vein, *Ubuntu* argues that moral obligation flows from recognising the humanity of others, especially the vulnerable [Mvula 2017:83]. Ethical action is not just rational but responsive to suffering, joy, and shared humanity. That’s what *Ubuntu* adds affective and embodied dimensions to Sensen’s rational duty. It suggests that moral law is not only a priori but also experienced through empathy, solidarity, and communal rituals.

Thirdly, Sensen strongly holds that dignity involves elevation, being raised above other beings through rational autonomy and moral agency. Similarly, *Ubuntu* states that elevation is earned through ethical participation in community life, generosity, forgiveness, hospitality, and justice [2024]. In other words, *Ubuntu* reframes Sensen’s *elevation* not as superiority, but as moral maturity within a web of relationships. A dignified person uplifts others, not just one who reasons well.

Fourthly, Sensen would say that dignity is not based on traits or capacities, but on moral status; even those with limited autonomy deserve respect. In the same line, *Ubuntu* strongly claims that every person, regardless of ability, is indispensable to the community [Ajitoni 2024]. Inclusion is not charity but recognition of shared humanity. It implies that *Ubuntu* strengthens Sensen’s critique of capacity-based dignity. It offers a practical ethic of care where dignity is affirmed through belonging, not performance. In general, Oliver Sensen’s conception of dignity informs one of the African concepts of ethics: *Ubuntu*. Beyond Hunhu, Sensen’s ideas deepen our African philosophical grounding and expand normative reach. Let us explain.

## Sensen's Relational Dignity and African Ethics: Points of Convergence

Sensen holds that dignity arises from moral relations, how we treat others as ends in themselves, and not from internal traits like autonomy or rationality alone. In the same vein, Ignatius Nnaemeka Onwuatiegwu [2025] states that this understanding informs our African Ethics, especially the concept of personhood and moral worth, which are earned and affirmed through communal participation, not automatically granted at birth. In this case, it reframes dignity as socially enacted and morally responsive, aligning with African views that emphasise relational personhood. It challenges Western liberal assumptions of dignity as fixed and individualistic, and instead supports dynamic, context-sensitive ethics.

In addition, Sensen puts that respect is grounded in duty, not in rights or metaphysical value. The categorical imperative compels us to act morally regardless of personal gain. Also, African Ethics emphasises obligations to the community, elders, ancestors, and the vulnerable. Rights are often secondary to responsibilities and harmony [Nicolaidis 2022]. This implies that Sensen's views strengthen African critiques of rights-based frameworks that neglect communal obligations. It supports justice systems that prioritise restoration, reconciliation, and moral duty, rather than punitive or entitlement-based models.

Sensen continues to argue that dignity is elevation, being raised above other beings through moral agency, not superiority. In African Ethics, moral excellence is shown through ubuntu virtues: compas-

sion, hospitality, forgiveness, and solidarity [Mofolo 2025]. This encourages ethical leadership and civic virtue as the basis for social justice. It affirms that dignity is not about status or power, but about how one uplifts others through moral action. Lastly, Sensen's view supports non-capacity-based dignity, vital for defending the rights of disabled persons, children, and marginalised groups. African ethics, when informed by relational dignity, can justify inclusive education, mental health support, and anti-discrimination laws not just on humanitarian grounds, but as moral imperatives. We therefore see that, although Kant did not make any reference to African ethics or Ubuntu, Oliver Sensen's sentiments portray such a picture. It then appeals to scholars, philosophers and moralists to consider adaptation and implementation.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Sensen probably might be right to interpret Kant's view that dignity has a relational value property and not an inner absolute value which is incomparable. Dignity exists with a realisation or recognition of moral law or a priori principle. The face of the other reminds us to discover a moral law that respects one's identity and dignity. Dignity is mirrored by others and exists with others. Human rationality and autonomy determine and guide us towards the discovery of moral obligation to respect oneself and others. Therefore, morality, which is authored by our rational will, ought to compel man to act from the duty of respecting oneself and, most importantly, others. The moral imperative to respect, honour, and protect others is deeply em-

bedded in the Southern African ethical tradition of *Ubuntu* or *Hunhu*. This worldview affirms that human beings do not exist in isolation, but are fundamentally interconnected. Nevertheless, this raises a critical question: do both *Ubuntu* and Oliver Sensen's interpretation of Kantian dignity regard personhood as inherently relational and rational? What, then, of individuals such as fetuses or those in comatose states who cannot actively demonstrate relational capacities? Are they still to be recognised as persons deserving dignity, honour, and moral regard? In light of these complex ethical considerations, this paper calls for further research to explore and respond to such pressing moral inquiries.

Photo by Erol Ahmed on Unsplash



## References

- ACTON, H. B., 1970. *Kant's Moral Philosophy*. London: The Macmillan Press Limited.
- AJITONI, D. B., 2024. Ubuntu and the Philosophy of Community in African Thought: An Exploration of Collective Identity and Social Harmony, *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* 7(3): 1–15.
- BEWAJI, A. I. J., 2016. *The Rule of Law and Governance in Indigenous Yoruba Society: A Study in African Philosophy of Law*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- BROODRYK, J., 2002. *Ubuntu: Life Lessons from Africa*. Tshwane: Ubuntu School of Philosophy.
- CHIREAU, P. Y., 2004. *Supernaturalism*. Swarthmore College.
- CORNELL, D. and NYOKO M., 2011. *Ubuntu and the Law: African Ideals and Postapartheid Jurisprudence*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- GREGOR, M., ed., 1996. *Kant: The Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- GRIFFIN, M., 2017. *Dignity in Roman and Stoic Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- HILL, T. E. Jr., 1992. *Dignity and Practical Reason: In Kant's Moral Theory*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- HOUNTONDI, P., 1996. *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. 2nd ed. Translated by Henry Evans and Jonathan Ree. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- IKUENOBE, P. A., 2004. Logical Positivism, Analytic Method, and Criticisms of Ethnophilosophy, *Metaphilosophy* 35(4): 479–503.
- IMAFIDON, E. and others, 2022. Are We Finished with the Ethnophilosophy Debate? A Multi-perspective Conversation, in Ada Agada, ed., *Ethnophilosophy and the Search for the Wellspring of African Philosophy*. Switzerland: Springer: 299–323.
- JONES, G. L., 1995. *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 130–145.
- KANT, I., 1997. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_, 1999. *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*. Translated by John Ladd. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- \_\_\_, 2002. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company: 46–60.
- \_\_\_, 2002. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Edited by Allen W. Wood. New Haven: Yale University Press: 95–104.
- MAGESA, L., 1997. *African Religion: The Moral Tradition of Abundant Life*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- METZ, T., 2022. *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and Beyond the Continent*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MOFOLO, F., 2024. *A Critical Analysis of Thaddeus Metz's Relational Moral Theory in the Context of African Ethics*. Master's Dissertation (unpublished). Harare: Arrupe Jesuit University.
- \_\_\_, 2025. Africanity of Thaddeus Metz's Relational Moral Theory, *Journal for Contemporary African Philosophy (JOCAP)* 6(1): 32–43.
- MOKGORO, Y., 1998. Ubuntu and the Law in South Africa, *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal* 1: 15–26.
- MUNZEL, F. G., 1999. *Kant's Conceptions of Moral Character: The 'Critical' Link of Morality, Anthropology and Reflective Judgement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- MVULA, H., 2017. Reflecting the divine image, *Journal of Humanities* 25(1): 79–93.
- NICOLAIDES, A., 2022. Duty, Human Rights and Wrongs and the Notion of Ubuntu as Humanist Philosophy and Metaphysical Connection, *Athens Journal of Law* 8(2): 123–134.
- VAN NIEKERK, J., 2013. *Ubuntu and Moral Value*. PhD Dissertation. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.
- OSBORNE, J., 2014. *Constructivism: Critiques*, in Richard Gunstone, ed., *Encyclopedia of Science Education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- RAWLS, J., 1988. The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 17(4): 251–276.
- SENSE, O., 2009. Kant's Conception of Human Dignity, *Philosophische Zeitschrift* 100(3): 309–331.
- \_\_\_, 2015. Kant on Human Dignity Reconsidered: A Reply to My Critics, *Kant-Studien* 106(1): 107–129.
- SPIEGELBERG, H., 1951. Supernaturalism or Naturalism: A Study in Meaning and Verifiability, *Philosophy of Science* 18(4): 339–368. URL = <https://doi.org/10.1086/287168>
- SUMMER INSTITUTE, 2002. *Kantian Ethical Thought*. Council for Philosophical Studies (original work published 1983).
- TODD, M. J., trans., 1990s? Chaliel, Catherine. *What Ought I to Do?: Morality in Kant and Levinas*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- TUTU, D., 1999. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Random House.
- UNITED NATIONS, 1948. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. URL = [www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights](http://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights)
- WIREDU, K., 1990. An Akan Perspective on Human Rights, in A.A. An-Na'im and F.M. Deng, eds., *Human Rights in Africa*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press: 243–260.
- WOOD, A. W., 2005. *Kant*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

# Gullible Legitimation of Poverty through Prophetism: The Case of Zimbabwe

Gaudencia Mudada, MA

Lecturer and PhD Candidate, University of Zimbabwe (Harare, Zimbabwe)

## Abstract

Prophetism has become a controversial and contested terrain in Zimbabwe, despite some taking it as the solution to Africa's problem of democracy and lack of human development. Prophetism is declared as part of the developmental package. The discourse of Prophetism in Zimbabwe has been invoked and implicated in the power and political dynamics, with it being accused of perpetuating the dominance and subordination of ordinary Zimbabweans by those in power and their access to national resources. The birth of the new crop of prophets in Zimbabwe around the turn of the century was heralded as a new beginning for Zimbabwe, which would see the ushering in of an era of prophets who would stand with the people while guiding them to the promised land of 'milk and honey'. However, with the passage of time, this wave of positivism soon gave way to harsh economic meltdown and poisoned politics which also realised the birthing of 'portfolio or briefcase prophets' whose lifeline or benefits and true allegiance was to political leaders and not the masses or ordinary congregants, while in some cases the state has turned a blind eye on the publicised omission and commission of Prophets' transgressions. This paper makes the case that prophetism in Zimbabwe has legitimised certain political players while delegitimising and silencing both alternative players and the suffering masses.

**Keywords:** Prophetism, Poverty, Political legitimation, Zimbabwe, Human development

## Introduction

Christianity, which is the foundation of the prophets' religion, came to Africa with the Portuguese and Dutch missionaries who came to colonise the continent. The religion brought by the colonialists was used as a political tool to gain the confidence and trust of the locals and then used to manipulate them. In contemporary Zimbabwe, one sees the continuation of this trend by the government of the day. However, they not only use Christian pastors and prophets but also incorporate in-

digenous African churches as well as African Traditional Religion practitioners. Prophets like Amos, Daniel and Isaiah were known to actively participate in the politics of their day. This is an indication of how politics is embodied or centred on religion. Zimbabwean politicians are known for seeking divine assistance, revelation and protection during campaigns. The church itself dabbles in politics, for example, when electing church officials who themselves canvass for votes.

## Religion and Politics: The Interface

Tshaka and Senokoane [2016] argue that it is clear that the entrenched idea of the separation between the material and the spiritual is problematic, especially now when the gap between the haves and the have-nots in Zimbabwe has significantly grown. Christians, because they are affected by politics, can and must become involved in politics, thus making the point that politics is unavoidable yet necessary. According to Bridston [1969:116], 'the problem is that the church generally has denied its character as a political institution, has camouflaged its political processes, and has refused to admit the political responsibilities of its leaders.' Like many African countries, the communal way of life

UMUNTU  
NGUMUNTU  
NGABANTU

and the individuals' duty to further the community's common good matter. *Ubuntu* is a clear example of how a particular religious group does not have the exclusive right to ownership of human dignity. *Ubuntu* is the theory of people of Bantu descent whose core idea is that *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which is loosely translated to mean 'a person is a person because of or through others.' For scholars like Mangena [2019] and Metz [2012], a person acquires personhood or humanity only through peers and the community. This conception of dignity with a Sub-Saharan lineage is the view that our communal nature makes us the most important beings in the world. *Ubuntu* argues that our

dignity is constituted by our relationship with others, as argued by Botman [2000], who posits that the dignity of human beings emanates from the networks of relationships with others. *Ubuntu*, therefore, sets certain guidelines emphasising interdependence and community-centred personhood and how individuals ought to treat each other and relate. In other words, the core prescription of *Ubuntu* is treating every person with respect, concern, and friendliness. Only such treatment conforms to the Ubuntu philosophy, leading to personal and communal development. Human beings are created as social beings. It has to be understood that it is through socialisation that we come to-

gether, share and learn from one another. It is also coupled with valuable information about life and the skills needed to live well, and this togetherness can be a powerful tool for promoting human development.

Significantly, we ask the question: What purpose does politics serve? Hulled [1993:13] gives this directive about politics: 'Political governance ... implies deliberations, aspiration for rationality, and subjecting governance by folkways to questioning and criticism'. If the church or Christian minister is not involved in politics, how then do they become part of the mentioned process of deliberations? The problem of

the involvement or non-involvement of church leaders or new age prophets in party politics is further exacerbated by a recent past that has elevated political correctness above sincerity. Political correctness not only plagues the current Zimbabwean society, but because what affects the civil community also affects the Christian community, this problem of political correctness is even more strongly applied in the church through a church order that has not allowed itself to move away from its past.

Prophetic activity is often characterised by either pro-state or anti-state prophecy. Pro-state or centre prophecy aims to protect the image of those in power through legitimising and sanitising state activities, whether these activities benefit the general populace or not. Pro-state prophets use the moral authority they derive from their religious positions to sway public opinion and actions. Anti-state or periphery prophets operate outside the formal institutions of government and are usually pro-majority or the general populace. They expose the supposed evils perpetrated by the system and therefore offer checks and balances on the state. This paper aims to show how religion has been used as a weapon of political gain by politicians. Some Zimbabwean prophets have been known to use religion to advance the political cause for some political parties and individuals, leading to the neglect of their mandate to protect the common good.

Religion and politics have a salient relationship which ought to be understood contextually [Levine 1986; Beyers 2015]. The very nature of the affinity of religion and politics in Africa creates the perception that religion can be manipulated in politics. Since

1980, when Zimbabwe attained its independence, Christian leaders have enjoyed an advantageous relationship with the Zimbabwean government and the ruling party. Chaguta [2018] posits that politicians such as the late President, R. G Mugabe, who despite being Catholic would attend different denomination conferences wearing their different regalia in a bid to garner votes for his party during elections while Nelson Chamisa the leader of the main opposition party in Zimbabwe the Citizens Coalition for Change is an ordained pastor of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe. Is this not then the use of religion by politicians as a tool for furthering their political agenda? Chitando [2013] argues that religious leaders and political leaders almost always have the same ideologies, which has led to the strengthening of religious leaders' influence on political issues.

With its own challenges, it cannot be denied that the church is still perceived to be one of the most credible institutions. This is because churches are trusted and presented as institutions that are better placed to assist communities in struggling against issues of poverty, among other problems people face. Politics cannot be separated from ethical considerations. Barth [1989:284] makes this point poignantly clear:

**“The poor, the socially and economically weak and threatened, will always be the object of the church’s primary and particular concern, and it will always insist on the state’s special responsibility for these weaker members of society.”**

It is from such premises that one can conclude that politics cannot be separated from religious con-

siderations. Given the fact that politics has a very intentional role to play in society and is concerned with the good of society before anything else, Zimbabwean prophets tend to align themselves with political leaders and, as a result, have weakened other leaders who do not always support state policies. Some prophets have been given positions in government and have been invited to attend dubious inauguration ceremonies where they sing politicians' praises as true political liberators and often offer prayers for the new leaders. They, in return, condemn opposition politicians as sellouts, conmen, political prostitutes and other derogatory which results in the prophets undermining the true role of the church in fighting for the weak.

Manyeruke [2013] argues that Zimbabwean churches are full of political activists who are part and parcel of political decision-making in Zimbabwe. It cannot be underestimated that what we believe religiously will affect our political beliefs and practices. Zimbabwean politicians are known to visit various church denominations during their campaigns, where they mobilise people to vote for them and their political parties. Churches have been beneficiaries of the Land Reform Program in Zimbabwe, with some individual prophets benefiting directly. Some scholars have argued that these land allocations, which have been under the guise of promotion of self-sustenance, are nothing but luring of positive attitudes towards the government, but most importantly, the ruling party in Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF).

Biblical prophets such as Amos and Nathan participated in the

politics of their day and often legitimised the rulers of their day despite their flaws and injustices that citizens suffered under their rule. Machingura [2012] brings to the fore the argument that Mugabe was propped up by religious leaders who praised and glorified his reign by emphasising his “God given” leadership abilities whilst neglecting to speak about the ills that were inflicted on the ordinary citizens by Mugabe’s party and government. Popular deliverance ministries such as United Family International Church (UFIC), which is led by Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, pray for political leaders who sometimes will be in the audience during the services. Granted, political leaders also have the right to deliverance and prayers, but the purpose of these ministries ought to be to motivate and give hope to the ordinary

church members who are burdened by socio-economic challenges such as unemployment. Manyeruke and Hamauswa [2013] argue that true prophets need to have the best interests of the people at heart. However, the situation on the ground is different, where Zimbabwe has seen a generation of prophets who are power hungry, fame hungry and fortune hungry, all at the expense of their “flock.” It is the argument of this paper that the church ought to influence governance through challenging unjust social systems by championing democratic processes.

Prophets and some members of the top leadership have benefited politically, socially and economically from politics as a result of their participation in partisan politics. Churches like Forward in Faith Ministries International (FI-

## Political Violence and Elections

According to the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace [2000], political violence is ‘any form of violence that seeks to achieve certain desired political objectives by enhancing the political fortunes of the perpetrator or negating those of the opponent.’ Assault, rape, murder, arson, robbery and theft are some of the forms of political violence. It is difficult for democracy to exist in such environments where political processes are compromised.

The Zimbabwean government has never failed to honour the requirements of its constitution that elections be held every five years. The year 2000 elections were the most critical as they marked a significant shift in voter opinion as a result of the emergence of a worthwhile opposition party, the

Movement for Democratic Change, which threatened to topple the ruling party, ZANU (PF), from power. The ruling party, ZANU (PF), unleashed a political terror campaign whose aim was to crush opposition support. In campaign speeches, ZANU (PF) leaders and candidates seemed to sanction the use of violence and intimidation against political opponents. Then ZANU (PF) Secretary for Information and Publicity, Nathan Shamuyarira, is quoted as saying, ‘the area of violence is an area where ZANU PF has a very strong, long and successful history.’ This was a clear admission of the ruling party’s reliance on coercive and intimidating tactics.

FMI, also known as ZAOGA) and the Zion Christian Church have annually benefited from agricultural inputs, food hampers and monetary benefits from the state. They have also been allocated land through the government’s Land Reform and Resettlement Programme, which the religious have argued has significantly improved their congregants’ lives through the creation of employment and helped improve food security in their communities. However, it is the submission of this paper that these prophets have failed to see the root causes of injustice, corruption and internal conflicts. Many Christians in Zimbabwe have learned the art of survival, while their leaders have chosen silence as their answer and have silently confined the work of salvation of souls.

Elections in Zimbabwe are often characterised by claims of violence and human rights violations, which have produced a polarised society where ordinary, innocent people suffer from socio-economic problems. Political parties have been involved in acts of violence in acts of violence in their bid to gain political support. Critics have questioned the role of the church in such a crisis. Can the church afford to “hold its peace” while the people it supposedly ought to serve are living in abject poverty, unemployed and suffering other social ills? Is the church not supposed to bring salvation and deliver the people from anything that prevents them from enjoying life in its fullness [John 10:10]? Is the church only for spiritual freedom and not political, social, economic and ideological freedom?

## The Church's Response

The church's role is that of advocating for justice and peace, which form the basis of human rights and dignity in any society. It is the sovereign responsibility of the church leaders to not only uphold the faith, but also to speak out firmly in the face of violence, injustice, among other ills, regardless of who is perpetrating these crimes. Zimbabwean church leaders, especially the "new age" prophets, have failed to act, mobilise their energy and political will to be part of the solution to the Zimbabwean social, economic, political and civil problems. The co-option of church leaders by the ruling ZANU (PF) party can be interpreted as an attempt to stifle the prophetic voice. Prophets like Walter Magaya of Prophetic Healing Deliverance (PHD) Ministries, Emmanuel Makandiwa of United Family International Church (UFIC), and Andrew Wutaunashe of Family of God (FOG) are some of the key centre prophets in Zimbabwe who have remained mum in the face of the growing loss of dignity of the person among the citizens of Zimbabwe. Thinkers such as Lobo [1993] have defended these prophets by arguing that some politicians are so suspicious about religious leaders that the prophets encounter opposition and even threats when they exercise their prophetic function of denouncing injustices and violations of human rights. He argues that some politicians have gone to the extent of advising church leaders to shepherd their flock and not meddle in politics.

## Periphery Prophets

Periphery prophets have sought to build a coalition that reflects the multiplicity of their religion as a whole, which they argue provides them with the political legitimacy they need to fight for programs and policies that promote social justice, economic inclusion, human dignity, and the common good. They seek to empower ordinary citizens to hold government accountable and advance what they view as the core principles of the Zimbabwean Constitution.

The Zimbabwean Catholic Bishops' Conference, as cited by the Catholic Commission for Justice [2000] and Peace, was concerned about the growing loss of dignity of the person among Zimbabweans. They argued that 'the Lord God created humanity in his image and gave us dignity above all creatures.' What we witnessed in Zimbabwe is a deprivation of this God-given dignity of the citizens by politicians for their selfish political gain. This is a serious abuse of both political power and fellow human beings. In their

message, the bishops reminded the politicians that everyone has a sovereign right to participate freely in political activities in one's society. The Declaration of Rights, as enshrined in the Zimbabwean constitution, contains various rights and freedoms, the observance, enjoyment and enforcement of which would make Zimbabwe a stable, peaceful and prosperous country.

Banana [1996] argues that the church must continue to be the watchdog of democracy and ensure that no impediments are placed on the path of those Zimbabweans wishing to exercise their constitutional right to vote. Dictatorship can breed discontent, for as long as there exists the possibility that, when the situation demands to change a government by democratic means, the temptation to resort to underhanded methods will always be averted. Therefore, the church has a mandate, by virtue of its mission, to exercise its prophetic voice.



## Prophets and Human Development

According to the Human Development Report [2021-2022], human development focuses on the improvement of people's lives, giving people more freedom and opportunities to live lives that they value. In effect, this means developing people's abilities and giving them a chance to use them. Human development entails providing people with opportunities, not insisting that they make use of them. The process of human development should at least create an environment for people, individually and collectively, to develop to their full potential and to have a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives which they value.

Politics deals with civil government in a material world. The material and spiritual are not opposed to each other, as the Persians taught. They are together just as the man's body and soul are together. A correct approach to politics involves both the material and spiritual. Much of politics deals with economic matters. The

economic questions are usually the most important ones in political campaigns. Economics has to do with making a living. It deals with man's work, his calling under God. The Christian leader and his or her congregation ought to be extremely interested in politics because the political issues and decisions affect them at the very core of their activity on Earth.

Prophets, it can be argued, should be development-oriented and not conventionally static. To fulfil this role effectively must always have their loyalties with the people and not necessarily the political leadership of the country. They have to take a leading role in defining democratic principles which ensure and encourage freedom, justice, and above all, the human development of the people. Like democracy, the church exists through the commitment and active participation of its members. The church represented by the prophets is therefore a midwife in bringing people together for a common purpose. It is the responsibility of the prophets to ensure that people exercise their rights as citizens who do not live only for a future world but for a present where their capabilities are fully realised.

Africa's economic progress has been affected by corruption, which has destroyed politicians' moral fibres. Prophets are therefore called upon to stand up against corruption in line with Exodus (23:8), which states that '...you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.' Christian leaders should actively fight against corruption by refusing to give or accept bribes from politicians and their surrogates. Prophets need to speak against corruption at all levels, which is understandably not an easy task given that corruption is rampant in Zimbabwe.

Politics deals with civil government in a material world. The material and spiritual are not opposed to each other, as the Persians taught. They are together just as the man's body and soul are together. A correct approach to politics involves both the material and spiritual. Much of politics deals with economic matters. The economic questions are usually the most important ones in political campaigns. Economics has to do with making a living. It deals with man's work, his calling under God. The Christian ought to be extremely interested in politics because the political issues and decisions affect him at the very core of his activity on Earth.

## Prophetism and Democracy

Resolutions about the economy, society and beliefs are taken in the political realm. Thus, the non-existence of a Christian in politics implies that a Christian is not part of this policymaking process, and, because what affects the individual in the Christian community also affects the same individual in the civil community, the idea of the Christian from politics is, in fact, outrageous. Makumbe and Compagnon [1995] argue that a successful democracy must be conducted in accordance with specific legal procedures and pre-conditions. Of utmost importance is transparency, where the various rules, regulations and procedures are adhered to throughout the exercise of elections. Elections must be conducted in a peaceful political environment, which means contestants are free to campaign for support, free to express themselves and their own views about their electorate without fear, intimidation or victimisation [Makumbe & Compagnon 1995]. A climate of tolerance and respect among citizens and political parties or even among various functions within a party strengthens democracy and fosters peaceful political competition, while political intolerance achieves the opposite. Elections are the principal means through which citizens can influence their leaders, select them and depose them. Democracy's guiding principle of citizenship involves the right to equal treatment of human beings, especially in the areas of making collective choices, being equally accountable and accessible to all members of the polity.

Concerning the issue of democracy, churches have a role to play, and prophets ought to be the midwives of democracy and the

watchdogs of human rights. The prophets' job is therefore both prophetic and institutional in effecting the gospel message in the world. Otto [2000] postulates that prophets need to courageously and boldly condemn injustice and oppression, whilst at the same time reminding society about their rights to vote, refrain from political violence, corruption, and tolerance. Otto [2000] further posits that the church, more than any other institution, is in a privileged position to reach the heart of the people.

If the prophets, pastors and other church leaders are to make a difference in people's lives, the church has to be open to dialogue with all forces and movements in society without identifying itself with any one of them. The church ought to make it abundantly clear to political players that it can never be an auxiliary force for any political party and owes no one unquestionable political allegiance. Instead, these prophets should be known as independent forces which avoid partisanship while remaining true to their own mission or challenge the world at large in terms of human development, and the justice of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus. It is also the role of the prophets and pastors to help build a truly democratic Zimbabwe where they can criticise election rigging, political violence, and hold the government accountable for its actions. The slogan "leave politics to politicians" needs to be banished to history, as it is a denial of democracy and development. Politicians need to realise that when Christian leaders engage in political issues, they are not anti-politicians but will be advocating for the ordinary man's well-being.

## Conclusion

A society where people can develop to their full potential and have a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives which they value is what every nation should strive for. Human beings are in constant search for free expression of their ideas and integral human development. This desire for development is at the heart of people's struggles, thus the church's crucial role of guiding the people as they fight against social, economic and political injustices. The new age prophets and other church leaders, therefore, ought to create an atmosphere where genuine democracy and human development can flourish. To do this, pastors and prophets need to empower the people to build their societies. If the prophets stand by the people, Zimbabwe will move from a situation of underdevelopment to one of justice, development and genuine freedom of the masses.

A deplorable lack of unity between the different Christian denominations has been exploited by the government and the media. The government occasionally invites centre prophets, pastors, priests and bishops to speak on and support the government's position on behalf of the church, thereby denouncing true Christian voices as being spiritually misguided. This has often been interpreted as an unwillingness by the political

leaders to have independent churches which cannot align with their political objectives. It seems the state does not appreciate the church as a partner in dialogue, asking or questioning their integrity, as evidenced by the vilification of peripheral prophets such as Talent Chiwenga and Pius Ncube of the Catholic Church. Zimbabwean politicians want the church's full support, whether they are right or wrong, or else they vilify the church or leaders as enemies or irrelevant outsiders.

Although the church does not have the blueprint for human development, it can assess the present situation of the people in light of the demands and principles of the kingdom of God.

Although some church leaders have raised their voices against the injustices and poverty the ordinary people are facing in Zimbabwe, their voices would be more audible if the Christian community leadership spoke with one voice. It appears these prophets are not sure what the solutions to the problems bedeviling the country are. The question to ask is, in addition to prayer, what should Christian leaders do in response to gross injustices and disrespect for life and human rights? The normal response of Prophets in the face of dictatorial rule ought to be to stand with the ordinary people.



Photo by Gracious Adebayo on Unsplash

## References

- BANANA, C. S., 1996. *Politics of Repression and Resistance: Face to Face with Combat Theology*. Gweru: Mambo Press.
- BARTH, K., 1989. *Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- BEYERS, J., 2015. Religion as a Political Instrument: The Case of Japan and South Africa, *Journal for the Study of Religion* 28(1).
- BRIDSTON, K. R., 1969. *Church Politics*. New York: World Publishing Company.
- CHAGUTA, T., 2018. *The Church and Politics: The Zimbabwean Perspective*. Bulawayo: Bulawayo 24 Press.
- CHITANDO, E., 2013. *Prayers and Players: Religion and Politics in Zimbabwe*. Harare: Sapes Books.
- CATHOLIC COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, 2000. *Crisis of Governance*, Volume One.
- LEVINE, G. J., 1986. On the Geography of Religion, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 11(4). The Royal Geographical Society.
- MACHINGURA, F., 2012. *The Messianic Feeding of the Five Thousand: An Analysis of John 6 in the Context of Messianic Leadership in Zimbabwe*. Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press.
- MAKUMBE, J. and COMPAGNON, D., 1995. *Behind the Smokescreen: The Politics of Zimbabwe's 1995 General Elections*. Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications.
- MANYERUKE, C. and HAMAUSWA, S., 2013. *Prophets, Profits and the Bible in Zimbabwe: Festschrift for Aynos Masotcha Moyo*. Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press.
- MHANDARA, L., Manyeruke, C., Muguti, T., and others, 2013. The Church and Political Transition in Zimbabwe: The Inclusive Government Context, *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 3(1).
- OTTO, M., 2000. *The Role of the Christian Churches in Democratic Malawi*. Blantyre: Kachere Series.
- TSHAKA, R. S. and SENOKOANE, B. B., 2016. The Christian Politician? An Investigation into the Theological Grounding for Christians' Participation in Politics, *HTS Theological Studies* 72(1).
- UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (UNDP), 2022. *Human Development Report 2021–22: Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives—Shaping Our Future in a Transforming World*. New York: UNDP.

## **DOMUNI-PRESS**

### **publishing house of DOMUNI UNIVERSITAS**

« Le livre grandit avec le lecteur »  
“The book grows with the reader”

#### **The University**

Domuni Universitas was founded in 1999 by French Dominicans. It offers Bachelor, Master and Doctorate degrees by distance learning, as well as “à la carte” (stand-alone) courses and certificates in philosophy, theology, religious sciences, and social sciences. It welcomes several thousand students on its teaching platform, which operates in five languages: French, English, Spanish, Italian, and Arabic. The platform is accompanied by more than three hundred professors and tutors. Anchored in the Order of Preachers, Domuni Universitas benefits from its centuries-old tradition of study and research. Innovative in many ways, Domuni consists of an international network that offers courses to students worldwide.

*To find out more about Domuni: [www.domuni.eu](http://www.domuni.eu)*

#### **The publishing house**

Domuni-Press disseminates research and publishes works in the academic fields of interest of Domuni Universitas: theology, philosophy, spirituality, history, religions, law and social sciences. Domuni-Press is part of a lively research community located at the heart of the Dominican network. Domuni-Press aims to bring readers closer to their texts by making it possible, via the help of today’s digital technology, to have immediate access to them, while ensuring a quality paperback edition. Each work is published in both forms. The key word is simplicity. The subjects are approached with a clear editorial line: academic quality, accessible to all, with the aim of spreading the richness of Christian thought. Six collections are available: theology, philosophy, spirituality, Bible, history, law and social sciences. Domuni-Press has its own online bookshop: [www.domunipress.fr](http://www.domunipress.fr). Its books are also available on its main distance selling website: Amazon, Fnac.com, and in more than 900 bookshops and sales outlets around the world.

*To find out more about the publishing house: [www.domunipress.fr](http://www.domunipress.fr)*

**Find us online:**  
<https://jocap.domuni.eu/>