

Conceptualising

Ubuntu as deconstruction of solidarity and collective action

In South Africa we have the wonderful concept of “Ubuntu” which translates as “humanity”. Ubuntu speaks to solidarity and human collective effort to achieve unity or oneness, and has a beautiful history. Today, however, Ubuntu is often reduced to a theoretical concept, sometimes used for political or personal gain. The original meaning was about solidarity to withstand the test of time, togetherness as our point of strength to fight and hold each other by the hand. We have an obligation to stand as one, to win as collective, to care for one another.

Perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to bring us back to humanity, where equality is natural and normal. Our earthly statuses and possessions have become useless, nothing matters more than the people around us. The suffering of another is the suffering of all. COVID-19 can attack our bodies and affect our self-centred social lives, but it has the potential to bring out humanity in all of us.

Would you still hang on to your racial prejudices, bitterness, and arrogance? There is no single person with a sound mind who would still be pursuing selfish agendas. All corrupt individuals are coming to the realisation that they have been thoughtless; the time of repentance is when death is eminent to all, even the so-called powerful are susceptible. Humans are meant to be equal; not that some will not thrive more than others but, while thriving, have the consciousness that whatever talent, ability or skill any of us has is a gift to fulfil the broad purpose of human solidarity (Oelofsen, 2015). The idea of appearing as a distinctive person through accumulation of material

possessions is irrelevant to a unified nation governed by collective common course.

Many companies have closed down because of the national lockdown and many people will not be paid, instead hoping that UIF will be made available during this period. However, this is not likely to happen if their companies were not registered with the UIF if they run informal businesses or work for commission or as freelancers. Therefore, those of us who will still get their salaries should help those affected. We cannot talk about love, compassion and Ubuntu without practising its noble principles. Mandela (1994) stated that “real leaders must be ready to sacrifice all for the freedom of their people”, and these are indeed times for us to sacrifice our selfishness for humanity. If I have food to eat, no one should die of hunger, and if I have clothes no one should be naked. Solidarity is crucial and collective actions produce desirable humanistic results when people value cohesion.

In African culture, we are all family

African history attests to the fact that there is no grave resulting from hunger. In the African culture we do not have an orphan because everyone around you constitutes a family. Some of these valuable beliefs or practices have been swallowed by modernity, but now we have a common enemy, COVID-19, and therefore solidarity, charity and collective action to ensure the well-being of all persons around us is pertinent.

The only fundamental variable to observe in order to lend a helping hand is humanness. We have degenerated our

humanness to party politics and racial, gender and economic discrimination. We can be better, we can all thrive and yes we can tackle inequality adequately.

COVID-19 has brought an important truth to our face: that we have adjusted to living with abnormalities, such as a Sandton suburb and its neighbouring Alexander Township, which depict an ugly South African truth of proximate co-existence of immense wealth and abject poverty. There are many variables that continue to divide us, and also expose the weakness of our education system, because it has failed to create graduates that understand their role in the society. We all come out as self-centred individuals who feel they need to live in their own safer, cleaner and better suburb than the rest of the people.

There is a great need for people to put their resources together and build better communities through stern collective programmes of action, in order to realise the growth and well-being of every person. Community efforts to create meaningful opportunities for everyone should emerge now and be carried out even after we have triumphed over COVID-19.

Biko (1978, p. 68) asserted that “Black Consciousness is in essence the realization by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression”. Poverty is our common enemy irrespective of our racial and economic distinctiveness. A fight against COVID-19 propels us to work together in defeating our enemy that utilises our inequalities as weapon for our destruction. It can be defeated through

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genuine solidarity and concrete collective action, but this should not be reactionary, because that will lead to selfishness and deviation from the common path. Solidarity is not something to be used for publicity reasons, but in recognition that we are all responsible for one another. The fall of my neighbour is my downfall too.

The restoration of our sanity should mean conceptualisation of Ubuntu as our governing principle to humanness and the power of unity.

The concept of Ubuntu as an African perspective on human interaction has been defined as, "I am because we are" (Tutu, 2007, p. 3). This interpretation points at the importance of communal life, in contrast to the gap between rich and poor that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed. The poor masses live in overcrowded areas where they are not able to practise social/physical distancing, making it difficult to manage the lockdown and curb the spread of the virus.

The shortcomings of government in addressing inequalities since 1994 has made the country vulnerable to social and health ills, particularly COVID-19. The existing party politics have failed to confront the neo-liberal predispositions conceded by white supremacy; instead, we have the elite class, characterised mainly by black politicians. The rhetoric of the elite class is dangerous because it resonates with and resembles that of the poor masses, but in fact, it represents a completely different ideology, i.e. neo-liberalism. The elite class has abandoned Ubuntu, in pursued of self-interest, personal glory and materialism.

The fundamental conceptualisation of Ubuntu lies with consciousness of the fact that one cannot flourish without the rest of the society flourishing (Oelofsen, 2015). Chasing after personal gratification at the expense of the majority's wellbeing is un-

African; thus, individualisation represents a moral degeneration in the African perspective (Daley, 2020). The politics of stomach marked with personality egotism has given rise to intense corruption among politicians, mainly in government, and the unfortunate consequences of their actions affect the poor majority of South Africa.

Too little, too late?

The government's current initiatives to curb the spread of COVID-19 such as relocating people from overcrowded areas, sheltering homeless people and subsidising small and medium farmers, should not be applauded, as they should have been implemented as part of usual service delivery not as emergency measures. Government should be expanding the capacity of health care facilities, the health care labour force and the distribution of basics such as foods to households during the lockdown. Government failed to address common social problems prior to COVID-19, so it is absurd to think that they can address the contagion of COVID-19.

The lockdown is becoming more impracticable by the day, as the governments begin to recognise its inadequacy. There have been relaxations of some lockdown regulations, such as permitting taxis to carry more passengers and the return of certain informal traders. These relaxations are necessary considering the intense poverty faced by majority of South Africans. However, they defeat the purpose of lockdown.

Disunity, lack of patriotism and self-serving leadership characterise South Africa in the democratic epoch, whereas the hope of South Africa winning the fight against COVID-19 lies in thoughtful solidarity and commitment to concrete collective action. United we triumph. As chapter 5 of the Freedom Charter

stipulates: "South Africa belongs to all who live in it", therefore let us make our country comfortable and conducive for everyone during these trying times. ☀

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