

Ubuntu and ‘Development’: Decolonizing Epistemologies

What is Ubuntu?”

The proverb ‘umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu’, translated as ‘a person is a person through other persons’ is often given when asked for a definition of Ubuntu¹. However, Ubuntu as a term is hard to define. There is no general agreement on whether to talk about Ubuntu as a concept, a philosophy, an (religious) ethic, a cosmology, or a way of living. All these dimensions overlap – and all categories tend to display perspectives which are rooted in epistemologies² of the global North³. From an Ubuntu perspective, these categorizations would probably not make sense, because they oppose the holistic and relational ideas that most interpretations of Ubuntu display. While sharing some of the most prominent examples, this article tries to rely on voices that know Ubuntu from a lived experience.

Augustine Shutte, a South African scholar, understands Ubuntu as holistic. He believes there is a close connection between the visible and invisible as well as between humans, animals, and things. Shutte prescribes God as the centre of this cosmivision (Shutte: 2001, 22). He states Ubuntu is relational because “each individual member of the community sees the community as themselves as one with them in character and identity [...] every other member as another self” (ibid., 27). Shutte also describes Ubuntu as an ideal that has never been fully practised (ibid., 32).

According to the Danish scholar Christian B. Gade, a common understanding of the proverb ‘I am because we are’ was established as a dominant discourse of the understanding of Ubuntu, after the end of Apartheid in the 1990s in South Africa (Gade: 2011, 313-320). Some people would understand Ubuntu as a moral quality of a person, and some would understand it as a philosophy, an ethic, or a worldview. The understanding of personhood is central because some people believe that: “all Homo sapiens are persons, to others only some Homo sapiens count as persons: those who are black; who have been incorporated into personhood; who behave in a morally acceptable manner” (Gade: 2012, 494). To those who believe Ubuntu is a quality that can be acquired, they agree that this quality can equally be lost by committing crimes against humanity such as rape or murder (ibid., 498).

Desmond Tutu, Nobel peace laureate and former bishop of Capetown, draws on the Christian idea of forgiveness and the interconnectedness of humankind as a key element of Ubuntu – known as *Ubuntu theology* (cf. Haws: 2009, 477-89; Battle 2009). Nyasha Mboti, professor of Apartheid Studies at the University of Free State in Johannesburg, South Africa, criticizes Shutte’s understanding of Ubuntu as a narrow dichotomy, based on a generalizing view that sees Europeans as individualistic and Africans as communitarian (cf. Mboti: 2015, 135f). Mboti

¹ Cf. Gade: 2011. The example here is given in Nguni (cf. Gade: 2011), but exists in many Bantu languages.

² Epistemology is essentially the study of knowledge and how knowledge is produced: the condition and validation of knowledge, of what is considered to be *true* than other alternatives. This includes a normative dimension (cf. Santos: 2018, 2).

³ Global North and global South are not geographical, but epistemic (see epistemology) units. To break it down: the (in itself very heterogenic) global South is the part of the world that has rather suffered from colonial, capitalist and patriarchal expansions and its historic consequences. The Global North is the part of the world that has rather benefitted from all these systemic injustices (cf. Santos: 2018, 1; Ziai: 2013, 732).

does not consider individual freedom and interdependent freedom as mutually exclusive (ibid., 126).

Siphokazi Magdala, lecturer at Rhodes University, SA, and Ezra Chitando, professor at the University of Zimbabwe, assess that Ubuntu has been used to define the rights of gay and lesbian people as decadent Western identity (cf. Magadla/Chitando: 2009, 188). Both argue that patriarchy exists in European cultures as well (cf. ibid., 179) and stress that there should be more focus on Ubuntu's emancipatory potential (cf. ibid., 190). Beyond that, a LGBTIQ+ perspective is basically lacking in the discourse of Ubuntu: most sources found were written by men, rarely dealing beyond heterosexual, cis-male perspectives.

Lesly Le Grange, professor at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, points out the dangers of Ubuntu when it is interpreted in a narrowly ethnocentric fashion to exclude those that are considered as 'outsiders' or when it is adopted by governments or supranational organizations to suit their agendas (Le Grange: 2019, 326).

This paragraph's intent is to show that Ubuntu is part of an ongoing, dynamic debate and all definitions are mere spot checks. There are probably as many understandings of Ubuntu as there are people relating to it. Still, one can identify with elements that occur frequently in the understanding(s) of Ubuntu. These include (but are not limited to) relational, holistic, spiritual, human quality, ethical, divine, and communitarian aspects.

What is 'Development'?

"Development" is an expression of that western enterprise, which consists in the development of the own world view myths and ideas of social and political life, and to spread their usefulness in other parts of the world. "Development has turned into one of the most powerful myths of our epoch." Felwine Sarr, Afrotopia⁴

At the beginning of the cold war in 1949, US-president Harry Truman (1884-1972) introduced the terms 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' countries. He stressed that the knowledge and welfare of the US can be shared with 'underdeveloped' countries for the greater good, and for a more peaceful and prosperous world. What was considered to be the *white man's burden* in colonial times – which was to bring 'civilization' to the 'uncivilized' – quickly shifted to 'civilize' the 'uncivilized' towards a world where the American way of life could flourish (cf. Doty: 1996, 83). Truman's approach to development is colonial, because his structure of thinking follows exactly those of the colonizers: someone who knows better can therefore help people who (supposedly) know little – in the name of 'progress'. Since then, many policies in 'development' have followed this structure (cf. Ziai: 2016, 27-35). It must be pointed out that the inherent devilish relation of colonialism and racism within the concept of 'development' is still present.

The term 'development'⁵ has indeed become highly controversial. There have been multiple projects carried out in the name of 'development' worldwide. In the name of sustainable 'development', dams with hydroelectric power plants have been built to provide 'green' electricity. However, for these plants to be built, indigenous and native people are

⁴ Sarr: 2019, 21. Translation from the German version by the author.

⁵ In order to stress that there is no agreement on the definition of 'development', although one name for so many acts may suggest so, and to point out the Eurocentric and colonial implications, I use 'development' and 'underdevelopment' in quotation marks only.

continuously and violently evicted from lands on which they live. In pursuit of economic 'development', millions of people have been financially assisted to reach improved living standards. But at the same time, environmentally protected virgin forests are being burned down to for agricultural purposes. So, what is the 'development' people are talking about?

A German professor from Kassel university, Aram Ziai, follows four assumptions considering 'development' discourses. The first is that 'development' is a good thing. The second and third assumptions are that 'development' can be achieved and realized globally. Units can be compared according to their 'development' respectively. The final assumption is that 'development' exists as a conceptual framework because it allows us to interpret things as either 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' (Ziai: 2016, 56ff). These assumptions create three major problems with several implications. One of the issues is that industrialized countries consider themselves as 'developed' in relation to other less 'developed' countries which need 'development'. Hence, more 'developed' countries apply specific implications to help, usually through transferring capital, technology, and market interventions. These interventions are disguised as 'development' programmes – relying on the knowledge of so-called *experts* who know how to attain a well-functioning society and are considered well equipped and legitimate for such a task (Ziai: 2016, 56-58). Another issue is that these understandings and implications of 'development' become Eurocentric because the 'developed' European and US -way of life is always portrayed to be the role model. As previously discussed, this follows the logic of historic colonial expansion (cf. Ziai: 2016). Individuals of the global South are forced to implement certain behaviours and changes in the name of 'development', mostly by organizations dominated by epistemologies of the global North. As the planet faces great challenges due to exhaustive CO₂- consumption, it seems a poor idea to look to European and US-models of 'development' (which are big consumers of fossil fuels) for solutions.

From the aforementioned aspects Ziai discusses, that the idea of 'development' is depoliticising and undemocratic because it represents a starting point of struggles in wealth distribution and land repartition, which are veiled by global statistics. Certain interventions, such as the building of dams and the forced eviction of people against their will appear authoritarian, because the opinion of those directly affected is most often never considered (cf. Ziai: 2016, 59-63). Because interventions of 'development' produce such dire consequences, many have demanded to bury the concept (cf. Ziai: 2013; Sachs: 2010, xv; Gutierrez: 1978, 6-42) or to replace it with different terms and concepts (cf. Gutierrez: 1978, 6-42; Conradie: 2016).

The Notion of 'Development' in Ubuntu

If one were to speak about 'development' from an Ubuntu perspective – what would it look like?

The ambiguous concept of 'development' is part of a discourse dominated by the global North while Ubuntu originated in the global South. This is why it may seem to be a wrongly placed question to ask about the notion of development in Ubuntu. The examples I would like to introduce will show that the question can be put as an act of intercultural translation. The examples will also show that elements of Ubuntu and 'development', are strongly entangled and interwoven.⁶ There is literature linking Ubuntu to 'development': In the following

⁶ I would like to point out that I regard the term culture(s) as inherently entangled, interwoven and dynamic – feeding on many sources. The contrary would be an understanding of culture as

examples from (I) business ethics, (II) a political model for democracy and Ubuntu as a foundation for (III) an 'African conception of 'development' are considered briefly.

I. Business Ethics

Mvume H. Dandala, former Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, emphasizes the importance of Ubuntu values in the field of business ethics (Dandala: 2009, 259-78). In his paper he attempts to establish good relationships between business partners, workers and employers and aims for economic growth. He strives to empower people towards self-sustainability in a work environment (ibid., 274). Dandala also encourages the tradition of storytelling to pass on knowledge, and cultural heritage. He believes storytelling represents a barrier against colonialism to: "sustain dignity and Ubuntu under humiliating circumstances" (ibid., 264-268).

In Dandala's business ethics, human relations and welfare are always prioritized over the accumulation of material wealth. Human dignity is more important than material wealth because a debtor can repay his debt in a currency he can afford, such as time and labour. He also states that the economy is a tool for self-empowerment and not dependency, and we should always consider the human context and condition when looking for tailor made and dignified solutions.

II. Model of Democracy

Bénézet Bujo, Congolese priest and professor, analyses sub-Saharan traditional political models from the *Bantu* societies⁷ (Bujo: 2009, 391-411). Bujo combines traditional African participative models with democratic models inspired from the US and Europe. "Traditional political models" (ibid., 392) were mostly dismantled during colonization. As an example, Bujo chooses to explain the model of the *Council of Elders* where a chief or a king has to consult the council of elders before making important decisions for the community. If a chief does not fulfil the community's expectations, a new chief would be elected (ibid., 392-394ff). It is also important to recognise that a chief in many African traditions plays the role of an intermediary between the ancestral world and a figure who holds religious and political power (ibid., 393f). This reflects the holistic idea of Ubuntu and a relation between the visible and invisible, unlike in some epistemologies of the global North. Bujo criticises undemocratic and authoritarian African leaders (ibid., 399).

In Bujo's idea of democracy all decisions must be democratically approved by collective participation, particularly on a local level, to prevent the corrupt elites from taking over. This

something pure, something static that needs to be preserved only and that cannot benefit from new inputs. The same principle applies to the genesis of epistemologies.

⁷ Ibid., 392f. Bujo does not explicitly mention Ubuntu, but he refers to examples from the "Bantu" (Bujo: 2009, 394f). Bantu languages refers to a multi-ethnic group of people. Within the bantu language family more than 500 languages exist (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Bantu languages", 2019). The proverb "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu – a person is a person through persons", which is, as mentioned above, widely used to break down a core definition of Ubuntu, is Zulu. Zulu belongs to the Bantu-languages. The realm of thought, of ethics, of society and religion is inseparably inherent to language. Content wise, as will be clear due to the thought of Bujo displayed, I consider Bujo's text to be influenced by what is often cited as Ubuntu thought, although he does not explicitly use the term. Desmond Tutu proceeds similarly in the case of Rwanda (cf. Tutu: 2001, 25; Rauhut: 2015, 280).

structure is similar to that of the subsidiarity-principle of the European Union. All systems, whether economic or political, must be rooted in local tradition so as to make democracy successful (ibid., 409). Bujo has a strong anti-colonial approach and insists that all encounters of the global North and South should take place on eye level (ibid., 410). Overall, Bujo prioritizes human dignity in democratic systems and states: “if the rich West were to collaborate with corrupt Southern elites, unjust structures would simply be promoted [...] the most well-meaning cosmetic corrections will produce no development in line with human dignity.” (ibid., 410).

III. The Good Life: An African Conception of ‘Development’

Motsamai Molefe, researcher at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, outlines a theory of development based on African perspectives with Ubuntu as the foundation. Molefe looks for ‘development’ with a *human face* and aims to particularly add a voice from the global South to the development debate. He also wants to show how a theoretical conception of ‘development’ can be grounded in Ubuntu (Molefe: 2019, 99). Molefe agrees with the dominant discourse of Ubuntu, which considers people as inherently social and characterized as relational, as reflected in the proverb ‘a person is a person through other persons’. He argues that people need each other, to become fully human, to achieve personhood, to achieve moral virtue and to ultimately become Ubuntu: People need a community with moral standards. If a society with moral standards might evoke ideas of constrain: Molefe sees this as a possibility and not as force (ibid., 100-103).

In terms of ‘development’ these foundations mean that the moral goal of Ubuntu is to achieve a normative notion of personhood: “generosity, kindness, compassion, respect and concern for others [...] or behaviour that conduces to the promotion of the welfare of others.” (ibid., 102). Ubuntu describes a good life is lived by a person who lives these virtues (ibid., 103). It enables a just society that allows people to pursue the good life, to pursue Ubuntu (ibid., 104). In a nutshell: A model of ‘development’ must provide capacity to virtue and secure dignity to all: to provide food, health, education and culture. The ultimate criterion depends on whether the means of ‘development’ are adequate, that is if they affirm a good life and a just society.

Ubuntu, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Threat of Epistemicide

As an exhaustive ‘development’ framework, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were introduced by the United Nations member states in 2015 to provide ‘development’ guidelines and goals for the next 15 years. It has been an immense project that provides new strategies to eliminate the planet’s most pressing issues such as poverty, hunger, clean energy, climate action, as well as the protection of non-human life, the reduction of inequalities and economic growth. It is a framework that seeks it’s equal.

The SDGs seem to follow a different approach than other ‘development’ agendas: Some countries could be ‘developing’ towards certain goals, while at the same time other goals may already be achieved. Germany, for example, is seen as ‘developing’ or ‘underdeveloped’, because the country has not met the required reductions in CO₂-emissions. However, regarding other goals which Germany has reached, it may be considered developed. Still, the SDGs use the words ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ which further perpetuate a hierarchy grounded in colonial thinking. Other patterns of colonial thinking remain in some aspects of the SDGs: universal goals for all, with mostly developed countries as role models. This follows US-president Truman’s (neo-)colonial thinking. Beyond this, critics state that there is no

analysis of how the structural roots of poverty, unsustainability, and multidimensional violence are historically grounded in state power, corporate monopolies, neo-colonialism, patriarchal institutions, and other forms of exploitation. The SDGs emphasise economic growth as the key driver of development, contradicting biophysical limits, with the arbitrary adoption of GDP as the indicator of progress. Additionally, culture, ethics, and spirituality are side-lined aspects which are made subservient to economic forces (Khotari, Salleh, Escobar (et al.): 2019, xxvi,).

Let us confront certain SDG goals with Ubuntu's ideas of 'development'. SDG 1; "End Poverty"⁸ reflects poverty as a mere material phenomenon where the poor are defined as having few(er) economic resources (ibid.). This is an important aspect, although it falls short. Ubuntu would also consider poverty to be a crisis of human relations, of dignity rather than purely in economic terms. SDG 8; "Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all"⁹ as well as SDG 13; "Take Urgent Action to Combat Climate Change and its Impacts"¹⁰ strongly contradict each other. Economic growth, which relies on the consumption of fossil fuels falsely regards these resources as limitless, although planetary and human resources are obviously limited. In line with Ubuntu, economic growth as the answer to end poverty would always be seen as a means to self-empowerment and – not as a mere goal in itself. All means taken to achieve these goals must be themselves virtuous (cf. Dandala 2009; Molefe: 2019). Exploitation of human beings and nature seems impossible to Ubuntu, since human dignity prevails over all other goals. A closer look into SDG 9; "Building an Inclusive Infrastructure, Promote Inclusive and Sustainable Industrialization and Foster Innovation"¹¹ has a strong focus on technology and natural science-based knowledge. Ubuntu not only focuses on these forms of knowledge, but also, on traditional ways of creating and passing on knowledge, such as storytelling (cf. Dandala: 2009).

There are underlying epistemologies of SDGs and Ubuntu that would be similar. This article mainly focuses on those mentioned epistemologies which contradict, to make the conflicting aspects of epistemologies evident. The mentioned aspects of SDGs meet with the critique of the Portuguese scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who characterizes epistemologies of the North with universal and non-contextual claims: epistemologies of the global North consider their knowledge as universal and applicable everywhere. This disregards many natural, societal, cultural and political contexts. Epistemologies of the North favour a strict preference of scientific, academic knowledge. This leads to the marginalization of knowledge which does not fulfil these requirements. Santos refers to this marginalized knowledge – I would consider Ubuntu so far to be excluded from the epistemological canon of the global North – as absent epistemologies. Epistemologies of the North marginalize knowledge of the epistemologies of the South by calling them mystic, superstitious, primitive, non-rational or emotional (cf. Santos: 2018, 37ff). To Santos, this exclusion is a waste of valuable knowledge following the neo-colonial patterns of excluding ways of knowing for a self-declared better good. He considers this a cognitive injustice that he calls epistemicide (ibid., 296).

How to Avoid the Dangers of Single Story: Decolonizing Knowledge towards an Ecology of Knowledge

⁸ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal1>, [11.12.2020].

⁹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8>, [12.12.2020].

¹⁰ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal13>, [11.12.2020].

¹¹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal9>, [11.12.2020].

To decolonize knowledge means to abandon standards of Northern epistemologies as universal and open up to an ecology of knowledge (cf. *ibid.*, 8). Unlike epistemologies of the North, epistemologies of the South do not aim to replace one knowledge with another. They aim for an ecology of knowledge, which means the coexistence of “different ways of knowing” (*ibid.*, 8). An ecology of knowledge is also beyond cultural diversity: it is a diversity of *cultures*, which are mutually entangled and learn from each other, enjoying the same appreciation. While for epistemologies of the global North, not to know something is mostly considered a weakness, epistemologies of the South are aware that knowledge is always deficient. The fact that epistemologies of the South know about their own limits opens up debate with other forms of knowledge (cf. Santos: 2018).

An outstanding example of decolonizing knowledge and a call for the existence of different knowledges at the same time – an ecology of knowledge – is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s famous speech “The danger of a single story”¹². According to Adichie, the problem with stereotypes is that they are generated when only *one* part of a story – and not the complete story – is told¹³. When it comes to ‘development’ and the African continent, most people from the global North tend to think about Africa as a place with more deficiencies than potential – they are looking only at *one* part of a story. My question of what Ubuntu would consider as ‘development’ and what ‘development’ can learn from Ubuntu, is a contribution to break this narrow narrative, to decolonize knowledge and to open towards an ecology of knowledge: to show what epistemologies of the global North can learn from Ubuntu.

What Can ‘Development’ Learn from Ubuntu?

Ubuntu has given practical suggestions about what ‘development’ could mean. Moving forward, Ubuntu can teach the numerous ‘development’ agencies of the global North – states, NGOs, and religious organs alike – to seriously consider their own epistemologies first. Ubuntu can be an example of an ecology of knowledge, where knowledge from Ubuntu is combined with another knowledge to create something new. This could range from a state containing (legal) Ubuntu elements to business ethics following Ubuntu aspects. This is also known as *cognitive decolonization*. *Cognitive decolonization* is to move towards an ecology of knowledge. This means unlearning knowledge reflecting the hierarchy between former colonizers and colonies. This is because knowledge containing colonial elements (in this article shown with the example of ‘development’) considers itself always universal and superior compared with other knowledge (cf. Santos: 2018). As we have seen, Ubuntu does not have a one-fits-all solution to problems with complex layers, but shows that every challenge is contextual and every solution therefore must be contextually tailor-made. Ubuntu also teaches that people in marginalized communities should actually be the ones to determine their fate.

If ‘development’ in the global North would embrace the concept of Ubuntu, ‘development’ would start at its own doorsteps. This could begin with overturning deep-rooted ways that remain in colonial patterns of thinking, giving up old power structures, and decolonizing their own epistemologies. Translating into the epistemologies of the North the first question would possibly be: “May I help you? And if so, how?” Ubuntu does not ask for *alternative* ‘development’, but for alternatives *to* ‘development’.

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-iYtzvR3YXk>, [18.12.2020].

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*

As observed in the paper, most of the sources discussing Ubuntu and 'development' were written by men, which is why male perspectives remain overrepresented in this article. Although many authors define Ubuntu as holistic including the natural environment, nature is rarely an example in their texts. Despite these deficiencies it is evident: Ubuntu can be of great help to 'development' knowledge in the global North. 'Development' should dare to be more Ubuntu.

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