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UBUNTU, SACRED TEXTS AND THE AGENCY OF PEOPLE ON THE MARGINS¹

Masiwa Ragies Gunda

Introduction

From the turn of the last decade of the 20th century, when the Women's Empowerment Movement took centre stage in Africa fighting for the equality of women and men in all spheres of life, another movement was being born on the continent. This was the Gay Rights Movement, which was fighting for the recognition of the humanity of Intersex, Transgender, Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual persons (ITLGB)² in our communities. While both women and ITLGB persons had participated in the wider war of liberation in various communities on the continent, a few years after independence was won, it became clear that they were not fully represented in the newly found independence. Their fight, therefore, was from their perspective, a continuation of the fight for independence and that largely remains their focus. While greater strides have been made in achieving the goals of the Women's Empowerment Movement (seen in the rise of women to very senior political, economic, religious and social positions), some churches in the region, however, remain resistant to full equality between men and women in ministry. The same cannot be said of ITLGB persons because for them, very little strides have been made.

Are the experiences of women and sexual minorities in line with the oft lauded concept of Ubuntu? How does Ubuntu relate with the Christian sacred text, the Bible, in fostering our ethos? This chapter engages with a concept that has been lauded as a critical indigenous philosophy about humanity and the world, Ubuntu. It also interacts with the critical and

¹ An earlier version of this paper was initially presented at a Fellowship of Church Councils in Southern Africa (FOCCISA) gathering of Presidents, General Secretaries and Gender Officers in Johannesburg, August 29 – 1 September 2016.

² I deliberately inverted the popular acronym LGBTI to ITLGB in this paper specifically because I wanted the religious leaders to begin from the categories of human sexuality and gender identities that are least challenging for them. That is, many would be more familiar with intersex individuals.

indispensable manual for the Christian faith, the Bible. This is accompanied by a consideration of the role and function of those that are on the margins in our society, the ITLGB persons. What is Ubuntu? Is there something within the concept of Ubuntu that makes this a useful resource in the quest to understand the position and role of those on the margins in our society? What is the Bible? Is there anything in the Bible that can serve as a resource in understanding the position and role of those on the margins in our society? These are some of the questions that will be tackled in this chapter. This chapter will unfold in sections: the background, a re-appraisal of Ubuntu, then of sacred texts, followed by the relationship between Ubuntu and sacred texts as well as the concluding observations.

Background

Southern Africa is a region with great and glorious stories to tell, as well as sad and sordid tales to re-tell. The glorious stories of the great Kingdoms of the past, of the great and fearless ancestors who resisted the gun-wielding coloniser with their bare hands and spears, and the bravery of young women and men who left their schools to go and fight for the liberation of their people from the yoke of colonial oppression. These glorious stories are, however, accompanied by some sad and sordid tales such as the humiliation of being made outsiders in our own lands, the humiliation of an elderly man being called “boy” (Vengeyi 2012) by a young white boy, the sad narratives of indigenous liberator-turned-oppressor in independent African states (Gunda 2009), the rabid resistance to women’s empowerment in the 1990s (which continues in some circles to date) and now the de-humanisation of the ITLGB persons born and raised in this region. Most of the ITLGB persons have never known any other place on earth other than this region. The Church has been found on both sides – the glorious and the sordid!

I want to salute the Church in this region for its involvement in the glorious narratives of the region, for the Church and its schools became the cradle for the birthing of the liberation movements in this region. In taking this stance, particularly symbolised by the World Council of Churches’ Program to Combat Racism, the formation of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, the gathering of the Kairos Theologians in South Africa (Mapuranga and Chitando 2008), the Church re-

claimed its position as the “salt and light of the world.” With the importance of “salt and light” lying in the transformative qualities that these substances possess, the Church became a transforming agent for this region. I call this a reclamation because it was a function and character of the Church that the Church inherits from Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, but which character and function the Church has allowed to be domesticated by empire at several points in the history of humanity post-Easter (Rieger 2007). We can also claim our rightful position as the new centre of Christianity, we could once again become the “salt and light” of this world. There is so much growth and vibrancy in churches in this part of the world, however, what has been lacking are platforms to discuss issues of our own accord. To this end, it is important to recognise the work done by the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical HIV & AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy (EHAIA) that has been spearheaded by Rev. Dr. Nyambura Njoroge, whose work has created multiple platforms for discussion and dialogue.

Through the work of EHAIA and other Christian organisations, discussions on the position of our brothers and sisters who have been crying to be brought inside for full fellowship have been held. However, the majority who are inside have consistently said that there is no more room inside, hence they have remained on the margins. Nonetheless, they retain the hope that the few (like Nyambura) who are inside, and who see that there is room for them to come and take their place alongside those already inside will eventually succeed, as happened with slavery, colonialism, apartheid and women’s liberation. It is no coincidence that the ITLGB individuals came to light in this region in the 1990s because they saw an opportunity for themselves in the rise of the Women Empowerment Movement of the same period, which benefitted immensely from the successes and publicity of the Beijing convention of 1995 (Gunda 2010). As Chitando (2016) has observed, in spite of our experiences of multiple deprivations in this region and the tremendous effort we put in fighting for freedom, we have also consistently excluded and even promoted the deprivations we considered dehumanising for ourselves to be adequate and good for the ITLGB persons, some of whom played a sterling role in the liberation of men and women of this region.

While we have judged all other persons on the totality of their humanity, we, however, have consistently judged the ITLGB persons *ONLY* on the aspect of their sexuality. We have decided to throw away all the other contributions that these brothers and sisters and those in-between have made,

by entirely narrowing our focus on their sexuality. Where states and churches have prided themselves as “rainbow communities” owing to their supposed celebration of diversity of the people, even in this celebrated diversity, no room has been found for those whose diversity is within the realm of sexuality. These individuals have mostly been disowned and labelled “foreign-influenced” persons who cannot be accommodated in our community of the “morally pure.” We have also found many other problems such as poverty, lack of clean water, and high unemployment rates as justifications for delaying talking about ITLGB rights and to justify their exclusion from the Church (Chitando 2016). In the meantime, those on the margins continue to cry and beg to be accommodated.

In taking positions on the subject of sexual diversity, two key instruments have been invoked, that is, African culture, represented in this region by the indigenous philosophy of Ubuntu and the sacred text of the Bible. In the following sections, I focus on these instruments, first by presenting their dominant view and then problematising the same for further discussion and engagement.

Re-thinking and Re-presenting the Concept of Ubuntu

The concept of Ubuntu is highly celebrated in this region, especially because of the way it was credited with facilitating the successful execution of the mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in post-apartheid South Africa by Desmond Tutu. The term Ubuntu comes from a group of sub-Saharan languages known as Bantu (Battle 2009: 2). It is a term used to describe the quality or essence of being a person amongst many sub-Saharan tribes of the Bantu language family (Eze 2010). Hunhu/Ubuntu also says something about the character and conduct of a person (Samkange and Samkange 1980: 38). Ubuntu is described as a philosophy that places an imperative on the importance of group or communal existence as opposed to the West’s emphasis on individualism and individual human rights. In Ubuntu, everything is done to put the interests of the community ahead of the interests of the individual (Mangena 2016). In short, Ubuntu is understood as a philosophy that proclaims the primacy of the community over the individual, and to further elaborate on this, some phrases and idioms have been used such as:

- in the Nguni/Ndebele phrase, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons)
- in the Xhosa proverb, *ungamntu ngabanye abantu*, (a person is made a person by other persons)
- in the Shona phrase, *munhu unoitwa munhu nevamwe vanhu* (a person is made a person by other persons)

Through these phrases, it is suggested that Ubuntu is about the group/community more than it is about the self (Mangena 2012). In line with this understanding, we are led to see Ubuntu referring to the quality of being human as well as the ideology that governs intra-community relations hence, the idea of Ubuntu as African humaneness and African humanism in which;

African humaneness would then entail that the qualities of selflessness and commitment to one's group or community are more important than the selfish celebration of individual achievements and dispositions. While African humanism, on the other hand, would then refer to an ideology, outlook or thought system that values peaceful co-existence and the valorisation of the community (Mangena 2012:6).

When it comes to the morality of the community, the community is the source, author and custodian of moral standards, and personhood is defined in terms of conformity to these established moral standards whose objective is to have a person who is communo-centric rather than one who is individualistic (Mangena 2012:11). Understood this way, Ubuntu can be an instrument that can condone the exclusion of those deemed non-compliant with community values.

Unfortunately, as has happened with most African inventions of the post-colonial era, things have been defined and understood in a dualism of Africa versus the West, that sometimes, we have not engaged the totality of our ideas in our quest to outdo the West. While this is the dominant presentation of Ubuntu in the region, there have been others who have expressed reservations to certain degrees, among the most important counter-perspectives being the observation of Onyebuchi Eze (2010:92); who observes:

Ubuntu is projected to us in a rather hegemonic format, by way of an appeal to an unanimous past through which we may begin to understand the socio-cultural imaginary of the "African" people before the violence of colonialism; an imagination that must be rehabilitated in that percussive sense for its actual appeal for the contemporary African society.

This observation is key in that it allows us to critically engage with the concept of Ubuntu, especially when it is largely used to romanticise pre-colonial Africa by making some problematic suggestions such as the one below:

Most homes in the West have durawalls or high fences to maximise the privacy of the owner and so a stranger cannot just walk in and be accommodated. This is quite understandable because in Western societies, the individual is conceived of as the centre of human existence and so there is need to respect his or her rights to privacy. In the West, the idea of a stranger walking into a private space is called trespassing and one can be prosecuted for this act. And yet in African traditional thought in general, and in the Shona/Ndebele society in particular, the idea of trespassing is not conceptualised in that way (Mangena 2016).

Even though Ubuntu has been used by many to entrench and sustain the exclusion of those on the margins, especially the ITLGB persons because their sexuality has been labelled anti-community, some, like Chitando, are convinced that *Ubuntu* can still be an instrument of inclusion of all, an instrument that has always acknowledged diversity, hence, he writes:

One of the most useful concepts to promote openness and acceptance has been that of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a Pan African concept which suggests that one's humanity is incomplete without acknowledging the humanity of the other/next person (Chitando 2016).

This idea is also expressed by Mangena as follows:

Thus, as an aspect of African traditional philosophy, *Hunhu/Ubuntu* prides in the idea that the benefits and burdens of the community must be shared in such a way that no one is prejudiced (Mangena 2012).

To sum up this section, I am proposing that *Ubuntu* expresses the fact that each individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relation to others, in such a way that the individual and community are conceived of as intrinsically and inseparably related. The one is in the many but the many are in the one; the individual is in a community and the community is in the individual. This way, the humanity of the community lies and is dependent on the humanity of the individuals. If the humanity of the individual is emasculated, the humanity of the community is emasculated! This understanding of *Ubuntu* makes it closely related to the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith as bequeathed to us by our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Sacred Texts as Sites of Struggle for Re-conceptualising the World

The Bible belongs among the very few select texts in the world that are classified as “sacred texts” or “scripture”. These texts and their importance are particularly emphasised in the three Abrahamic faiths, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In these three faiths, sacred texts are considered the be-all for believers, these are timeless writings that originate with God. These writings are not ordinary writings, hence, there is the belief that when approached properly and correctly, these writings will answer all questions put to them. My focus here is especially on the Christian Bible, but most of my observations could as well be applied to the sacred texts of other faiths. Through an interpretation of sacred texts, believers develop their worldview – how the world works, the relationship between humanity and other beings in the universe and, critically, the intra-relationship within the human species itself. This explains why most Christians are quick to invoke the Bible each time ITLGB persons are mentioned as members of the community at large and the community of faith in particular. How have we come to be “people of the Bible”?

While African exposure to the Hebrew Bible happened even before the time of Jesus Christ, it is true that this exposure occurred in North Africa and was largely limited to that region. Most of sub-Saharan Africa was exposed first not to the Hebrew Bible but rather to the Christian Bible through the agency of Imperial Europe and Western missionaries. Our Christianity is, therefore, intrinsically connected to colonialism and all its vagaries and the quest for independence and the joys and sorrows of such aspirations. Our Christianity is essentially “Bible-based Christianity” (Gunda 2014:150), with the Bible being the book; read in times of joy and in times of sorrow (Togarasei 2008:73). In most cases the Bible is the only piece of literature that one finds in many homes. The Bible was mediated to us as the Holy Book, one that guided everything that we did in our lives. Through this Book, we were informed that God spoke to us. We believed, and we became “people of the Bible”, people who are quick to seek authentication from the Bible. While initially, the Bible was read to us through the agency of missionaries and their indigenous collaborators, the Bible was translated into indigenous languages, thereby making it accessible to more people. The success of the translation project was aided by the success of the mission schools that were set up by missionaries (Gunda 2009:79).

The shift from having the Bible read for them to indigenous people reading the Bible for themselves brought to the fore the nature of the Bible as a “site of struggle.” In articulating the values of the Contextual Bible Study method, Gerald West (2013) says:

the CBS works with ‘struggle’ as a key socio-theological concept because ‘struggle’ is a key characteristic of reality. In that regard, the CBS takes sides with the God of life against the idols of death. For CBS the primary ‘terrain’ of struggle is the ideological and theological; CBS recognises that the Bible is itself contested, including biblical ‘voices’ or theologies that bring life and biblical ‘voices’ or theologies that bring death. Therefore, CBS ‘wrestles’ with the biblical text to bring forth life.

During the colonial-evangelisation onslaught and before the colonised-converted could read the Bible for themselves, the Bible was presented as a single unified document with a single unified voice on all matters, hence, all who heard the text read were obliged to obey and follow its instructions. During this period, one could not refer to the Bible as a site of struggle, for there was no such struggle because the Bible was being read by one for the other, from the single perspective of the one reading.

This consistent Bible did not last long because as soon as indigenous converts had learnt how to read English and as soon as it was translated into local languages, in the spirit of European Protestantism, it became clear to some of the readers that the Bible possessed many voices. Not only did they begin to struggle with the text to speak to their situation of being emasculated in their own homes, they also began to struggle with the readings that seemingly suggested that it was fine for them to be so emasculated while they also encountered texts that suggested that it was not God’s plan for any human being to be so constrained.

Since the 1990s, the same scenario that characterised the colonial-evangelisation context re-appeared in most communities in Southern Africa, with most Christians *reading the Bible for* people on the margins, such as the ITLGB persons. The Bible was used mainly as a tool to domesticate, dehumanise and disempower those on the margins. While these readings gained momentum in the 1990s, they remain the major voice on the subject. It was so vicious at first that those on the margins reacted in the same way that most Africans reacted towards the Western missionaries once they had fully appreciated how the Bible was being used to exclude them:

by disowning and removing themselves from submitting to this text! The text was labelled “empire text, developed and deployed for the benefit of only those that serve the empire while depriving those on the margins of empire!” (Rieger 2007).

Contestation becomes a reality once those being pushed outside resolve to put their own questions to the text and to wear their own reading glasses because it is only then that it becomes apparent to them and others that it is not necessarily the text that is pushing them outside, but the prejudice of the dominant readers (Gunda 2009). At no point must we ever resolve to engage the text in a struggle for understanding, and we should even be more suspicious when those in charge of empire are informing us how we should read the Bible and who we should accept in the house of God, for then the house of God will become house of Empire. We are aware that there were white missionaries who were deported by white colonial governments because they refused to accept empire-championed interpretations of the gospel.

Bishop Donal Lamont is one such celebrated missionary, who in his 1976 open letter to the government of Ian Smith, wrote: “Far from your policies, defending Christianity and western civilisation, as you claim, they mock the law of Christ and make communism attractive to the African people.” That same year, he was sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment with hard labour because he had permitted nuns in his diocese to tend to wounded guerrillas and because he had also advised them, for their own safety and for the good reputation of the Catholic Church, not to report the presence of the guerrillas to the authorities. He was held under house arrest before he was deported” (Maye 2011).

We have now come to the point where the ITLGB persons that have been confined outside because the Bible has been read for them, have now started questioning the ways of reading and the motivations behind those who are inside, who continue to refuse them their humanity and who refuse to see the image of God that is in them. Whereas they once ran away from the Church in search of alternative accommodation, they are clear that they belong within the family of God and have and continue to come back to ask for their own space in the House of God. Through their readings, we are reminded of our own past of deprivation and rejection, when, because of our skin colour, we were considered not human enough.

Two lines of argument have emerged in this contestation over and in Scripture:

- **First**, that sexual minorities are an aberration of the created world, that God intended for heterosexuality hence, God created Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve. Through the use of the so-called “bullet texts” (Genesis 19, Leviticus 18 and 20, Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6, 1 Timothy 1 and Jude), it has been suggested that homosexuality was so wicked that God punished the people of Sodom so severely and that if any society were to accept sexual minorities it would put them on the path to destruction.
- **Second**, that sexual minorities are a wonderful part of God’s creation, that God created males and females and others who are neither male nor female. This diversity is not an aberration, but a divinely ordained difference. Through the use of some texts (Genesis 1, Matthew 19, 1 Corinthians 12-13), it has been argued that diversity is inherent in God’s creation, yet we are all united by the Image of God in all individuals. The hermeneutics of love and abundant life have been central to this alternative reading that seeks to “enlarge the tent of the House of God” (Isa.54:2) to accommodate all those that have been excluded so far.

Herein lies the ‘struggle’ for which our communities are invited to engage in. We are aware that the largest threat to this struggle is the politicisation of the ITLGB people in our communities. However, we are called to mission by Christ, and we must engage with ITLGB persons through the lenses of Christ’s own dealings with those that were on the margins, the outcasts of Jesus’ time. In my perspective, there are ways in which a struggle with scripture can lead us into a happier House of God where all children of God will find a place to abide because the Lord is already in all of us (1 Cor.12:9). Below, I will highlight areas that could make Ubuntu and sacred texts resources for re-appraising the people on the margins.

Ubuntu and Sacred Texts: Resources for Re-appraising People on the Margins

In this section, I intend to highlight some aspects of *Ubuntu* and the Bible that actually challenge us to re-think our perception towards ITLGB persons in our community. While there has been an emphasis on the “communo-centric” nature of Ubuntu, I critically think that the individual is not completely annihilated by the same. Similarly, at the heart of the rev-

olutionary Christian faith and as attested both in the Old and New Testaments, is the charge to “protect the vulnerable, especially those that are victims of the machinations of empire” (Ex.12:49, 22:21-22; Lk.4:18-22). The following are points that are critical in our quest to re-engage with Ubuntu:

Ubuntu is the idea that no one can be healthy when the community is sick. Ubuntu says I am human only because you are human. If I undermine your humanity, I dehumanise myself (Yamamoto 1997:52).

For Battle (2009:2), Ubuntu is the interdependence of persons for the exercise, development, and fulfilment of their potential to be both individuals and community.

From these two key conceptualisations of Ubuntu, one could argue that it is in its openness to protecting all persons within the community that it could become “the gift to the world” because our world is driven by philosophies that are built on discrimination of the “Other.” All members of the community, notwithstanding their diversity, are fully accommodated in the community. Their role and status in the community is not dependent on them converting to be like the majority. Diversity has always been a part and parcel of all communities. However, I am not suggesting that there are no expectations or obligations for those that are members of the community, because they are there. There are expectations and obligations not to harm other members of the community and to assist members of the community in every way possible. These expectations do not seek to eradicate the diversities that exist among community members.

Coming to the Bible and following on earlier observations that the Bible must be taken as a “site of struggle,” it is important to consider how we approach the Bible, especially being aware that some of our readings may cause death and harm while others may give life, comfort and security to some people. I consider the following points to be critical for our engagement with the Bible:

- That in the Old Testament, God’s Israelite project is to create a society that is governed by the principles of justice, righteousness, equality and equity. In this society, all would be welcome and would be catered for (the image of Eden, the Abrahamic nation (Gen. 18), the Promise to the Exodus party, the Occupation and Settlement in the Promised Land and the reigns of Judges are all inter-woven into this project of God). The prophetic theology of the Old Testament is also falling into this consistent strand of thought that God is making Israel a “pilot project for just human society.”

- The great inaugural statement by Jesus in Luke 4 follows this consistent strand of thought, proclaiming the “good news”, which would offer hope, comfort and security to those who were at the mercy of the Roman Empire. Are we surprised, then, that from its inception Christianity started off by becoming a refuge to those that were outcasts of their time and of their empire?

I am aware that this consistent strand has been threatened, challenged and, over time, been subordinated to empire strands that are also fairly represented in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament. The project of God towards a just society is disrupted when, instead of the other nations coming to copy the good thing in Israel, it was Israel who opted to be co-opted into Empire (Gen.18:18-19; I Sam.8:5). Clearly, the Bible demands that we choose either to follow the first strand, which focuses on justice and righteousness or the reading that legitimises injustice in society.

These observations provide for us the most solid platform upon which to engage with our faith and with our perceptions, not only of those on the margins like the ITLGB persons, but also of those on the center, who mostly belong with and for empire. In this regard, I propose here the adoption of “the hermeneutical option for life,” which challenges every reading we undertake on its impact on life. Every reading that threatens or can be used to threaten life cannot be part of the “good news of and in Christ!”

Concluding Observations

For millennia now, there has always been contestation in society regarding the persons that stood on the margins of society. Theories and philosophies were developed in order to keep those on the margins where they were, while alternative theories and philosophies were also developed to bring those on the margins inside. From recent history, this reminds us of the situation of people of African descent both on the continent and abroad, who suffered so much because of their skin colour; we are also reminded of women from across the world, who also suffered (and continue to suffer) innumerable numbers of deprivations simply because they (are) were women; the list goes on.

However, what has been heartening is that at each stage, even when it seemed impossible because those inside had built fortifications and arsenals to keep others outside, they were still defeated because they were

fighting against a life-giving force. We are, like those before us, at the crossroads where critical decisions must be made; are we going to opt for safety first and downplay what is in our faces or are we going to stand up for all life that possesses the image of God and join the life-giving force that cannot be stopped by empire?

Ubuntu and the Bible provide us with the basis to engage with ITLGB persons in our communities because they both value all individuals since in their personhood lies our own personhood. The individual diversities that exist among us cannot be the basis upon which we decide to deny the personhood of the other. Perhaps, brothers and sisters, Ubuntu is what Paul is speaking about in the texts 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and Romans 12:5. Ubuntu is about a body that celebrates the diversity of its many parts. When it comes to those on the margins, let us always consider the question; “On which side would Jesus be: exclusion or inclusion?” Jesus, I contend, consistently expressed commitment towards radical inclusion.

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