

Exploring 'nostalgia' and 'imagination' for *ubuntu*-research: A postfoundational perspective

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This article is an effort to put some of the paradoxical and confusing concepts of *ubuntu* on the table. Both the terms 'nostalgia' and 'imagination' provide us with language that can help us to talk about this complex of ideas and perspectives. On the one hand, the clouds of nostalgia surrounding *ubuntu* will be acknowledged and used. On the other hand, the difficulties and challenges brought about by nostalgic language have to be explored with imagination. Options for the conducting of empirical research in order to create a thicker understanding, including nostalgic language, will then be discussed. I will firstly reflect on the role of nostalgia as the atmosphere within which concepts of *ubuntu* find breathing space. Then the two types of nostalgia, namely restorative and reflective nostalgia will be discussed. The choice for reflective nostalgia will be argued and explained and this will hopefully provide an imaginative basis for the development of the research project on such an evasive concept as *ubuntu*. In conclusion some methodological guidelines, based on the postfoundational approach, will be drawn.

Introduction

The *ubuntu* landscape consists of a collage of images, ideas, pictures, and dreams. 'Ubuntu' is a concept that is both old and new. It has a long history. From time to time, it is being dragged back onto the radar screen by politicians, philosophers, academic researchers, and others. It functions on a variety of levels and therefore one finds multiple perspectives in literature. When put together it forms a rich, but also confusing collage of concepts, which make misunderstandings and opposing ideas part of the landscape.

This article is an effort to put some of these paradoxical and confusing concepts of *ubuntu* on the table. The aim of the article is not to present a piece of comprehensive research, but to explore some of the questions that will surface in most of the other articles of this Special Edition of *Verbum et Ecclesia*. This edition contains 14 articles with a variety of perspectives on *ubuntu*. Each article represents unique research, but should also be read in the context of the bigger research project.

The concepts of nostalgia and imagination seem to provide us with language to enter this complex of ideas and perspectives:

- On the one hand, the clouds of nostalgia surrounding *ubuntu* will be acknowledged and used.
- On the other hand, the difficulties and challenges brought about by nostalgic language have to be explored. The article does not present a full exploration of nostalgic concepts, but rather tries to alert researchers in this field of the problems surrounding *ubuntu* as a nostalgic term.
- Options for the conducting of empirical research in order to create a thicker (imaginative) understanding will then be discussed. The research project on *ubuntu*, which is currently underway at the University of Pretoria, is both the basis of, and the motivation for this investigation and for the writing of this article.

My epistemological position for the *ubuntu*-research and for this article can be described as postfoundational practical theological. This concept will be explained shortly with reference to other articles about this. It consists of both an epistemology and a methodology. However, this article as such, does not reflect the complete postfoundational research process. It is merely a postfoundational exploration of the language of *nostalgia* and imagination in order to make myself and other *ubuntu* researchers more aware of the multilayeredness of the field that we are entering.

I will firstly reflect on the role of nostalgia as the atmosphere within which concepts of *ubuntu* find breathing space. Then the two types of nostalgia, namely restorative and reflective nostalgia,

will be discussed. The choice for reflective nostalgia will be argued and explained and this will hopefully provide a sound basis for the whole of the research project on such an evasive concept as *ubuntu*. Some methodological guidelines, based on the post foundational epistemology, will then be drawn.

The concept 'nostalgia' has its roots in two Greek words, *nostos* meaning 'a return home or homeward', and *algia*, which is 'grief; painful longing'. This is according to Svetlana Boym (2007; cf. Liddell & Scott 1889:33, 535), who goes on to explain that the 'home' is actually a home that no longer exists; she says:

Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life. (p. 9)

The word 'nostalgia' has an interesting history. Although the word has ancient Greek roots, as was mentioned above, the word as such was coined by Johannes Hofer in 1688 in a medical dissertation. Nostalgia was then considered a curable disease, similar to a severe cold. The Swiss doctors thought opium, leeches, or a journey to the Swiss Alps might be the best medicine for this condition. The first recognized victims of this newly diagnosed disease were various displaced people of the 17 century, like domestic servants working in France and Germany and soldiers fighting abroad (Boym 2007:8).

If one thinks about these 'victims', it becomes immediately clear that nostalgia is not so much an individual sickness, but a symptom of our age, a cultural emotion linked to contexts of transition and displacement. It seems as if it consists of a longing for a place that is missed, but it is actually a yearning for a different time, 'the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams' (Boym 2007:8). As such, nostalgia is not only a longing, but also a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of development and progress. It becomes a rebellion against the irreversibility of time.

When one thinks and reads about *ubuntu* it seems as if the yearning for a better world and the ideal of a harmonious society, as it is often reflected in *ubuntu* language, is indeed something nostalgic. *Ubuntu* can, and is often presented as, a practical philosophy of 'I am because we are'. As such, it functions as a challenge to the individual to find his or her identity via the inclusion and embracing of the group and community. However, there is undoubtedly also the other side with *ubuntu* language that speaks of the romantic, the nostalgic dream of 'I long, therefore I am'.

Restorative and reflective nostalgia

In describing the difference between restorative and reflective nostalgia I borrowed greatly from the work of Boym (2007).

She offers typology that helps with the illumination of the mechanism and dynamics of nostalgia. The distinction between the two types of nostalgia is described as follows:

Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts a trans historical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives on *algia* (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately. (Boym 2007:13)

Restorative nostalgia

Restorative nostalgia tends to confuse itself with truth and tradition. In other words, with this type of nostalgic *ubuntu*, there is a tendency toward essentialist thinking. *Ubuntu* is a fixed idea and a reachable ideal. It has a clear tradition with the truth shining out of it.

Reflective nostalgia

Reflective nostalgia tries to be more in harmony with the paradoxes of human longing and belonging. With restorative nostalgia, *ubuntu* needs to be protected as the absolute truth, whilst with reflective nostalgia, *ubuntu* needs to be problematised and called into doubt in terms of its usability and effect on modern communities. It remains in the realm of nostalgia and therefore is not questioned in totality and disregarded, but the reflective type of nostalgia asks for a critical engagement.

Restorative nostalgia is dependent on two plots: the return to the origins, and the plot of conspiracy. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, does not work with a single plot. It rather explores different ways of being in many places at once and imagines different contexts and times. It is more open for details and is not carried away by symbols.

Restorative nostalgia works with selective memory and therefore is prone to conspiracy about the past. It thrives on symbols that are disconnected from real contexts. It has a simple conception of good and evil. A worldview based on a single transhistorical plot. The battle between good and evil is formulated by 'scapegoating the mythical enemy' (Boym 2007:14). Such an oversimplification has the result that ambivalence, the complexity of history, the variety of contradictory evidence and the specificity of circumstances in new contexts are erased.

My impression is that Desmond Tutu, in his book *God is not a Christian* (2013) is working with restorative nostalgia when he writes his chapter on *ubuntu* (chapter 2). He contradicts, in a very stereotypical way, *ubuntu* with the western way of life. His (Tutu 2013:22–23) remark, 'the West's emphasis on individualism has often meant that people are lonely in a crowd, shattered by their anonymity', is put against an even more oversimplified concept of *ubuntu* as a way of life that 'speaks of spiritual attributes such as generosity, hospitality, compassion, caring, sharing'. His discussion of *ubuntu* lacks the critical reflection of reflective nostalgia and therefore does not speak of the ambivalence, the complexity and variety to be found in both African and Western communities.

Richard Kearney, amongst others, although not writing about *ubuntu* as such, offered more sophisticated language categories. Kearney (1988) says:

What is historically far removed from us may thus be brought near and *reinterpreted* in the light of contemporary commentaries and perspectives. But this act of reinterpretation remains a two-way process. If what is foreign to our present consciousness becomes familiar, by the same token, what is familiar becomes foreign. (p. 38)

When we try to interpret old and faraway concepts into current contexts and try to make sense out of past stories and find the meaning of it for today, we are actually trying to converge different horizons. Thinking about *ubuntu* and the way in which it can or should be integrated into today's society, entails a hermeneutical process. It 'aims at a mutual *dialogue* in the etymological sense of *dia-legein*: welcoming the difference in order to learn from it' (Kearney 1988:38). In the words of Moletsane (2014:9): 'the desire to both understand and to nurture a past that has been stripped and taken away'.

Imagination

The notion of 'welcoming the difference' (Kearney 1988) can be seen as the link between the concepts of *nostalgia* and *imagination*. Our knowledge of *ubuntu* and how it is/was operational in different societies is not based on exact facts, but on perceptions. Our ideas about how our current societies operate are in the same sense based on perceptions. Welcoming the difference is not possible without nostalgic imagination. It allows for nostalgia and imagination to develop and as such become the source for a retelling of the *ubuntu*-story.

Ubuntu language is and should be the language of becoming. Not the language of achievement. In Jewish teaching, the ethical notion of goodness is related intimately to the notion of becoming, which is a different category from the Hellenic ontological category:

The biblical concept of goodness thus calls for the action of man with man, and ultimately with all men, so that the Messianic era may be achieved in its proper time: at the end of history. (Kearney 1988:51)

Goodness and *ubuntu* are similar and related concepts. It is all about relations and community. Both the biblical concept of goodness and good neighbourliness on the one hand and the African philosophy of *ubuntu* on the other, should be seen as ideals or promises to become and not as states of being. Moletsane (2014) refers to Boym, who says:

Perhaps nostalgia is not so much a longing for the way things were, as a longing for futures that never came or horizons of possibility that have been foreclosed by the unfolding of events. (p. 9)

This idea of becoming, but never arriving, is captured beautifully in the words of Kumashiro (2000):

Although we do not want to be the same, we also do not want to be better (since my Utopian vision would simply be a different

foretold way to be, and thus, a different way to be stuck in a refined sameness), rather, we constantly become, we want difference, change, newness. And this change cannot come if we close off the space-between. (p. 46)

Ubuntu-research: The imagining of the story of the lion

In *Nostalgia: Aids review 2013* (Moletsane 2014:7), reference is made of the African proverb, which says that until we have the historians of the lion, we will only have the story of the hunter. This makes one aware of the one-sidedness of our perceptions, but it also emphasises the importance of both nostalgia and imagination. How will we ever be able to see and hear the story of the lion without imagination? Zwicky (2014:42) says imagination is the most direct route to the good life, because it is 'the capacity to see-as and -into, as sensitivity to ontological resonance'. He (Zwicky 2014:42) also quotes Simone Weil: 'To know that this human being who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do – that is enough, the rest follows of itself'.

We indeed become the historians of the lion, when we imagine the lion's life, as a reality, as my own. Whether the 'rest' really follows of itself, is a question. On the other hand, nothing can follow without imagining the lion's life. The challenge of *ubuntu*-research is to bring the multilayeredness, which includes the nostalgic aspects of the *ubuntu*-story to the table. The challenge is to entertain not only one thin story about *ubuntu*, whether it is the idealistic positive story, or the pessimistic skeptical story, but the thick story with all its paradoxes and perspectives. The danger is to have a thin description and by doing so to indeed not be the historians of the lion. We need a thickened picture. A picture of the whole and especially the picture from the other side in order to achieve good research that does not only support the dominant story.

In thinking about and doing research on *ubuntu* we should avoid the either-or approach, as is suggested in the title of Henk van den Heuvel's thesis *Between optimism and opportunism* (2008). It is not the one or the other, but rather a dynamic movement 'between' different meanings. In telling the *ubuntu*-story, we need both the fantasies and the determining facts of the present. We need imagination together with so-called hard-core research. The concept of *ubuntu* will always be a mix of desire, nostalgia, and what is *really* happening.

Towards postfoundational practical theological research

Nostalgia is commonly defined as the painful longing for a lost home, a yearning to return, according to Jill Bradbury (2012:343). That is why it features in exile literature and art: 'This complex relation of loss and longing is re-experienced in the present where art functions to construct an ambiguous relation between the past and the present' (Bradbury 2012:343). Not only high art, but also ordinary sensations like

smell and the sounds of a home language evoke nostalgia. I experience something of it when I listen to a song like *Geel September* by Koos Kombuis. However, these nostalgic memories of me about a house with warmth and many assurances also need to be deconstructed because it tells of an exclusive white background of privilege. What would be the role of reflective or restorative nostalgia in this regard? With reference to Boym (2007), we can think of ways of recuperating the past that can direct, instead of just recreate it in the present.

In the words of Bradbury (2012):

[...] nostalgia might be rightly dismissed as irrational, romantically naive, and dangerously sentimental. However, I want to argue otherwise, suggesting that, in nostalgia we can (not that we inevitably *will*, but that we *can*) find the seeds of possibility, the traces of life lived resiliently and agentially. (p. 343)

Nostalgia can be described as the longing for belonging (Bradbury 2012:343). Nostalgia therefore provides a necessary perspective to research, which when excluded from the research categories, became dull and without imagination. When included on the other hand, the research has the potential to be creative and to open new perspectives and help the researcher to move beyond the familiar and the obvious.

The way Murray Hunter (2013) formulates the role of imagination for memory and the recollection of the past, seems to give good direction for research in a field so loaded with nostalgia:

Imagination is a manifestation of our memory and enables us to scrutinize our past and construct hypothetical future scenarios that do not yet, but could exist. Imagination also gives us the ability to see things from other points of view and emphasize with others. (p. 113)

The suggestion by Bradbury (2012) seems to be applicable here:

I am suggesting that narratives of the past may serve not to restore an earlier time or the place of 'home', but to dislocate our positioning in the present, to open not only windows on the world, but new ways of viewing ourselves. (p. 348)

By telling and sharing the narratives of the (nostalgic) past, we are turning towards the future. The stories might provoke us to seek connections and common purpose. The telling of stories is a way of constructing a preferred reality. A reality in which our individual hopes can be reconciled with the dreams of others.

According to Ricoeur (1981:143), reading a text is not to restore the author's experience, meanings, and intentions, but to create new understandings of ourselves 'in front of the text'. When we read the *ubuntu* texts in all its forms (for instance oral history, written texts, art, etc.) we are inventing ourselves as a new *ubuntu* community. In order to achieve that, we need a good reading in the first place. To find

ourselves 'in front of the text' is not easy. It asks for good listening and lots of imagination, which is the making of good research.

I have written extensively on postfoundational epistemology and methodology (Demasure & Müller 2006; Müller 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013). The postfoundational approach is an integration of various perspectives: ecohermeneutics, narrative therapy, narrative theology, narrative research, social-constructionism, autobiography and ethnobiography:

In doing this type of research, we should always focus on ... specific and concrete 'moment of praxis' that is always local, embodied and situated. Practical theological knowledge is local knowledge, dealing with specific persons in their particular contexts. The formulation of a theory for praxis is seen as being too far removed from the real world. Hence, the task of the researcher is to assist the 'co-researchers' (research participants) to develop their own interpretations of their stories and to help them to create alternative (life-enhancing or 'preferred') stories. (Dreyer 2014:50)

What we need is a sort of hybrid understanding of *ubuntu*. Current understandings of *ubuntu* and the nostalgic perceptions should be expressed in new interfaces or hybrid-concepts. Our research would need imagination in order to open our minds for possible new mutations of *ubuntu*.

We must consider with Moletsane *et al.* (2008:74–75) how to 'go beyond the stories that are actually told ... and to consider those that are untold, such as the missing characters (or role players), the alternative viewpoints'.

Imagining in research is at the same time embracing nostalgia and deconstructing nostalgia. It is a 'back to the future' approach. Moletsane (2014:54) refers to Mitchell and Weber (1999:221) who pose 'alternative readings' of nostalgia, which entails the imagining of 'particular scenarios for the future'. Such an imagination is not possible without a good deconstructive understanding of very specific contexts of the past. The roots of nostalgia need to be understood in order to allow for an imaginative development of restorative nostalgia for the future.

We have to imagine back to the future, and imagine in a restorative nostalgic way, but we also need to imagine on the level of narrative methods. Caine and Steeves (2009:1) suggest that we can enter the narrative landscape between researchers and researched in an imaginative and playful way. Engaging with each other in such a narrative and playful way can make it possible to create an equal and balanced landscape between researcher and the participants. The narrative researcher will have to come up with creative ways of imagining and playfulness. One such a possibility is the video recording of children's games in different communities in order to explore how *ubuntu* is played out, or not, without the use of the word. On a naive level, children are playing the serious games of adults. Their play becomes the mirror of the adult world. Adults from the community can be invited to reflect on the

dynamics between children. Lugones (1987:180) discusses 'playfulness', 'imagination', and 'becoming' in relation with each other. According to Kearney (1988:218), the 'play' with each other in laughter and suffering makes it possible to bring our imaginings in present time and space. Research with integrity is supposed to create such a kind of 'play'.

Caine and Steeves (2009:10) say: 'Without imagining there is no possibility of becoming. Imagining makes us take the risk of being alive, of being real, while also being imaginative and improvisational'.

Our individual and shared imagination has a life of its own (Caine & Steeves 2009:11). Like imagination, nostalgia is not to be managed and manipulated, but it should be reckoned with and allowed to give direction to the research.

Caine and Steeves (2009:6) remind us that our imaginings draw upon our perceptual and embodied knowing. It also draws on our remembering, our stories, and past encounters and experiences. That is why it is so important that we as researchers do not pretend that we are able to imagine on behalf of our participants. We are embodied in different contexts. We can at the most work towards a fusion of horizons and create a new landscape where we can try to share some of our imaginings.

Narrative inquiry assumes the entering of the in-between landscape, the borderland, the ecotone, where new mutations and hybrids can be created, where new stories can be imagined. In this in-between land the emphasis shifts from 'what' questions to 'who' questions. We become interested in each other as our primary concern and not so much in the issues surrounding us. It is no longer about the phenomenon of *ubuntu*, but about the people living in the *ubuntu* landscape, perhaps living with the nostalgia about *ubuntu*, and perhaps experiencing here and there glimpses of an imagined *ubuntu*-world.

This in-between space becomes a fruitful ground where imagining and narrative inquiry can intersect: 'It is the invisible but felt presence of the other that ignites imagination leading to connection' (Caine & Steeves 2009:11).

Postfoundational research made practical for a specific *ubuntu*-research project

The 'Seven Movements', developed by Müller (2009a), serve only as a broad outline that can be used as a framework for the conducting of *ubuntu*-research. This is based on a specific understanding of practical theological as postfoundational theology. It is hoped that this approach will provide an epistemology and a methodology for the research that will both open avenues for contextual exploration and for interdisciplinary investigation with good theological reflection. In the following section, the seven movements are mentioned and very shortly described.

A specific context is described

The context or action field or *habitus* of this research is different postconflict contexts in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya.

In-context experiences are listened to and described

The team of researchers does empirical research, based on the narrative approach. They listen to the stories about people's perceptions, expectations, general understanding, or action-narratives that might be informed by the *ubuntu*-discourse.

Interpretations of experiences are made, described and developed in collaboration with 'coresearchers'

Postfoundational researchers do not see themselves as the best interpreters of data, but rather as facilitators of interpretation. Instead of reaching early conclusions, they are foremost interested in their coresearchers own interpretations and formulations regarding *ubuntu*. They listen carefully and formulate tentatively.

A description of experiences as it is continually informed by traditions of interpretation

There are specific discourses or traditions in certain communities, which inform perceptions and behaviour. The researchers are curious about these discourses and will try to gain some understanding on how current behaviour is influenced by historically based beliefs, perceptions and habits and how these are linked to the *ubuntu*-tradition.

A reflection on experiences of God's presence and/or absence in a specific context

Without introducing God-language into the research conversation, there is an alertness for the way in which people interpret their situation in view of their understanding of the ultimate questions. What is the spiritual content of *ubuntu*?

A description of experience, thickened through interdisciplinary investigation

Interdisciplinary work is complicated and difficult. Language, reasoning strategies, contexts and ways of accounting for human experience differ greatly between the various disciplines (Midali 2000:262). The ideal is therefore a *transdisciplinary* approach, which includes the insights of scholars from various disciplines based on transversal rationality. The starting point for this interpretation is always a very specific, local, concrete narrative, which is told with the inclusion of *ubuntu* language.

The development of alternative interpretations, that point beyond the local community

Generalisations are avoided because with every generalisation the particular meaning within a certain context becomes blurred. Specific interpretations are tentatively

formulated for a specific context. However, the question of what this might mean for different other contexts, is also taken seriously and reflected upon. The presence or absence of *ubuntu* in a certain location does not necessarily say anything about other contexts. Nevertheless, it might say something and the research will not be completed without entertaining these questions.

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