Lubunga[1] -Leadership: An Afro-Biblical Perspective

George I. Emedi, Cape Town Baptist Seminary, Godfrey Harold, Cape Town Baptist Seminary, Research Associate University of Pretoria.

Abstract

This article explores the African traditional value of Ubuntu as embedded in the Bembe[2] concept of lubunga. In our attempt to develop a practical contextual leadership model, we have deliberately avoided to make use of the concept of Ubuntu seen by some as purely philosophical, academic, in favour of a more "institutional" and practical concept of lubunga (or its Xhosa equivalent, ikundla/ lekogla). Seeing that these concepts are not only African but also carries values validated in the Bible as strongly expressed in the Old Testament, making them both social and biblical imperatives, their receptivity will be made easier. The use of lubunga, thus, serves as a self-defining concept for Africa's leadership. This is the value we want integrated into our theology. By grounding our theological leadership construct in African social values we are "balancing leadership and followership" Malunga (2006:12) as the African people see themselves as both givers and recipients of life shaping values. Managing life in society as a lubunga has the advantage of creating "a holistic community in which everyone involved becomes an active member who participates in all its activities and who thus shares in its success and failures" Prinsloo (1998:48), with a more likely effective outcome.

1. Introduction

The current socio-political and economic crisis in the continent of Africa calls for an assessment of how life is organized in society. This crisis has already passed the alarming stage and reached a fatal stage Walt (2003:39). The wars flaring in almost every country in Africa, leaving an aftermath of destruction, dysfunctional economies, educational, health systems, and a massive peoples' migration are but visible signs of a crisis of leadership in the continent.

What could be the cause of such a dehumanizing scene? Deng (2007) attributes Africa's instability to colonialism. He situates the effects of colonialism at a political, social and economic level, connecting them to slave trade and oppression by the West. At a deeper level, this assertion is corroborated by Arowolo (2010:1), saying, "colonialism serve(d) as a vehicle of implantation of cultural imperialism in Africa…subjugation of African people in all spheres of their social, political, cultural, economic and religious civilisations." When cultural values are tempered with, people lose solid foundations to build on. This is what Arowolo (2010:2) calls loss of cultural continuity, affecting the ability to strive for cultural progress. He further remarks that:

> *"It is appalling to note that two hundred years or so of colonisation were not only destructive in terms of cultural heritage and values for which Africa was famous before colonialism but also precariously retrogressive as the continent was robbed of decades of opportunities-opportunities of self-development, opportunities of self-government and, indeed, opportunities of self-styled technological developmental pace."*

This is why we are calling Africa to return to the values of the man-*ntu* such as *Ubuntu* as we seek to steer the continent back toward change and effective leadership. Khoza's (2012) recent book, *Attuned Leadership: African Humanismas Compass*, is illustrative that such an approach is supported by both leadership practitioners and scholars. The salvation of Africa needs to be placed in the context of the salvation of its systems. And this systemic dis-functionality can be situated in the dis-functionality of its leadership system which could be linked to the rejection of Africa's past and traditional values.

No import of ideology without proper contextualisation will ever bring about change in Africa. Thus, in this article it is suggested that the solution to the African dilemma lies within the African philosophy, ideology, or systems theory, rejecting it, embracing it or adapting it to new realities. In any case a serious re-look into the people's worldview is indispensable. Models regulating life in society and therefore conducive to producing social well-being should be "adapted" to people's worldview and customs.

Engaging worldviews is necessary because models should be addressing the minds of people at the subconscious level, connecting with the person at the core of their being. This is based on the understanding that, "philosophically, there are certain platforms on which our existing ethics, beliefs and behaviours are based" Boone (2007:25). Actions are informed by worldviews. Therefore, worldview-based models will produce the intended effects of that particular worldview. Hence the question: What is the philosophical framework that governs Africa's living?

2. Ubuntu as Africa's Philosophical Framework
The concept of *Ubuntu* as a philosophical framework guiding life in Africa raises a question of culture. Before attempting to discuss the above question one needs to touch on the issue of culture as it relates to life in general and the gospel in particular.

2.1 Understanding the Concept of Culture
Hiebert (2004:30) defines culture as "the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do." This definition is simple but not simplistic. It allows a basic understanding that

culture is life as experienced by a specific group of people. This definition further shows that cultural values and behaviours are correlated. One cannot speak of the one without the other. Culture is the "cause" for determining behaviour in that context.

The unpacking of this definition, further, discloses the three basic dimensions of culture: cognitive, affective and evaluative Hiebert (2004:31) as revealed in the concepts of "ideas, feelings and values". Speaking of the cognitive dimension, Hiebert (2004:31) posits that this deals with the question of knowledge as "the conceptual content of a culture" or the dimension that "tells people what exists and what does not." Our perception and thinking is based upon what has been passed onto us as what life is or is not. While the cognitive dimension deals with "knowledge", the "affective", as the word suggests deals with affection, emotions, attitudes Hiebert (2004:32-33) and the evaluative dimension tackles the question of values "by which (culture) judges human relations to be moral or immoral" Hiebert (2004:33, parenthesis added). This last dimension is an evaluation of the first dimensions of culture. It evaluates the cognitive beliefs, the emotional expressions and the values upheld by people.

2.2 Ubuntu as a Cultural Expression of Community Life
Ubuntu as a cultural expression is, therefore, cognitive, affective and evaluative. This means that it demands the "knowledge", in the context of Africa, of what it means to be a man-*ntu*[3] . But *Ubuntu* is also an issue of "attitude", feelings, the emotive expression of "africanness", demonstrated through our singing, dancing, mourning, eating, in births, and deaths, rituals and rites, etc. *Ubuntu* is spiritual as religion is pervasive in the life of the Africans Rafapa (2007:93). This is the value central to the man-*ntu*. This is the value against which we judge everything we do. This is the value that informs the course of action in living as an African.

Boon (2007:25) has defined *Ubuntu* as morality, humaneness, compassion, care, understanding and empathy. It evokes the concepts of hospitality, togetherness and solidarity. It stresses the principle of oneness. Murithi (2006:26) says it "highlights the essential unity of humanity and emphasizes the importance of constantly referring to the principles of empathy, sharing and cooperation in our efforts to resolve our problems." On his side, Botha (2007:162) prefers to portray it as "a metaphor which describes the significance of group solidarity…a practice of collective unity (governing) every aspect of traditional African life, and to a large extent also in modern day Africa" (parenthesis added). At a philosophical level, it seeks to find balance between self and other Masina (2000:180). The pan-African nature of this social value is attested by Murithi (2006:28) when he says that the concept is found in languages spoken in the East, Central and Southern Africa.

The social value of *Ubuntu* finds its best expression in the familiar Zulu expression: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (You are because we are). This saying finds

echoes in almost every African language and dialect. The Bembe people from the Democratic Republic of Congo, in central Africa, would say, *ntu ale ntuwabatu*, meaning, "it is the community that defines an individual". Consequently, other values such as hospitality, compassion, etc. "flow from this central value" of community, adds Botha (2007:163). During the process of *mitamba*[4] discussions –*lobola* in Xhosa-, for example, the father of a *Bembe* bride would not have a say in the discussion because *mwana ta'le wa ntu, mwana a'le w'ebonde* (Literally: a child does not belong to a man but to the community); and therefore, the extended family decides on such an important matter as giving away one's daughter in marriage. To stress the point of communal relationships Botha (2007:163) says that in Africa "conformity is important", "conformity" understood as"obligations towards the group is to be valued above all other obligation". Hence, corruption is "un-African" as it does not consider the consequence on the community. He goes on to show how this group inclination permeates in every aspect of the life of the community, ranging from eating, the question of poverty and wealth and morality Botha (2007:163) and even the cosmological question of the living-dead Botha (2007:164).

Life in African society is interactive. The purpose of *Ubuntu* is to work toward a situation that acknowledges a mutually beneficial condition Masina (2000:181). "Ubuntu is not empirical" Boon (2007:26). "It manifests itself through the actions of people, through truly good things that people unthinkingly do for each other and for the community" Boon (2007:26). A man who deliberately disconnects from this norm, disconnects from life, and therefore disconnects from humanity. He is not a man-*ntu*. The pride and dignity of "africanness" is in its community life and community leadership. This is the value that defines humanity for Africans. Many *Bembe* traditional proverbs and sayings Muhunga (1977:12-46) convey this worldview, for example:

> *Ati be, ati be, ntwukyekami nuhunge*
> Literally: a tree shakes another tree, (but) a man leans on
> another man.
> Meaning: no one can live as an island.

> *Bukumba bushi noo, tamukyuhiwakeke*
> Literally: there is no shout of joy in a birth house (maternity ward)
> where the mother is absent.
> Meaning: There is no celebration in individualism. Celebration is
> always with…

Nevertheless, this communal man, referred to as man-*ntu*, needs to be understood in the context of his community. His solidarity is to his defined community. Hence, a *Hutu* man in Rwanda is in greater solidarity within his community than with a fellow *Tutsi* countryman, considered as an outsider –and vice versa. Thus, African ethnicities create degrees of solidarity that have contributed to tribal-

ethnic conflicts in the continent. But, used positively the communality of these ethnics could be used as building blocks in the promotion of national identities.

It goes without saying that this understanding of life goes against the ethical fibre of the Western society. Contrasting the African and Western social life, Boon (2007:27-28) says:

> The Western philosophy of humanism, which itself emanates from the Renaissance, is based on the Greco-Roman premise of man as both an individual and a rational being. It intellectualizes the concept of humanity and, in so doing, makes it individual –something one can choose to follow if one accepts the rationale. African *ubuntu* does none of this. It simply exists. It is moral and good. It is emotional and deep, and people simply act in a way they intuitively know to be right. It is not something one chooses, and it is accepted as a way of life.

It is this individualistic humanism noted above that is more and more influencing life in Africa. Hence, African thinkers such as Ezekiel Mphahlele (1959, 1984, 2002, 2004) call for the de-colonization of African humanism. However, Mphahlele's theory of African Humanism makes room for the integration of new values, of Christian or other origins (hybridity), but insists on the refusal of African traditional values to die Rafapa (2007:95). This is a refusal to embrace "Western Christianity" and other imported lifestyles in an uncritically mimicking manner Rafapa (2007:95).

The contrast between African and Western social life is further exemplified in that Africans place emphasis on the *being* rather than *doing* of people in as far as their principal mode of human activity is concerned Botha (2007:167). "In the sphere of 'Interpersonal Relationships' the focus in the West is on *individualism*", explains Botha (2007:167). This means, "the focus is on the individual above all else and education and training is aimed at individual development, individual choice, individual rights, individual reliance, self-realizations and so on", expounds Botha (2007:153-154). This is a direct contrast of the African value system that places the community above the individual. In his attempt to be more practical, Botha (2007:154) elaborates by saying,

> A person is an individual first and member of a group secondly. Individuals make up groups and the individual still retains their identity within the group. Kinship relations are influenced by this and are subject to individual choice too…Even in the sphere of religion the focus is on the self, on individual relationships with God, on self-acceptance and individual emotion.

When this value system influences how life is lived in community, traits of "in-

dividualism" will clearly be visible. In the case of leadership, the focus may be more on personal capacity to influence than interactive, shared capacity, going against the grain of a communal people. Botha (2007:155) supports this conclusion, saying that "it is inevitable that certain social values will be reflected in the theological constructs created by the people who live in that particular culture." But the questions about our "African theological construct" are: how much of the Western social values have been filtered down, assumed to be biblical and therefore "absolutes"? Should we rethink our Christian heritage in light of "true" biblical social values? Is there room for an enriched theological construct based on African social values? A construct that is African, biblical and evangelical?

2.3 Understanding the Concept of Lubunga

Let me introduce another concept, that of *lubungu*. What is meant by *lubunga*? The Bembe people –the researcher's ethnic group- use this concept to describe what Villa-Vicencio (2005:58) defines it as a "place where the king and community elders meet in order to resolve conflicts and address concerns of the community." It is a "place" in the sense of "platform", "system" of adjudication, approach, and leadership style. Murithi (2006:30) describing its Xhosa equivalent says:

> This Inkundla/Lekgotla forum was communal in character in the sense that the entire society was involved at various levels in trying to find a solution which was viewed as threatening the social cohesion of the community (…) the proceedings would be led by a Council of Elders and the Chief or…by the King himself (…). By listening to the views of the members of the society, the Council of Elders could advise on solutions which would promote reconciliation between the aggrieved parties and thus maintain the overall objective of sustaining the unity and cohesion of the community.

The lubunga was a round hut always built at the centre of the village. This prime position further reinforces the importance, position and value of the system/institution in the life of the community. The Bembe were and still are a people with no absolute monarch. Their *lubunga*-government system made it possible for every head of the family or clan to have a say in the running of the affairs of the community. The *Bwami* (chieftaincy) was merit-based and non-hereditary. The *Mwami* (chief/king) "*led with*" the clan elders through the *lubunga* Emedi (2005:133). Although the system could be described as sexist in the modern sense of the word, it was innovative and democratic to a greater extent. To counter the argument that "the monarchical system" is the only and best way to advance society, the *Bembe* would say: *inobenabwami, nubungenanliliwabatu* (your neighbour with his chief and you, with your group of men.) For them, the collective was as good as a charismatic leader (if not better). They pride themselves for not having a typical African monarchical system, but found strength in the collective (*ilongo i bita*, there is strength in numbers).

Villa-Vicencio et al (2005:58), in their book entitled *Building Nations: Transitional Justice in the Great Lakes Region* preferred to make use of the Swahili word *barza* in their description of *lubunga*. Masina (2000:169-181) attests to its practice among the Xhosa people –*Ikundla/lekgotla*. Though the context of the concept used has been limited to the question of justice, peace and reconciliation, *lubunga* is a whole-life-encompassing system. It is about providing group leadership to a community; and brings about peace, order and good governance Masina (2000:171). It is this adaptability nature of *Ubuntu* Villa-Vicencio *et al* (2005:59) that calls for an application, beyond the scope of conflict resolution, in the area of leadership in general.

In their day-to-day language the Bembe already refer to "gathering" in general as *lubunga*. More specifically, local churches are referred to as *lubunga*. Although the Bembe ecclesiastical terminology is showing signs of contextualization, their "functions" do not always follow suit. In the case of local churches, not all "function" as a *lubunga*, for a simple reason that the denominations and local churches' polities are defined by theologies which are not necessarily informed by African social values and that see African social values as foreign to the Bible.

If *lubunga*, though African, could, at the same time, be valued as "acceptable", "valuable", and compatible with biblical values, their intrinsic traditional "value-functions" would also be appreciated, by both Western and African people. Consequently, a more effective and "acceptable" way of governing life in the church and society will emerge. People will then be in harmony with the fundamental principles that govern their life on the earth. Africa is not a "dark continent"; there is lots of light in its value system that can shed "light" on our "paths" as we seek to lead our lives through an understanding of Biblical principles, indispensable to our life here and now and thereafter.

2.4 Ubuntu/Lubunga as a Biblical Value

With the help of social scientific criticism - an approach that gave birth to biblical social science - biblical studies has gained a better understanding into the biblical world and its value system. It is against such research that one can critique the current "Christian" values. The result of such enterprise would surprise many to find that what we consider to be "Christian values" are in fact "Western social values" read into the text as people interpreted the Bible. Pilch (1991:224) provides us with an excellent research illustrating how diametrically opposed the Western social value system is to the Biblical system. To illustrate this, a clear contrast is seen in the two groups' view on human relationships. While the West is individualistic, the Mediterranean society of the time of the Bible valued the group. Pilch, quoted by Botha (2007:158) elaborates, saying that this socially inclined life includes the following: it promotes interdependence, there is a strong integration into society, primary responsibility lies towards the group, conformity is urged, group membership results from one's inherited social and familial place in society, behaviour is dictated by the group's mores and sanctions, individual

worth is rooted in familial status or group status. From the principal mode of human activity to relationships with others, question of time and the nature of mankind, we find a clear contrast between the two worlds.

An additional and interesting finding is the striking similarity between the Mediterranean society and the African traditional value system. Pilch (1991:224) places Africa and the Mediterranean society on the same side of his categorization, whereas the West is on the other extreme. Botha (2007:162), agreeing with Pilch's categorization says that "it is immediately obvious that this would place Africa and …the Ancient Mediterranean very close to each other, because the same kind of collectivism is core value there, and almost all other values are in some way determined by this." He goes on to call for serious consideration of what the implications of such similarity would mean in doing theology in Africa.

Considering that *Ubuntu* is "the over arching and core value of Africa" Botha (2007:162), a concept that places emphasis on the group rather than the individual, the collective over the personal, same values shared in the pages of the Old Testament, and clearly embraced by Jesus Botha (2007:160-161), it would be safe to say that *Ubuntu* is a biblical social value in the sense of the Old Testament value system. *Ubuntu* is therefore biblical in its ethos. In *Colonial Conquest and its Impact on African Culture*, Mphahlele (2004:255) applauds African Independent Churches, not because of the orthodoxy of their theology, but their effort to preserve African cultural values. He see their mode of worship as more *Afrikan Humanist* than many "main line" churches. This is the effort we want to see in Evangelical African churches as we seek to influence people who will bring transformation to our society.

3. Lubunga-Leadership: A Local Expression of Ubuntu
We choose to speak of "*Lubunga*-Leadership" instead of *Ubuntu* because of the institutional nature of *lubunga*. It is a practical expression of a philosophy of being, *Ubuntu*. Though, *lubunga* (or *inkundla/lekgotlain* Xhosa) is mostly used in conflict resolution, it is its practicality in dealing with dis-harmony in society that draws our attention. In that sense, it is a practical mechanism or system, model that can be applied in any dysfunctional situation. Thus, the *Bembe* people refer to the church of God as *Lubunga lwa Ombe*, not inferring to any conflict to be resolved, but as a gathering of people functioning in harmony for mutual benefit. What would then be the characteristics of such a model?

4. Characteristics of Lubunga-Leadership
Drawing from the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, the characteristics of *Lubunga*-Leadership will therefore include:

- *Collective ownership of life in community*. This implies that individuals are bound together in opportunities, responsibilities and challenges (Malunga 2006:2), but also with a common vision;

- *Collective leadership of the affairs of the community:* African leadership has room for "monarchs", "chiefs", but these draw wisdom for practical leadership from the community, the congregation. Decisions are made together. People "belong in a bundle of life" Murithi (2006:28), quoting Desmond Tutu. Leadership is therefore participatory. Even in the Western world leadership is shifting more and more towards a collective style as "strategic leadership requires the contributions of more than a single individual" Denis et al. (2000:6). This collective leadership is expressed in terms such as 'leadership role constellation' implying "not only multiple actors, but also a certain division of roles among them" Denis et al. (2000:6). The biblical principle of the priesthood of all believers should find a well prepared, fertile soil in African churches. The church needs a "participlan process" Ayiotis (2008:24) that encourages participation and interaction in decision-making processes of the church. Mbigi's (1992:26) *developmental holistic approach*, derived from *Ubuntu*, places a strong emphasis on cooperation and participation as part of its management model.
- *Collective or mutual sustenance of the community*. This is African solidarity. When someone passes away the community shares in the loss. Growing up we saw baskets passing through the community, street by street collecting food and money to feed mourners coming to console X family. The pain and responsibility that came with it was shared by all. That was the "African insurance plan". In rural communities, the *Bembe* practice *essale*, which is a community building or farming task for the benefit of an individual member.
- *Collective maintenance of social harmony* through communal conflict resolution.
- A Collective of people: At the heart of the African philosophy of being lie the people. Relationships are key to social life. A leadership that is concerned with people has "broken the missional code" Stetzer (2006) of organisational development. Africa seems to be rapidly losing this key ingredient, fundamental to its past harmony. Malunga (2006:9) suggests that the return to that value is a panacea for the benefit of the person and the organization.

Bekker's (2008) brief overview of Christian leadership scholarship presents a useful synthesis of various approaches developed from the ground-breaking work of Engstrom in 1976 to Ayers and Niewold, in 2006 and 2007 respectively. He concludes his work with what he calls convergent traits of Christian leadership, prevalent in most proposed models: mimetic, concerned with correct understanding of power, follower-centered and Christological Bekker (2008:148). It should be made clear that the *lubunga*-leadership approach born out of the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is not in contradiction with the above-mentioned traits. The *lubunga* approach is "mimetic" in that Christ portrayed *Ubuntu*, people values Botha (2007:160), was born in and affirmed communal values. This approach is ultimately Christological as it is "a metaphor" Botha (2007:162), concept and philosophy pointing to Christ Himself as the ultimate and perfect man.

5. Conclusion

In his concluding remarks Malunga (2006:12) poses a pertinent question worth repeating as we are winding up this reflection: "How are we balancing leadership and followership (as co-creator and co-definer of leadership and leadership development)?" This is in order to prompt African people "to dig deeper into who they are for a reawakening of their own and Africa's leadership capacity" Malunga (2006:12). Though his work is in the sphere of "secular" leadership, the question warrants consideration. Africans need to re-learn to appreciate who they are and what they have. Biblical social studies are reinforcing the truth that the African value system is not as evil as we were previously forced to believe.

African similarities with Old Testament values encourage a relook into African values such as *Ubuntu* or its institutional expression of *lubunga* or *Ikundla/ lekgotla* as a valid and effective leadership model that makes Africa "co-creator" and "co-definer" of the leadership style capable of taking the continent and its church back to social harmony and prosperity. This is the "balancing" act of leadership and followership in *Lubunga*-Leadership.

This approach should not be considered as the panacea to Africa's complex situation, but rather as a pointer in the direction of African renaissance and solidarity capable of promoting its prosperity.

6. Notes

1. *Lubunga* is a communal governing system used by the Bembe people to regulate life in society. It is used primarily for conflict resolution, but its function extends to the general running of the affairs of the community. It is a participatory, collegial leadership system.

2. The *Bembe* are a tribal people from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Kivu Province, Territory of Fizi. They are an agrarian pastoral people who –according to oral tradition- have originated from Uganda before settling in the mountainous region of Fizi and later along Tanganyinkalake. The Bembe do not have an absolute monarch. They are organized in clans with the heads of those clans assuming the spiritual, social and political leadership (Emedi 2005:133).

3. A man-*ntu* refers to a man or humanity as expressed through Bembe culture. He is not a generic man, but a man rooted in specific social values.

4. Bridal price

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Email: godfrey@ctbs.org.za; emedi_pg@yahoo.com