

RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Ubuntu and Violence

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## ABSTRACT

Ubuntu in its essential outlook is committed to a humane and conciliatory interchange between moral agents and their environs. Yet the countries that have given ubuntu its name have had violence at the centre of their public spaces. This raises the question: what sort of engagement could there be between the violence inherent in these countries and ubuntu? And to what end would that engagement be? I examine ubuntu's relationship with violence, looking at the enduring effects of the historical reality of the banality of the violence of oppression. In the second instance, I seek to demonstrate how ubuntu, which is characteristically postcolonial, has developed an identity that is antithetical to ubuntu. The routine production of these disasters, and the normalcy of the existence of absurdity that generates violence of all sorts, has become the sign and mode of modern postcolonial Africa. This identity appears intransigent. In the light of these two instances, I seek to explore what aspects of ubuntu render it unable to shape its home turf.

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## Introduction

The general and representative picture of postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa is one of undemocratic and war-torn countries, rebel movements, child soldiers, political violence and coups. The forerunner to this episode was the well-calculated violence of slavery and colonial tyranny. The transition from colonialism to postcolonialism was a remarkable passage from one state of thuggery to another. So-called political freedom did not translate to true social and economic empowerment. Neither did it succeed in uniting citizens and the newly formed state into a coherent vision of mutual recognition and benefit. On the contrary, the state continued to be suspicious of the ordinary people as it deployed the same apparatus the colonial administrator used to surveil as well as oppress citizens. Yet there is also subtle but everyday violence against the existence of the individual. Either carried out in the name of the state or as a result of state inertia or maleficence, or a combination of all. There is a certain manner of progressing that is decidedly debasing for many African lives. That manner of debasement is one that threatens the very survival of the individual. It, at times, shows itself in how individual lives are extinguished in quick and devastating

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ways. It is from this pervasive existence of violence that ubuntu shows itself as having a rehabilitative power. Its advocates insist that the core principles of ubuntu have the capacity not only to humanise but to cause and sustain harmony. I will argue that ubuntu offers too much yet it is under-resourced to deal with postcolonial reality. I divide this paper into three sections. In the first section I describe the banality of violence on the continent. In the second section I describe how ubuntu must be seen as an overhyped ambition. In the third section I detail how ubuntu fails to inspire in the face of violence.

## The banality of violence

Borrowing from Arendt's (1994) notion of the banality of evil, I deploy the term banality of violence to refer to the commonplace, widespread, and mass participation in the perpetuation of violence on the continent (Ismail & Olonisakin 2021; Strauss 2012). To underscore my point, I pick up a few events that may illustrate what I have in mind. The first is the genocide in Rwanda. It is common cause that the numbers of the killings and the involvement of erstwhile ordinary everyday people in the murder of their neighbours and fellow countrymen was astounding (Denis 2022). The second is the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Not only does this ongoing war show a willingness to sustain itself through a continuous re-invention, but it is also remarkable for its tendency to be executed in the midst of a civilian population (Pratt 2017). The third is suspected herders' shooting of displaced people in Nigeria in April 2023. The number of deaths is placed at 35. The fourth is the South African police's killing of protesting mine workers in August 2012. The number of deaths was 34, and there were many more injuries. Notably, this shooting was compared to an apartheid massacre. And who can forget the post-election violence of 2007 in Kenya. Or the violence in Sudan, currently, where two army Generals' personal clashes have led to a war. To this we can add the 60-plus people who are murdered every day in South Africa, or the many who just barely survive while living in fear, battling the twin evils of hunger and helplessness. Let us also not forget the many who are kidnapped and murdered for a ransom in Nigeria, or those who live in fear for supporting this or that party or for openly identifying as gay. This sort of violence is immediate, visible, and direct. Perpetrators and victims see each other and may understand what the end of the engagement is likely going to be. The perpetrator may have a clear or ambiguous goal. The victim may or may not know what the goal of the perpetrator is. All that does not matter. What matters is that the individual has no capacity for self-defence or ability to call upon other agents to defend her. In this instance, the victim is utterly powerless while the violence is upfront and decisive.

A contrasting mode of violence to the above is one that is subtler, with no noticeable public traces, yet its results cannot be countenanced. This sort of violence is one that is every day, commonplace, and normalised. The logic of its normalisation lies in its stubborn persistence as an irreversible reality of what constitutes African societies and experiences thereof. Its essential character is the large reduction of the African to a state of enduring an existence that is the hallmark of statistical disgrace. Such measurables are expressed in terms of short life expectancy, surviving on less than US\$1.90 a day (the global mark of poverty), high percentages of joblessness, high numbers of otherwise avoidable infant deaths, poor health and other service provisions and so on. All these incidents that are a result of social and economic paralysis are to be separated from other

incidents that ruling regimes directly sponsor and that include routine murder of ordinary citizens, forced displacement and migration, incessant wars, brutalisation of political opponents, incarceration without trial and other blatant miscarriages of justice. The latter has become an all too common characteristic and performative act of the modern African state. On average, the African state is more tyrannical than anything else. It is a state that is more likely to cause spillage of blood than protect it as sanct.

Violence, if not its possibility, is everywhere on the continent (Wai 2014). Hoebeke (2015) gives a comprehensive assessment of the nature and causes of conflicts on the continent. In their assessment they refer to political violence affecting part of central and west Africa, terrorism in West Africa, the violence of the Sahel, armed conflict in the DRC, political instability from electoral tensions in most of Africa, and the ongoing political tension in North Africa. Added to this are the dangers of religious radicalisation and the terrorism as well as the political hegemony they bring. I am sure the same can be said about the rest of the world. So, it could be more appropriate to say that violence is everywhere.

However, the case for violence on the continent is interesting for its lack of a productive end. There are instances where violence may be justified. For example, a nation that goes to war with the intention of repelling an invading foreign force, is a nation that is fully justified in engaging in that violence. A state that deploys its security forces to hunt down and terminate violent gangsters and drug dealers is a commendable state. Yet in Africa, since the independence of all countries, maybe two or three wars have been about territorial integrity. The Janjaweed, Joseph Kony, Corporal Foday Sankoh, Jonas Savimbi, Afonso Dlakama, and Boko Haram – have been engaged in pointless and unproductive wars. Rather, these engagements only succeed in depraving and destroying African lives for a cause that does not even benefit a small section of the African population.

A plausible explanation for the occurrence of violence at this common scale could be that conflict (and accompanying violence) could be a result of the nature of humans themselves. Humans by nature, it can be argued, are prone to engaging in conflict of varying degrees and varying outcomes. However, what is important is to understand the cause of this violence and how it can be sorted. If humans, are by nature, perpetrators of both violence and conflict; how can that side of their reality be adjudicated? By what sort of human reality can we hope to understand violence and how it can be mitigated? Claiming that it is possible for people to kill in the name of ubuntu, Shutte (2001) provides an interesting suggestion. If violence is a requisite of peace, for Shutte, adherents of ubuntu will not hesitate to kill in the hope of restoring cordial relations. This thinking, for all its merits, underplays the complexities of the sources of conflict that may lead to violence. It overplays the possibility of the extermination of conflict as lying in one ultimate violent act. Yet that ultimate act may have its own spin-offs that may be carried out in the belief that they are equally ultimate. Notwithstanding Shutte's intervention, what is needed is a holistic understanding of the genesis and perpetuation of conflict on the African continent that could lead to a more interesting understanding of how that conflict may be dealt with. In addition, there is need to understand why the spillage of blood is such an easy occurrence on this continent. Especially so with the confessions of humane and communitarian ethos as principal sources of African identity. If the two forms of violence that I have identified above are true, the most that can be said about them is that they stand in contrast with the famed sub-Saharan ethos of being, which Murove (2011) calls relational rationality based on humaneness.

Besides insistence on human nature as responsible for violence, a historical check on how modern Africa was manifested may help to understand how things have turned out the way they have. What can be said of the banality of today's violence is that it has its traces and origins in the extraordinary events of slavery, colonialism, and their intended as well as unintended after facts (Murove 2011). One enduring effect of these historical spectacles was the complete dehumanisation of the African. This dehumanisation has perpetuated itself in a variety of forms that are also banal. Be they openly violent or subtle. For example, a tribalist war lord who butchers people from a different tribe has to set himself to be attuned to the dehumanisation of his victims. In equal measure, a government official who pillages public funds meant to buy small children medication has to dehumanise those children so that their deaths do not move him. The same applies to a dictator and his collaborators whose sole goal is the retention of power by suppressing their fellow citizens. The dictator and his friends will have to arrive at a station where they see their fellow countrymen as debased and lacking in something such that their cries and pleas would be dispensable without compunction. The same applies to a murderer who shows no mercy in shooting his victim at a point-blank range or one who holds his victim while stabbing him. There has to be a wholesale dehumanisation of the victim in order to successfully carry out the intended act without any pressure to recognise the human standing of the victim.

There could be other forms of violence that are prevalent on the continent. It could be the case that some of the violence we see on the continent is peculiar to it. It could also be the case that some of the violence we see is quite common to humanity or is a distinct possibility with humans anywhere. It could even be the case that if humans are subjected to roughly the same sort of conditions, the likelihood of some form of violence emerging is the same. What might differ is the intensity of that violence. It could also be the case that some violence is random, not well thought out, and quite difficult to explain. It could be that temporary conditions that necessitate a reaction that is seen as violent move some to be violent. Or it could be the case that violence is necessary, in some cases, for the very survival of one who is seen as having perpetuated it.

Whatever we may conceive as violence, its occurrence, explanation, and possible justification; we have to reckon with its ordinariness. Even if it is executed at a large scale with shocking outcomes, it is executed, in ordinary circumstances, by ordinary people (see Gobodo-Madikizela 2003). What could have possibly turned them into unrecognisable and non-ordinary perpetrators of shocking violence would be the extra-ordinary circumstances that drive them in this or that way. There is a way in which participants of violence vacillate between the ordinary and the extra-ordinary. Let us consider, as an example, how at the end of a violent episode perpetrators are made to feel the shame of their actions. Quite appropriately, most perpetrators recognise that they should be ashamed about such acts and that they should either be punished or seek reconciliation with the humanity of those they desecrated, and by so doing connect with their own humanity.

There have been a few instances of this kind. Two of those are most prominent. The first is South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which sought not only the truth but the hope of the humanisation of both the perpetrator and the victim (Clark 2012). The second is Rwandan post-genocide gacaca court systems that represented transitional justice with emphasis on healing and re-building (Haberstock 2014). Notwithstanding the problems associated with these systems, they

may be held as examples of what humaneness is about on this continent. That humaneness has gone by the name of ubuntu.

It is about being human, being open to all possibilities of being human, including being a debased human, as well as the possibility of healing and recovering from that debasement. Ubuntu, it can be said, does not ignore that things can go wrong and horribly so. What it seeks to do is to set a course of recovery where the return to humanity is possible for all concerned. The best way for that return is through the recognition of the humanity of the perpetrator and the victim as indistinct. Even in situations where the perpetrator seeks to dehumanise the other, at best she is only dehumanising herself. Half of her humanity is lost in the act of dehumanisation and it can only be returned when the perpetrator reconciles herself with the victim. Hence Shutte, commenting on politics and crime and ubuntu writes:

Crime should be seen in relation to the growth and community of persons: it diminishes the personal integrity of both perpetrator and victim, and thus harms the wider community as well. So methods of prevention and punishment must have as their aim the healing and restoration of this whole interpersonal system. Victims, offenders and the community itself should all be involved in undoing the harm, making restitution and reparation, so that eventually reconciliation is achieved. In this way victims of crime cease to be mere passive spectators of the judicial process. And because offenders are not distanced from the effects of their crimes and isolated from the community, they have the opportunity to recognize for what they have done and to play a part in putting things right (2001, 194).

Even if the above were to be true, such a truth immediately invites at least two questions. The first has to do with how unique ubuntu is in dealing with human affairs. As a social and ethical system, what advantages it over other systems that may also appear to have an interest in dealing with human conflict and associated violence as well as possible reconciliation? There have been great violence in the world and some of it appears to have been sorted out without invoking ubuntu. Strategies for sorting out that violence have varied from negotiations to complete and total subjugation of opponents. If ubuntu is to be recommended to the rest of the world, as Shutte (2001) has advocated, what distinctly humane feature is compelling for its recommendation to stick? Is there anything to it more than that it originates from the African continent and it the best that Africans imagine they can contribute to humanity? The second question will have to deal with how ubuntu takes seriously the various facets of conflict that may give rise to violence. As we have already seen, one of the most important assumptions about ubuntu is the possibility of reconciliation and that human agents are not only willing to be reconciliatory but to be truthful to the demands of the journey of reconciliation. However, what has to be spelt out is what would make the conditions of reconciliation possible.

### **Ubuntu as overhyped hope**

Ubuntu as an indigenous mode of being has a wide reach in African conceptualisation and practice. It is the basis of African metaphysics and epistemology (Ramosé 1999). The foundation of both African logic and ethics (Shutte 2001). The pinnacle of African social and political theory. In basic terms, ubuntu is the foundation of African thought and living. I will not rehash its principles as I believe that sufficient descriptions of its

nature abound and are easily accessible to anyone who wishes to read. What I will do in this instance is to identify the dissonance between ubuntu's ideals and the space it now operates, with the aim of showing how ubuntu cannot shape this space. The most important ideal from ubuntu, for my current purpose, is community. The community as the basis of ubuntu gives itself to people living in some degree of harmony that enable a sense of a shared life. A life that aims at specific outcomes that echo values of bondedness, shared visions, and common values. Social, religious, community, individual, and political ideals and reality are then tailored towards the realisation of a myriad of goals that naturally reconcile themselves to the preservation and furtherance of the shared and encompassing community. These values may be given different description as seen in Metz (2022), Ramose (1999), Shutte (2001) and so forth. What is important is that there is a belief that all acts and utterances are aimed at preserving the shared idea of community and relationality. The differences, therefore, found in ubuntu scholars are only but a family difference of appearance but with the same commitment to the fundamental viability of individual relationality in affirming community (see Etieyibo 2022).

What cannot be debated is that ubuntu is a historical, social, political, and ethical practice. Its emergence was within a traditional African context where its logic and practice needed no argument or justification. Its veracity was widespread as was its acceptance. Defying its spirit and code was self-defeating for any individual or group as all life was premised on co-operation and consensus (see Nyaumwe & Mkabela 2007). Fast forward to the academic revival of ubuntu, which can be dated as coinciding with the arrival of freedom in South Africa and Zimbabwe. For whatever reasons, the academic (and sometimes political) revival of ubuntu was unable to reflect the historical and socially bound virtues of traditional ubuntu. This absence of reflection was important in determining how the project of ubuntu became overhyped. It is necessary that I explain why this reflection, perhaps, could not happen. It could not happen because the post-independence state for which ubuntu was invoked was no longer a traditional community of shared motivations, sources, and values. It was now a society plagued by all forms of ills ranging from injuries of racism, apartheid, colonialism, economic divisions, ethnic divisions, wars, hatred, losers and winners, the dissatisfied and those seeking justice and/or revenge. I do not think I need to belabour the extent of the brokenness of postcolonial societies. In the case of South Africa and Zimbabwe, their brokenness, which started in colonialism and apartheid, continues to show itself in absolutely shocking and riveting ways as both societies continue to fight different forms of social, political and economic discord (see Francis & Webster 2019).

The real point to argue is this: with all these ills, what could ubuntu hope to cure? What sort of resources, within the logic of ubuntu, were primed to show themselves appropriate for the moment as an antidote to the disruptive realities of intervention? My own response is: none. Ubuntu, as a reality locked in a traditional utopia and only armed with the revivalist's capacity to dream of a new society, was to meet a fatal end at the hands of the reality of the tragedy of postcolonial society. The deep fractures of racism, oppression, and exclusion had robbed society of any sort of basic coherence that could even make the ideal of a society possible. Traditional societies that were the cornerstone of the viability of ubuntu had been turned into ignoble native reserves and homelands that were under serious political threat and economic exclusion and stagnation. Towns and cities were inhospitable to all blacks who resided in them making do with eking a

living on the outskirts of economic viability. In a word, the entire existence of the African in any part of the colony was perilous and doomed to hopelessness.

On the political front, ubuntu countries were about to embark on a meaningless journey of nominal independence whose implication they could not, then, fully comprehend. As newly independent postcolonies, what awaited them were tasks beyond the reach of the conciliatory politics of ubuntu. The reality of these former colonies was one of division between the formerly oppressed and the oppressor, the former colony itself and the former colonial authority, and the various internal political players. These realities turned out to be too radical and for ubuntu. One can also claim that these realities also turned out to be beyond the reach of ubuntu's generally conciliatory tone.

As earlier intimated, critique of ubuntu as overhyped, is the hope it professes in providing a cure to the ills of postcolonial societies (see Eze 2008). In arguing against ubuntu's usefulness in the new postcolonial state, I wish to emphasise the nature of the change in the logic of ubuntu communities into communities of the postcolonial state. If Achille Mbembe's reading of the postcolony is credible, we might be dealing with a different community from what ubuntu supporters envisage. In his discussion of the notion of the commandment, which is representative of how power is exercised and how it seeks to influence society, Mbembe (1992) paints a grim picture of the exercise of power deeply steeped in the grotesque and obscene. The 'commandment' (as he calls it) displays its power in public spaces and occasions with the aim of influencing how individuals abide by that power as well as how they will seek to regulate their lives. However, nothing is positive in the power itself and its subsequent regulation. Mbembe (1992, 4) argues that an appropriate understanding of the postcolony and exercise of power within it, is one that would shun using relations of collaboration or resistance to understand the order of the postcolony as a society:

It is only through such a shift in perspective that we can come to understand that the post-colonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or collaboration but can best be characterized as illicit cohabitation, a relationship made fraught by the very fact of the commandment and its 'subjects' having to share the same living space.

He explains that it is this sharing of space that has led to the stifling of expected possibilities of the oppressed rising against the oppressor. Rather, the oppressed have resorted to mocking power by twisting its representations into distortions that show the emptiness of the commandment itself.

What this brief reference to Mbembe (1992) shows is an understanding of power on one hand, and the effects of its exercise on communities, on the other. There are three significant issues from Mbembe's idea. The first is the commandment's concerted attempt to impose its bankrupted exercise of power on all aspects of existence and social reality. The second is the response of the public to these attempts by firstly playing along with them and secondly seeking to undermine them. The third is how the commandment, understood as cohabitative with the public, leads to the oppressed's soporific, non-revolutionary response. Yet what we must really keep in mind is what forms of existence are called forth by such arrangements? Secondly, how best can we characterise the potential of societies or communities that this state of affairs shapes? My thinking is that the existence that is called forth, theoretically, is one that will not be supportive to ubuntu's endeavours. It will be in keeping with the demands of the commandment. The

point is not to claim that the commandement succeeds. The real point is that the commandement shapes the discourse of existence. It is from the template of the commandement that the ordinary people shall seek to shape their realities and experiences of interaction shall also proceed from there. This will be the dominant spirit of the communities that constitute the nation. The dominance of the spirit will be seen in how people conduct themselves as everyday beings who seek to survive and as political beings with real aspirations and hopes for their lives in the particular settings they exist. If facts of existence in the postcolony are to be laid bare, which aspect of the harshness and bankruptcy of the postcolony can ubuntu ever claim to be capable of correcting? The incapacity so rendered to ubuntu emerges from the fact that the sort of community for which it was designed, is no longer the dominant community in Africa. Communities that are meant to give sustenance to ubuntu exist in sparse and distant location from the capricious capitals where the national character is authored and spread across all cities in different provinces. The postcolony is not a place of harmony, by its national identity. It is a place of serious contestation of what it means to be in that space. It is also a site of confrontation between and amongst different and competing individuals and groups seeking to advance their own interests that are in opposition to those they just so happen to co-habit with. Whatever ubuntu promises to offer, under these circumstances, can only be hope and nothing else. It does not have the commanding capacity or powers to marshal the logic of community towards opportunities for ubuntu to thrive.

### **Ubuntu's failure in violence**

My titling of this sub-section indicates what we can imagine to be ubuntu's role in violence. It is a role of failure. Let us start by expanding on the earlier claim made about Africa having a propensity to engage in unproductive conflict. There are just too many coups, too many wars, too much internal displacement, and too many avoidable deaths. This is the sort of violence that is open in its aggression and has the potential to terminate life with immediate effect. In this instance, there are two ways to think of ubuntu in relation to this type of violence. The first way is to imagine that if ubuntu were as prevalent as some of its adherents suggest, what form of violence would possibly emerge from ubuntu communities. Even if we were to admit that episodes of violence are part of the human experience, what must really interest us is what our expectations of violence would be in a context said to be ubuntu-dominated. If there is ubuntu, even in the face of extreme disagreement, there should be a level or threshold that ubuntu adherents will not cross as parties to a conflict. Ubuntu is in the game of humanising the other. If we take seriously that attempt at humanisation, then we have good reason to think that what is sought is the making of a human of the other. This making of a human involves recognising the inviolability of the humanity of the other to a degree that prevents one from acting in ways that either diminish the human agency of the other or completely decimate their existence.

What we have seen with wars that emerge in Africa, does not even show any traces of ubuntu both in the purpose of the war and the manner in which the war is waged. There is actually a horror side to these episodes of war that make the whole world aghast at what Africans are capable of doing to each other in the name of conflict. Ranging from child soldiers, murder of innocent people, disregard for any civilised rules of

engagement in war to marauding rebels amputating civilian limbs, the war scene in Africa is ugly and inhumane.

The fact that ubuntu is unable to forestall the possibility of violent conflict on any part of the continent tells us that either ubuntu is largely absent (in those zones of war) or is completely incapable of influencing practical affairs such as wars and the conduct of individuals and communities that are at conflict with each other. If ubuntu was the governing ethical thought or a prevalent ethical system, whichever phrase to be used, then it would not be so easy for conflict to start in the way it does with the results it ends with. Ubuntu, in its way, would have prohibited such a large scale of inhumane behaviour. The easy way in which wars start and are conducted, horrifying as it is, clearly shows that there is another set of ethos that is at work on the continent. That ethos, I suggest, is more in line with Mbembe's idea of how the commandement attempts to make itself the dominant feature of social reality. In the uneasy cohabitation Mbembe (1992) refers to, anything is possible, notwithstanding Mbembe's allusion the non-revolutionary mentality of the oppressed. The logic of the postcolony, as Mbembe argues, is filled with contradictions. These contradictions have a weird way of working themselves out. One way in which they work themselves out is through violence as either a continuation of the violence of colonialism or as a beginning of yet another violent chapter in an environment that is not unaccustomed to violence. It could be the case that the violence of colonialism has found ways of remaining intact in some social institutions that ordinary people still do not want to identify with. I will give an example of the security sector. The police and the army were used as tools of controlling and oppressing the black masses. Even in instances where the army and the police were largely made of members of the local population, their zeal to serve the oppressor as a controlling tool, was uncompromised. At independence both the police and the army never quite transformed themselves to genuinely stand for national interests or promote the common security good. In many instances the army and police (together with the secret service) retained the same structures and modus operandi to dominate and suppress the citizenry, only this time for the new local master. In instances where the army grew impatient with the master, the overthrow of the master did not lead to any genuine liberation of the people or the ushering in of a new dispensation that would promise the beginning of a journey to freedom. On the contrary, military states became securitised, with greater oppression being visited on the people. A cycle of overthrows followed that reduced the entire state, country, and people into a joke whose existence was steeped in postcolonial buffoonery. Where coups did not happen, the security forces, whose heavy handedness returned the citizens into an uneasy cohabitation with its characteristic non-revolutionary posture, were sure to quell every civil strife or unrest. The African police, in general, has excelled as a self-enriching unit that feeds on the carcass called citizens. The promptitude with which citizens have trained themselves to offer a bribe rather than argue their innocence or admit their guilt speaks volumes of how the police are viewed. Most roadblocks are not an occasion to implement the law but to fleece motorists, passengers and passers-by, alike. The police are the face of the ruthlessness of the regime when they are called to deal with the striking workers, the unhappy university students, and the chanting opposition. Their brutality leaves a lasting impression that directly leads to a retreat into safe spaces where the population know better than to provoke the commandement. This is the reality of many African countries. In fact,

when it comes to one feature the entire continent shares, it is the brutality of regimes in suppressing dissent.

It is in this picture that ubuntu has to operate as a determining force of how human affairs can be made humane, again. What is clear, if my description above is acceptable, is that the prevailing spirit is not consistent with ubuntu. Certainly, ubuntu is neither found in Mbembe's commandment, nor does it inform the way in which the ordinary population seeks to respond. Whatever that spirit is, it is something that is not in line with ubuntu.

The second element of violence in which ubuntu shows itself to be rather on the hopeless side, is in the everydayness of violence. A never-ending series of dumbfounding events that are solely aimed at reducing composite experience of life as a positive adventure characterises existence on the continent. I will start the everydayness of violence in the fundamental structures that govern life. Taking a cue from ubuntu's reliance on traditional structures, one of the most secure or foundational structure of traditional society was governance. Where selections were to be made, leaders were openly selected, and where lines of succession were used to determine the next crop of leaders, this was done openly and with the full knowledge of all as to where the next leader was going to come from. It is quite tragic that this assured manner of proceeding where it matters the most – political legitimacy – has been fully compromised. In Africa, it is routine for elections to be contested from the beginning to the end, with a touch of the aftermath of the end where it is routine for electoral outcomes to be disputed. Without getting involved into the technicalities of voter counting and winner announcements, what is clear is long-term resentments between winners and losers will characterise such spaces, and there will be a way in which such spaces settle down. That way of settling down is one that will not likely be in favour of reconciliation or pursuit of a common goal. Rather, it is a settling down characterised by disdain, resentment and refusal to recognise the other. It is this refusal to recognise that manufactures its own spin-offs that become markers of how real people interact. Inter-party violence is not new in Africa, and it is not just a political phenomenon. I suggest that the political differences are indicative of other differences that people already hold. For example, it is not unknown phenomenon that tribalism simply transfers itself to the political realm emerging as political parties organised and aligned along ethnic lines. Such divisions, when politicised lead to a range of other difficulties that are sure to break down any notion of community or possibility of coherent action.

Added to this is the fact of the social and economic tragedy that Africa has largely become. This tragedy undermines and threatens life everywhere on the continent. It is a form of violence that is consistent and unwavering. People die of otherwise preventable deaths due to lack of medication or a decayed health system that is just but a shell of its former colonial self. Decent conditions of living are a mirage for most citizens while the youths of Africa are incessantly faced with the possibility of not finding a meaningful job, let alone follow the career of their dreams. Many young people are forced to flee their homes in search of the proverbial greener pastures, in foreign lands. One could go on listing the tragedy that Africa is, however, what needs to be shown is how ubuntu relates to this tragedy. Ubuntu relates to this tragedy in a peripheral manner. Having not created it and having no powers to stop its extension or multiplication, ubuntu can only offer itself as a curative proposition. However, the proverbial horse

has bolted. Ubuntu is no match for the predatory nature of the postcolony. This terrain has become extraordinarily rough for its inhabitants. That extraordinary roughness has been borne out of a number of contradictory factors that combine not so well to create a state of Africa that adeptly defies any form of logical explanation. This is a place where brute local dictators eagerly succeeded equally brute colonisers. In fact, the locals have succeeded in venturing into zones colonials could not imagine. It is as if the colonials were only setting the stage for the main act of local torture at the hands of local torturers. What Africa is, is a pitiable state of failure, dysfunction, and unparalleled nonsense turned into human existence. It is a shame and a disgrace. Ubuntu was never made for this kind of stuff. Even military coups and revolutions cannot set things right. This, after all, is Africa.

Three possible objections could be raised against my position. I will consider what these possible objections could be and then offer appropriate responses to each of them, in turn. The first objection could be that I have ossified ubuntu into practical arrangements while failing to recognise that it is a theoretical position. Like any other theory, whether people live up its principles or not does not determine its strength. The objection can then continue to argue that my claim that ubuntu does not have the resources to deal with violence is simply untrue as in its theoretical formulation, ubuntu will be specific to the conditions of each place it operates in. My response to this objection is that those who insist that ubuntu should be viewed as a theoretical position, miss the real point of the debate. While it is absolutely true and even necessary to theorise on ubuntu, there are two things to consider. The first is that ubuntu does not originate from the realm of the theoretical. Ubuntu is firmly grounded in the historical and contextualisable experiences of being African. In its historical formulation and how it was lived out from its outset, ubuntu was never a theory. It was a way of organising society and a very specific mode of recommending how individuals would live within society. I do not deny that one can theorise about this and even take away principles and concepts to recommend them to other societies. However, what such theories need to acknowledge is that the principles gleaned from specific instances may not have the same theoretical appeal in different circumstances. Thus, while harmony as a principle is understandable and desirable in a traditional set up, its desirability may not be easily guaranteed in a severely broken society. Harmony is the basis on which ubuntu is built, and harmony was a desirable principle, theoretically, because it was the necessary ingredient for cordial relations. On my view the reality of today's Africa, for its majority of citizens, the most important goal is not cordial relations, but survival. If that is the case, harmony is not going to be the most desirable principle that leads to the realisation of that goal. It does not matter whether individuals or communities under threat undertake that goal.

The second objection could proceed directly from my response given to the first objection. It could be argued, against my view, that ubuntu is fluid and always becoming. The idea of fluidity and becoming makes it adept at dealing with changing normative situations. It could also be added that its idea of relationality should not be understood as stuck in some utopian understanding of traditional society's practice of relationality or offshoots thereof. My response to this view is that the onus is on the advocates of ubuntu to demonstrate what the so-called fluidity of ubuntu entails for its core values. One way of understanding my response is to consider the idea of relationality as

changing. When ubuntu advocates claim that relationality may be given to change, which makes ubuntu relevant beyond its initial prescriptions of relationality in traditional society, underlying such conviction is one significant commitment. This significant commitment is to the assumption that relations may change in different contexts and times, hence needing context and time relevant relational principles, but the relations themselves will always have a positive outlook. In other terms, ubuntu adherents believe that relations everywhere and at all times, must ultimately take a positive outlook. Indeed, Kwasi Wiredu holds a similar view in his dismissal of disagreement in consensus. I choose to differ with this formulation. In my invocation of Mbembe's view of commandement, I was seeking to show that it is not only possible but an existing daily reality, for the majority of Africans, of encountering negative relations on a national level. These negative experiences may just as well reproduce themselves in many ways to affect all ways of living. Advocating principles of harmony in a state of strife is odd. Thinking that the pursuit of harmony will overcome the dominance of strife, may not be correct.

The third and final objection could be that I have failed to demonstrate how ubuntu is incapable of dealing with violence. The objection could insist that the Shutte (2001) position I referred to, contrary to my thinking, does show that ubuntu is capable of dealing with violence. The way ubuntu deals with violence can be conceived in two ways. In the first instance, ubuntu itself does not abhor violence as it may permit instances where violence is undertaken to ensure that conditions of justice are generated. Secondly, the values ubuntu extol – justice, harmony, equality – are not handed over to communities that adhere to ubuntu. Rather these are values that have to be fought for and may have to be defended with a fight. My response is that I do not disagree with the basic sentiment of this position. However, I think this objection entirely misses the point. The point I am making is that the conditions under which violence generates itself and is eventually felt are at odds with everything that ubuntu represents. Those conditions, such as Mbembe's notion of the commandement, may even be the most dominant in society. It is from such dominance that ubuntu is disempowered, in my view. The violence that the third objection refers to, is one that occurs in contexts where ubuntu is a dominant ethical system in ethical subjects' dealing with the world. The case I have in mind is where ubuntu is called upon to correct a derelict system, which is not of the making of ubuntu.

## Conclusion

My grandparents and their parents lived ubuntu. They were children the village raised to be faithful to the ways of the village. Those ways were perfectly encapsulated in what we theorise about, today. Their world, both in private articulation and its public expression, is radically dissimilar to mine. They did not have to contend with any of the issues that affect me and those that will be my grandchildren. If those issues have an ethical tone to them, it is hard to believe that such a tone should be ubuntu inspired. The reason for this is simple, ubuntu as a thought device, emerged from social and personal conditions that have largely disappeared. Where these forms of life remain, they are uninfluential and at the periphery of modern African challenges requiring creative thinking. Africa and its reality are not just its approximations to its traditional ethos. Africa is far much more complex than that, and as a postcolony it is drifting further and further away from its traditional past. Yet the tragedy of that drift is that it is incoherent and beyond the reach of

ubuntu. As a place that is remarkably violent, Africa needs to think of new ways of dealing with complex unfolding realities. Those new ways could be positive or negative but they must have the capacity of informing us what is wrong with Africa and how can it forge ahead into full membership of the new world, on its own terms. Neither an essentialised past nor the dictates of former colonial powers will be a part of those terms.

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## Note on contributor

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