Munhu: Unlocking the Roots, Indigenous Knowledge for Development

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Abstract

This paper is based on both written academic literature and Shona oral traditions. The paper looks at the conceptual framework, practice, and understanding of the *muntu / munhu* philosophy. The lateral translation of *muntu / munhu* is person. Conceptually the word goes deeper than this individualistic western worldview. *Munhu* is complex, multifaceted and generally understood at two levels; the lower and higher level. At lower level *munhu* means the physical body of a human being. At higher level *munhu* becomes the physical body and a lot of other extras. This paper argues that the concept of *munhu* (humanity) is the foundation of life and the only key to stability and progress / development among Africans. Destroying the human body or even showing disrespect to that body is a punishable offence. Thus whether *munhu* is understood at lower (physical) or higher (spiritual plus) level, *munhu* is sacred and has to be treated with respect for progress, wellbeing and development of the humankind. If respected, *munhu* will contribute towards both personal and communal development. In fact, in Africa the personal is communal.

1. Introduction

The lateral translation of *muntu/munhu* is person. Conceptually the word goes deeper than the individualistic western worldview. According to Shona oral tradition, *munhu* is complex, multifaceted and generally understood at two levels; the lower and higher levels. At lower level *munhu* means the physical body of a human being. At higher level *munhu* becomes the physical body and a lot of other extras.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on both written academic literature and Shona oral traditions for as put forward by Outlaw (2004), Obenga (2004), Gyekye (1995), Asante (1990), and Diop (1974), cultural practices and African oral traditions are valued sources of knowledge. The paper looks at the conceptual framework, practice, and understanding of the *muntu / munhu* philosophy.

3. Muntu: Lower Level

At this level *muntu / munhu* is the physical human body. *Muntu* is not viewed as different from any other things; the *–ntus / -nhus* from such words as *munhu, umuntu, kintu, kuntu, hunhu, ubuntu, abantu, or chinhu*. It is the prefix to *–ntu / -nhu* that determines whether one is talking of a human being, an animal or any other thing. *Muntu* at this level is either a stranger or someone below communal/societal expectations.

Strangers are *vanhu/bantu*-people, but with some question marks because one does not know their background and way of life. At their first encounter with Europeans, the Shona called them *vanhu vasina mabvi*-people without knees because they wore trousers and they could not see their knees. Europeans were people but they could not tell whether they qualified to be as human as themselves. As such they had to qualify them-*vanhu vasina mabvi*. The strangers had a human body but the Shona did not know what was inside that body and how it related with the total universe. Any stranger is treated with some degree of suspicion as evidenced in the Shona idiom *rooranai vamatongo*-(marry someone whose ancestry is well known to your people). A stranger can turn out to be a vampire, a witch, a thief, or anything else that does not qualify to be *muntu* at higher level.

People who lack the human content as shall be shown below are mere things and as such not different from the rest of the *–ntus / -nhus*. Shona expressions like *uri mbwa*-(you are a dog), *imhuka*-(one is an animal), *munhu pasina vanhu*-(a person where there are no people), fully explain *muntu* at this level. Thus the *–ntu / -nhu* refers to one's physical existence as a thing with no values attached (Chivaura, not dated). It is this level that Moyo (2004) calls the individualistic level and equates to the western worldview.

Nevertheless, even at this level the human body is sacred. Whether it carries a saint or a brute, familiar or unfamiliar, dead or alive, the human body deserves respect. Otherwise one gets punished by the ill-treated person's

ngozi-(dead person's avenging spirit) when the ill-treated dies. If you see a dead body and leave it without putting effort to help it get proper burial, the spirit of the dead body will follow and punish you in form of *ngozi* until you confess and pay beasts to the dead's relatives as compensation. The same happens to those who let strangers die without trying to save the strangers' lives. The idea of the sacred human body is well captured by Moyo (2004: 16) when she writes:

> I saw people, not color, race, culture or status, something that is encapsulated in the phrase: *Umuntu ngu muntu*. This is the cornerstone of *Ubuntu* which sees people for who they are [sacred bodies]

4. Muntu: Higher Level

Muntu is not the physical body per se. In its broad context *muntu* means the physical body, *unhu / ubuntu*-dignity or human content (Chivaura, not dated), adaptability, enterprising, and anything positive and progressive about the human being. *Muntu* is a "set of concrete social relationships, a system of systems; the pattern of patterns in being" (Fu-Kiau 2001: 42). Thus *muntu* is able to produce materially and technologically other mechanical systems. This makes the species unique (Ani 1994) and not comparable to other animals. In the Shona community a lazy person / somebody who is not innovative *haasi munhu*-(is not a person).

The multifaceted character and complexity of the *muntu* concept is evident in the components of a full human being. Among the Zulu a person is a cluster of the body, aura, law, and *uqobo*-essence (Asante and Abarry 1996). For the Nupe *muntu* includes the *naka*-body, *ravi*-soul, *fifingi*-shadow soul, and *kuci*-personal soul (Denise, Martin 2008). A Yoruba consists of the *ara*-physical body, *emi*-soul, *ori*-inner head, and *esse*-individual effort (Ambimbola 2006). This is a universal characteristic of Africans for they "share a common religion, philosophy of life and culture" (Chivaura, not dated).

The principles upon which the *muntu* philosophy is built are "harmony, peace, balance, love and justice. Violation of any principle will unleash chaos, disorder and conflict among things in the universe" (Chivaura:, not dated). Good character is the prerequisite of all human activity including the creation and application of knowledge. Someone who is not applying ethics with their knowledge is seen as a witch (Fu-Kiau 2001). The Yoruba concept of *iwapele* describes the active moral component of *muntu*. It distinguishes *muntu* (being) from *kintu* (thing). Chivaura (not dated: 231) believes,

> The spiritual of one's personality is the truly human. It is moral and ethical. It is the ability to distinguish right from wrong and do what is right and reject what is wrong. It aspires towards the beautiful and abhors the ugly in life.

For him *munhu* has the ability to control overpowering urges in one's physical being.

The *muntu* soul-mind can remain and interact with the world community after death (Fu-Kiau 2001). The dead remain human and continue to exist among people and take part in human affairs and influence human destiny (Chivaura, not dated). Birago Abare, as captured by Chivaura (Ibid), writes,

> Those who are dead are never gone,
> They are there in the thickening shadow…
> The dead are not dead…

Life is communal, not individualistic and thus the nuclear family is alien (Oyewumi 2002). *Muntu* is not gendered. In Dangarembga's (1989) Nervous Conditions, Aunt / Tete had patriarchal status. Sekai Nzenza-Shand (1997: 19) writes of her mother:

> My mother was looked on as the great aunt, or an honorary man; the *varoora* gave her respect due to a father and my mother could command them as she wished.

Munhu munhu-(a human being is a human being), whether female or male. One becomes a man or a woman only in bed. Otherwise in the true *muntu* thinking there is no clear demarcation between female and male. Oyewumi (2002) talks of male daughters and female husbands. She says in Dahomey some women of the palace were male and vice versa. Kwesi Yankah (1995) writes of female chiefs with male wives and therefore the social role wife is

not inherent in the female body of a *muntu*.

Muntu is thus more than the physical body (whether female or male) and can only survive in the African culture that has an acute sense of solidarity and community of life, especially in the extended family structure. A real *muntu* has to be in harmony with oneself, family, community and the universe at large.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we argue that *munhu* is complex, multifaceted and generally understood at two levels; the lower and higher level. At lower level *munhu* means the physical body of a human being. At higher level *munhu* becomes the physical body and a lot of other extras. We argue that the concept of *munhu* (humanity) is the foundation of life and the only key to stability and progress / development among Africans. Destroying the human body or even showing disrespect to that body is a punishable offence. Thus whether *munhu* is understood at lower (physical) or higher (spiritual plus) level, *munhu* is sacred and has to be treated with respect for progress, wellbeing and development of the humankind. If respected, *munhu* will contribute towards both personal and communal development.

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