

African Ethnophilosophy: Reflexive Models and Anthropological Insights

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Abstract. The article examines two forms of African ethnic philosophy — Bantu and Ubuntu — that have been evolving in the postcolonial period of the continent. It highlights the core principles and the categorical framework of ethnophilosophy, rooted in the indigenous values and traditions of African peoples. The analysis focuses on Bantu philosophy, widespread in Southern Africa and theoretically founded in Placide Tempels' seminal work *Bantu Philosophy*. The study emphasizes the ontological and anthropocentric nature of Bantu thought, which is based on the belief in a special life force permeating the peoples belonging to this broad ethnic group. It explores the worldview of African ethnic communities shaped by Bantu philosophy and discusses the pursuit of identity through this philosophical lens. The article also identifies the metaphysical principles of Ubuntu ethnophilosophy, where ubuntu means “humanity” in Zulu. Ubuntu, as both a worldview and a mode of theorizing among sub-Saharan peoples, encapsulates two fundamental dimensions: rootedness in cosmic being and the unfolding of human existence within the universe. The study traces certain paradigmatic features of Ubuntu as a philosophy that transcends specific ethnic communities. It introduces the African conceptualization of umuntu, which, in a universal philosophical sense, denotes the notion of a human being. The article underscores the significance of both Bantu and Ubuntu philosophies for the social, cultural, educational, and political development of the African continent.

Keywords: philosophy of Contemporary Africa, Bantu, Ubuntu, Ethnic philosophy, African identity, African renaissance

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Introduction

The African continent is characterized by a unified civilizational community that encompasses a vast number of peoples, each with their own distinct cultural and religious traditions. In the postcolonial era, Africa has witnessed a theoretical rethinking of its historical legacy and an active search for a new ethno-cultural identity — one that differs fundamentally from previous models of identification. In the philosophical culture of Africa, this process has come to be known as the African Renaissance, which is marked by a growing diversity of theoretical reflections on the ethnic, religious, and folkloric and cultural foundations of African peoples and communities.

Among the most significant currents of this intellectual resurgence are the philosophy of Bantu (which reflects the worldview of many ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa and is rooted in the work of Placide Tempels [1]), the philosophy of Ubuntu (widespread in Southern Africa, with the term deriving from the Zulu language meaning “humanity”), and the so-called conversational philosophy, which correlates with formal reasoning procedures and is oriented toward dialogue with other cultural traditions.

Each of these currents represents an effort to conceptualize ethnic characteristics, indigenous traditions, and African systems of belief. Taken together, they form a nascent ethnophilosophical paradigm within the broader framework of African philosophy in the postcolonial period. The foundation of this paradigm

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lies in the African thinkers' turn to indigenous worldviews and value systems, in the rationalization of mythology, the development of distinctive religious representations, and the affirmation of communality as a principle of social life, as well as in the existential interpretation of nature.

Russian philosopher A.S. Kolesnikov, in his analysis of the various strands of African thought, identifies key features of ethnophilosophy. He writes:

"Ethnophilosophy may be understood as a set of values, categories, and assumptions embedded in the language, practices, and beliefs characteristic of African cultures. As a direct offshoot of the Negritude movement, ethnophilosophy seeks to define African identity in ontological terms, since metaphysics is not separated from experience but is, in fact, an intrinsic part of it" [2, pp. 22–23].

The Senegalese philosopher, poet, and statesman Léopold Sédar Senghor noted that the diverse intellectual expressions of identity and socio-cultural existence in Africa are united by an idea that conveys a holistic African conception of the world, in which Africans themselves are seen as an inseparable and primordial part of that world [3]. Africans and the cosmos form a single synergistic reality, within which lie the uniqueness and specificity of their enduring traditions and conceptual frameworks — frameworks that give rise to new forms of philosophizing. Within this natural-philosophical unity, the African worldview finds expression in a multitude of ethno-cultural manifestations. The continent's philosophical culture thus reflects a broad spectrum of ethnic perspectives.

As scholar O.M. Mikhalina rightly observes: "Several African philosophers (K.C. Anyanwu, L.S. Senghor, P. Tempels, A. Kagame, J. Mbiti) trace the foundations of philosophy to the traditional African worldview, a perspective informed by the vastness of the continent and the diversity of its peoples" [4, p. 40].

The following section will explore two major forms of ethnophilosophical thought in contemporary Africa, represented by the conceptual frameworks of Bantu and Ubuntu.

Theoretical Framework

Bantu Philosophy

The origins of ethnophilosophy in Africa are commonly associated with the Belgian Franciscan missionary Placide Tempels, who authored the book *Bantu Philosophy* (1945), which reflected the ethnocultural worldview of the Luba people in what was then the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). In his examination of the traditional culture and religious beliefs of the peoples collectively referred to as Bantu (from a-ba-ntu—"people"), Tempels studied 44 authentic religious systems and concluded that there were significant correspondences between Bantu philosophical principles and Christian thought.

Russian philosopher A.S. Kolesnikov emphasizes the importance of Tempels' work for shaping the subsequent "philosophical orientation" of Francophone Africa. Tempels demonstrated what he called the "reflective disposition" of the Luba people, highlighting the emergence and potential of philosophical thinking within this ethnic group [1]. As A.S. Kolesnikov notes: "He attributed to them a collective philosophy and a profound ontology... Bantu Philosophy provided both a model and a conceptual framework for the formation of an original African

philosophy and has remained a central reference point in African philosophical debates" [2, p. 19].

The emergence of ethnophilosophy in Africa is traditionally associated with the Belgian Franciscan missionary Placide Tempels, who in 1945 published his seminal work *La philosophie bantoue* (*Bantu Philosophy*). This work presented a conceptualization of the ethnocultural worldview of the Luba people, residing in what was then the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Through his analysis of the traditional culture and religious beliefs of various ethnic groups collectively referred to as Bantu (from a-ba-ntu—"people"), Tempels examined 44 indigenous religious systems and concluded that there were significant philosophical affinities between Bantu metaphysical principles and Christian doctrine.

Russian scholar A.S. Kolesnikov emphasizes the conceptual significance of Tempels' work, noting its decisive influence on the subsequent philosophical orientation of Francophone Africa. Tempels, he argues, revealed a "reflective predisposition" within the Luba culture, thereby demonstrating both the nascent potential and the historical continuity of philosophical thought within this ethnic group. As Kolesnikov observes:

He attributed to them a collective philosophy and a remarkable ontology... Bantu Philosophy provided both a model and a conceptual framework for the initial development of African philosophy and has remained a central reference point in philosophical debates across the continent [2, p. 19].

According to Tempels, Bantu philosophy is grounded in several core principles. It is fundamentally ontological, as it articulates a vision of collective existence that is inherently animated by a unique "vital force" — an internal, cohesive energy that binds individuals together. The being and thought of a people are inextricably linked to this energy. This vital force possesses a form of passionarity: it may emerge, undergo stages of development, and eventually dissipate. Interpersonal relationships within the community are infused with this force, enabling individuals to exert a profound influence on others and on living beings more broadly.

The Bantu worldview also affirms the idea of divine creation — a cosmos brought into existence by God, within which human life unfolds. The vital force is transmitted not only between human minds but also to animals, plants, and even inanimate objects. Tempels maintained that the philosophical thought of so-called "primitive" peoples, as it develops, holds the potential to inform and enrich various domains of knowledge, including ethnology, law, psychology. In this sense, ethnophilosophy represents a rationalizing trajectory — one that marks a departure from mythology, magic, and archaic representations, and which positions itself as a genuine form of popular philosophy.

The ontological and anthropocentric dimensions of Bantu philosophy have been noted by many subsequent scholars. African intellectuals, drawing on Tempels' work, have expressed diverse views on ethnophilosophy — ranging from critique to affirmation of its importance. For instance, Valentin Mudimbe acknowledged that Tempels' book facilitates an understanding of the worldview of African ethnic groups and highlights the otherness and autonomy of African culture as a whole. Although Mudimbe, like many thinkers on the continent, employed Western conceptual tools and methodologies, he nonetheless emphasized the necessity of constructing a self-sufficient African ethnophilosophy — one grounded in non-derivative logical forms and authentic indigenous ideas [5].

It is important to note that the emerging ethnophilosophical discourse also served as a reflective medium for the processes of Christianization in Africa and contributed to reinterpreting the relationships between the individual and the community, as well as between humans and the natural world. A.S. Kolesnikov offers the following insight:

Through philosophical thinking (including Bantu philosophy — author's note), the human being is able to exercise indirect dominion over nature; the African philosophical tradition, whose roots lie in magic, is underpinned by a deep faith in the divine essence of natural elements and their capacity to fulfill human desires. In the African worldview, religion is prioritized over science, and faith is placed above reason [2, p. 12].

This transformative role of ethnophilosophy proved essential to the intellectual and cultural processes of the African Renaissance. Following the widespread resonance of Tempels' publication, a dynamic wave of interest emerged in Africa surrounding the history and cultural traditions of the diverse ethnic groups classified under the Bantu umbrella. In 1983, the International Center for Bantu Civilizations (CICIBA) was established in Libreville, the capital of Gabon. Around the same time, the periodical Muntu was launched, serving as a scholarly platform for research on this sociocultural and linguistic phenomenon.

Ubuntu Ethnophilosophy

No less metaphysical and ontological than Bantu thought, Ubuntu philosophy has served as a principal channel for the formation of African ethnophilosophy. The concept of ubuntu connects the populations across the territory south of the Sahara, imbuing them with a sense of familial atmosphere and spiritual kinship among the indigenous peoples of this vast region [2, p. 22]. Etymologically derived from the Zulu language (South Africa), the term ubuntu encapsulates the Zulu worldview and conveys the moral imperative expressed in the phrase “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” — “a person becomes a person through other people” [6]. This ethical axiom articulates a foundational principle of the Zulu ethos: individual existence is possible only within the context of close communal unity, grounded in humanity, mutual aid, and collective life.

In the African ethnocultural context, humanity implies the imperative to affirm one's own humanity by recognizing and affirming the humanity of others, in all its infinite diversity of expressions and forms [4, p. 43]. South African scholar Johan Broodryk describes Ubuntu as a historically authentic African worldview, shaped by the values of love, compassion, mercy, and respect. These moral norms govern interpersonal relations within ethnic communities, each of which is envisioned as a large extended family [7].

The term ubuntu is not confined to the Zulu language but is also used by other peoples of Southern Africa, which lends it polysemy and philosophical depth. As A.S. Kolesnikov observes:

This word is employed across several Bantu languages — Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele. Botho is its Sotho equivalent, and hunhu in Shona. Mogobe Ramose argues that the meaning of ubuntu is not limited to the human world or its ethical and political dimensions. He also considers the concept within an ontological horizon [2, p. 22].

Despite its linguistic variation across ethnic groups, the term retains a unified philosophical foundation that grants it coherence and humanistic meaning. In all these linguistic and cultural contexts, “ubuntu symbolizes a human being

endowed with essential human virtues such as compassion, interconnectedness with the environment, reverence for God and the ancestors” [8, p. 144].

The identification of Africans as integral parts of the universe is reflected in the semantic structure of the word *ubuntu*, composed of the prefix *-ubu-* indicating rootedness in cosmic being and the root *-ntu*, denoting the unfolding of human existence in the universe through diverse and unique life forms. This process of existential unfolding gives rise to speech, writing systems, and various forms of knowledge, which together constitute the epistemological dimension of *ubuntu* [9]. According to Mogobe B. Ramose, *ubuntu* is the wellspring of African philosophy and holds promise for its continued development. Through the gnosis of *ubuntu*, Bantu-speaking peoples have formed social and cultural institutions, including systems of jurisprudence.

Given that the theoretical foundation of *ubuntu* lies in the concepts of humanity and humanism, it is reasonable to argue that its philosophical framework has a distinctly anthropological dimension. Anthropology, perhaps unconsciously, becomes an essential component of the worldview of the Zulu and other communities that live according to *ubuntu*. In essence, *ubuntu* is a central aspect of the broader concept *umuntu*, which, in a universal philosophical sense, simply means “human.” *Umuntu* reflects the multifaceted nature of the human being, revealing its various essential components.

O.A. Mikhulina, analyzing the work of contemporary scholar Johann Le Roux, identifies the following core elements of the anthropological concept of *umuntu*:

- *umzimba* — form, body human nature (flesh);
- *umoya* — breath, air, life;
- *amandla* — vitality, strength, energy;
- *umqondo* — head, brain, intellect;
- *ulwimi* — language, speech;
- *ubuntu* — humanity, humaneness [4, p. 43].

Among these, *ubuntu* holds primacy, as it serves as an existential principle: life within society is impossible without it, just as society itself cannot exist without the realization of this unique spiritual principle of being.

Ubuntu is thus a unique category of African thought that transcends ethnic particularism and can be viewed as a philosophical paradigm. It enables a normative understanding of human relationships across diverse ethnic collectives in Africa. As such, it functions as a practical means of communication and interaction between ethnic groups, uniting them on the basis of shared existential values. In this respect, *Ubuntu* is original, distinct, and philosophically self-sufficient. It does not resemble other philosophical systems — whether European, Confucian, or broadly Eastern [10]. Rather, *ubuntu* addresses the specific realities and traditional lifeways of African societies, where a person has always been conceived in relation to others. It offers a reflection on human nature that is revealed only through relationships with others. The values of collectivism, interdependence, compassion, and mutual assistance highlight the deep-seated foundations of traditional African life.

As noted by scholars: “*Ubuntu* may be understood as a collective African worldview characterized by strong communal solidarity (communitarianism), which plays a central role in the survival and optimal organization of African communities” [8, p. 144].

Today, *ubuntu* resonates so closely with the lived realities of African peoples that it is actively integrated into educational and pedagogical systems in several

countries of Southern Africa, such as schools in Pretoria. It has been incorporated into curricula as a value system that reflects the aspirations of modern Africans. More broadly, ubuntu embodies the cultural and civic identity of South Africans, their self-consciousness, religious convictions, and moral imperatives. In this light, ubuntu can be regarded as a system of values that unites diverse ethnic groups and reconciles various worldviews on the basis of shared philosophical and anthropological principles. This is what makes ubuntu a foundational and enduring form of ethnophilosophy in Southern Africa.

Conclusion

Overall, ethnophilosophy facilitates the search for identity among African peoples and contributes to the harmonization of relationships within communities and social groups. The theoretical frameworks developed within ethnophilosophy — both in the Bantu and Ubuntu traditions — are marked by a high degree of universality and are oriented toward the interpretation of indigenous forms of being and their practical application in contemporary life.

Bantu and Ubuntu represent flexible systems grounded in a philosophical categorical apparatus enriched by culturally specific and authentic themes. As such, they function as mediators between traditional ways of life and the processes of modernization within African societies. Precisely for this reason, these forms of philosophical reflection are now employed across various domains of social, cultural, educational, and governmental activity on the African continent. They offer paradigms of humane engagement with the individual and with collective existence as a whole.

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Африканская этнофилософия: рефлексивные модели и антропологические смыслы

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Аннотация. Рассмотрены две формы этнической философии Африки — банту и убунту, — развивающиеся в пост-колониальный период континента. Выделены основные принципы и категориальный аппарат этнофилософии, основывающейся на исконных ценностях и традициях коренных народов Африки. Проанализирована философия банту, распространенная в Южной Африке, теоретически обоснованная в книге П. Темпельса «Философия Банту». Отмечена онтологичность и антропоцентричность мышления банту, основанная на вере в особую жизненную силу, пронизывающую народы, принадлежащие к этой широкой этнической группе. Подчеркнуты особенности мировоззрения африканских этнических общностей, проводится идея о поиске своей идентичности посредством этой философии. Выведены метафизические принципы этнофилософии убунту, означающей на зулусском языке чело-вечность. Убунту как мировоззрение и теоретизирование народов к югу от Сахары являет собой два важнейших фактора: укорененность в мировое бытие и разворачивание человеческого бытия во Вселенной. Прослеживаются некоторые парадигмальные черты убунту как философии, выходящей за пределы конкретных этнических коллективов. Показано африканское видение понятия «умунту», что во всеобщем философском смысле означает сущность человека. Отмечена роль и значимость банту и убунту для социальной, культурной, образовательной и государственной деятельности Африканского континента.

Ключевые слова: философия современной Африки, банту, убунту, этническая философия, африканская идентичность, африканское Возрождение

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