

Ujamaa, Ubuntu and Reimagining Pan-Africanism

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A Brief Philosophical Excursion

Ujamaa and ubuntu express a set of African values, the core conception of which is **humanness** or **human dignity**. Linguistically, the word ‘ubuntu’ belongs to the Nguni language family but there are variations of the same in other languages. Its general root is –*ntu*’ which stands for ‘human’. One professional linguist and researcher argues that in ‘the entire group of [Bantu] languages, spoken from the Cape to the Sudanic belt, ... the root -*ntu* stands for ‘human’ (Praeg 2014: 3). I am not competent to enter into further discourse on the linguistic formation of the word ‘ubuntu’. Suffice to say that the term is rooted in the philosophical term ‘human’.

At this stage a little digression is in order. To reduce ubuntu or ujamaa to a kind of African humanism, in my view, is a modernist construction that draws heavily from the Western philosophical outlook. I therefore caution against equating ubuntu, or for that matter ujamaa, with African humanism. This will become clear as I now discuss the concept of the Kiswahili term ‘ujamaa’, with which I am more familiar.

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Ujamaa

The philosophical pillar of ujamaa is equality. This is not ‘equality of opportunity’, or biological equality expressed by the expression that ‘all human beings are born equal’, or ‘equality before law’. All these are Western modernist constructions based on the capitalist social order. In an essay written most probably just before Tanzania’s independence, Julius Kambage Nyerere cited the American Declaration of Independence, which starts by saying:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

However, he thought this was incorrect because all men are not created equal. He modified it to read thus:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that although all men are not created equal,

they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. (Nyerere 2016: 11, my translation)

Nyerere’s essay then proceeds to explain that all human beings in real life are not equal. They are unequal in their height and structure; they are unequal in their capacities and talents; generally, they are unequal in many ways. Indeed, he asserts, it would be a bleak day if all human beings were equal like a currency coin. Here, Nyerere is clearly celebrating differences. Having argued in the first part of the essay that all human beings are not equal, he returns to the question, ‘Why do we then say all human beings are equal?’ In the second part of the essay, he embarks on answering his own question. He arrives at the conclusion that all human beings are equal in their **humanness**, in their humanity or human dignity. In a beautifully constructed passage, he says (my translation from Kiswahili):

Human beings are equal in their humanity. Juma and Mwajuma do not differ in their humanity. In all other matters, Juma and Mwajuma are not equal, but in their humanity, they do not dif-

fer an iota. Neither you, nor me nor anybody else, nor God can make Juma more of a human being than Mwajuma or Mwajuma more of a human being than Juma. God can do what you and I and our fellow beings cannot do—God can create Juma and can make Mwajuma to be a different creature better or worse than a human being, but God cannot make Juma and Mwajuma better or worse than other human beings; God can neither reduce nor increase their humanity. (Nyerere 2016: 8)

Contemporaneously with the essay, Nyerere wrote a poem following the same tenor of argument, divided in two parts. In the first eight stanzas he shows the inequality of human beings, and then pauses to ask: Tell me then, where from human equality? In the next eleven stanzas he again proceeds to answer his own question. In one of the stanzas, he gives the example of water to illustrate his argument. Let me first give it in Kiswahili before translating.

*Niseme maji ni maji, pengine utaelewa,
Ya kunywa ya mfereji, na yanayoo-gelewa,
Ya umande na theluji, ya mvua, mito, maziwa,
Asili yake ni hewa, hayapitani umaji.* (Nyerere 2015: 11)

If I say water is water, you may understand
Water to drink, water to shower
Of dew and snow, of rain, rivers, lakes
Its ancestry is air—it does not differ in its wateriness.

(I have translated *umaji* to ‘wateriness’. It does not quite capture the sweetness of the Kiswahili term *umaji*.)

Many Western writers writing on Nyerere’s concept of equality have totally missed the philosophical profoundness of the concept. They have tended to assimilate it into the notion of the Western concept of equality. Nyerere’s concept of equality based on human dignity suggests as its integral part the notion of equity. Anything that offends human dignity is inequitable (see Shivji 2014). Poverty and disease offend human dignity; so do oppression, exploitation, unfreedom and torture. Needless to say, colonialism and imperialism are gross violations of human dignity. Thus, Nyerere had no problem in arriving at his conception of socialism from his philosophical premises. He once remarked that, ‘No one who qualifies his belief in the equality of man is really a socialist ...’ (Nyerere 1968: 4–5).

I’d like to make a few remarks on equality of rights and equal treatment, the terms that are commonly used in the mainstream discourse. These are two other notions, the effect of which is to hide and disguise social inequality and inequities of the capitalist social order. As one philosopher observed, ‘Equality among unequals is inequitable’. I would argue that the concepts of equal rights and equal treatment are profoundly unjust. You cannot give equal rights to two unequal individuals and say this is just or that they are treated equally. Borrowing an example from Nyerere, giving ten acres of land equally to a one-armed man and a two-armed man is not just treatment. It may be equal but it is patently unjust. Justice demands an unequal treatment, not an equal treatment. It may sound obvious when said, though in our daily discourse dominated by the hegemonic bourgeois ideology of equality, it passes as com-

mon sense. We think we are being fair and just when we give equal treatment to two unequal individuals. And, by the way, this cannot be corrected by any affirmative action because the dominant social order based on inequality and inequity is inherently unjust. Affirmative action is meant to correct historical inequality, not the unjustness of the social system itself (see, generally, Shivji n.d.).

Reimagining Pan-Africanism

In the second part of my address, the issue I want to deal with is how we reimagine Pan-Africanism in the current era of rampant imperialism and voracious capitalist world order. I want to suggest that the bedrock of African values of ubuntu and ujamaa, as summed up in the first part of this address, provide us with both a departure point and a handle to construct our reimagination of Pan-Africanism. More than two centuries of the struggles of global Africans has indeed been a struggle for the recognition of their human dignity and humanness. The last five or so centuries of the development of capitalism and its plunder of African lives and livelihoods has been justified, rationalised and legitimised by ideologies that deny the dignity and humanity of African people. This is now well known, and I need not rehearse it. I will assert, though, that racism is inherent in the capitalist-imperialist system and that some African scholars have theorised the system as racial capitalism (Robinson 1983, 2000; Clarno and Vally 2022).

In this sense then, the Pan-African struggle for human dignity and human freedom continues unabated. What global Africans need is a global outlook and a global ideology, from which emanate the

global politics of the Pan-African struggle. That outlook and ideology is Pan-Africanism. We need to reclaim Pan-Africanism. We need to reimagine and reinvigorate it. More than anything else we have to make Pan-Africanism a category of intellectual thought, which is another way of saying that we need to theorise Pan-Africanism as a revolutionary theory. Without a revolutionary theory there cannot be a successful revolution, Amilcar Cabral taught us (Cabral 1966, in Cabral 1969: 75). Without a revolutionary Pan-African theory there cannot be a successful Pan-African revolution.

In saying this I am not breaking new ground. Our ancestors, through their struggles, suffering, songs and dance, have left us a rich heritage from which to learn and be inspired. Unlike many other 'pans' which have not only been defeated but have disappeared, Pan-Africanism may have been temporarily defeated but it has refused to be destroyed. Pan-Africanism still strikes a chord; it still has resonance among Africans. (For a history of Pan-Africanism, see Adi 2018). It needs to be resurrected not like a phantom or a phoenix but like a rising African sun to herald a new epoch.

To begin with I suggest several paradigmatic shifts to help us theorise Pan-Africanism.

First, a shift from locating Pan-Africanism on a **geographical plane** to rooting it in **social space**. The dominant Pan-Africanist discourse tends to talk about African countries, African nation-states and the African continent, while Africans outside are characterised as the diaspora. This discourse gets reinforced in post-colonial Africa with the gain of independence and con-

solidation of states. The paradigm that governs independence and state sovereignty is of course based on European history and Westphalian doctrines. It lies at the basis of nationalism in Africa, including its appropriation by states that use it to legitimise the rule of new governing and ruling classes. Variants of nationalist ideologies are also used by both left and right populisms. The Pan-African discourse is either pushed to the back burner or is reduced to African unity, which in politics and practice means the unity of African states. The implication of the shift I am suggesting is that instead of talking about the **unity of states**, we talk about the **solidarity of people**.

Second, related to the first shift, we need a paradigmatic shift from **state-centric** to **people-centric** Pan-Africanism. Historically, Pan-Africanism as an ideology and a world outlook was socially anchored in the struggles of the African people for human freedom. Thus, per force, it was people-centred. The people-based Pan-Africanism birthed African nationalism, not the other way round. With the advent of independent African states, African nationalism was captured by the petty and proto bourgeoisies, draining it of its Pan-African content and turning it into variants of state nationalisms. Pan-Africanism as a people's project was hijacked. I think that this hijacking has been so successful that many of our genuine Pan-Africanists have internalised it, justifying statist Pan-Africanism on the grounds of pragmatism and political realism. The shift from state-centric to people-centric Pan-Africanism will have to have a dialectical relationship with the social practices of our people who have continued to defy artificially created state boundaries anyway.

Third, at the philosophical level, we need to shift from the concept of **individual being** to the concept of a **social being**. The concept of the abstracted individual has been the foundation of a bourgeois outlook, ideology and jurisprudence. This is the foundation of the theory of rights in bourgeois law. It is to the individual that rights and freedoms inhere. This allows bourgeois ideologues to talk about human rights and equality of all human beings while ignoring the social inequality and inequities that underlie them. Concomitantly with the shift from the individual being to the social being, a shift from **human rights** to **human dignity** and a shift from **humanitarianism** to **humanness** follows. Humanitarianism at best is an act of charity; humanness by definition is an act of solidarity. Charity signifies inequality between the giver and the recipient. Humanness signifies fellowship.

Finally, a number of political and ideological perspectives follow from the paradigmatic shifts I have suggested.

First and foremost, Pan-Africanism in its politics must be thoroughly, consistently and audaciously anti-imperialist. Centuries of struggles of the African people all over the world have been against imperialism. Imperialism, underlying which is the capitalist social order, has pillaged and plundered the resources and livelihoods of Africans just as it has enslaved them in the most atrocious and barbarous way imaginable. There cannot be a compromise with imperialism, particularly now when in the form of settler colonialism it is on the brink of obliterating a whole people and committing genocide with impunity.

Second, Pan-Africanism in its theory and strategy must be anti-capitalist. I cannot imagine a capitalist Pan-Africanism just as I cannot imagine an imperialist Pan-Africanism. Although tempted, I shall not go further to say that Pan-Africanism must be socialist. I am not here to dish out blueprints. That would be presumptuous. Alternatives will emerge in the very course of reimagining Pan-Africanism and the actual existing struggles of the people. Just as Marx said:

If we have no business with the construction of the future or with organizing it for all time, there can still be no doubt about the task confronting us at present: the *ruthless criticism of the existing order*, ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries, nor from conflict with the powers that be. (Marx 1843)

I know my address will immediately attract the label of utopianism and day-dreaming from the pragmatists and realists of this world. So be it. I plead guilty. But I also know from history that no struggle has been waged without first dreaming of it. Freedom is first dreamed and then fought for. I have only suggested the first steps in reimagining the new Pan-African struggle for freedom. And that step has to do with conceptualisation, with thought. Human beings first think before acting. They first conceive before contending. They first contest the existing order before condemning it. And after contesting and condemning, they act.

In sum I am saying: **Revolutionise thought first before thinking of revolution.**

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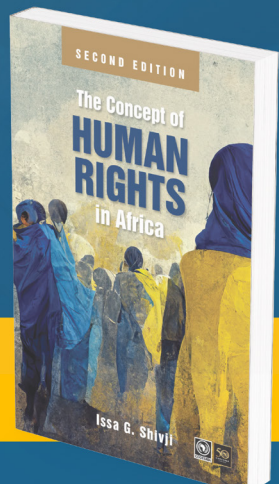
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