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Role of documentaries in the construction of national identity: Project 10 documentary series, South Africa

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CHAPTER 3

THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE AFRICAN NATION

> *While social identities are what concern us in a discussion of nation building, individuals are bearers of these identities.*
>
> *Kwame Appiah (1994:151)*

In many African settings, life revolves around the community. Individuals live by the rules, expectations and prescriptions of their communities. The perception in such African communities is that a person exists only because of other people, as Kethiwe Ngcobo comments in the documentary *Belonging.* What this implies is that the desires and aspirations of an individual, in a number of these societies, have to be stifled on many occasions so as to fulfill the expectations of the community. This sometimes results into the isolation of many individuals socially, emotionally and psychologically from the rest of their community. A number of questions arise here. First, are individual identities, needs and diversities acknowledged in African communities? If they are, then what choices and options do such individuals have to shape and determine their destinies and that of their community and nation? If they are not, then who should be given primacy - the individual or the community? Should the society be allowed to subjugate the individual or should we question, as do Lindholm and Hall who wonder whether,

> We (should) argue like the western liberalism (philosophy) which believes that the individual existed before the social world and the American belief in the primacy of the individual coincide(ing) with anxieties that the demands of the community might destroy one's personal freedom.
>
> (Lindholm and Hall, 2002:36)

Secondly, are individual and communal identities (which includes national identity) concurrent and at par in an African setting? Should they be concurrent and at par? Thirdly, can any equilibrium be achieved between these two identities in African societies? These are questions raised in several documentaries in the Project 10 series. These pertinent yet complex questions will form the basis for the discussions, analyses and arguments in this chapter.

The discussions here will begin with an examination of the *Ubuntu* philosophy upon which the communal-centric arguments are premised. In certain communities living in South Africa, the African cultural philosophy of Ubuntu is highly esteemed. In most African traditions, culture blends seamlessly with religion. In fact, traditional culture and religion are synonymous and to go against traditional culture is seen as defiance to the ancestors and the gods of the land. “Ubuntu” is an ancient African word, meaning "humanity to others". The word also means "I am what I am because of who we all are." It both describes human beings as "being-with-others" and prescribes what "being-with-others" should be all about (Louw, 1997).

Augustine Shutte writes that,

> Ubuntu [a Zulu word] serves as the spiritual foundation of [some South] African societies. It is a unifying vision or world view enshrined in the Zulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, i.e. "a person is a person through other persons".[29]
>
> (Shutte, 1993:46).

[29] The words in brackets are my own additions.

Joe Teffo (1994) explains that Ubuntu underscores the importance of agreement or consensus arguing that the philosophy is not rigid and dogmatic, but that it has room for negotiation. He asserts that Ubuntu accords the individual the chance to negotiate certain positions with(in) the community. Similarly, Dirk Louw (1997) argues that African ways of life and the Ubuntu philosophy in (South) Africa acknowledge the importance of the individual in a subtle and uniquely African way. He argues that,

> Ubuntu's respect for the particularity of the other links up closely to its respect for *individuality*. But, be it noted, the individuality which Ubuntu respects, is not of Cartesian making.[30] On the contrary, Ubuntu directly contradicts the Cartesian conception of individuality in terms of which the individual, or self, can be conceived without thereby necessarily conceiving the other. The Cartesian individual exists prior to, or separately and independently from the rest of the community or society. The rest of society is nothing but an added extra to a pre-existent and self-sufficient being. This "modernistic" and "atomistic" conception of individuality lies at the bottom of both individualism and collectivism.
>
> (Louw: 1997)

Louw's argument emphasizes that Ubuntu acknowledges the differences and diversities of individuals as well as their unique needs. This is contrary to the belief that this philosophy privileges the community at the expense of the individual. It points out an alternative conception and perception of the individual in African societies from what is commonly understood. This argument will be tackled later in this chapter.

[30] Cartesian philosophy or methods revolves around the works of Rene Descartes, a French mathematician, philosopher, and scientist who is considered the father of analytic geometry and the founder of modern rationalism. His main works, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) and *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), include the famous dictum "I think, therefore, I am."

Many scholars have theorized on the importance of incorporating and acknowledging the individual in the construction of any nation. This argument emphasizes the importance of cultivating a sense of ownership of the nation by its members. Anthony Appiah argues that,

> While social identities are what concern us in a discussion of nation building, individuals are bearers of these identities.
>
> (Appiah, 1994:151)

The (individual) members of any nation need to feel that they do contribute directly to the existence, sustenance and development of their nation. Gerald Mare feels that,

> Individuals have to feel like they own the nation and not [that the nation is] imposed to them.
>
> (Mare, 1999:246)

Sindane aptly illustrates this argument when writing about the contribution of Ubuntu to the process of constructing the South African nation. He believes that,

> The process of nation building in post-apartheid South Africa does not, for example, require universal sameness or oppressive communalism. What it does require is true Ubuntu. It requires an authentic respect for human/individual rights and related values, and an honest appreciation of differences.
>
> (Sindane, 1994:7)

The stories in the Project 10 series are very personal and very individual yet, either individually or collectively, they tell a national story. These are stories of individual experiences and imaginings of the South African nation and what the filmmakers, or the people they know, have undergone in the past ten years and even in years preceding that period.

This chapter critically analyzes the stories that deal with identity and the identity crisis in which many South Africans find themselves. Even though these are individual stories, they epitomize what exists across the South African nation.

The stories in the Project 10 series can be categorized into three different groups depending on the filmmaker's proximity to the story. The first category has documentaries such as *Belonging* by Kethiwe Ngcobo, which is about her search for identity at both the individual, communal and national level. Also in this category is *My Yeoville* by Sello Molefe who narrates his experiences of living in what he calls 'a tiny cultural enclave in Johannesburg called Yeoville', and *Umgidi* a story by an interracial couple, Sipho Singiswa and Gillian Schutte. These are very personal and passionate stories about the experiences of the filmmakers themselves.

In the second category are stories about people very close to and familiar with the filmmakers. This category has films such as *Ikhaya,* by Omelga Hlengiwe Mthiyane who tells the story of her aunt and the tribulations she underwent after fleeing her violence-torn home in Bhambayi district of KwaZulu Natal. Others include *Solly's Story* by Asi Mathaba who chronicles the rise of his school and village mate from a poor village boy to a South African Under 17 and Under 12 national coach, as well as Zulfah Otto Sallies' *Through The eyes of My Daughter* who tells a story about the experiences and life of her 15 year old daughter, Muneera Sallies.

The third category consists of stories about ordinary individuals in the South African nation who might not be close to, or related to, the filmmakers but who are ordinary members of the South African nation recounting very personal experiences. Included here are stories such as talented Elton Nkanunu's opera singing journey from a small seaside town in the Western Cape in Being *Pavarotti* by Odette Geldenhuys and *Cinderella of the Cape Flats* by Jane Kennedy, which tells the story of workers in the South African textile industry. Other stories in this category are *The Devil Breaks My Heart – Ten Years Later* (discussed in chapter 2) by Lederle Bosch about four individuals in their late teens and early twenties. *Hot Wax* by Andrea Spitz is about Ivy, a beautician who runs her own business and is highly successful (Project 10: 2004) and *Nabantwana Bam* by Khulile Nxumalo, the story of Beatrice Khubheka's two sons Nhlanhla and Miles.

A common denominator in the Project 10 series is the concern with the ordinary individual while narrating a national story. What becomes apparent is that it is possible to include and incorporate the average individual not only in telling a national story but also in shaping and interrogating the imaginings of a nation. The documentary mode of storytelling allows for this form of narration and therefore could be incorporated and encouraged in the processes of national identity construction. Two films in the Project 10 series that encompass this approach are the films *Belonging* and *Umgidi.*

Belonging is the story of 39-year-old Kethiwe Ngcobo, a woman born in exile in England to parents who fled South Africa in the early 1960's for political reasons. In 1994, the year that South Africa became a democracy, her family moved back home and she had to grapple with the intricacies and difficulties of her history (as a South African born into exile), her new environment and her attempts to fit into what she perceived to be her homeland (Project10, 2004). At first she thought that

she would easily connect with the people in South Africa but came to realize that it was much more complex than she had anticipated.

The story's personal approach is manifested in the film in both its content as well as its style. Stylistically, the story has opted for very tight shots especially when Kethiwe is in the frame. This not only makes her emotions, actions and reactions apparent to the viewer but also reinforces the narrative as her own personal rendition. The documentary also uses the self-reflexive mode of narrative where Kethiwe's image and viewpoint dominates the frame and film running time. To emphasise the self-reflexivity of the story, her voice-over runs right through the narrative recounting the events unfolding in the film as well as revealing her thoughts, feelings and perceptions in her search for identity.[31]

While growing up in England, Kethiwe felt like an outsider since she could not blend in with other black children who she describes as 'Western' and who saw her as an exile from Africa, nor could she fit in with the white children who perceived her as different from them culturally, ethnically and racially. Ironically while in South Africa, she underwent experiences similar to those she encountered in England - though the reasons for her alienation here were quite different. In South Africa, she says she received no acknowledgement and recognition from either black or white people. Black South Africans saw her as British, someone alienated from their community because of her different cultural background and her imperfect command of the Zulu language. As for the white South Africans, she says, "… they would look straight through me as though I never existed …" alluding to the lack of recognition she received from them. In one of her emotional moments in the documentary, she wonders whether she will fit in and belong anywhere. She asks her mother,

[31] The term Self Reflexive as used here is borrowed from Bill Nichols (1994:95)

> What can I do to be accepted? … Do you think we will belong to South Africa or anywhere for that matter...? Do you think not being brought up here [South Africa] there is … 'unwholeness' [in me]?

Kethiwe's story, therefore, is about searching for identity at several levels. The first is the individual identity that among other aspects appears to involve a romantic relationship. This subject – of a romantic relationship - comes up in many of her conversations with her friends (especially in England) and her family, and she talks about it very passionately and emotionally. The subject is given prominence with long sequences of the film dedicated to this subject.

What Kethiwe's friends and family, and eventually Kethiwe herself seem to intimate in the story is that involvement with somebody in a romantic relationship would enhance her connection with South Africa both physically and emotionally. During the period she has been living in South Africa, Kethiwe has not been in a relationship and this, to her mother, seemed to be a major factor in her isolated life and her disconnection with the community around her. Although she says that a romantic relationship is not a priority for her at that moment, she appears to believe that maybe her connection with the community and the South African nation would follow seamlessly once she is in a healthy stable relationship. She says,

> Maybe I have to belong in a relationship to belong [in South Africa]. I am doing stuff that is interesting to me, that is stimulating. I have a son, I have work, I have responsibilities … but … [I still don't feel like I belong.]

Kethiwe's sentiments here are interesting in that they may have merit in several ways. For Benedict Anderson's (1999) "deep horizontal camaraderie" that bonds the members of a nation to be sustained, the bonding needs to be initiated at the

immediate community level (which includes family and close friends) before it can be experienced at the level of the larger community (the nation)[32]. The belief here is that once she has bonded with those closest to her, then bonding with the rest of society would be much easier. The second point, which is equally arguable, is that Anderson's 'deep horizontal camaraderie' that bonds any nation inevitably involves some form of relationship between the members of that nation. Kethiwe's search for a romantic relationship would be the first step of a journey towards searching for a 'relationship' with the rest of South Africans. Settling in a romantic relationship for Kethiwe, therefore, would impact substantially into her settling in a 'national relationship'.

Kethiwe's mother is similarly concerned about her relationship with men and at times she blames herself, as a parent, for her daughters' "poor" relationship with men[33]. Eventually Kethiwe participates in the *Ukwemula* ceremony, which her mother says will invoke the blessings and recognition of her ancestors in matters relating to her marital status[34]. This also seems to emphasize the importance that her mother attaches to a romantic relationship *vis-à-vis* her bonding with the rest of the community and nation.

However, it is somewhat limiting to imagine that a romantic relationship would sufficiently bond her with her community and nation. Whereas it could impact positively to Kethiwe bonding with her community, it would be equally important – if not more important – to try and establish this bond with friends, colleagues and other people in South Africa. Throughout the film, Kethiwe is not seen with friends, neighbours, colleagues or acquaintances in South Africa. The audience

[32] The term deep horizontal camaraderie as used here is borrowed from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991).
[33] Kethiwe's sister was also not in a relationship at the time the film was made and their mother felt that she was responsible for the situation since she had not been able to have them undergo the *Ukwemula* ceremony.
[34] The Ukwemula ceremony involves matters relating to a woman's/girl's marital status in Kethiwe's community.

does not, for instance, get to know her relationship with her colleagues at work or even outside her work setting. She is depicted as enclosing herself either within her house or only communicating with members of her family and this seems to isolate her even further from the rest of the country. Compare this to her brief visit to England where she not only relates to her family but is almost always in the company of several friends where they talk and discuss several issues. She, at these moments, seems to be at ease with her environment and appears to bond better with the community around her. This is a principle that could be applied in her South African setting.

The concept of horizontal camaraderie above advocates for a bottom up approach in the construction of a national identity as opposed to - or in conjunction with - the more dominant top down approach. In this sense, the process of identity construction begins from constructing and consolidating individual identity and develops ultimately towards national identity construction. This is the reverse of the more prevalent top down approach where identity construction begins at the national level, where national symbols and sentiments are engineered at the national level only to trickle down to the individual much later.

The next level of identity Kethiwe is searching for is at the level of the family and community. Kethiwe goes to her elder brother's ceremony to unveil his tomb. This ceremony, she says, fully incorporates her brother into the Ngcobo family and ancestral lineage. Her brother's ceremony inspires her quest for participation in her own ceremony to incorporate her into her family and community, and accord her recognition from her ancestors.

At this level, the language question plays a vital role in her acceptance by her community. She believes that one reason why she is not fully recognized by members of her community (both at the local and national level) is her not so

perfect command of any of her African languages. This seems to alienate her from her community and raises the question as to whether language is a determining factor for an individual to be accepted in the community.

Renowned African scholars such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe have debated on this issue at length. Ngugi, for instance, argues that,

> Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world … Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.
>
> (Ngugi, 1986:15)

Whereas language plays an important role in defining human beings, their cultures and their identities, the reality in contemporary African societies is that language alone cannot be a yardstick for inclusion or exclusion from membership of a community. The reality on the ground is much more complex because of the many permutations that exist between the real as opposed to the ideal world. *Belonging,* therefore, raises very important questions pertaining to language *vis-a-vis* identity. What happens to people like Kethiwe who are not able to fluently speak their native languages because of reasons that are way beyond them? Should the society discriminate against them when it is not through their choices to be in the linguistic situation they find themselves? What this documentary highlights is that the notion of a language determining (the acceptance or rejection of) membership of any community of people should be given deeper thought and that there should be more debates on this question.

The third level of identity in the film *Belonging* is at the national level. Kethiwe wants to be recognized and accepted as a South African and she also desires to be

allowed to imagine herself as one. What this brings to the fore is that it is not just enough to be a citizen of a nation but that it is equally, if not more important for the feeling of belonging to be embedded in the psyche of both the individual and other members of that nation. In the story, Kethiwe is quite bitter for having to assert her 'African-ness' while she was in England. When she comes back to South Africa, which she perceives as her home, she is no longer considered as African but British and she, again, has to fight for her African-ness. She feels that she does not properly belong to either places and this motivates her to go back to England to reconcile with her British roots before her *Ukwemula* ceremony in South Africa

As discussed in chapter one, Anthony Smith (1991) argues that national identity draws on other forms of collective identity. He also believes that national identity can never be completely divorced from other forms of collective identity. This implies that these different levels of identity are all interconnected and one, in a number of cases, could lead to the fulfilment of the other(s). Question then arise as to what the role of the individual is in his/her quest to belong at these levels of identity and, ultimately, in national identity. Is there space for the individual's self-expression in the mapping of his/her national identity or should the structures and the processes under which nations are constructed be allowed to stifle the individual's expression and participation in constructing the nation? Kethiwe Ngcobo feels that in the African spirit of Ubuntu, members' lives are heavily dependent on the community and that she is human only because of other humans. One of Kethiwe's friends expresses her frustrations with the African way of life because, as she argues, "…the individual's life is prescribed by the community. Things are done in relation to family, clan and ancestors." Larsen (1999) seems to concur with her when he argues that nations define limits to what 'I am and what I ought to do'. The individual has been ignored for a long time in the process of constructing and regenerating symbols that sustain national identity and this could

contribute to the slow process through which national identity construction is taking place in Africa. These sentiments beg the question, is Ubuntu alienating Kethiwe from her nation or is it drawing her closer to other South Africans? Louw believes that,

> For post-apartheid South Africans of all colours, creeds and cultures, Ubuntu dictates that, if we were to be human, we need to recognise the genuine otherness of our fellow citizens. That is, we need to acknowledge the diversity of languages, histories, values and customs, all of which constitute South African society.
>
> (Louw, 1997)

A very interesting hypothesis develops from the arguments above. Supposing individual diversity and identity is not acknowledged in the process of nation construction, would this not ease the process of nation building? In response to this hypothesis, this chapter will draw from examples of existing nations around the world.

As Lindholm and Hall (2002) argue, a number of nations in Western Europe such as Britain and France, and in North America such as the U.S.A. and Canada, believe in the primacy of the individual over the demands of the society. These nations are also perceived to be more coherent and stable in their levels of national identity perceptions and feelings among their members compared to other nations such as those in Africa and other parts of the world that are perceived to place the society ahead of the individual. Although there are several other factors that contribute to these perceptions, the aforementioned is a pointer in support of the argument that acknowledging the individual can impact positively – or at least not be a hindrance - to the process of nation building.

These nations perceived to have relatively stable national identities are also very old. Many of them developed as early as the 15th and 16th century compared to the nations in Africa and the third world that emerged only in the mid to late 20th century. The argument here is that the experience of the older nations, over a long period of time, shows that acknowledging the individual in the nation speeds up the process of nation building and this is why they still hold on to this philosophy.

Kethiwe's story also highlights a pertinent issue related to national identity that this chapter would like to revisit here. This is the significance of the national landscape or the geographical space that is imagined as constituting the nation. Being a South African citizen alone does not seem to satisfy Kethiwe. She also desires to live on South African soil and connect with other members of her nation. This, among other reasons, explains why she would leave her career and friends in England to settle in South Africa. Higson (2002) argues that land is vital in sustaining a sense of national identity since it symbolically bonds the members of that nation. He argues, however, that national identity is not dependant on actually living within the geo-political space of the nation.

Larsen seems to think slightly differently. His argument is that,

> The national landscape in its material symbolic complexity serves three basic ideological functions in the make up of a national identity. First it gives unity to people and place, it also provides people and place with common origin and lastly it naturalizes the people and the unity.
>
> (Larsen, 1999:64)

Kethiwe's decision to settle in South Africa seems to correspond to Larsen's arguments. Ideologically and psychologically, Kethiwe seems to believe that she should be accepted more as a South African when living in South Africa as compared to when living in England. She also seems to believe that she will be

able to bond more easily with South Africans while living with, and amongst, them than when she is away. This thought is in concurrence with Larsen's argument that the national landscape naturalizes the people and their unity.

Kethiwe's story in *Belonging* further reinforces Larsen argument that,

> The national landscape is a mindscape that is intensified by the denial of the physical reality of the perceived landscape. The mental image of human belonging, for example as the national unity, is then projected on physical landscape in order to claim that this is its basic reality… the national landscape inscribes the members of the nation into the landscape so that they cannot escape it. It is their nature. Outside the landscape, (they) live an artificial inauthentic life.
>
> Larsen (1999:64)

Larsen's arguments above, however, are not always true since under the apartheid regime in South Africa, the national landscape did not have some of the attributes he mentions. During the apartheid era, whereas land was shared by the different communities, no sense of unity prevailed. The different communities were divided and separated even though they shared the South African landscape.

In the last sequence of the film, after her Ukwemula ceremony, Kethiwe moves out of the house she has been living into a new one. Symbolically, this suggests transformation into a new beginning and a new life as an Ngcobo and a South African and, in a lighter tone, reinforces the old adage, "life begins at 40". It also suggests the achievement of some sense of closure in her alienated life, a situation she had been striving towards in the whole film. She now feels that she rightly belongs in her community. In her final statements in the film, she says that she might never be truly a South African in other people's eyes, but now, she feels that she will get as close to being a South African as she wants.

Umgidi, by Sipho Singiswa and Gillian Schutte, is one of the most profound stories in the Project 10 series because of its insightful examination of the complexities of the identity question in South Africa, especially now after the ten years of democracy in the country. In discussing this story, the individual's position in the nation will be examined to find out what choices, if any, an individual perceives himself/herself as having to determine his/her destiny in a national setting and the pressures and demands exerted by the larger community and nation on the individual's existence.

These discussions on national identity will draw extensively from debates on other forms of identity and, specifically, individual identity versus communal identity. In this sense then, the immediate community around the individual will be used as a microcosm of the nation bearing in mind Anderson's (1991) definition of the nation as being an imagined 'community' and A.D Smith's argument that national identity draws on other forms of identity. Parallels will be drawn between individual and communal identities to analyse how the documentary addresses these issues.

Umgidi is a story told by an interracial couple Gillian Schutte, a white South African woman and Sipho Singiswa, her Xhosa husband. It is the story of their family – both nuclear and extended. The documentary also tells the story of Sipho's brother, Vuyo, who discovers that he was adopted by the family and sets out to find who his real parents are. A further twist in the story emerges when Vuyo reveals to his family that he is gay, a status that is often shunned and given very little space for debate in the African setting, and the eventual antagonism that this identity creates in Vuyo's strict and conservative African family and their *Myirha* clan.

In *Umgidi*, Sipho enthusiastically prepares for his journey to Robben Island where he was circumcised while an inmate in the then dreaded apartheid political prison. The journey is of immense significance to him since it should welcome him officially to his *Myirha* clan and symbolically unite him with his ancestors and the rest of his clan members. As in Kethiwe Ngcobo's case in *Belonging,* this ceremony is a passionate journey for Sipho to be accepted by his clan and society not only as an adult, but also as a member of that community. His passion to be identified with his people, through the circumcision ceremony, is further underlined in his disclosure to the village elders of the conditions under which he was circumcised - it was against the laws of the apartheid regime for anyone to undergo the circumcision ritual while in the prison. The couple muse and joke about the apartheid law which considered the cutting of the fore-skin as destruction of state property. Discovery by the regime of such an act would earn the inmate an additional six months in prison. The potential danger to Sipho, if found out by the prison authorities, and the physical discomfort as well as the pain during the healing process, however, did not deter him from undergoing the circumcision ritual while in prison.

Sipho's younger brother, Vuyo, who is being pressured by his family to undergo the circumcision ceremony is, on the other hand, adamant in his refusal. He believes that his identity should not be pegged on the ritual and that circumcision ought to be a personal choice. He says,

> I don't understand it, the ritual … the fact that you have to go to some bush camp to learn about manhood.

His parents and clan are incensed by this kind of argument and one of his uncles even contemplates forcing Vuyo to undergo the circumcision ritual.

What these two sequences in the film illustrate is that individual members in any community, and this includes the nation, have different perceptions of what it entails to be a member of that community. Different members have different demands and expectations of and from their communities. As in Kethiwe's language question, it is rather limiting - in some instances - for communities to prescribe what its members have to attain to be embraced by the community without giving the individual some choices and options. These prescriptions, in many cases, only result into discontent and outright rebellion by some members of a community as in the case of Vuyo in *Umgidi* who refuses to undergo the circumcision ceremony.

What also emerges in this sequence of the documentary is that it is equally important that the members of any nation be educated and constantly informed about the symbols and events that are meant to bind them together - if they are to fully accept and understand them. The documentary genre would be useful in this sense as argued earlier. Vuyo needs to understand why his community demands of him to be initiated in the bush. He should not be compelled to undergo the rituals if he does not yet understand them or appreciate their significance. The argument here is not that there should not be any benchmarks for the individual to attain in order to be accepted into the community's membership (since all societies usually have criteria to be met before membership is granted to new parties). The argument here though, is that these benchmarks and criteria need to acknowledge the permutations, differences and diversities of needs, realities and beliefs among the individuals within a community. The 'bottom up' approach to nation building would be appropriate here as argued earlier.

An interesting point also emerges in this story on how much, if at all, an individual in a society can determine his/her destiny. Personal choices, sometimes, have to be overridden by communal decisions and interests for the well-being of the

individual. In the sequence where Vuyo overdoses on drugs in order to attract the attention of his family members, his family and community make the decision to rush him to hospital to save his life[35]. Later, as Vuyo argues that he has the choice over his destiny, his father points out to him that in a society such as theirs, there are instances when the communal decision has to override the individual's. He says,

> Just now you were sick and dying from the overdose of pills that you alone decided to take. We were the ones who took you to hospital. We didn't argue that it was your personal choice to take an overdose so let him be… now that you are well and strong, you are insisting on your personal choice, but when you were dying we struggled collectively to save you.

These sentiments by Vuyo's father, Stanford Myirha, raise the vital question of whether decisions about identity (and these include the decision to belong), either at the individual, communal or national level, should be the individual's choice or whether they should be imposed by the larger society where the individual's opinion plays a very minor, almost insignificant role. It would be prudent for some form of compromise to be negotiated between the individual's right to choose his/her destiny in the community and the community's demands on the individual. The equilibrium between the 'top down' approach and the 'bottom up' approach in nation building ought to be given profound consideration in the African setting. The question of what should be given primacy between the individual and the nation is still open to further debate and analysis especially in the African setting and context.

Another vital point that this documentary raises is the need for tolerance and acknowledgement of the dynamic cultures and beliefs in the contemporary world

[35] Vuyo (in explaining his overdose) says that he needed his family to know that he was serious about finding out who his biological parents are.

especially in a culturally diverse setting such as South Africa. In *Umgidi,* Gillian has to tolerate and embrace her husband's culture and tradition so as to coexist not only in her nuclear family but also in her extended family. She, for instance, accepts the dress code prescribed by Sipho's relatives for her husband's announcement ceremony. The fact that she also becomes a willing and active participant in Sipho's ceremony is a pointer to her level of tolerance towards her husband's traditional culture. Sipho would similarly like his son to be part of his clan, to learn the ways and traditions of the Myirha clan, to know his language, Xhosa, and to undergo the ritual he has gone through and is still undergoing. He, however, says that when their son, Kai, becomes of age, he will decide for himself whether to embrace his African traditions or not. Sipho says he will encourage the young boy to go to the bush, but that he will not force him. Gillian has no problem with this. She says that she knows that their son has grown up in a different culture, her culture, and also that things are changing in the 'new' South African nation and, therefore, the boy's experiences are bound to be different from his father's. Another manifestation of tolerance is through Sipho's parents. His mother says of Vuyo's refusal to get circumcised,

> You can take a horse to the river but you cannot force him to drink. I am very disappointed [about Vuyo's objections to circumcision] but I cannot force him.

These sentiments are also shared by Sipho's father who has resisted numerous attempts to compel Vuyo to undergo the circumcision ritual even after several members of his clan pressurized him to do so.

The biggest test for the Myirha's tolerance, though, is seen when Vuyo discloses to his family that he is gay. This infuriates Sipho's father who demands to know from Vuyo what he means by this and from where he got the notion of his gayness. He tells Vuyo that the term has no place in their community. This is one

of the boldest decisions made by the filmmakers of *Umgidi* who chose to include this aspect in their film. This is especially since the theme of homosexuality is still a taboo subject in many African communities. The gravity of this theme is exemplified by the African Anglican Bishops threat to break away from the mother church in England if the church (in England) insists on acknowledging the ordination of a self-confessed gay bishop. The move to include this theme in their story is similarly courageous since, as mentioned earlier, very little time and space is dedicated to it in the African setting. The story, therefore, acknowledges that homosexuality exists in Africa and it opens debate on how homosexuality should be handled in the African context, a move that very few films in Africa would attempt to engage with. The film certainly does not offer answers for this extremely difficult scenario in the African context, but it allows the audience to think about it. This theme ultimately suggests that individuals with unique situations need to be heard and their situations engaged with by the community however difficult or unpalatable they may be to the rest of the community or the nation.

Vuyo's obsessive search for his biological parents further underlines the magnitude of importance attached to the identity question. Once Vuyo discovers that the Myirha family adopted him, his quest to find out his real identity is unquenchable. It becomes almost an obsession. He receives a lot of love and care from his adopted family. Sipho's sister says that she and her mother love Vuyo even more than Sipho and that they could do anything for him but Vuyo still feels the need to locate his biological parents. This sequence points out the complexities involved in the identity question especially in African communities.

Drawing an analogy from Vuyo's experiences to a national scenario, it emerges that it is not as easy as it seems to belong to any collective identity. It involves more that just apportioning members certain rights and privileges in the nation for

them to fully embrace the idea of their membership to that nation. As in Kethiwe's case, the construction of a national identity can be done from the individual level towards the national level and not always vice versa.