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Afrophobia and Belongingness: Why *Ubuntu* Fails and Conversationalism Works

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Abstract For a long time, some African thinkers have sought to project communalism—or, more specifically, *ubuntu*—as the face of social life in African thought. Unfortunately, rather than emphasizing *ubuntu*, the reality of things in Africa portrays contextualization and exclusion in some of its most destructive form. One of the more prominent examples of this is the Afrophobic sentiments that have pervaded and continue to pervade the continent. Often, *ubuntu* is touted as the solution to these types of problems since it emphasizes belongingness and a certain camaraderie that involves mutual caring and sharing. However, this article proposes conversationalism as an alternative to *ubuntu*, which is too bordered, in one sense, or too utopic, in another. It begins by properly mapping out a general overview of the sociopolitical and existential context in which most Africans live today. It then shows how the current iteration of *ubuntu* fails. Finally, borrowing from conversationalism, it proposes *arumaristics* (or creative struggle) as the more viable solution to the problem of Afrophobia and other related forms of exclusion.

Keywords Africa, arumaristics, conversationalism, synthesis, *ubuntu*

I start with a caveat. In recent times, my ideas about the nature of reality have led me to a rigid deterministic view of the world, one that naturally dismisses claims of normativity and the ability to make decisions that

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are anchored in free will. If this view is true, as I think it is, then there would be no need for me to speak prescriptively in this article, which then means that there is no need for me to write this article. For once, I will put aside my views. I am allowed to do so because, as the conversationalists say, context upsets facts, and thus absolute truth may simply be impossible. If we agree that absolute truth is impossible, then there must necessarily exist (at the very least) a tinge of doubt, and it is this tinge of doubt that allows me to set aside my views temporarily and write this article. Perhaps I could also say that I have been predetermined by past states of affairs to think and write about this problem the way I do, and that is fine. Regardless, this article remains written.

During a recent talk in Tübingen, the African philosopher Jonathan Chimakonam summarized the problem of the twenty-first century (as identified in his summary of the ideas of the members of the Calabar school of African philosophy) as the "problem of border lines." The more I thought about it, the more this presented a moment of clarify for me. If you look around yourself, separation, exclusion, and discrimination have manifested themselves in varying aspects of sociopolitical life and in their most potent forms. Wherever social differences exist, the border lines that express such fragmentations have mostly deepened, and walls have been built.

For instance, the racism of past centuries has evolved into its most insidious form, having marinated in the minds of its victims (both the oppressed and the oppressors). Overt racism has been replaced with a more structural and covert type that, not only seriously undermines the oppressed, but also presents the oppressors with the appropriate mask (usually of virtue signaling and a patronizing attitude) for their covert discrimination. This is not to say that overt racism is not making a comeback. Even sexual orientation—one of the most personal and intimate of all human characteristics—has become a target of the type of border line that excludes and separates.

Africa is not exempt from this fragmentation as things like tribal and religious differences often account for the series of crises experienced there. But why should anyone be surprised by this? The Great Disruption—constituted by the destructive encounter that many African societies had with European states vis-à-vis slavery and colonialism—did more than dehumanize the African, commercialize those dehumanized

bodies, and/or commandeer geographic spaces. It also put a stop to the organic evolution of African communities (Rodney 1973). Thus, when in Berlin[1] African societies were conjoined and divided, an inorganic (and wildly skewed) nationalism and exclusionism became inevitable. Unrelated groups were forced into intimate relationships with each other, while kith and kin were separated and differentiated by colonially imposed borders. All the while, those outside the newly created borders were considered the *other*—all in the name of colonially imposed artificial borders. This is why Afrophobia is possible in Africa as those who have been conditioned by the borders established in the colonial era continue to resist and exclude others while haggling over very limited resources (see Attoe and Azeez 2021). *Afrophobia* is used here instead of *xenophobia* to represent the specificity of the phenomenon. For the resistance and exclusion are not primarily aimed at all those who exist outside colonial borders, nor are they necessarily aimed at dark-skinned people in the diaspora. Rather, they are aimed at dark-skinned people born and bred in Africa. This phenomenon reminds me of the intuition Stokely Carmichael had not too long ago when he drew attention to the alleged conspiracy by Euro-American governments to keep Africans within and outside the continent perpetually divided and at odds with each other (Carmichael 1997). Regardless of whether the conspiracy is real, the division is real and must be addressed.

For the longest time, I have pondered the origins of this phenomenon and the foundation on which it has been built. Notice that the question here is not why resistance to *any other* is possible—here, limited resources is one simple answer. The question is why Africans, still oppressed by the legacy of their erstwhile European oppressors, find it profitable to oppress themselves. Limited economic resources do not constitute a good enough answer, for even those who are economically well-off also act as if they are oppressors themselves. Of course, one can reply that it is a matter of solidarity, that, regardless of their economic status, members of a group must stand together. After all, it is all about the absolute commandeering of resources for one's own group at the expense of the undeserving *other*. Is this not survival of the fittest after all? I am not convinced. It is rarely the case that the well-off concern themselves with the plight of the oppressed. Malik El-Shabazz talked about liberal White people who cared about the fate of oppressed Black people only when appearing to

do so was to their advantage (see al-Gharbi 2022; Pope 2020). Steve Biko (1978/2005) said the same. Karl Marx's whole philosophy was, in part, anchored in the greed of well-off capitalists and their tendency to ignore or oppress those who are not well-off (Marx and Engels 1970). Why else would the poor eat the rich? The desire to be Afrophobic must, thus, be anchored in something more solid, and what this thing is can be found in the work of Frantz Fanon and the intuitions of others like Carmichael. It is the desire to mirror the (neo)colonial masters and the power that they wield. I will explain.

The experience of oppression—whether overt or covert—is wildly traumatic. But underlying the act of oppression is the expression of power. Power is a beautiful thing when one has it, and, for those without it, the desire to wield it is strong. In human relationships/societies, as in other animal relationships/societies, power is distributed hierarchically. It is this power that grants access to the resources that the group controls. Since self-preservation is the supreme instinct in the human being, it is often the case that those who have the power often commandeer their group's resources for themselves, often oppressing others in the process.

At the time of the Great Disruption, power always lay in the hands of the colonizer. From World War II to independence, there was a slight shift of power from the traditional European colonizers to the United States, the Soviet Union/Russia, and (more recently) China. Still, the colonized remained oppressed, their oppression powered by structures that accentuate what is now referred to as *neocolonialism*. In all this time, Africans—including their leaders—have remained mostly powerless.

Nevertheless, the expression of power remained something admirable, not because it is morally good, but because it adds a certain fearsome elegance to those wielding it. The powerless are often inelegant, unassuming, unnoticed, inconsequential, beige—often envious of (yet subservient to) those in power. Here lie the origins of the feeling of inferiority in the minds of many Africans. One can see how/why, stripped of power as they are, Africans would despise their inelegance and why they would be desperate to regain or express elegance/power—via the path of least resistance. This point is precisely, what Fanon (1952/2021, xi) has in mind when he said: "There is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white." Since this desire has yet to manifest itself in many Africans and power remains irresistible, some people settle for the next

best thing—a clownish mirroring of power and the desire to make sure that others at their mercy (the path of least resistance) also suffer the envy, oppression, and subservience that they themselves know all too well. This is why Africans who have mastered colonial languages and mannerisms, received colonial educations, and visited the colonizers' homelands regard themselves, demand regard, and are regarded by their fellows as elegant/powerful (Fanon 1952/2021, 3). Unfortunately, proximity to power is not real power.

Disappointment at being unable to wield real power and the almost insatiable desire to acquire and display the elegance of power nevertheless combine to demand a show of force. While the highest forms of power remain out of reach, dominance of the less powerful is not, and, thus, individuals who desire power seek out those who are most vulnerable (and, therefore, less powerful), mirroring the neocolonialist mode of expressing power. And what are the characteristics of the neocolonialist mode of expressing power? Generally involved are such things as exclusion on the basis of differences that are irrelevant (since power must remain in the group), dehumanization, violence, exploitation, harmful policies, and negative propaganda (Hodges 1972). I dare say that most expressions of Afrophobia involve all or most of these elements. It is not that other factors are not relevant. It is simply that they are built on a noetic foundation of mirroring the neocolonialist expression of power.

If this seems far-fetched, some examples might convince. Take the case of Nigeria. The Afrophobic episodes of 1983 and 1985 were humanitarian crises. They began with the theoretical expression of exclusion, with terms like *alien* and *foreigner* taking on sinister meanings that stigmatized and residualized nonindigenes. The importance of repurposing these terms so that they carried scurrilous connotations lies in the need to negate the Golden Rule: treat others as you would have them treat you. These terms began to imply not just difference but inferiority. The alien/foreigner is now less than human and need not be treated as we would wish ourselves to be treated. Next came policies that established this exclusion in practical terms and covertly legitimated the violence that followed, the most prominent expression of which was the "Ghana must go" episode of the early 1980s (Oni and Okunade 2018). The same pattern had expressed itself some years before (in 1969), Nigerians being the victims at that time (Gocking 2005).

In South Africa, the elements remain the same, only the progression is different, in that, while the process started with theoretical expressions of exclusion, it proceeded directly to violence and is only now beginning to acquire some government backing. Fairly recently, there was some uproar when a government health official in South Africa berated a Zimbabwean patient for receiving treatment at a South African hospital since health care in South Africa ought to be reserved for South African citizens (Maseko 2022). At roughly the same time, a mayor in South Africa (and the leader of the Patriotic Alliance), Gayton Mckenzie, also suggested that much-needed oxygen in hospitals ought to be reserved for South African citizens and that it would be best to turn off the oxygen being used by foreign patients in order to ensure that there was a sufficient supply for South African citizens—an action that he was, he said, willing to carry out personally (Charles 2022). Sure enough, these statements by government officials influenced a significant number of South Africans (especially Black South Africans under the aegis of Operation Dudula) to blockade a hospital and prevent patients from accessing health care on the basis of their *skin color*, *accent*, and *language proficiency*[2]—darker-skinned people were fair game for attack and/or exclusion since their skin tone marked the foreign African who needed to be excluded (Maromo 2022; "Government Condemns Victimisation" 2022). Again, Fanon's point rings through: "There is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white."

Beyond the inherent similarities among all these attempts at exclusion, even the reasons given as justification—such as economic hardship and the demand for scarce/important resources—mirror (neo)colonial exclusions. If it were the case that economic hardship or political distraction explained such Afrophobic reactions, it would be so only because the situations in question also mirror those behind the Great Disruption of Africa, namely, the need for resources to fuel development in Europe. Still, the (neo)colonizer remains the preferred role model.

Since what is mirrored are things like exclusion and violence, it is immediately clear that the type of relationality that exists among certain African groups is one of exclusion rather than the type of belongingness that sufficiently transcends the inward gaze. Thus, beyond the heated squabbles that characterize tribal conflicts, those Africans who have been afflicted with this strange case of biomimicry (or should I say

sociomimicry?) have found a way to mirror the (neo)colonizers' extreme distaste for Africans. How else can one explain the discrimination against dark-skinned Africans by other dark-skinned Africans simply because they were dark skinned?

What then is the solution to such a problem? If disharmony or discord is the main symptom of Afrophobia and other related conflicts, then a theory of belongingness, harmony, and unity ought to be the cure. If scarce resources enable such conflicts, then an attitude of mutual caring and sharing ought to defuse them. Indeed, exclusionism ought to be replaced by belongingness, or so we believe.

Belongingness is a loaded concept. It is ironic that it is in African philosophy that the concept has built its most stable home since it is also in Africa that expressions of exclusion are so evident. Belongingness generally implies a mutual, complementary relationship between the parts and the whole. It represents a rejection of *absolute* solipsism/autonomy/individuality (i.e., a rejection of the notion that *being alone* is an attractive way of both conceptualizing reality and existing in the world) and the acceptance of group identity and solidarity.

Belongingness—especially socially speaking—does not come cheap, and it is certainly not free. It involves first acknowledgment and then acceptance. That is, as Thaddeus Metz (2017) notes, it involves an individual first identifying with a certain group and then being accepted by the group. It is one thing for me to say to myself and others: "I belong to the New York Academy of Science." But such a declaration makes no sense if the New York Academy of Science has not accepted me as a member. It would be equally ridiculous for me to declare, "I am South African," and expect to receive all the privileges and benefits of being South African automatically. Some, like Iroegbu, also include a common history/culture as a key feature of belongingness. As Iroegbu puts it: "Belongingness is the arrangement of the fundamental structure of society (laws, duties, privileges, jobs, offices, advantages and incumbents of the community) such that it incarnates and manifests the commonness of origin, of history and of general destiny of all the members of the community. . . . It makes sure that all belong and that none is marginalized: both contributively (duties and responsibilities), and distributively (sharing of communal cake)" (Iroegbu 1995, 350). While the concept is mostly thought of in social terms, its metaphysical and psychological connotations are equally important.

Metaphysically, existing involves being part of a community of things in the world and being perceived by other things in the world (Attoe 2022a, 2022c; Iroegbu 1995). According to Iroegbu (1995, 375–77), to be is to belong, and to belong is to be. People's individuality as existent things is concretized by their contribution to the existence of the whole via a relationship with something or someone else in the community of things.

If this is true, then reasons for exclusion are absent since all human beings and all things in the world exist and contribute to the community of things. Psychologically, there is a yearning in almost every human subjective consciousness to belong to a group and to be accepted by a group. Beyond the fact that we often need the help of others to fulfill our needs, it is also the case that, for most people, some sort of companionship is necessary for proper mental well-being. Thus, psychologically speaking, the *experience* of belonging and the understanding that one *belongs* are crucial to individual feelings of well-being and self-worth. This is one of the ways in which the saying "A person is a person through other persons" manifests itself. In the same way, a lack of companionship, the experience of exclusion, and the understanding that one *is* excluded, engender a type of emotional or psychological sickness in which, at the very least, the signal that one is a person is absent.

At the heart of all these spheres of belongingness is relationality, the idea that things in the world are connected to one another. For me (see Attoe 2022c), this connectedness is so absolute that merely existing necessitates a relationship with the world, such that, if it were possible for a thing to cease to exist, then that disappearance affects the world in very real ways. Of course, relationships can be negative and positive, depending on the mind that is perceiving that relationship. The relationship between a fast-moving bullet and a human body is often considered negative, especially in the eyes of the owner of the body, who is keen on living. However, this relationality is not a blind one as the traditional African view concedes that relationality serves a purpose, which I have identified as the sustenance of the universe for the legitimization of God's existence (Attoe 2022a). This point is particularly important because it is this teleology that informs the need for individuals to pursue positive relationality rather than negative relationality—since the latter is least likely to engender the sustenance of the universe and keep society alive (Attoe 2022a; see also Mbiti 1975, 175).

It is from these last views that the ethical dimension of theories of belongingness, like *ubuntu*, emerges. Like most philosophical concepts, *ubuntu* is hard to define precisely. In terms of scope, one can think of it as referring specifically to Southern African views about morality or, more generally, as capturing African relational ideas about morality. For instance, John Mbiti (1970, 141) is famous for his terse description of what *ubuntu* means: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." He then goes on to say that the emphasis on relationality is what determines what is good or bad: "Whatever strengthens the life of the community is held to be good and right. What weakens the life of the community is held to be evil and wrong" (1975, 177). It is little wonder that even metaphysical ideas like personhood and vitality recommend the strengthening of the other(s) as a way of improving one's own well-being (Tempels 1945/1959) and/or personhood (Gyekye 1992; Menkiti 2004).

As the dominant ethical idea of Southern African peoples, *ubuntu* is known by many other names, such as *ukama*, *botho*, and *hunhu*. For Mogobe Ramose (1999)—one of the foremost scholars of *ubuntu*—it reflects a general unfolding of being and a concrete instantiation of being as it unfolds (individual existent things in the world), and as such it is an active and dynamic concept that is always in motion. This is why it is a "-ness" and not an "-ism." What is interesting is that Ramose is not clear as to what principles of right action precisely capture what *ubuntu* is as an ethic, perhaps because the concept itself is dynamic (how can one propose static ethical rules or principles on the foundation of a supposedly dynamic concept?), but two terms seem very important in his conception of the idea—*mutual care* and *sharing*. Mutual care and sharing are first conceived in partialist terms, as Ramose says that one owes these duties to members of one's family and then one's community: "This [*ubuntu*] maxim underlines the vital importance of mutual recognition and respect complemented by mutual care and sharing in the construction of human relations. According to this understanding of the family, it is unethical to withhold or to deny botho/ubuntu towards a member of the family, *in the first place*, and the community at large. In other words charity begins at home" (Ramose 1998/2003, 385; emphasis added). Thus, one can say that this sense of belongingness begins with a recognition that one is a member of a specific unit (family or community) and develops a relationship of mutual positivity (sharing and caring) first to that unit and then to others outside that unit.

The problem with this interpretation is the obvious closed type of belongingness that provides no principle or requirement for positive relationships with those outside the group, *in spite* of those within the group. Where scarce resources or opportunities are available, it would make sense to ignore the needy outside one's community in favor of those inside, first, one's family and, then, one's community. One can then say that, within the view, there is a hierarchy of moral worth based on blood relation, communal solidarity, and the world in general (in that order). The partiality that follows from this outlook is not lost on Ramose. For, if *ubuntu* is a form of humanness, excluding or including some humans on the basis of what groups they belong to (relative to the moral agent) and certain other contexts (usually scarcity) can be problematic. *Ubuntu* would become an ethic for abundance only. Ramose recognizes this and goes on to say:

> The idea of community implies some kind of enclosure. Thus the procedure is to name, to take possession and, to enclose. This is what we call bounded reasoning. The philosophical problem is not with bounded reasoning as such but with the reason and the effects of the exclusion of others. Ubuntu ethics takes cognizance of this. It resolves the problem of exclusion in bounded reasoning by prescribing mutual recognition and respect complemented by mutual care and sharing. Thus motho ke motho ka batho is the maxim that prescribes permeable and not impermeable boundaries. (Ramose 1998/2003, 386)

Here, Ramose adds two more variables—*mutual recognition* and *respect*—although one does not get a sense of whether the terms possess special meaning in the context in which they are used and how they work in the context of practical moral encounters. However, one can presume that the idea is that recognizing the humanity in others—even those outside one's own community—one ought to treat them as beings that also possess dignity. This recognition and respect, then, allow one to engage with them positively—through mutual caring and sharing. Ramose imagines that it is in this way that those enclosed communities, to which we belong, possess permeable borders. Belongingness within this context is somewhat all-inclusive since human beings who are recognized as having

moral dignity or moral worth are thought of as worthy of recognition, respect, care, and sharing. However, shades of the old view still remain, for one wonders how much charity abounds for those outside one's enclosed but permeable moral borders, especially if one had to choose between running over a member of one's family/community or running over a stranger. How often do we see individuals, in real life, almost always retreat into national, then tribal, then familial cocoons rather than proceeding outward toward the universal when things of significance are at stake? Truly, charity, more often than not, begins at home, regardless of permeable borders.

Thaddeus Metz is another scholar who engages extensively with *ubuntu* ethics. His approach to the meaning of *ubuntu* is analytic, and he defines *ubuntu* in terms of harmony, which, in turn, is broken down to include shared identity/solidarity grounded in goodwill. In his analysis of what shared identity entails, Metz states: "First, a given individual conceives of oneself as part of a group. You refer to yourself in the first person plural, including yourself in a 'we.' Second, the group that you consider yourself a member of also considers you to be a member of it. So, others in the 'we' you refer to also include you in their 'we'" (2017, 112). Sharing an identity or belonging to a group is, therefore, dependent, not only on certain facts specific to the individual in question (such as psychological state/feelings, familiarity, biological connections, etc.), but also on communal or group acceptance. This is loosely but significantly tied to Ramose's view that *ubuntu* (without the imperatives of mutual recognition and respect, which allow for permeable borders) is enclosed and bounded. Such radical views put certain types of individuals (usually the outsider) at risk, even within the context of *ubuntu* as a form of belongingness. In this way, when individuals are not recognized as part of the community—whether because they are actual outsiders or because they have come to be considered as such through the severance of communal ties (usually after committing a serious crime or engaging in taboo activities that threaten community identity and survival)—they become vulnerable to exclusion, in the context of a partialist understanding of *ubuntu*. A good example to buttress this is the recent decision by certain African leaders/governments to denounce nonheterosexual relationships as "un-African" or not in conformity with traditional African values. Because this decision was made unilaterally as it were, individuals

who participate in nonheterosexual relationships become vulnerable as they have lost their shared identity with the larger community (because they no longer share a seemingly crucial value)—thus moving down in the scale of preference (in terms of who is worthy of *ubuntu*). In this way, one need only be excluded by the larger community to become vulnerable, and communities have exercised such powers, throughout history, more often than not. The imperatives of mutual recognition and mutual respect manifest themselves only as a seemingly noncompulsory afterthought. This is my first critique of the *ubuntu* view.

Yet another scholar, Reuel Khoza, presents another interesting view regarding the nature of *ubuntu* and its default attitude of belongingness: "Ubuntu is a concept that is generally regarded as the foundation of sound human relations in African societies. Its proponents claim that *ubuntu* or African humanism does not only form the basis of an 'African World-view' but also 'runs through the veins' of all Africans. . . . Simply put *ubuntu* means 'humanness' or 'being human' and encompasses values like 'universal brotherhood for Africans,' 'sharing,' 'treating and respecting other people as human beings,' etc." (Khoza 1994, 2).

Two points can be drawn from this. First, the type of belongingness that characterizes *ubuntu* is, according to Khoza, two pronged. The first sense of belongingness is bordered, with Africa forming the scope and limits of the brotherhood that *ubuntu* encompasses. The second sense is more universal (at least as far as people are concerned) as it includes all of humanity in its scope. A keen observer would immediately notice the similarities between Khoza's view and Ramose's view since both struggle with the partiality/impartiality divide—with the limited, bordered sense of belongingness, on the one hand, and a wider universal sense, on the other hand. Another point that a keen observer would notice is that, as in Ramose's view, *ubuntu* involves a more intense sense of belongingness in its bordered sense than it does in its universal sense. In its bordered sense, notions like "universal brotherhood for Africans," "shared/identity," and "charity begins at home" are invoked, while, in its universal sense, seemingly weaker notions like "mutual respect," "recognition," and "mutual sharing" are invoked. A brotherhood, for instance, suggests a strong relationship or *familiality*, but mutual respect leans more toward something like courtesy, good-naturedness, politeness, etc.

From the foregoing, one would believe that *ubuntu* betrays a type of belongingness that is partial and considers those enclosed in the relevant communal borders first and foremost before any *other* (Molefe 2018). However, there are views of *ubuntu* that fully espouse a universal, borderless type of belongingness. For instance, according to Desmond Tutu (1999, 29): "A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are." Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013, 200) describe Nhlanhla Mkhize's position as follows: "Ubuntu is about what qualifies a person to be a person. Mkhize . . . , affirming [Maulana] Karenga . . . , sees ubuntu as a process of becoming an ethical human being. It is the process by which balance or 'orderedness of being' is affirmed. This orderedness is realised through relationships characterised by interdependence, justice, solidarity of humankind, respect, empathy and care." Finally, Michael Onyebuchi Eze says the following: "*A person is a person through other people* strikes an affirmation of one's humanity through recognition of an 'other' in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation in which the 'other' becomes a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me" (2010, 190–91).

Tutu, Mkhize, and Eze all portray *ubuntu* as a universal type of belongingness. This universal sense is portrayed in the lack of enclosing or bordering words that express some sort of partiality. All three mention *others* that are not defined communally or geographically and, therefore, receive *ubuntu* solely on the fact that they are human.

Now we have two competing views regarding what it means to belong within the context of *ubuntu*. However, there are good reasons to take neither seriously. The universalist sense of belongingness within the context of *ubuntu* fails because it does not reflect the reality of everyday living in Africa (see Matolino and Kwindingwi 2013). While one might criticize the view for being utopic, another critique (which applies to both senses of *ubuntu*) lies in the assumption that *ubuntu* constitutes the

very essence of the African (and this cuts across both the universalist and the bordered senses of *ubuntu*). When Ramose (1999, 35) says that "the be-ing of an African in the universe is inseparably anchored on ubuntu," and when others like Khoza asserts that *ubuntu* "'runs through the veins' of all Africans," they invariably make the claim that what it means to be African is to have *ubuntu* as an essentializing characteristic.

Unfortunately, a cursory glance at Africa today does not find the average African to be essentially characterized by *ubuntu*. While one could say that colonialism is responsible for the type of Africa we see today and that politics can strip a being of its essence, the truth remains that *ubuntu* cannot be a reflection of what it means to be African today (Matolino and Kwindingwi 2013). If this is true, then one can admit that, either *ubuntu* does not reflect anything intrinsically African, or that many Africans today do not reflect *ubuntu*. Either way, *ubuntu* remains absent.

Now one can reply with the argument that *ubuntu* is a relic of the past that requires new life in the present and, therefore, that we must perform the necessary ethnophilosophical rituals that would resurrect this idea that is presumably relevant in contemporary times. Unfortunately, any claim to an authentic and complete precolonial understanding of *ubuntu* is at best suspicious since the documented oral and written evidence on *ubuntu* that has emerged from precolonial times (which would have been the reference point) does not provide a systematic account of the concept. Similarly, one cannot confidently depend on social systems of present-day traditional communities as precise expressions of *ubuntu* since one must also accept the influence of colonialism in even rural communities. Thus, even the most ethnophilosophically competent version of *ubuntu* is necessarily incomplete. But whether or not the view is historically accurate or a true representation of contemporary African attitudes, the real questions are whether it is plausible and applicable and whether it can or should be applied to our present-day situations—especially in the universal sense.

I will answer the question in this way. The concerns expressed earlier about how to navigate the partiality-impartiality (particular-universal) dilemma properly lead us to a deeper problem/question. Ethical behavior is contextual. There are no actions that are so absolutely right or wrong that all instances thereof are consistently morally commendable/condemnable. As the conversationalists say, context upsets fact. Indeed,

lying is wrong until one needs to tell a lie to save a life. Taking the life of another man is obscene, but we often give a pass to a person defending himself or to soldiers fighting at another's behest. Furthermore, deciding what is ethical behavior must also involve carefully navigating between individual and communal interests (or the interests of others). It seems right to share one's resources with a child in dire straits because children ought not to experience (especially preventable) suffering. But what if sharing one's resources puts one's own family in dire straits? Would not sharing in that instance be evil? I do not think so. What this implies, on the one hand, is that *ubuntu* in the partialist sense does not adequately account for the interests of those excluded from a community. If one is a partialist, the parameters for border permeation are not set, and even declarations that borders are permeable are not enough. On the other hand, *ubuntu* in its universal sense glosses over the real tensions that exist (and ought to be considered) when an individual's interests clash with the interests of others or when individuals from seemingly opposed contexts find themselves in an ethical conundrum. Thus, if one is an impartialist, treating others well is thought of as necessary, neglecting the very real and polarizing nature of the relationship between seemingly opposed people/groups. If *ubuntu* fails, what type of belongingness works? I recommend conversationalism.

Conversationalism can be traced back to the lineage of complementarity (developed and propounded by Innocent Asouzu), which itself can be traced back to the general relationality that pervades much of systematic African philosophical thinking. Complementarity introduces the idea of missing links, which captures the metaphysical idea that, whereas reality is constituted by individual things, or fragments, or links, or all the actors and factors that make up the universe, these missing links (no matter what they are) serve to complement themselves in a fundamental way, such that our understanding of the universe as well as the very sustenance of that universe is dependent on our knowledge of the mutual relationships among missing links. I have gone so far as to conceive that mutual relationship as *necessary*, such that by merely existing one is in a complementary relationship (see Attoe 2022c). However one might think of it, the idea of complementarity suggests some form of harmonious sustenance and/or complementary understanding of reality, and, thus, the theory falls under the purview of both metaphysics and

epistemology—metaphysics because it describes a complementary state of affairs and epistemology because, to understand a thing in the world fully, one must also possess an understanding of all possible links that prop up that thing's existence as a complementary being.

Now, while it is easy to spell out the sort of relationship that exists among symbiotic things or factors, how do we understand the full nature of relationships, especially how relationships between seemingly opposed actors/factors lead to a relationship of *mutual dependence*, as envisioned within the context of complementarity? Conversationalism arose, in part, as a response to this question. It concerns itself mainly with the relationship between seemingly opposed variables, which in turn encapsulate everything in the world since everything in the world possesses its own distinct identity in time and space (difference, here, would imply opposition whether strong or weak). While different things in the world may complement themselves in the most intense of ways—like a mother who is in a loving relationship with a child—their differences reveal the differences in the contexts in which they belong and how they are opposed to and different from each other. Thus, following *ezumezu* logic, things in relationship with each other are capable of expressing complementary and contextual relationships (relationships of difference). Conversationalism, then, becomes the ontological theory that delineates our understanding of that relationship.

While it is true that certain things in the world complement each other positively, complementarity does not necessarily lead to synthesis—a total subsumption of one thing into another—despite the optics. And the presence of difference—no matter how minute—implies contextuality and opposition. To think about how these opposed variables ought to relate, I turn to the idea of *arumaristics*. According to Jonathan Chimakonam, the noun *arumaruka*—the Igbo phrase from which *arumaristics* derives etymologically—refers to "'the act' (but *not* the state) of engaging in a critical and creative conversation" and "'the mechanism' for engaging in critical and creative conversation": "Both senses of the word describe a form of critical and creative relationship" (Chimakonam 2017b, 120–21). *Arumaristics*, then, describes "a procedure for reasoning in which thesis and anti-thesis complement rather than conflate and maintain their individualities in order to frustrate the emergence of synthesis": "It is from the English translation as 'conversation' that the concept

conversationalism—as a description of the method—is adopted" (Chimakonam 2017b, 121). Opposed variables/ideas are identified in terms of *nwa-nsa* (proponent) and *nwa-nju* (opponent), and it is through a process of construction, mutual deconstruction, and reconstruction (creative struggle) that *nwa-nsa* and *nwa-nju* improve their understanding of a particular state of affairs. To ensure that the emergence of a synthesis is frustrated, the notion of the *benoke* point is introduced by conversationalists to describe exactly where complementarity ends and synthesis begins. (According to Chimakonam: "[The concept *benoke*] is derived from a collection of Igbo words: bere which means 'reaching' and n'oke which means 'the limit or terminal point'. Put together 'berenoke' or 'benoke' for short means 'reaching the limit or terminal point'" [2017a, 19].) Crossing this point is fatal to any attempt at a conversation since doing so implies allowing for a merger that dissolves both the *nwa-nsa* and the *nwa-nju* into one thesis (Chimakonam 2021, 13)—usually with the less dominant view being lost and subsumed under the more dominant view (Attoe 2022b).

Now what has this got to do with belongingness? In the first instance, conversationalism (as I conceive it here) asserts that one must proceed toward belongingness with the understanding that things in the world (in this case human beings and/or human societies) are necessarily different from each other and are, therefore, naturally opposed variables. These different variables are, in turn, missing links that can be both complementary (expressing relationality) and opposed (portraying individuality and contextuality). What is problematic is that, in their contextuality/individuality/difference, people and/or societies are mostly destructive (or deconstructive) only. Thus, the struggle among people and societies is not always a creative one that leads to meaning making[3] (the essence of complementary relationships) but a destructive one.

If the reality of things suggests that people/societies are necessarily opposed to each other (by virtue of their individuality and context), then the idea that belongingness ought to involve a seamless brotherhood that lacks contextuality and erases identity would be wrong. This is why the emphasis on this sort of belongingness has failed to mirror reality, where the lack of social harmony is only getting worse. In the same vein,

contextualization that involves only destructive struggle fails to mirror relationality in its best form—creative struggle. This is why toxic types of enclosed and exclusivist relationality often breed problems—things like ethnic violence/cleansing, Afrophobia, etc. The need to retain and cherish one's identity is natural to things, including human beings, and conversationalism implicitly recognizes that individuality whether contextually or in complementary relationships (that avoid a synthesis). What allows conversationalism to stand apart even further is its emphasis on relationality through creative struggle.

This creative struggle generally involves mutual critical engagements that—especially when it comes to people/societies—aim to deconstruct the assumptions, ideas, viewpoints, etc., that constitute a particular context (Attoe 2022b), not to destroy, but to reconstruct, weeding out seemingly implausible and unnecessary aspects of the constituents of the particular contexts/identities involved. In other words, seemingly opposed variables relate through creative struggle in order to engender mutual growth. This is what belongingness is all about. When social problems like Afrophobia arise, what constitutes a plausible solution is not a subsumptive type of belongingness that seeks to merge seemingly opposed contexts into something new, nor is it a type of belongingness that naturally excludes and treats unfairly. What is required is the understanding that people/societies in Africa are all different and that different ideologies, assumptions, and cultural worldviews characterizing their peculiar contexts. Since, as noted earlier, every person/society serves as a missing link of reality, it is thus the case that these diverse contexts possess the same power as missing links. Therefore, the type of relationality that ensures a vertical power dynamic (superior-inferior relationships) is resisted and dissolved by conversationalism (which encourages a horizontal type of relationality). In this way, varying contexts enter into conversation on an equal footing rather than in terms of superiority/inferiority (which would involve a type of relationship that would necessarily encourage strife or subservience).

Once on equal footing, individuals from different contexts then relate in terms of creative struggle. In this instance, all that constitutes the makeup of a certain context is laid bare, whether palatable or not. It is by displaying contexts (in this case human societies) in terms of their

ideologies, history, heritage, assumptions, influences, habits, etc. that we prepare them for the mutual deconstruction that follows. Through mutual criticism (between *nwa-nsa* and *nwa-nju*), we engender the shedding of false views, ideas, etc. owing to their implausibility and/or the negative effects they produce. This is then followed by reconstruction, which involves taking stock of what has been shed as well as piling up new ideas/views as a way of building a more robust thesis, one in which one's position is strengthened without being lost. While the conjunctive motion toward complementarity signifies a consensus on what needs to be abandoned, incorporated, or reinvented, the disjunctive motion toward contextuality—signified by disagreements, a lack of consensus on a particular point, and/or new points of critical engagement—ensures that each entity retains its identity.

Insofar as contexts ought to remain missing links, insofar as the *benoke* point ought not to be crossed, and insofar as achieving a state of absolute perfection is not possible, conversations ought never to end. Thus, there is a need for constant encounters between missing links (which would involve constant mutual refinement) ensuring growth through relationality, all without a collapse of identity (and the emergence of a monism) through perfection. The very essence of belongingness is captured by this process since a lack of conversation means either a monism (in which relationality is useless) or a negative relationality (in which flourishing is impossible).

Contexts, identities, communities, etc. are precious, and, in the real world, any theory of belongingness that purports to project either a subsumptive monism or a negatively tensioned (and bordered) relationality ultimately fails. What conversationalism offers is a recognition of different (even opposed) identities, contexts, or communities and a process by which these seemingly opposed communities (or individuals within those communities) can reach out to each other in a relationship that is marked by creative struggle. Africa in the twenty-first century does not reflect the sort of camaraderie that thinkers like Desmond Tutu propose. What we have today is a bordered world simpliciter. What is important at this point is, not making unrealistic attempts to reverse the irreversible, but finding concrete ways to make the best of the present and deeply rooted state of affairs. Nothing more.

NOTES

1. I refer here to the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, sponsored by the genocidal King Leopold II, and convened by Otto von Bismarck. The conference served to carve up Africa for the purpose of a more seamless implementation of colonialism.

2. Again, the eerie similarities with racial profiling in Europe and America today and in the past as well as with racial profiling in colonial Africa and apartheid South Africa are uncanny.

3. *Meaning making*, according to Chimakonam (2021), describes a process of creating presence from the metaphysics of absence. It involves reaching beyond one's borders in search of relationship with the other. And, in that relationship, where reconstruction follows deconstruction, new ideas necessarily appear (since a reconstructed view must introduce a new dynamic). These new ideas imply new meaning, and, thus, conversations drive meaning making.

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