

INTRODUCTION

Towards *Botho/Ubuntu*-centred Individuals,
Communities and Nations
Musa W. Dube ¹

“Botho (Ubuntu)... must permeate every aspect of our lives, like the air we breathe” (Vision 2016: 2)
“Botho (Ubuntu) will be the cornerstone that guides our lives in the future” (Vision 2036)

The research project, “*Botho and Community Building in the Urban Space*,” was sponsored by John Templeton Foundation in 2016. The collaborative project involved ten scholars from the Faculties of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education at the University of Botswana.² The study investigated how *Botho* (commonly known as *Ubuntu*) is expressed in urban areas using multiple case studies of Bridal, Baby, Naomi and Laban showers in Gaborone, Botswana. Bridal and baby showers are commonly known social gatherings for

¹ Musa W. Dube is a professor of New Testament Studies, currently based in Candler School of Theology, Emory University. Her research interests include Postcolonial, gender, hermeneutics, translation, HIV and AIDs and Ubuntu Studies. Dube is the current continental coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (2019-2024), the President elect of the Society of Biblical Literature 2022-2023) and Humboldtian awardee (2011).

² The research team included: Musa W. Dube, Senzokuhle D. Setume, Malebogo Kgalemang, Rose M. Gabaitse, Seratwa Ntloedibe-Kuswani, Tirelo Modie Moroka, Elisabeth Motswapong, Tshenolo Madigele, Mmapula Kebaneilwe, Anna Mmolai and Amanda K. Matebekwane.

supporting a new bride and new mother respectively. The Naomi and Laban showers are new events created in Botswana for parents and in-laws, to prepare them for receiving new members in their homes and communities, following a new marriage. *Botho/Ubuntu* is a philosophy that is central to Batho/Bantu people the following quote best captures the centrality of *Botho/Ubuntu* to the identity of Bantu people:

The word *Botho/Ubuntu* is derived from *Bantu/Batho*³ (meaning people), which refers to an African linguistic group spreading from southern, eastern, central and western parts of Africa. *Isintu/Setho* refers to the cultural ways of *Bantu/Batho*. *Botho/Ubuntu*, on the other hand, is the philosophy of being human, or what constitutes one's humanity. *Botho/Ubuntu* is supposedly measured by one's capacity to uphold the dignity of the Other. It encompasses human, economic, environmental and divine relations that underline the sanctity of the creation community as a whole, by acknowledging that *Botho/Ubuntu*—or humanness—is and can only be measured by the capacity to care for/about and respect the Other. The saying,

³ Bantu (people) is in Nguni spelling, whereas Batho (people) is Sotho-Tswana spelling. I have highlighted the root word of *Botho/Ubuntu* and how it is related with the word *Bantu* for people.

“*Umntu ngu muntu nga banye/motho ke motho ka ba bangwe* (a human-being is only human with/through Others) highlights that community-building is a central part of exercising *Botho/Ubuntu*. The saying best captures *Botho/Ubuntu* as a process of realizing one’s identity and of being fully human as an experience that occurs within the types of communities that we build, namely, through building empowering and affirmative relationships (Dube, 2021: 4).

Botswana and its people, accordingly, value *Botho/Ubuntu*. In *Vision 2016: Long Term Vision for Botswana*, *Botho* is listed as the fifth principle for the nation. According to *Vision 2016*, ‘*Botho* defines a process of earning respect by first giving it, and to gain empowerment by empowering others... and encourages social justice for all...’ (2016: 2). It is notable that this definition of *Botho/Ubuntu* includes:

1. The capacity to earn and give respect
2. The capacity to empower others
3. The obligation to build social justice for all.

In these outlined qualities, we note that the expression of *Botho/Ubuntu* is not about selfishness, but the recognition of one’s communal identity and responsibility to the wider community, which includes animals and the whole ecological environments. As we described in the first publication of this project, the African concept of community extends to the animal world and the forests they inhabit (Dube, et. al 2016:1-22). This is

attested by the concept of totems, where most human communities in Southern Africa identify with particular animals and call themselves by the names of the animals they identify with. Such animals constitute their communal and individual identity and history of origins. They cannot be killed, eaten, nor can their skins or parts be used in such a community, since they are regarded as sacred members of that community. The Earth is held to be a supreme mother, whose sacredness must be maintained through seasonal ceremonies, rituals and by avoiding the pollution of the land (Penxa Matholeni, Boateng and Manyonganise, 2020; Chirongoma & Rackozy, 2021).

The human communal angle of *Botho/Ubuntu* is best captured by the Setswana saying: “*motho ke motho ka batho*,” that is “a person is only human through other human beings.” The saying underlines the importance of both the individual and the community in building up *Botho/Ubuntu*-centred communities, institutions, nations and ecological environments. Every individual member, therefore, has an obligation to relate with, and serve all people from the perspective of *Botho/Ubuntu*, while the whole community is equally obligated to uphold the humanity of all its individual members. The individual and the community are inseparable faces of the same coin. *Vision 2016* thus underlines that a *Botho/Ubuntu*-centred individual refers to “a person who has a well-rounded character, who is well mannered, courteous and disciplined, and realizes his

or her full potential as both an individual and as part of the community to which he or she belongs” (3). *Vision 2016* further underlines the implications of *Botho/Ubuntu* for our relations, pointing out that “*Botho*” as a concept must stretch to its outmost limits in the largeness of the spirit of all Batswana. It must permeate every aspect of our lives, like the air we breathe, so that no Motswana will rest easy knowing that another is in need” (2016:2). From a justice-seeking perspective, individuals and communities that subscribe to the philosophy of *Botho/Ubuntu*, as defined above, should have zero tolerance for any form of oppression based on differences—be it gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, age, religion or physical ability, among others. *Botho/Ubuntu* underlines that failure to recognize and uphold the humanity of the other is in fact a statement against the self, that is, a demonstration of one's dire inhumanity.

Botho/Ubuntu is clearly not just for one segment of the community such as young people or women or servants. It is for the young and the adults, men and women, bosses and their workers, leaders and their followers, the rich and poor, and people of all ethnic groups, races, sexualities and abilities, who realize their *Botho/Ubuntu* as not only in relation to other humans, but to the entirety of creation community on Mother Earth (LenkaBula 2008). *Botho/Ubuntu* must be given by all and received by all. *Botho/Ubuntu*, no doubt, challenges dominant masculinities, patriarchy, racism, tribalism, capitalism, poverty-creating structures, violence of

sorts, neo-liberalism, environmental degradation by denying any justification of the discrimination and exploitation of the other (Maluleke 1999; Mmualefe, 2004; Dube, 2009; Mertz and Gaie, 2010, Chitando, 2015; Manyonganise 2015; Dube et al., 2016; Gaie and Mmolai, 2007; Le Grande, 2015; Chisale, 2018). Just as individuals must embrace *Botho/Ubuntu*, our communities and society at large should have a social and moral obligation to build *Botho/Ubuntu-centred* families, groups, departments, sectors, institutions, economies and ecological environments, which strive to serve justice with, to and for all. *Botho/Ubuntu* is, therefore, Botswana's social and moral foundation as well as the brick and mortar of the nation's being. *Vision 2016* best captures this angle by underlining that "*Botho* as a concept must permeate every aspect of our lives, like the air we breathe... so that no one will rest easy knowing that another is in need." Undoubtedly, our national understanding of *Botho/Ubuntu* is that it is a commitment to working for the dignity and justice of all members of the Earth Community (Lenka-Bula 2008). This definition highlights that *Botho/Ubuntu* makes us strive to be a nation that has zero tolerance for all social issues that diminish the human dignity of any of our citizens, such as structures of poverty, violence of any form, corruption, tribalism, gender, unemployment, homophobia, ageism or racial-based discrimination as well as environmental exploitation and oppression (*Vision 2016*: 8-9). *Botho/Ubuntu* is, in other words, a posture, a style of living, working and relating through an ethic of dedication - dedication to giving human dignity to all people we

meet and serve, as well as a dedication to working for the justice of all members of the Earth community. Therefore, our families, institutions, villages, cities, nations, worlds and ecological environments highly desire and are receptive of members of the community who are guided and embraced by the ethic of *Botho/Ubuntu*.

Gaborone Showers and the *Botho/Ubuntu* Spirit

Given the above understanding, the research project on *Botho/Ubuntu and Community Building in the Urban Space* sought to investigate how *Botho/Ubuntu* is expressed in cities and towns of Botswana, by focusing on women-driven events Naomi/Laban, Bridal and Baby Showers in the city of Gaborone. It took cognizance of the fact that in urban areas the community spirit can be lost and poverty can easily encroach. The question, therefore, is “How does *Botho/Ubuntu* mitigate the situation?”

The objectives of the project were as follows:

- a. Explore the theological and spiritual base of *Botho/Ubuntu* values/ethics.
- b. Examine how *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic was understood and manifested in traditional Botswana communities.
- c. Analyze how *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic is expressed in contemporary urban settings of Botswana.
- d. Investigate how *Botho/Ubuntu* activities in the urban space construct and reconstruct gender.

- e. Highlight how *Botho/Ubuntu* spirituality can inform the building and maintenance of justice-loving communities.

Fieldwork of this study ended in 2018 and several papers have already been published in various journals.⁴ However, the researchers have deemed it necessary to share some of their findings and recommendations with various stakeholders through this special issue of the *Journal of ITC*. The special volume also welcomed other researchers who had independently done work in similar areas. These papers are the ones authored by Boineelo Pearl Lefadola and Poloko Nugget Ntshwarang as well as

⁴ Some of the group authored papers include: “*Botho*, Community-building and Gender Constructions in Botswana,” *ITC Journal of Theology*, Volume 42:1-22, 2016; “Exploring the Concept of *Africa*, Vol 2/3, 2017: 173-191 ; “A Little Baby is on the Way: *Botho/Ubuntu* and Community-Building in Gaborone Baby Showers,” In *Gender Studies* 16/1 (2017): 50-70; “Reproducing or Creating a New Male: Bridal Showers in the Urban Space of Botswana.” In *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa*, Vol 24/1 2018:79-95; “Pathways to Social Capital and the *Botho/Ubuntu* Ethic in the Urban Space of Gaborone.” *Botswana. Global Social Welfare: Research, Policy and Practice*. 2019:1-13; “Emergent Rites of Passage in Botswana: The Case Study of Naomi/Laban Showers,” In *Pula Botswana Journal of African Studies* Vol 33/1, 2019: 61-79; “Pre-marital Pastoral Counselling/Go-Laa on Issues of Gender and Human Sexuality: Naomi/Laban Showers in Gaborone, Botswana.” *The International Journal of African Catholicism*, Volume 10, Number 1, Winter 2020.

the one by Tebogo B. Sentsima featured in the subsequent volume. We hope that the publication of our findings will contribute towards evidence-based policymaking in Botswana and other countries that subscribe to the *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic. In this issue, the reader will get a glimpse of some of the findings.

This volume consists of four articles, focusing on bridal showers. The first article, “Botho/Ubuntu and Unsettling Patriarchy: *Go laya* in Gaborone Bridal Showers”, utilizes theories of agency to read and analyze the content of counselling (*go laya*) provided during the events. It seeks to assess the content of *go laya* in Gaborone bridal showers so as to understand how it confronts, reconstructs or co-habits with patriarchal structures, as well as to note their agency. The paper finds that there are multiple ways utilized to unsettle patriarchy. The article on “Exploring Botswana Bridal Showers through Relational-Cultural Connections Lens” found that themes such as mutually enhancing and growth-fostering relationships among participants, reciprocity, social support, mutual trust and empathy characterize the findings of the study. The analysis of data shows that participation in the showers could bring satisfaction, improved social relations, an increased sense of control and empowerment. The article “How I Met My Husband’: Bridal Narratives at Bridal Showers in Gaborone,” explores the narratives shared in bridal showers on how the prospective brides met their suitors. It investigates how such stories may exhibit *Botho/Ubuntu*, embody gendered relations or create a space for reconstructing gender relations. The findings generally agree that while bridal showers

still embrace many forms of patriarchy, they have shifted the rules of the game by disregarding age and marital status as a required criteria for counselling the bride-to-be. The Gaborone bridal shower space welcomes every woman who is an adult to participate without making marital status and age a requirement. In so doing, they challenge patriarchy that forces women to define their humanity in relation to patriarchal marriage. Given that in Setswana and many Bantu cultures, open discussion concerning sexuality is not the norm, the paper on “Botho/Ubuntu and Sex in the shower: Bridal showers and Sexuality” seeks to analyse the ways in which sex talk in Gaborone bridal showers empowers women to deconstruct patriarchal heteronormative perceptions. Further, the article demonstrates how sex conversations embody life-giving values and ideals of *Botho/Ubuntu* within marriage.

Some Recommendations

Making indigenous resources and concepts such as *Botho/Ubuntu* subjects of scientific research was exciting for us (Chirongoma, Machinga & Chitando, 2021). The research enables Botswana to become a knowledge-based nation-one that is able to measure how its indigenous resources enrich and enable its contemporary society; how its cultural sources can be explored further, for enhancing the development of the nation. Botswana will be misleading herself to believe that optimum development and productivity can be achieved without exploring, re-enforcing and re-interpreting her ethical resources as foundations of excellence.

One of the findings of the research was that the groups that were most likely to organize showers for others were church goers followed by friends. Workmates, on the other hand, were the most less likely to organize a shower for their fellow workers. On a positive note, it confirms Mmualefe's claim that the practice of *Botho/Ubuntu* is close to godliness (2013: 26). On the negative side, it suggests that the *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic does not strongly characterize the Botswana workspace and relationships. Needless to say, *Botho/Ubuntu*-centred individuals, families, citizens and the workforce are central to effective development of Botswana. The embodiment of the *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic should be a miraculous catalyst for optimum productivity and development at the national level. Harnessing the benefits of the *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic would create a flourishing and justice loving nation. *Botho/Ubuntu* is key to nation building. Botswana, therefore, constantly needs to evaluate if:

- a. citizens still understand what it means to be *motho yo o Botho*
- b. families and all its institutions are founded and guided by *Botho/Ubuntu*
- c. various departments, sectors, institutions are *Botho/Ubuntu*-centred.
- d. citizens are guided by *Botho/Ubuntu* in their relationship with the environment
- e. manuals and handbooks that train citizens to become *Botho/Ubuntu*-centred individuals, communities, institutions, companies and businesses in Botswana are needed.

One major confirmation was that Batswana women in Gaborone are led by *Botho/Ubuntu* to make efforts to make more humane the arrival of a new bride into her new home; the arrival of a new mother and her new baby and the arrival of new parents-in-law and their daughters/sons-in-law. Women voluntarily organize events; contribute money, give material goods and moral guidance to ensure that the new home, new baby and new-in-laws are socially well grounded and are materially equipped to begin their new roles.

This research project has contributed, even in small ways, to the above. But to concretize the above goals, Botswana needs to:

- a) deliberate on how to infuse *Botho/Ubuntu* in its formal and informal curriculum so that all learners at all levels of learning are trained on *Botho/Ubuntu* as a guiding principle.
- b) consider *Botho/Ubuntu*-centred schools and institutions, through which learners and all citizens will appreciate and understand *Botho/Ubuntu* as a process for earning respect by first giving it, a process of gaining empowerment by empowering others... and the spirit of encouraging social justice for all through our programs and the skills that empower all our citizens to serve *ka Botho/Ubuntu* (Vision 2016: 2).

Research is central to providing data required to make informed decisions and plans. Quality research is needed to inform developmental policies. We are

grateful to the John Templeton Foundation that sponsored this University of Botswana research group to explore how *Botho/Ubuntu* is expressed in the urban area of Gaborone. The findings will inform, hopefully, policy makers in their developmental plans. In addition, it may be necessary for the research team to consider re-packaging some of the findings in user-friendly ways for developmental purposes. Training manuals for both the public, private sector and civil society on how to build *Botho/Ubuntu*-oriented institutions would assist in mainstreaming the *Botho/Ubuntu*-ethic in the work force and within the civil society at large. As said, all ministries and private sectors should be very interested in mainstreaming *Botho/Ubuntu* in all their sectors and departments; and among all its workers and stakeholders, for excellent service delivery and for building a *Botho/Ubuntu*-centred nation.

Selected Bibliography

Botswana Government. (1997). *Vision 2016: Long Term Vision for Botswana*. Gaborone Botswana Government.

Botswana Government. (2016). *Vision 2036: Achiving Prosperity for All*. Gaborone Botswana Government.

Chirongoma, Sophia and Susan Rackozy. Eds. (2021). Sacred Earth and African Women's Theology. *African Journal of Gender and Religion*. 27/1.

Chirongoma, S., M. Machinga, & E. Chitando. Eds. (2021). Special Issue on African Women and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. In *African Thought: A Journal of Afrocentric Knowledge*. Vol.1/1-15.

Chisale, Sinenhlanhla. (2018). "Ubuntu as Care: Deconstructing the Gendered Ubuntu." *Verbum et Ecclesia*. 39/1,1-8.

Chitando, Ezra. (2015). "Do not tell a person Carrying you the S/he Stinks": Reflections on *Ubuntu* and Masculinities in the Context of Sexual and Gender-based Violence and HIV;"

in Elna Mouton, et al. *Living with Dignity: African Perspectives on Gender Equality*. (269-284). Stellenbosch: Sun Press.

Denbow, James and C. Phenyoo. (2006). *Culture and customs of Botswana*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

Dube, Musa W. (2021). "Postcolonial *Botho/Ubuntu*: Transformative Readings of Ruth in the Botswana Urban Space (161-182). In Juliana L. Claassens ed. *Transgression and Transformation: Feminist, Postcolonial and Queer Biblical Interpretations as Creative Interventions*. London: T&T Clark.

Dube M. W. et. al. (2021). "Mother Economies: *Botho/Ubuntu* and Community Building in the Urban Space, A Focus on Naomi/Laban, Bridal and Baby Shower." In Lilian C. Siwila & Fundiswa A. Kobo. Eds. *Religion, Patriarchy and Empire: Festschrift in Honor of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*. (61-112). Pietmaritzburg: Cluster Publications.

Dube, M. W. et. al. (2016). "Botho/Ubuntu, Community Building and Gender Constructions in Botswana." *Journal of ITC*. 40/1,1-22.

- Dube, M. W. (2009). "I am Because We Are": Giving Primacy to African Indigenous Values in HIV&AIDS Prevention." In M. F. Murove, Ed. *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*. (178-188). Pietmaritzburg: Univ. of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press.
- Gaie, Joseph B.R. and Sana Mmolai (eds.). (2007). *The Concept of Botho and HIV & AIDS in Botswana*. Zepf Chancery Publishers Africa.
- Le Grange, Lesley. (2015). "Ubuntu/Botho as Ecophilosophy and Ecosophy." *J Hum Ecol* 49/3, 301-308.
- LenkaBula Puleng. (2008). "Beyond Anthropocentricity—Botho/Ubuntu and the Quest for Economic and Ecological Justice in Africa. *Religion and Theology*. 15/3-4 375-394.
- Maluleke, Tinyiko S. (1999). "The Misuse of Ubuntu". *Challenge*. No. 53, 12-13.
- Manyonganise, Molly. (2015). Oppressive and Liberative: Zimbabwean Woman's Reflection on Ubuntu." *Verbum et Ecclesia*. 36/2,1-8.

- Metz T. & Gaie, J. B. R. (2010). “The African Ethic of *Ubuntu/Botho*: Implications for Research on Morality.” *Journal of Moral Education*. 39/3, 273-290.
- Mmualefe, Dumi O. (2004). “Towards Authentic Tswana Christianity: Revisiting *Botho*.” Unpublished Master’s Thesis: Eden Theological Seminary Missouri.
- Mmualefe, Dumi. (2007). “*Botho* and HIV and AIDS: A Theological Reflection.” In Gaie, Joseph B. R. and Sana K. Mmolai. *The Concept of Botho and HIV/AIDS in Botswana*. (1-29). Eldoret, Kenya: Zapf Chancery Research Consultants and Publishers.
- Penxa Matholeni, Nobuntu, Georgina Boateng & Molly Manyonganise. Eds. (2020). *Mother Earth, Mother Africa, and African Indigenous Religions*. Cape Town: Sun Media Press.