Exploring *ubuntu* discourse in South Africa: Loss, liminality and hope

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This article explores the current state of the social value of *ubuntu*. The notion of *ubuntu* seems to offer possibilities for nation building and social cohesion in post-Apartheid South Africa. However, this is contested by scholars who argue that the concept is vague and open to abuse. Interviews reveal that, whilst core elements remain, the meaning of *ubuntu* has been eroded, and is subject to distortion and even abuse. *Ubuntu* exists tightly interwoven with un-*ubuntu*. The notion of liminality is introduced to understand the current state of both *ubuntu* and South African society in transition. A liminal space offers possibilities for the creative re-imagining and recovery of *ubuntu* as a social value that can drive social transformation in South Africa. The lens of discursive leadership offers insight into the ways in which leaders can stimulate and shape *ubuntu* discourse and facilitate the construction of new meaning in society.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article forms part of broader research into perceptions of difference and threat, and prejudice on the part of South Africans towards foreigners. *Ubuntu* is a social value that should challenge prejudice and xenophobia and shape social relationships. Research in a rural and urban context in the Eastern Cape suggests that *ubuntu* discourse has been eroded and is in need of reinvigoration.

Introduction

Is the African social value of *ubuntu* dead? Does it offer any hope for transforming South African society or fostering social cohesion? Is it able to play a meaningful role in the building of a post-Apartheid South African society that embodies reconciliation and is based on principles of justice and equality? Whether *ubuntu* could (or should) play such a role has been debated. Within the broad spectrum of positions, there are two generally opposing viewpoints amongst academics:

- there are those who argue that, as a foundational principle in African philosophy, *ubuntu* offers significant possibilities for the transformation of South African society
- on the other side, there are those who argue that *ubuntu* is vague, full of contradictions, and subject to manipulative and even nefarious use.

This article will outline both of those positions, and based on an investigation of people's understandings of *ubuntu* in a specific context, argue that the notion of *ubuntu* appears to have been eroded to the extent that it currently seems unable to play a meaningful role in nation-building.

Where does this leave *ubuntu*? I will borrow the concept of liminality from anthropology and argue that, as a society that has undergone discontinuous change, South Africa is in a liminal space, as is the notion of *ubuntu*. Within this space there is both threat and possibility. There is the threat that the erosion of positive social values will continue and that our already fragmented society will tear itself apart. There is also the possibility that we can creatively recover both the meaning and force of *ubuntu*, and find significant ways to embody it in our society.

Ubuntu in an emerging society

The birth of a democratic South Africa in 1994 created hope for healing and transformation in South Africa. The leadership of Nelson Mandela was an example and an inspiration that gave impetus towards forgiveness and reconciliation. Desmond Tutu spoke of a 'Rainbow Nation', a phrase that encapsulated a vision for the future of South Africa that was full of possibility and hope. The notion of *ubuntu* has been central to attempts to build a transformed, just society.

The desire to find something uniquely African upon which to build postcolonial or postconflict African societies is not unique. As African countries have emerged from colonial rule and attempted to transform their societies, this has often included attempts to return to something

from their past that is deemed to be noble or worthy. Gade (2011:304–305) observes that these narratives of return tend to divide history into three phases: the precolonial age which is often conceived of as a time of near perfect harmony and prosperity; a second phase in which outsiders steal the resources, dignity and culture of African people; and a third phase of recovery in which African dignity and culture is restored. *Ubuntu* discourses in South Africa fit into this broader category of narratives of return (Gade 2011; Matolino & Kwindingwi 2013).

Ubuntu as central to African life

The principles of *ubuntu* resonate with universal values of human worth and dignity. Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu (1999:34–35) explains that the meaning of *ubuntu* is that, 'a person is a person through other people. It is not "I think therefore I am". It says rather: "I am human because I belong". I participate, I share'. The concept highlights the interconnectedness of human society, with the implication that people should treat others as part of the extended human family.

Ubuntu has been translated as 'humanity' (Shutte 2001:2), 'African humanness' (Broodryk 2002:13), 'humanism or humaneness' (Mnyaka & Motlhabi 2009:63), or 'the process of becoming an ethical human being' (Mkhize 2008:35).

Prinsloo (1998:41–45) describes various understandings of *ubuntu* in the South African context. Chikanda (1990) sees *ubuntu* as African humanism. It involves sensitivity to the needs of others, charity, sympathy, care, respect, consideration and kindness. For Khoza (1994), *ubuntu* is an African view of life and the world in which people share and treat each other as humans, based on an underlying 'universal brotherhood' of Africans.

In Mkhize's (2008:43) understanding, *ubuntu* 'incorporates ideas of social justice, righteousness, care, empathy for others and respect'. Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2009:74) write that *ubuntu* 'is inclusive … it is best realised in deeds of kindness, compassion, caring, sharing, solidarity and sacrifice'. Makhudu (1993) writes as follows:

> Every facet of African life is shaped to embrace *ubuntu* as a process and philosophy which reflects the African heritage, traditions, culture, customs, beliefs, value system and the extended family structures. (p. 40)

Mcunu (2004:25) presents *ubuntu* as the ideal stage of being a human being; it is the 'best way of being a person according to African understanding of the human person'.

Louw (2001) points out that whilst these translations involve a loss of culture-specific meaning:

> The maxim '*ubuntu ngumumntu ngabantu*' articulates a basic respect and compassion for others ... As such, it is both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic. It not only describes human being as 'being-with-others', but also prescribes how we should relate to others, i.e. what 'being-with-others' should be all about. (p. 15)

For Gathogo (2008), *ubuntu*:

> [C]an be interpreted as both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic. It both describes human beings as 'being-with-others' and prescribes what 'being-with-others' should be all about. (p. 46)

Cornell and Van Marle (2005:207) capture this when they describe *ubuntu* as 'an ontic orientation within an interactive ethic'.

Advocates of *ubuntu* as a guiding principle

Given the historical meaning and significance of *ubuntu*, it is hardly surprising that the notion has strong appeal within a post-Apartheid South African context.

The Interim Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1993) spoke of the need for *ubuntu* rather than retribution. The Batho Pele (i.e. 'people first') principles that promote service delivery in the public sector are based on *ubuntu*. An example of this can be seen in the Department of Education's Service Delivery Plan (2007/2008). *Ubuntu* was the foundation of the Moral Regeneration Movement that was launched in South Africa in 2002 (Matolino & Kwindingwi 2013:200).

Ubuntu has been harnessed in many ways:

- as a constitutional value that can be operationalised in law (Bekker 2006; Mokgoro 1998)
- as a philosophical basis for constitutional democracy (De Gruchy 2011)
- as foundation for moral theory (Metz 2007; Shutte 1993)
- as the basis for public policy (Nkondo 2007)
- as a guiding principle for citizenship education (Letseka 2012)
- as a normative value for education (Higgs 2003; Venter 2004)
- as the basis for business ethics (Lutz 2009; West 2014)
- as a model for management (Mbigi 1992; eds. Van den Heuwel, Mangaliso & Van den Bunt 2007)
- as the basis for an African approach to conflict resolution and peace building (Murithi 2006)
- as a theological motif (Tutu 1999)
- as the framework for a theology of relational ontology (Forster 2010).

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it is indicative of the wide scope of application that is proposed by the advocates of *ubuntu*. Shutte (2001) and Broodryk (2002) have argued that *ubuntu* should be exported to the rest of the world as Africa's unique gift to humanity.

It seems clear that *ubuntu* has a rich and even provocative meaning. It is also evident that *ubuntu* resonates with a number of theological motifs, including the *imago Dei*, the church as the body of Christ, instructions to love one's neighbour, and the practical expressions of early Christian fellowship in the book of Acts. It is a social value from our African context that seems to reflect the orientation towards

other human beings that the Gospel requires of those who follow Jesus Christ. If embraced and lived out, *ubuntu* could be a powerful driver of meaningful reconciliation, justice and healing in South African communities.

Concerns about *ubuntu* as a guiding principle

Enslin and Horsthemke (2004) are suspicious of some of the claims and principles associated with *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is specieist because of its focus on human beings. There are questions about whether it can include other cultures. They argue that *ubuntu* is contradicted, or weakened by the prevalence in Africa of autocratic rule, corruption, sexism, homophobia and the degradation of the environment. Furthermore, they question the value of *ubuntu* as a practical guide for policies or actions, arguing that it does not offer practical guidance for issues such as wasteful public expenditure or HIV and/or AIDS education. They conclude that *ubuntu* does not offer a solution as a foundation for a uniquely African form of democracy and question its value in citizenship education.

Cornell and Van Marle (2005:196) mention various criticisms that have been levelled against *ubuntu*. These acknowledge the meaning it once had as a social value, but question its relevance today, especially to young South Africans. It is argued by some that *ubuntu* is inherently patriarchal and conservative. Its usefulness as a guiding principle for South African society is also diminished by its vagueness and ability to accommodate a range of meanings.

Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013:197) criticise what they call the 'aggressive promotion of *ubuntu*' in post-Apartheid South Africa. They argue that history has shown that the use of such narratives of return to promote black identity has always resulted in failure. What it means to be 'African' is homogenised and alternative interpretations are suppressed as a hegemony is created around an ideal African way of being. They point to the massive disconnect between the ideals of *ubuntu* and the lived reality of most South Africans.

Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013:200–201) observe that through misappropriation and overuse, 'the notion of *ubuntu* has enjoyed such popular appeal that it can be said that it has become anything to anyone who so wishes to deploy it'. It is an outdated notion and there are greater dangers associated with its attempted revival than there are benefits. They conclude that *ubuntu* does not have the capacity to shape ethics in the current South African context. For the authors, attempting to return to the old is dangerous because of the elitist political agendas behind this, and faulty because what worked in Africa then is not suitable for a now that has been shaped by urbanisation and modernity. Whilst there is no fault with the ideal of *ubuntu* itself, it is not suited to the social and ethical challenges of our current situation.

Setiloane (1998:75) argues that an African worldview places a significant emphasis on the 'wholeness of all being'. Humanity, god, spirit powers, the ancestors and the created order are connected. *Ubuntu* plays a role in the interconnectedness that Setiloane describes. This links it strongly to a number of cultural practices that contradict more universal *ubuntu* ideals that may be extrapolated from the original cultural understanding of *ubuntu*.

Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013:204) point out that, 'some of the most dedicated adherents of *ubuntu* would not be comfortable with some of the rights that are defended by the bill of rights/the constitution'. *Ubuntu* does not make all people equal. The cultural system that is said to be an expression of *ubuntu* relegates women to a lower social status. This is seen particularly in the regulation of customary marriage, access to land, and inheritance rights. *Ubuntu* seems to exclude certain groups from the scope of its benefits.

This raises the question of the extent of *ubuntu*. How wide do its boundaries stretch? Gathogo (2008) captures the dilemma as follows:

> Primarily, *ubuntu* expresses itself well in the provision of assistance to 'our people' who may mean – the members of the blood relatives, tribemates, clanmates, political camp mates, social camp mates, and so forth. This has its obvious dangers in that the criterion in determining who is 'Our person' and 'who is not one of us' is indeed a tricky one. (p. 47)

Naude (2013:246) argues that when *ubuntu* is interpreted in a narrow or ethnic fashion it becomes corrupted. It is reduced to the use of one's power to benefit those close to you. 'We' is limited to those in my family, tribe or political party and *ubuntu* becomes a system of patronage that is used to pursue power and money. Naude adds that there are signs that *ubuntu* has disappeared completely and traces this to factors such as the damage done by colonialism to African identity, cultural globalisation and the encroachment of modernity on traditional African culture. Naude (2013) describes the results of this in our society:

> The weak and the vulnerable fall by the wayside; the old sit alone; those dying of AIDS are socially shunned; foreigners – many of them desperate – are attacked; and tax money (the small proportion that does reach the state's coffers in many African countries) is spent on sport stadiums and airports for the rich and benefits for the ruling elite, instead of being invested in education and basic health care for the poor. (p. 246)

One could reflect on the murder rate in South Africa, the incidence of rape and child rape, violent acts of xenophobia, corruption and nepotism, and legitimately question the existence of *ubuntu* or its power as a social value.

Ubuntu on the ground

Interviews

Both the nature and the usefulness of *ubuntu* are clearly contested. However, much of this debate is taking place on a theoretical level, and this made me curious about how ordinary people understand the nature and relevance of *ubuntu*. If a social system is an accurate reflection of the values that it embraces, what conclusions could be reached

about the dominant values in South African society, given the existence of so much that contradicts and defies the spirit of *ubuntu*? I wanted to explore this further by asking a range of people about their understanding of *ubuntu* and their experiences of it. I interviewed 20 people in East London, from a range of age groups. Eight of the respondents were unemployed and two were students, the other 10 worked in the public sector. As a narrative researcher, my goal is not to make generalisations about *ubuntu*, but rather to listen deeply to people's stories in order to explore their meaning.

All of those I spoke to defined *ubuntu* in familiar terms: hospitality, compassion, humaneness, sharing and respect:

- *'Ubuntu is about treating people with respect, it's about courtesy and compassion.'* (Respondent 3)
- *'My child is your child.'* (Respondent 6)
- *'If you want to see ubuntu you will find it in socialism. It's when we are sharing.'* (Respondent 8)
- *'Ubuntu can't be defined, but speaks for itself in action.'* (Respondent 10)
- *'Ubuntu is a general term, and it is associated with your heart. How do you feel about others, how do you see the whole community you are sharing, you see? If there is empathy, take yourself to the shoes of that person. If it were you, how would you feel? Ubuntu is something in a person's heart.'* (Respondent 12)

I asked people to tell me recent stories of *ubuntu* from their communities:

- *'There is an old woman in my community who is using her pension money to feed the street kids. You see? Every day she is feeding those children something. That is ubuntu. She is poor, but she has ubuntu.'* (Respondent 4)
- *'If you look at the people who are feeding and caring for the mineworkers who are striking. That is ubuntu.'* (Respondent 10)

This was a reference to the assistance that was being given to workers who were struggling because of the impact of a prolonged strike on platinum mines in 2014. A notable example of this was Seipati Mmekwa, who is married to one of the striking workers. She used her husband's pension to start a soup kitchen to feed miners and their families, some of whom were going for days without food (South African Press Association 2014).

The following reflects a traditional expression of *ubuntu* that was described to me:

- *'Where I live I slaughtered a cow. Then all of my neighbours come with dishes to get meat. It is not their cow, but the meat is for all of us because no one should be hungry. So each person will take what they need and we share the meat.'* (Respondent 1)

I asked if this kind of practice was still common. Only one person still believed that this version of *ubuntu* is a powerful force in shaping social behaviour in South Africa:

- *'It's poverty now, you see now if you have something you are going to keep it for yourself because of poverty. But in those days everyone would share ... meat, mealies, everything ... but those days, they are gone.'* (Respondent 5)
- *'Poverty is killing ubuntu, because people they don't care about another human being. They will rob and kill just to get something for themselves.'* (Respondent 3)
- *'What we understand as ubuntu today is very different of our great grandparents understood it.'* (Respondent 15)

Is *ubuntu* for everyone?

- *'Everybody can experience ubuntu. If you are a human being I must treat you with ubuntu.'* (Respondent 1)
- *'No, it isn't. It is for our people.'* I asked what was meant by 'our people', and the Respondent laughed in response. *'You must know what I mean* [pause] *it's the people in our community. White people do not understand ubuntu, they do not want ubuntu. Even we show them ubuntu in 1994 but they cannot show it.'* (Respondent 8)
- *'Ubuntu is for Africans. White people must go back to Europe where they come from.'* (Respondent 14)

Would a Zimbabwean living in South Africa be shown *ubuntu*?

- *'Yes, you will see that even a taxi driver will sometimes let that foreigner ... maybe he has only five Rand and the fare is eight Rand, but he can still come on that taxi because that is ubuntu.'* (Respondent 2)
- *'No, he is stealing our opportunities. He must go back to Zimbabwe.'* (Respondent 8)
- *'Many South Africans, they don't trust outsiders, so I don't think they will show that person ubuntu.'* (Respondent 15)
- *'It depends, if you are coming with money and your own opportunities then you won't be discriminated against, but if you are looking for a job then it becomes another story.'* (Respondent 11)

I was particularly interested in the meanings attached to *ubuntu* that differed from the ideal in some respect:

- *'People say that the izinyoka*[1] *– that is ubuntu. They are sharing electricity because it belongs to all of us – even if they are doing it illegally.'* (Respondent 5)
- *'Ubuntu is about looking after your family. My brother he got a job in government, he is an Assistant Director. He got a job there for me and for his wife and for her brother. If you have a job you must help others. That is ubuntu.'* (Respondent 19)
- *'Maybe if you have some influence, you can make sure that people in your network have some access to business opportunities so that they can be empowered economically.'* (Respondent 7)

The loss of *ubuntu*

What conclusions can be drawn from reflecting on these stories about *ubuntu* in South Africa, especially in light of the optimistic and pessimistic positions on the usefulness of *ubuntu*? What do the acts of un-*ubuntu* that dominate our news reveal? Tutu's (1999) reflections on the absence of *ubuntu* in certain African contexts are worth noting:

1. A Zulu word for people with illegal electrical connections.

> Where was *ubuntu* in the Belgian Congo in the early 1960's? Why did the Rwandans forget *ubuntu* in 1994 and instead destroy one another in the most awful genocide ...? I don't really know except to say that honoring *ubuntu* is clearly not a mechanical, automatic and inevitable process … (p. 36)

Tutu asks pointed questions about a lack of reverence for life in communities that should be characterised by *ubuntu*. How can children dance around the burning corpse of someone who has been 'necklaced'? Why is the environment treated so badly, with so much littering and dumping in these communities? Tutu (2011) writes:

> It seems to me that we in the black community have lost our *ubuntu* – our humaneness, caring, hospitality, our sense of connectedness, our sense that my humanity is bound up in your humanity. (p. 172)

There can be little doubt that both the force and meaning of *ubuntu* have been eroded in South Africa today, and in some cases even distorted to justify blatant corruption and nepotism.

The erosion of *ubuntu* could be understood by referring to a number of forces that have impacted on traditional African culture. Colonialism, Apartheid, globalisation, and the encroachment of materialism, individualism, and consumerism have all played a role in shaping contemporary African culture. Part of their legacy is surely this weakening and distortion of the meaning and practice of *ubuntu*. Tragically, this erosion is part of and arises from a broader, sustained assault on African culture and identity from colonialism and racism. Within the fabric of what could be viewed as normal social change are woven the often dominant threads of gross systemic evil perpetuated against black African people over sustained periods.

It is concerning that advocates of *ubuntu* do not seem to have given much attention to the impact that all of these forces have had on indigenous African cultures. From the comments of some scholars it seems that both the existence of *ubuntu* as a defining social value in African communities as well as its meaning within those communities is taken for granted (Masango 2006:930–931). It is simply assumed to be there, and to be passed down from one generation to the next in a relatively undiluted form. However, both the theoretical debate about *ubuntu* and the understandings of *ubuntu* expressed by people I interviewed suggest that that this is not the case. *Ubuntu* has a range of meanings in current discourse, some of which seem close to traditional understandings and others which have less savoury implications. Apart from its use in discourse, the many acts of violence, discrimination and exclusion that take place in African communities suggest that *ubuntu* has lost some of its power to shape the actions of people in South African society.

Is *ubuntu* still alive? Is it still expressed in South African society? The answer seems to be an equivocal, 'yes and no'. It is alive and it is dead; it is seen and it is not seen. *Ubuntu* exists tightly interwoven with un-*ubuntu*.

For me, the erosion of *ubuntu* becomes symbolic for a broader and deeper erosion of identity. To be black and South African is to experience deep and profound wounds. A scouring of identity has stripped life of meaning and robbed humanity of its dignity. Within this place of deep and profound loss, a re-imagining and recovery of *ubuntu* might offer hope for a recovery of dignity and meaning.

Liminality: *Ubuntu* in transition

Is it legitimate to propose that the meaning of *ubuntu* is in a state of transition and needs redefinition? Gade (2011:315–316) has demonstrated that the way *ubuntu* has been understood has not been static. From an analysis of written discourses on *ubuntu* he observes five stages:

- Stage 1: A period in which *ubuntu* was defined as a human quality.
- Stage 2: A period in which *ubuntu* was defined as something either connected to, or identical to, a philosophy or an ethic.
- Stage 3: A period in which *ubuntu* was defined as African humanism.
- Stage 4: A period in which *ubuntu* was defined as a worldview.
- Stage 5: A period in which *ubuntu* was defined as something connected to the proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*'.

Gade (2011) shows that the meaning of *ubuntu* has already been in a process of redefinition for some time. Enslin and Horsthemke (2004:551) point out that certain communitarian and Africanist advocates of *ubuntu* mistakenly view communal identities as fixed and fail to recognise that identities and cultural practices change and evolve.

The concept of liminality is useful for reflecting on the current state of *ubuntu*. Liminality was first described by Van Gennep (1960), and developed by Turner (1967; 1969). Turner (1969:94) observed three phases in transition experiences:

- separation – losing an old world
- margin (liminality) – entering an unknown world
- reaggregation – re-emerging into a new world.

For Turner (1967:94), the liminal functions as the period of transition from 'one type of stable or recurrant condition that is culturally recognised' to another. There is an instability associated with liminality because it is a stage of transition or a process of becoming. Turner (1969:95) describes liminal positions as 'neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony'. Turner (1969:95) refers to this space as 'the realm of pure possibility'.

The term liminality is often used fairly loosely in discourse. Roxburgh (2005) defines it as the condition of being on the threshold or at the beginning of a process. Liminality can also be used to describe the space between historical periods, or cultural communities, in which political or cultural

change takes place (Thomassen 2009). In such periods social hierarchies and traditions may be disrupted. Discontinuity and uncertainty create a space of indeterminacy, openness and flexibility in which new traditions and institutions may arise (Horvath, Thomassen & Wydra 2009).

The notion of liminality is applicable to South African society in transition. To use narrative language, we are 'in between stories'. Our narratives of culture and identity have to some extent been lost[2]. We are in an unsettled, uncomfortable transitional space. Between narratives of *what was* and *what could be* we find ourselves in a *what is* that is full of contradictions and loss.

The temptation in times of unsettled transition is to nostalgically invoke the past and attempt to return to what once was. Whether one agrees with the romantic revisions of African history that underlie narratives of return or not, it cannot be disputed that current social realities in most of Africa, and particularly in South Africa, are far removed from the revisionist picture or landscape. The ground has shifted. The nature and extent of the shifts is enormous. As in the legend of King Canute, where he sat on his throne on the beach and rebuked the incoming tide, forbidding it from wetting his feet, it would be naïve to imagine that we can stand at the threshold of social change and prevent it from making incursions on a preferred social reality. Equally, we cannot simply undo the damage of our country's violent and fractured past and the way it has shaped our present reality. To the extent that narratives of return are nostalgic attempts to recover to the past, they do not seem to offer answers for the present.

Hope for *ubuntu*

Roxburgh (2005:87–89) describes the challenge for Christian leadership in a liminal context and argues that rather than attempting to control and predict, or attempting to return to the safety of what worked in the past, leadership should be concerned with forming 'networks of discourse' that intentionally take people beyond simplistic 'us versus them' thinking. We are in a period of rapid, discontinuous change on multiple levels. Within this context an important task for leaders is to create spaces in which our society can be re-imagined, and to facilitate the clarification and adoption of the social values that would support the kind of society we would like to build. If we reflect back on our best experiences of *ubuntu*, how can they shape and define the *ubuntu* we want to practice in our faith communities and our society? In addition to this, what does this re-imagined, re-membered *ubuntu* mean for the way we structure our economic activities, conduct our relationships, and view the resources that we occupy or use?

2.It could be argued that 'white' cultural identity in South Africa has suffered similar loss and erosion in a post-colonial, post-Apartheid, globalised postmodern world. The cultural anchors that offered security and a sense of personhood have been lost. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the process through which this took place, but white South Africans are also 'in between stories' and in need of a new story of identity and belonging.

Discursive leadership and *ubuntu*

The lens of discursive leadership is helpful for conceptualising this task. Discursive Leadership explores the social, linguistic and cultural aspects of leadership. It focusses on discourse rather than the inner psychological world of the leader, both discourse as language used in ordinary social interaction and Discourse as systems of thought that provide the linguistic resources for communication (Fairhurst 2007).

Leadership is socially constructed by the leaders and their followers, influenced by intermediaries such as the media (Liu 2010). It is not necessarily the domain of the individual, but can be distributed quite widely amongst members of an organisation or community (Fairhurst 2007:6).

There is an increased depiction of leaders as 'managers of meaning' (Shotter & Cunliffe 2003; Smircich & Morgan 1982). The implications of constructionist views of leadership are that leaders must constantly enact their relationship to their followers and 'perform leadership in communication and through discourse' (Fairhurst 2007:5).

Leadership is a social activity that involves defining reality and making sense of it. It is an intentional facilitation of the social construction of reality. Leaders identify what is important and then find ways to communicate about the meaning of events and seek consensus (Pondy 1978; Smircich & Morgan 1982; Weick 1979). Shotter (1993) sees leadership as 'practical authoring' where leaders, faced with conditions that they have not chosen, create a range of enabling constraints along with moral positions and are able to argue persuasively for these.

Social meanings emerge and are managed as different interpretations of events compete with each other in social interaction (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005). There are always a number of competing Discourses at play in any context. Fairhurst (2007:99) writes, 'Because subjects attain their identities by being represented discursively, *identity* becomes a contingent identification with a subject position in a competitive discursive field'.

Greater competition within the discursive field creates the possibility that people can break free from the way a Discourse defines them. Fairhurst (2007:99) writes, 'The presence of other meaning potentials, in effect, dislocates a subject's identities, which opens a space for contingency and choice'.

Discursive Leadership will approach *ubuntu* by offering new stories and metaphors, introducing new categories that have the potential to shape identity, or by reframing social questions and challenges in a manner that offers possibilities for different ways of knowing how to emerge. Discourses intersect transversally in a social context, and meaning is shaped by their confluence. Leadership involves provocatively and subversively introducing additional linguistic resources for meaning-making and emphasising their intersections with other Discourses.

Conclusion

Ubuntu, shared history and shared fate

There is hope for the kind of liminal space in which we find ourselves, there is hope for a healing of identity (which surely must underpin any reinvigoration of *ubuntu*), and there is hope for creating patterns of living which embody the notion of *ubuntu* in its most basic sense.

Roxburgh's challenge to Christian leaders within liminal spaces is to create networks of discourse that take people beyond simplistic thinking. Nostalgic attempts to return to the past are impossible, but discursive leadership will shape the conversations we are having in South Africa by introducing new linguistic resources for imagining the future. Discourses of deficit and loss can be replaced with discourses of possibility and hope – even as the tangible evidence suggests that such hope is impossible. This is the nature of faith.

Within a narrative framework, we become the stories we tell about ourselves. This necessitates critical reflection on the stories that currently dominate social discourse, especially within faith communities, and an intentional shaping of social discourse so that our stories are reshaped through the lens of the biblical narrative.

We do not only share a painful history in South Africa. Williams (2003) points out the nature of citizenship as shared fate. South Africans will share the fate that is going to result from the ways they navigate the present moment together. Perhaps a reinvention of *ubuntu* might help us navigate this shared moment in our history. Even if we can't recover *ubuntu* in its once pristine form, I have hope that certain kinds of conversations could help each of us connect with the other in a way that leads us to the creation and embrace of social values that reflect our location in Africa, honour the pain and struggle of our past, but that ultimately provide impetus to shape a shared fate that we anticipate rather than one we fear.

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