

CHAPTER 2:

AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONCEPT OF UBUNTU/HUNHU

This chapter seeks to explore the notion of *ubuntu/hunhu* to fully comprehend its nature and essence before proceeding to test and appraise the practice of whistleblowing in the field of business ethics. On the nature of *Ubuntu*, the chapter offers an analytic cum-historical information on how *hunhu* has been defined in written source. The elucidation in this chapter will unravel the modifications *ubuntu* has undergone through modernity and globalisation but without losing its prime essence. The information also indicates that many of present ideas about to *unhu* first came into being in epistolary during the second half of the 1900s though it backdates to the 1840s. It is shown as that this period in question was marked by political regaining of power by the blacks that may suggest that *ubuntu* and self-rule by the Africans are inseparable.

To present an accurate piece of information about *ubuntu/hunhu*, it is of paramount importance to unpack the historical chronology of how a written text of the *ubuntu* philosophy came about. According to Gade (2011:303), *ubuntu* has been defined in written sources from 1846 to 2011. This would therefore suggest that it has survived so many tribulations to date. In his findings, Gade (2011: 303) notes that *ubuntu* as a philosophy or ethic as a worldview was documented from 1993 to 1995 in the Nguni proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngamuntu*' (a person is a person through other persons) and this was used for the first time to describe what *ubuntu* is. This notion of collective belongingness of the members of the community is common in the philosophy of Mbiti (1969:106) who says, 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. So *ubuntu* is a philosophy that values togetherness.

Verliet cited in Gade (2011:303) has written that '*ubuntu* is rooted in a search towards African dignity in all circles of life'. It can now be proffered that the search for African dignity commensurate in the postcolonial era in a bid to reclaim the supremacy of the stolen legacy well-vested with the various capabilities of Africans. This view points to the fact that the African nationalists or liberation leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere among others, postulated that Africanization is vital in the formulation of a foundation of politics that consists of traditional African conception of personhood or socialist values. Gade (2011) in the trace of the development of a written source of *ubuntu*

observes that the narratives by legends like Nyerere (*ujamaa*) were attempts to identify past values that they believed would inspire politics and life in general in the future society, do away with colonial oppression and restoration of the lost dignity and culture. For the Africans, all the human beings are members of an extended family. As such, Nyerere, as quoted in Gade (2011:306), writes that, '*Ujamaa*' (family hood), describes our socialism and the African past has taught them their own ethical theorem-*ubuntu*. This epistolary by Nyerere marked the authorship of the first texts among others about *ubuntu*. Alongside this viewpoint is the claim by van Binsbergen (2001) who explains that the first publication on *ubuntu* known to him is the Samkange and Samkange (1980) *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy* (1980) (Van Binsbergen 2001:82).

Having highlighted all this, it is logically sound to investigate the meaning of the term *ubuntu* used in the writings. In trying to shed more light on this issue, Gade (2011) conveys it across that 'in many texts from 1980 the term 'quality' appears in descriptions of *ubuntu* and in many texts *ubuntu* is evidently considered to be very positive quality' Embedded in this description is the goodness of nature in the creation of man or the good moral disposition. This can be said about the African from an immemorial period in time since the philosophy being investigated here is central to the life style of the Shona in particular. However, one may need to contest that the description above is too narrow to carry the essence of *ubuntu* as it is today. Of course, that may boil down to a hasty generalisation. But, Gade (2011:308) goes on to expatiate on the possible bone of contention as he says, 'a term such as humanity is, for instance, ambiguous: it might refer to a human quality, but it can also refer to the members of the human race in total ... Did the different authors, for instance, believe that all human possesses the quality of *ubuntu*?' Thus, the question of the multi-faceted quality of *ubuntu* is in great obscurity if and only if it is to be grounded on these too simplistic descriptions.

Developing from the unabated debate above, it can be argued that these texts/authors understood African humanism as something complex, well devoid from a mere trait of humans. In his grappling with the obscurity, Gade (2011:308), quoted Ngubane (1963) who writes;

Supreme virtue lay in being human, in accepting the human being as a part of yourself, with a right to be denied nothing that you possessed. It was inhuman to drive the hungry stranger from your door, for your neighbour's sorrow was yours. This code constituted a philosophy of life, and great Sutu-Nguni family (Bantu has political connotations that the Africans resent) called it, significantly, ubuntu or botho (pronounced butu)-the practice of being humane (Ngubane 1963:76).

What can be drawn from the above quotation is the fact that the Africans had a philosophy which they translated into action, thereby pronouncing it an ethical theorem that seeks to govern and control the conduct of the people. In effect, this paragraph says a lot in that it entails the kindness, gentleness, humility, respect and love for others. To this end, one can argue that these authors were now starting to use the term *ubuntu* as a philosophy.

In a bid to substantiate the point raised above, that the term *ubuntu* gained much popularity in the post-colonial era, Gade (2011) argues that Samkange and Samkange's publication in 1980 marked the epistolary work as far as *ubuntu* is concerned. Some think that in Zimbabwe *ubuntu* was born on the same day with the nation of Zimbabwe. In support of this, Samkange and Samkange (1980) pose these questions: What political philosophy or ideology should inspire the new Zimbabwe in this era? Is there any philosophy or ideology indigenous to the country that can serve its people just as well, if not better than, foreign ideologies? This would suggest that the academics and leaders had to write and publish this philosophy such that they would do away with the foreign hand in their lifestyle to recover and further develop the native philosophy. Samkange and Samkange (1980:540) continue to argue that to be consistent with *ubuntu/hunhu*, the new Zimbabwean government should use the inhabitants' fear of *ngozi* (aggrieved spirits) to prevent murder. To further substantiate this argument a statement by the President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, always reminds the Zimbabwean people that they should be governed by the desire for peace and prosperity within the boundaries of *ubuntu*. Almost through the above paragraphs, it is evident that some written sources about *ubuntu* proliferated since the mid-1840s up to date though the meaning of the term was surrounded with a lot of obscurity.

It is important to define *ubuntu* or *hunhu* before any attempt to show how its appraisal on the ethics of whistleblowing in Zimbabwe. Thus, Mangena and Chitando (unpublished) say the word '*hunhu*' (and in some Shona dialects, '*unhu*') is prominent in the works of Samkange and Samkange (1980), Ramose (1999), Nicolson (2008), and Mangena (2008). Other non-Zimbabwean scholars such as Van Binsbergen (2002) have also grappled with this concept. For instance, in *Reflections on Reconciliation and Ubuntu* (2002), Van Binsbergen argues that '*...ubuntu/hunhu* has become a key concept to evoke the unadulterated forms of African social life before the European conquest'. *Ubuntu* is an ethic or humanist philosophy focusing on people's allegiances and relations with each other. Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999), defines a person with *ubuntu* as one who is open and available to others, affirms others, does not feel threatened because

others are more able, 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.

For Van Binsbergen (2002) *ubuntu/hunhu* has survived the taste of time: 'the worldview (in other words the values, beliefs and images) of pre-colonial Southern Africa is claimed to survive today more or less in remote villages and intimate kin relationships and to constitute an inspiring blue-print for the present and future of social economic and political life in urban and modern environments...' It therefore implies that *ubuntu/hunhu* as the moral benchmark of the African people makes and protracts a guide to the African natives in all their endeavours of life. Thus, to claim that *hunhu* plays an important role in judging whether human activities are morally right or wrong be it within political social and economic realms. *Hunhu* is the springboard of ethics in the sub-Saharan Africa, especially in Zimbabwe among the Shona. In one way or the other, *hunhu* is a life time process of becoming a human being or conferment of the traits of personhood by the society since the notion of being entails the requirement of co-cooperativeness of persons is to be social. *Hunhu* is, therefore, an integral aspect of being a human being. *Hunhu* calls for members of the society to be empathic to others, to be respectful and to have conscience. Any social deviance from these well protracted benchmarks of social life repudiates the virtue of a community, resultantly a manifestation of disequilibrium and immorally activities which undermine the essence of personhood.

Caplan (1970), views *ubuntu* as a moral and political exhortation and an expression of hope for a better future that creates a moral community, admission to which is not necessarily limited by biological ancestry, nationality, or actual place of residence. To participate in this moral community, therefore, is not a matter of birth-right in the narrower, parochial sense. If birth-right comes in at all, it is the birth-right of any member of the human species to express concern vis-a-vis the conditions under which her or his fellow-humans must live, and to act on that basis. This moral community consists of people sharing a concern for the present and future of a particular local or regional society, seeking to add to the latter's resources, redressing its ills, and searching its conceptual and spiritual repertoire for inspiration, blueprints, models, and encouragement in the process. Such a moral community focuses not on a particular locality or region, but on the African continent (Van Binsbergen, 2002).

However, *ubuntu/hunhu* can be referred to as a circular moral process and in that circular moral process, moral transgressions weaken the community by

causing separation between people. As such, it makes it possible to rectify the moral transgressions provided the society thrives together, interactively to re-initiate social sensitivity through say, *kurova bembera*, accommodative and interdependence and hence a moral community. It can be claimed as well that *hunhu* is metaphysical and ethical progeny seeking to instantiate the African understanding of humanity and let alone the essence of a society.

In his grappling with *unhu netsika* Gombe (1986:11) says;

'tsika ubatanidzwa wezvinhu zvakananda izvo zvinoti mutupo, zvitendero, zvitevedzerwa...zvinoita kuti vaShona vatevedze kumwe kuita kwavanofunga kuti ndiko kunounza ugaro nendaramo yakanaka (culture is a combination of many things ranging from totems, religions imitations...which make the Shona people to behave in a manner believed to bring good life and piece').

To expatiate on *tsika* (*culture*), the essence embedded in this notion is a set of norms or customs, traditions and values which are ever picked up by the next generation in perpetual succession which is then referred to as a historical set of *tsika*. Respectively, among the Shona and the Ndebele *tsika/nyatela* means to place one's footprint on top another's and to this end it literally means to follow someone. Mkhize (2008:42) emphasises this point as he writes;

Ubuntu as an ethical philosophy is concerned with the phenomenological or lived experience of the people in question. It is a historical philosophy being passed through the lineage of tribes or clans of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Thus, the perpetual observation of these norms, values, customs and traditions of their departed fathers, the Shona are precisely following their footprints in upholding the notion of *hunhu* which entails a virtue of being morally good. To this end, it can be safely claimed that *hunhu* is not obtained from the abstract, rather it requires us to be fully aware of our social surroundings and to discharge our duties and obligations to others and natural environment in general, thereby contributing towards the orderness of being.

In support of the above general understanding of *ubuntu* Nicolson (2008) writes;

In defence of ubuntu we must reiterate the point; ubuntu is concerned with the welfare of everyone in the community. In theory, at least, it is intended to ensure that no voice goes unheard. Although the welfare of the community is the basis of the welfare of individuals, the welfare of the community depends upon individuals being cared for. Where the needs of individuals – especially powerless individuals – are ignored or overridden, the peace and equilibrium of the community are thereby harmed. Thus, a necessary balance has to be maintained (2008:9).

Of central importance in the above quotation is the fact that, the prime goal of *ubuntu* is to safeguard the good or welfare of the community which in turn

ensures that the individual's needs are protected and guaranteed. In more simplistic words, the community comes first while the individual next as far as *ubuntu* is concerned. Thus, togetherness or collectivism without any individualism makes the gist of *ubuntu*.

It is profoundly good to paraphrase the main thrust of the above exposition on *ubuntu*. In a way, the chief characteristics of *ubuntu* may be drawn easily using an attempted longer and precise definition by Tutu (1999);

A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that come from knowing that he belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed (Tutu: 1999).

Therefore, the following traits of *ubuntu* are in fact embedded in this definition; *Ubuntu* is all about communitarian way of life where togetherness is most cherished.

Ubuntu's togetherness assures the security or welfare of the individual since the community comprises of members who adorned with love, kindness to other. Most importantly, love because it protects everyone that is concerned as well as the wellbeing of other members.

Ubuntu is established in the realm of total sharing, that is whether good or bad is equitably cascaded among all the members of the society.

Ubuntu is well characterised by respect for all; thus, it is bent to heed to any voice from the community, hence, consensus democracy.

Ubuntu as a philosophy is based on mutuality or reciprocity in all dealings as members feel for each other, that is, being empathic.

Most importantly, *ubuntu* is a sort of an estate entrusted onto the living by the departed forefathers of the Africans as such it ought to be guarded jealously and kept in perpetual succession for the wellbeing the community.

Samkange and Samkange (1980) highlight the three maxims of *ubuntu/hunhu* which shape this philosophy; the first maxim asserts that, to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them the second maxim means that if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life, and the third 'maxim' as a principle deeply embedded in traditional African political

philosophy says that the king owed his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him.

While sharing is incorporated within *hunhu*, it is only one of the multiplicities of virtues within *hunhu*. In the *hunhu* domain, visitors do not need to burden themselves with carrying provisions- all they need is to dress properly and be on the road. All visitors are provided for and protected in every home they pass through without payment being expected. In fact, every individual should try their best to make visitors comfortable and this applies to everyone who is aware of the presence of a visitor within a locality. This explains how David Livingstone survived on his journeys in Southern Africa especially among *ubuntu*-oriented societies of the time.

Other manifestations of *ubuntu* are that it is taboo to call elderly people by their given names; instead they are called by their surnames. This has the effect of banishing individualism and replacing it with a representative role, in which the individual effectively stands for the person among whom he comes at all times. The individual identity is replaced with the larger societal identity within the individual. Thus, families are portrayed or reflected in the individual and this phenomenon is extended to villagers, districts, provinces and regions being portrayed in the individual. This places high demands on the individual to behave in the highest standards and to portray the highest possible virtues that society strives for. *Hunhu* embodies all the invaluable virtues that society strives for towards maintaining harmony and the spirit of sharing among its members.

A key concept associated with *ubuntu* is how we behave and interact in our various social roles, e.g., daughters-in-law traditionally kneel down when greeting their parents-in-law and serve them food as a sign of respect and maintain the highest standards of behaviour that is extended or reflected to her family and all the women raised in that family. The daughter-in-law does this as part of the ambassadorial function that she plays and assumes at all times. However, this does not apply only to daughters-in-law but to all women in general, even among friends and equals such as brother and sister, and this does not imply that the woman is subordinate to the man, or sister to brother. It's all essentially considered to be a characteristic of having *hunhu* and a social interaction within the context of *hunhu*. The demands imposed upon men within the context of *hunhu* are more physically demanding than that placed upon the woman. Under *hunhu* children are never orphans since the roles of mother and father are by definition not vested in a single child. Furthermore, a man or a woman with *hunhu* will never allow any child around them to be an orphan.

The concept of *hunhu*, also constitutes the kernel of African Traditional Jurisprudence as well as leadership and governance. In the concept of *hunhu*, crimes committed by one individual on another extend far beyond the two individuals and has far-reaching implications to the people among whom the perpetrator of the crime comes from. *Hunhu* jurisprudence tends to support remedies and punishments that tend to bring people together. For instance, a crime of murder would lead to the creation of a bond of marriage between the victim's family and the perpetrator's family in addition to the perpetrator being punished both inside and outside his social circles. The role of 'tertiary perpetrator' to the murder crime is extended to the family and the society where the individual perpetrator hails from. However, the punishment of the tertiary perpetrator is a huge fine and a social stigma that they must shake off after many years of demonstrating *ubuntu/hunhu*'. A leader who has *hunhu* is selfless and consults widely and listens to his subjects. He or she does not adopt a lifestyle that is different from his subjects and lives among his subjects and shares what he owns. A leader who has *hunhu* does not lead but allows the people to lead themselves, and cannot impose his will on his people that is incompatible with *hunhu*.

Basing on the rate of modernity and globalisation, one may need to suggest that *hunhu* has grossly undergone a transformation in many if not all aspects. For Van Binsbergen (2002) concurs with this view as he writes 'one may say the dwellers of Southern Africa have been effectively exposed to globally circulating cultural, consumptive models new styles of dress, underpinned by equally global technologies of information (IT) and communication, (including new internet information technology) that they are no longer in any direct contact with, have no longer have any real competence with regard to the values, beliefs and images of Sub-Saharan communities'. However, information technology is also about the sharing of information; hence it is still in tandem with *unhu* because the latter enshrines the virtue of sharing in any respect of life. Ironically, the aspect of global technology in information and communications coupled with tradition therapy, that is *unhu* offers a long-lasting panacea to the immorally activities among the Shona's life settings and let alone in the business fraternity.

One should hasten to note that, *hunhu* as an over acute philosophy of the Shona and information technology fit harmoniously and co-exist with Shona culture. That is, we are not so secretive and information technology is upholding the essence of communication of the African society through sharing the information for the good of the whole community and not for the solitary perpetual triumph of an individual. This argument can be substantiated by the claim postulated by

Mkhize (2008:43), who propagates that, 'the concept of *ubuntu* has far reaching implications, given the social injustices that have become synonymous with many contemporary societies. The ethics of *ubuntu* is a call to action because an ethical being (*umuntu/munhu*)-a being with moral sense cannot look on the suffering of another and remain unaffected.' Embedded in these propositions is the fact that the Shona and the Ndebele are compelled to feel for others and obligated to help because one's suffering is automatically cascaded to the whole society since a member of a particular community is an integral part whose malfunctioning distorts the logic of structural functionalism. In a fact, this philosophy under interrogation values and up plays communitarianism and down plays individualism as a vice.

Of course, *hunhu* succumbs to intercultural dynamism, but its primary essence does not change since it is rooted in tradition and identity. As alluded to above classic *ubuntu* is embedded in the values and norms of the African; that is repudiating individualism while accommodating togetherness as a virtue. In fact, the Shona are a sensitive people that personalise information but still believe that anything can be shared, be it good or bad because it affects the entire community. For instance, they share *mitupo* (totems), *zvidau* (veneration names) and so forth, so being encouraged by information technology to share information about immorally activities by fellow members of that particular society is not bad as long as it is not for retributive reasons but for moral rectification aiming at the restoration of societal good and harmony.

Still in pursuit of *ubuntu* in this dynamic world of modernisation and globalisation, it ought to be noted that Africans (the Shona in particular) are of the view that everyone is important for the good of the whole hence there is much value attached to each member of the society. Thus, togetherness, collectivism and sharing marks the essence of *ubuntu*. Therefore, cultural cross pollination is part of being accommodativeness of *unhu* hence Shona's embracing of new styles of life is not tantamount to total eradication of *ubuntu* as some may need to proffer. To this end, *ubuntu* is humanism or character or personhood so, it is sacred and ought to be persevered for the sake of sacrosanct of *hunhu* or ethical codes in all life endeavours by the Shona.

In conclusion, it has been argued that *ubuntu* is amoral ethical reasoning among the Shona, if not the entire African continent are premised on the worldview assumptions that the departed forefathers of the people under discussion formulated and passed on that to the living. Furthermore, *ubuntu* like any other moral theorem or philosophy incorporates ideas of social justice, righteousness,

care, empathy for others and respect. That is, *ubuntu* is an integral aspect of being or personhood among the Africans and the two are inseparable. It also presupposes that social good knowledge and equilibrium of human societies are not given from above but mutually negotiated and agreed upon for the welfare of an individual which is embedded in that of the whole community since the former is a mere part of the latter.