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► **To cite this version:**

| Stefania Capone. Between Ubuntu and milonga: the Bantu legacy in Brazil. 2024. hal-04536226

HAL Id: hal-04536226

<https://hal.science/hal-04536226v1>

Submitted on 10 Apr 2024

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5th April 2024

Between ubuntu and milonga: the Bantu legacy in Brazil

By Stefania Capone.

The Ubuntu philosophy is seen as a model of ethical behaviour by some capoeira groups. Anthropologist Stefania Capone, a specialist in African-based religions in the diaspora, shares with CapoeiraHistory.com her recent speech on the topic.

This post is the transcription of the lecture given by the author at the opening of the XIII Tumba Junsara Seminar – “Rediscovering your history”, at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), Brazil, on August 5, 2022.

Mukuiu!

Good afternoon to everyone. First of all, I would like to thank Terreiro Tumba Junsara, and its leading priestess, Nengua Mesoeji – Iraildes Maria da Cunha -, the Board of AbemTumba, especially its General Director, Esmeraldo Emetério de Santana Filho, Tata Zingue Lubombo, and Tata Evilásio Nkodiamambo for inviting me to take part in this meeting.

It is a pleasure and an honour to be here with you, even remotely, in this conversation about ubuntu. I would like to open my speech with a greeting that seems to me to express the very essence of the *ubuntu* philosophy: “*Sawu Bona*”, a Zulu greeting that means “I see you”. The response to this greeting is “*Sikhona*”, meaning “I am here”. Recognising the others, “seeing” them, is thus a way of making them exist.

This greeting is another way of expressing the Zulu and Kossa [Xhosa] saying, “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”, which can be translated as: “A person is a person through other people”. This means that a human being is only fulfilled when they humanise other human beings, when they “see them” and thus “make them exist”.



Tumba Junsara cult house in Salvador, BA. Photo from the Iphan portal.

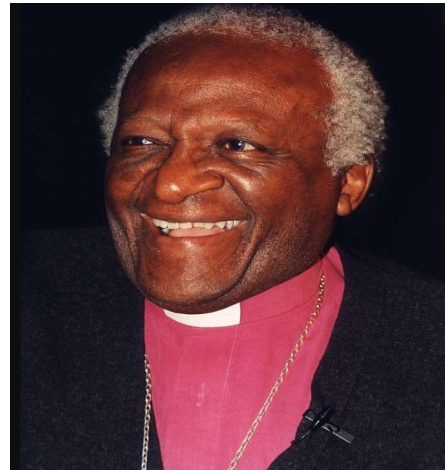
Diffusion in South Africa and political *ubuntu*

We know that this *ubuntu* philosophy has been spreading in post-apartheid South Africa and has generated the utopia of the Rainbow People society, a utopia dear to Nelson Mandela and Reverend Desmond Tutu. During the long process that followed the abolition of Apartheid in that African country, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission thus promoted the word *ubuntu*: a shared word, a word that heals the wounds of Apartheid, the wounds of racial segregation.

Despite the difficulties that still exist in South African society, the *ubuntu* philosophy is undoubtedly a great legacy to humanity, a legacy that speaks of solidarity and

respect. In ubuntu philosophy, the dehumanisation of other human beings is in fact an obstacle to self-knowledge and prevents us from realising our full potential. For this reason, ubuntu is considered by many to be a humanist philosophy that could even correct the negative effects of economic and cultural globalisation.

For some, this worldview could help to produce institutions that are dialogical, inclusive and supportive, in search of negotiated solutions. This was the dream of Nelson Mandela and the other leaders of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa to get out of the mentality of racial segregation once and for all, by fostering an intercultural dialogue that could contribute to a general perspective of reconciliation.



Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, precursors and propagators of the *ubuntu* philosophy.

Ubuntu is therefore first and foremost a utopia, the dream of an ideal civilisation: ubuntu philosophy is based on the idea that the human community is one and indivisible: no one can be pitted against another, and no distinction should be made on the basis of "race" or colour. For *Ubuntu* philosophy, the destiny of each person is linked to the destiny of all. For this reason, political ubuntu is thought of by many as a project of inclusion, solidarity, and consensus building, where humanity is seen as a community of life and destiny. A person with ubuntu is aware that they are affected when their fellow human beings are diminished and oppressed. As philosopher Renato Noguera (2012) reminds us, *ubuntu* is therefore "a way of living", "a possibility of existing together with other people in a non-selfish way, an anti-racist and polycentric community existence

Ecological and spiritual

The term *ubuntu* is often translated as "humanism". But if *ubuntu* philosophy speaks of "humanity" – "I am because you are" – it also speaks of everything that exists. In *ubuntu* philosophy, all of reality is integrated, not just human beings. *Ubuntu* is

based on the idea that everything in the cosmos is interdependent and interconnected. In other words, nothing exists in itself, nothing is truly autonomous and separate from the rest.

And this is very close to the vision that has been preserved in religions of African origin in Brazil, where the human being is the product of the confluence of distinct energies that combine different planes – and modes – of existence: human beings, animals, elements of nature, spiritual powers, gods, spirits, ancestors.... All these realms and modes of existence must “live together”, they must coexist in harmony in order to realise the *ubuntu* philosophy. In this philosophy, there is an ecological dimension and also a spiritual dimension, which connects to the past through the ancestors.

For many, *ubuntu* would also require tolerance between people, because they are all members of the same community. In African thinking, tolerating and respecting the point of view of others would therefore be an innate behaviour, because everyone is connected and what is done to one has an impact on everyone’s life, both socially and spiritually. As Father Tempels wrote in his book on Bantu philosophy, published in 1959: “The world of forces is like a spider’s web of which no thread can vibrate without shaking the whole network.” (p. 41)

If others are different beings with whom we exist, this coexistence should require tolerance on both sides, especially in these dark times when so-called “religious intolerance” is a mask that barely conceals the structural racism that underpins Brazilian society. As the late Mãe Beata and Makota Valdina used to say, nobody wants to be tolerated. What they wanted is respect, respect for cultural differences, respect for ways of existing that do not reproduce a Judeo-Christian worldview.

But *ubuntu* goes beyond Western humanism, which is based solely on respect (not invading the other person’s territory, limiting the exercise of one’s own freedom in relation to that of others...).

Practising *ubuntu* means breaking the illusion of separation in order to recognise yourself in the other. In reality, before being a philosophy, *ubuntu* is an ethic of life that goes beyond the concept of respect and compassion, in the sense that it is not simply a “with + passion”, the fact of suffering at the sight of the other’s suffering, but a question of being attentive to and understanding the other. If the other is a piece of me, it means that I need them to be complete, to be who I really am. The other completes me rather than diminishes me.

So could *Ubuntu* be a response to the violence, racism and religious intolerance that so much plague contemporary Brazil?

But if *ubuntu* implies the desire to see oneself in others, to put oneself in their place, to learn to listen to them in order to understand them better so as to achieve a more

harmonious life, in respect and benevolence, this never eliminates conflict. Let me quote again the Afro-Perspectivist philosopher Renato Noguera who, in a recording for the event “*Ubuntu and black resistance*” (2019), declared that ubuntu “is not a magical panacea where people love each other, hug each other and the world becomes colourful”.

And I fully agree with him when he says that the concept of ubuntu does not eliminate conflict, because conflict is inherent to the living condition and is always present in human relationships.

In fact, the importance of conflict in the existence and maintenance of the world is a central element in the philosophies that underpin all religions of African origin in Brazil, not just those of Bantu origin. The Yoruba believe, for example, that conflict perpetuates the world, as in the work of Exu, who causes chaos in order to re-establish order.

For Noguera, what ubuntu is saying is that we need “a multilateral dialogue so that we can create new possibilities for interlocution and the production of realities”. This was the utopia foreshadowed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa: to promote an ubuntu word, that is, a shared word, in order to achieve what was called the “miracle of the negotiated solution”, through the promotion of dialogue and the recognition of the common right to memory, justice and speech.

***Ubuntu* in metaphysical dimension**

But it is in its metaphysical dimension that *ubuntu* allows us to think about this connection to others, to all realms of existence. In fact, as several African authors such as Felix Murove (2011) have emphasised, the effectiveness of *ubuntu* philosophy comes from the primacy it gives to “relational rationality”. Considering that man is essentially relational is a direct challenge to the individualistic and self-centred conception of the human being. It is in the reality of our mutual dependence that we achieve the fullness of our humanity. And this includes the living and the dead, the different realms of existence. Those who lived in the past made my current existence possible and I, in turn, will influence the future when I join my ancestors in death.

Here again we find that utopian vision of harmony and cohesion within the community. But this vision is not only expressed in contemporary *Ubuntu* philosophy. In the 1960s, Leopold Sédar Senghor, the founder of the Negritude movement and the first president of the Republic of Senegal, already expressed this vision when he wrote in *Liberté, négritude et humanisme*, published in 1964, that African identity could only be conceived on the basis of the relationship with the other. And I quote him: “Here, then, is the black African who sympathises and identifies, who dies to himself in order to be reborn in the Other. He doesn’t assimilate, he assimilates himself. He lives with the Other in symbiosis: ‘I think, therefore I am’, wrote Descartes

[...]. The black African could say: 'I feel the Other, I dance the Other, therefore I am...'" (p. 259).

We know that Cartesian rationality underpins modern Western individualism, which emphasises the uniqueness of the individual as indispensable to the very notion of a person. The saying *umuntu ngomuntu ngabantu*, which indicates that an individual depends on others to be a person, radically modifies this doctrine of individualism and affirms that individuality depends on the relationship with others. Therefore, it is not an inalienable property of the individual, but something that he or she shares with others, which is enriched and developed through the relationship with others, without being limited to human society and also including the natural world and the spiritual world.

But if the philosophy of *ubuntu* was already in germ in the black movement, it is also present in the origins of political Pan-Africanism and in the work of other militants of the black cause, such as the Martiniquan writer Edouard Glissant (1990), whose thinking on relationships is in fact very close to *ubuntu* thinking.



The *milonga* and the ritual dimension of *ubuntu*

But what strikes me as particularly interesting – and which I'd like to emphasise in conclusion – is thinking about *ubuntu* philosophy in its ritual dimension. In an article published in 2020 with my colleague Mariana Ramos de Moraes, we analysed the incorporation of the notion of "milonga" into the processes of heritagization of *candomblé terreiros* (cult-houses).

"Milonga" could indeed be thought of as a form of *ubuntu* – recognising and incorporating what the other brings us. This is a powerful response to the discourses on purity that are still so present in the religious universe of African origin in Bahia, especially in some Nagô houses. I have analysed this issue in my book *Searching for Africa in Brazil* and in various other publications over the last few years.

Just to give an example, one of the authors who has most emphasised the supposed "purity" of the Nagô rituals has been Roger Bastide who, right at the opening of

his *Le candomblé de Bahia*, published in France in 1958, justified his choice to study the “Nagô ritual” among the different types of candomblé, stating that “the influence of the Yoruba dominates unchallenged the group of African sects, imposing their gods, the structure of their ceremonies and their metaphysics on the Daomeans and the Bantus. However, it is clear that the Nagô, Queto and Ijexá candomblés are the purest of all, and only they will be studied here.”

In this excerpt, Bastide not only justifies his choice but also hierarchises the types of candomblé. This view is evidently inherited from his predecessors, such as Nina Rodrigues, Arthur Ramos and Édison Carneiro. For them, the Bantu religions were “degenerate” because they were more open to external influences, while the Nagô candomblé had preserved a supposed African ritual “purity” in Brazil.

This classification of religions linked to the Bantu as “degenerate” and those coming from the Yoruba as “pure” has also had an impact on the selection of *terreiros* that have been recognised as cultural heritage sites in Brazil. In the list of cult_houses listed by IPHAN, the Nagôs are indeed prominent. Of the eleven *terreiros* listed as heritage sites by IPHAN, seven have Yoruba roots, two are Jeje (Ewe-Fon) and two are Bantu.

However, if we take a quick look at the period between the first listing of a candomblé terreiro, namely Casa Branca in 1984, and the latest in 2018, we can see that the criteria and arguments behind the choice of terreiros have changed considerably. It’s important to emphasise that from the 1980s onwards, the preservation of “Afro-heritages” – the term that Mariana and I coined to refer to cultural assets of African origin in Brazil (Capone and Morais, 2015)- began to be demanded not only as recognition, but also as a form of reparation for the damage suffered by the black population as a result of slavery. Safeguarding the living heritage thus becomes a way of giving visibility to groups that were previously on the margins of public policy. In other words, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage can be an instrument of social inclusion.

But safeguarding this heritage also hierarchises, creates ideal models and defines rules for choosing what should and should not be recognised as cultural heritage. By safeguarding cultural heritage, the State also excludes those assets that don’t conform to an established standard or that don’t have an “exceptional value”. And it is precisely in this context that a fundamental change appears in the way we understand what “African tradition” is in Brazil.

In fact, in the report carried out for Tumba Junsara’s inscription into the UNESCO Safeguarding List, in 2018, the same idea of “traditionality” was not reaffirmed, understood as fidelity to an African past which, according to various authors, would be at the basis of the processes of heritagization of Afro-Brazilian religions. On the contrary, what was defended in the report for the first time was the idea of “milonga”,

i.e. the mixture, encounter and interpenetration of practices and knowledge of African origin, as defended by the members of Tumba Junsara's community

The milonga then becomes a form of resistance, the "uniting feature between all traditions", living proof of "the failure of the policy of separation between enslaved African peoples", in the slave quarters and in Brazilian cities. The strength of the milonga lies in its "creative strategy", which allowed enslaved Africans to preserve their worldview by combining it with those of their unfortunate companions (Capone and Morais, 2020).

The milonga is thus the ritual dimension of *ubuntu*; it expresses the foundations of *ubuntu* philosophy. It is from adaptation, dialogue and the interpenetration of African cultures in the slave quarters that milonga is born, a positive value that dispels the false idea of cultural "purity".

Milonga – in this constant movement towards the other and the acceptance of their diversity as constitutive of our own identity – is thus a specific actualisation of the *Ubuntu* philosophy. Both are two facets of the Bantu legacy in Brazil.

Ntondele!

Thank you for your attention!



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