A CONTRIBUTION FROM THE AFRICAN CULTURAL PHILOSOPHY TOWARDS A HARMONIOUS COEXISTENCE IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a comprehensive review of the African cultural philosophy. The aim of the study is to focus on identifying the elements present in the African ontology and epistemology which may contribute towards the consecution of a harmonious coexistence in the increasing plurality of today society. Based on an understanding of reality in which everything dwells in complementarity, interdependence and mutuality, the African worldview approaches difference and particularity as opportunities for mutual growth and cooperation. The acknowledgement of such an intimate mutual relatedness among all human groups which form a given society is the African key to understand the process towards coexistence. This sheds light on the understanding of social dialogue, the peace-building processes, and the means for the resolution of conflicts.

KEY WORDS: African philosophy; relatedness; coexistence; peacebuilding; conflict resolution.

Contribución de la filosofía cultural africana a la coexistencia pacífica en sociedades plurales

RESUMEN: El presente trabajo presenta un análisis general de la filosofía cultural africana. El estudio tiene por objeto identificar los elementos presentes en la ontología y epistemología africana que puedan contribuir a la consecución de una coexistencia pacífica en la cada vez más plural sociedad actual. La cosmovisión africana, basada en una compresión de la realidad en la que todo existe en complementariedad, interdependencia y mutualidad, aborda y entiende las diferencias y las particularidades como oportunidades para el enriquecimiento mutuo y la cooperación. La aceptación de la existencia de tal íntima relacionalidad mutua entre todos los grupos humanos que forman una determinada sociedad es la clave africana para comprender el proceso hacia la coexistencia pacífica. Esta relacionalidad arroja, por tanto, luz sobre la comprensión del diálogo social, los procesos de fomento y consolidación de la paz y los medios destinados a la resolución de conflictos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: filosofía africana; relacionalidad; coexistencia; fomento de la paz; procesos de resolución de conflictos.

Introduction

It is possible to identify three different African schools of philosophy with regards to the understanding of society: the cultural school, embodied in the African oral tradition; the ideological school developed in the arena of political activism; and the critical school, encompassing the thought of academic philosophers from the Continent. The African cultural philosophy is collective or, in words of Mazrui, «a philosophy without philosophers»[1]; meaning that, rather

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[1]   MAZRUI, ALI A., *African Thought in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2014, 14.

than belonging to particular individual authors, it is the accumulated wisdom of many generations of concrete human groups. However, by making use of the work of cultural anthropologists and philosophers from the other two schools, namely the ideological and the critical schools, it is possible to identify elements in such accumulative body of philosophical thought which may positively contribute to the making of a harmonious coexistence in the present pluralistic societies.

Scholars have found that cultural traditions play a crucial role in the processes of peace-building, managing conflict and restoring concord. The harmonious living, reconciliation and the resolution of disputes has an unavoidable cultural foundation which is present across all cultures. African cultural tradition is no exception. It contains a profound worldview and reach human values and beliefs which sustain and promote such goals[2]. In addition, keeping in mind the interconnectedness of our world and the multiculturality of society today, the approach to the building of peaceful coexistence must necessary adopt a model which is inclusive, intercultural and multivocal. Hence, this process cannot ignore the various cultural heritages depicting them as out of time and devoid of meaning for the construction of today society; instead, they should be given a relevant position in the inclusive cooperation and mutual enrichment towards an enduring global peace and the promotion of justice and equity. Consequently, Africa can be considered a necessary partner in the consecution of those goals. The Continent is in a position to offer its local cultural thinking as contribution to the response to the demands of this global age in which «the fluidity and complexity of multiculturalism, transnationalism and even multiple identities have energized the need for emotive dialogues and relationships»[3].

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[2]   For the connection between cultural tradition and the harmonious coexistence with special focus on the African Continent cf. LUNDY, BRANDON D., and ADEBAYO, AKANMU G., *Atone: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation*, Lexington Books, Lanham 2018; ADEBAYO, AKANMU G., et alia (eds.), *Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies in West Africa: Beyond Right and Wrong*, Lexinton Books, Lanham 2015; ADEBAYO, AKANMU et alia, *Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies: Global Perspectives*, Lexinton Books, Lanham 2014, 73-179; ADEBAYO, AKANMU G., (ed.), *Managing Conflict in Africa´s Democratic Transitions*, Lanham, Lexinton Books 2012; COMAROFF, JEAN, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2013; JACKSON, TERENCE, (ed.), *Management and Change in Africa: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Routledge, New York 2013; AVRUCH, KEVIN, *Context and Pretext in Conflict Resolution: Culture, Identity, Power, and Practice*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder 2011; ZARTMAN, WILLIAM I., «Peacemaking in West Africa: Historical Methods and Modern Applications» in: *African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review* 1, n. 2 (Fall 2011), 1-5; HUYSE, LUC AND SALTER, MARK, *Traditional Justice and Reconciliation after Violent Conflict. Learning from African Experiences*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm 2008; LEBARON, MICHELLE AND PILLAY, VENASHRI, *Conflict Across Cultures: A Unique Experience of Bridging Differences*, Intercultural Press, Boston 2006; LEBARON, MICHELLE, *Bridging Cultural Conflicts: A New Approach for a Changing World*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco 2003; NADER, LAURA AND GRANDE, ELIZABETTA, «Current Illusions and Delusions about Conflict Management in Africa and Elsewhere» in: *Law and Social Inquiry* 27, n. 3 (2002), 573-594; ZARTMAN, WILLIAM I. (ed.), *Traditional Cures for Modern Conflicts: African Conflict «Medicine»*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder 2000.

[3]   ADESINA, OLUTAYO, «Conflict in Africa. Negotiating Space for Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies in the Contemporary Age», in: ADEBAYO et alia, *Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies in West Africa*, 21-34, here 29.

The African cultural heritage is extraordinarily rich and very plural in its forms. It is comprised of diverse number of ethnic groups and cultural expressions. Although there is a variety of cultural patterns in the people of the Continent, most scholars defend that it is possible to identify an underlying basic sameness and common principles present in the majority of the African communities and their cultural-religious expressions[4]. Among these common elements, this essay focuses on those which may be harnessed as African cultural philosophy´s contributions to peaceful coexistence in pluralistic society, namely: the centrality of life, the ecological understanding of reality as interconnected, the importance of the ancestral worship, the African concept of family and what has been called the «Ubuntu» worldview.

1. Centrality of Life

The concept of life is central in the African worldview. Life is the primary category which constitutes the unifying factor of all African understanding. Among Africans, the concept of «being» is inseparable from the concept of «life». Being is «being alive». Everything, creatures and events, refers to life; therefore, as Bénézet Bujo argues, «it must be the corner-stone»[5] of an African understanding of coexistence and community living. The community's behaviour, customs and practices are all centred in the core value which the pioneer in the study of African Philosophy, Placide Tempels, called «vital force». The purpose behind every action of the individual or the group is «to acquire life, strength or vital force, to live strongly, to make life stronger, or to assure that force shall remain in one's posterity»[6]. In the African cultural tradition, the person's vocation is basically to protect and transmit the all-embracing life in which she is also inserted. In all areas of life, the person´s principal responsibility is to contribute to the preservation and increment of the life of the human group to which she belongs. Gloria Wirba has affirmed in this regard:

> Africans conceive life as a continuous cycle and rhythm which should not be destroyed. All internal human forces are directed towards the service of life, its reinforcement, maintenance and protection. The quest for a meaningful life and its preservation is considered the principal scope of human existence. Whatever promotes, transmits, manifests, enriches, saves, ensures and heals life is good and must be promoted. Whatever does the opposite is evil and must be avoided.[7]

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[4] Cf. Magesa, Laurenti, *What is not Sacred? African Spirituality*, Acton Publishers, Nairobi 2014, 4; Mbiti, John S., *Introduction to African Religion*, East African Educational Publishers, Nairobi 2011[2], 2-5; Nyamiti, Charles, *Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of Humankind: Methodological and Trinitarian Foundations*, Studies in African Christian Theology, Vol. I, CUEA Press, Nairobi 2005, 9-16.

[5] Bujo, Bénézet, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi 2003, 85.

[6] Tempels, Placide, *Bantu Philosophy*, Presence Africaine, Paris 1969, 44-45.

[7] Wirba, Gloria, *Women and Inculturated Evangelization in Africa*, CUEA Press, Nairobi 2012, 169. See also Magesa, Laurenti, *African Religion. The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi 1998, 71-77; Ochieng'- Odhiambo, F., *African Philosophy. An Introduction.* Guide to Philosophy Series Consolata Institute of Philosophy Press, Nairobi 2002[5], 46-47; Bujo, *African*, 89.

In this African view, life is considered as sacred. God is the source of all life; in fact, He is the one who possesses the vital force in Him. In this way, the Shona people of Zimbabwe call God «Mwari» which translated into English means «the one who is» or «the one who lives». God is the source of life for every creature. He acts in a living way. He is giver of life. He alone can give life and only He can sustain every living thing. God has endowed in every creature His own vital force. In this way, all creatures participate in God's life. God's vital force is the soul of reality; it is present in every creature which, consequently, deserves respect and reverence. Hence, as Magesa affirms, all creation and all events are not just what they appear to be on their surface. Rather, since everything is touched by the supreme vital power, it is also a spiritual creature or event:

> Life is, in essence, a mystery. As the principle of life, mystery constitutes spiritual power that is not of human origin but is at the foundation of everything that exists. This makes all reality spiritual and of religious concern.[8]

2.   Ecological understanding of reality: Interconnectedness

The universal common participation in God's living power makes all events and creatures —living or not, corporeal or spiritual, to be universally interrelated. All are but parts of a harmonious whole. The inner presence of the divine vital force in all realities makes them to be in a harmonious coexistence. Every creature exits for and because of the rest of creation. Consequently, there is also an interdependence among all of them which is to be preserved and nurtured. The African view sees the whole creation as inserted in this interdependence. Nyamiti has coined it as a «cosmotheandric» conception of the universe. He explains it in the following terms:

> The universe is believed to consist of three different worlds: the world of spirits (the Supreme Being and lesser divinities), the world of human beings, and the world of nature. These three worlds are conceived as mystically united to each other to form a sort of cosmo-biological whole. It is believed that any beneficial or adverse contact with a member in one of these worlds tends to affect accordingly the other members in all the three worlds. No human being can achieve personal accomplishment without beneficial association with these worlds.[9]

Both the whole universe and each of its individual parts exist in interdependence, mutuality and complementarity; each part only makes complete sense as inserted in the whole. At the same time, eliminating or removing one part, element or category alters the existing equilibrium in interdependence and complementarity of the whole; such action will provoke a decrease in the life of the whole and, therefore, in each of its parts. While the preservation and promotion of one element of existence

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[8]   Magesa, *What is not*, 25. See also Mazrui, *African Thought*, 241-242. Bujo, *African*, 17-19; Mbiti, *Introduction*, 49-52.

[9]   Nyamiti, Charles, *Christ's Ancestral Mediation Through the Church Understood as God's Family: An Essay on African Ecclesiology,* Studies in African Christian Theology, Vol. IV. CUEA Press, Nairobi 2010, 6, cf. page 207; See also Ochieng', *African Philosophy*, 54.

constitute the preservation of the living force of the whole and, consequently, of all parts which exist in complementarity, interdependence and mutuality.

> ...the principle that makes life, indeed, all creation, possible is «interdependence», «mutuality», and «complementarity». Nothing can live or even exits on its own. The universe exists on account of its component parts and vice versa, and each creature needs the rest in the delicate balance of existence. Life is not possible on the basis of strict autonomy, but no creature is completely subservient to any other.[10]

At the same time, as Mbiti affirms, «the universe is orderly»[11]. All creatures are inserted in an ordered system in which all are, at the same time, givers and receivers at small or large measure. The participation in God's vital power is always mediated by one standing above the recipient in a hierarchy of being which starts from God, the all-powerful force. This hierarchy belongs to the invisible and to the visible world and has the human person as the special object of God's attention. Hence, in the African worldview, peace is understood as a general condition of harmony, tranquillity, cooperation and well-being which affects the whole of reality[12].

The human person is at the centre of creation. The whole creation is there for humanity's sake and at the same time, humanity plays a special role in its protection[13]. In view of all this, Magesa concludes that, in the African view, spirituality and ethics imply a way of relating with the whole universe and with every particular creature which contributes to the conservation and promotion of the harmonious coexistence of all which has its foundation in the universal presence of the divine vital force:

> In the African worldview, spirituality is more of an activity than a passive quality. Rather than a «state of being», it is a way of behaving or, rather relating. It involves dynamic relationships between visible and invisible powers. Better yet, it entails the mutual exchanges of energies among all beings... This happens through relationships; thus spirituality can be described as a «verb». It is an activity that is proactive. It involves the aspiration to achieve a certain degree of harmony in the universe, without which the universe in general and human life in particular would not only collapse but might indeed never have existed in the first place.[14]

The vitality of the human community and of each individual depends on the welfare of the entire universe and, at the same time, the well-being of humanity is core for the rest of the created world. Human beings hold a special responsibility in the preservation of the equilibrium and harmony of the whole created order. Human behaviour can both positively or negatively affect the fate of the universe which ultimately is also the fate of humanity.

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[10]   MAGESA, *What is not*, 34. Cf. OCHIENG', *African Philosophy*, 54.

[11]   MBITI, *Introduction*,40. See also MAZRUI, *African Thought*, 239.

[12]   Cf. ALBERT, I. OLAWALE «Understanding Peace in Africa» in: FRANCIS, DAVID J. (ed.), *Peace and Conflict in Africa*, Zed Books, London 2008, 31-45.

[13]   Cf. BUJO, *African*, 19-20; MBITI, *Introduction*, 43-44.

[14]   MAGESA, *What is not*, 26. See also KNOX, PETER, «Theology, Ecology, and Africa», in: OROBATOR, AGBONKHIANMEGHE E. (ed.), *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace. The Second African Synod*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll 2011, 159-170; MAGESA, *What is not*, 26-32; MBITI, *Introduction*, 40-43.

3. ANCESTRAL WORSHIP

In this hierarchical and participatory concept of life, there is a basic relation which is core for the maintenance of harmony in the community. Every member of a clan or family group is obliged to maintain contact with the living-dead and with all those whom the ancestors have established as their representatives in the group. Ancestors constitute the pillar in which a clan rest. Despite many of the traditional rituals, festivals and spiritualities are fast disappearing and, as Olupona affirms, are considered «as an unimportant source of contributions to moral and epistemological culture and the public sphere»[15], the ancestral relationship still remains as one of the main factors of unity in African human communities. Ancestral worship is, therefore, a fundamental principle which affects society at all its levels. In the traditional African worldview, the ancestors play an important role in all human affairs. This relationship bestows meaning and harmony to social living, since the ancestors never depart from the family and remain in full membership of their human group. According to the data of social anthropology, the African traditional society includes a vertical dimension, whereby it is closely related to the ancestors and other spiritual beings. It follows from this that peaceful coexistence is not possible without nurturing this intimate link. Hence, there is a continuous exchange between the visible and the invisible worlds, between the living and the «living-dead».

Ancestors are the disembodied spirits of the departed relatives. To attain ancestorhood, the person must have lived a virtuous and exemplary life and, after her death, had all the prescribed rites of passage performed by their living relatives. They are remembered by their families as role models to imitate by the rest of the members of the clan, and they are considered to continue being part of their families. Ancestral spirits keep a close relationship with their descendants, especially at relevant moments of the life of the community. Ancestors protect their families and clan, exercising a mediatory role between the clan and God. On their side, their relatives must venerate and honour them properly by fulfilling the accorded rituals as expression of their love and thanksgiving for their protection[16].

God, through the ancestors and the elders of the group, gives rules in the form of laws and rituals to ensure the preservation of the vital force and harmony of the community. Ancestors prescribed laws and established customs, which embodied their own experiences, and passed them on to their descendants as their most precious legacy. When the living follow the prescriptions established by the ancestors, they are strengthening the life of the clan as a whole and contributing to the well-being of each individual member. By their careful observance of those

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[15]   OLUPONA, JACOB K., *City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ife in Time, Space, and the Imagination*, University of California, Berkeley 2011, xii.

[16]   For a definition of «ancestor» see WALLIGGO, JOHN M., «The African Clan as the True Model of the African Church», in: *The Church in African Christianity. Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, MUGAMBI, J. N. and MAGESA, L. (eds.), Action Publishers, Nairobi 1998, 111-127, here 123; AWOLALU, J. O., *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, Longman, Essex 1979, 54; MBITI, *Introduction*, 77-79; NYAMITI, *Christ's Ancestral*, 2.

same laws and customs, the forbearers, when still alive, protected the group against the forces of disintegration and misfortune that would have destroyed life. The living must continue doing the same if their society is to continue in existence[17]. In other words, as Bujo has affirmed, the ancestral worship is intimately related to the core value of life and of the preservation of the vital force of the human community and, consequently of the whole creation:

> The drive towards life is the inspiration of all African religions, often expressed in terms of identity, both individual and group, which must be preserved at all costs. Here we begin to understand the supreme importance of the past for the African: for the secret of life is to be found above all in the hallowed attitudes and practices of the ancestors. In their wisdom is to be found the key to a better and fuller life, and it is therefore crucial that the rites, actions, words and laws which the ancestors have bequeathed to their descendants be scrupulously observed: they are the indispensable instruments of salvation...The ancestral traditions are gifts of God, they have a truly sacramental character. The life-giving traditions of the past must determine the present and the future since in them alone is salvation to be found.[18]

Therefore, the ancestral worship is more than a mere imitation of the past or just being anchored in that past. In the African worldview, people look back into the past seeking the abundance of life. The recalling of the history of the ancestors and their remembrance and communion with them through prescribed rituals make them present among us. Traditional actions bring back their power of life which has now defeated death. In this way, firstly, by cherishing and recalling the past, the community enters now and here in communion with the fullness of life present in its forefathers. Secondly, the communion with the ancestors makes the actual community benefit from the original and founding communion of the clan. The aim of this «anamnetic dimension» goes beyond a mere and sterile fidelity to the past; rather, since «the past is significant only when it proves to be the bearer of life for the present and the future»[19], hence, its purpose is the preservation of the community.

In this view, conflict has always a connection with an alienation between the community, or one member of the community, and the world of the supernatural. Hence, the restoration of harmony requires the maintenance of an ontological balance between the natural and the supernatural. The ritual actions and formulas followed for the veneration of the ancestors strengthens such equilibrium and, therefore, the unity of the group by making it enter in contact with its ancestral origin. Hence, ancestors, by actualizing the original vital power and the unity

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[17] Cf. ADESINA, OLUTAYO, «*Ilepa* Among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria. What the Dead Have to Do with Peace and Conflict», in: ADEBAYO et alia, *Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies in West Africa*, 177-189; MAGESA, *What is not*, 28-29 and 36-38.

[18] BUJO, *African*, 26. See also ABAKA, E., «*Ancestor Veneration*», in: IRELE, F. A., and JEYIFO, B. (eds.), *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of African Thought*, Vol. I, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, 71-73.

[19] Cf. BUJO, BÉNÉZET, *Foundations of African Ethics. Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, Herder and Herder – The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York 2016, 49-50.

of the ancestral community, are mediators of fullness of life and fullness of communion.

What has been affirmed above implies that the relationship with the ancestral community projects the individual person beyond his own human group, since such relationship includes also stablishing communion with the vital force which dwells in the interdependence, complementarity and mutuality of the whole reality. The clan communion is a visualization of the already-there original communion of the entire humanity and creation. The ancestors, as intermediaries between the divinity and humanity and as holders of an important responsibility of maintaining the family united, can be considered also as intermediaries among human groups since they connect their community to the wholeness of reality to which all human communities belong. Ancestors point to a single future and, at the same time, to a present family to which all, regardless of political, sociological, or religious affiliation, are related and in which all are interconnected.

The person who has already reached the ancestral condition exercises his role beyond the limits of institutional belongings. She can be such for people who belonging to various religions are members of the same family. Therefore, ancestors are a factor and a source of communion among the religious families. We keep communion with them and they intercede for the communion of their descendants because, after passing the gates of death and entering into the world of ancestors, they have gone beyond their own particular religious affiliations and now belong to the eschatological family of God. Hence, there is an element of exemplarity in their ancestral communion as model for the communion among the earthly families. Furthermore, since they already fully participate of the divine life of the absolute being, «there is between us and the ancestors a dynamic mutual concern in view of intimate, personal sacred communion and reciprocal enrichment»[20]. Their communion in the supernatural family benefits our still earthly, temporal and, therefore, subject to our weaknesses and limited attempts to express our radical communion. Their communion is mediation of our communion; the ancestors' communion strengthens, fosters, and motivates the harmonious coexistence among the present earthly families.

Putting together all the above affirmations, the African worldview understands that the future is possible when communion is present. The community looks back to the past for present reconciliation in order to assure its future existence. Tomorrow is worthy of the effort when today belongs to all. If the future is not meant for all, it will not be. The future belongs to all when familyhood is preserved; when all are considered, then life is present in the community.

4.   FAMILY: BELONGING IS BEING

As it has been explained above, in the African worldview, the fullness of life and of communion are intimately interrelated. The fullness of life is only accessible in solidarity with the latter; while the preservation and fostering of the unity of

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[20]   NYAMITI, *Christ's Ancestral*, 296, see also 1-12 and 285-313.

the group preserves and increases the vital force of that particular human group. This interrelatedness is expressed in the way Africans understand family, since «family is the cradle where life is protected, propagated and attended to; a place where life is shared, nourished and enriched»[21]. In the African logic, the person is not described as an ontological act; rather, the process of becoming takes place within the framework of the community. The individual attains her personality through and in solidarity with the group. Consequently, in the African context, being is defined in terms of belongingness and relatedness. Tempels explained it as follows:

> The Bantu cannot conceive of… the human person as an independent being standing on his own. Every human person, every individual is as it were one link in a chain of vital forces: a living link both exercising and receiving influence, a link that establishes the bond with previous generations and with the forces that support his own existence. The individual is necessarily an individual adhering to the clan.[22]

Since Africans identify the family as a fundamental epistemological principle, the African understanding of family is to become an integral framework of the understanding of social life and coexistence. For an African, saying «family» means a wider reality than that contained in the European concept of family. The African family here is to be understood as family-clan or community[23]. Family and kinship cover the whole clan stretching in all directions to embrace everybody in any given local group. Therefore, when speaking of family in African, it can be considered equal to the concept of society.

The whole community or group constitutes the family to which the individual person belongs and in which the individual grows. Hence, points Magesa, the African saying «it takes a village to raise a child»[24]. The family is so central to such an extent that nothing happens outside the family. The whole life rotates and takes part inside the family, including the resolution of whatever has perturbed the harmony of the community. In addition, everything is performed first and foremost concerning the unity and subsistence of the family. The life and unity of the family is promoted through common rituals, social gatherings concerning all aspects of life, from birth to death, and through the solidarity among the members of the group who share their material and spiritual goods[25].

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[21] WIRBA, *Women*, 170. Cf. Burrow, Rufus, «Personalism and Afrikan Traditional Thought» in: *Encounter* 61, n. 3 (2000), 322-348, here 325-326; MAGESA, *What is not*, 69.

[22] TEMPELS, *Bantu Philosophy*, 41.

[23] It is widely spread the use of the term «extended family». We avoid its use because, in our view, it already implies a European concept of family which makes a distinction between the immediate family and extended family. In the African view, such a distinction does not exist. Therefore, we prefer to use the term «family» to speak about what the African worldview puts inside it. It would rather be better to say community rather than extended family. Cf. BUJO, *Foundations*, 48-49.

[24] MAGESA, *What is not*, 13.

[25] Cf. ADESINA, «Conflict in Africa», 29; AKINJOGBIN, I. A., *Milestones and Concepts in Yoruba History and Culture*, Olu-Akin Publishers, Ibadan 2002, 116.

5. PARTICIPATORY RESPONSIBILITY

What has been previously affirmed does not eliminate the individual, since the person is defined both in terms of belonging to the community and mutual relationship with the community. In this way, the family is the milieu where the individual person is brought to her personal fulfilment[26]. The family is the place of learning and individualization of the person. An African person would hardly come to understand herself without reference to her family, since the person becomes such through the active participation in the community. Consequently, family is an institution, Walliggo explains, oriented both towards the assimilation of the communitarian values and the growth to the individual:

> The clan is a proper institution of learning whence members learn the history of the clan, the customs and practices expected of each member, the virtues of good community living and the wisdom of the ancestors. The clan provides a clear code of conduct in all relationships and professions. The clan identifies the talents of its members, develops them, and utilizes them for the good of society as a whole.[27]

The family also gives relevance to the individual in the fact that all its members have a responsibility inside it. Consequently, all are to be respected since all are and have an un-substitutable gift which enhances the life of the family. Every member of the community shares the responsibility for strengthening the vital force of the family and, therefore, of each of her relatives. Hence, African ethics are a «we-ethics». The morality of an act is determined by its life-giving potential to the harmony and unity of the family: good acts are those which contribute to the community's vital force, whereas bad acts, however apparently insignificant, are those which tend to diminish life[28]. Hence, Orobator affirms that «the essence of communal life in Africa finds expression in the principle of participation»[29]. Co-responsibility and vital participation are fundamental elements in the understanding of the African family. All living members of the family have the inalienable duty and right to protect the life of the community in all its aspects. The participatory dimension provides to the individual member a strong sense of belonging and ownership which significantly

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[26]   Cf. IKUENOBE, POLYCARP, «African Communal Ethics», in WARIBOKO, NIMI. AND FALOLA, TOYIN (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Social Ethics,* Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2020, 129-145; MBITI, JOHN S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, Portsmouth1990², 108; MBITI, *Introduction*, 115; WIRBA, *Women*, 167.

[27]   WALLIGGO, «The African Clan», 123. Cf. BUJO, *Foundations*, 87.

[28]   Cf. SEGEJA, NICHOLAUS, «Social Doctrine of the Church: A Reverential Dialogical Guide towards Reconciliation, Justice and Peace in Africa» in: *African Christian Studies* 26, no. 1 (March 2010), 7-22, here 10; BUJO, *African*, 22.

[29]   OROBATOR, AGBONKHIANMEGHE E., *The Church as Family. African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi 2000, 42; Cf. ZAHARNA, R. S., «Beyond the Individualism-Collectivism Divide to Relationalism: Explicating Cultural Assumptions in the Concept of "Relationships"» in: *Communication Theory* 26 (2016), 190-211, here 199-200; MBAGWU, JOAN, «Border Disputes in Africa and Traditional Approaches to Resolving Them», in: ADEBAYO et alia, *Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies in West Africa*, 53-64, here 57; WIRBA, *Women*, 167.

enhances the personal concern for the success of the common aims and, at the same time, reduces future possible conflicts within the community.

Together with the values of unity, solidarity, mutual respect, co-responsibility and participation, there are many other positive values contained in the African concept of family like respect for life, fecundity, fraternity, mutual aid, sense of community, trust, reconciliation, family-based education, respect for leaders and the elderly and hospitality[30].

Alongside all this positivity of the African family, there are also negative aspects which need to be acknowledged. The first problem attached to this concept is that the institution of family, together with the whole African society, is undergoing a fast transformation. These changes pose the question of what does it mean being family in Africa today? But, probably, the principle limitation of the African model of family is that it is restricted to local identities and the loyalty to one's own clan or ethnic group; in this view, others are excluded from the solidarity and mutual care among the members of the community. This limitation has already constituted in some African countries the base for ethnocentrism, negative ethnicity, tribalism and the subsequent ethnic conflicts and violent crises. Despite these loyalties pose serious problems to harmonious coexistence in Africa, it is possible to go beyond them.

6.   UBUNTU: «I AM BECAUSE WE ARE»

The next category present in the African culture can still be classified under the category of family. However, it is worthy to study it separately since it contains new insights and holds a significant relevance regarding what has been just affirmed in the previous section. There, it was acknowledged how the African concept of family has some limitations. Despite the existence of these challenges, they are not insurmountable. Rather, the concept of family contains elements which can help to go beyond it[31]. In order to do so, there is need to bring about the African concept of person. In this view, the person is understood in terms of relation[32]. This has been developed as the philosophy of «Ubuntu». In some African countries, political and

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[30]   Cf. NYAMITI, *Christ's Ancestral*, 2.

[31]   In this regard Peter Gichure affirms: «It is erroneous to say that the African People did not have systems that allowed others to coexist. They had their problems, but they had means and ways where they directed themselves to avoid exaggerations and excesses» in GICHURE, PETER, «Ethnicity and Enculturation. Challenges and Promises», in: DE JONG, ALBERT (ed.), *Ethnicity, Blessing or Curse*. Tangaza Occasional Papers No. 8, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi 1999, 20-26, here 21. In the same line of thought Bénézet Buyo confirms that: «I believe, however, that it has been sufficiently demonstrated that people in Africa are able to avoid both the ethnocentric and the ontological fallacies, since they are not confined to the little world of their clan community —ultimately, they understand community as a world community in which they encounter every single human person» in BUJO, *Foundations*, 86.

[32]   Cf. NDERIBU, DAVID, «The Meaning of Human Person in the African Context», in WARIBOKO AND FALOLA (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Social Ethics*, 93-102; NEEQUAYE, GEORGE K., «Personhood in Africa», in WARIBOKO AND FALOLA (eds.), *o.c.*, 103-127.

religious leaders have deepened it and used it in order to overcome ethnic or racial conflicts, as it is the case of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu in South Africa in the national process of reconciliation followed after the abolition of apartheid, and Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere's «Ujamaa» view of society[33].

From a linguistic point of view, the word «Ubuntu» belongs to the group of Sub-Saharan languages known as Bantu. In the etymology of the word is the root —*ntu*, which means human, and the prefix *u*—, which expresses an uncountable reality or category. Therefore, Ubuntu has a range of meaning which goes from personhood or humanity to humaneness or solidarity[34].

The concept has been used to express the Bantu understanding of the person in terms of relation with others. The African worldview is anthropocentric, meaning that everything is seen in terms of its relation to the human person[35]. According to Elochukwu Uzukwu, in Africa, «the most common characteristic of the way human living societies are conceived is "relatedness"»[36]. A person depends on other persons to become a person. Nobody can reach her fullness in isolation. Rather, a person can only understand and develop her own identity to the full in relationship with others[37]. «Only in terms of other people», affirms Mbiti, «does the individual becomes conscious of his own being, his duties, privileges and responsibilities toward himself and toward others»[38]. Ubuntu, therefore, is the interdependence of persons for the fulfilment of their own potentialities. As the Afro-American thinker Michael Battle has affirmed, only in the relation with others the person becomes capable of living her own existence to the full:

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[33]   Tutu, Desmond, *No Future without Forgiveness*, Doubleday, New York 1999; Masina, N., «Xhosa Practices of Ubuntu for South Africa», in: Zartman, *Traditional Cures*, 163-182; Nyerere, Julius, *Ujamaa. Essays on Socialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1971. Similar processes of national healing and reconciliation based on traditional mechanisms of communication and building consensus have been carried out in Rwanda through the Gacaca Courts, see Ingelaere, Bert, *Inside Rwanda´s Gacaca Courts. Seeking Justice after Genocide*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2016 and Molenaar, Arthur, *Gacaca. Grassroots Justice after Genocide: The Key to Reconciliation in Rwanda?*, African Studies Centre, Leiden 2005. Also in Ghana during the 2012 election crisis, see Brewoo, Serwaa and Abdallah, Mustapha, «Exploring Indigenous Mechanisms for Peacemaking in West Africa», in: Adebayo et alia, *Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies in West Africa*, 35-52, here 38.

[34]   Battle, Michael, *Ubuntu. I in You and You in Me*, Seabury Books, New York 2009, 2.

[35]   Ochieng'-Odhiambo has said: «Africans have their own ontology... Their ontology is divided into five categories, but it is an extremely anthropocentric ontology... God is the Originator of man and Sustainer of man; the Spirits explain the destiny of man; Man is the centre of this ontology; the Animals, Plants and natural phenomena and objects constitute the environment in which man lives, provide a means of existence and, if need be, man establishes a mystical relationship with them», in Ochieng', *African Philosophy*, 54.

[36]   Uzukwu, Elochukwu E., *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, Orbis Books, Mariknoll 2006, 36; Cf. Segeja, «Social Doctrine», 10.

[37]   Tshiamalenga sees the relatedness to the «we» as the foundation of social and inter-personal trust, cf. Tshiamalenga-Ntumba, «Afrikanische Philosophie: Zum originären Vertrauen des afrikanischen Menschen», in: Mutombo-Mwana and Mbaya, E. (eds.), *Eglise et droits de la société africaine*, Cilowa, Mbujimayi 1995, 109-120, here 112-113; See also Nyamiti, *Christ's Ancestral*,124; Wirba, *Women*, 171; Magesa, *What is not*, 12-13 and 43-44.

[38]   Mbiti, *African Religions*, 106.

> To become a healthy person we must be fully human both as a person in com-
> munity and as a self-differentiated person... You cannot know you are unique or
> beautiful or intelligent without the reference point of a community in which such
> attributes become intelligible. We need to become communal selves. Ubuntu re-
> cognizes that our need to be seen for who we really are is an existential reality in
> which we need to be part of something larger than ourselves. Ubuntu also helps
> us see that we need to be part of a community with a measure of mutuality and
> like-mindedness.[39]

The concept is based on the family values of mutuality, complementarity and
solidarity which the Ubuntu philosophy has summarized in expressions such as
«You in Me and I in You» or «I am because We are, and since We are therefore I
am»[40]. These condense the conviction that the mutuality and solidarity among the
members of a family are not just extrinsic or restricted to the external sharing of
knowledge, goods and personal gifts among individuals. Rather, it is an intrinsic
and existential solidarity that impels the person from inside to trust that the other
—individual or family— is not a competitor, rather someone who fulfils her. The
individual person belongs to the others and, reciprocally, the other belongs to one's
own, as mutual gifts that complement one another. Therefore, one's own fulfilment
is never in detriment of the other's fulfilment; rather the other's achievement of
plenitude is one's own achievement. This understanding brings human relation
beyond competition. As Desmond Tutu affirms, the other is not a competitor who
threatens one's own development, rather:

> It speaks to the very essence of being human. When you want to give high
> praise to someone we say, «Yu, u Nobuntu», he or she has Ubuntu. This means
> that they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. They sha-
> re what they have. It also means that my humanity is caught up, is inextricably
> bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life. We say, «a person is a person
> through other people»… I am because I belong, I participate, and I share. A person
> with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming others, does not feel threa-
> tened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that
> comes from knowing that he or she belongs to a greater whole and is diminished
> when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed,
> or treated as if they were less than who they are.[41]

Consequently, «Ubuntu» is an alternative to any other worldview which, based
on competition, holds that one is strong when the other is weak and, vice versa, one
is weak if the other is strong. On the contrary, in the Bantu worldview, the other's
strength is one's own strength and the other's weakness is one's own weakness, since
all things hang together in solidarity, mutuality and complementarity. Far from
reinforcing competitive ways of knowing and developing one´s own self, it rather
offers a way to discover self-identity through interdependence and communion. In

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[39]   Battle, *Ubuntu*, 8.
[40]   Cf. Cf. Brock-Utne, Birgit, «The Ubuntu Paradigm in Curriculum Work, Language of
Instruction and Assessment» in: *International Review of Education* 62 (2016), 29-44, here 30;
Mbiti, *African Religions*, 104-106; Uzukwu, *A Listening*, 36.
[41]   Tutu, *No Future without*, 34-35.

the Ubuntu way of thinking there are «spaces of inclusion»[42] in which it is possible to affirm both «You» and «I», rather than choosing for one or the other; hence, it follows that I can never be what I ought to be if you are not what you ought to be; and, consequently, you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. In this view, difference and diversity are a source of enrichment through mutuality and complementarity based on the solidarity of origin and destiny of all individual humans and human families. All depend on each other and on the whole group[43].

All this applies particularly to human beings, who are intricately connected with each other. Furthermore, based on what was explained above as the interrelatedness of the whole creation, it can also be applied to the relationship among the various families, clans and ethnic groups. The African view contains the necessary elements to surpass the limitations proper to a narrow concept of family, since the concept of «Ubuntu» points out the importance of peace-making through reciprocity, inclusivity and the understanding of a common future between peoples[44]. Based on the complementarity, interdependence and mutuality of the whole universe, we can conclude that every family, ethnic group, clan or nation, as part of the wider family of creation which includes nature and the invisible world of the ancestors, can only reach its fullness when nourishes its relationship with other human families, ethnic groups, clans or nations. The concept of «Ubuntu» purifies the restricted alliances and fidelities to one's own family. Any familiar alliance which does not open the individual and the group to the wider universal human family is, ultimately, self-destructive, since all families coexist in complementarity, interdependence and mutuality. Each family or human group has, as part of its inner vocation to plenitude, an intimate orientation towards the harmonious coexistence with other families or clans and, therefore, it is meant to say «I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am».

7. Strategies for the Restoration of Harmony and Dialogue towards Consensus

The philosophy behind the institutions, methods and strategies established for resolving conflicts and the upkeep of coexistence is founded in the African epistemologies. Since the members of a given human group are intimately related to one another, any dispute between them is understood as a matter which affects and, therefore, belongs to the entire community. Based on the intimate link between unity and the preservation of the vital force in the social group, the ultimate aim of the conflict resolution processes is the reconciliation among parties as the necessary way to restore harmony in the community. Based on the commonly acknowledged understanding that «I am because we are», a peaceful and healthy community

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[42]   Kayira, Jean, «(Re)creating Spaces for *uMunthu*: Postcolonial Theory and Envioronmental Education in Southern Africa» in *Envioronmental Education Research* 21, n. 1 (2015), 106-128, here 115 and 122

[43]   Bujo, *African*, 22; Uzukwu, *A Listening*, 37; Battle, *Ubuntu*, 6-7.

[44]   Tshiamalenga-Ntumba, «Afrikanische Philosophie», 119; Mbagwu, «Border Disputes», 59.

is only possible when the social trust is rehabilitated; the «we» is restored and, consequently, all the «I» parts are also restored[45].

Despite the punitive dimension is also present, the process of restoration of social cohesion does not focus in determining who is guilty and who is innocent. Such achievement comes through a process of forgiveness and reconciliation which creates the necessary environment for the involved parts in the conflict to return to a harmonious coexistence. Hence, in an African setup, the peace-making system is less punish-focused and, on the contrary, more aimed at recovering proximity, re-establishing the personal relationships and, ultimately, reintegrating all the parties. Consequently, this methodology is based on inclusiveness and relatedness. It is also more comprehensive since, firstly, it is a win-win solution in which all the parties´ grievances are addressed and included in the outcome. Secondly, it achieves a stronger settlement which minimizes the possibilities of conflict recurrence in the long term since all parts come out with a sense of ownership, rather than one party taking all the justice and the other feeling dissatisfied or not listened. Finally, the process provides an opportunity for the education on peaceful coexistence[46].

The African traditional strategies for the restoration of harmonious coexistence have the following characteristics. They are processual and gradual starting from the grassroots. They foster participation so that the process is owned by all parties and the whole community[47]. For this end, facilitation and mediation is a crucial aspect; hence, such role is carried out by trustworthy members of the community, generally the elders. During the process, there is a narration of the events and an acknowledgement of the injustices. At the same time, all parts can manifest their pain and emotions through a dialogue in which perceptions and assumptions are clarified. The restoration process appeals to relatedness based on past successful

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[45]   Cf. TELEKI, MOFIHLI et alia, «Recognizing the Value of the African Indigenous Knowledge System: The Case of Obuntu and Restorative Justive», in OLORUNTOBA, SAMUEL O. et alia (eds.) *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Development in Africa*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2020, 303-327; ESTRADA-HOLLENBECK, MICA, «The Attainment of Justice through Restoration, not Litigation: The Subjective Road to Reconciliation», in: ABU-NIMER, MOHAMMED (ed.), *Reconciliation, Justice, and* Coexistence, Lexington Books, Lanham 2001, 65-86; ASSEFA, HIZKIAS, «Coexistence and Reconciliation in the Northern Region of Ghana», in: ABU-NIMER, *Reconciliation*, 165-186; MBAGWU, «Border Disputes», 57-58 and 62-64.

[46]   Cf. NWOLISE, O., «Traditional Models of Bargaining and Conflict Resolution in Africa», in: ALBERT, I. OLAWALE (ed.), *Perspectives on Peace and Conflict in Africa*, John Archers, Ibadan 2005, 152-168; KRIESBERG, LOUIS, «Changing Forms of Coexistence», in: ABU-NIMER, *Reconciliation*, 47-64; BELLO, PAUL O. and OLUTOLA, ADEWALE A., «Indigenous Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in Africa: Lessons Drawn from Nigeria» in: *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology* 13, no. 2 (2016), 70-88, here 79-80; DANSO, SARAH OKAEBEA, and OSEI-TUTU, JOANA AMA, «Homegrown Crises, Homegrown Solutions? The Efficacy of Indigenous Conflict Resolution/ Management Approaches in Ghana», in: ADEBAYO et alia, *Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies in West Africa*, 115-132, here 121-125; LOSHA, SOLOMON and AGBOR, STEPHEN OJONG, «Indigenous Peacemaking among the Banso People of Cameroon. Bonyang as a Conflict Resolution System», in: ADEBAYO et alia, *Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies in West Africa*, 295-305, here 304; BUJO, *Foundations*, 46.

[47]   Cf. OBI, CYRIL AND BABATUNDE, ABOSEDE O., «The Challenge of Building in Post-Conflict African States: What Role for Local Institutions?», in: *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 9, n. 2 (2019), 1-8.

resolutions. It ends by setting up new alliances emphasizing that they are one people and must resume friendly relationships. The agreement is usually symbolically visualized through an oath and the exchange of gifts or the sharing of a meal. These elements, on the one hand, are an indication of the restored trust and they strengthen the affective bond among the reconciled members of the community; on the other hand, they articulate forgiveness and serve as restoration for the losses.

Since communication is at the heart of these restorative processes, dialogue is one of their most important elements. The Ubuntu worldview implies an understanding of dialogue which can highly contribute to the peaceful coexistence among individuals or communities and the resolution of conflicts. Since it is not argumentative, but a dialogical process of healing, dialogue, far from being the discernment of who is right and who is wrong in a particular social matter or conflict, is rather the process whose ultimate outcome is the achievement of a common solution. Such common achievements are made possible and founded on the ground of the coexistence in harmonious complementarity, interdependence, and mutuality of all members of the community. This way of conversation has been termed as «indaba» or «palaver». Augustine Schutte explains them as follows:

> The *indaba,* the traditional meeting for discussion of important matters affec-ting the life of the community has as underlying conviction that the community has a common mind, a common heart. The purpose of the discussion is to disco-ver that common mind, that common heart, in relation to the specific issue being debated. So the goal of the *indaba* is consensus. A mere majority vote on the issue is not enough. Discussion must continue until unanimity is achieved, a really com-mon mind and heart. This is the only adequate sign that the truth of the matter has been discovered. It is also valuable achievement in its own right. Achieving a common mind and heart on a specific issue builds up the community as such, intensifying the spirit of solidarity of its members.[48]

None of the participants in the process can claim for herself to be the owner of truth. Truth, however, is the vital force which inhabits all of them and sustains them in complementarity. Hence, since the Ubuntu view goes beyond competition, it avoids choosing between this or that party. In an African perspective, partners engage in dialogue hoping to reach consensus, rather than victory over the other

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[48]   SHUTTE, AUGUSTINE, «Ubuntu as the African Ethical Vision» in: MUROVE, MUNYARADZI FELIX (ed.), *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, University of Kwazulu Natal Press, Scottsville 2009, 85-99, here 95. Regarding «palaver», Orobator affirms in similar terms: «Palaver basically embodies a way of exercising authority (or decision-making) in a community, based on extensive consultation, patient listening, unhindered communication and active participation, with a view of reaching a binding and lasting consensus among the parties involved. Dialogue and open communication lines constitute the most crucial components of this process», in OROBATOR, *The Church*, 44. For more on these terms see also SHAH, MIRA, «A Word: "Palaver" and Its Transferal Residues» in: *A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* IV, n. 2 (2014), 67-83; SCHEID, ANNA FLOERKE, «Under the Palaver Tree: Community Ethics for Truth-Telling and Reconciliation» in: *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, n. 1 (2011), 17-36; BÉNÉZET BUJO, «Reasoning and Methodology in African Ethics», in: KEENAN, JAMES F. (ed.), *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future: The Trento Conference*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll 2011, 147-59, here 154; UZUKWU, *A Listening*, 112, 127-128, 137-138; MAGESA, *What is not*, 42-43 and 139-143.

part[49]. All parts conceive the others as partners rather than competitors. Hence, every partner accepts that all are part of the solution and, consequently, their concerns must be considered by the final solution. Therefore, more than accepting the rule of the majority and its opinion to which all must bend, the voice of everyone is to be heard and respected as expression of one's own humanity[50].

This form of dialogue is, affirms Segeja, a «holistic listening and silence, respect and acceptance are involved»[51]; it should avoid any sort of rush, it needs sufficient time and it must be exhaustive, not leaving behind any concern or worry of the parts. In this way, consensus and harmony can prevail facilitating more durable solutions. The leaders must listen trying to understand the logic and rationality of the argument of each one of the involved parties so that all angles and views are included in the resolution. It implies an empathetic listening which gives importance to what is not uttered. Hence, it is kind of an exploration to find out what lies behind the behaviours and the claims of each party. In this way, all of them are given the opportunity to express their feelings towards the matter under discussion. The African dialogue points at the heart and the emotional world of the person in order to operate a wholistic and deep healing and, at the same time, fostering in all parts a sense of ownership of the entire resolution process.

CONCLUSIONS

The exploration of the African traditional philosophy has led us to understand that harmonious coexistence is not achieved by the unanimous acceptance and implementation of a sole particular view. Rather, it is a process which implies the understanding of the intimate interconnectedness in which all social actors and partners dwell. Based on this, it is possible to argue that the journey towards harmonious coexistence does not start from zero towards an aim which we do not possess; rather, coexistence is an all-abiding reality in which we live and move together. Coexistence, in a way, is a reality that possesses us all. We commit to be family with others because we are already family and intimately related to one another in complementarity, interdependence, and mutuality. In the African epistemology, mutual belongingness, solidarity, and reciprocal enrichment are omnipresent characteristics which cut across the whole reality embracing, sustaining, and moving from within all individual creatures towards a visible harmonious coexistence.

If, in the African worldview, the clue term to understand society is relatedness, the same applies to the harmonious coexistence in plural societies. Any given human

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[49]   Cf. SEGEJA, NICHOLAUS, «Reverential Dialogical Ministry: A Pastoral Paradigm for New Evangelisation in the Parish (Part II)» in: *African Christian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2012), 67-88, here 84-5.

[50]   Cf. MUNGWINI, PASCAH, «Dialogue as the Negation of Hegemony: An African Perspective» in: *South African Journal of Philosophy* 34, n. 4 (2015), 395-407, here 396-398; MAGESA, *What is not*, 140.

[51]   SEGEJA, «Social Doctrine», 11; cf. SEGEJA, NICHOLAUS, «Reverential Dialogical Ministry: A Pastoral Paradigm for New Evangelisation in the Parish (Part I)» in: *African Christian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2012), 45-66, here 57-58.

group understands itself *ad intra* in terms of relatedness and, therefore, it affirms the importance and need of all its members for the achievement and preservation of its wellbeing. In the same way, relatedness is applicable to such human group in its relation *ad extra* with other human groups. This can be summarized in the following threefold affirmation: the particular group´s vital force, welfare and success are present in all other human groups which form the society, therefore the group needs others to become itself and, consequently, struggles to know them in order to better knowing itself.

Firstly, the common commitment for harmonious coexistence in plural societies works on the conviction that the vitality of the entire society can be traced beyond origin, culture or political or religious affiliation. It is universally present in all, rather than only in those who belong to one's own family. The other family has a say in one's own vitality, since there is a presence of the vital life in all other families. The African understanding of reality fosters the ability to perceive such presence in all human families and, consequently, a «reverential» attitude towards them. This requires from every social group respect towards all other groups as holders of an indispensable role in society. It also involves an unconditional acceptance of the other as it is which is founded on the conviction that every group is an unrepeatable gift towards the welfare of all other individual groups and towards the common good of the entire society. Such conviction means to believe that a particular group is more than its present actions even when these are objectively immoral or harm coexistence. It entails a patient acceptance of the other which grants it time based on the belief that the common welfare which is present in all will finally conquer its present negativity.

Secondly, this understanding makes us to become a «we», moving from «I-centred» attitudes to «we-centred» ones. Relatedness means that any human group, which is part of a given society, is a possible channel of wellbeing for the rest of all social groups present in that society. African understanding of society enhances the mutual understanding of one another as source of enrichment. Furthermore, it is a conviction which claims that one cannot be without the other. Hence, any group in order to achieve its own fullness needs to understand itself as family with others; it needs to be «we» with other human groups. Coexistence is then founded on the acceptance that all belong to one another and that all are there for the benefit of one another.

This is translated into a readiness for solidarity which involves mutual concern and support specially in moments of difficulty. In this way, the challenges, pains and griefs undergone by one particular group are understood by all as their own challenges, pains and griefs. In addition to this, the recognition of our common interconnectedness leads to a necessary conversion from exclusivist attitudes to inclusive ones. Solutions to today challenges and conflicts are no longer achievable in isolation from others. Behind this unavoidable reality lies an important truth expressed in the saying: «If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together». Despite the option for togetherness is arduous and full of obstacles, it assures that both the resolutions of conflict and the means to achieve them are fruit of consensus. Hence, based on the solid foundations of mutual understanding and inclusiveness, the process guarantees more durable endings and the achievement of better results.

Finally, relatedness and interconnection lead to openness and closeness to the other. All partners are called to leave behind any kind of prejudice or negative

disposition towards others, embarking themselves in a sincere effort to know the other deeply and from inside. This is only possible when the process is based on grass-roots encounters which foster mutual knowledge through direct contact. Hence, it involves relying on the other group's own account of its own understanding of reality and ethical principles, instead of the sole scholar analysis which can end in a laboratory work without flesh. Reaching deep mutual knowledge is necessary for two reasons. On the one hand, in many cases, poor knowledge of the other is the spark for xenophobia, fanaticism and bigotry. In the contexts of Africa and Europe, where various forms of division and hostility are arising, an honest effort to know the other human groups can help to prevent such situations, since intimate mutual knowledge fosters mutual appreciation and care. On the other hand, based on the universal interconnectedness, the distinctive richness of every human group present is the basis to build up coexistence. The specific characteristics of a group constitute opportunities for the rest of groups to achieve a better self-understanding of their selves and of the whole reality and society. At the same time, the mutual exchange through the narration of one's own self-understanding can be an excellent moment to mutual transformation and the purification of wrong conceptions of one's own self. In this process, all social partners can achieve together a better understanding of their common goal as society and their specific roles in the achievement of the common good.

The understanding of a universal interconnectedness and relatedness present in all reality is certainly an original African contribution to present plural society which can foster more positive and constructive relationship among various human groups and, at the same time, can contribute towards the consecution of more peaceful societies.

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