



Ubuntu is Dead, Long live Ubuntu

Festakt-Rede von Tsitsi Dangarembga anlässlich des 125-jährigen Jubiläums der Caritas im englischen Original

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Die simbabwische Autorin, Filmemacherin und Friedenspreisträgerin Tsitsi Dangarembga erzählt in ihrer Rede mit dem Titel „Ubuntu is Dead, Long live Ubuntu“ von ihrem Leben und Aufwachsen in Simbabwe, referiert über die Grundpfeiler der afrikanischen Gesellschaft und erörtert die Frage, wie wir friedlich miteinander leben können.

Lesen Sie hier die Rede im englischen Original.
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort.



Tsitsi Dangarembga beim Festakt zum 125. Jubiläum des Deutschen Caritasverbandes

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Ubuntu is Dead, Long live Ubuntu

Greetings everybody, all protocol observed. I have a lot to say, so I will dive straight into it.

It was my absolute pleasure to accept Frau Welskop-Defaa's invitation on behalf of Caritas Germany to be with you today. It is with grateful surprise that I find myself participating in this visionary conference. I am thankful to Caritas Germany for giving me this opportunity to share a few ideas about the the things that keep me awake at night. Thank you, Caritas Germany.

The invitation touched me very deeply. Christianity has been part of my life since I was a small child. My relationship with the Christian faith was a result of missionary activity. The missionaries who influenced my young life were American, and they were protestant. They were American Methodists.

American Methodists had established themselves in Zimbabwe, then called Rhodesia, in 1897. This was only seven years after Cecil Rhodes annexed the land through his private company, the British South Africa Charter Company for the British Crown, which he did by means of a reign of terror perpetrated by his own private army, which he called the British South Africa Police.

The notion of the state as private property of elites, and the camouflage of a private army as police, are systems that go back to the very foundations of modern Zimbabwe in the nineteenth century. 1897, the year the American Methodists established themselves in the country, was only four years after the first act of insurrection had occurred in 1893, when telegraph wires were cut by the local population. That year 1897, was, furthermore, only one year after the people rose up in the first war of liberation, that had begun in 1896.

At this time, with African people fighting to free themselves from the brutal misgovernance of the British South Africa Charter Company, the various groupings of American Methodists reconciled their differences in the United States and became the United Methodist Church.

My parents were staunch members of this church. Their parents - my grandparents - had also been staunch members of the United Methodist Church. Even my maternal great grandfather had been a member of this Church. I was born into the heart of pre-independence Zimbabwe's brand of United American Methodism and, for the sensitive child that I was, it was a nightmare.

Ours was the sulphur and brimstone version of Christianity. King Leopold the Second of Belgium wrote an infamous letter to Belgian Christian missionaries in 1883. In this letter, the Belgian monarch wrote - and I'll quote extensively:

“Reverends, Fathers and Dear Compatriots: The task that is given to fulfill is very delicate and requires much tact. You will go certainly to evangelize, but your evangelization must inspire above all Belgium interests. Your principal objective in our mission in the Congo is never to teach the [n-word] to know God, this they know already. They speak and submit to a Mungu, one Nzambi, one Nzakomba, and what else I don't know. They know that to kill, to sleep with someone else's wife, to lie and to insult is bad. Have courage to admit it; you are not going to teach them what they know already. Your essential role is to facilitate the task of administrators and industrials, which means you will go to interpret the gospel in the way it will be the best to protect your interests in that part of the world. For these things, you have to keep watch on disinteresting our savages from the richness that is plenty [in their underground. To avoid that, they get interested in it, and make you murderous] competition and dream one day to overthrow you. Your knowledge of the gospel will allow you to find texts ordering, and encouraging your followers to love poverty, like “Happier are the poor because they will inherit the heaven” and, “It's very difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.” You have to detach from them and make them disrespect everything which gives courage to affront us...Your action will be directed essentially to the younger ones, for they won't revolt when the recommendation of the priest is contradictory to their parent's teachings. The children have to learn to obey what the missionary recommends, who is the father of their soul. You must singularly insist on their total submission and obedience, avoid developing the spirit in the schools, teach students to read and not to reason. There, dear patriots, are some of the principles that you must apply. You will find many other books, which will be given to you at the end of this conference. Evangelize the [n-word] so that they stay forever in submission to the white colonialists, so they never revolt against the restraints they are undergoing. Recite every day – “Happy are those who are weeping because the kingdom of God is for them.”¹

¹ <https://www.fafich.ufmg.br/~luarnaut/Letter%20Leopold%20II%20to%20Colonial%20Missionaries.pdf>

It seemed to me, growing up as a United Methodist, that our brand of Christianity carried on the tradition stated so explicitly by the Belgian Monarch. There was nothing emancipatory about the messages we received. Instead the demands of that brand of Christianity were like shackles: don't do this, don't do that. Almost anything I had an inclination to do like read a book instead of attending to my chores, or going mountain climbing in a group that included boys was sin and made you a terrible, an evil, a despicable person. And once you'd sinned, in the version of Methodism that I imbibed, you'd had it. You were a sinner.

It is my great joy to tell you today that it was the Catholic church that saved me. From junior school under Methodism, I attended a Catholic secondary school. It was there that I came to understand, because I was taught it, that sin was not irrevocable and final: that it could be followed by confession, repentance, penance and ultimately redemption. That was a life-changing lesson to learn.

Today I am a de facto Lutheran. I attend the Lutheran Church at home in Zimbabwe, and in Cambridge Massachusetts, where I am currently pursuing a fellowship for a few months. Nevertheless, I still practice some of the rites that I learnt as a young girl in secondary school: I make the sign of the cross, I like to partake of communion often, I say the rosary - sometimes - and appeal to the saints and angels, as I do to Jesus Christ and to God.

Moreover, even though I am a protestant, it is the Catholic Church that has enabled me to continue with my core business of developing women's voices through women's art in Zimbabwe. I do this through the Institute of Creative Arts for Progress in Africa (ICAPA) Trust, an NGO I founded in 2009. Icapa Trust aims to foster works of art, particularly in the powerful audio-visual media, that are imbued with a strong spirit of confidence and courage, and knowledge of how this confidence can be brought to bear in the democratic development of Africa.

ICAPA fosters new ways of thinking that bring about social change through the the creative economy. We envision a flourishing, fearless creative economy in Zimbabwe and Africa, driven by artists who sustainably create competitive, critical, engaging and engaged art. In this way ICAPA has, and continues, to contribute to a courageous high energy creative economy that positively transforms African creators, audiences and nations through innovative, entertaining, gripping, sustainable arts production. In all of this, we mainstream gender, through increasing the participation and production capacity of women in Zimbabwe and Africa in the arts, especially film, and through telling women's stories. ICAPA Trust is a women led organisation.

Times are always difficult for artists and arts organisations. This is particularly true of artists who live under repressive regimes, as it is my opinion we have in Zimbabwe. Many arts organisations, particularly those not aligned with the government, have closed. And the greater proportion of those that have closed are women's arts organisations. Women are always silenced disproportionately to men, and more so in times of crisis.

I am very happy to tell you that ICAPA has been able to continue existing, due to a micro grant that we have received for several years now from CAFOD, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development in the United Kingdom. CAFOD, has been a fundamental part of enabling me and ICAPA to survive and continue some of our work in the challenging times that Zimbabwe is going through. I share this to illustrate that while I am a protestant by baptism, confirmation and church membership and attendance, I live well together with the Catholic Church.

The question of how we can live well together is the question I am here to consider with you today.

The Economist magazine has called the challenges currently facing the world "the new world disorder".² Human Rights Watch in its World Report 2023, which is its annual review of human rights around the globe says "The obvious conclusion to draw from the litany of human rights crises in 2022—from Russian President Vladimir Putin's deliberate attacks on civilians in Ukraine and Xi Jinping's open-air prison for the Uyghurs in China to the Taliban's putting millions of Afghans at risk of starvation — is that unchecked authoritarian power leaves behind a sea of human suffering... We have witnessed world leaders cynically trading away human rights obligations and accountability for human rights abusers in exchange for seeming short-term political wins... the Biden administration, despite its rhetoric about prioritizing democracy and human rights in Asia, has tempered criticism of abuses and increasing authoritarianism in India, Thailand, the Philippines, and elsewhere in the region for security and economic reasons, instead of recognizing that all are linked."³

Of Zimbabwe, my country, the report says "The human rights climate in Zimbabwe deteriorated in 2022 without the government taking any meaningful steps to uphold rights and ensure justice for serious past abuses primarily committed by state security forces. There has been little progress on investigations into abductions, torture, arbitrary arrests, and other abuses against opposition politicians and activists."

As I stand here engaging with you, many freedom and democracy loving Zimbabweans are outraged at two recent atrocities.

² https://www.economist.com/the-world-ahead-2023?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&utm_campaign=a.23worldahead&utm_content=conversion.content.anonymous&utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=15798087560&ppcadID=144581141273&ppcgclid=CjwKCAiA5Y6eBhAbEiwA_2ZWIVMJO3wJuki9bvrRcu63ZV3B1Hg3gynuzuTGrpr_7Re_mGUPaL0_LBoCoT4QAvD_BwE&gclid=CjwKCAiA5Y6eBhAbEiwA_2ZWIVMJO3wJuki9bvrRcu63ZV3B1Hg3gynuzuTGrpr_7Re_mGUPaL0_LBoCoT4QAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds

³ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023>

In the first, shown in a video by the online news agency Zimlive, published on the 7th of January, that also circulated on social media, a group of older people, including senior citizens, are seen being flogged by Zanu PF youth. The attackers also intrude on the older citizens' privacy, demanding to know which political party they belong to, their names and age. In a later video one of the survivors said their cell phones were confiscated. Some phones were smashed, while others were pocketed. The survivors also said they had not attended a political meeting. A colleague was ill, and so they had gone to visit their colleague.

In a further incident, a few days later, 25 opposition members from an area called Budiro were arrested by the police for holding an opposition party meeting. The group included women who said they were sexually abused. The twenty five were remanded into custody without bail.

This happens at a time when an opposition member of parliament, Job Sikhala has been in pretrial detention at Chikurubi Zimbabwe's maximum security prison, since June 14 2022, without bail and without trial. Sikhala was arrested in the middle of last year following his pursuing a case in which a CCC activist, Moreblessing Ali, was abducted and murdered by ZanuPf supporters, her dismembered body being found in a well weeks after her disappearance.

These are just a few examples of the politically motivated violence that is currently occurring in Zimbabwe. There are many other kinds of violence taking place as well, such as violence against women, and child abuse and neglect at the family and national level. While I understand that all countries have such problems to some degree, many countries have recourse for the survivors of such violence.

The paucity of such recourse in Zimbabwe magnifies the violence and its effect. So, while I and ICAPA Trust, are living well together with an organ of the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe, we Zimbabweans amongst ourselves are not living well together.

Sub-Saharan African countries have been called names by at least one president of a powerful nation. As sub-Saharan Africans, our humanity is seen as not being on par with the humanity of other groups of people. Throughout history, melanated people have been seen as chattel, as human cattle, as ignorant and incompetent at the business of living well. Yet, when Enslavers and colonisers came to the continent, they found well-functioning, sustainable societies. This is true of whatever kingdom you look at - be it the 18th and 19th century kingdom of Dahomey in west African, now largely in Benin; be it the Kingdom of Kongo, that flourished between the 14th and nineteenth centuries, be it the Monomotapa Empire in what is now Zimbabwe, that was at its zenith from the 15th to the 17th centuries.

Europeans, on beginning their expeditions to Africa south of the Mediterranean, noted that as a rule in the cultures they visited, there were no jails. Yet the polities functioned with sufficient law and order to enable their cities to become important trading partners for the early European travellers. Indeed, it was the practices of the slave, trade introduced and conducted by the Europeans that undermined these well-ordered polities. These slave trade practices laid the foundation for the warlordism and lawlessness that still plague our continent.

The slave trade was followed by colonisation of intentionally weakened and exploited peoples. Scottish missionary and traveller David Livingstone was able to convert only one person throughout all his missionary activities. Analysing his failure, Livingstone concluded that the people were happy as they were. They were content with their social system, systems of government and lifestyle.

Livingstone went on to observe that in order to achieve the British Crown's vision of three Cs in Africa - Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation - the way of life of the people would have to be destroyed completely. And they did exactly that.

The way of life that Livingstone, other missionaries and various other nationals of European states, destroyed was a way of being that was governed by the system of ubuntu. Through Ubuntu, people in my part of the world, before engagement with the Europeans, had been able to live well together. Not perfectly, but well enough to maintain sustainable societies.

What do I mean by "ubuntu"?

In the Zulu language, the word for person is the noun "u-muntu". Ubuntu is a word derived from umuntu, that refers to the abstract quality or essence of being a person. In other words, to be a full person, you need the material physical body, but in that material physical body, must reside the abstract quality of ubuntu. Ubuntu can be conceived of as the quality of being that confers a state of practical humanity on beings embodied as we are - human beings.

In the days before African cultures were disrupted by slavery and colonisation, life was ordered by kinship. Kinship systems regulated how people interacted with each other from the nuclear to the extended family, and beyond. There was no writing, so people did not sit down to codify behaviour. Ubuntu was a practice of daily life. Instruction as to how to be a person with full humanity happened within the family and the community. It was in this way, within the family and through the community, that the norms of ubuntu were passed on.

The essence of ubuntu can be expressed in a greeting that we have in my part of the world, in Zimbabwe. As in all greetings everywhere, this greeting begins with an acknowledgement of the other. This is the "hello" part. Hello is followed by an inquiry into the other person's well-being.

This is the "how are you?" part of greeting. Where I come from, the response to "how are you" is not simply "I am well. How are you?" The essence of ubuntu is contained in the way that these two different sentences are linked. In my part of the world, the response to "How are you?" is "I am well, if you are well, too."

Kenyan academic, Micere Mugo, Professor Emerita and former Chair of African American Studies at Syracuse University, who is a scholar of ubuntu, reasons that the logical conclusion of not being well is death. Thus, the meaning of my region's greeting can be expanded to mean: "I am dead if you are dead, too"; Or "I live if you live too". Mugo formulates the central idea of "ubuntu" in this way: "I am because you are and since you are, therefore, I am."⁴

What a wonderful way of living, in which we take responsibility for our joint well-being and interconnectedness. Ubuntu is a normative system that results in the practice of living well together because of its assumption that a person can only live well when the people lived with in society also live well, so that all live well together.

The bad news is that I have painted a very rosy picture. The kinship bonds that I referred to earlier that stabilised society, that began in the nuclear family, and radiated out through the extended family into the community, and into the wider clan as far as the whole polity headed by the sovereign, were broken with the advent of European practices into our societies.

I liken this breaking of bonds to what happens when a molecule is broken up into its elements. When a molecule is broken up into its elements the individual atoms fly apart. They are no longer connected with each other. The forces that held the atoms resolve into charges on the individual atoms. The old stable composition is no more. It cannot be returned to because the atoms are scattered and may bond with other atoms in new ways to form new entities.

⁴Mugo, M, I Am Because We Are: The Imperative of UTU/UBUNTU for Transformational Scholarship, Lecture Montanta University, 2021; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKFEiKtEkOM>

This is why the first part of my title is that Ubuntu is dead. We shall never know ubuntu as a practice again, as it was known and practised by the by its original societies. Today South Africans are debating whether the ubuntu notion of being jointly responsible for our well-being is possible or not in a capitalist environment. Some South Africans now refer to the ubuntu obligation to look after the well-being of the destitute in the family, beginning with the nuclear family and extending outward, as "black tax". This is also one reason why politics malfunctions as it does in many African countries. The local MP or counsellor is looked upon as the local sovereign, not as the representative of the voice of the people to central government. Ubuntu cannot be practiced sustainably in the capitalist system that now reigns in the world.

If this is the case, and ubuntu cannot be practised, what are we left with? We are left with the knowledge of ubuntu. We are left with a philosophy of ubuntu, derived from the old practice. This philosophy can point us to ways of doing differently, in order to promote living well together. That is why for me it makes little sense to say "the monarch is dead, long live the monarch". It makes more sense to say "Ubuntu is dead in its original, practical form, but long live ubuntu in its new symbolic, philosophical form."

This is why I am so excited to be here today, as a protestant person, having an extended conversation in a Catholic setting about how we can live well together as physical and non-physical beings. That to me is the very essence of ubuntu.

Thank you for your attention.

Tsitsi Dangarembga