

In Search of Common Ground: Oral History, Human Rights and the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council¹

By

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If the United Nations is to meet the expectations of men and women everywhere—indeed, if the Organization is to take the cause of human rights as seriously as those of security and development—then Member States should agree to replace the Commission on Human Rights with a smaller standing Human Rights Council.²

We are all interconnected. We are one. Let us work together and learn from each other. Africa's Wisdom calls! Are you ready to listen with an open mind?³

If we were the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the most wealthy, the most powerful person—and then found all of a sudden that we were alone on the planet, it wouldn't amount to a hill of beans!⁴

We have to show that our values are not Western, still less American or Anglo-Saxon, but values in the common ownership of humanity, universal values that should be the right of the global citizen.⁵

In rejecting Western values, therefore, we are rejecting those things that are not only foreign to us but that seek to destroy the most cherished of our beliefs—that the cornerstone of society is man himself—not just his welfare, not his material wellbeing but man himself with all his ramifications. We reject the power-based society of the Westerner that seems to be ever concerned with perfecting their technological know how while

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² Report of the Secretary-General, 'In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights For All' United Nations General Assembly A/59/2005 fifty-ninth session agenda items 45 and 55, p. 45.

³ Speech given by a South African dignitary under the theme 'Aichi Expo 2005: The Wisdom of Africa: What would the World be Like If there were no Africans on Earth?' (Aichi, Japan, March 2005).

⁴ Bill Clinton, 'All you need is Ubuntu,' BBC News in http://www.newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazi...

⁵ Tony Blair, 'A Battle for Global Values,' in *Foreign Affairs*, (January/February 2007) <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20070101fessay8606/tony-blair/a-battle-for-global-v>

losing out on their spiritual dimension. We believe that in the long run that the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in the field of human relationship. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa—giving the world a more human face.⁶

Native society is not simply described as lacking in values...the native represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values...⁷

Abstract

The setting up of the United Nations Human Rights Council with a responsibility for promoting universal human rights at this crucial moment in human history must be appreciated as long as it will manage to facilitate dialogue and in the process breaking the strong bonds of Western hegemonic monologue and cultural imperialism. The current universalism is not a product of democracy and consensus, but was largely created through conquest and violence involving suppression and colonisation of African people as well as ‘inventions’ of African values and cultures. The main crisis in the current human rights regime is that it has taken the form of Euro-American liberalism masquerading as universalism, imposing its core values across the world as global values, and inevitably provoking contestations and resistance. Universalism should take the form of an achievement of progressive human efforts rather than a product of conquest and domination. Therefore, the task of setting the agenda for the Human Rights Council must focus on seeking more democratic ways of tapping into the diverse human voices and cultural diversities as building blocks for common interests and common conceptions of human rights. The challenge of re-imagining, recreating, remaking and reordering world governance in a new fashion, necessarily calls for the inclusion of the voices of the subaltern who are exposed to human rights violations across the world. The African continent and its people occupy a ‘subaltern’ position in global politics where voices from the African continent remain on the peripheries of global governance. Since the Human Rights Council is envisaged to be a forum for dialogue on thematic issues on all human rights, Africans need to seize the opportunity to be heard, rather than remaining as a problem to be solved. Oral history is ideally suited as a medium to bring the voices of the subaltern to the notice of the Human Rights Council and the Council itself could adopt oral history as its key methodology in its endeavour to understand different situations of human rights violations so as to break the silences imposed by governments, groups and individuals on some gross violations of human rights across the globe. The subaltern in turn could make full use of their oracy (skilful, confident and strategic use of the orality) to make themselves heard. Moving from theory to practice, the paper provide empirical examples where oral history has been deployed in strategic-political terms to contribute to the advancement of human rights struggles and battles. Finally, it grapples with the important question of whose values and whose voice should underpin the universal human rights discourse.

⁶ Steve Biko, *I write What I Like*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002), pp. 46-47.

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 32.

Introduction

The former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan concluded his report entitled, *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All*, by stating that:

At no time in human history have the fates of every woman, man and child been so intertwined across the globe. We are united both by moral imperatives and by objective interests. We can build a world in larger freedom—but to do it we must find common ground and sustain collective action.⁸

It was within this spirit of searching for a common ground that Annan proposed the establishment of the United Nations Human Rights Council, stating that:

The establishment of a Human Rights Council would reflect in concrete terms the increasing importance being placed on human rights in our collective rhetoric. The upgrading of the Commission on Human Rights into full-fledged Council would raise human rights to the priority accorded to it in the Charter of the United Nations. Such a structure would offer architectural and conceptual clarity, since the United Nations already has Councils that deal with two other main purposes—security and development.⁹

The spirit underpinning the United Nations reform is that of recreating and remaking the world order involving infusion of new progressive moral values into global governance institutions and persuading global opinion leaders to realise the imperatives of an interdependent world. The Human Rights Council is to be guided by the principles of universality, impartiality, objectivity, non-selectivity, constructive global dialogue and cooperation, with the following mandate, functions and responsibilities:

- Promotion of universal respect for the protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind and in a fair and equal manner.
- Addressing situations of violations of human rights, including gross and systematic violations, and make recommendations thereon.
- Promotion of effective coordination and mainstreaming of human rights within the United Nations system.
- Promotion of human rights education and learning as well as advisory services, technical assistance and capacity-building.
- Serving as a forum for dialogue on thematic issues on all human rights.
- Making recommendations to the General Assembly for the further development of international law in the field of human rights.
- Promotion of the full implementation of human rights obligations undertaken by States and follow-up to the goals and commitments related to the promotion and protection of human rights emanating from United Nations conferences and summits.

⁸ Report of the Secretary-General, 'In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All,' United Nations General Assembly Fifty-Ninth Session Agenda Items 45 and 55, A/59/2005, p. 53.

⁹ Report of the Secretary-General, 'In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All: Addendum: Human Rights Council: Explanatory Notes by the Secretary-General' in United Nations General Assembly A/59/2005/Add.1 Fifty-ninth session Agenda items 45 and 55.

- Undertaking a universal periodic review of fulfilment by each state of its human rights obligations and commitments, based on objective and reliable information.
- Contribution through dialogue and cooperation toward prevention of human rights violations and responding promptly to human rights emergencies.
- Assuming the role and responsibilities of the Commission on Human Rights.
- Working together in the field of human rights with governments, regional organisations, national human rights institutions and civil society.
- Submission of an annual report to the General Assembly.¹⁰

The issue of dialogue is emphasised as well as the spirit of inclusiveness and cooperation. It is also interesting to note that these reforms at global level are taking place at a time when Africa and Africans are engaged in what has come to be known as the *African Renaissance* that include recovery of positive African values and wisdom from the African past as well a vigorous struggle to make the African voice heard throughout the councils of the world affairs and claiming a space for a permanent seat (s) at the United Nations. African leaders like Thabo Mbeki of South Africa are raising the issue of the African voice within the ‘larger freedom.’ African leaders are caught up in very invidious position where they have resist Western domination at many fronts while at the same time asserting common humanity. They are in agreement with Kofi Annan that: Larger freedom implies that men and women everywhere have the right to be governed by their own consent, under law, in a society where all individuals can, without discrimination or retribution, speak, worship and associate freely. They must also be free from want—so that the death sentences of extreme poverty and infectious diseases are lifted from their lives—and free from fear—so that their lives and livelihoods are not ripped apart by violence and war.¹¹

There is very strong discourse that is pushing the point that for far too long, the African continent has occupied a ‘subaltern position’ in global power relations where its voice has not been taken seriously and that Western hegemony must be decentred.¹² African values have been ignored during earlier formulations of global declarations including even the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. This African reality was partly captured by Kofi Annan when he wrote that ‘we must recognise Africa’s special needs’ because the continent is affected by global problems of development, human rights and security ‘disproportionately.’¹³ Yes, one need to add that Africa must not just be taken as a problem to be solved but must also be seen as a contributor to positive global development. It has values that could give meaning to the fullness of human society.

This reality has provoked some African scholars like Abdul Karim Bangura and many others to think of what is now popularly known as ‘African solutions to African

¹⁰ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly 60/251: Human Rights Council, 3 April 2006.

¹¹ Report of the Secretary-General, ‘In Larger Freedom,’ p. 5.

¹² C. A. Diop, *The African Origin of Civilisation*, (Lawrence Hill, Chicago, 1974), S. Frederic (ed.), *Enduring Western Civilization*, (Praeger, Westport, 2005) and Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us*, (Vintage Press, Buffalo, 1975).

¹³ Ibid., p. 23.

problems.’ In line with this vision, African scholars are re-visiting African history in their search for best practices to underpin their systems of governance. They wish to see their values incorporated into global human rights instruments and declarations. Bangura has concluded that ‘a re-examination of African history reveals that traditional Africans possessed a strong sense of justice and a deep respect for law and human rights.’¹⁴ This argument stands in strategic contradiction to the traditional racist stereotypes whose key contours were that pre-colonial Africans were essentially savages who lacked civilised codes of behaviour and that primitive Africans were guided largely by instinct without any overarching social convention.

In a recent book edited by Adekeye Adebajo and Helen Scanlon entitled, *A Dialogue of the Deaf: Essays on Africa and the United Nations*, a number of African contributors emphasised the point that ‘if we are to have a UN that is truly representative of all its members, then the African perspective must be more adequately enunciated and understood than has previously been the case.’¹⁵ In a foreword to this book, Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane of Cape Town argued that:

For far too long, the UN system has benefited the wealthy at the expense of the poor, and the powerful at the expense of the weak. The challenge to the whole UN system in the twenty-first century is to put people first and especially those who most need protection, assistance, support, or perhaps even a voice.¹⁶

The essence of the debate in Africa at the moment is that for far too long, Africa has been treated as a problem to be solved than a voice to be heard. The UN reform process that was initiated by Kofi Annan and that began in September 2005 was seen as an opportune moment to try and break the fifty-year monologue and the ‘dialogue of the deaf between the rich North and the global South.’¹⁷ An edited volume by Pindelani Mathoma, Greg Mills and John Stremlau, entitled, *Putting People First: African Priorities for the UN Millennium Assembly* made a similar call for a better treatment of Africa in global politics.¹⁸ The issue of the African voice to be recognised is a major concern that needs urgent attention in this century where the issue of finding a common ground is burning. This is a point well captured by Helen Scanlon in her conclusion to *A Dialogue of the Deaf* where she said:

African voices raised during the formulation of any future reform initiatives are imperative, as any new model for global governance will affect the lives of Africa’s 800 million people.¹⁹

¹⁴ Abdul Karim Bangura, ‘African Peace Paradigms,’ (Unpublished paper presented at a seminar on peace, South Africa, 2006), p. 11. See also Bangura, ‘Ubuntu: An African Educational Paradigm that Transcends Pedagogy, Andragogy, Ergonagy, and Heutology,’ in *Journal of Third World Studies*, xxii, 2, (2005), pp. 13-53.

¹⁵ The Most Reverend Njongonkulu Ndungane, Archbishop of Cape Town, ‘Foreword’ in Adekeye Adebajo and Helen Scanlon (eds.), *A Dialogue of the Deaf: Essays on Africa and the United Nations*, (Fanele and the Centre for Conflict Resolution, Cape Town, 2006), p. xiii.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Pindelani Mathoma, Greg Mills and John Stremlau (eds.), *Putting People First: African Priorities for the UN Millennium Assembly*, (South African Institute of International Affairs, Johannesburg, 2000).

¹⁹ Helen Scanlon, ‘Conclusion,’ in A. Adebajo and H. Scanlon (eds.), *A Dialogue of the Deaf*, p. 281.

These African voices dovetail with the equally very vocal and very critical voices from other parts of the human globe about the inadequacies of a post-enlightenment modernity. This modernity is on trial because of its failure to curb the scourge of violence and war, to protect children and women from the effects of war, to protect the rights of indigenous peoples, and to guarantee democracy to all people, rich and poor. Worse still, the twentieth century saw the largest number of violent conflicts including two world wars as well as the Cold War conflagration that was not so cold at all in Africa.²⁰ While the twentieth century began as a century of promise and hope in world history, with technological revolutions and a belief in the possibility of human emancipation, it was equally the bloodiest century dominated by several of the most brutal states and brutal leaders the world has ever known.²¹

The current human desire across the world is to make the twenty-first century better than the twentieth century in terms of respect for human rights, tolerance of diversity and respect for difference. This was put clearly by Kofi Annan as part of what he termed larger freedom and where 'our guiding light must be the needs and hopes of peoples everywhere.'²² This is a very big challenge before humanity, requiring intellectual and political capital to respond to such pertinent questions as:

- Which democratic mechanisms/methodologies are to be utilised in creating more inclusive global governance institutions?
- Which values and wisdoms from across the world should be harnessed to inform ethos of global governance?
- Whose values should inform the ethos of global governance?
- How do we cater for the voices of the subaltern and make sure their views are taken on board as we set the agenda for the UN Human Rights Council?
- Is it possible to establish a foundational truth for this millennium?

In my analysis what is central in all this human endeavour to create humane society is the issue of values which has become very significant in this global age. Indeed if the race/colour line was the fundamental problem of the twentieth century as argued by William Du Bois, the twenty-first century's major problem is that of the 'culture line' involving clash of values, clash of cultures as well as clash of civilisations, as well as coalescence of some into global common values.²³ Samuel P. Huntington was the first scholar to put the issue of culture/civilization into the global high table of politics as he was forecasting on the nature of post-Cold War conflicts. Since the publication of his book *Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, many other scholars as well as politicians have confirmed the significance of culture/values/civilizations in shaping contemporary politics. One of Africa's well known academics and global intellectual

²⁰ John R. Hinde, *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2000) and Gunther H. Lenz and Kurt L. Shell (eds.), *Crisis of Modernity: Recent Critical Theories of Culture and Society in the United States and West Germany*, (Westview Press, Boulder, 1986).

²¹ One can think of fascist leaders in Germany and Italy, of Idi Amin in Uganda and other African dictators, military regimes in Latin America, the list is just endless.

²² Report of Secretary General, 'In Larger Freedom,' p. 5.

²³ Samuel P. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996).

luminary, Ali Mazrui has recently reinforced the fact that racial distinctions are on the decline and underlined that the culture line is pervading the human globe.²⁴ The debate on values/cultures/civilizations has been joined by politicians too.

In a recent article entitled *A Battle for Global Values*, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair captured the centrality of values in contemporary struggles including even the 'war against terrorism' that developed in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 disaster. He defined this war on terror as a battle for values and one that can only be won by the triumph of tolerance and liberty.²⁵ Blair made a number of controversial but important arguments that are relevant to the broader debate on universality of human rights as global values. He pointed out that Euro-American/Anglo-Saxon values represented humanity's progress throughout the ages and that these values were fought for and defended over time. According to him, globalisation is a positive process in that it begets interdependence and that interdependence underlay the necessity for a common value system. The key task of the 'civilized' world according to Blair, was to demonstrate that Euro-American values were not 'Western, still less American or Anglo-Saxon, but values in the common ownership of humanity, universal values that should be the right of the global citizen.' To Tony Blair, universal application of global values was the answer to poverty, injustice, and terrorism across the world. He emphasised that the struggle for global values has to be applied not selectively but to the whole global agenda. He defined the current global struggles crystallising around the mantra of 'war on terror' as a clash about civilization and not a clash between civilisations.²⁶ These are interesting arguments that demonstrate the desire by the West to universalise their conceptions of rights and democracy as global values. This is the West's common answer to the question of whose values should underpin global governance systems and institutions. It is a purely arrogant and hegemonic answer bereft of reflexivity and empathy for other civilizations, cultures/values that can be equally useful in the formulation of global systems of governance.

The discourse and the debate on values is itself very controversial and sometimes very flawed but at the same time very central in human search for a common ground. The discourse becomes very controversial when the 'happy-clappy' neo-liberal agenda and its democracy and human rights as global values is used even to invade weak nations by stronger ones and to hide extremely cruel and violent acts such as the occupation of Iraq by the West. On the other hand, it is great to have common values to underpin the co-existence of human being within the global village.

It is against this background that my contribution to the theme of *Oral History and Human Rights* will encompass the central issues of values as I map out how oral history could be positively harnessed to advance the cause of human rights and in the process try to bridge the gap between academia and activism. I will discuss three cases where oral

²⁴ A. Mazrui, 'Africa in the New World Disorder,' (Public seminar presentation, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), 15 January 2007.

²⁵ Tony Blair, 'A Battle for Global Values,' in *Foreign Affairs*, (January/February 2007) <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20070101essay8606/tony-blair/a-battle-for-global-v...>

²⁶ Ibid.

history was utilised to highlight human rights issues, including one instance where oral testimonies and oral submissions led to the crafting of a very democratic freedom charter. That way I hope to inspire human rights activists to realise that oral history could be positively used to influence public opinion and policy making.

Oral History and the Power of Oracy in Africa

Human rights violations are not part of popular history and the human rights discourse itself is not yet part of popular history. Human rights violations are part of hidden histories, known by victims and perpetrators only. Those who violated human rights do not want their acts to be known because human-ness does not accept heinous acts as normal. Most violations of human rights are not only surrounded by secrecy, but are also accompanied by silences on the part of victims. Silences are induced at various levels: by mental oppression, government surveillances, human resignation to fate, and lack of communication outlets to make testimonies.

Most human rights violations exist as part of memory of the violated groups, violated communities and violated individuals. Most oppressive regimes deliberately destroy all their records implicating them in human rights violations and commissions of enquiry on human rights violations are never made public.²⁷ This means that written record is not ideally suitable as a medium to understand cases of human rights violations. On the other hand, oral history is very useful for this purpose.

Oral history can be defined at many levels including historiographical, epistemological and methodological perspectives. The most common one is the methodological perspective where it is understood as a source of history that needs to be handled with extreme care since oral sources are different from written sources of history. Oral history is here defined in strategic-instrumentalist political terms where it directly assumes the role of an important weapon/instrument within human rights struggles. It become very useful to tap into the emancipatory power of oracy as the weapon of the violated. Oracy is here defined in strategic-instrumentalist-political terms of deploying the spoken word for purposes of exposing situations of human rights violations and forms of oppression by the subaltern. Here oral history takes the form of a deliberate strategy that is directed at making the voices of the subaltern heard and their concerns taken from being private into the public domain. Oral history then takes a combative form targeted at particular situations of oppression and breaking some silences about particular events. Gayatri Spivak defines the subaltern as people who have been equally instrumental in history as the Europeans and Americans, but have been under-represented, their voices disarticulated and their histories, values and wisdom decentred from mainstream knowledge.²⁸ Since the time of inscription of colonialism on African soil, Africans have suffered from voiceless-ness at global level.

²⁷ The cases in point are that of the fate of the Dumbutshena and Chihabakwe Commissions launched by the ZANU-PF governments in the 1980s to investigate Fifth Brigade atrocities in Matabeleland and the Midlands regions.

²⁸ Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998).

To change this situation, oral historians need to deploy oral history in strategic-instrumentalist, directed and combative terms so as to enable the subaltern to re-articulated its voice. Only this way can oral history constitute itself as a democratic way of reconstructing the history of the marginalised and disarticulated communities. The Indian Subaltern Studies Series initiated by the historian Ranajit Guha and others have proven beyond doubt that the subaltern has no archives and that orality is their only power.²⁹ Strategic essentialism is needed here. It is a strategy of deliberately representing of a group in a particular strategic way to achieve particular objectives.³⁰ Strategic essentialism is positively subversive of dominant discourses and is a useful weapon for the subaltern whose voice is rarely listened to or even captured. Since one of the challenges before us is how to capture the voices of the excluded, the poor, the vulnerable and the abused in order to factor them into the agenda of the United Nations Human Rights Council, this conception of oral history in strategic-instrumentalist terms makes oral history a useful instrument of enabling the subaltern to speak and be heard. The Italian oral historian, A. Portelli pointed out that the value of oral history is in the 'construction of suppressed memories' of non-hegemonic groups.³¹

The conception and definition of oral history adopted here can be termed activist definition as opposed to the common academic methodological and historiographical treatment of oral history in non-political and non-strategic terms. The publication of Jan Vansina's ground breaking book, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* in 1965³², inaugurated the feverish considerations of oral history in methodological and historiographical terms that has passed through three stages that can be summarised as: Giving Africa a history involving de-centering and countering Eurocentric narrations of Africa history and in the process establishing the modern discipline of African History in the 1960s.

Capturing African lives and experiences involving the use of individual oral testimonies to construct African social history

The focus on African imaginations, African voices and authenticity.³³

When Vansina wrote his book there was a general belief that African societies were oral societies. Vansina was quick to articulate this argument saying 'many African civilisations were to a great extent civilisations of the spoken word.'³⁴ In the present age literacy and orality co-exist in Africa and other parts of the world. One needs to be very careful not to fall into the trap of constructing Africans as 'oral' people and other people

²⁹ Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies 1: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1982) Paula Hamilton, 'The Oral Historian As Memorist,' in *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Winter-Spring 2005).

³⁰ G.C. Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, (Routledge, London, 1990).

³¹ A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastalli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, (SUNY Press, New, 1991)

³² Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1965).

³³ This historiography of oral history emerges clearly from the organization/themes of a recent book by Luise White, Stephan F. Miescher, and David W. Cohen (eds.). *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2001).

³⁴ Jan Vansina, 'Oral History and Its Methodology,' in Joseph Ki-Zerbo (ed.), *Methodology and African History: UNESCO General History of Africa Volume 1*, (UNESCO, Paris, 1981), p. 28.

as 'literate' people. Here the 'oral' is taken as the main voice of the subaltern and it does not have any connotations of inferiority and lack of civilisation.³⁵ What is emphasised is the issue of power differentials responsible for making African voices remain in the peripheries of global governance.

Commenting on the significance of the book *Voices of the Poor from Many Lands*, Muhammad Yunus, had this to say:

I have a very strong feeling that we don't care to know about the poor. We not only don't know about the poor, worse still, we love to make up our own stories to build our favourite theories around them. We keep our selves in a comfortable position by fortifying ourselves with these theories... We have trained our eyes not to see them, trained our ears not to hear them. When we want to hear them, we make sure we hear them the way we wish to hear them.³⁶

For the subaltern to be heard there is need for effective and strategic use of oracy to pothole dominant discourses. Oracy is defined by Austin Bukenya as the skilful, confident, and productive use of the spoken word mainly by the disadvantaged, exploited, and oppressed groups like women for purposes of empowerment.³⁷ Oracy has useful implications for African struggles to transcend marginalisation and lack of voice at global level. As noted by Bukenya:

Oracy implies not only the ability to speak, but also to manage, marshal and deploy the spoken word efficiently, for specific purposes, in specific context. Command of the spoken word means just that: power. Productive oracy would entail self-definition, self-assertion, negotiation of relationships, resolution of conflicts, claiming of rights, and indictment of their violation.

Oracy is not just words. It is holistic communication. It is attitude, it is posture, it is voice, expression, gesture, movement. It is also access to, and entitlement to, contexts, discourses and technologies.³⁸

I agree with Bukenya that Africa and Africans are currently suffering from 'systematic de-oracisation'.³⁹ Africa is a 'silenced continent' with a majority of 'silenced' people. Oracy is the key to breaking the boundaries of monologue or the dialogue of the deaf that Africa and Africans are subjected to at the global level. Breaking the silence entails harnessing oral history to capture the views and voices of the excluded and marginalised groups.

³⁵ Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Wailing for Purity' : Oral Studies in Southern African Studies,' in *African Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 2, (1995), pp. 16-31.

³⁶ See back page of Deepa Narayan and Patti Petesch (eds.), *Voices of the Poor from Many Lands*, (World Bank and Oxford University Press, New York, 2002).

³⁷ Austin Bukenya, 'Oracy and Female Empowerment in Africa' in Russell H. Kaschulla (ed.), *African Oral Literature: Functions in Contemporary Contexts*, (New Africa Books, Claremont, 2001), pp.32-38.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 33. See also P. Zirimu and A. Bukenya, 'Oracy as a Skill and Tool for African Development,' (Unpublished paper presented at the Colloquium on African Art and Culture: Festival African Art and Culture (TESTAC'77), Lagos, Nigeria, 1977).

³⁹ Ibid, p. 32.

Oracy as part of purposeful communication of pertinent issues and an aspect of dialogue forms an indispensable tool of putting African issues on the global table where global systems are crafted. Unless oral history is deployed strategically and in a directed way it may remain a mere source of history. But strategically deployed, oral history forms one of the few democratic ways of capturing African voices, particularly of the subaltern that are globally marginalised and silenced. Since the subaltern has no archives, all their concerns can only be well captured through their oral testimonies. That way oral history could be fruitfully used to transcend tyrannies of the written record and its elitist form. Strategically deployed, oral history is ideally placed to tape directly into the concerns, wishes and aspirations of the marginalised and oppressed peoples across the world. Oral history has the potential to capture stories seldom heard during crises such as war, famine, and floods. Using oral history strategically enables one to break the boundaries of silence surrounding violated individuals, groups and communities without an official media to communicate their experiences to the wider world.

Oral History for the Advancement of Human Rights Agenda

The process of oral history can be a medium of social and personal change in itself. Its emphasis is not so much the hard, cold, and dry facts but more of the soft, warm, moist aspects of human experience and social relations.⁴⁰ As noted by Mark Libin oral history enables those concerned with human rights violations and protection to capture voices of victims and even perpetrators without ‘mediation, preserving moving registers of emotion—voices cracking with tears, voices lowered in shame or raised in anger—that render the speaker present and knowable to the listener.’⁴¹ Oral historians can play a very significant role within human rights movements through capturing the realities of human rights violations, including capturing the emotions, anger and shame involved in the speeches of victims and perpetrators and recording these in videos, CDs and cassettes.

Example 1: Exposing Modern Slavery

The interesting modern example is the work of Zoe Todd and Kevin Bales, academics at Harvard University who in an endeavour to bridge the gap between academia and activism, have targeted the oppressive institution of modern slavery and strategically deployed oral history in capturing the testimonies of slaving people including child soldiers, sex slaves, domestic slaves, factory slaves, and agricultural slaves to produce a ground breaking book entitled *To Plead Our Own Cause: Narratives of Modern Slavery* containing direct voices of 100 slaves from around the world and helping to publicise their plight.⁴² Trodd and Bales strategically deployed oral history in a directed and target specific way in order to inform the world about the existence of around 27 million slaves in the world today. They also exposed the hidden dynamics of modern slavery.⁴³

Example 2: Drafting a Democratic Charter of Rights

The second example of how oral history was used to advance the cause of human emancipation is that of drafting of the Freedom Charter in South Africa that became a

⁴⁰ ‘Oral Histories: The Biographical Background of the Collective,’ in <http://www.stefan-szczelkun.org.uk/phd900.htm>

⁴¹ Mark Libin, ‘Can the Subaltern Be Heard? Response and Responsibility in South Africa’s Human Spirit’ in *Textual Practice*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (2003), p. 125.

⁴² Zoe Trodd and Kevin Bales, *To Plead Our Own Cause: Narratives of Modern Slavery*, (Cornell University Press, USA, 2007).

⁴³ ‘Oral history project uses captive voices to fight modern slavery,’ in <http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2000/10.26/05-slavenarrative.html>.

testament of the oppressed people of South Africa's aspiration for a non-racial and democratic society. The processes involved in the drafting of the Freedom Charter in 1955 are very instructive to us as we grapple with the setting of the agenda of the United Nations Human Rights Council. The methodology that was adopted was very democratic and inclusive of the views of many people. This how the Chartists put it: We, the political leaders of our people, would not simply give a directive as to the meaning of freedom. We would consult the people to tell us. They would draw up a Freedom Charter as a guide for us. We would consult the people in town and country, in every occupation, and across all the race and colour barriers of oppression. We would ask what shape they wish to give the freedom that was coming. And finally, we would compile what they demanded into a single Charter... We were asking people to draw up their own constitution for the future... We were going to ask them to speak of freedom and its meaning. And finally, we were going to ask them to send delegates to vote for that Charter of the future...⁴⁴

Oral history was strategically and positively deployed as an instrument to solicit for the voices of the people about their political future and nature of governance they preferred. Despite the limits imposed by the apartheid regime, the Chartists were able to come up with one of the most democratic Charters the world has never seen before because of the democratic route they took to draft the charter. The important lesson to learn from the way the Freedom Charter was drafted is that of inclusion of the voices of different people and capturing different interests into a charter. The people of South Africa were afforded an opportunity to use their oracy in shaping the nature of 'the good life that they seek for themselves and their children' and the people responded enthusiastically to this democratic way of shaping the future and made sure their visions were captured. Three thousand delegates approved the final document after it had been read section by section, in three languages.⁴⁵

During the transition from apartheid to democracy, again the subaltern in South Africa were given an opportunity through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to use their oracy to relate the stories of their oppression as the basis of redressing the wrongs of the past. Silence on the atrocities of both the liberation movement (s) and the apartheid regime was broken and a new rainbow nation was born.⁴⁶

Example 3: Breaking Silence Surrounding Genocide

The third example is of how oral history could be used in breaking the silence surrounding a genocidal act by a state. Between 1980 and 1987, the state of Zimbabwe deployed and unleashed the notorious Fifth Brigade into Matabeleland and the Midlands regions where the minority Ndebele ethnic group resides. The army was said to be

⁴⁴ 'The Demands of the Freedom Charter: Drawing Up the Demands of the Freedom Charter Adopted at the Congress of the People on June 26, 1955 published in *Sechaba*, June 1976 in <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/campaigns/cop/demands.html>.

⁴⁵ 'The Charter of our singing tomorrows' in http://www.joburg.org.za/2005/june/june24_history.stm

⁴⁶ Sarah Nuttal and Carli Coetzee (eds.) *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1998) and Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1998). See also *South Africa's Human Spirit: An Oral Memoir of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 5 Volumes*, (SABC, Johannesburg, 2000).

fighting against dissidents but the operation took the form of ethnic cleansing as well as the political dimension of violently crushing the opposition PF-ZAPU led by Dr Joshua Nkomo.⁴⁷ The Fifth Brigade operated under conditions of curfew and the media was barred from covering the activities of the military. Under the cover of curfew the Fifth Brigade committed serious atrocities including burying some people alive, bayoneting pregnant women, shooting school children, razing out homes and villages, burning some inside their houses and raping a lot of women.⁴⁸ Ex-ZIPRA combatants (those who had fought for independence under ZAPU) and their leaders were hunted and killed. An estimated twenty thousand Ndebele speaking people were killed and some disappeared up to today. Total silence surrounded these events as the government was quick to dismiss any reports that the army was randomly killing every Ndebele speaking person under the pretext of fighting the dissidents. The silence was broken in 1997 with the publication of *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1988* by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) and the Legal Resources Foundation (LRF).⁴⁹ These two human rights non-governmental organisations used oral history to gather information on the operations of the Fifth Brigade and the experiences of the Ndebele speaking people. They focused on one district in each province where the Fifth Brigade operated and carried in depth oral interviews with the victims of the Fifth Brigade and produced a very detailed report. In their justification for writing the report, this is how they put it: People who live in Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands know only too well what happened to them during the 1980s. Their lives were affected in serious ways by both government troops and also by dissidents and youth brigades at this time. However, most people from other parts of Zimbabwe still have no idea what it was like for those who were suffering. They have no idea how people still suffer as a result of the violence that took place. People who were affected also do not have ways of talking to people in other parts of the country about what happened. Ordinary people all over Zimbabwe need to know what happened during those years in their country.⁵⁰

This example demonstrates how oral history could be used to put pressure on the government to account for its activities. With the publication and production of over 2000 copies of *Breaking the Silence*, silence on the Matabeleland genocide was broken and became known. Because this episode was not part of popular knowledge, and in 1999 during the burial of Joshua Nkomo, President Mugabe came nearer to apologizing to the people of Matabeleland when he described the whole thing as a time of madness which must not be allowed to happen again. The three examples detailed above demonstrate how oral history could be harnessed to advance the cause of human rights and democracy.

⁴⁷ J. Alexander et al, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the 'Dark Forest of Matabeleland*, (Weaver Press, Harare, 2000).

⁴⁸ Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'The Post-Colonial State and Matabeleland: Regional Perceptions of Civil-Military Relations, 1980-2002,' in R. Williams, G. Cawthra and D. Abrahams (eds.), *Ourselves to Know: Civil Military Relations and Defence Transformation in Southern Africa*, (Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 2003).

⁴⁹ CCJP and LRF Report, *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1988*, (CCJP and LRF, Harare, 1997).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Strategic Essentialism and African Values

Kuan-Hsing Chen, a specialist in Asian cultural studies argued that:

Without re-inventing tradition, we have no ground to stand on; without roots, we do not know where we have come from; without critical spirit, we will only flow with the dominant currents to become reactive and reactionary.’⁵¹

Also making the case for strategic essentialism in African struggles for position in global politics is the acclaimed Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, who argued that:

You have all heard of African personality; of African democracy, of the African way to socialism, of negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up we shall not need any of them any more. But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are better.⁵²

Despite the fact that nobody these days doubt the fact that culture is a dynamic entity which makes and remakes itself continuously and that there are no pure cultures, the West still continues to strategically essentialise their values and globalising them as common human values and spreading them as universal truth through books, newspapers, radio and television. The same Western media is engaged in feverish negative representation of Africa and Africans. The African continent featured on CNN is a tragic one with starving women and children, with incurable diseases, and an abode of civil wars. This Western hegemonic idea has been articulated clearly by the British Prime Minister Tony Blair in a recent article on the battle for global values where he stated that: We have to show that our values are not Western, still less American or Anglo-Saxon, but values in the common ownership of humanity, universal values that should be the right of the global citizen.⁵³

Such thinking is seen by Africans as neo-liberal imperialism. Again such hegemonic and essentialist thinking feed and reinforce bifurcation and polarisation of human-rights discourse into universalism versus cultural relativism. For Africans to regain their dignity and for them to project their voice at the global level, they have to solidify their identity and mobilise their values just like all human being the world over. Strategic essentialism becomes useful as a power issue whereby the West has the privilege to define its identity and its values and to deploy these strategically to remain on the top of the ladder of global power configuration. As noted by many scholars including V. Y. Mudimbe, African identity and values have been defined and invented by others.⁵⁴ The debate on essentialism become very political when some scholars become very quick to deny Africa and Africans the opportunity to define their own identity and values. When Africans

⁵¹ Kuan-Hsing Chen, ‘Introduction: The Decolonization Question,’ in Kuan-Hsing Chen (ed.), *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, (Taylor and Francis, London, 1998), p. 8.

⁵² Chinua Achebe quoted in Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*, (Verso Publishers, London, 1997), p. 179.

⁵³ Blair, ‘A Battle for Global Values.’

⁵⁴ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1998).

begin to project and present their own identity and distil values from their history and culture, they are quickly told that theirs are inventions of colonialism.

Even the adoption of the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights [Banjul Charter] in 1981 as an attempt to bridge the gap between the forces of universalism and the forces of cultural relativism by Africans was subjected to serious criticism. Although there are some like Pal Ahluwalia who saw sense in the adoption of such a charter to the extent of writing that:

What is different about the African Charter is that it is a unique document which seeks to include African values whilst recognising the importance of the internationally accepted declarations and covenants of human rights.⁵⁵

The criticisms have included the following:

Its emphasis on collective rights rather than individual rights.

Its emphasis on performance of duties by every African.

Reduction of rights protection to those defined in national law.

No clear restraint upon governments' power even to create human rights unconscious laws.⁵⁶

The criticism also touched on the powerlessness of implementing agencies such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the power vested in the Assembly (of Heads of State), a political body that was not likely to be an enthusiastic guardian of human rights.⁵⁷ While some of the criticisms were valid, the key problem is that Western scholars and politicians are fond of saying the right things for wrong reasons about initiatives from Africa. The philosophy permeating western thought is that nothing positive could come from the 'dark continent.'

Any endeavour to raise issues of African values and African identity faces serious resistance from the anti-essentialist scholars. These scholars go to the extent of doubting whether there is anything like Africa in the first place. The anti-essentialists are quick to raise issues of differentiation and heterogeneity within Africa. The anti-essentialist scholars raise such questions as:

Does Africa exist as a homogenous cultural entity from Cape to Cairo?

Is there anything like common African values and African wisdom?

Who defines African values and African wisdom?

Taking an anti-essentialist position Terence Ranger raised the issue of invention of tradition, arguing that what exists as African oral tradition, African custom, African culture, African wisdom and African values is in reality re-inventions of colonialism as well as African reconstructions. Ranger added that:

⁵⁵ Pal Ahluwalia, *Politics and Post-Colonial Theory: African Inflections*, (Routledge, London and New York, 2001), p. 94.

⁵⁶ Claude E. Welch, 'The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights,' in *Human Rights Quarterly*, Volume 14, No.1, (1992), pp. 43-61.

⁵⁷ Thomas Buergenthal, *International Human Rights in a Nutshell*, (West Publishing, New York, 1988).

As for historians, they have at least a double task. They have to free themselves from the illusion that the African custom recorded by officials or by many anthropologists is any sort of guide to the African past. But they also need to appreciate how much invented traditions of all kinds have to do with the history of Africa in the twentieth century and strive to produce better founded accounts of them....⁵⁸

One needs to pose a challenging question here that if colonialists were free to re-invent African traditions and re-define African values for instrumentalist colonial purposes, is it not only very pertinent for Africans to be given a chance to define themselves and their values for purposes of liberating themselves from colonial yoke? Are values and identities not at the centre of power struggles? Is naming not part of claiming something as one's own? Is denying Africans the chance to present their own identity and define their values not part of the broader politics of keeping Africans in a 'subaltern position' within global power politics?

The issue at stake is power differentials here. When Africans begin to assert their identity, their history, and their values in positive terms compared to the colonial strategic appropriations, re-inventions and re-deployment African traditions and values for purposes of disempowerment, those who have claimed for themselves superiority of their cultures and values begin to shake and to take anti-essentialist defensive positions. Richness of African traditions and values need to be mobilised in this current struggle to position Africa within global politics.

What is crucial to note is that as people across the world become critical of modernity and as they imagine a new future, the issue of which values should guide society becomes very pertinent. On the African continent, the idea of African Renaissance is predicated on using insights from pre-colonial past, African traditions and African culture to inform the Africa struggles for development and for continental ascendancy into the centre of global power politics. This African drive for space in global governance has seen the emergence of scholars committed to recovery of progressive aspects of African history, African values and African culture to assist in the solution of intractable problems of conflict for instance. Vasu Gounden, the Director of the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) based in South Africa, writing a foreword to Jannie Malan's book *Conflict Resolution Wisdom from Africa* and stated that:

We have held a firm belief, for a long time, that Africa has a rich heritage and history, supplemented by a colourful oral tradition that is pregnant with knowledge and expertise. We do not therefore have to look far for the answers to our challenges. Our problem today is that the intrusion of modernity and its attendant features, especially the gravitation of communities to urban life, has robbed the oral tradition of its utility as a tool for transferring centuries of useful life experiences and communal approaches to problem solving.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid. See also Terence Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa,' in Terence Ranger and Olufemi Vaughan (eds.), *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-Century Africa*, (Macmillan, London, 1993), pp. 62-111.

⁵⁹ Jannie Malan, *Conflict Resolution Wisdom from Africa*, (ACCORD, Durban, 1997), p. 4.

The beginning of the new millennium inspired many people across the globe who hoped for re-invention of human values in order to realise broader human rights and democracy. Cascading from this optimism was the expectation of a new human rights regime that was more inclusive and effective than the previous one that was spoiled by Cold War conflagration and proxy war across the world. This optimistic mood carried the world leaders to New York for United Nations' Millennium Summit where they adopted United Nations Millennium Declaration stated that:

We believe that the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalisation becomes a positive force for all the world's people...Only through broad and sustained efforts to create a shared future, based upon our common humanity in all its diversity, can globalisation be made fully inclusive and equitable. These efforts must include policies and measures, at the global level, which correspond to the needs of developing countries and economies in transition and are formulated and implemented with their effective participation.⁶⁰

It was against this era of optimism that United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) boldly stated that 'developed in a state-centred world, the international system of human rights protection is suited to post-war era, not the era of globalisation.'⁶¹ Three key criticism were levelled against current human rights universe. First is the narrow legalist conception, which allows only states to be parties to the conventions, meant to protect human rights. What we currently have is a state-centred human rights regime. This approach has failed to capture the existential variety of non-state actors capable of gross and systematic human rights violations as well as protection of human rights. What is needed is to transcend this narrow state-centric conception of human rights through 'giving voice and choice to the powerless within power structures.'⁶² The second major problem is identified by Michael Goodhart and he locates it directly within the classical liberal theory of human rights and it relates to the 'artificial separation of the 'public' and 'private' realms. This has led to the 'exclusion of non-state actors and left some people, especially women, particularly vulnerable and subject to violations by private actors who dominate not only the public but also the private domain, including family.'⁶³ The third problem was raised by anthropologists who since the drafting of the Universal Declaration in 1948 have remained critical of universalisation of human values based on Western civilisation.

Anthropologists like Melville Herskovits criticised 'what they perceived as the ethnocentric extension of absolutist Western values' during the drafting of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1947. Herskovits in particular urged the international community 'to respect cultural differences.'⁶⁴ In 1947, the American

⁶⁰ United Nations Millennium Declaration.

⁶¹ UNDP, *Human Development Report*, 2000, p. 43.

⁶² George J. Andreopoulos, Zehra F. Kabasa Arat, and Peter Juviler, 'Introduction,' in G. J. Andreopoulos et al (eds.) *Non-State Actors in the Human Rights Universe*, (Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, 2006), pp. xviii-xiv.

⁶³ Michael Goodhart, 'Human Rights and Non -State Actors: Theoretical Puzzles,' in G. J. Andreopoulos et al (eds.) *Non-State Actors in the Human Rights Universe*, (Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, 2006), pp. 23-30.

⁶⁴ Richard A. Wilson, 'Human Rights, Culture and Context: An Introduction,' in Richard A. Wilson (ed.), *Human Rights, Culture and Culture: Anthropological Perspective*, (Pluto Press, London, 1997), p. 1-2.

Anthropological Association issued a 'Statement on Human Rights' that was submitted to the UN Commission on Human Rights, emphasising Western cultural biases in the Draft UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights:

It will not be convincing to the Indonesian, the African, the Indian, the Chinese, if it lies on the same plane as like documents of the earlier period. The rights of man in the Twentieth Century cannot be circumscribed by the standards of any single culture or be dictated by the aspirations of any single people.⁶⁵

Supporting the stand taken by earlier anthropologists, Richard A. Wilson recently added that, 'In so doing, he [Herskovits] defined the roles of the anthropologists as advocates of indigenous peoples who would defend them from attempts by international agencies such as the UN to globalise a set of 'western' moral values.'⁶⁶ However, since the days of Herskovits, anthropologists have moved away from the simple rejection of global values and norms to a position where they appreciate the argument of universalisation of human rights value based on the appreciation of the reality concerning 'globalisation of cultural, economic, and political processes.'⁶⁷ The idea of a 'post-cultural world' facilitated by economic and commercial transactions, global communications, transnational movements of capital, and huge movements of populations has come to be accepted by anthropologists. They advocate for 'contextualisation, interpretation and negotiation' of a multiplicity of values 'into and with local situations.' Hence, Wilson concluded that: Thus our study of human rights becomes an exploration of how rights-based normative discourses are produced, translated, and materialised in a variety of contexts.⁶⁸

Alongside acceptance of globalisation, African leaders are also pushing the agenda of African Renaissance pivoted on recovery of positive aspects of African civilisation, African culture, and African wisdom in the re-making of Africa.⁶⁹ One of the widely discussed key contours of African culture that is permeating the ethos of African Renaissance is the discourse of 'ubuntu' as a value that Africa offers to the world. *Ubuntu* means humanness that has crystallised around African communal solidarity. *Ubuntu* encapsulates the key idea that the self is defined in terms of relationships to others and that happiness and fulfilment are to be found within these relations. It enables human beings to acknowledge and appreciate unity in their humanity despite differences.⁷⁰ The Nobel Peace Prize Winner and Archbishop Desmond Tutu stated that: Africans have this thing called UBUNTU...the essence of being human, it is part of the gift that Africa will give the world. It embraces hospitality, caring about others, being

⁶⁵ Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association, 'Statement on Human Rights,' in *American Anthropologist*, Volume 49, (1947), p. 543.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ngwabi Bhebe and Terence Ranger, 'General Introduction,' in N. Bhebe and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Historical Dimensions of Democracy and Human Rights in Zimbabwe: Volume One: Pre-Colonial and Colonial Legacies*, (University of Zimbabwe Publications, Harare, 2001), pp. xiii-xiv.

⁶⁸ Wilson, 'Human Rights, Culture and Context: An Introduction,' pp. 8-14.

⁶⁹ Mose Oke, 'Cultural Nostalgia: A Philosophical Critique of Appeals to the Past in Theories of Re-Making Africa,' in *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 15 (3), 2006, pp. 332-343.

⁷⁰ Workineh Kelbessa, 'Re-Mapping Global Realities: The Necessity of Including African and Other 'Third World' Voices,' (Paper presented at International Conference on 'Crisis in Africa at the Beginning of this Millennium: The Response of Philosophy, Science and Religion at Seat of Wisdom Seminary, Owerri, Nigeria, March 21-25 March 2006), p.9.

willing to go an extra mile for the sake of others. We believe a person is person through another person, that my humanity is caught up, bound up and inextricable in yours. When I dehumanise you, I inexorably dehumanise myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms and, therefore, you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own community, in belonging.⁷¹

Ubuntu is an ideology of reciprocity, a 'tradition of giving something to the people as well as taxing them.' It entails a sub-ideology of limitation on the powers of authority and of respect for the rights of humans.⁷² This ideology of *ubuntu* is said to permeates the broad spectrum of African civilisations spread across the continent. Like all ideologies the world over, *ubuntu* was articulated in varied idioms and varied languages. The Sotho/Tswana traditions that emphasised the maxim that 'a chief is a chief because of the people' speaks directly to the African notions of governance, justice, and the government's duties to the people.

Similarly, the institution of *kgotla* among the Tswana has direct relevance to the notions of direct democracy, justice, equality and tolerance.⁷³ Among Nguni societies two popular proverbs captured their conceptions of human relations and the relations of the ruler to the ruled. These were *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a human being is a human being because of the people) and *inkosi yinkosi ngabantu* (a king is a king because of the people). In short, what permeated and was central in human relations was the human being. Even those with power enjoyed that power because of the people. Without the people there is no king. This public ideology underpinned contours of reciprocity, solidarity, communality, legitimacy and accountability. The emphasis was on interdependence of human beings. All this was underwritten by a strong kinship ideology and the nation as an extended family under a revered but accountable leader. The current global village must be re-imagined as an extended family underwritten by human kinship ideology, then such problems as racism, exclusion, oppression, xenophobia, exploitation can be minimal. The liberal fashioned world emphasising individuality over collective/communal rights has created selfishness, exploitative impulses as opposed to human brotherhood and sisterhood consonant with the notion of a global village and the spirit of interdependence among human beings.

However, anti-essentialist have even dismissed the discourse of *ubuntu* as just nothing unique but a reflection of values common to all pre-industrial societies. While at the same time, these anti-essentialists are not equally critical of essentialism if practised by Westerners. Hidden under the garb of anti-essentialism, the West is even trying deny that African culture is communal compared to Western cultures that are individualistic in nature.

⁷¹ Quoted in Mukanda Mulemfo, *Thabo Mbeki and the African Renaissance*, (Actual Press (Pty) Ltd, Pretoria, 2000), pp. 57-58.

⁷² Stanlake Samkange and Tommie Samkange, *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Philosophy*, (Graham Publishers, Salisbury, 1979).

⁷³ Stimela Jason Jingoes, *A Chief Is A Chief by the People*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1975). See also Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im and Francis Deng (eds.), *Human Rights in Africa: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, (Brookings Institution, Washington, 1990) and John Holm and Patrick Molutsi (eds.), *Democracy in Botswana*, (Ohio University Press, Athens, 1989).

Conclusions

As long as the phenomenon of racism is alive across the world and is being used to create hierarchies among human beings, finding a common ground to install larger freedom remains part of global rhetoric. As long as such issues as trade regimes continue to push the African people into a 'subaltern position' within the global village, the notion of global citizenship remains a Western fallacy. As long as the West continues with its drive to install its Western values and broadcast them across the world as global values, the ideal of common ground remains far fetched.

On the other hand, there is general consensus on the reality that the world that was fashioned and underpinned by enlightenment ideas of rationality and technological advancement created modern cities with their problem of street children and the homeless in Africa. Modernity and its technology produced the gun as well as the dreaded weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that are even feared in the West itself (the citadel of modernity). To many people, imagination of the world on the mirror of Washington, London, Tokyo, Amsterdam, Berlin, and Paris, has proven to be problematic. Not every human being is catered for and not every human being enjoys the beauty of these cities. There is too much individualism in these cities as well as reinforcement of egoism that is not consonant with the notion of a global village.

The reality that must be accepted is that human beings have always engaged in invention and reinvention of their identities and cultures across different historical epochs for strategic and progressive purposes as well as for purposes of excluding others. Every political epoch is remembered in terms of its defining myth.⁷⁴ For the African continent and Africans, the African Renaissance is their defining myth of the moment. Africans cannot claim the 21st Century without a defining myth, lest they just remain flowing with the dominant currents constantly invented and re-invented by the dominant Euro-American world. This is no time for being always 'reactive and reactionary' as put forward by Kuan-Hsing Chen, it is time for assertion of African agency including putting on the global table progressive ideas and values from Africa.

As the human globe reconstitute itself into a 'global village,' the emphasis on individual rights is no longer adequate and sufficient as the basis of peaceful human co-existence for this extended global family. The image of the human globe as a 'village' raises the question of the importance of communal rights if this village is to be habitable. It also raises the issue of values to underpin life in this village. Blair want this village to be governed by Anglo-Saxon/Euro-American values predicated of capitalistic individualism and materialism. Africans are saying no-- this village should be governed by the spirit of *ubuntu* which emphasises interdependence of human beings. Under *ubuntu* there is space for the subaltern to survive. *Ubuntu* emphasises the importance of empathy, sharing and cooperation. Already *ubuntu* is gaining currency and supporters in the West to the extent that Bill Clinton, a former president of America, advised the Labour Party of the United

⁷⁴ Touraji Atabaki, 'Beyond Essentialism: Who Writes Whose Past in the Middle East and Central Asia?' in Inaugural by Dr Touraj Atabaki, Extraordinary Professor of the Social History of the Middle East and Central Asia in the University of Amsterdam, Friday, 13 December 2002), p. 13.

Kingdom to remember that ‘society is important because of ubuntu.’⁷⁵ Yes, ubuntu can form a sound basis for common ground as long as the following contours of *ubuntu* are taken into account:

A person is only a person through relationship to others.

Forgiveness and reconciliation as the foundation of a harmonious society.

Cater for the hungry and the poor.

Emphasis on *amalungelo abantu* (people’s rights).

One treating other human beings as one would like to be treated by others.

Communalism and togetherness as the basis of human living.

Accountability by leaders.

Sharing of economic wealth.

Equality of human beings.

Sanctity of human life.

Strategic essentialism is very necessary in the African struggle for ascendancy into the centre of global politics where global governance is negotiated and crafted. Western ideological hegemony is propped up by strategic essentialism of Western culture, western tradition as well as customs. To subvert such hegemony, the African world view and its values need to be strategically essentialised, robustly broadcasted and factored into global governance institutions.

Oral history remains a valuable tool/instrument in this Africa struggle as it is capable of capturing the voices of the subaltern, and is open to strategic deployment to advance the African and global human rights agenda.

The world has reached a crucial stage where values from different parts of the human globe need to be harnessed to inform and underpin the human drive for more responsive, more inclusive and more humane global governance and human rights architecture. Where cultural relativism and universalism meet that would form common ground for celebration of diversity as global richness but still accepting common humanity.

⁷⁵ Bill Clinton, ‘All you Need is Ubuntu,’ in BBC News.