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Living Ubuntu: The struggles of Abahlali BaseMjondolo as an African philosophy in the making

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Abstract

What does it mean to engage in a philosophy of struggle and emancipation in our South African context? As part of my MA research I took an internship with Abahlali BaseMjondolo, a shack dwellers' movement whose office is based in central Durban. Their members reside in various settlements within KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape. Whilst interning at the movement I conducted interviews with some of their members, using this experience to gain insight into the movement's theory and philosophy. Here I was challenged by what it means to do research using narrative as the foundation of my work. It is through narrative that one can tackle the problematic representations of black people in academia and society. I argue that in this movement a philosophy is at work. Their philosophy is based on the lived experience of struggle. As producers of knowledge, I argue that they represent the workings of Ubuntu. Using Maboge B. Ramose's (2002) explanation of 'Ubuntu as philosophy' I show how it can help us understand what it means to be human and how this is being affirmed in spaces of struggle. As agents of struggle we (black people) must be recognised for how we create knowledge. Ubuntu becomes the means through which we can map out the ways in such recognition can be understood and which an African philosophy is being being practiced. It is this recognition that is at the heart of the movement's philosophy of 'Abahlalism' which demonstrates the complexity of black experience in the space of social movement struggles.

Towards a new understanding of social movements

> The new sociology will get its emancipatory instinct back once it has deciphered the experiences of Karl Marx's visit to Algiers in 1882 as retold to Frantz Fanon by an inmate of the clinic he was reforming and whose dementia he was studying, who happened to be, as he claimed, a waiter at the Imperial Hotel who was looking after the convalescing patriarch of communism. In turn, both the waiter's and Fanon's narrative was researched by an Algerian-born woman whose post-colonial thesis on colonial psychology and the revolutionary psychology of Fanon had her hospitalised and then in a wheelchair for being a westernised whore.

> Theoretical riddle as told by Ari Sitas: *Voices that Reason: Theoretical Parables* (2004).

The significance of any social movement lies in how their work affirms the humanity of their members. Abahlali BaseMjondolo is such a movement whose struggle goes beyond the acquisition of municipal services. The struggle is for their members to be recognised as human beings and to be treated as such (Zikode 2006). Their work is expressed through their philosophy of 'Abahlalism'. This is based on their experiences of being economically marginalized and excluded from political processes that directly affect their lives. They engage with this struggle by forming a space in which their ideas can be collectively organised, which they describe as the 'University of Abahlali'.

In their work we see how a theory is made in tangent to the struggle of being marginalized as black people. Through their narrative I tease out the complexities of what it means to be black people in the space of struggle. In doing so, I show how this narrative offers us challenging ways in which research is conducted by emphasising the importance of representation of black people within our work as academics. The theories and philosophies that are worked on in the university must be tested alongside the narratives of those in struggle if we are to understand their relevance in our world.

It is through this space struggle that an Ubuntu philosophy can provide a means in which we can guide our understanding of black lives in a struggle to have their humanity recognized. Using Magobe B. Ramose's (2002) description of 'Ubuntu as a philosophy' we see how the human is defined and how this description sets the parameters for how we affirm our humanity. With this description at play, the movement is not only the creator of knowledge but also affirms the humanity of their members. 'Ubuntu as philosophy' provides a means of understanding how one's assertion of dignity is both procedural and an intellectual engagement, which I argue is being practiced through the movement's philosophy of 'Abahlalism'.

Why Abahlali BaseMjondolo?: A Space To Question Our Research Practice

The significance of this movement is best seen in how it has persisted. In 2005, in the community of Kennedy, a township in Durban, KwaZulu Natal, its members engaged in an impromptu protest by blocking the street. They were promised land by the director of housing and the ward counsellor, but were deceived (Zikode 2006). The community were meant to be moved to the vacant land on Clair

Estate for housing but would later find that bulldozers were digging up the area to build a brick factory (Zikode 2006). The community members blocked the road stopping the construction:

> The police beat us, their dogs bit us and they arrested fourteen of us. We asked what happened to the promised land. We were told 'Who the hell are you people to demand this land?' This betrayal mobilised the people. The people who betrayed us are responsible for this movement (Zikode 2006).

The community was lied to and their municipal representatives responded with violence. It is from such a context that the movement "now has tens of thousands of supporters from more than thirty settlements" (Abahlali BaseMjondolo 2006). This movement refuses to be reduced to struggles for "service delivery". From its inception Abahlali has been calling for the inclusion of its people in the decision-making process where those in positions of power are meant to act in the interest of those they represent.

In June 2012, I made an application to Abahlali asking them for permission to intern at their offices and conduct interviews with their members. I undertook this investigation as part of the research component of my Master's degree. My intention was to move beyond the researcher-subject dynamic of knowledge excavation. I would learn from them and provide my labour with the intention of our interaction being one of mutual gain. The narratives of their members are the basis for their theory and thus I would have to learn about the individual experiences and thoughts of Abahlali members.

Nthabiseng Mostemme in 'Loving in a time of hopelessness: On township women's subjectivities in a time of HIV/AIDS' (2007) argues for the importance of using narratives when doing research on the lives of people experiencing marginalization. Motsemme (2007) examines the under-explored lives and lived experiences of woman from the province of KwaZulu Natal, the worst hit by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa. Here she argues for the location of socio-historic and cultural frameworks when examining the sexualities of African youth. In doing so she is given the opportunity to describe issues of "personhood, choice, risk….and more generally how meanings are generated in times of social break down" (Motsemme 2007).

Where approaches to the study of the lives of these woman (including ones on socio- economically precarious people or other marginalized groups) tend to be individualist in their focus of study, such studies end up focusing on high-risk behaviours and high-risk personality traits such as "low self-esteem and low internal locus and so on" (Motsemme 2007). Mostemme (2007) goes on to argue that such studies posit solutions in terms of changing the personality traits of those they examine. The dominant use of survey research methods affirms such a position, where psychological models of behaviour are structured through epidemiological concerns (Motsemme 2007). Those being studied are therefore framed as "the problem", where the solution lies in changing their behaviours and understandings of their own lives. This argument – of individuals needing to "pull themselves up by their own boot straps" – greatly misinterprets the situation. What results is research that tends to exclude discussions "on the diverse social, cultural, economic and political factors potentially influencing or shaping sexual experience" (Motsemme 2007).

Such 'behaviourist' methods of research create 'static' notions of the sexualities of black women. From here a discourse emerges where their bodies are framed as being a "dangerous, polluted person who is a potential carrier" (Motsemme 2007). These narratives function to reinforce notions of women living in poverty as having a "symbolic and physical pollution" (Motsemme 2007). Motsemme (2007) argues for an analysis of these women's lives that stems from how they navigate their lives in the township and how they talk about lives in "time of social fragmentation (and reconfiguration)".

In her work Motsemme (2007) found that it was through narratives that these women see the impact of the breakdown of social fabric through the experience of displacement. Motsemme (2007) argues that this offers insight into the histories of violation experienced by women in South Africa within social studies. Motsemme (2007) furthers this argument by exploring such narratives and is able to realise "why young women are imagining relationships with each other, their families as well as their sexual partners in particular ways" (Motsemme 2007).

The idea of narrative becomes especially important for understanding the experiences of those within the Abahlali movement. It helps researchers go beyond the rhetoric of protest and 'service delivery'. Looking at the ways in which members relate to their context gives us a deeper understanding of the movement. An example of this understanding is evident when we consider the members' past experiences with researchers and academics. It is here that the concept of what it means to conduct research is challenged. During one of my interviews I asked one of the committee members what they thought the role of the academic should be:

> You know, since academics have access to Abahlali, to the life of the poor, to the lives of the poor through Abahlali, they get first-hand information of how things are at grassroots level. They should be standing up and take that reality to government officials because they are being recognised and we are not recognised. So their role would be pretty much … unlike the sugar-coated pill that they used to sell to other countries, that everything is running smooth in South Africa, everybody is happy. (Personal interview: September 2012).

It is here that the concept of listening becomes vital. Academics must engage with the ideas of those they are writing about. I was not present to simply collect data but to understand who the people of the movement are.

I took up this challenge of representation by taking pictures of the things I saw when working with the movement. I armed myself with my voice recorder, note pad and Minolta X-300 film camera. I had recently purchased the camera and was doing research on the best film for it. This technology represented the very limits of my thinking within academia. I learnt how the earliest colour reference cards used in the creation of film are biased towards light skin (Zhang 2015). It would only be from the 1970s that this changed, when wooden furniture makers and chocolatiers asked Kodak to create a film that was able to capture wood and chocolate hues (Zhang 2015). The very camera that I was using was tainted by racist historical exclusion where darker hues were only an afterthought.

A recent online article from The Conversation entitled 'How art and technology helped bring faces of the dead to life' (May 2019) argues for the importance of images of communities who had their land stolen, and reflects on their meaning to their descendants (who continue to feel the effects of this

marginalization). The use of archaeological research and imaging technologies were used to identify the faces of those whose land was unethically acquired by the University of Cape Town in the 1920s (May 2019). Their descendants were included in the project, in that they requested to see the faces of their relatives.

Facial reconstruction becomes culturally visible when it is applied to archaeological research. The article argues for the importance of the "facial image [which] becomes a powerful and complex medium, fostering connections between historical events and personal lifeways, and re-establishing a degree of personhood" (May 2019). It is in this context that images of passed loved ones represent repressed knowledges that help us understand the past and affirm their existence within history (May 2019). Here the image serves a similar purpose in the context of Abahlali in that it contributes to the archive of their lives. We access a history of the movement that shows the various faces of those who form part of the movement. Here the complexity of the movement resists homogenising discourses that are used to describe the movement and its members.

So when Abahlali define themselves as the creators of theory our duty as academics is to use this in our discussions of social justice. A massive part of the movement's work is addressing the ways in which their members are portrayed in the public eye. One of the founding members of the movement, Zikode (2012) gives an account of how their members are framed in such problematic ways:

> Before Abahlali BaseMjondolo was formed the shack dwellers in South Africa were considered by government and some other people in our society to be the undeserving poor. This claim came as the result of the perception that the poor are lazy, uneducated and people who do not think and therefore do not count the same as other human beings. The public, civil society and the media could not defend the poor against this indignity. The media had little or nothing to report on anything that surrounds shack dwellers, be it good or bad, that considered us as human beings or citizens. We were mostly seen as a threat to society – as a problem to be controlled. … The rights that we have on paper were always refused in reality. This included our rights as citizens and our rights to the cities. Whenever we asked for our rights to be respected, for our humanity to be recognized, we were presented as troublemakers, as people that were being used by others, or as criminals. Our request to participate in the discussions about our own lives was taken as a threat.

Such negative representations as 'criminals' affirms current positions of power. Through the work of creating their own narrative on who they are, Abahlali is participating in "shifting the geopolitics of knowledge" (Mignolo & Tlotsanova 2006:206). Colonial logic is based on the racial classification of peoples that puts western knowledges at the top of humanity and excludes those outside as the other (Mignolo & Tlotsanova 2006). This logic of coloniality serves to justify the violent oppression and exploitation of those identified as the bottom of humanity, from which they are defined through a discourse of the "inferiority or devilish intentions of the Other" (Mignolo & Tlotsanova 2006). Those defined as such are not trusted in their ability to think and are excluded from the categories considered to be knowledge producers. "Decolonial epistemic shifts" function to dismantle this "colonial unconsciousness" disrupting the logic where imperial power affirms its classification of peoples (Mignolo & Tlotsanova 2006:208).

Such an epistemic shift can be seen in W.E.B. Dubois' notion of a double consciousness where the experiences of being excluded (black, poor, violent; "inscribed in the memory and histories" of colonialism) are classified as "the Other" through an imperial gaze (Mignolo & Tlotsanova 2006). It is from this space of realization that one starts to think outside of colonial logic. This thinking is based on its own genealogy and its own history from the subaltern space, those marginalized and denied of their voice by western discourse (Mignolo & Tlotsanova 2006). It is this type of thinking that the philosophy of Abahlali engages with. It is our duty as academics to recognise how Abahlali's collective actions contribute to understandings of knowledge production and how black people in economically and politically marginalized positions are a source of knowledge.

Abahlali must be understood as a space where knowledge is being produced and where our theories as academics should be tested. African philosophy should reflect the "shifting of the geopolitics of knowledge" (Mignolo & Tlotsanova 2006:206). An African philosophy needs to reflect such a practice which I argue can be accomplished through an Ubuntu philosophy (a category of African philosophy from Sothern African). This is achieved through the fact that Ubuntu defines the human as being the centre of knowledge production and is key to the assertion of our humanity, our ability to engage in critical thinking.

Ubuntu as a living philosophy

Through Ubuntu we see an understanding of ontology and epistemology reflected in its distinct linguistic explanation of cultural practices. In Mogobe B. Ramose's seminal text, 'The Philosophy of Ubuntu and Ubuntu as a philosophy' (2002), Ubuntu as a philosophy is examined in the "strictest sense"[1]. Here, our humanity is the basis from which we affirm our being. In isiSotho Ubuntu is referred to as Botho. The 'ubu' in its name becomes an identifier of a fixed position. It is the final goal to which our humanity strives. The 'ntu' suggest a process of becoming or a continual development (Ramose 2002). Ubuntu is the process and goal of attaining our full humanity. It describes two aspects of our being (Ramose 2002). Although constructed as separate, ontologically, they cannot be conceived as such. Ubuntu or Botho recognizes that being also means becoming and that the two can never be understood as separate experiences (Ramose 2002). Within Ubuntu the description of humanity is one that acknowledges a developing and non-fixed nature.

Ubuntu poses a serious challenge to our conception of the human experience as one of 'constant struggle'. It forces us to consider 'being' as constantly striving for completeness whilst attempting to act as already complete within the present moment. It is however impossible to experience this complete humanity. This humanity will never be complete because of our locked state of incompleteness. We must constantly better ourselves. This procedural state of development impacts the value of humans which, within Ubuntu, is both inherent but also has to be earned. Where 'Being' and 'Becoming' are two states of the same reality there is no fundamental divide (Ramose 2002). Thus,

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[1] Odera H. Oruka explains his use of this term in the 'Four trends in Current African Philosophy' (in *Philosophy from Africa: A text with readings* (1998)). The term identifies philosophy as a "universal activity or discipline" whose method is one of "critical, reflective and logical enquiry". This description is important as it rejects explanations of African philosophy that are oppositional to Western philosophy, or ones based on the assumption that Africans have a unique way of thinking that is "radically unEuropean".

within the discourse of Ubuntu one must earn their right to their constantly developing humanity. Such right is earned through one's engagement with family and community.

This acknowledges the complexity of human representation in that our experiences greatly impact the subject-object relationship. Yet, what this also does is force us to acknowledge the uncertainty in the ontological category of 'Ubu' (Ramose 2002). The experience of those having to affirm their humanity involves the process in which we analyse our context; which in this case are the present systems of knowledge. We do so in order to realise the impact of how they deny the humanity of this deemed 'other'. It is this analysis which makes us engage with the complexities of what it means to be black people in a world that denies our humanity. We are therefore forced to look at how aspects of the social and political serve to achieve this denial.

Ababhali, in their work, achieve the two key functions of botho and 'ntu. The first ('ntu) is to 'put the human first' in the affirmation of their members humanity through 'the university of Abahlali'. The second being how they theorize their context in the form of their philosophy of 'Abahlalism'. The movement reflects an understanding of how our humanity functions. These various dimensions within this context of community struggle must thus include explanation of the links between persons, communities and institutional practices that impact their lives.

The philosophy of 'Abahlalism' / The university of Abahlali

'Abahlalism' at its core is the rejection of the praxis/theory distinction. Here theory is the political work done in communities. An example of such a rejection can be seen in where they do their political learning. Abahlali members refer to the University of Abahlali as the space where their learning is not only limited to one's ability to access institutional resources. One's ability to participate is not dictated by qualifications but by one's ability to contribute knowledge. Like an Ubuntu philosophy this knowledge is also based on an understanding of the procedural nature of being. One learns through participation and their ideas must account for such change. One's part in the movement is not fixed and changes are constant for those holding positions of power within the movement as one member describes:

> Our university on its own makes us differ from other organisations because that's when you realise, we have to think about the South Africa today. The South Africa then, the South Africa that is about to come, that's where we 'Deep think'. And we 'Deep Think' about what is written on the document and what we are living is the same. How can [we] make this the same. And that's when people's mind are being able to open up. And that's when I realise that I've got my freedom of and that when I…even, if Mandela comes here: [here]! I have built houses in 1994" and I'll say 'Mandela you did that then, you did not make a follow up to check that the people you left then they did it'. You know? (Personal interview: August 2012).

Members engage in ways that circumvent such a system and access spaces where they are told they do not belong. Most importantly members engage in politics that move beyond the idea of political participation through voting. They also extend our understanding of civil participation where protest becomes one of many tactics through which to engage with the state, exemplified in the following member statement:

> Well umm one of the tactics Abahlali has is that there is nothing going on without you. They open doors for you to speak for yourself. … Where their rights have been violated, where they can be unable to speak but have to use their councillors, their leaders to speak for themselves. But have they become, they gain these powers back, the powers of being a councillor, the powers of being a leader. So it gets back. (Personal interview: August 2012).

As researchers we must unlearn our ideas twisted by a 'colonial unconsciousness'. It is such ideas that would reduce them to the category of the 'wanting poor'. They must be recognised as agents in the quest for social change. At the University of Abahlali one is taught to use their experiences as means to achieving this goal. When engaging in the South African socio-political space you must first understand that movements such as Abahlali are working within a context of exclusion. Those identified as the 'poor black' are excluded from the very spaces that make the decision on how to deal with the challenges facing their communities.

Discussion of African philosophy and Ubuntu must be understood within the context in which it was conceived. This is expressed in the movement's call for "living politics". Zikode (2012) describes this concept as an understanding of how knowledge is created from a certain position of exclusion:

> [It] starts from the places we have taken. We call it a living politics because it comes from the people and stays with the people. It is ours and it is part of our lives … Throughout our struggles, we have found that others want to define us and they want to understand our struggle according their own definitions and projects. It is always necessary to resist this and to insist that we think and speak for ourselves. Without this discipline, our living politics would die.

This concept of 'living politics' is based on ongoing experiences. We can see from Zikode's (2012) description of how knowledge is created by those deemed unfit to create knowledge that one does not need to attend the academy, or come from spaces where only certain bodies are privileged, to have access and become legitimate purveyors of knowledge. Abahlali challenges the position that certain black bodies are incapable of thought by declaring their space of learning as being the site of knowledge production. It is through their 'University of Abahlali' that they create constantly evolving 'Abahlalisms' to reflect their memberships' diverse needs.

Doing Ubuntu research means engaging with oneself

Through my research I have come to realize that the lenses through which I was 'capturing' the movement is influenced by the university. From the start my work was compromised by my internalized 'colonial unconsciousness' that affirmed a power dynamic with those I engaged with. When I first entered the offices of Abahlali I realized I was already way out of my depth. One example of this can be seen in how the dominant language of conversation is English. I spoke English when I was in Durban, even though Zulu is a first language of most of the community members that I spoke with. Our role as academics should be one that challenges these power structures whenever we can.

The issue of representation is amongst the most accessible ways in which researchers can do so. This does not mean that the issue of language should not be dealt with; many of my colleagues have engaged with such issues. It is by challenging such representation that we move against the rhetoric that functions to justify the violence against marginalized communities. It is through narrative that I have attempted to show the complexities within the movement and its members.

Ubuntu philosophy becomes the means through which we can understand the beautiful chaos of the lives of black people. Through its description of the human we are forced to comprehend our own humanity as both being (botho) and becoming ('ntu). This description allows us to see how Abahlali are both creators of theory and affirmers of their members' humanity. This practice is in line with an Ubuntu philosophy and shows how African philosophy is practiced in a space of struggle. This practice emphasizes a need to engage with ideas in such spaces of exclusion. The knowledges of indigenous peoples and marginalized communities must be added to our archive of theory within African philosophy and critical race theories. To exclude them would be to participate in the very same racist structures that would exclude their knowledge. In performing this one affirms a colonial logic that wilfully ignores and denies black people their humanity as well as their status as creators of knowledge.

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