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Botho bo tšile pele: Reflections on Moral Decay in Post-1994 South Africa

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Abstract

From reports in both print and electronic media, it has become obvious that South Africa is under a wave of unacceptable social behaviour. The situation poses a challenge for those who are custodians of the culture to reinstitute the traditional value systems that have over the years guided and characterized African communities. The crucial question here is: Which moral values should guide those assigned with the task of reconstructing the nation? In response, the article advocates for the retrieval and reinstatement of critical African traditional cultural value systems that can be employed to purge the country of anti-social behavioural tendencies such as the grab-and-run syndrome and others (list at least two others) that tend to undermine the fundamental human relations principles that are supposed to govern society and are meant to inculcate the spirit of love, compassion and respect for one's neighbour. This article aims to identify some of the prevalent anti-social behavioural modes in modern-day South Africa and their negative impact on the country's socio-economic development.

1. Introduction

There is a growing tendency in Africa for people to believe that most of our ills are imported, that the real sources of our problems lies outside ... I believe that most of our social ills are native. They are rooted in the social set-up, and the most effective solutions cannot be imported,

but must be the result of the deliberate re-organization of the resources available for tackling specific issues. (Okot p 'Bitek 1973)

It would be an absolute fallacy to create an impression that the pre-1994 South African society was perfect and did not have within it some individuals and groups that consciously or unconsciously thrived on behaviours and practices that were totally anti-social and a violation of human dignity. To begin with the very laws of the apartheid government were very much inhuman and had less regard for human life. The situation was always a fertile ground for any tendencies that encouraged thuggery as a means of survival. However, actions that violated rights of women and children within the poor and marginalized communities were out rightly shunned. What motivated these communities to be inclined in valuing human life and upholding the ubuntu ethic was the fact that they had a common enemy, namely, apartheid regime, that was hell-bent to destroy life of the poor and marginalized, their self-worth and traditional cultural expression.

The problems in South Africa today, and perhaps in the years to come, are not tied to the lack of socio-cultural structures and economic resources necessary for taking care of the needs of the poor and protecting the rights of the weak. Rather, it can be traced to the lack of a sense of expedience among some of the country's leaders in the political, economic and civic circles, and above all the moral bankruptcy that has become the trademark of some of these elites. Moral bankruptcy is a major obstacle to efficient and quality service delivery, a paralysing factor in the fight against poverty and the realisation of a better life for all. This shows in the delay or compromise in the delivery of critical services to the poor in our society due to the inability of the power brokers to reach a consensus on the choice of a service provider. Moreso when the inability to agree on a provider has nothing to do with the capacity of the provider.

This is succinctly captured in Ntuli (1998:4) concept paper, *Contextualising the African Renaissance*. He said,

it is no exaggeration to say that the moral fiber of our nation is frayed and faded. That the blanket that once covered us in the winter of moral decline has now shrunk. The winter of crime and violence

[against women and children] that sweeps our land threatens to freeze our values even further.

This observation might explain why it has become normal for a political or civic leader to be associated with an unethical business transaction at one time or the other in his or her political career. In some cases, allegations of corruption have become weapons anti-democratic elements use to destroy legitimate and credible leaders; making it had for the electorates to know who to trust.

To reverse this tide, we need an intensive programme of moral renewal which will focus on the retrieval and reinstatement of African cultural value systems. Among other things to be included in this programme should be an audit process that would aid South Africa's attempt to find out what societal evolution ultimately led to the collapse of the nation's social morality. As p'Bitek points out in the epigraph, not all of Africa's social ills are imported and as such solutions to address them should not be imported. Without any doubt, the process of transition of South Africa from the apartheid hierarchy of cultures and an authoritarian unjust society to a democratic society is about ensuring that values such as honesty, accountability and respect for human life are upheld and are embraced as central to the country's evolvment.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to highlight some issues of moral decay that has since engulfed democratic South Africa and their implications for the country's chances of socio-economic advancement. The article will also identify a few strategies that exist within the African cultural framework or value systems that can be employed to purge the country of anti-social behavioural tendencies that are now prevalent in society and have negatively impacted the country's chances for socio-economic advancement. The article is an attempt to answer a question that was raised by the then President of the Republic of South Africa, Mr. Thabo Mbeki. He asked, "What must we all do to rebuild a system of morality in our country, a generally accepted value system that is inimical to actions that are ethically wrong!" (Sunday World, 18 April 1999, p 15). This question was asked considering the emerging culture of looting public resources and nepotism.

2. Contributing factors to the moral decay in post-1994 South Africa

There are a number of emerging socio-cultural behavioural tendencies that have contributed, either directly or indirectly, to the collapse of the moral fiber of post-1994 South African society. Some of these factors were identified by Cedric Mayson in his article, *Getting our act together to regenerate morality*, which appeared in the Mail and Guardian Newspaper of 6-12 September 1999. Pityana (1999: 141) asserts that

Morality is of the essence of community life. An understanding of right and wrong, however, does not simply derive its force and currency because it is imposed by some moral policemen. It derives its currency because it constitutes norms we internalise and even take for granted and without which it would be difficult, if not impossible, to have expectations about how others are to behave.

Following are the factors that are further discussed with a view to finding a remedy to the anti-social behaviours that are beginning to create hell-on-earth situations in some cities in South Africa.

2.1 *Western individualism versus African communalism*

Every elite of post-1994 South Africa is daily faced with having to choose between being guided in his/her business or social activities, by either the *indoda idla yodwa culture* (a man eats alone), which describes Western individualism, and contradicts African social-cultural ethics as clearly expressed in *motho ke motho ka batho ba bang* (I am because we are). The individuals whose sense of moral judgment are not grounded in their African cultural value system become victims of dominating moral values, which at times are anti-society, and as such encourage self-centredness.

On the other hand, the African ideal of communalism, as expressed through the Ubuntu social ethic, encourages *batho*: love, truth and consideration of others in all circumstances. This is clearly explained by Es'kia Mphahlele (2004: 287) argued that “African humanism, like traditional Indian thought and belief, emphasises the realm of **to be** over that of **to have**, without necessarily negating the joy of physical being.” This means in their belief system, Africans are more inclined to find

meaning in life by being able to be truly human without being defined by material possession or even status in society.

Commenting on the unacceptable moral decadence of the elite of modern African societies, a non-believer in the Western Christian God, Okopt p'Bitek (1973: 14), in a lecture delivered at the National Arts Festival of Zambia in 1967, said if there was a god who will hear him, he would have made the following prayer:

O God protect Africa
From our new rulers
Make them humble
Open their eyes
So that they may see
That material progress
Is not to be equaled with spiritual progress.
Lord, open the ears of the African rulers
So that they may appreciate
The music of the drum
And the poetry of their mothers!

In post-1994 South Africa, from Cape to Limpopo Provinces, those who are assigned with the task of reconstructing the society are the ones working against the promotion of societal harmony and cohesion. Their actions constantly undermine African traditional moral and social values. Some now have cases against them in courts of law for alleged fraud, rape, murder and stealing of public funds. For example, there are alleged cases of political leaders who have colluded with the so called Guptas family in defrauding the state, and worse in the front page of Sunday Independent of 24 September 2017 there is a story about university executives who are accused of swindling R30m from the institution's purse.

2.2 The influence of mass media

One of the factors that has contributed immensely to the moral decay in the society today is the mass media. The mass media, directly or indirectly, impact and influence how society thinks and act, and in this regard, television ranks high. This is seen in some of the SABC drama series that are found popular in most the country's communities, which on a close look are found to be promoting some behaviours and

tendencies that are anti-social. What is sometimes lacking in the political leadership of the post-1994 South Africa is the political will to be intentional in addressing some of the socio-cultural and economic challenges of the evolving country.

Critically looking at the evolution of post-1994 South Africa and the influence of mass media, Mayson (1999) pointed out that:

In South Africa also, stories of anti-social behavior, the breakdown of morals, dishonesty and crime are dominant. In theory people can be horrified and say, “not for me”, but the constant portrayal of dirty tricks, crime, irresponsible sex and violence that is thrown at children all day long in TV programmes is a major factor in developing immoral unethical attitudes and practices.

As indicated above the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) tends to air shows with questionable moral undertones. These shows usually have a large viewership and have slowly shaped societal perceptions as some of these stories have since become accepted as standards of behaviour. Most of the programmes have very little that reflect the African culture and, as rightly observed by p’Bitek (1973), they encourage apemanship. In addition, they contribute to the moral decay in our communities.

2.3 The declining interest in religion

The history of humankind is littered with evidence of the pervasive influence of religion. Religion, from time immemorial, has played a role in guiding the thoughts and actions of people. According to Mayson (1999):

It is now popular not to believe in God. Many people in all religious traditions have become fed up with the teaching or practices of the church, mosque, synagogue, temple or traditional customs and no longer take part in them, except for funerals or an occasional festival.

If we use Christianity as a yardstick, we see many cases of how the tenets of the religion are daily violated by men and women who practice the religion and are also held in high esteem by their communities, regarded as guardians of the shrine of good morality. It is now a regular

sight to see such men and women arraigned in the same court as rapists and murderers.

In his 2007 Easter sermon, Bishop Barnabas Lekganyane registered his concern on the rise of criminal activities in the country. He warned members of his flock to refrain from these activities that undermine the Christian credo that encourages harmonious co-existence amongst all members of society and hard work in order to achieve a better South Africa for all. Ramphele (2008: 17) locates the problem in the fact “most analyses of our society tend to focus on material issues in the socio-economic and political domains. Yet human beings as the main actors in history are framed in significant ways by spiritual and psychological impulses that go beyond material needs.”

3. Reconstructing our communities along African ideals

From the above, it can be gleaned that those who are viewed as custodians of the shrine in their communities have a responsibility to be the moral conscience of the people they lead. However, as a nation, we seem to have very few political, religious and traditional leaders who are prepared to be the voice of morality in our public discourse (Ramphele 2008). There is enough knowledge on how to influence the discussion on morality and socio-economic development of post-1994 South Africa.

For example, there are idiomatic expressions found in almost all indigenous languages in South Africa which give moral instructions. The purpose of these idiomatic expressions has always been to warn individuals and groups against conducting themselves in manners that oppose the fundamental principles that underpin the spirit of Ubuntu. To buttress this point, Ramphele (2008: 17) argues that “we are at our best as human beings when our souls and minds are in harmony with what we do and how we relate to others.” This forms the basis for the argument in this article that by nature human beings have the potential to be at peace with their environment, with one another, and are capable of doing things in the best interest of the collective or community.

4. Conclusion

It is obvious from what is presented in this article that some of the socio-economic challenges that beset Africa are not from a lack of economic and human resources but the moral decay of some of its leaders. Communities that have been sustained by moral values and practices that promoted harmony and social cohesion are now exposed to anti-social behaviors that are making it impossible for them to start engaging in activities that are meant to contribute to the socio-economic advancement. For some of these communities to regain their identity and dignity, they need to consider deliberately retrieving and reinstating progressive traditional African norms, mores and cultural value systems that are central to the ubuntu social ethic. In support, Teffo (1999: 149) argues that “a conscious critical and elaborate detour into African culture will yield a wealth of cultural values,” that can be used to build a incorporated into the life and work of the evolving society.

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