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Ukukhonza as an ethic-oriented ontology to ensure harmonious existence among AmaZulu

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The production of knowledge should be premised on the inclusion of all epistemologies to provide possibilities to build a more just world. However, knowledge production, as we have it today, is premised on Western epistemology which is used to distil other knowledges before they could be accepted as legitimate. This approach stifles possibilities to find different ways of knowing that could contribute to imagining the world anew. There is a need, therefore, to unthink the West such that we find other ways to understand the world. The article helps in unthinking the West to allow an authentic understanding of the indigenous people of South Africa. I argue that the ontology of AmaZulu – one of the indigenous groups in South Africa – is an ethic-orientated ontology that is expressed through the concept of *ukukhonza* – a process where one surrenders their identity in order to belong to the group (this can also refer to worship). In *ukukhonza*, the surrendering of one's identity is to ensure harmonious living centred on a common identity that is unified by the principles of ubuntu. Drawing on the nuances of *ukukhonza*, this article argues that the ontology of AmaZulu is centred on respecting life in its different forms because it is believed that everything is interconnected. This understanding of life provides a different conceptualisation of God which anchors the religion that is practised everyday such that doing good is inescapable. This is an ethic-oriented ontology which when brought forth in its authentic form can address the many ills of modern society.

Contribution: This is the conceptual article that contributes to rethinking religion from an African perspective to provide a possibility of an ethic-centred society that can inform the new ways of being in the world.

Keywords: *ukukhonza*; African worldview; Western epistemology; religion; indigenous knowledge.

Introduction

Many scholars such as Ramose (2005) have challenged the unjustified dominance of Western knowledge and argue that all societies have their knowlegdes. However, the idea that it is only Western epistemology that can produce knowledge continues to marginalise the role of indigenous epistemologies in the production of knowledge. The epistemologies from the indigenous societies are still not fully recognised as legitimate to inform the process of producing knowledge in the institutions of higher learning. This is supported by Senekal and Lenz (2020:147) who argue that 'there is not sufficiently developed African content to jettison Western education without leaving a void'. This is despite the fact that many initiatives have been taken to decolonise knowledge; for Keet (2019:204–205), these initiatives are 'intended to turn decolonisation into a metaphor and thus an ideological strategy to maintain epistemological orientations and justify existing positions'. There is still a need, therefore, to bring other epistemologies to the fore such that they inform and influence the production of knowledge in the academy. This requires that we move away from the colonial ground such that indigenous knowledges are able to come up as alternatives to address the world's challenges, not remain as footnotes to support the already existing Western knowledge.

This article explores the ontology of AmaZulu to showcase a fundamentally different knowledge system from Western knowledge. I use language to conceptualise African knowledge from an African worldview. This means language is used as a source of knowledge because as Wa Thiong'o (1993:11) argues: 'Our language gave us a view of the world'. As such, languages help us to understand how different societies make sense of the world which is encapsulated in cultures that govern people's behaviour. To provide evidence of the logic that is fundamentally different from the Western societies, the article brings the concept of *ukukhonza* (a process through

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which one can belong to the land) to show how AmaZulu – one of the indigenous groups in South Africa – conceptualises religion. The concept of *ukukhonza* as understood today provides an opportunity to think about God from an African worldview. Paying attention to this concept suggests that the Christian God was introduced as part of the civilising project for the indigenous people in South Africa. This is so because Africans understand life as interconnected and interdependent (Ani 2013), so, God cannot be outside of the universe. Drawing from the nuances of *ukukhonza* opens a window to think about the idea of God and religion from an African perspective and their role thereof. In order to explore such knowlegde it is required that we move away from the Western ground such that Western concepts and categories are not used to distil this knowledge.

Unthinking the West

Before delving into the idea of the 'West', it is important that I clarify what is meant by the West in this article. The West in this article is not geographical but a concept that 'was created somewhere at the beginning of the sixteenth century in the midst of a global wave of material and symbolic transformation… through which Europe became the West' (Trouillot 1995:74–75). It is during this period that Western epistemology was formulated centred on critiquing the (fetishist) religion (Dussel 1985:8). Hence Mignolo (2009) argues that Western epistemology is:

> [T]heology and philosophy-science that compete with each other at one level but collaborating with each other when the matter is to disqualify other forms of knowledge beyond these two frames. (p. 6)

This article is conceived as a response to the limitation in the process of knowledge production that is premised on Western epistemology. Moreso because other ways of knowing are not taken into consideration such that they inform the manner in which we understand the function of knowledge. Drawing from Vellem (2017:1), I use the idea of unthinking the West to declare my locus of enunciation 'in order to contribute with humility and responsibility'.

Currently, knowledge produced in institutions of higher learning is commodified to the extent that it is not accessible to the majority of people but is privy to the educated few. For example, in South Africa less than 6% of South African adults had a degree as their highest level of educational attainment in 2021.[1] However, in other societies, knowledge is understood as a necessity for the functionality of the entire society and thus cannot be commodified. To support this claim Moyra, Khuphe and Muza (2016) note that:

> The notion of knowledge as a commodity, a thing discrete and apart from ourselves, each other and our wisdom of living in the moment assumes a particular view of knowledge that does not exist in an indigenous worldview. (p. 166)

This means that the understanding of knowledge as a commodity is foreign to some societies. This commodification

1.Statistics South Africa Quarterly Labour Force Survey 2010: Q4 and 2021: Q4.

of knowledge has devastating effects because it is a hindrance to the advancement of knowledge for the betterment of society at large because commodified knowledge has no context and thus no use to ordinary people. This is the point that Khuphe makes in Moyra et al. (2016), referring to her experiences with the knowledge that was taught at school:

> My experience of school was that it was markedly different from home. We memorised English rhymes and stories happily, although we did not understand them. The elders seemed to be aware of the lack of a contextual relevance in our education and they always reminded us to maintain unhu (Shona for ubuntu), that is, the traditional cultural norms, values, beliefs, expectations and actions. (p. 168)

Clearly, this points to the limitations of Western education derived from Western epistemology. Responding to the lack of relevance of the Western education to many indigenous people, this article firstly makes an argument centred on a worldview different from that of Western societies. This is an important fact to highlight because the argument developed here cannot be understood using Western logic. Secondly, the article moves away from comparing or seeking equivalence to Western epistemology. Rather, the article is unthinking the West to ensure that African knowledge is not distilled into Western concepts and categories to make it palatable to the Western university. I, therefore, urge the reader to suspend Western theories and the idea of God to understand the argument developed in this article in an uncompromised manner. Taking into account that there are different ways of making sense of the world determined by different worldviews, there could be similarities or differences, but they have no significance in this article because it is unthinking the West. This means that the argument is made outside the Western ground.

To unthink the West is based on the premise that (1) other societies are not the creation of the West and (2) all societies have knowledges and ways of producing those knowledges. This means that these knowledges are complete in their own right and can be used as an alternative when needed or left alone if not applicable. This does not deny the impact of colonialism but is also cognisant of the Western failures. One of the limitations of Western epistemology is its separatist logic that fails to understand the interconnectedness of life which means that even the dead and living are inseparable. This means that when something is dead, it will be woken by the living. It is in this context that we say as Africans we do not die. The Western limitations provide a space for a decolonial turn that Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012) define as moving away from the colonial ground. A decolonial turn means thinking with the West on our back, such that it does not inform how we produce knowledge.

However, unthinking the West is a difficult task because of Western hegemony or coloniality which Vellem (2017:2) defines as the 'obstinacy of supremacy and superiority by the West'. According to Argyrou (2012:4), Western hegemony 'means being under the spell of Western ideas that appear to

the dominated just as rational, meaningful, and necessary as they appear to the dominator'. Some of these ideas present the West as omnipotent and omnipresent in societies that were colonised such that every experience is presented as Western creation. This further suggests that the West colonised everything. It thus becomes rational to see Western knowledge and experience as necessary and relevant in 'saving' the colonised, and this is Western hegemony. This is what Vellem (2017:2) sees as a 'syndrome with subtle but all-pervasive racism, this woundedness still hovers over all of us'. Fighting this Western hegemony 'is a painful process because it is as much a struggle against one's (colonized) self' (Argyrou 2012:4). The struggle is more real because it means we have to fight against what at some point we stood for. It is a well-known fact that most radical work is premised on saving the 'poor'. It is apparent therefore that this radicalism stands to lose relevancy if the 'poor' cease to be a problem. But if we take into account the fact that the indigenous knowledges have sustained communities in spite of their onslaught during colonialism, it might be appropriate to argue that in fact these knowledges are even capable of saving the world. If this is the case, there is more work ahead of us to save the Westerners who have proven to the rest of the world of being incapable of saving it. Hence, we have all these global catastrophic challenges: 'the woundedness, wretchedness, emptiness, squalor, created by Eurocentric colonialism and apartheid in our case is South Africa' (Vellem 2017:2). Indeed, all these challenges are catastrophic to the indigenous people because they destroy the core of what it means to be human.

The call for the inclusion of other ways of knowing in knowledge production is not a call to centre the West by engaging or responding to its questions. This does not suggest that the West ceases to exist. On the contrary, this acknowledges Western failures which then allows us to stop responding to its questions and it ceases to determine what is and what is not for the rest of the world. This is not utopia, but this is how many indigenous communities especially rural communities in South Africa live; their everyday practices are not informed by the Western standard but by their cultures. It is for this reason that in this article, I see African life not through the Western lens because it is not the creation of the West. It is thus obvious that Africans cannot just have one reality of being oppressed, but of being survivors too. This is equally important and focusing on this is as radical as focusing on being oppressed. And if looked at correctly, it is as liberating as fighting oppression. This is the point Ndebele (1983:236) makes that 'every aspect of life if it can creatively be indulged in, is the weapon of life itself against the greatest tyranny'. Unthinking the West is as liberating because it means looking at the rich cultures that are evident in everyday existence, and these are the cultures that have sustained many indigenous societies since the beginning of time. To show this rich culture, the article uses the concept of *ukukhonza* as evidence of other ways of knowing that permeate a more ethical existence which is critical in rethinking the world anew.

Understanding *ukukhonza* from an African epistemology

In a religious context today, the word *ukukhonza* is used in four contexts that are interrelated: (1) it refers to passing one's regards, (2) used to express holding one person dearly. In this instance, the suffix *-ile* is added to express this *umkhonz-ile*. (3) *Inkonzo* which is a noun (*ukukhonza* is a verb) refers to service. (4) Lastly, *ukukhonza* refers to surrendering one's identity in order to belong to a new group or worshipping God. However, the idea of *ukukhonza* as referring to worshipping God would seem to be a recent definition; as such the concept is not inherently religious. The conceptualisation of God from an African worldview will be explored later in the article. I, therefore, urge the reader to suspend the idea of God to allow an uncompromised reading of the argument developed here. The fourth definition centres the argument of the article because it has greater bearing on the understanding of the ontology of AmaZulu. The practice of *ukukhonza* is within and informed by the principles of ubuntu; hence, all the definitions have an aspect of caring as will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

Central to the understanding of *ukukhonza* is the concept of ubuntu that is a philosophical underpinning of the indigenous people of South Africa to ensure that every member of the society has a moral obligation to take care of others (Sithole 2009). This means that ubuntu anchors a sense of belonging that ensures that everyone lives well. The importance of belonging is thus twofold: (1) that everyone is protected and (2) that everyone has an obligation to take care of others and everyone is held accountable. This reveals that *ukukhonza* is about social cohesion where everyone has one set of principles that ensure that everyone lives well. *Ukukhonza*, therefore, anchors an ethical behaviour where people are held accountable for wrongdoing to forge a more just world. It appears that there are different ways of being in the world that are fundamentally different from the Western worldview.

Coming to the main argument of the article, I draw from some of the Norwegian missionary diaries as compiled by Hale (1997). In a nutshell, the Norwegian missionaries were expressing their frustrations in failing to convert AmaZulu to Christianity. It is this difficulty in conveying the 'good news' to AmaZulu that this article is trying to make sense of. The point of departure is the different worldviews that are in the contradictions. The Norwegian missionaries were bringing a Western worldview to Africans without taking into account the fact that Africans had a worldview that was totally different from theirs. This is so because a worldview is derived from the environment in its truest form and how it is experienced. The missionaries 'created the universal community accessible through faith' (Molapo 2019:4). For Molapo (2019), this universal community was created on the unequal relations that negated the social thought system of the indigenous people. The approach negated the fundamental difference in their quest for a universal community. This is the approach that was used in all Western endeavours that presented Western culture and experience

as universal. This is the approach that is more devastating to the colonised because this was the annihilation of cultures. The missionaries and anthropologists erased these cultures in texts by writing them from Western culture and experience. The indigenous cultures were measured against a Western culture which was the standard of what it means to be human. I am therefore writing against the unequal relation where Western society is presented as having a worldview that is applicable everywhere. It is in this context that the article took a position to unthink the West as an attempt to read AmaZulu from their worldview that informs their ontological existence.

The struggle experienced by Norwegian missionaries as compiled by Hale (1997) provides an opportunity to revisit the African worldview based on these struggles. One of the struggles the missionaries expressed in the diaries was 'the difficulty of communicating fundamental Christian doctrines to African peoples whose cultural background and cosmologies were radically different from those earlier shaped by the Judaeo-Christian tradition' (Hale 1997:xii). Hale (1997) continues to emphasise the struggle of missionaries that they found 'difficulty of making even the most fundamental theological tenets of the Christian faith comprehensible to the Zulus' (Hale 1997:22). Clearly, AmaZulu were never converted to Christianity but were coerced into it because of defeat. This is deduced from the fact that Hale (1997) notes that the conversion of AmaZulu to Christianity was minimal until the conclusion of the Anglo-Zulu war that crushed the resistance to British imperialism. Hale (1997) writes:

> [I]t should be emphasized, however, that this wave of construction and influx of missionary personnel did not signal a dramatic rise in the number of conversions amongst the Zulus [] baptism remained sporadic during 1860s and 1870s. Not until after the conclusions of the Anglo-Zulu war in 1879. which effectively crushed indigenous resistance to British imperialism in the region. (p. 22)

This 'defeat' of AmaZulu thus explains the reference of *ukukhonza* to worship the Christian God. This is so because *ukukhonza* in isiZulu (the language of AmaZulu) means to surrender one's identity in order to belong to the group. It will follow then that for AmaZulu, worshiping the Christian God was about surrendering their identity because they were 'defeated'. It needs to be emphasised that for AmaZulu, worshipping the Christian God was not based on being converted but on being defeated. Jordan (2010) argues that the defeat of Africans meant land dispossession, confiscation of cows, and forced labour. So, the meaning of *ukukhonza* as a reference to being Christian for AmaZulu, in particular, was part of this absorption that Jordan (2010) explains. The surrendering of their identity was so that they belong in the newly formed dominant group because according to *isintu* (cultural practices of ubuntu), being defeated goes hand in hand with accepting and thus surrendering. Once the person has surrendered, they could be absorbed as full members of that particular society because, through *ukukhonza*, people fully immerse themselves in the new value system of the particular society. At the core of *ukukhonza* is the ethical

existence inscribed in *isintu* to ensure that everyone belongs and is thus taken care of. This is derived from the concept of ubuntu which is centred on taking care of every member of society. Key to this is the fact that the members of society have an obligation to abide by societal values to ensure harmonious living. In other words, *ukukhonza* is a reciprocal approach where those who are defeated have to abide by the new rules while the 'conquerors' have a moral obligation to ensure the 'conquered' live well. Therefore, from an African perspective, being defeated is not a state of enslavement because there are measures in place to incorporate every person to be a full member of that society.

Ukukhonza thus can be understood as ensuring order by inscribing values in cultural practices. This signifies what people do rather than what they believe in. It is important to emphasise that among AmaZulu, *ukukhonza* is completely different from the understanding of worshipping the Christian God. The concept of the Christian God that needs to be worshipped has no equivalence in isiZulu because *ukukhonza* is about belonging to the group and being of service rather than worshipping one person. An attempt to read *ukukhonza* as worshipping God would be 'the imposition of a Christian worldview on an otherwise local … outlook of life' (Molapo 2019:3), which is different from the Christian or Western worldview. Or worse, it is what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018:24) calls epistemicide where 'colonialism planted European memory' to Africans such that we do not remember our knowledge embedded in a language.

Among AmaZulu, the belief system is thus segregated to the private space such that individuals are at liberty to practise their beliefs in whichever way they please. It will follow then that there will be no churches in the culture of AmaZulu as beliefs are family-based and can never be for everyone. However, this does not suggest that AmaZulu have no religion, because according to Geertz (1993:89) religion is 'a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life'. In a way, religion is a philosophical underpinning derived from a worldview that finds expression through cultural practices of a particular society. For Africans, 'there is no formal distinction between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is there is his religion' (Mbiti 1990:2). So culture is the cornerstone of every society as it governs people's behaviour in all spheres of life. Religion is therefore part of the culture. It can thus be argued that ubuntu is the religion of AmaZulu which is embedded in *isintu* (cultural practices), not *ukukhonza*. However, *ukukhonza* as a practice reveals the ontology of AmaZulu which is informed by the interconnectedness of life. How then can we understand the conceptualisation of God from this belief system?

Where is God?

Molapo (2019) argues that in Southern Africa, the conception of a Christian God is relatively recent as it came with the missionaries who had come to save the savages. He continues

to argue that this Christian God was translated into a religion, which is the constitution of modern African subjectivity. The European conquest in South Africa ushered in a new worldview to the conquered which had a Christian God. Obviously, this Christian God is not inherent to the indigenous people of South Africa. This can be deduced from the names used to refer to God. Among AmaZulu, God is referred to as *uNkulunkulu, uMvelingqangi, Sonininanini,* and *uSimakade.* All these words are descriptive where *uNkulunkulu,* when dissected, means 'big big'. Clearly, these words do not carry any ontological expression but are descriptive of God. This is contrary to the word *amathonga* [the departed] which are understood as the most powerful wherein the root word *-tho-* is found in all the words that reflect the qualities of *amathonga.* This includes words such as *uku-tho-la* [to find/get], *ubu-tho-ngo* [the ability to sleep], *uku-tho-ba* [has two meanings: to be humble and to reduce pain], *uku-tho-mba* [reaching puberty], *um-tho.mbo* [spring water], *um-tho-ndo* [penis], and so forth (Radebe 2022). However, all the words used to refer to God are not connected to any words used in everyday language. This could explain the struggle of the Norwegian missionaries because it would seem that what they were introducing was radically different from the worldview of AmaZulu (Hale 1997) which is centred on interconnectedness.

The 'cultural background and cosmologies of the African people [*that*] were radically different from those shaped by the Judaeo-Christian tradition' (Hale 1997:xii) is also noticeable in the translation of heaven in isiZulu. In isiZulu, heaven is *izulu*; thunderstorm is *izulu* and AmaZulu, the nation are Ama-*zulu*. Indeed, this is a misnomer because there are no similarities in all these concepts. In some ways, it suggests that some things were lost in the translation. History tells us that AmaZulu, as a nation, was formed in the late 18th century and it is rather disjointed to refer to AmaZulu as heaven. More research is needed which can trace the originality of naming heaven and AmaZulu; however, this is not the focus of this article, and thus it will not be explored. What is of interest in this article is the idea of heaven from the worldview of AmaZulu. The African worldview is derived from a cosmological understanding that the universe is one whole and nothing is outside of it (Ani 2013). With this understanding how could AmaZulu comprehend something that is referred to as outside the universe? Especially that AmaZulu believe that the most powerful are in the belly of the earth – *amathonga*. Similarly, the Sotho-speaking people believed that 'the abode of molimo [*in today's context 'molimo' is equated to God*] was … in the underground, in the belly of the earth' (Molapo 2019:8). It is clear that the idea of heaven was incomprehensible among AmaZulu. This would seem that the conceptualisation of the most powerful among the indigenous people in South Africa is stationed in a constant location which is inside the earth to forge an idea of the unchanging force such that they can never lose their power. From this worldview, how could the indigenous people understand the Christian God that was introduced to them?

Clearly, the Christian God could not make sense to the indigenous people of South Africa. This introduction of God

as a universal God was thus epistemic violence that resulted in physical violence in cases where communities resisted conversion and incorporation into Christianity, as was the case during colonisation (Molapo 2021:12). It is in this context that the influx to Christianity only emerged after 'the conclusions of the Anglo-Zulu war in 1879' (Hale 1997:22). It can thus be argued that AmaZulu were never convinced by this Christian God which had a human face. This Christian God would prove to be highly problematic because his introduction came with a patriarchal, capitalist, and racist logic that did not exist in the African worldview. Molapo (2019) argues that the introduction of the Christian God:

> [*U*]shers in a new era in the 19th century in Southern Africa that privileges space over time, writing over speech, life over death, and beings over things and the materiality of life. (p. 14)

If the Christian God has no equivalent to the African idea of God, the question is: what then is the conceptualisation of God among the indigenous people of South Africa?

Earlier in the article, I urged the reader to suspend the idea of God to forge an uncompromised reading of the article. This request was also intended to prepare the reader for the possibility of a society without God. Reading the cosmological understanding of Africans that the universe is one whole and as such everything is interconnected would mean that rather than having the idea of God there is *umoya* that is all-encompassing (Radebe 2022). *Umoya* refers to the spirit, force, wind, and oxygen and thus is inescapable; as such it cannot be worshipped. *Ukukhonza,* as argued in this article, reveals a different kind of religion that is practiced every day. This religion is expressed in respecting every form of life because everything is equal. This kind of belief permeates a more just world where no one has authority over anything but everyone is accountable to life in its totality. *Ukukhonza* in its truest meaning, therefore, means to be of service to other people who in return can confirm our humanity. It is in this context that from an African perspective *umuntu* takes precedence over materiality (Ramose 2005). Holding someone dearly resonates with the principles of ubuntu where the next person takes precedence over oneself. This is so because one's humanity is dependent on the next person who can confirm that one is indeed *umuntu* [human].

As we are now in the modern world that is founded on the idea of a God, the legitimate question from the indigenous people of South Africa is: where is this God? Especially that this God was supposed to ensure that we all live in harmony. This question is based on two things: (1) the worldview from which the indigenous people draw from. (2) How the Christian God was introduced which has more bearing, the God who is fair and just, whose will was supposed to happen on earth as it is in heaven (Mt 6:9–13). We are told that in heaven there is no hunger and thirst. However, hunger and thirst are the order of the day among the indigenous people in South Africa. Indeed, this is contrary to what the missionaries were preaching as part of the civilising project. Since the advent of modernity, the colonised have lived in the shadow of death. This caring God has not shown himself to

the colonised. The question, therefore, remains: where is God? By asking this question, the article proposes that maybe it is about time that we take the knowledge from the indigenous people seriously to create a more just world. There is a need therefore for further research that will explore the idea of God from the ontology of AmaZulu.

An ethic-orientated ontology

The exploration of *ukukhonza* reveals the ethic-centred ontology that is concerned with harmonious living based on the shared value system. The concept of *ukukhonza* forms part of the practice of ubuntu which ensures that every citizen lives well. This is practised by putting the next person before oneself. As such, among AmaZulu, the notion of a first-person does not exist. Taking care of others, therefore 'entails an outward movement that does not have the self at the centre because it is a movement that is a response to the call of the other' (Molapo 2021:14). This logic brings a totally different meaning of *ukukhonza* that is opposite to worshipping a BEING as it means to be of service to others. More salient, it moves from a different ontology that commands people to love their neighbour as they love themselves (Molapo 2021) because, from an African ontology, a person can exist only when the next person is well. The neighbour, therefore, takes precedence over one's needs, hence the most honourable and cherished act is to be of service. Even the king is understood as a servant of the people because a king is a king because of the people [*inkosi inkosi ngabantu*]. This understanding of *ukukhonza* challenges the idea of worshipping an unseen BEING premised on saving the people rather than serving the people. It propels us to love ourselves as we love our neighbours!

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