

TOWARDS A MORE HUMAN RACE

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Umcwaningi wezilimi zesintu

This essay is a meditation on race, prompted by the lectures and experiences we had on The Bus, and drawing from the gifts given by busmembers on our journey. Ebhalweni ongaphansi kuvela namazwi acashuniwe encwadini eyisichazamazwi solimi lwesiZulu ngesiN-gisi, ibhalwe nguBambatha kaMshini (Benedict Wallet Vilakazi) no Clement M Doke.

The following are extracts from CM Doke and BW Vilakazi's *Zulu-English Dictionary*, Second Edition Revised (1953):

-lungu (isilungu, 3.2.9.9, sg. only) n. [<umlungu.]

1. Customs and characteristics of white people.
2. The white man's language.
3. (in loc.) esilungwini: in the white man's country (e.g. Natal as opposed to Zululand; town as opposed to country).

-lungu (umlungu, 3.3.9.9, abelungu) n. [Ur-B. *-luŋgu*, white man. >isilungu ; ubulungu; u(lu)lungwana.]

White man, European. *Umlungu angathunga isicoco* (A European can wear a heading; i.e. The impossible may happen).

-ntu (isintu, 3.2.9, sg. only) n. [<umuntu.]

1. Bantu characteristics, culture.
2. Bantu language.
3. Humankind, mankind. [th.] *Indodana yesintu* (Son of Man).

-ntu (umuntu, 3.2.9, abantu) n. [Ur-B. *muntu*. > dim. umntwana ; unomuntu ; ubuntu ; isintu ; u(lu)ntu ; umuntukazana ; bantu.]

1. Human being, person ; man (not of necessity male).
2. Member of an African Native race; black man. *Abantu bayalobolisa kodwa sizwa ukuthi abelungu qha.* (The Bantu marry by lobolo, but we hear that the Europeans do not). *Hhayi abantu abamnyama!* (Where are the Black people heading for?).
3. Person with human feelings. *Akumuntu, yisilwane* (He is inhuman ; he is brutal). *Akumuntu, yinsinga* (He is as cutting as a razor; i.e. quick-tempered or of bad morals). *Ngukwenza komuntu lokhu* (This is the behavior of a decent person).

...

6. Loc. forms ... **emuntwini** is used with special collect. meaning of 'among, etc. the human race', e.g. *Ukufa yiyona-nto encinzayo emuntwini* [Death is what stings the whole human race).

-ntu (ubuntu, 3.2.9) n. [< umuntu.]

1. Human nature
2. Humaneness, good disposition, good moral nature. *Benziwa ubuntu babo* (They are urged on by their humane feelings).
3. One's real self, character. *Ubuntu bomuntu* □utholwa *ezenzweni zakhe* (A man's real self is revealed by his deeds).

UKUFA YIYONA-NTO ENGINZAYO EMUNTWINI

I want to talk about death, with regard to race, inso-much as race can either be a matter of life, or it can be

dead. The dead kind of race is when it is a *thing*: a fixed property of an individual; a fundamental feature or the hard fact of ostensible and immutable difference. It is to think of race as an objective reality of human physical form, constant through history, and a natural underlying condition of grouphood.

Race then is an absolute fact of birth, and so it is a built-in object we must carry around with us until we die, and by which we are identified and filtered. We may treasure this self-object and point to it with pride and affirmation. We may despise and fear it and try to control its presence around us. We may want to review its social meaning, to change the perceptions of where in the social order its bearers belong, or perhaps ignore those perceptions, subvert them or behave in spite of them. But we can never be free of this fact of our birth: that we come into the world as a certain race, as a certain *thing*.

This is human reification, making a dynamic life into a dead thing. It is making a person into a bundle of sticks. And a living society is then just an arrangement of these bundles; and history is nothing but the inventory book. The natural extreme of this is the complete commodification of human beings, as property or as items on display. But it is not just in the extreme where there is death.

If races are discrete divisions of humanity, they have been historically related in hierarchical ways. Colonial racism has seen the hierarchy as inherent, because the divisions entail different levels of advancement of the organism, say. We want to understand structural inequality as a result of this overarching prejudice based on race. In so doing, however, we have overlooked the fact that race itself comes out of the oppressive society, comes out of these structures. It is not a precept of oppression. It is the result of it. Racial

categories have been realised from processes of dominance and submission, they cannot simultaneously be the original bases of those processes. To hold them as such is the domain of whiteness, by which whiteness is maintained as the hegemonic norm.

Ngukwenza komuntu lokhu

The dictionary entries above show that racial terms in Bantu languages (in this case, Zulu) semantically imply a different kind of analysis of race. In these words, *umuntu* can with veracity be glossed as “person”, but *umlungu* is glossed in a paradoxical form: “white person” – how can you be *umuntu* “a person” while also being *umlungu*? The terms *umuntu* and *umlungu* are mutually exclusive semantically. The only way around it is to directly transpose the term “white person” word for word into the language to form *umuntu omhlophe* “white [colour] person”. This sounds like a bit of a forced euphemism, and strikes one as a capitulation to the hegemonic reading.

I am suggesting here that the difficulty with the translation is based in a difference in analysis of the concept. Under a Black (~Bantu-speaking) analysis, race is the rhetoric for describing the hegemony – *esilungwini* (“the white man’s country”) can mean “town as opposed to country” (above). *Lekgoa la ka* (“my white man”) can simply mean “my boss”. *Lekula la ka* (“my coolie”) can mean “my supplier”. Race is used in these everyday cases as a relational rhetoric – it refers to certain sociopolitical relations. The thingness of race is ousted by this. It is a humanizing of race, or, we could say, a Blackening thereof.

“Human being, person ; man (not of necessity male).

This Blackening could also be called a Queering. Because we might see race in the same way that we might see gender, not as an internal reality or something which is simply true about us, but as a phenomenon which is produced and reproduced all the time – as a lived out reality that we are born into, not with.

The analysis then is not about dead facts, but about *modes of life* – about processes, about *relationships* in the social order. The dead analysis – the reification of race, which is the dehumanising of people – is a white one (and a heteronormative one) couched in the terms of *isilungu* (white man’s language/culture). When we speak English, we speak *isilungu* as opposed to *isiNtu* (language/culture) – the language and culture is named in relational terms – as a relative position in the hegemony, that is performative in the speaking of the language.

The dead analysis framed in English is precisely the racism that regulates the hegemony, while the living analysis, that is not usually framed in English, describes it.

Akumuntu, yisilwane. Akumuntu, yinsinga

So by *isilungu*, the banal thingness of race, which is the normativising of race as an inert distinguishing mark of identity, is the basis of all racism. It is because the racial hegemony exists, that this is a racist normalisation: fixing the hegemony in the phenotype, like fixing the gender in the sex (and so making it resistant to change), is clearly a normative formation. The thingness of it produces racism by leading us to retreat from the countenancing of human beings, into scrutinising the surface of inanimate objects. Like playing-cards read for suit, or chemicals under a microscope,

people can then be measured, sorted, used, held and discarded.

The terms of *IsiNtu* work against this, by reinforcing the counter ideology of *ubuNtu* – that one is a person only by one’s relation to people – that personhood is a relational process – that to countenance others is to be human.

UMLUNGU ANGATHUNGA ISICOCO

Umlungu akusumuntu. Izinhlelo zabelungu ziyizinhlelo zeziNto, kodwa ubuNtu buvela emuntwini. Uma sibheka umuntu njengento, sibheka ngamehlo womlungu.

Lekgoa ga se motho. Ga ke tsebe gore e ka spana ka sekgoa moo, mara : whites are not people, inasmuch as whiteness is the act of (self-)denial of humanity – whites don’t just do this dehumanising to blacks, they do it to themselves (whiteness is dehumanising) and the whiteness in us (as black people) makes us do it to ourselves - the white economy of thinghood living in us pushes down our own blackness (*ubuntu bethu - lento esizenzela ukuthi singabantu*).

But whites are just those who have minoritised their humanity (*sengathi bangenabantu ngempela*) – the hegemonic reality in the ontology pushes down the humane reality such that, in South Africa, whites behave in a parochial fashion, unable to assimilate indigenous culture, although it predominates around them, because they have minoritised that reality and reified the indigenous as the property and domain of blacks, while majoritising the hegemonic one as their own. When we do the same we become whites and we see ourselves like whites see us. But us, as *people* (*batho, bantfu, vanhu*), are called “black” in the terms of whiteness. Properly being a person requires you to reject the white analysis of these terms:

Ngoba okusalayo, lamagama lawo siwabiza ngo-”black” futhi u-”white” ngamagama esilungu! Thina sikhuluma ngomuntu futhi ngomlungu, njengokubhaliwe ngaph-ezulu - it just so happens that our “umuntu” coincides with their “black”, so we can use “Black” masiringa ngabantu...

Ekucabangeni kwami, lokhu kufanelana nokukaX-hamela makakhuluma nge-“Black Consciousness”.

In order to move towards a non-racial society, I think we have to embrace our own Blackness, which we can understand as the mental attitude that privileges personhood, *ubuntu*, over thinghood.

When we do this, *umlungu angathunga isicoco*: we will “pump life into each other”, instead of treating each other as receptacles of death.