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UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR D.R. CONGO: BONDING CITIZENS TOGETHER

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ABSTRACT: This article explains the philosophy of *ubuntu* by grounding the discussion around the concept itself (*ubuntu)*. The significance of *ubuntu* for D.R. Congo is also explored. In actual fact, *ubuntu* lies at the heart of the way of life in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is the 'soul force' that drives the different facets of societal life in this part of the world. It is *ubuntu* that guides the interpersonal relationships in Sub-Saharan African societies. On this ground, this paper seeks to show how *ubuntu* is highly required for improving and strengthening the state-citizen relationship in D.R. Congo. In its essence, *ubuntu* is a capacity in Sub-Sahara African culture that expresses reciprocity, dignity, compassion, harmony and humanity in the interests of building a community with justice and mutual caring. Now, the consequence of failing to embrace it in a country like D.R. Congo has been manifested through violence and unending warfare, among many other challenges, in the country. For this, our objective in this paper is to place the reader in Congolese society and present *Ubuntu* as the philosophy that is appropriate for the improvement of the interpersonal relationships in this society.

I.   THE CONCEPT OF UBUNTU

The concept of 'ubuntu' is traced to the Bantu peoples of southern Africa, especially the Zulu and Xhosa of South Africa and is generally translated into English as 'humanness'. But its sense is best conveyed by the expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning 'a person is a person through other people'.[1] This tenet is expressed by sayings such as 'I am because we are' and 'I am human because I belong'. Contrary to René Descartes who says *Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am), in ubuntu terminology, an individual says *I participate, therefore I am*. Placing emphasis on 'being human through other people', ubuntu is succinctly reflected in the phrase *I am because of who we all are.*[2]

In Zulu language, for instance, the word 'ubuntu' symbolises "being human," a meaning that is found in other sub-Sahara African languages as well. For instance, in Shona, a Zimbabwe language, the word *unhu* means the same thing as ubuntu. The same meaning is also expressed by *ubuthosi*in Ndebele, another Zimbabwe language. And in Botswana, the word *botho* has the same meaning, while in Tanzania it is *bumuntu*. Then, D.R. Congo, Angola, Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda use respectively the words *bomoto, gimuntu, umunthu, vumuntu,* and *umuntu* to imply being human.[3]

II.   UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY

'Ubuntu philosophy'[4] is "best understood as a social philosophy based on principles of care and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness that expresses the fundamental interconnectedness of human existence."[5] This thought expresses reciprocity, dignity, harmony, humanity in the

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[1] Cf. Richard Bolden, "Ubuntu," in *Encyclopedia of Action Research*, ed. David Coghlan and Mary Brydon-Miller (London: Sage Publications, 2014),
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259849297_Ubuntu
[2] Cf. Jacob Mugumbate and Andrew Nyanguru, "Exploring African Philosophy: The Value of Ubuntu in Social Work," *African Journal of Social Work* 3 (1) (August 2013): 82-83.
[3] Cf. Mugumbate and Nyanguru, "Exploring African Philosophy," 85.
[4] Conceived as a philosophy of peace, 'ubuntu' was spearheaded by post-apartheid leaders in South Africa such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Thabo Mbeki, among others. In this philosophy, Africans are urged to re-engage with African cultural values.
[5] Bolden, "Ubuntu," https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259849297_Ubuntu

interests of building and maintaining a community with justice. Ubuntu is an alternative to the individualistic philosophy that tends to dominate the world today. And it is summarized by various words such as caring, compassion, forgiveness, solidarity, sharing, interdependence, kindness, benevolence, consensus, or any value of humanness towards others, etc.[6] This African collectivist philosophy of 'ubuntuism' is highlighted in three different maxims.

> *The first maxim asserts that 'to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them'. And the second maxim means that 'if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life'. The third maxim as a principle deeply embedded in traditional African political philosophy says that 'the king owed his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him'.[7]*

In this sense, "Ubuntu is inter-subjective in that it focuses on the relationship between the individual and the collective, rather than privileging one over the other."[8] Its power is in forging stronger relationships between people. It is

> *...the principle of caring for each other's well-being and fostering the spirit of mutual support. Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual's humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being.[9]*

With its articulation that "I am because we are," 'ubuntu philosophy' points towards a strongly constructivist ontology in which a person's sense of being cannot be detached from the social context in which that person is found. This is a philosophy that "highlights the importance of interdependence and of people working together in pursuit of shared goals."[10] *Ubuntu* suggests a framework for reciprocal responsibility whereby the citizens as a whole support one another and, in so doing, construct and strengthen their state-citizen relationship.

This is a normative philosophy of how people should relate to one another. It is "collectivist in orientation - expressing the value of collaboration, cooperation and community. It espouses an ethos of care and respect for others and the importance of solidarity in the face of adversity."[11] Unlike the continual violence and warfare of D.R. Congo, these characteristics are opposite to vengeance, confrontation, and retribution. They describe a worldview that values life, human dignity, humaneness, harmony, reconciliation, social justice, and the like.

III.   D.R. CONGO'S UNENDING ARMED CONFLICTS

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country situated in the central part of Africa, became independent on June 30, 1960. This was after seventy-five years of colonial Belgian rule. But the celebration of its independence was short-lived. Just in mid-July of 1960, the Congolese state started a series of internal and severe crisis that has exposed its population to the torments of warfare till now. Since the 1960s, this country has been a theatre of unending civil clashes and armed conflicts, which have provoked various dehumanizing conditions and miseries for the Congolese people. Life situation in D.R. Congo has repeatedly incorporated rebellions, secessions as well as local insurrections.

At the end of the cold war[12] in the 1990s, Congolese armed conflicts started involving other African countries directly. For instance, the Congolese war of October 1996, which overthrew President Mobutu Sese

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[6] Cf. Mugumbate and Nyanguru, "Exploring African Philosophy," 85.

[7] Mugumbate and Nyanguru, "Exploring African Philosophy," 83.

[8] Bolden, "Ubuntu," https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259849297_Ubuntu

[9] Mugumbate and Nyanguru, "Exploring African Philosophy," 92.

[10] Bolden, "Ubuntu," https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259849297_Ubuntu

[11] Bolden, "Ubuntu," https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259849297_Ubuntu

[12] "Cold war" is a term that is commonly associated with the 20th century period of political, cultural, economic, and military rivalry between the communist Eastern bloc and the capitalist West bloc. It was essentially a state of geopolitical tension that prevailed after the World War II between the Eastern Bloc (the

Seko in May 1997 after seven months of conflict, and replaced him with Laurent-Désiré Kabila, brought Ugandan and Rwandan troops into D.R. Congo. Then, after a short time, came the war of August 1998, generally known as "Great African War," that sought to overthrow the new leader who was just installed in the country. This war is also referred to as the "African World War" for the reason that from 1998, the year when it started, to 2004 it resulted in around 3.8 million deaths, according to the estimations of the International Rescue Committee reported by Thomas Turner.[13] Known as being the deadliest war in the modern history of Africa, it involved directly nine African countries arranged into two groups of six and three, namely D.R. Congo, Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe, Chad, and South Africa on the side of Congolese government; then Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi on the side of the anti-Congolese government groups. Aside of these countries, there were likewise armed groups that engaged in the same war, and they were approximately twenty, foreign and local altogether. And up to date, military operations combined with political endeavors have not put an end to the armed violence and warfare of D.R. Congo, particularly in its eastern part.

IV.   SIGNIFICANCE OF UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY FOR D.R. CONGO: BONDING CITIZENS TOGETHER

Ubuntu is a normative philosophy of how people should relate to one another. It is "collectivist in orientation - expressing the value of collaboration, cooperation and community. It espouses an ethos of care and respect for others and the importance of solidarity in the face of adversity."[14]

Relating 'ubuntu philosophy' to D.R. Congo, it calls to forging stronger relationships between Congolese people by "caring for each other's well-being and fostering the spirit of mutual support."[15] It is the right and responsibility of every Congolese citizen to promoting individual and societal well-being as this is grounded in African maxim that "people are people through other people."[16] From its characteristics, *ubuntu* worldview is of great relevance to the reconstruction of the state-citizen relationship in D.R. Congo. Unlike what is lived in this country, namely unending armed conflicts, violence, corruption, tribalism, mismanagement of public goods, nepotism, etc. "*ubuntu* is opposite to vengeance, opposite to confrontation, opposite to retribution."[17] Instead, it values life, compassion, dignity, humaneness, reconciliation and harmony. It relates to bonding with others in the society. Therefore, enforcing 'ubuntu philosophy' is very necessary to reconstruct the state-citizen relationship in D.R. Congo. *Ubuntu* values are needed to suppress and overcome the causes of state failure, which has opened and keeps open the way to repeated armed conflicts in the country. To overcome their social and political upheavals, Congolese citizens should embrace mutual assistance; inculcate inclusive life principles founded on dignity and respect for others.

V.   CONCLUSION

This article has called for a renewed attention to the sense of *ubuntu* as an intellectual resource for the reconstruction of the seriously flawed and dysfunctional state-citizen relationship in D.R. Congo. This is neither "given" nor is it automatic in any society. So, for it to take place in D.R. Congo, the state needs to enforce,

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Marxist-Leninist Soviet Union and its satellite states) and the Western Bloc (the democratic and capitalist U.S.A. and its allies). In a more specific language, cold war is the period of rivalry between the USA-dominated West and the USSR-dominated East that extended from 1945 to the collapse of communism with the Eastern European revolutions of 1989-1991. These revolutions led not only to the falling of orthodox communist regimes in the USSR (the "Sovietic" superpowers) and elsewhere, but also unleashed a process of political liberalization and market reform. This was a result of certain recognition that only capitalism was offering the prospect of economic prosperity and political stability. However, historians do not fully agree on the dates limit of the cold war, but a common timeframe is the period between 1947, the year the Truman Doctrine (a U.S. foreign policy pledging to aid nations threatened by Soviet expansionism) was announced, and 1991, the year the Soviet Union collapsed. On the other hand, this war was "cold" in the sense that the adversaries avoided direct confrontation; there was no large-scale fighting directly between the two sides involved in the conflict, although there were major regional wars, known as proxy wars, supported by the two sides around the globe. Aside from the development of the two sides' nuclear arsenals and their deployment of conventional military forces, the struggle for dominance was also expressed via massive propaganda campaigns and espionage, rivalry at sports events, and technological competitions such as the Space Race.

[13] Cf. Thomas Turner, *Congo Wars: Conflicts, Myth and Reality* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2007), 2.

[14] Bolden, "Ubuntu," https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259849297_Ubuntu

[15] Mugumbate and Nyanguru, "Exploring African Philosophy," 92.

[16] Mugumbate and Nyanguru, "Exploring African Philosophy," 92.

[17] Mugumbate and Nyanguru, "Exploring African Philosophy," 85.

among other elements, the values of *ubuntu*, namely collaboration, care, consensus, sharing, dignity, harmony, humanity in the interest of building justice, just to name but a few.

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