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# Dispensing with the Occult: Theorising Ubuntu as a Pagan Ethics of Migration

**Abstract:** This paper situates its discussion of the relationship between botho (ubuntu) and migration in South Africa after 1994. It asks whether botho (ubuntu) can respond to the vulnerability migrants face in South Africa after apartheid. It claims that botho (ubuntu) has potential to address the vulnerability migrants face but only if the underlying assumptions informing freedom after apartheid find orientation away from rational calculation to nature. When nature informs the understanding of freedom, botho (ubuntu) appears as a new hospitality that counters state conferred forms for hospitality. The consequence of this is the orientation of freedom to care for those the crossing of borders makes vulnerable.

**Keywords:** *Botho (ubuntu); the heart; migrants; vulnerability; South Africa.*

## Introduction

This paper borrows epistemic ideas from Mohlomi, the last of the Afro-pagan intellectuals of southern Africa in the 18th century, in order to reflect on the relationship between botho (ubuntu) and migration in South Africa after apartheid. The paper asks whether botho (ubuntu) can respond to the vulnerability migrants face in South Africa after apartheid. The claim it makes is that botho (ubuntu) has potential to address the vulnerability migrants face but only if the location of freedom is in nature and not in abstract rational calculation as is the case with the ideology underlying the contemporary ruling neo-liberal hegemony that informs the making of South Africa after apartheid. When freedom is located in nature botho (ubuntu) takes the form of a new hospitality with potential to counter hospitality as a construct of states under conditions of neo-liberal globalization. This new hospitality positions freedom as the capacity to care, especially for others that the crossing of borders makes vulnerable.

The connection between the contemporary post-apartheid dispensation and the vulnerability of migrants in South Africa is well established in the literature (Mosselson, 2010; Neocosmos, 2010; Nyamnjoh, 2006). The same is true for explorations of what constitutes botho (ubuntu) (Gade, 2012; Mogobe, 2005) and some critique of the concept (Matolino and Kwindigwi, 2013). What is,

perhaps, not well known are attempts that reflect on how this heritage of Africa can serve as a resource capable of guiding deliberation on how the vulnerability of migrants in South Africa can be addressed. Equally unknown are attempts to reflect on botho (ubuntu) as hospitality and less a philosophy as is the common practice. There is a general sense of admission of the relevance and significance of this heritage to some of the most pressing challenges South Africa and the continent faces today. Both Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu are known for their positive appraisal of this heritage as well as its relevance for the contemporary post-apartheid South Africa (Battle, 2000). The problem, however, is that discussions about botho (ubuntu) are often undertaken apart from the Afro-pagan intellectual traditions that have potential to elucidate contemporary imaginations of the relevance of this concept. This often leaves conversations about botho (ubuntu) trapped in western metaphysical and theoretical concerns in ways that render such conversations limiting. By borrowing epistemic ideas from Mohlomi in order to guide its deliberations, this paper tries to overcome this pitfall.

In terms of methodological approach, the paper imitates the movement of the Sankofa bird that is in the present and moves forward by looking back. It adopts this approach in order to refuse submission to the colonial amnesia that, if left unchecked, guides the thinking of former subjects of colonization. This amnesia, characterized by the erasure of Africa's history and its marginalization, is part of the contemporary moment and finds validation via coloniality. The paper understands the looking back of the Sankofa bird as a conscious call to thought to pay attention to the pitfalls that colonial amnesia makes apparent. Consequently, it will proceed in the following way. Firstly, it outlines its own understanding of freedom in South Africa after apartheid. Secondly, it furnishes epistemic ideas it claims have potential to challenge this notion of freedom. Thirdly, it shows how these ideas have potential to redefine botho (ubuntu) as a new form of hospitality that orients freedom to care.

### **The world of terror**

This paper begins by claiming that the contemporary dispensation in South Africa, and the world at large, is limited in its inclinations to address the vulnerability migrants face. This is because in this dispensation, rational calculation has become the cornerstone defining the understanding of freedom. Rational calculation is not only the foundation defining the understanding of freedom but it has become an end in itself. The contemporary dispensation, that is, follows exactly in the footsteps of the ruling neo-liberal ideology that argues that freedom is a possibility but only when the interference of state institutions in

our lives is held at bay (Myers, 2021). Less interference, by external state forces, releases and frees the individual's natural disposition in the world and does so in a manner that maximizes the individual's productivity. This claim that the individual's natural disposition in the world becomes apparent only when external, and implicitly oppressive state derived conditions, are held at bay, defines the understanding of freedom after apartheid. That is, the understanding of freedom after apartheid arises as a construct of the individual whose natural disposition in the world depends on less intervention by state institutions.

The claim that rational calculation is what defines the nature of freedom after apartheid can be seen in the character of the post-apartheid state. One of the hallmarks of this state is retreat from the region (southern Africa), evident, among other things, in policies governing mining work in the era of democracy. These policies forbid the employment of mineworkers from the southern African region and replaces them with South Africans (Crush & McDonald, 2001; Crush & Tshitereke, 2001). This is an interesting retreat into the nation away from the historical linkages connecting South Africa's industrial base to the region. Of course, given the historical baggage of migrant labor, this can be interpreted in progressive terms as doing away with the historical abuse and exploitation of families in the hinterlands of southern Africa. The irony here, however, is that the democracy that many mineworkers fought for via their organizations under apartheid results exactly in new forms of insiders and outsiders defined not so much my race but citizenship. Citizenship defines insiders from outsiders, who as far as possible, need to be kept away from the post-apartheid structure of opportunity. Citizenship, therefore, forms a key instrument of the calculus of rational calculation, which has become an end in itself.

The connection of citizenship to rational calculation is part of a broader emerging logic of the state after apartheid. This logic, characterized by transition from Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR), defines changing priorities in the relationship between the state and the market. This is a change away from the state as the provider of public goods to one in which this responsibility is assigned to the market. Understood in relation to rational calculation as what defines the character of freedom after apartheid, this reassigning of responsibility for the provision of public goods, spells out that the market has priority and is terrain for the experience of freedom. GEAR, that is, signals that the emerging logic of the state is one inclined to less interference lest the individuals' natural disposition in the world becomes obstructed. Importantly, this gesture suggests that freedom after apartheid finds its course mainly via the market mechanism. The implications of this, sadly, has been that money and wealth facilitate the expe-

rience of freedom. While it is true that anyone can live and work where they want irrespective of race, the reality is that for many South Africans, money and wealth place barriers on where to live and work and does so in ways, sometimes, that reproduce historical divisions put in place by apartheid (see Hook & Vrdoljak, 2002; Murray, 2011: 283-319). Freedom, therefore, that has rational calculation as its foundation tends to miss pertinent and important questions of justice that ought to concern public discourse. Anyone who cannot live and work where they want have themselves to blame because the lack of money and wealth is their fault.

The intimacy of rational calculation and freedom, as well as the significance this assigns to money and wealth, has some important implications. First, it has tended to normalize and make corruption a way of life. This is because in a strange but unsurprising manner, freedom has come to define itself in relation to the accumulation of things (Mbembe, 2004). To have and to consume gives freedom its own articulation. Under this circumstance, power, especially organized power, becomes of paramount importance. This power serves as a conduit connecting individuals and groups to money and to wealth. It facilitates access to the post-apartheid structure of opportunity. This has meant that access to political power, via membership in political organizations, has become a lucrative way by which individuals and groups move towards money and wealth. Membership in a political party, especially the ruling party, makes the realization of freedom possible because it connects those aspiring for freedom to the resources within the state and government. The recent commission chaired by Judge Zondo appears to make this apparent. It has shown how membership in a political party, the ruling African National Congress in this case, provided individuals with channels to money and wealth within the state and government via connections of these individuals to the business underworld. Organized power, as well as its capacity to connect individuals and groups to money and wealth, is not evident only in relation to party politics. It serves the same function where the organizations of the workers (trade unions) are concerned. Membership in trade unions, among other things, places individuals in a queue leading to the acquisition of things.

Secondly, because the intimacy of rational calculation and freedom manifests in the accumulation of things, it has generated a tendency for polarization among a variety of constituencies in South Africa. This is because, more often than not, this accumulation relies on the mobilization of sameness. It depends on the marshalling of the sameness of race, ethnicity and region, among other things. That is, it rests on familiar people who are rendered as such by the need to accumulate. This suggests that race, ethnicity, and regionalism are constructs,

to a greater extent, of processes of this accumulation. They are not necessarily fossils tied to a time memory has washed aside. One of the most horrifying ways by which this mobilization of sameness occurs pertains to violence orchestrated against people considered foreigners. Considered as such by their apparent lack of citizenship, these people are often seen as an obstacle towards the realization of freedom. This is because their presence in South Africa gives rise to contestation around opportunities, especially job opportunities. In order to resolve this, locals tend to marshal citizenship and advocate for the expulsion of foreign nationals from South Africa. This mobilization, with its attended xenophobic violence, bear testimony to the ruthless nature of this accumulation process.

The broader implications, concerning this paper, of the intimacy of rational calculation and freedom means that the orientation arising in South Africa after apartheid limits and constrains the application of the ethos of botho (ubuntu) as hospitality. This is because this orientation grounds freedom in an abstraction and because of this it surrenders freedom to the power of occult. That is, the elevation of the abstract as what forms foundation for the experience of freedom bypasses the person who should constitute the foundation of freedom. This reduction of the person opens the definition of freedom to forces and factors that claim priority over the person. These are the forces associated with consumption. They are occultic in the sense that they derive from submission to the power of the commodity and its capacity to divorce itself from its origin in problematic social relations (Marx, 1887: 26-83). This ability of the commodity to appear as an entity divorced from problematic social relations constitutes the modern sense of occult. It points to the power that is real but is rendered invisible by fetishistic processes associated with production. Consequently, the vulnerability associated with migrancy becomes frivolous under these conditions because this dispensation derives from blind submission to the capacity of the commodity to conceal the problematic relations from which it arises.

### **The return of the pagan**

If the new, post-apartheid dispensation is to maximize the ethos of botho (ubuntu), and consequently, address the vulnerability associated with the conditions of migrancy, it will have to challenge the connection of rational calculation and freedom that defines South Africa after apartheid. This is because among other things, this connection takes for granted the division between 'physis' nature and 'nomos' law that underscores a neo-liberal episteme (Milbank, 2015: 96). The neo-liberal order of things that this intimacy assumes, that is, opposes freedom to what it considers wild and uncontrollable forces of life (i.e., the state of nature). Freedom in this schema is a product of the rational artificial con-

ventions consequent upon human social interactions. By positioning freedom in the realm of humanity's artificial conventions the episteme that informs the intimacy of rational calculation and freedom suggests that in its genuine manifestation freedom is unnatural. The view of this paper, however, is that freedom is the most natural experience of being in the world and of being human. Returning freedom to nature, it argues, has the potential of rehabilitating contractual relations away from the occulting power that defines the contemporary dispensation in South Africa and the world in general.

This paper sees in the thinking of Mohlomi, the last of the Afro-pagan intellectuals of southern Africa in the 18th century, potential for epistemic challenge to the current intimacy of rational calculation and freedom defining South Africa after apartheid. This is because Mohlomi's thinking grounds freedom (freedom from political tyranny, in this case) in the primacy of the heart in the organization of political life (Ellenberger, 1992: 106-107). Ordinarily, in Sesotho, reference to the heart denotes a counter-intuitive approach to life. So, for instance, a person who is calculating, and is perhaps, long suffering, and does not easily get into fights when provoked, is said to have a heart. At a philosophical level, however, this counter-intuition takes on a critical posture and makes life, especially political life, an object of inquiry. As critical counter-intuition, the heart is an episteme that rests on a claim that the organization of political life ought to rest on an empirical observation of the human in society. Critical counter-intuition, that is, is the very good that ought to inform the art of political governance. The most natural way of being in the world, this seems to suggest, happens when we base political organization on critical counter-intuition. Critical counter-intuition, it would seem, is what gives political life its natural orientation and expression. When political life loses its orientation to critical counter-intuition, it simply loses its natural manifestation.

The significance of the heart as the center of thought manifests in Mohlomi's teachings on politics directed at one of his famous students, Lepoqo, later to be known as Moshoeshoe, founder and king of the Basotho nation. In these teachings, inspired by Mohlomi's disdain for dictatorship in matters related to political governance, he instructs and mentors Lepoqo about a form of governance whose foundation is the heart (Ellenberger, 1992; Guma, 1960). The aim of this governance whose foundation is the heart is the attainment of freedom from the tyranny of political dictatorship that appears to have colored southern Africa at the time. This dictatorship, of course, derives from the elevation of the abstract as the organizing principle of political life and this elevation of the abstract is apparent in the esteemed role given to diviners who appear to legitimate the idea that the legitimacy of monarchy (and therefore of sovereign



power) rests on a power that transcends the power of the people. This of course is the power of occult. In Mohlomi's teachings, this gesturing to the power of occult as what furnishes the institution of monarchy with legitimacy is the basis of political dictatorship because it bypasses the power of the people and renders it epiphenomenal to the power of occult which rests on the primacy of the abstract. Consequently, this gives monarchs the right to act in the most unnatural way, which is to act apart from the interests of the people where such people are turned into fodder for political gain. Dictatorship, that is, is the most unnatural way of experiencing political life.

Evidently, the heart orients freedom away from a connection to the abstract because it is about the capacity to rationalize the aspirations of the people and to bring about a form of government that reflects these aspirations. The heart, therefore, is about the operations of the intellect and of its capacity to establish goodness (defined in relation to the interests of the people and, therefore, in opposition to the priority of the occultic and the abstract) as foundation for the experience of freedom. This goodness rests on nothing but the priority of the people as what must inform the imaginations of governance. The heart, consequently, establishes governance as being about the experience of freedom because it presupposes a deeper engagement with the circumstances that shape a people's life. This stands in sharp contrast to political dictatorship that abdicates responsibility for the wellbeing of the people in favor of governance founded in the elevation of the abstract. To found governance whose epistemic foundation is the heart means taking seriously the concrete circumstances of life as the only thing that must guide the imagination of a people-centered political governance. Only when this is done does freedom take on a natural path.

The significance, further, of placing the heart at the center of the imagination of this version of good governance (in its Afro-pagan sense) is that this does not only put abstraction at bay in the understanding both of governance and freedom but it lifts the lid on the problematic social relations that the connection of politics and the power of occult conceal. This connection hides problematic social relations because in its attempt to elevate the power of the sovereign, it trivializes the people. The consequence of this is that goodness resides elsewhere other than in the centrality of the rationalization of the aspirations of the people as what must inform the articulation of governance. The power of occult and its connection to politics, that is, functions to mystify real and often problematic social relations around which the articulation of the character of governance must take its cue. The heart introduces a form of a counter-governance to governance defined by political dictatorship. It does this by rehabilitating sovereignty away from its unnatural manifestation in dictatorship and accords

it its natural expression under people-centered governance. This rehabilitation, however, does not necessarily do away with the state of exception (Agamben, 1995) but imagines it as earned via capacity to rationalize the aspirations of the people.

The assault of the heart on the primacy of the abstract as well as on occultic power does not only introduce governance as domain for the natural experience of freedom but it furnishes a potent epistemic ground for changing the background assumptions informing the contemporary understanding of freedom away from rational calculation and the accompanying modern power of occult. This is a possibility because, as counter-episteme, the heart collapses the binary division between physis (nature) and nomos (law) and the consequence of this is the relocation of freedom from the realm of the artificial and unnatural to that of the natural. Freedom appears as the natural thing defining what it means to be human because as counter-episteme, the heart treats reason as the most natural way of deliberating on the circumstances of the human in society. As the heart orients freedom to nature, the face emerges as terrain mediating an appreciation of the suffering arising from problematic social relations. Of chief concern to this paper, is the face of vulnerability represented by the migrant moving under conditions of globalization.

### **A new hospitality**

Once the background assumptions informing freedom are changed away from rational calculation to the heart, it becomes possible to address the vulnerability associated with migrancy. This is because changing the background assumptions informing freedom away from rational calculation to the heart opens scope for thinking about others not only in terms of the logic of instrumental rationality but in terms of a dialogue between rational calculation and capacity for hospitality which is lost when rational calculation becomes an end in itself in the understanding of freedom. Hospitality, after all, if we follow Mohlomi's thinking, is one of the defining features of an orientation to the heart (Ellenberger, 1992). It is about opening relations to the affective dimension of life in relations with those designated as others. Thinking and relating with others requires an opening of all the dimensions that define the person's presence in the world and not only preference for an abstract mind. This is what an orientation to the heart seeks and tries to achieve. This paper argues that under conditions wherein the heart constitutes foundation for an understanding of freedom, botho (ubuntu), appears as a new hospitality capable of furnishing an ethical infrastructure that can deal with the vulnerability of migrancy. This is because an orientation to the heart elucidate conversation about botho (ubuntu), as



well as freedom, as talk about the most natural ways of being in the world with others.

It is important to understand that anchored in the orientation of the heart, and therefore, in its Afro-pagan intellectual traditions, *botho* (*ubuntu*) as hospitality is opposed to binary thought and its tendency to construct life as being about oppositions. With regards to this paper, the opposition between the citizen and the foreigner stands as a chief example, especially where the citizen chooses to be one-eyed. An orientation to the heart dispenses with this opposition because, in its Afro-pagan intellectual traditions, the heart stands for revolt against sovereign power when it manifests as dictatorship (i.e., when it manifests as being apart from nature). Consequently, as hospitality, *botho* (*ubuntu*) challenges the modern contemporary approaches to hospitality because these approaches take the sovereign power blessed by neo-liberal ideology, which constitutes it as unnatural, for granted. The implication of this is that *botho* (*ubuntu*), as a construct deriving from the centrality of the heart to the understanding of politics and freedom, is critical of any version of hospitality that takes for granted the sovereign who is a construct of the ideological denial that collective life, especially where that life has to be lived in anticipation of others, as the most natural way of being in the world. Presiding over collective life positioned in relation to the denial of nature, the sovereign accepts masculinist reason as the reason that gives legitimacy to the modern neo-liberal political art. Consequently, the sovereign becomes the embodiment of masculinist reason and acts to endorse its outlook on life. This is why as hospitality, *botho* (*ubuntu*), dispenses with versions of hospitality that take as given the sovereign (who is always defined in patriarchal terms) as the one who must open the door/s to the stranger, the stranger who must understand that his/her reception and welcome depends entirely on keeping the set rules of the sovereign. As a new hospitality, *botho* (*ubuntu*) disavows this accommodationist political version of hospitality evident in a whole arsenal of visa rules and deportation schemes of the contemporary world. These accommodationist versions of hospitality, which take their cue from contemporary neo-liberal expressions of sovereign power, represent, to a great extent, a refusal to let others in. This is apparent in that these versions of hospitality use a language of law that the migrant 'does not speak,' thus forcing the migrant to negotiate hospitality in terms of a language that is not amenable to his/her vulnerability (Derrida, 2005: 7).

In order to counter this expression of sovereign power and the accompanying versions of hospitality that derive from it, *botho* (*ubuntu*) must have benevolent power as its foundation. The cornerstone of this form of power is critical counter-intuition which informs the heart as a counter-episteme to the episte-

me of neo-liberal ideology. It is benevolent because it arises out of a process of the rationalization of the aspirations of the people. Consequently, benevolent power positions botho (ubuntu) on other concerns other than the sovereign's household (i.e., the nation) and the rules governing that household. It helps shift discourse concerning hospitality away from the patriarchal nature of the sovereign's household. This is because benevolent power's concern and its starting point is with the rationalization of the aspirations of the people. This rationalization concerns the people at large and is not only confined to those who, by virtue of citizenship, belong to the household. The people, therefore, and not the sovereign's household, inform imaginations of hospitality as a construct of benevolent power. In this case, the welcoming of strangers cannot occur on the basis of the priority of the household and the rules that govern it. What informs the welcoming of strangers, instead, is ethical responsibility as debt that is always due to others as neighbors. Benevolent power proceeds from the point of view of others who must be let in and stands in contrast to the logic that seeks their deduction as is exhibited by the neo-liberal expressions of sovereign power.

The importance of shifting discourse about botho (ubuntu) as hospitality away from the concern with the sovereign's household is that this transition places care, understood as sovereign responsibility (see Molapo, 2022), at the center of the understanding of botho (ubuntu) as hospitality. Defined by an orientation towards non-productive care, botho (ubuntu) as hospitality, seeks to transcend the narrow boundaries defining the sovereign's household. These boundaries are apparent in the hierarchy of human beings that the sovereign's household makes visible. Citizens and foreigners make up this gendered (and racially structured) hierarchy of human beings that are accorded value depending on their location in the hierarchy. Oriented towards non-productive care, botho (ubuntu) as hospitality seeks to overcome this hierarchy and to put in its place difference as the defining feature of relationality in the household. Difference refers here to the singularity that defines a person's presence in the world – a singularity marked by a variety of indexes which include but are not limited to gender, sexual orientation, race and nationality. Recognizing and giving value to the difference of those in the household does not only mediate hospitality but it suspends the sovereign and his rules. Botho (ubuntu) as hospitality is shallow if difference does not become a value that must be defended by the new rules that subject the household to the people writ large. Difference stands opposed to the totalizing logic of the sovereign which seeks nothing but accommodation and always carries a threat of expulsion. Understood in relation to benevolent power therefore, botho (ubuntu) as hospitality removes the household from its

location in binary thinking and places it firmly at the 'borderlands' where a multiplicity of knowledges defines belonging and relationality (Ybarra, 2009). It is here at the borderlands that the possibility of imagining productive and progressive ways of dealing with the vulnerability that defines the life of migrants is found.

The interesting thing about this major transformation is that understood in relation to the importance of benevolent power, *botho* (*ubuntu*) as hospitality, orients freedom to care defined as sovereign responsibility. This orientation of freedom to non-productive care, interestingly, stands in sharp contrast to the contemporary hegemonic notion of freedom that defines South Africa after apartheid. As hospitality and understood in relation to benevolent power, *botho* (*ubuntu*) dispenses with the centrality of rational calculation to the understanding of freedom. As this happens, the ethical appears as important domain that must inform and guide the search for solutions related to the business of a shared life lived together under the challenging conditions of globalization. Still, and more importantly, as hospitality, *botho* (*ubuntu*) demystifies the vanity of a life that thrives on an uncritical relationship to consumption. This is because it disavows the centrality of the commodity which is evident in its rejection of rational calculation as the principal article of the understanding of freedom. Oriented towards care, therefore, *botho* (*ubuntu*) dispenses with modernity's inclination towards the power of occult.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to reflect on the relationship between *botho* (*ubuntu*) and migration occurring in South Africa after apartheid and under conditions of globalization. It has advanced the argument that *botho* (*ubuntu*) has potential to address the vulnerability migrants face but only if the understanding of freedom is oriented towards the heart as episteme. Orienting freedom to the heart supplants the priority of rational calculation in the understanding of freedom that defines the contemporary neo-liberal dispensation. The consequence of this is transcendence of masculinist notions of the sovereign that color the contemporary neo-liberal order as well as the accompanying accommodationist versions of hospitality. In place of this, arises the people at large as potential framework for imagining hospitality. This happens when we return sovereignty back to nature such that the primary thing defining hospitality is not the primacy of the spatial but rather the challenges that accrue with sharing life under troubling spatial confines. The most natural thing to do, it would seem, is not to foreclose national identities from contact but rather to open them up to contact. However much difficult undertaking such a project may appear, this is what *botho* (*ubuntu*) as hospitality imagines.

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