



Buntu Mtenyana

## ubuntu abantu abeLungu

Mr Buntu Mtenyana is a socio-linguist who is particularly interested in the origin of *ISINTU*, the African way of life. Sash went to see him to find out more about the meaning of the words *ubuntu*, *abantu* and *abeLungu*.

If we want to consider the origin of the meaning of *ubuntu* we must separate the prefixes and suffixes that surround the root NTU, or what to the Sotho's is THO.

NTU is an ancestor who got human society going. He gave us our way of life as **human beings**. It is a communal way of life which says that society must be run for the sake of all. This "human" way of life requires cooperation, sharing and charity. There should be no widows left alone, or orphans — they all belong to someone. If a man does not have a cow, then give him a cow to milk. There should be no poor person *ohlelekileyo* (a deprived person).

This way of life demands cooperation in hunting, food-gathering and so on. It includes the quality of negotiating with others and trying to accommodate others.

## People and whites



From her experiences as a Trac fieldworker in the rural areas, ANINKA CLAASSENS comes across some notions that black people have about white people . . .

Aninka Claassens

In South Africa there have been many different ways of naming people: Europeans, Makgowa, Natives, Bantus, whites, *abeLungu*, blacks. Most of us recognise that *abeLungu* is a Zulu word for white people and that *abantu* is the Zulu word for people. Learning Zulu I had always used *abantu* in that sense, people; people in a crowd, people of the world. But I began to notice that this can cause confusion with Zulu people. *Abantu* sometimes has another meaning, which is black people, white people not being included. It is necessary to specify who is in the world before one can continue to call everyone there *abantu*. Otherwise when you mention that one of these *abantu* is called Oliver Twist people look sceptical — *abantu* don't have names like that.

It's sad really to have to say *abantu nabaMhlope*, 'people' and whites; particularly when the word *abantu* is a personification of the quality *ubuntu* — meaning human behaviour, compassion, humanity. It is however not all that surprising — whites have used the word *Bantu* to mean black people and there has been a terrible shortage of *ubuntu* in white

people's behaviour towards blacks.

*AbeLungu* on the other hand seems to have a wider meaning than just 'white people'. A farm worker from Piet Retief district earning R25 a month, describing his life and conditions of employment said, 'We are the people (*abantu*) who live on the farms. It is alright about the whites *abaMhlope*, we agree that we live here on the farms with them, but let them give us money for our work. A white man has become an *umLungu* because of us. However much money he has, it is we people (*abantu*) who do the work'. (Translation of taped interview with Aron Mlangeni, April 1982).

The next time I heard *umlungu* in a strange context was at Kwa Ngema. Kwa Ngema is a farm owned by a black family, called Ngema, also in the Piet Retief district. It is a rich and beautiful place where the people grow mealies, beans, potatoes and sun-flowers. There are Ngemas living there as well as tenants.

One of the tenants, in talking about his life at Kwa Ngema referred to the *abeLungu*. 'Which *abeLungu*?' I asked. 'The Ngemas, the Ngemas are our landlords, they are the owners of the farm. They allow us to live on the farm, in exchange we must help them with work when they ask us.' This is a system of labour tenancy similar to that which was the norm on the neighbouring white farms. It is still in practice on many white farms, but unofficially. I asked the tenant why he had chosen to come to Kwa Ngema rather than make a similar arrangement with a white *umLungu*. He replied that the system was the same, but that life at Kwa Ngema was much better, because he was treated with *Ubuntu*.

What can you reply to an old farm worker who says, 'Tell me, *ntombazana*, how do these farmers feel when they see our children's bellies swelling up with hunger, and we have worked for them all our lives?' I said I did not know. She said, 'But you are a white person, you must know how they feel, and what they think about.' She asked the question as part of a long conversation. It was not a rhetorical question. She was deeply interested.

(Translated taped interview with Alice Kunene in April 1982)

The prefix UBU refers to the abstract. So *ubuntu* is the quality of being human. It is the quality, or the behaviour, of *ntu* society, ie, sharing, charitableness, cooperation. It is this quality which distinguishes a human creature from an animal or a spirit. When you do something that is not humane then you are being like an animal.

The prefix *abe* is the plural of *umu* which refers to a person. So *abantu* are the people of *ntu* society.

Strictly speaking it's not possible to refer to the people who came in 1652 with a different way of life and took our land, as *abantu*. We distinguish those who came after 1652 with the words *abeLungu* or *abaMhlope*. This distinction could not have carried on if the new arrivals had shared the land and way of life in a humane way.

*AbeLungu* refers to people who are privileged. If I were to arrive in a Mercedes Benz and wearing a suit, people would say *umLungu oMnyama ufikile* a black privileged person has arrived. The root *hlope* simply means white. So *abaMhlope* are white people.

Today the meaning you give to *abantu* depends on the context in which you use it. If you go into a hall in which a riot has taken place and three black people and three white people have been killed you will simply say six people are dead (*abantu bafile*). Later you may distinguish between their colours. But if you are saying that people are suffering because of the high rents then it is implied that you are talking about black people because white people are privileged, they appear to be quite okay and without any problems.'

## A new kind of banning order?

While banning as a form of silencing people remains on the statute book, it has been less frequently used in recent years. In 1980 due to world pressure it was dropped, with 11 people banned at that stage. Now it has cropped up again in another guise.

Once again it is a question of playing with words. Since the State of Emergency was de-

clared, some 65 people have effectively been banned, under restriction orders.

These people ironically are included in the statistics of those 'released' from detention under the State of Emergency regulations. On their release they were issued with orders similar to the one published below. . . The penalty for breaking these orders is a fine of R10 000 or 10 years in prison.

### SCHEDULE

#### Conditions of release of Mr X

The said MR X shall not without the permission of the Minister of Law and Order, during the period from the date of his release, for as long as the Regulations promulgated by Proclamation R121 of July 21 1985, issued in terms of the Public Safety Act, 1953 (Act 3 of 1953), remain in force —

- (1) absent himself from the magisterial district of JOHANNESBURG;
- (2) take part in any manner whatsoever in the activities or affairs of any of the following organisations:
  - MEDIA ADVISORY AND RESOURCE SERVICE (MARS);
  - COMMUNITY RESEARCH AND INFORMATION CENTRE (CRIC);
  - SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS PRESS UNION (SASPU);
  - JOHANNESBURG DEMOCRATIC ACTION COMMITTEE (JODAC);
  - ANY TRADE UNION;
  - ANY YOUTH ORGANISATION; OR
  - ANY ORGANISATION RELATED TO THE BLACK COMMUNITY IN THE MAGISTERIAL DISTRICT OF JOHANNESBURG.

- (3) enter the premises of any school or other educational institution;
- (4) (i) prepare, compile, publish or disseminate in any manner whatsoever any publication as defined in the Internal Security Act, 1982 (Act 74 of 1982);  
(ii) participate or assist in any manner whatsoever in the preparation, compilation, publication or dissemination of any publication as so defined;  
(iii) contribute, prepare or compile in any manner whatsoever any material for publication in any publication as so defined;
- (5) attend any gathering —
  - (i) at which any form of State or any principle or policy of, or action or contemplated action by, the Government of the Republic of South Africa is attacked, criticised or discussed;
  - (ii) at which any local authority as defined in section 1 of the Black Local Authorities Act, 1982 (Act 102 of 1982), is attacked, criticised or discussed;
  - (iii) of pupils or students; or
- (6) enter the premises of FREEWAY HOUSE in De Korte Street, Braamfontein or KHOTSO HOUSE in De Villiers Street, Johannesburg for any purposes whatsoever.