



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



Aninka Claassens

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

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)