

UPF Africa: I Am Because We Are

Adama Doumbia
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I Am Because We Are

5 Surprising Ways the Philosophy of Ubuntu Reimagines Global Cooperation



The "Ubuntu: A Blueprint for Interfaith Cooperation" webinar, organized by the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD) Africa, explores the African philosophy of Ubuntu—"I am because we are"—as a foundational framework for global peace and interfaith solidarity.

The modern world is currently trapped in an ontological crisis. For centuries, the dominant global narrative has been anchored in "Cartesian atomism"—a philosophical tradition that views the human being as a solitary, thinking unit, disconnected from the collective whole. While this mindset fueled the rise of the modern state, it has also bequeathed us a legacy of fragmentation, in which hyper-individualism and secular forces threaten to dismantle the very foundations of social cohesion and shared spiritual meaning. In this landscape of competing interests, our identity has become a private, internal state rather than a shared social reality. This "lone individual" model treats relationships as transactional and peace as merely the absence of conflict. To bridge the widening chasms of polarization and global inequity, we require more than a temporary political fix; we need a civilizational correction—a radical reimagining of what it means to be human in the 21st century. This correction is found in the ancient African wisdom of **Ubuntu**. Far from a vague sentiment of kindness, Ubuntu offers a rigorous, practical blueprint for peacebuilding and global governance. It posits that "I am because we are," shifting the focus from the self-contained ego to a model of relational accountability.

By embracing this framework, we can move beyond mere tolerance and toward a new moral architecture of solidarity.



1. The Cartesian Crisis: Why Thinking Is Not Enough

The Western philosophical foundation, famously summarized by René Descartes as *"I think, therefore I am,"* has inadvertently prioritized the private mind over the public good. This focus on the individual as the primary unit of reality often results in decision-making that leads to isolation and, eventually, conflict. Ubuntu offers a radical alternative: identity is not discovered internally; it is negotiated socially through our connection to others. In the Ubuntu framework, a person is only a person through other persons. This is an ontological shift that suggests our humanity is not a pre-existing state we possess, but a quality we co-create through our relationships. When we recognize that our very existence is contingent upon the community, the incentive for war and division evaporates, replaced by a fundamental drive for social stability. "Our colleagues in the West base their fundamental philosophical belief in Descartes who say 'I think, therefore I am.' This is based on individualism and it brings about individual making decisions ending up in wars and conflict. Ubuntu is the blueprint for formidable interfaith cooperation."

— **Bishop Dr. David Masupa**

2. The "Palm Oil" of Peace: Reconciling Faith and Humanity

One of the most profound insights from Dr. Faridun Abdallah describes Ubuntu as the "palm oil with which faith is consumed." In many societies, religion can become a "vertical" axis—a private connection to the Divine that, if left ungrounded, can lead to exclusion or fanaticism. Ubuntu provides the "horizontal" axis, the indigenous spirituality that makes faith palatable and practical in the realm of human interaction. This metaphor suggests that while faith provides the spiritual sustenance, Ubuntu is the lubricant that allows that faith to nourish the community without causing friction. It acts as an integrated spirituality where who we are (our character) and what we do (our actions) are inseparable. By centering Ubuntu, interfaith leaders can ensure that religious devotion manifests as "humanness"—the capacity to express mutuality and dignity regardless of theological differences.

3. The Universal Grammar of the One Human Family

Interfaith unity is often treated as a distant goal to be manufactured through negotiation, but the Ubuntu framework reveals it as an existing reality. When we examine the world's major spiritual traditions, we find a consistent "Universal Grammar" that mirrors the "One Human Family" concept. This common ground is not a future achievement but a foundational truth evidenced across diverse texts:

- **Islam:** The *Hadith of Bahi* and the Quran (49:13) emphasize that we were created from a "single pair" to know one another, teaching that those dearest to God are those who treat His children with kindness.
- **Hinduism:** The ancient principle of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* explicitly declares that "the world is one family."
- **Buddhism:** The *Lotus Sutra* teaches that we are all children of the same source, while the Dhammapada reminds us that hatred is never ceased by hatred, but only by love.
- **Sikhism:** The *Adigrant* asks, "What fear have I?" when recognizing the Creator as father, mother, and friend to all.

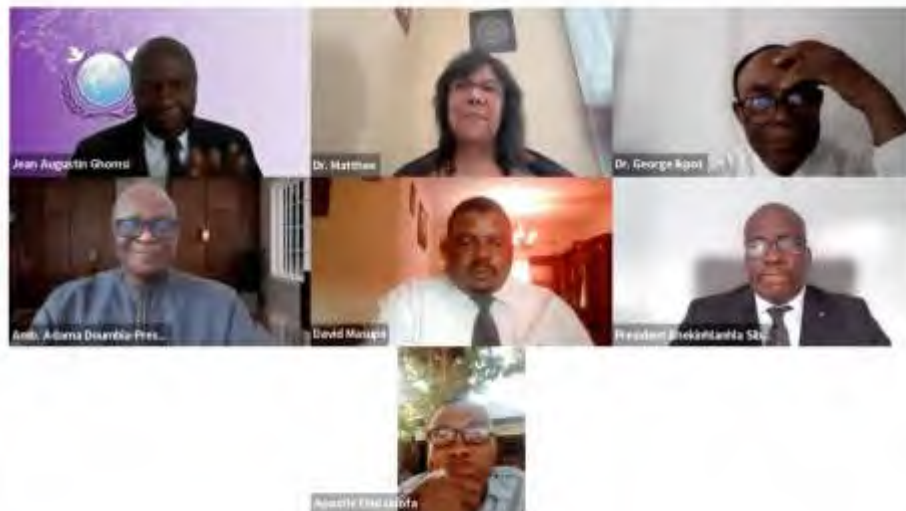
- **Confucianism:** The *Book of History* describes a "common world" where mutual confidence is emphasized and brotherhood is cultivated as the highest virtue.

4. Service as Identity: Beyond Moral Heroism

In the Ubuntu framework, the concept of service undergoes a revolutionary transformation. As Father Molifi Olifant argues, service is not an act of "moral heroism" or "charity" performed by a superior for an inferior—an approach that often mirrors the "global apartheid" and "colonial extraction" of our current world order. Instead, service is the very "fulfillment of one's humanity." This philosophy redefines leadership as a "Sacred Trust." In an individualistic model, success is measured by how high a leader rises above the group. In Ubuntu, a leader's success is measured exclusively by how many people rise because of their service. True personhood is realized only when our actions restore the dignity of our neighbor, moving the conversation from "global charity" to "relational accountability." "In African ethics, service is not charity and not an act of moral heroism. It is the fulfillment of one's humanity. True personhood is realized when our actions uplift others, restore dignity, and strengthen the soul." — **Father Molifi Olifant**

5. The "Insaka" Blueprint: Practical Governance and Justice

Ubuntu is more than a philosophy; it is a practical mechanism for social stability. This is best seen in the Zambian "Insaka" model—a traditional wooden shelter with thatched grass located in the center of the village. The Insaka is a space of radical inclusion where meals and stories are shared. It ensures that shared resources, like transport for the sick or food during droughts, are distributed based on mutual responsibility rather than individual wealth. Furthermore, this philosophy is now being encoded into modern legal frameworks. In Kenya, **Article 159** of the Constitution empowers "Alternative Justice Systems." These systems use traditional mechanisms and spiritual leadership to solve conflicts through restoration rather than the adversarial nature of litigation. By bringing traditional leaders, youth, and spiritual guides to the table, Ubuntu reduces the cost of justice and heals the social fabric, providing a scalable model for governance that prioritizes community harmony over retribution.



Conclusion: The Architecture of Moral Renewal

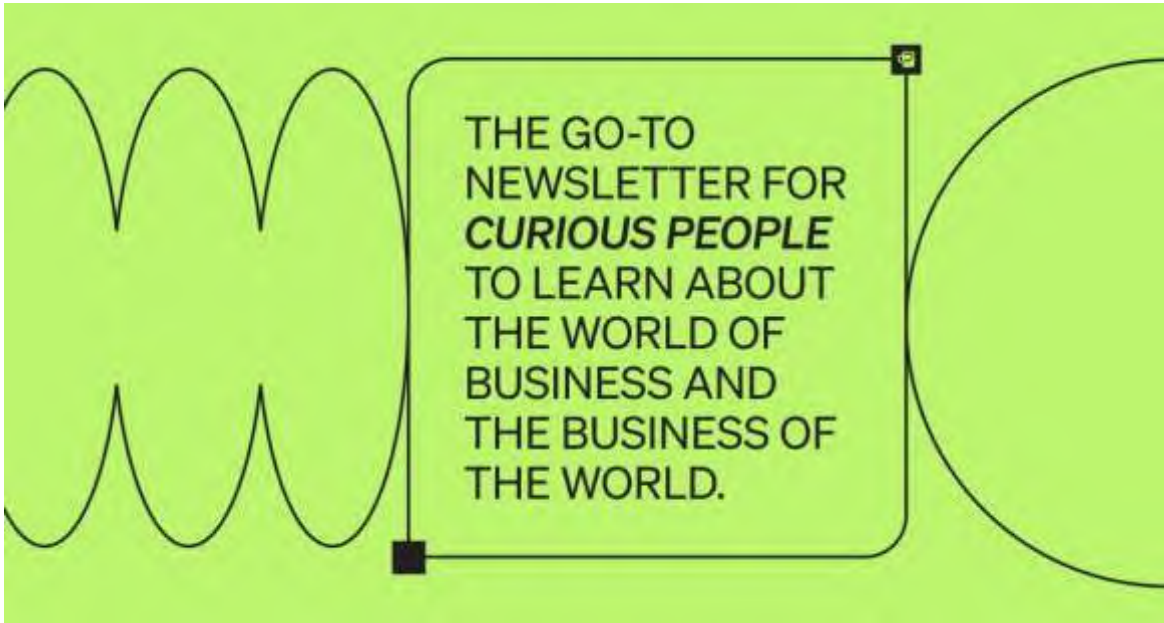
The path forward requires us to move from the "childhood of humanity"—defined by division and adolescence—into a mature era of solidarity. This is the vision behind the **"100 Days Campaign,"** a strategic call for religious and spiritual leaders to engage their communities in concrete actions for peace, moral renewal, and social harmony. It is a movement designed to turn the abstract beauty of Ubuntu into a living, breathing reality in our neighborhoods. If we accept that our dignity is co-created and our well-being is inextricably tied to our neighbor's, the way we exist in the world must change. Ubuntu challenges us to recognize that we are not merely individuals living side-by-side, but a single organic unit. "Ubuntu postulates that a person is a person through other persons. This is a capacity to express compassion, dignity, humanity, and mutuality in the interest of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring." — **Dr. Faridun Abdallah** If your dignity is inextricably tied to your neighbor's, what is the first bridge you will build today?





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