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Ununtu - Resonating with the world

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**English
podcast transcript**

Ubuntu

An introductory podcast

English transcript

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ES = Eliane Schmid

WH = Wakanyi Hoffmann

ES: Hello, and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast accompanying the METIS Project, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices to be found on www.metis.ethz.ch.

My name is Eliane Schmid and I'll be hosting today's conversation centered on Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a timeless concept deeply ingrained in the diverse cultures of Southern, Central, West and East Africa, particularly among people of Bantu origin. This profound philosophy, as Nobel Prize winner and former South African President Nelson Mandela described, represents a universal truth and a way of life that forms the bedrock of an open and inclusive society. In today's Wisdom Talk, we will explore what exactly Ubuntu is, as we will try to transcend language and time and delve into its principles that are consistent across various Bantu languages.

While Ubuntu doesn't discourage individuals from addressing their own challenges, it encourages us to consider whether our actions empower and uplift our communities. With the help of Wakanyi Hoffmann, we will discover how Ubuntu helps us treat others with kindness and respect, which can ultimately lead to an improved collective performance. Wakanyi Hoffmann is a research fellow at The New Institute, Hamburg and founding researcher of the African Folk Tales Project that makes these sources of wisdom and knowledge accessible to school children.

Wakanyi is also the author of numerous children's books, an African Indigenous Knowledge Scholar, journalist, and global citizen. Wakanyi, thank you very much for joining me today.

WH: Thank you so much, Eliane.

ES: In our email exchanges preparing for this podcast, I noticed that your email signature reads Wisdom Sower, followed by the quote: "The future is always beginning now with the stories we choose to pass forward." I'm very intrigued by both the description and the quote and would like to ask you, what is a Wisdom Sower and why did you choose exactly this quote to attach to your correspondence?

WH: Thank you so much, Eliane, and thank you everyone that's listening. Wisdom Sower; so the concept of wisdom sower as opposed to wisdom keeper is steeped in the idea that you are still in the process of experiencing. So, Wisdom Seeker, a Wisdom Holder is a title that you're granted. That is a title that is given to you, usually by elders. And so, in order for you to say you're a Wisdom Keeper, you couldn't possibly claim that title. It's a title that's given to you by others, honored to you, much like you would say other people would refer to you as an elder. So it isn't that you could claim to be an elder, you're already an elder, and that is an established role within society. Wisdom Sower to me is the idea that you've got in you the values and the principles of the elders, and therefore you have this responsibility to sort of go planting seeds of wisdom. And really that's what it is at the base of it all.

So, as I've been exploring through my work as an indigenous person from Africa and also steeped in indigenous values, I have discovered that the idea of wisdom keeping has become sort of commercialized almost. But at the same time, when I look back to the elders that instituted or gave me these principles of Ubuntu and other values that are very steeped in the idea of being human and community and all of that, my responsibility as it was proposed or shared with me as a child was that it's my job to experience this human adventure and through that then collect wisdom. And then that wisdom is what you go sowing, it's what you go planting. It's really planting of seeds. That's what wisdom sowing is.

And when it comes to the future begins now with the stories that we tell, that we pass forward, African storytelling is very much orally told, and the idea is that you pass a story forward and then that means that it's up to the person given the story to really interpret it for themselves and then be able to design or perceive of a better world. What stories can we tell ourselves today that would then define or design the future that we want? In essence, it's the idea that the future doesn't actually exist. The future is a fallacy. It's a concept that we make up in our minds, but the stories that we tell ourselves today about what our aspirations are and what our dreams are, then in essence design an idea of a future. And therefore, you go about trying to confirm by practice what you've already dreamt is the future. You're designing a future based on storytelling. That's sort of where this quote holds a space in my space.

ES: And this seems to go very much together, the idea of passing on stories, sowing seeds, and trees will grow that will be for, as you said, a kind of future, but it's nothing you ever really keep because our story should be passed on, right?

WH: Absolutely. Storytelling in the African tradition...and I think we have to be clear that this is not an African concept, it's a human concept. Storytelling, humanity, that's how we survive. We survive on the basis of being able to tell stories to make sense of the world through spoken word. So, the idea of wisdom keeping is also very much steeped in the idea of what is the experience of being human. If you have a particular experience that's particular to you that you think is a particularity, it isn't really, it's probably an experience that's been had by others. Our ability to tell stories then enhances our ability to find commonality, to find common ground, find common values. So, storytelling plays an enormous role in this idea of passing on wisdom because as much as your story might be unique to you, it's your version of the story that's unique to you, not exactly the story that you're telling. The experience is not unique to you, but the narrative that you choose to tell might be specific to you because of the way in which you tell it. What is a wisdom you've gained out a particular story that's not particular to you, but it's actually particular to humanity.

ES: Now that you just talked about wisdom and wisdom for humanity, I wanted to ask you if you could explain a bit more if Ubuntu is such a wisdom for humanity in a way, and what exactly Ubuntu consists of.

WH: Right. Thank you for that question. The way that I see it and the way that it's been explained also by other scholars such as Mogobe Ramose, who calls it humaneness versus humanity, so, this idea that you are your human nature is to be kind, gentle, hospitable, empathetic, these sort of universal human qualities one could say. So yes, I believe that Ubuntu is really a universal timeless wisdom. But then the word itself, the philosophy of Ubuntu, the idea of Ubuntu originated in a particular location in the world. However, it has been transported elsewhere by other human beings, other cultures. You'll find this similar idea, similar words describing the same concept of being a community in the sense that as a human being, you have a place in society with others. While Ubuntu might have originated from a small community in Southern Africa, it really is a universal timeless wisdom that you can trace in other communities and even modern societies.

ES: So it's very much also a philosophy passed on through oral storytelling, as you described before.

WH: Absolutely, it's a very practical way of understanding your position in the society, and it really comes down to the stories that we tell, and that is also based on the experiences of those who are story seekers or storytelling. But then there is a general understanding that the idea is that you're telling stories that will enhance these common values that we have, so that then society is organized in a way that it accommodates for all human experiences to be able to be seen and known and heard as well.

ES: I would like to go deeper into what exactly makes Ubuntu so special and why it can connect so many people. But first, could you give us a historical overview maybe of how it actually started, where exactly it started and how it started spreading?

WH: There are several traces of Ubuntu, and then there are several early scholarly ideas of Ubuntu. If you look at the work of Fainos Mangena, for example, she talks about common moral positioning of Ubuntu, and Thomas Sankara talks about humanism as well. So, you could tie it to the concept of humanism, although I prefer the idea of humaneness, just being human, being able to see another being as yourself, the suffering of another is yours. However, historically it dates back to the San people of the Kalahari Desert in Namibia, and these are the hunter-gatherer community. They're the earliest human beings as we know. They've been around for about 30,000 years, as far back as we can remember.

And if you really get into the details, the intricacies of how that community is organized, it is really organized around this concept of Ubuntu in the sense that the society, the community looks out for one another and the individual is accommodated in the way that that individual is inside the community, and therefore a well community, a community that is made up of beings that feel well taken care of will then essentially or ideally be able to look after the environment around them. And the earliest traces of this idea of a thriving, flourishing society within the Kisan community can be traced in the way that they hunt and gather and in the way they track. Tracking is probably the earliest idea of the origin of what Ubuntu in action really looks like. There's a lot of self-organizing, there is a lot of trust, there's a lot of collecting of knowledge in order for humanity to continue thriving. And that tracking method is sort of the earliest form of Ubuntu, if you may.

ES: So, it's very much a philosophy also centered around, as you said, the community looking out for each other and the community being the central concept versus when I now compare it to Western ways of living. In the West, often it's the individual that's the highest thing that you should reach. You should take care of yourself, you should strive for yourself and so forth. Is this a bit of a contrasting concept?

WH: If you look at the visualization, the visual representation of Ubuntu, usually you'll find images of a circle, and therefore that implies that everybody has a place in the circle. And there is the balance of power in the sense that everyone has equal representation, equally represented in terms of their voice and their place in society. And you can look at that as little

circles making a bigger circle. You might have a circle of elders or a circle of children, but there's this sort of larger circle of existence and it removes the individual from the center and the individual becomes a part of a greater whole, whereas one could argue that the Western way is the human at the center and then everything else. Ubuntu really is this concept of life as unfolding through you and through others, and that in fact your own wellbeing is intricately tied to others' wellbeing.

And if we are all in it together, more or less, then we are able to look after the wellbeing of what that environment serves as, whether that is the environment, the physical environment we live in, or the health of the nation or the health of a family. So really it is the individual that plays an enormous role in ensuring that the health of the community is safeguarded. There is an individual pursuit, but at the same time, there is the role that the individual plays in the community. These two sort of have a common equal role, the community and the individual. The community wouldn't be without individuals that are well, and individuals wouldn't be well if community wasn't promoting the wellbeing of the individual. There is that sort of balance between how well the community does and how well an individual is as well.

ES: And you mentioned also that it can be the environment of the people surrounding you, but it could also be the environment that you're physically in. Does Ubuntu also encourage people to consciously be aware of where they are in space and also be aware of the nature that's surrounding them, for example?

WH: By nature, do you mean the physical environment?

ES: The physical environment.

WH: Absolutely. So, Ubuntu, again, the origins of it comes from a very indigenous society. And with an indigenous society, you must look back to what is their worldview. And the view of an indigenous community is that the environment, human beings are part of the environment, they do not own. We do not have ownership of land, for example. Therefore, an individual

who's growing up with these Ubuntu principles understands clearly that their first responsibility is to the environment that serves them and therefore their behavior, the values that they mirror to other human beings will then be able to promote the wellbeing of say, the physical environment or the planet or the greater universe. You could expand that into any sort of physical space, but the idea is that the mirroring of values should then indicate that you are determined, or you are aware of your responsibility in looking after the planet or the physical location that you're in.

ES: Now, you several times mentioned the word indigenous and also refer to yourself as such. And I wanted to ask you...I also read someplace that you say that we are all indigenous in a way, and I know it's a very loaded term. Could you maybe describe what you would define indigenous as?

WH: So, there's a difference between indigenous and native, and I would even want to correct that. We're all native to the planet, and then there are certain communities that are indigenous to a particular location. There are indigenous communities all around the world. There are native indigenous people in the Americas, there are native Maori in New Zealand or the aboriginal community who are indigenous to Australia and other communities around the world. So, the idea is that we have a role to play as natives of this planet, and perhaps we have something that we could borrow from those who have been located or who have located themselves and have not necessarily moved out of that physical space. And those who have lived there and sort of done the same thing culturally and understood the intricacies of the environment around them could be described as indigenous to a particular landscape. However, they also exist in this greater global whole as native to the planet that we live in. So again, the difference between native and indigenous is I think important to point out here.

ES: Yes, definitely. And now I'm also thinking about the concept of global citizen that you also mentioned. And I would like to ask, because you also encourage children to be educated as a global citizen, how does that go together with the concept of native to the world and indigenous?

WH: Well, if you think about the concept of Ubuntu and how I describe it as a universal ideal steeped in universal values, and these are values that resonate across the world, then that would imply that everyone is a citizen of this world. So, what are those common values that we can draw from each other? If we are to borrow a concept such as Ubuntu or borrow any other ideas from elsewhere, we must always be able to look at how that is universally true to everyone, and therefore within the education system, how can we embed what is resonating with society around the world? How can children be able to embody these values that are not individualistic, but are actually serving the entire global community? And that's sort of my description of what it means to be a global citizen. What are those timeless values of human beings that we can bring into an education system and allow or enable for children to explore who they are, what their position is in the world, but also their position in the environment, in the physical location where they're located in the world. We can borrow from indigenous communities and see that wherever you are in the world, you've got a responsibility towards that environment. However, as native to the entire global society, you do have that responsibility as a global citizen, and also you have that established position in the world as a global citizen.

ES: We talked about child education now a bit, and I know that you also write children's books. Could you maybe explain a bit what is important to you when you write these children's books and what you would like to pass on in that case?

WH: Thank you. So, at some point throughout this work that I've been doing around collecting stories and collecting folktales from Africa, I decided at some point to start what is called 'The African Folktales Project'. And this is a bank of stories. What those stories were to begin with were just stories from Africa to the rest of the world, to children, to educators, to families, to bridge that gap between Africa and the world and to really have an African voice telling African stories. However, as I was exploring these stories, I discovered that a lot of them actually, a lot of the African folktales attempt to respond to the same challenges that we find globally. There's a lot of the stories that are tied to the challenges of the sustainable development, for example. In my exploration, I found that those stories are actually quite timeless and essential right now

and can offer a new way of thinking or an alternative if you wish, or an additional way of exploring what it means to live in a sustainable global community. So the role of storytelling becomes very clear here in establishing who we are and what we want to be, and therefore what are the stories we're going to tell ourselves now that will help us design a flourishing society. To me, storytelling is really essential, and to that end, I have written a couple of books. What I've attempted to do is to not necessarily contain the art of oral storytelling in a printed book, it's to leave an open-ended discussion at the end of the story. They tend to look slightly different to what the typical stories for children are. They're not necessarily for entertainment, but they're stories that are story starters for other stories as well. So really, they are question marks to our ideas of who we are. And my latest book also explores the idea of storytelling and wisdom keeping and wisdom sowing as seen through a little girl and her grandmother. And what does grandmother's wisdom, how can grandmother's wisdom help inform children about who they need to become and how they need to pass on that wisdom forward? That's really where my exploration, that's the body of my work, is really this idea of wisdom keeping from the elders and how that wisdom is then passed down to children through storytelling. And if there is a way to contain the stories inside a book and in fact allow for children to have an opportunity to expand that storytelling through passing on the stories to others, that's the body of my work at the moment.

ES: I love that idea that the stories end with a question, also give the children room to think about what they might've just learned and also have their own thoughts about what they were taught because it's the time when you start exploring the world as well. And so, I wanted to ask also that if we want to pass on these stories also on a global scale, how would you recommend people of, for example, because I'm obviously from Western society, I'm Swiss. How would you recommend that I pass on such stories? Or would you recommend that I even do that, or is that not my job?

WH: Absolutely. I think ideas are not personalized. Ideas are free for all. And so, the idea that a story from Africa might be able to influence or inspire someone else living in Switzerland or any other part of the world, I think that is brilliant. I think that's what we need. We need more of

the stories. However, I would ask, what is the intention behind your desire to pass on a particular story that maybe isn't originating from your cultural background? And could you find similarities to the stories? What stories from your own childhood perhaps? I would hope that these stories encourage anyone around the world to look back and discover their own stories from their own cultures and then start to see really the similar values that we hold and we might find that Ubuntu might be one term in Africa, but there's another term in French that means similarly the same thing, and is also trying to encompass this idea of who we are as humanity and what are our common values. Then these stories become a bridge between cultures rather than details of a particular culture that doesn't necessarily relate to your own. I would like for those stories to be able to bridge those two and find that common ground of where we really come together as human beings and what are those ideals that we can hold and say, this is definitely who we are, and this is definitely who we are not as a global society.

ES: So, it's very much also a collaboration in a way, a cooperation and listening to one another in that sense, which would go well with the whole concept of storytelling.

WH: Absolutely. And collaboration is Ubuntu. There are certain ethics of Ubuntu if you want to dig into that, that also are explored and can be seen in the stories that we tell about humanity. For example, if you look at the idea of respect your elders, or it takes a village to raise a child, that's very much steeped in that Ubuntu wisdom. And if you start to look at the storytelling from an African perspective, you will clearly see that that is a principle that is reinforced throughout in the storytelling, even in the way that children are organized, maybe around a tree, and they sit down and there's an elder telling them the story. There is a very clear idea that children, you sit back and you listen to an elder. However, that doesn't suggest that these children don't have a voice or don't have the power of asking. It's a very much reciprocal experience where they feel safe enough to be in the presence of an elder. And I think this is culturally...it resonates culturally with everyone around the world. So therefore, if you take that as a principle of storytelling, you can definitely see that that is also the same principle of storytelling you would find elsewhere, whether it is in a classroom scenario or in a community or in a home where parents are trying to pass down a particular idea or a particular value

steeped in their own experience. And therefore, that wisdom keeping then becomes a universal ideal rather than contained in a particular indigenous or ancient or other traditions.

ES: This all sounds as if it's very easily – you need to consciously do it, of course – adaptable to everyday life or it's a practical thing that you can do in an easy way. And I wanted to ask, is the philosophy of Ubuntu still something that is consciously practiced nowadays?

WH: Yes and no. It's been watered down a little bit. We have over time explored other ways of organizing society, and not to say that it is individualistic or not, but that we have much more modern societies that are also exploring other global ideals from other cultures. However, you will see the spirit of Ubuntu in certain rituals, in certain African rituals, whether it is the birth of a new baby or the death of a community member. This is really the moment that you will see the spirit of Ubuntu show up, where communities come together, whether it's a modern community or a village style community. There's a sense that a newborn brings people together or the death of a member of the community also brings people together. And again, that very much has sustained...that practice has been sustained over time and hasn't really been watered down or hasn't reduced. It might look differently now. People might not be gathering under a tree or in a hut, they might be gathering in a big conference room or in a hospital where the baby was born. But there's still that sense of oneness, that sense of community coming together when there is the birth of a new baby or the death of any member of society. So, it's still alive, but not necessarily in the way that you would have seen it as a daily practice. But it is definitely being practiced still in certain ways, in certain ceremonies, weddings as well.

ES: Now you said that the spaces may have shifted, the physical spaces, of where these practices come alive again in a sense or are consciously practiced. And in our previous talk in preparation for this podcast, we were thinking about how, and this is maybe a bit of a jump, but how AI actually might influence Ubuntu or what does Ubuntu mean in the face of artificial intelligence?

WH: This is something I'm working on actually in part of my research: how do certain concepts, such timeless ideas of who we are as humanity stand in the face of non-human intelligence? We can talk about, for example ChatGPT, a large data model that has collected all our stories

and feeding us back or regurgitating back to us who we claim to be. But of course, with lots of problems there of excluding certain voices or certain languages or certain cultural expressions. However, my biggest question would be where is the wisdom behind the answers that we derive out of this artificial intelligence? And even more important, I would even dig back and say, what is the intention behind the question that one is asking? Therefore, one, we could begin to look at what is a worldview that is shaping our ideas of what we want to find out and what we want to contain and what we want to preserve.

I think ideas such as Ubuntu bring us back to positioning ourselves as humanity, and by positioning ourselves as a collective society, then we start to look at our collective ideas and those collective ideas then refer back to our collective values. And so, when we're exploring what our values are, there's wisdom behind those values. The idea is that at the moment as we're battling to understand what artificial intelligence is really doing is how it's changing the structures of society. We might want to also look at what are the values and what is the wisdom behind what we value so that now we have this information available to all of us as essentially an example of who we are, but is it really an example of who we are? We might want to look at concepts such as Ubuntu and say what does that really mean to say that my humanity is intricately tied to your humanity? What is it that I value in you that I would not destroy, that I would value in myself? And in that way, then what is a wisdom that I can build into these large data models so that when someone is looking for an answer or asking a question, we might be training ourselves to also be asking the questions that enhance our ability to live and flourish in a sustainable manner.

ES: In a way this actually encourages us to be more conscious about the questions that we're asking rather than the answers that we're seeking. Because before when you said that the children's stories, they are open-ended, they want children to think about questions. And it seems here that of course, ChatGPT will always just give us the answers we are in a way looking for, it depends very much on how we phrase our questions. Do you think this is somehow a link to Ubuntu that we become more aware of what we're actually asking?

WH: Absolutely. And also, that's something I'm working on, what is the logic behind the questions that we ask? And I tend to deal more with children than other populations. When it comes to children, what are the questions they're not asking and what are the questions that they're asking? And is there a way to train ourselves or to think about how we come around to asking questions? I think it was Albert Einstein at some point said if he had 60 minutes to formulate an answer to a particular problem, he would spend 55 minutes figuring out what is the question. What is the question behind what I'm being asked to explore? So again, there are certain human principles that we may or may not be remembering, or we may or may not be considering as we are feeding these large data systems with our information. So perhaps this is something to explore from a technology aspect. What are the questions behind the question that one is asking? And if we can dig back to that level, then we can start to see the wisdom behind the questioning, and we can start to maybe explore the idea of taking a pause or figuring out less answers and more of the questions. And what would that look like? What would be a ChatGPT that gives you a pause, that doesn't necessarily give you a direct answer, but actually leaves you with more questions than answers, with the ability to figure out what is the question you really want to ask? Give yourself that step back and allow yourself to think about why do I need an answer to this particular question? What is the logic behind this? And what is the motivation? And that motivation then will lead us back to what is the view of the world that we have across the planet that we can say unifies us? And you start to look at concepts such as Ubuntu, and you see that it is a unifying principle of our coexistence as human beings and our coexistence as beings, as living beings in the planet.

ES: Now, what our listeners don't see, but what you've been doing throughout the podcast was with your hands you always made this a beautiful gesture of a circle of things coming together and being in a way circular and definitely connected also, and it felt very, very inclusive. And I just wanted to point that out since this is a podcast. But so as time is running short again, I would like, as a final question, ask you, how would you recommend for people in everyday life, because I always like to ask this for our Wisdom Talk, how would you recommend people use Ubuntu in everyday life when they, for example, think about questions or just when they try to

integrate better in the community they're in, how would you recommend they go about doing this?

WH: Ubuntu can be traced back to certain spaces, certain times in society. And I think we have come to a certain point in society or in the history of humanity, where we're really grappling with understanding the discourse that we are in at any given time, whether we are on an online platform, whether we are having debates, face-to-face or virtually. So, Ubuntu in action I think is a moment to consider what is my position in this relationship with the next human being, with the person that I'm in? If you take for example, in a family setting, parents and children or teachers and children or the community in which the child is being raised, what is it that we want to aspire as a community? What is the health of our community based on? And therefore, then you start to think of yourself as your own individual responsibility. Ubuntu is very much a duty of care. How much do I care about the end, about winning or about my voice being heard, and how much do I care about creating a peaceful environment, whether it is for the animals that live in your home or whether it is for the children that are in your home or the society in which you live in? There is an element at the bedrock of Ubuntu, there's this element of care, and I think care is universal, and it is something that transcends human beings. It can be seen in the animal kingdom as well. It can be seen in the oceans, it can be seen in how the environment self-organizes. So really, that would be my advice if you may, or my suggestion would be, think about yourself and the level of care you have, especially when you're having debates, because we are living in a very polarized society where information is all over the place, and we are quite loud online, but offline we are different people. We wear many different hats. So how much do you really care about a particular issue in order to put as much effort as you want to see a peaceful end result to any particular discourse that you might find yourself in?

ES: Thank you very much. I think this was a beautiful ending, encouraging us to take care of one another, to take care of the community we're moving in, and I would, at this point, thank you very much for explaining the concepts of Ubuntu and the art of storytelling to us.

WH: Thank you so much, Eliane. It was lovely to talk to you.

ES: At this point, I would also like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks as well as to curiously plunge into the multitude of texts and further podcasts that can be found on our website, www.metis.ethz.ch, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices. If you would like to share your own wisdom thoughts on the METIS portal, we encourage you to do so. We have an open call for contributions and welcome your texts or creative contributions on any topic connected to wisdom that you would like to share with the METIS community. You can find more information about this and about today's podcast in the show notes below. Thank you for listening and goodbye.

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