



Research into Reconciliation and Forgiveness at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Homi Bhabha's "Architecture of the New"

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Abstract

The central argument of this article is that within the discourse around the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), many scholars have insufficiently applied the concept of an indigenous African worldview in their analysis of the TRC's work, leading them at times to describe the process as coerced, contradictory, and politically manipulated. Using the different stages of my research as well as the different texts that "lit up" every phase, I argue that through a focus on language and translation, the pervasiveness of a particular worldview of interconnectedness can be traced that enabled the commission to execute its mandate creatively and without incidences of revenge. The acknowledgement of an indigenous interconnectedness has wide implications for the concept of transitional justice as it rejuvenates the main concepts of healing, amnesty, and reconciliation. As a journalist who reported on the daily activities of the commission, I move in this piece between the different epistemic communities of journalism, writing, and academia in order to understand the way in which language and its underlying epistemology provides an important access route to understanding the workings of the TRC and the testimonies provided by witnesses.

Keywords: South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Ubuntu, interconnectedness, African philosophy, restorative justice

Résumé

Le principal argument veut que, dans le discours sur la Commission sud-africaine de vérité et de réconciliation, les érudits ont négligé d'analyser les travaux de la commission à la lumière de la vision africaine indigène du monde, de sorte qu'ils ont parfois décrit la procédure comme étant coercitive, contradictoire et politiquement manipulée. Aux diverses étapes de ma recherche et à l'aide des divers textes qui ont « éclairé » chacune des étapes, j'avance que, en mettant l'accent sur la langue et la traduction, l'on peut déceler l'omniprésence de la vision indigène d'interrelation qui a permis à la commission de s'acquitter de son mandat de façon créative en évitant le phénomène de vengeance. La reconnaissance de la vision indigène de l'interrelation a de profondes répercussions sur le concept de justice transitionnelle car elle permet de redonner vie aux concepts de la guérison, de l'amnistie et de la réconciliation.

Mots clés : Commission sud-africaine de vérité et de réconciliation, Ubuntu, interrelation, philosophie africaine, justice réparatrice

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Introduction: Reflections on Researching the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

As a journalist overseeing a multilingual team reporting for the South African National Radio Broadcaster on the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), I was often interviewed by scholars and journalists from other countries. Three of these interviews haunted me and became the main impetus behind this research. My entry point was my own experience, and the research itself explores not only the worldviews of others but also my own place in post-apartheid South Africa. Moving between the different epistemic communities of journalism, writing, and academia, I came to understand the way in which language and its underlying epistemology provides an important access route to understanding the workings of the TRC and the testimonies provided by witnesses.

The first interview was with a filmmaker from Tel Aviv. Brimming with compliments about the TRC, he added that, of course, it would never work in Israel, because forgiveness is Christian at heart.

In the same month, one of Ireland's top radio journalists, eyes rolling with incredulity, interviewed me about black people's willingness to forgive. When I asked him about the possibilities of a similar process in Ireland, he immediately shook his head: "It will never work in Ireland, too many Protestants! Forgiveness is a Catholic thing."

About a year later I was interviewed by an Australian woman working on her Ph.D. Afterwards, she told me that she thought that the TRC process was nothing but white people bulldozing black people into forgiveness and reconciliation. Storing this in the back of my mind, I wondered whether this assertion was not an insult to the 45 million people who had just overthrown apartheid? Were Nelson Mandela and his first democratic cabinet, our vibrant civil society, Desmond Tutu and the church, and the youth movements all stooges or at best mere puppets manipulated by whites?

As a kind of industry developed around the work of the TRC, I often came across the same kind of assessments in texts, whether literary, journalistic, or from the humanities. Every intellectual or commentator worth his or her salt wrote about the TRC—and was almost always critical about its work, more or less regarding it either as widespread conceptual confusion and undue political pressure or as a deliberate glossing over of profound injustices.¹ Then there was the accumulating bulk of writing from human rights and legal quarters,² which regarded the

¹ Richard A Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Anthea Jeffrey, *The Truth About the Truth Commission* (Institute of Race Relations, 1999); Deborah Posel and Graeme Simpson, eds., *Commissioning the Past: Understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2002); Mahmood Mamdani, "Reconciliation without Justice," *Southern African Review of Books* 10, no. 6 (1997): 3–5 and "Amnesty or Impunity? A Preliminary Critique of the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (Trc)," *Diacritics* 32 (2002): 33–59.

² Andre du Toit, "The Moral Foundations of the South African TRC: Truth as Acknowledgment and Justice as Recognition," in *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*, edited by Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); David Bloomfield, Teresa Barnes, and Luc Huyse, eds., *Reconciliation after Violent Conflict: A Handbook* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2003).

TRC process more positively as an important tool and one of the four processes that could be used as part of a broadening phase of transitional justice.

But as various factors were blamed or celebrated for determining the outcome of the TRC, a feeling of discomfort remained with me; it was as if I experienced a sense of subliminal racism in the pointing out of contradictory actions, confusing remarks, and manipulative behavior (e.g., Chairperson Desmond Tutu was often described as “a man in a dress,” a gangster, or a witch in the Afrikaans newspapers, or was depicted as being confused between human rights and reconciliation. I will return to this statement). The commission was also referred to as the “Kleenex Commission,” dominated by “theatrical displays” and “much praying and weeping.”³ A white testifier was overheard by one of my reporters, Darren Taylor, saying: “Now she fucking cries!” Farmers I interviewed in the Ladybrand district insisted that the black people were simply waiting for the television camera to be on them before they started crying. In more sophisticated ways, some academics tended to maintain this notion that there was something “performed” in the process. I felt convinced that there were elements missing in the discourse that would clarify what was found to be so confusing, a kind of switch that would light up the *logic* of the TRC picture—a logic I experienced right through the period of reporting on the commission. Therefore, this article is an attempt to raise a few questions challenging the broad consensus on why and where the TRC failed or succeeded.

Moving from journalism to literature, I oversaw a translating project of indigenous poetry with mother-tongue speakers⁴ and quite soon became aware of the same absence when reading, assessing, or trying to understand the literary works selected from nine of our indigenous languages. For example, a modern Setswana praise poem, “Sempe of the Lesoboro-family,”⁵ expresses a young man’s feeling towards the work he was doing, saying: “I am being killed by this ox called work.” I could not understand why a healthy young man, in a country riddled with unemployment, would be unhappy about a job in which he, according to himself in the poem, earns good money without working too hard. I could think to myself: “He is lazy,” or I could acknowledge that I did not have the faintest idea of the worldview within which this poem was being written and therefore could come to no conclusion about the text at all. Indeed, translating the text within an indigenous worldview revealed the poem to be a critique on the kind of “white” work that is being done for money against the background of indigenous work from which everybody benefits. So I decided to use my appointment at the University of the Western Cape as a time for more in-depth research into an African worldview.

A Daily Living Activity of Research

I want to stress that I began with the ordinary desire to understand the post-apartheid context in which I found myself. Being raised within racist structures and surrounded by racists and racism, I found it crucial to find logical links to

³ R.W. Johnson at <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n24/letters>.

⁴ Antjie Krog, *Met Woorde Soos Met Kerse* (Cape Town: Kwela 2002).

⁵ M. Damane and Peter B. Sanders, *Lithoko: Sotho Praise-Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

actions in order to begin to make sense of what could be described as the incomprehensible: that Mandela did *not* forgive his Afrikaner warder or Betsie Verwoerd because he was too alienated after his imprisonment to understand what was at stake; Tutu was *not* smuggling African paganism into his faith with contradictory remarks about Christianity; black people did *not* sing and dance when Mandela died because they were too callous to have deep feelings. I want to emphasize this: I have no desire to speak for or explain to others, or to claim a field of research; I have no ethnographic or anthropologic parameters, I regard my research as a daily living activity needed in order to live a more, and morally, intact life within an assertive black majority.

I brought two important advantages to the research process: first, three years of coherent reporting on all the phases of the TRC, beginning with its legislation through parliament and followed by the selection of commissioners, the constitution of the commission itself, and finally, the commission's daily work. This experience involved overseeing reporters from different languages and backgrounds and ended with the final TRC report and its discussion in parliament. I know of no other reporter or academic who worked through all these stages, and I believe it gave me a certain grounding that could, at times, validate a feeling that some remark or finding was inconsistent with what I had experienced.

Second, I came as a poet and translator aware of the multi-layeredness of language and the complex problems around translation and interpretation. I was astounded at how easily academics, in the beginning, analyzed material without even realizing they were working with translations, interpretations, and transcriptions. On the TRC website, all testimonies appear in English, and nothing indicates which testimonies were simultaneously interpreted and which were originally given in English. To access the original testimony in an indigenous language, one has to find the correct audio cassette in the national archive, a notoriously difficult process, and then find somebody to transcribe the indigenous sound before it can be translated. The first analysis using both the indigenous and the translated language was done in 2006, more than eight years after the TRC concluded its work.⁶

I also brought several important disadvantages: I wrote a book on the TRC that became an enormous success, so I am often criticized for feeling compelled to “defend” the TRC process, as I have “invested” so much in it. However, I believe that many academics have been “invested” in various fields, and that this has not necessarily made their work suspect. I am also an Afrikaner, and one might have argued that forgiveness “suited” me. But it is also true that I have experienced as an activist in the townships, and have witnessed as a reporter on the TRC, acceptance of Afrikaners by black people as a magnanimous embrace:

The last TRC victim hearing is concluding with the anthem. I stand caught unawares by the Sesotho version and the knowledge that I am white, that

⁶ Zannie Bock, Ngwanya Mazwi, Sifundo Metula, and Nosisi Mpolweni-Zantsi, “An Analysis of What Has Been ‘Lost’ in the Interpretation and Transcription Process of Selected TRC Testimonies,” *Spil PLUS* (2006): 1–26 and Zannie Bock and Nosisi Mpolweni-Zantsi, “Translation and Interpretation,” in *Truth and Reconciliation in South African: Ten Years On*, edited by Charles Villa-Vicencio and Fanie du Toit (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2006).

I am to re-acquaint myself with this land, that my language carries violence as a voice, that I can do nothing about it, that after so many years I still feel uneasy with what is mine, with what is me. The black woman next to me looks surprised that I know the words in Sesotho. She smiles, holds her head close to mine and shifts to the alto part. The songleader opens the melody to us. The sopranos envelop, the bass voices support. And I wade into song—in a language that is not mine, in a tongue I do not know. It is fragrant inside the song, and among the keynotes of sorrow and suffering there are soft silences where we who belong to this landscape, all of us, can come to rest. Sometimes the times we live in overflow with light.⁷

Although I had no explanation for why thousands of revenge killings took place in Europe after the Second World War and not a single revenge killing was recorded in South Africa directly linked to a TRC hearing, I went back to my assessments during the TRC hearings. On the one hand, the forgiving by many victims expressed a magnanimity and generosity that was truly beyond my understanding;⁸ on the other hand, I found the forgiveness and embrace of perpetrators deeply inconsistent with justice and also, at times, repulsive. But there was something else: many of the perpetrators were Afrikaners. They testified in Afrikaans, and from their surnames and their accents I could understand, intimately, how they were raised within lower-middle-class circumstances, how they were abused by the self-enriching Afrikaner political powers, and how un-understandable their current position was to them. The scenes of asking and giving forgiveness during the TRC were unforgettable moments; one felt something like awe when it seemed that a black victim was sensing exactly this vulnerability and was therefore willing to forgive. On the other hand, I was reminded time and again how perpetrators mostly seemed unable to enter the vulnerability and grief of the victims. I also recognized the interpretive framework of the perpetrators, while that of the victims' forgiveness remained confusing to me.

Faced with what seemed to be an incomplete knowledge and understanding of what I was observing, I asked myself how I was to discover what it was that enabled black victims to accept the humanity of the perpetrator, while the perpetrator generally failed to do the same. Judging from victim reactions after the Second World War, the issue clearly involved more than just a universal difference between perpetrator and victim; it had to be linked, at least in South Africa, to race. Of course, many black people expressed a desire for revenge and many white people forgave, but it is important to remember two things: more than 40 million black people accepted the TRC process and refrained from taking revenge, and as my analysis of a particular week of hearings will show below, black people based their forgiveness on a specific kind of humanity, while non-black people based their forgiveness on the forgiveness of their own sins by Christ. This difference, albeit with several exceptions, was lodged in something broader, and the only way I could begin to

⁷ Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998), 216–17

⁸ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, trans. Andrew Kelley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xxii.

tease this out was to start at the precise point where I picked up this difference most acutely: language, and more specifically, particular words indicating a different ontological and epistemological background such as *Ubuntu* and *Noxelelwaniso*.

During this time, I came across the work of Homi Bhabha, which suggests that “newness” enters one’s frame of mind through translation—finding its routes through the unstable elements of literature and life.⁹ Bhabha, using Salman Rushdie’s words on newness, described in his chapter how it is only through a structure of splitting and displacement, “the fragmented and schizophrenic decentering of a self,” that *the architecture of the new could emerge*.¹⁰ Bhabha also quotes Abdul Janmohamed and David Lloyd:

“Becoming minor is not a question of essence ... but a question of subject position.’ Such a position articulates ‘alternative practices and values that are embedded in the often-damaged, -fragmentary, -hampered, or -occluded work of minorities.’”¹¹

I also take on board the words of Román Álvarez and Carmen-África Vidal that the act of translation, whether we like it or not, is always political,¹² as it creates an experience of difference, of feeling “the characteristic resistance and ‘materiality’ of that which differs,” and is a way to “re-experience identity. One’s own space is mapped by what lies outside; it derives coherence, tactile configuration, from the pressure of the external.”¹³

Although I spent many years translating poetry from African languages into Afrikaans, including Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*¹⁴ as well as work by the First People of Southern Africa, namely the San, it was only after submergence in African philosophy that I began to find the epistemic framework to make sense of that absence/newness that I increasingly found so essential for living in South Africa. In these works one was often confronted with actions and descriptions that could be regarded as immoral or uncaring, but by interpreting first and foremost through translation, which in turn opened up a specific African framework, one changed one’s initial response. Even the Mandela text, which was already in English, caused reviewers (and initially myself) to think that Mandela was a mask and that the text was not really revealing anything. Within an African ontology where the public and private, the religious and profane, the living and the dead are always simultaneously present, the book makes for fascinating confessional reading.

Contestations and Clarifications of Language

My research rested on three key concepts: African philosophy, reconciliation and forgiveness, and Ubuntu. The contestations around the words African and African philosophy/worldview rendered them nearly unusable within the confines of an

⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 217 (emphasis added).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹² Román Álvarez and M. Carmen Africa Vidal, eds., *Translation, Power, Subversion* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1996), 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2008).

article, while the over-use and exploitation of the word Ubuntu similarly caused problems. But in terms of this article the following clarifications can be made in order to allow a greater understanding of the epistemic frames used in the interpretation of language:

African (philosophy): I suggest that a Malian, Congolese, Madagascar, and South African experience could be termed African in the same way that an experience in Japan, India, Indonesia, and China could be termed Eastern; that Lampedusa, Stockholm, and Berlin could be termed European; or that Germany, Australian, and America could be termed Western.

Philosophy/Worldview: There is tension between those who claim the word “philosophy” for “higher” arguments and those who feel that philosophy, worldview, ethos, and cosmology overlap in many areas.¹⁵ The sources describing and defining Ubuntu are, however, unanimous in regarding it as part of African philosophy. I will use the term “philosophy” to mean a particular system of philosophical thought that forms the basis of a particular branch of knowledge or experience, as well as a theory or attitude that acts as a guiding principle for behaviour.

Ubuntu: This seems to be a word without an English equivalent, and it is precisely here where a possibility for “newness” is created. According to Wikipedia, used by most people to quickly find a reasonable definition, “Ubuntu is a Nguni Bantu term (literally, ‘human-ness’) roughly translating to ‘human kindness’” and “has come to be used as a term for a kind of humanist philosophy, ethic or ideology.” But it is in the multitude of other definitions that some of the meaning becomes clearer. John Mbiti describes it as follows in *African Religions and Philosophy*:

(The individual) owes his existence to other people. ... He is simply part of the whole.... Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: “I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am.” This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.¹⁶

Philosopher Michael Onyebuchi Eze formulates it in another way:

A person is a person through other people, strikes an affirmation of one’s humanity through recognition of an “other” in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation in which the “other” becomes a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: we are because you are, and

¹⁵ Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology—the Key Concepts* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁶ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Double Day and Co., 1970), 106. See also: Richard H. Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues in Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 60.

since you are, definitely I am. The “I am” is not a rigid subject, but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this otherness creation of relation and distance.¹⁷

It has to be stressed that I am fully aware that I, being a white African, mainly formed by a Western worldview could, at best, have an objective experience of Ubuntu and a *theoretical* understanding of it, but could never contribute in “making” philosophy around it or speak authoritatively in any way about it. To preserve this notion, I will use the term interconnectedness-towards-wholeness trying, on the one hand, not to render African consciousness exotic, peculiar, and special, while at the same time trying to distinguish it, within its normalcy, from a Christian-redemptive ethos.

The term interconnectedness in this essay refers to more than just a theoretical knowledge that all things in the world are linked; rather, it refers to both a mental and a physical awareness that one can only “become” who one is, or could be, through the fullness/wholeness of that which is around one—both physical and metaphysical.

“Wholeness,” as I use it in this paper, is not a passive state of nirvana, but a process of becoming in which everybody and everything is moving towards its fullest/most whole self or personhood. This can only be reached through and with others, including ancestors and the cosmos.

The point I am trying to make is that, through translation, “newness” makes its appearance; then, by examining specific relevant philosophical foundations, this newness can become intelligible, allowing us a fuller knowledge of that which we seek to understand.

Rethinking the TRC’s Epistemological and Ontological Context

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1986, Wole Soyinka linked the astonishing way in which some Africans seem able to forgive after much suffering and injustice to their worldview:

[T]here is a deep lesson for the world in the black races’ capacity to forgive, one which, I often think, has much to do with the ethical precepts which spring from their world view and authentic religions, none which is ever totally eradicated by the accretions of foreign faiths and their implicit ethnocentrism.¹⁸

Elsewhere Soyinka warns that “[w]e should differentiate first of all between the deliberate use of Christian or Islamic symbolism, metaphors or historic archetypes” and the application of “African indigenous values.”¹⁹

According to David Bloomfield, Teresa Barnes, and Luc Huyse,²⁰ the South African TRC differed in several important and useful ways from the previous (at least fifteen) commissions elsewhere in the world that investigated human rights abuses.

¹⁷ Michael Onyebuchi Eze, *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 190–91.

¹⁸ Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy*, 87.

¹⁹ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 76.

²⁰ Bloomfield, Barnes, and Huyse, *Reconciliation after Violent Conflict: A Handbook*.

The South African TRC was the first truth commission to *individualize* amnesty and had public testimonies, but what has not, to my knowledge, been mentioned anywhere is that it was also the first truth commission to allow victims from both sides of the conflict to testify at the *same* forum.

As Christianity failed for decades to bring about forgiveness in Northern Ireland, parts of South America, or the United States after 9/11, I argue that the peaceful acceptance of the specific work of the TRC by the black community (whether as victims or perpetrators) is indicative of the presence of something broader and deeper that emanated from highly educated truth commissioners and ordinary illiterate testifiers alike. I will return to this point in more detail below.

The importance of interconnectedness has been stressed many times by African philosophers. In his famous *Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, Kwame Gyekye states that communitarianism is held by most of the scholarship involving cultures of Africa as their most outstanding trademark, as well as their most defining characteristic.²¹ Gyekye states that communitarian logic forms a kind of pervasive and fundamental concept in African socio-ethical thought that animates other intellectual activities and behaviour and provides continuity, resilience, nourishment, and meaning in life.²²

Taking this interconnectedness, from which a person “builds” himself into a caring being, as a basis, the South African theologian Gabriel Setiloane, in his seminal work on the image of God among the Sotho-Tswana, suggests that Christianity became embedded within this communitarian spirituality and was moulded by it.²³

In other words, Christianity (or, for that matter, human rights or restorative justice) is not simply linked or an add-on to an (often dismissively called pagan or animistic) interconnectedness, but is in fact embedded therein; interconnectedness-towards-wholeness forms the interpretive foundation of it (as well as of the theology of Desmond Tutu or the politics of Nelson Mandela). I want to suggest that it was this foundation that enabled people to reinterpret Western concepts such as forgiveness, reconciliation, amnesty, justice, and so on in a new and usable way; in other words, that these concepts had moved across cultural borders and been infused with and energized by a sense of interconnectedness-towards-wholeness.

“Forgiveness,” Reconciliation,” and “Transitional Justice” Within Shifting Ontology and Epistemology

Much has been written about the difference between forgiveness (letting go, personally, of resentment and the past) and reconciliation (mutual commitment to an improved ethical future),²⁴ which provides for the possibility of forgiving, but not

²¹ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

²² *Ibid.*, 50

²³ Gabriel Molehe Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1976), 161.

²⁴ Ervin Staub, Laurie Pearlman, Anne Gubin, and Athanase Hagengimana, “Healing, Reconciliation, Forgiving and the Prevention of Violence after Genocide or Mass Killing: An Intervention and Its Experimental Evaluation in Rwanda,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2005): 297–334.

necessarily reconciling (or living with the perpetrator); or reconciling (living in peace with the perpetrator), but not forgiving.

However, within the concept of interconnectedness-towards-wholeness, the notions of forgiveness and reconciliation can never be separated. They are not only closely linked but also mutually interdependent: the one begins, or opens up, a process of becoming, while the other is the crucial next step in this becoming. As the TRC testimonies and texts show, within the worldview of interconnectedness-towards-wholeness, in order to grow into one's fullest self, one's fullest potential personhood, asking for forgiveness, and forgiveness itself, has to lead to recovery, reconciliation, and eventually to a fuller personhood for both parties. In this process, asking for amnesty is the first step: it means admitting to wrongdoing and asking for forgiveness. The concept of transitional justice can therefore be neatly embedded in the interconnectedness-towards-wholeness: the acknowledgement of guilt and the forgiveness create the transition period in which the perpetrator is assisted in changing for the better.

Initially it was suggested that many black people felt under pressure to forgive, because the commission was translated into isiXhosa as the Truth and Forgiveness (instead of Reconciliation) Commission,²⁵ but it is only when carefully translated by an isiXhosa linguist that the real meaning(s) of *noXolelwaniso* became clear:

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in isiXhosa is *Ikomishoni yeNyani noXolelwaniso*. *Noxelelwaniso* is the isiXhosa for “and reconciliation.” The *no*-consists of the connective *na*- (and, plus the prefix *u*- of *uxolelwaniso* [reconciliation]). *Uxolelwaniso* and the noun *uxolo* (peace) comes from the verb *ukuxola* (to become satisfied), which are being used most often as *ukuxolela* (to forgive). The verb *ukuxolelwanisa* (to see to it that forgiveness happens) is in its turn the origin for the noun *uxolelwaniso* (reconciliation).²⁶

Thus the word for reconciliation and forgiveness are versions of the *same* root in isiXhosa; and here lies the “newness”: in the philosophy of Ubuntu, the two concepts are indivisibly intertwined, philosophically and linguistically. This means a radical departure from the general assumption that reconciliation and

²⁵ Brandon Hamber, *Transforming Societies after Political Violence—Truth, Reconciliation and Mental Health* (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London, New York: Springer Science and Business Media, 2009); Fiona Ross, *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2003); Antjie Krog, “This Thing Called Reconciliation...Forgiveness as Part of an Interconnectedness-Towards-Wholeness,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (2008): 353–66.

²⁶ Koos Oosthuysen learned to read and write in the isiXhosa medium mission school at Isilimela and went on to achieve a BA honors degree in philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch, a masters degree in theology at Yale University in the United States and a PhD in African languages at Rhodes University. He wrote a graded grammar of isiXhosa, was involved in the translation of hymns, and the 1996 isiXhosa Bible. In a private correspondence with me, he explains in Afrikaans the difference in isiXhosa between the words “reconciliation” and “forgiveness”: *noxelelwaniso* is die isiXhosa weergawe van “en versoening.” Die *no*- bestaan uit die konnektiewe *na*- (en, saam met) plus die voorvoegsel *u*- van *uxolelwaniso* (versoening), wat soos die naamwoord *uxolo* (vrede; ekskuus!) afgelei is van die werkwoord *ukuxola* (om tevrede te raak), wat meerendeels in die voltooië tyd [-*xolile* (is tevrede)] en die applikatiewe vorm *ukuxolela* (om te vergewe) gebruik word. Wanneer *ukuxolela* nou verder met die die passiewe verlengingsmorfeem -*w*-, die resiproke verlengingsmorfeem -*an*- en die kousatiewe verlengingsmorfeem -*is*- verleng word, gee dit die werkwoord *ukuxolelwanisa* (om te veroorsaak dat mekaar vergewe word, m.a.w. om te versoen. Hiervan word die naamwoord *uxolelwaniso* (versoening) afgelei.

forgiveness are two separate and divisible processes. In research on the conflict in Ireland the possibility is discussed of forgiveness without reconciliation, or of reconciliation without forgiveness.²⁷

In this way the linguistic root of the words “forgiveness” and “reconciliation” reflects the African philosophical concept of interconnectedness: one cannot reconcile without forgiving and vice versa. This knowledge, only released after exploring translation within a particular epistemological and ontological context, throws a different light on the general acceptance of the commission among the majority of black people and the instances of forgiveness. To put it bluntly: whites were forgiven *not* because black people were pressured by Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s rhetoric, because they were forced by an ANC government trying to legitimize itself, or because they did not completely understand what was at stake. Whites were forgiven because, within a particular epistemological and ontological context, it seemed the obvious thing to do in order to change profoundly both whites and an apartheid country.

Practice Objectives and Context Found in Formulations of Forgiveness and Reconciliation During the TRC Process

The most coherent and deeply understood sense of interconnectedness related to forgiveness that I know had been articulated by one of the Gugulethu Seven mothers, Cynthia Ngewu, during the second week of TRC human rights violations hearings. Ngewu’s son, Christopher Piet, was killed by security police.

One of the black perpetrators, Thapelo Mbele, requested a private meeting with the Gugulethu mothers in order to ask forgiveness. The following quote from Ngewu, who spoke after the meeting, was translated from Xhosa and broadcast on SABC radio:

This thing called reconciliation . . . if I am understanding it correctly . . . if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back . . . then I agree, then I support it all.²⁸

In simple terms, Cynthia Ngewu spells out the full, complex implications of being interconnected-towards-wholeness and the role in it of reconciliation.

Her words mean, firstly, that she understood that the killer of her child could, and did, kill because he had lost his humanity; he was no longer human. Secondly, she understood that to forgive him would open up the possibility for him to regain his humanity, to change profoundly. Thirdly, she understood also that the loss of her son affected her own humanity; she herself had now an affected humanity. Fourthly and most importantly, she understood that if indeed the perpetrator felt himself driven by her forgiveness to regain his humanity, then it would open up for her the possibility to become fully human again.

²⁷ Miles Hewstone, E. Cairns, A. Voci, F. McLernon, U. Niens, M. Noor, “Intergroup Forgiveness and Guilt in Northern Ireland: Social Psychological Dimensions of ‘the Troubles,’” in *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives*, edited by Nyla R. Branscombe and Bertjan Doosje (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²⁸ Krog, *Country of My Skull*, (Parktown: Random House), 109.

It affirms, furthermore, how someone who would be regarded by many as not effectively literate, let alone schooled in African philosophy, intimately understood her interconnectedness and could formulate it succinctly. I argue that it is precisely this inherent and general understanding and knowledge of interconnectedness-towards-wholeness that underpinned most of the testimonies delivered before the TRC and was largely responsible for the absence of revenge and the way anger was articulated. To put it differently, the daily living of interconnectedness, and not simply Christianity, was the determining factor in “making the TRC work.”

In the biography, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace*, Desmond Tutu is quoted as describing reconciliation as involving three separate actions: the perpetrators have to say “I’m sorry,” the victims are under the gospel imperative to forgive, and the perpetrators then have to make restitution.²⁹ This is Christianity.

On the very next page, however, Tutu quotes Malusi Mphumlwana, who said that while he was being tortured by police, he looked up at them and thought: “By the way, these are God’s children too, and . . . they need you to help them to recover the humanity they are losing.”³⁰ This is Ubuntu.³¹

This means that forgiveness can never be without the next step—reconciliation—and that reconciliation cannot take place without fundamentally changing the life of the one that forgives as well as the one that is forgiven.

Of course, one recognizes strong Christian elements in this explanation, but I want to make space for the possibility of a forgiveness that is sourced from or based in an indigenous humaneness—I believe that even the Christian forgiveness in Southern Africa would have this interconnectedness-towards-wholeness, rather than the more familiar individual relationship between a Christian and Christ, as a decisive main source.

TRC Testimonial Responses to Forgiveness

As part of its first round of hearings throughout the country, the TRC held a four-day hearing in Cape Town (22–25 April 1996). A total of forty-four testimonies focusing on twenty-five cases were heard over four days, and the following observations can be made:

Not once in any of the Xhosa and Tswana testimonies was Christ mentioned in terms of forgiveness. This could indicate that the “reason” to forgive was not located in Christ, but was found elsewhere. (In contrast to this, the coloured victims as well as their white minister explicitly said that they had forgiven the perpetrators because Jesus had forgiven them.) This is not to homogenize black and white, but to attempt to create an awareness that some ontological and epistemic differences also played a crucial role in the TRC process.

At least nine direct references were made to interconnectedness: four by Chairperson Desmond Tutu, two by Commissioner Dumisa Ntsebeza and three by victims. The direct references to interconnectedness by the commissioners

²⁹ John Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace* (Johannesburg: Rider Books, 2007), 342.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 343.

³¹ For an examination of how Ubuntu influenced Desmond Tutu’s Christianity, please see Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1997).

focused on the sharing of pain and loss, while the victims underscored the breakdown in interconnectedness but articulating the need of victims to grant forgiveness in order to re-humanize themselves.

The idea is not to classify any expressions as uniquely interconnected in content, but to warn that they should not be read as mere expressions of people who are misled, or pressured or confused into a kind of Christian forgiveness, because within a particular “social imagining” they could well be signifiers of a hitherto unnoticed worldview made visible through translation. It is also important to keep in mind that the above quotations are all taken from English transcriptions, which means that the full weight of the embeddedness and reference of the words to an African ontology is significantly diminished. This means that only the obvious statements of forgiveness can be used, while the more subtle ones referring to the perpetrator are lost in the English translation.

How This Local Knowledge Could be Used by Others and the Possible Harm If It is Conflated With Particular Understandings of Human Rights and Christianity

The philosophy of Ubuntu from the African continent throws a different light on some of the remarks about the failures of the TRC. It reveals the incomplete nature of the knowledge generated about the TRC and urges us to recognize the dynamic relationship between the process of knowledge production and the nature of the knowledge itself.

When Mahmood Mamdani asks, “If truth has replaced justice in South Africa—has reconciliation then turned into an embrace of evil?”³² he ignores a worldview that suggests that embracing the evil one is exactly the point where a humanizing process should begin in which compassion, change, and restoration bring the ultimate form of justice.

Within a communitarian worldview, one could have assumed that black South Africans could have felt themselves interconnected with the perpetrators and assumed that amnesty (as acknowledgement) would therefore be the start of a process of change leading to reparation involving everybody. That this did not happen, I would argue, is more an indication of a dominating non-interconnecting culture clashing with an indigenous one, than of a moral failure or political manipulation of those involved in the TRC process from a grassroots level.

Maybe even Derrida would not have regarded it as a “confusion” on Tutu’s part “to oscillate between a non-penal and non-reparative logic of ‘forgiveness’ [he calls it “restorative”] and a judicial logic of amnesty.”³³ Tutu was not simply naively linking human rights and amnesty to religion, but was using the foundation of interconnectedness to logically allow people back into humanity through processes such as forgiveness and amnesty.

Amnesty, as a process of admitting wrong and wanting it to be set aside, fits in neatly with the victims’ desire to rebuild a humane and caring community.

³² Quoted in Krog, *Country of My Skull*, 112. See also Mahmood Mamdani, “Reconciliation without Justice,” *Southern African Review of Books* 10, no. 6 (1997): 3–5.

³³ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 32.

The fact that many, mostly white and Western people, did not read amnesty in that way and preferred to see it as being “let off the hook” is attributable to a Christianity-emphasizing individualism and a particular understanding of human rights and does not suggest that the majority of South Africans were coerced by Archbishop Tutu into forgiving.

The often-quoted analyst of the TRC, Richard Wilson, regards Ubuntu, the South African version of interconnectedness-towards-wholeness, as mere “wrapping” for an ANC agenda that seeks to use the TRC to legitimize a new government:

Ubuntu should be recognized for what it is: an ideological concept with multiple meanings which conjoins human rights, restorative justice, reconciliation and nation-building within the populist language of pan-Africanism. In post-apartheid South Africa, it became the Africanist wrapping used to sell a reconciliatory version of human rights talk to black South Africans.³⁴

Wilson also suggests that the TRC suffered from a “dual consciousness” with practical justice and forgiveness on the one hand and a confused understanding of human rights on the other.³⁵ In other words, Ubuntu was an agenda and ideology abused by the powerful to present political, legal, and/or personal interests in palatable form to more or less unsuspecting people. I want to argue that it was the other way round: Ubuntu was the essence, coherence, and foundation of the TRC process and South African politics, but this interconnectedness became visible only when intellectuals began to flounder amid contradictions because of their own “wrappings” of Christianity and justice.

As noted earlier, the South African TRC is credited for being the first truth commission to hold victim hearings in public, individualize amnesty, and allow victims who believed in or were against apartheid to testify at the same forum. All three of these innovations can be traced back to the desire to restore the interconnectedness of a community: because people share each other’s pain, the audience has as much right to be in the presence of the testimony as the testifier—hence public hearings; because people who are prepared to apply for amnesty are willing to admit that they have done wrong and could begin to change to be readmitted into society—hence specified amnesty; because mothers who lost their loved ones fighting for the “right” or the “wrong” side suffer alike and are interconnected—hence sharing the same platform as victims.

From this Research to Practice in Transitional Justice

Misreading forgiveness is the kind of subliminal racism referred to at the beginning of this article. A process such as the TRC, so democratically put together by so many political parties, NGOs, and civil society leaders, executed so publicly by prominent individuals, its workings so widely translated and interactively experienced on such a broad scale over such a wide spectrum across the country,

³⁴ Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State*, 13. See also Wim Van Binsbergen, “Ubuntu and the Globalization of Southern African Thought and Society,” *Quest* 1-2 (2001): 53–89 and Annelies Verdoolaege, *Reconciliation Discourse: The Case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008).

³⁵ Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State*, 153.

should receive the benefit of the doubt. If there are contradictions and inexplicable moments, their integrity should be accepted and efforts made to search for a source of coherency.

Another lesson that this process of research has taught me is that one should disentangle interconnectedness-towards-wholeness from the other credited driving forces of the TRC such as Christianity, human rights, legitimizing liberation politics, and so on. Doing so would help in promoting a more complex interpretation of the TRC process and testimonies instead of assuming that they were mainly or exclusively informed by Christianity or post-coloniality and therefore able to be usurped by a range of judgements and critiques.

Doing so would also make those “exporting” the South African version of the TRC aware of the presence of a rather decisive element in the process that, although deeply spiritual, does not (yet) fall into one of the main religious or legal categories of the world. Being aware of this particular worldview would also make it possible to understand the current groundswell of anger and frustration among the very people who seemed to be so forgiving during the TRC process itself, as expressed in letters to the media and group actions demanding compensation. Although their anger is used as proof that the TRC pressured them into forgiving, interconnectedness means that they could well have been expecting the perpetrators to show signs that they were regaining humanity after forgiveness was extended to them and were beginning to share and restore the country. This is not really happening.

Initially, interconnectedness made victims forgive, but because no reciprocal signs of change and *wiedergutmachen* (literally, “to make good again, to restore”)³⁶ came from the interconnected perpetrators, victims *now* become angry. Thus, and perhaps most importantly, only by identifying interconnectedness-towards-wholeness as the foundation of the TRC process is one be able to understand that TRC resentment has more to do with thwarted beliefs now, because things were not made “good,” than with the abuse of Christianity to suppress anger.

Finally, the usurpation of the TRC process by better-known, Western cultures obscures the fact that a radically new way (especially in the light of World War II), but one embedded in an indigenous African philosophy, had been suggested for dealing with gross injustice and cycles of violence. This throws a sharp light on a different way of becoming and being. Sustained scholarship into the formation, sustainability, integrity, and morality of interconnectedness-towards-wholeness could lead to a more informed discourse around transitional justice.

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³⁶ It is indicative that the German version of restoration has often come to the fore during the TRC process when reparations were discussed, perhaps, partly, because there does not exist a synonym in Afrikaans or English for “repairing” in the sense of making things “good” again. In this way, again, “newness” emerged: it is not simply a question of restoring, but restoring to the extent that things for the victim are again “good.”