



Podcast

Creating a level playing field for collaboration

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15 Babah Tarawally: The wisdom of Ubuntu – a path to connection

Podcast published on 2 May, 2025

Keywords

Ubuntu, migration, integration, community, diversity, inclusion, reciprocity, support systems, philosophy, human connection

Episode description

In this episode, we welcome Babah Tarawally, a journalist, columnist, and author originally from Sierra Leone. Baba discusses the philosophy of Ubuntu and its relevance to creating a level playing field for collaboration. He shares his experiences as a migrant from Sierra Leone to the Netherlands, highlighting the challenges of integration and the importance of seeing each other as human beings. The discussion also touches on the need for reciprocity in relationships, the differences in how migrants and refugees are welcomed, and the role of community support systems in fostering a sense of belonging. Reflecting on the broader journey of life, Babah encourages listeners to consider what they will leave behind for future generations. He stresses the importance of investing in others and taking care of the environment, so that we leave the world in a better state for those who come after us.

Transcript

[Italic words are spoken by Tonnie van der Zouwen]

Introduction to Babah Tarawally

In this episode we welcome Babah Tarawally. Welcome Babah. Thank you very much... I would be happy if you could introduce yourself tell a little bit more about who you are and maybe why you are here.

I am Baba Tarawally. Originally from Sierra Leone. I am a journalist, and I work also as a columnist for one of Dutch biggest newspapers and I give training in diversity inclusion and I get training also in the African philosophy of Ubuntu I am because we are. And because I believe that that philosophy is the biggest gift from Africa to the world. I'm also a writer, I write books, so I have written four books. I'm now working my fifth book. And, yes that is it for now. I do a lot of things.



And I'm interested, what are your books about? My books are about migration. About forgiving and reconciliation and about diversity inclusion about black and white thinking and how we can stop thinking in black and white. I write mostly in fiction but also non fiction, so I'm in both worlds of fiction and non fiction. ***Yeah Thank you. For our listeners I will put the links to the books in the in the show notes.***

And my last book is about manhood, about how to become a man and what is needed to be a real man or what is a real man and so this is very interesting book because it's really touches on my own journey from being African born in Sierra Leone where I was taught to be a real man. And then, coming to the Netherlands, we are in different type of meds. And so it was very interesting for me to write that book. So I find it very interesting.

The philosophy of Ubuntu

Thank you. So right now we are talking about creating a level playing field for collaboration and of course all the items you mentioned are related, I think to what makes a level playing field for collaboration. So can you tell me something from your experience that illustrates what works or what didn't work?

First of all, when you meet somebody the connection starts with the meeting you know when you meet somebody and the connection starts. And in that meeting you need to identify or to know what the other person needs or what gives that person energy. When you realize what gives someone energy then you have that conversation on that energy field then you have automatically a better connection. Because if somebody for example likes football and I want to make a connection then I have to go into that energy of football and talk with that person about football. Then I see immediately that there is a connection because you see the person, really having that appetite...for more conversation. So for me that is the first level if you want to meet somebody and make a connection. And the second is also if you want to be that person who wants to have that, how you call it, level ground, to be that equal with somebody don't look at the color of the skin or the type of hair the person wears, the color of the eyes. For me, the first thing is to see somebody as a human being. And that's where the African philosophy of Ubuntu comes in. You identify somebody first as a human being. And in that connection when you see somebody as a human being you connect on that human level. But when you see somebody as not a human being then you yourself you are not a human being. You know? So why I'm saying this because it's very important to see each other. Mostly we look at each other but we don't see each other. So when you actually see somebody, then the connection is better. It's just like a WiFi connection, you know? Yes. When you plug it very good then you see that there is a good connection. And when you come closer it's a good connection. So this is for me the point of departure, meeting and making connection and from there on seeing each other not looking but seeing each other. And you take it from there.



Okay Thank you. And I know that Ubuntu is a widely used word. Also in the Western world. But to my idea I think it's also misunderstood. Maybe you can tell a little bit more about what you think about Ubuntu?

Well especially in the West people use Ubuntu to satisfy themselves. And that has to do with the fact that when you look at South Africa where Ubuntu had it's more essence in the sense that it was really placed there doing the truth and reconciliation commission after apartheid we knew about Desmond Tutu and Mandela. Who made Ubuntu a worldwide philosophical vision. And during the truths and reconciliation commission, it was more about forgiving and reconciliation. That forgiving reconciliation was better for the perpetrators, the white South Africans who were forgiven for what they did, but their deeds mostly did not change. Because what aspects of Ubuntu is not only forgiving and reconciliation, but also justice. Justice was not done. That was a missing part of it. So when you see most white people using Ubuntu as if Ubuntu is just like everything's acceptable ...No! Justice is very important. It's a third leg in Ubuntu. I can forgive you and reconcile with you. But if you did something very very wrong to me, despite forgiving and reconciliation justice should be part of it. So I agree with you that people may misuse that ideology or philosophy of Ubuntu just to satisfy their own deeds.

I think you touch on a very essential part also on what I call a level playing field there should be mutuality reciprocity equity maybe not equality because people are different and they there are different power levels, but give everyone what is needed. So that's what I call equity. Am I right when you say Ubuntu also needs reciprocity?

Definitely. I cannot just be the only one taking the steps to meet you. Both of us take steps to meet each other, because in the middle, that's a bigger space to connect. So not only for example migrants who should be able to integrate in a society without the dominant culture trying to meet halfway to understand each other. That is what I believe in. Both have to take steps.

Comparing welcomes: Migrants vs. Refugees

And what's your experience? Because you came from Sierra Leone to the Netherlands long time ago, you told me when we introduced. So what happened?...

When you come as a migrant you are received, but not really welcomed. The government receives you in our asylum centre but you are not truly, welcome. So why I'm saying that is because when you come here you of course when you go to Rome you try to do like the Romans, I believe that concept. My grandmother once told me when you go to a foreign country or you go to places where people are foreign to you, and you see them working on one leg. Don't start working directly on two legs. You know, try first to copy, work on one leg until they trust you, love you, have confidence in you, that you can learn them how to work on two legs, on both legs. That is what I did when I came here, I tried to integrate into the society knowing where I come from and knowing my culture and everything that made me who I am in my identity I had it with me, but I needed to know what they thought people are and who they are, what their culture is.



So I made effort to learn the language, to learn about the people but I was the only one with more effort to do that. And the other side what we call the reciprocity, the other side was not doing much effort to learn to know who I really am. Instead they only look at me as a black person as an asylum seeker. My identity was a bit reduced to the color of my skin. And the box they have put me in as asylum seeker but I was more than that. So the whole struggle of trying to let the order see me as somebody who's an expert. I only imagine when a white person or a European goes to Africa you are an expert. We want to learn from you are bringing something for us. We need your expertise, money, you know. On the other way when we come here we are reduced. To judge the color of our skin or coming to take and not coming to give. So this has been my experience that there is no equal level field just by seeing me as somebody with a different color my skin color. A struggle for me because then there is no level fields in everything I take part in. Even the place I live around they see me as exotic, black African guy. I have been struggling with that. See me as a human being first. Yeah you know I have qualities I have expertise.

One time I wrote a very interesting article. I interviewed a very important person in the Netherlands and both of us were on the cover of the magazine. And instead of seeing a journalist Babah Tarawally interviewed this person it said a former asylum seeker interviewed this person. I've been away from asylum more than twenty five years. So why still reduce me to that? I was of course not happy with that caption that's a asylum seeker x.

Yeah, of course not. I understand your message is not to reduce identity but it resonates with me also to be more welcoming not to receive people, but to welcome. Maybe can you give an example, did you experience situations where you really felt welcome?

Let me just make it a very clear example. When I came to seek asylum, I was received or not welcome. But let's see what happened when people from Ukraine came as asylum seekers. They were welcomed, warmly welcomed. Some people even drove to go and get them from the borders to bring them here. To the whole media and everybody was just very positive about receiving them and welcoming them... But in in my case and in many other cases of people from Africa, out of the European countries we are seen differently. So if I see I did not feel that because the government reduced me just to asylum seeker and I had to stay seven years in the asylum procedure waiting for my papers. Seven years while if you are welcomed it's a different story. Yeah. So those were times I thought I'm not welcome in this country. Despite the fact that there was a bloody war going on in my country. They cannot send me back where they let me live here for seven years in that asylum centre. Seven years. Seven years! It's not seven days, seven weeks, seven months, seven good years of my life being in this type of prison actually. You are allowed to go out. But you cannot study, you cannot do anything. So it was more of a mental prison, you're in prison. I went through that, and I saw how I was reduced almost as non human.

Maybe as a burden. It's a burden. Yeah. As somebody who comes to take away, not as somebody who comes with an added value in the society.



And how come Ukrainians are, welcomed differently? What's your idea?

Well first of all the color of their skin. Okay. They are identified as white. So this is exactly what I was trying to say in the beginning. Seeing them as white, makes them welcome. Seeing me as black, maybe to be rejected and seen as the other. So when you asked me for this podcast about an equal level playing field, I found it a bit difficult because I know I'm not going to tell you much of positive stories. About how I have struggled. I have to work twice more than somebody who's a white person. I need to study harder to show that my existence has meaning. So if that is your struggle your point of departure the way you see life you are always trying to prove you are a human. You can do better. Yeah. And that's not the way it's supposed to be.

And I think it's very important that, as many people as possible hear your story and examples like that. That they become aware of why am I doing this? What I'm thinking, how come your example when a white person goes to Africa, it's different? The difference is the same. You have a white person from maybe Europe or America in a black community. But somehow the mechanism of Ubuntu works there. Am I right?

Yeah. You are welcomed and not received as a burden, or someone who wants to steal something from you. We see your humanity, see us as a human being. Of course, we are very forgiving people. We have never in the history of the world been going to other countries and we take over the country. We have never enslaved other people out of Africa we have never done things to other people outside of our continents. So we see people as equals in terms of humanity. We are not in that supremacy thought of we are better than other people. No. And that's the reason why we receive people, because we know at the end of the day we all have the same needs. All want good health. We all want to be happy. We all want to be loved. So why should I look at you differently when we're all seeking the same needs?

Support systems and individual responsibility

Yeah that's important. So what can we do in Western countries, especially nowadays when it seems more and more the right of the most powerful prevails, to see each other more as human beings. Because in my personal life you don't become more happy when you have more power or more stuff or you feel better than other people. It doesn't make you happy. What is wisdom for facilitators, for researchers, for leaders when they organise something or invite people to really help see each other as human beings?

Let me just give an example of South Africa. When the Zulu people greet you, they say 'sawubona', which means I see you. And the other person answers 'sikhona', here I am. It's just a small aspect of the way of doing things but it says a lot, I see you. Here I am, I appear as a human being to you. Having said that, I think one of the things that makes very much defensive about the other people is because the European system is constructed in such a way that government is very important. The government caters for



its people. The governments give people money who don't have money, the governments have this sort of a system that really makes people dependent. We have social security, which is very good here. We have insurance companies which make people also very much dependent. So you decide to see the we, which is very important, the community which is very important, that you don't see that as important anymore but your insurance is more important. Your health insurance is more important than the people around you, than your family. Because anything you want will be arranged by those instances, those institutions which have been created to support you. So you don't see human beings around you anymore as people who can be of help. Because you don't need them. And that's the reason why we see here me and myself and I. I don't need anybody, because you have institutions that are really supporting. Like in African countries, we don't have those systems in place. We need each other. So it is the idea of how you see the we and the I. In this part of the world the I is very important, more important than the we. And in most African countries, outside Europe also, the we is more important than the I. So this is for me what people should see the biggest difference. And in as much as in the West where we have all these institutions, insurances that supports our wellbeing, we should also not forget that we as human beings we need each other. So coming back to your question, I think what we can do now is to create a strong community around those small communities, strong communities. We, group of people to support each other. When governments become very radical and very unsympathetic to people, people should come together to organise themselves, to be able to be of help to each other. That's the only way we can make governments a little bit irrelevant.

Yeah, because more and more people do not fit into the system. And then they are not taken care of. We, got connected through Fiona Frank and she's one of the organizers of communities, small strong communities, can you give an example of communities you are in or you want to create?

Like presently I'm working, let me see, once in a week, every Tuesday I spent time to work with an organisation called Collective Capital. It's a it's a concept that is meant to support people who are having difficulty making ends meet in their lives. You know, depending on government but they have difficulty after the end of the month to pay their bills; they are surviving. So what we do is that we have a concept. We have like eight people in my place in Utrecht who we support for a year. Every month they get one thousand euro in their bank account. One thousand euro is not taxed. It's just for them. It's above what do we earn so that they stop that surviving mode of living. So for one year we'll be getting one thousand euro every month. And that money has been donated by people who earn more money they donate money in that pot. From there we give these people eight people a type of try-outs, to see what happens when you help them out in that way. At the end of the time we hope that many more people will be part of it, that we have many people to support. In that way we make government a bit irrelevant. Human beings, we as people, we come together to facilitate, to support each other. Because if I earn more money and I decide to spend like every month I give



fifty euro to this organization just to support them, so that if many people donate they will have more people who will benefit.

What was the name of the organization this Collective capital. Collective capital Okay. You will find a link in the show notes.

Great. So to help people and I think you need a year maybe longer you'll find out to stop surviving and start living. Be build a life again. For example, very interesting, when I speak to some of them they would tell me: "Since I got the money now like once a week I go for a spa, you know spa, to take care of my own health. Yeah I will get massage. Before I never had money for that, that I can take care of my own self care." So she's working more now on her self care because she has that extra money to keep herself more happy and healthy. And another lady told me also: "I've never gone to the dentist, because I don't have money for that. With this extra money, I'm making my teeth. You know, going to the dentist, taking care of myself." So this motivates me to see really if people are surviving what happens. Their health is in jeopardy. What the food they eat become trash, because they are only surviving.

Yeah. And it's very stressful. It's very stressful also. And it makes you sick. So you don't have the energy to build anything. A beautiful example.

Leaving a legacy and the journey of life

I was thinking, looking back at our conversation, is there anything else you would like to share?

Well, of course I'm trying to speak to the people who are listening, and we are on this journey in this world. We are not here to live forever. We are walking on the path to the end. And it is not what you take with you at the end that matters, but what we, what you leave behind. So what do you want to leave behind when you finish this journey? What do you give back to the world? This is something which I want people to really think about. Because mostly we are just here in this world trying to find money, and at the end of the day when you are sick and you are at the end of your life, what do you think about? So it's what you invest in other people that is what you get back. So like in the Ubuntu philosophy, we want to see those of you, we have what we call the Trinity. Like the unborn, the living, and the living dead. We don't see the dead, but we see the living dead. And the unborn. So with the living we have demanded to leave this world behind in a proper way, for the unborn, for those to come. So we have a mandate to take care of the climate, the environment. You know, to leave this world behind so that when they come they can live in it. And we can take the next step to the world of the living dead. And then we come back to the unborn, that we come back to this world. So if we leave this world behind in shit, we come back in our own shit. So the best thing is to live a life that you are a support system for other human beings. Because that is what people will remember you for, for how you made them feel.

Thank you Babah, that's a beautiful ending.

Thank you for having me.



More information

[Babah Tarawally on Wikipedia](#)

[Books by Babah Tarawally](#) (overview and descriptions)

[Column in Trouw](#) (Dutch daily newspaper)