

# Rethinking Management in Africa: Beyond Ubuntu

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**Abstract.** *The arrival of colonialism in Africa disrupted the people's cultural beliefs and traditions and led to the transplant of Western organizational practices and standards into the African context. However, with business leaders being confronted with numerous contemporary challenges, it is almost certain that they require not only generic, but also realistic leadership and management know-how, which the Western paradigms seem not to provide. This paper has four main aims: firstly, to propose a new philosophical rejection for the rationale and institution of Western management theory and practice in Africa; secondly, to provide an approach for appreciating management in Africa through evaluating the role of ubuntu; thirdly, to evaluate the dilemma of ubuntu as an alternative to Western paradigms in Africa; and lastly, to suggest the way forward for management in Africa. Besides these aims, I wish that this paper will initiate true philosophical literature on the subject of management practice and leadership styles in Africa, and serve as a general foundation for a more detailed and specialized philosophical and social study of the subject.*

**Keywords:** Ubuntu, Western Paradigms, Management, Leadership, Africa.

## INTRODUCTION

It is often claimed that African countries can accelerate their development process by promoting the transfer of knowledge from the west. Advocates of this claim argue that if African countries adapt themselves to the transferred knowledge, their economies will improve. However, this line of thought is not supported by all and sundry. It has met with stiff resistance from especially budding African scholars who argue that there is a clear contrast between Africa and the rest of the world. Nkomo (2006) who expresses this contrast argues that Western management is Western, individualistic and modern, while African management philosophy emphasizes more on traditionalism, communalism, co-operative teamwork, and mythology. Hofstede, (1993) argues that unlike the more self-serving and individualist paradigm of the West, where strong individuals and achievers in society are valued, the African leadership paradigm is characterized by a purposeful emphasis on people and their dignity, and takes a deeply entrenched collectivist perspective.

Moreover, with business leaders being confronted with numerous contemporary challenges, it is almost certain that they require not only generic, but also realistic leadership and management know-how, which the Western paradigms seem not to provide. Indeed, Africa's appeal for Western management theory and practice in the recent past seems to be fading. African management scholars, in the recent past, have sought to question extant organizational norms, management practices and leadership styles that are largely taken for granted and seem to be untouchable. According to Karsten and Illa (2001), the almost self-indulgent conceit with which global management is practiced in an African environment is revolting to many African management thinkers, and this causes them to raise fundamental questions.

Disinterest in Western paradigms explains the interest by scholars to search for and propagate the concept of African management philosophy. Scholars argue that Africa needs to enter the global market, not by imitating the West, but by following its own cultural heritage and searching for an indigenous model. But the search for an authentic indigenous model for management and leadership in Africa is by no means an easy one, especially when Western and eastern thoughts pervade the realm of management practice and leadership in Africa. Nevertheless, ubuntu has been put forward by a number of commentators as a management paradigm, and there seems to be consensus over its authenticity. The idea often put forward is that the best way to understand the work behaviour of the African is by looking into his world through his eyes. Scholars and practitioners alike are quite confident that some of the attributes that characterizes the world of the African are espoused in the philosophy of ubuntu. They argue that it is not simply coherence of fact and faith, nor of reason and traditional beliefs, nor of reason and contingent facts, but a coherence and compatibility.

However, questions have also been raised about ubuntu and its values, its genesis, and its consequences, due to its limitation as a management paradigm that it has become imperative to rethink management and leadership in Africa. In the effort to achieve this end, the study aims to provide for a philosophical rejection of the rationale and institution of Western management theory and practice; present the approach for appreciating management in Africa through examining ubuntu as an Afrocentric paradigm; outline the dilemma of ubuntu management paradigm, and evaluate the essence of rethinking management practice and leadership in Africa. Similar themes according to the aims are considered in the subsequent sections.

## **EXTANT MANAGEMENT THEORY AND PRACTICE IN AFRICA**

The composite effect of colonialism and the disparagement of scholarship in management is the denial of African management system, and the continuing subjugation of African management to Western management theories and practices (Inyang, 2008). Although there is no doubt that 'management in Africa is strongly rooted in cultural beliefs and traditions' (Fashoyin, 2005), the arrival of colonialism in Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century disrupted the people's cultural beliefs and traditions, and 'triggered the beginning of what may be called colonized African management' (Eze, 1995). Colonial regimes created both administrative bureaucracies and colonial companies to exploit

the vast natural resources of the African continent. African approaches have been seriously altered and disrupted, which destruction is still perpetuated by the north–south political and economic system (Lalonde, 1993). It has led to the transplant of Western organizational practices and standards into the African context.

Since the 1950s, Western (and sometimes Eastern) paradigms have dominated literature in textbooks and publications the world over and predominantly in Africa. Generic British, American and (lately) Japanese models and theories of practice have emerged leading to changes in the dominant paradigm: Britain from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the US from the late nineteenth century to the end of 1960s, and once again in the 1990s and 2000s; and Japan in the 1970s and 1980s. Each of these countries generated trends and innovations in the management field which were widely believed to define a global and universal standard of management.

Some of these trends and innovations are interesting to overview: from the 19th century can we talk about *The Scientific Management School* comprising the works of Frederick W. Taylor and Lillian Gilbreth's motion study, among others; *The Classical or Rational School* comprising the works of Henri Fayol's views on administration, and Max Weber's idealized bureaucracy, among others; *Behavioral School* comprising the work of MP Follet, Elton Mayo and his associates; *The Management Science School*; and recent developments in management theory about open systems comprising works such as *Systems Approach and Situational or Contingency theory* which later leads us to the development of management branches of today (strategy, control, human resource management and organizational behaviour); and finally *The Japanese style of management* whose principal writers includes William Ouchi in his books *Theory Z* and *The M-Form Society*.

Western scholarship and literature generally devalued and deprecated the astonishing management prowess and practices of early African civilizations, as evidenced, for example, in the building of the great Egyptian pyramids, and the great ancient civilizations in Africa like Timbuktu, Songhai, Empire of Mali, and Mapungunbwe (Diop, 1987; Inyang, 2008). Indeed, African scholars argue that Western management theories and practices have hindered progress in Africa. Kiggundu (1991) argues that Western models suppress entrepreneurial creativity and development in favour of bureaucratic risk-averse administration based on absolute obedience. Hofstede (1993) confirms that Africans are facing an acute problem of transfer of Western knowledge and says that 'if one thing has become clear, it is that the export of Western-mostly American-management practices and theories to poor countries has contributed little to nothing to their development'. Western paradigms have proved to be authoritarian, personalized, politicized, and not conducive for management development and the emergence of new leadership in Africa (Theimann and April, 2006; Mbigi, 1997; Inyang, 2008; Hofstede, 1993). Reviewing the statements developed by these authors, it becomes clear that it is imperative to reorganize the modern management and leadership today with the African, in order to realign it with cultural values and epistemology from an Afrocentric point of view. It becomes obvious that much has been written on the African philosophy of ubuntu.

## AFRICAN MANAGEMENT PHILOSOPHY: UBUNTU

'Literature has emerged on the so called African management philosophy' (Nkomo, 2006). Interest in this literature has to do with the 'limitation of the Western management philosophy for Africa' (Mbigi, 1997). Scholars argue that Africa needs to look beyond western paradigms in its search for excellence. According to Mbigi and Maree (1995), organizations in Africa must draw on indigenous cultural practices in order to improve their management, effect transformation and make themselves more competitive. This urge in the scholarly circles is an attempt to develop indigenous management knowledge and practices, which are rooted in the African culture, value system and beliefs, and to use this management knowledge to run organizations efficiently and effectively.

There is general consensus over the authenticity of ubuntu as an "African management" paradigm in contrast to western management paradigms. Ubuntu contrasts Western knowledge systems where discussions confront plurality for truths or credibility because the particularity or individuality of the other is not modernistic (Louw, 2004). According to Louw, each individual exists prior to, or separately and independently from, the rest of the community or society such that the rest of society is an added extra to a pre-existent and self-sufficient being (2004). Perhaps the most important difference between Ubuntu and Western narratives is that Ubuntu confers humanity upon a research process, in contrast to some of the Western distanced top-down imposed research (Muwanga-Zake and Johnnie, 2010).

Ubuntu as an ancient African worldview is based on the primary values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative human community life in the spirit of family (Broodryk, 2002). It is a combination of *Ubu* and *ntu* – the latter being a common root in most Sub-Saharan African languages. *Ntu*, is a suffix that simply means 'human' (Binsbergen, 2003; Foster, 2006; Colliers, 2008). Ubuntu encapsulates the concepts of humanity, humanness and even humane-ness and expresses respect and compassion to others (Louw, 2001). Ubuntu is inherently collectivist and much more holistic in nature (Broodryk, 2006). Ubuntu implicitly demands that tradition is venerated, continuity revered, change feared and difference shunned (Louw, 1998). Individualism is not tolerated. Conformity and group loyalty are the toll order.

Etymologically speaking, ubuntu reflects Africa's historical, cultural, legislative and social systems, especially among the Bantu who inhabit over three quarters of Africa, from West to South Africa. The term Ubuntu comes from the Nguni languages of Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, Sotho and Ndebele versions of a traditional African aphorism(s): *Munbu, munbu nevanbu* 'Muntu, umuntu ngabantu' 'Umuntu Umuntu Ngabantu' 'Motho ke motho ka Batho' (Cilliers 2008 Broodryk, 2006, Mangaliso, 2001, Karsten and Illa, 2005). Phrases roughly translated into English would mean: 'Humanity towards others,' or 'I am because we are,' or 'A person becomes human through other persons', or also, 'A person is a person because of other persons'. Another translation could be: 'The belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity.' Or 'I Exist Because You Exist'.

These philosophic statements are part of the world-view of some three hundred sub-ethnic groups that use variations of Bantu languages on the African continent (Smkange, 1980). For instance, the Zimbabwe concept of '*Ubukhosi*' expresses itself metaphorically in the ubuntu philosophy. In Senegal, the concept of '*Teranga*' is used to express the spirit of collective hospitality between people. The Baganda in Uganda believe in the culture of '*obuntu bulamu*,' literary meaning 'good humanness.' It reflects a concern for the whole humanity and recognizes the contribution of all humanity to a common human virtue reflected in '*Obuntu*' or '*Ubuntu*'. In the same vein, the ideas of *Ujamaa* in Kiswahili, Tanzania are synonymous with those of ubuntu. Nyerere described the *Ujamaa* philosophy as a full acceptance of our 'Africanness' and 'a belief that in our past there is very much which is useful for our future' (Nyerere, 1967). From this point of view, ubuntu is therefore seen as an authentic representation of Afrocentricity that 'contests 'Western' cultural hegemony that is supposedly universalistic and as such rarely challenged' (Heuvel, et al. 2007). Ubuntu advocates seem to oppose a Western hegemonic position and claims of universalism in the domain of management and organization (ibid).

As an Afrocentric management paradigm, ubuntu has attracted widespread attention in the African scholarship in the last two decades or so. A growing number of African scholars of note have written about and advocated for the paradigm as an indigenous management paradigm. Kuk and Bolden (2006) argue that ubuntu must be treated as a point of reference and guiding principle for inquiry and enabling organizational culture and set of skills and competences. Mangaliso (2001) asserts that incorporating ubuntu principles in management holds the promise for superior approaches to management organizations. Mbigi (1997) is certain that ubuntu can be translated to what he calls 'The African Dream in Management', especially as a new management concept in the popular management literature in Africa.

African scholars are convinced that ubuntu can find its concrete expression in modern forms of business organizations, and leadership and management (Mbigi and Maree, 1995; Mbigi, 1997; Swartz and Davies, 1997; Karsten and Illa, 2005; Poovan, et al. 2006). Indeed, ubuntu seems to succeed in drawing attention in popular media and academic debate, occasionally leading to revisiting 'conventional wisdom' (Karsten and Illa, 2001). However, it does not follow that all the African people propagate or are even consciously aware of the philosophy as such. Ubuntu and its application as a management practice and leadership style is faced with numerous limitations.

## THE DILEMMA OF UBUNTU

Since colonialism, conceptions of the nature and purposes of management development and excellence as well as the theories and strategies for achieving them have remained a territory transverse predominantly by non-African social scientists (Odei, 2007). Studying Africa's development, they proclaimed a 'paradigmatic crisis' and embarked on 'a quest for new paradigms' (ibid). These paradigms have led to the existence of great differences in terms of political, social and

economic dimensions between Africa today, getting in the way of ubuntu as an indigenous paradigm.

Moreover, it is not yet beyond doubt that ubuntu is a management, or merely a broad Afrocentric concept. According to Karsten and Van Veen, (1998), a management concept must have several (business) dimensions, and must provide a solution to business problems. However, from an organizational perspective, it is still not clear whether ubuntu provides this solution or just gives some guidelines to Africa's management problems. It is still not absolutely clear what value is added to an organization from the use of ubuntu and why and how it delivers improvement. The concept ubuntu is often vague and open to ridicule.

The major demise for ubuntu has to do with its universalization and providing it with dichotomous distinction from Western thought. Nabudere (2008) argues that Ubuntu is faced with the problem of people who attempt to problematize the idea of 'African philosophy,' by essentializing the African experience as being unique and valid outside actual lived experiences and histories. While this kind of distinctiveness arguably may be of critical necessity, this has polarized African philosophy to the extent that it is, in its current form, about a resistance to the Western philosophical discourse. This has often tends to deny the irrevocable influence of different indigenous epistemologies on the continent within different situations and places, often lending an air of romantic essentialism to these efforts (Binsbergen, 2003; Kiggundu, 1991; Smkange, 1980). This image denies Africa its true contribution to world knowledge and civilization.

Quite synonymously, as a management paradigm, ubuntu is often idealized 'without being aware of the potentially negative aspects of the process' (Swartz and Davies, 1997). In fact, ubuntu has become too popularized in the scholarly circles (Van der Wal and Ramotsehoa 2001), that it runs the risk of falling victim to the lifecycle of so many fads and fashions in management literature. The concept has been translated into a commodifiable, programmed change initiative trying to diffuse it in Africa and other places in the world. For instance, there are today *ubuntu* consultants, there is even an *Ubuntu Institute* in Pretoria which arranges seminars on such topics as '*ubuntu* marketing and public relations' and '*ubuntu* management' (Lodge 2002). Although such attempts help to modernize and revitalize the ideology, and generate a mini-industry of sorts, ubuntu risks being reduced to the status of a management fad.

Swartz and Davies (1997) talk of the 'shadow side of ubuntu' – particularly where an individual has to give up personal needs to conform with and fit the role expected of the community/group. Failure to conform can be met by harsh punitive measures. Archbishop Tutu himself says that the strong group feeling has the weaknesses of all communalism in the way that it encourages conservatism and conformity (Battle, 1997; Tutu, 2004). Ubuntu impacts negatively on many important issues, because the community or individuals have to suspend valuable time and other resources on others for purposes of harmony (Batuuka and Nkanda, 2005). Some examples of lost time include; wedding meetings, funeral arrangements until the corpses are buried, the sick who are



hospitalized at home, those who have been admitted to hospitals and even those who have been discharged from hospitals, consoling those who have lost their close and distant relatives, bailed from police cells, those who have been convicted sentenced and have completed their prison sentence in jail, they even go to the extent of attending and consoling those who have lost their domestic animals and poultry, and other types of sicknesses or problems that might have happened to their fellow *umuntu* (Batuuka S. and Nkanda D. 2005). In its worst form, ubuntu reflects elements of ‘totalitarian communalism’ which ‘frowns upon elevating an individual above the community’ and so can be overwhelming. In the same vein, Themba Sono, (cf. Louw, 2001) talks about the ‘constrictive nature’ or ‘tyrannical custom’ of a derailed African culture which ‘frowns upon one beyond the community.’

There is another strand of thinking that should not be discounted that ubuntu is anti-modernist, represents out-dated values and stands in the way of efficiency (Hailey, 2008). Many educated Africans see Bantu indigenous knowledge systems as shameful because it does not fit into Western knowledge, and its imperial education or its scientific and religious or spiritual notions (Kawooya, 2005; Raseroka, 2005). Others suggest it is a pastiche of the original idea, and we now only see ‘the remnants of ubuntu’ (ibid). Others still sometimes dismiss it as a post-colonial ‘Utopia’ invention and/or a ‘prophetic’ illusion crafted by the African political elites in the age of globalization. Some of the cynics even question the philosophy on the ground that, at best, it is a ‘Bantu’ philosophy not related to the ways of life and outlook of other ‘tribal’ groupings of Africa (Nabudere, 2008).

Overall, it would be wrong to suggest that the *ubuntu* approach has had a tremendous and profound effect on management in Africa in the last decade despite its praise and admiration especially in the African scholarly circles. Management in Africa is still largely north European, Western, British, and Anglo-Saxon, or even American as ‘Africans are still addicted to Western paradigms’ (Kawooya, 2006). The imperative of Western paradigms notwithstanding, they have halted and discontinued the development of African local knowledge systems. This is so much to the extent that some indigenous academia in Africa ignores or even suppresses indigenous knowledge. Even worse, its contribution towards African management practice and leadership has been to echo, often in an opportunistic fashion, the voices of the non-African theorists. ‘African management is almost invisible in management textbooks’ (Sigger, Polak and Pennink, 2010). Of course much has been written on the African philosophy and management practices, but ubuntu is doubtless still a largely marginal perspective globally. Much of the literature seems to be dogmatic and lacking a scientific underpinning (Swartz and Davies, 1997, Nkomo, 2006). This is so much the case that even the books of Mbigi (1995; 1997; 2002), are not really what can be called academic and lack significantly in terms of empirical data to support claims about the existence and imperative of ubuntu within organizations. Despite these challenges, ubuntu serves as ideal, and may well represent an approach that is more in line with the way in which African employees value a person, and a humanistic *locus of human value*.

## **TOWARD RETHINKING MANAGEMENT**

There is a tendency, especially in international management literature, to use dichotomies in explaining and popularizing management in Africa. Principally, it is described by means of binary positioning. The literature either uncritically accepts Western theory and practice, or “African management philosophy” in opposition to ‘Western’ conceptions and practices of management. Even though it is the view of the author that a post-colonial approach which seeks to impose Western ideas on Africa is simply not adequate for the present day management challenges, ‘the African renaissance approach which seeks to remove the Western influence and return to African cultural roots will not succeed, as history cannot be erased and the influence of the multinationals and globalization are not going to recede’ (April and Ephraim, 2006).

Some African researchers have decided to reject modernity and collaboration with the west and east, calling for dependency on African culture, traditions, and norms rejecting the role of scientific method in management (Karsten and Illa, 2005; Poovan, etal. 2006; Mbigi and Maree, 1995; Mbigi, 1997; Swartz and Davies, 1997). The ‘Western perspective’ is depicted as an inadequate and unjust approach and in any case out of place for the African context. Advocates for Western management theory and practice argue that due to globalization, cultures are coming together often through the economic power and hegemony of American influence. “African management philosophy” advocates argue that cultures, although continuously changing, remain essentially different from each other, which differences should be taken into consideration when managing across cultures.

However, the use of such dichotomies puts emphasis on denial, as ‘African management’ philosophy means ‘not-being-Western’, without actually clarifying the substance of ‘African management’. The tendency of portraying the west and its culture in negative terms, treating it as a monolithic entity, entirely ignores a wide variety of traditions in management that have been developed in the west. However, that would mean depriving one’s own self from the benefits of today (methods, technology, and behaviour) and this is also a false way.

Besides, scholars and practitioners who have contested the “universality” of Western theory and practice and acknowledge the diversity of the cultural experience and its effect on Africans’ way of life, should not be seen as trying to create an “African universal” Afrocentric theory and practice through ubuntu. It is only logical that if Africa’s main problem with Western models is its purported hegemonic tendencies, it would then be neither wise to substitute oneself in the place of a hegemonic perspective of Western theory nor to claim African ‘superiority’. It is unlikely for a single universal Afrocentric perspective to ever replace a Western perspective in the domain of management and organization entirely. The argument against universalism should benefit the development of multiple Afrocentric or African-centred measures and styles in addition to the western styles.



We ought not to squeeze ourselves between the two artificial positions: our traditions, rejecting the scientific method; the science, rejecting our traditions and norms. Because of limitations in both the Western and African approaches we ought not to focus our debate on deciding which position is the more valid one, but on attempting to integrate both in a synthesis model. To bridge the differences between the two positions, this paper proposes a middle ground. Clearly, African organizations would blend the best elements of both their domestic and imported ideas. Africans could develop complex combinations of convergence (associated with universalism or the science) and divergence (associated with particularism or our traditions), labeled ‘crossvergence’ by Ralston and his colleagues (1997). Crossvergence means that Africans internalize some aspects of Western individualism into their African-based value system to develop a unique perspective or set of values that possesses facets of both cultures. By slowly integrating Western ideas into their traditional-based value system, a unique hybrid set of values would emerge from the union. Of course, such a behavior is likely to be viewed as a confusing paradox but it is a typical modernization process and a very significant stage of developing a hybrid value set. It is the view of this paper that modern cross-cultural theory must be built on a concept of crossvergence of cultures.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined four areas: namely, the philosophical rejection of the rationale and institution of Western management theory and practice; the approach for appreciating management in Africa, through examining ubuntu as an Afrocentric paradigm; the dilemma of ubuntu management paradigm, and the essence of rethinking management practice and leadership in Africa. The paper is an attempt to redirect African thought to ubuntu. At the same time, it is not meant to disparage whatever is western or alien. The author recommends the retrieval of ubuntu, knowing full well that African culture, just like all other cultures, has never been static but changes with time. It is recognized that cultures grow with time. Hence, the author proposes that people have to re-adjust to meet new challenges and demands brought about by modernization. The author’s position is that since there is hardly any idea one can call purely African given our historical background; and since Africans can hardly imbibe purely Western ideas, then it is imperative to Crossverge. It is imperative therefore, not to attempt to replace all things either Western or African. It is the author’s view that since Africa is an ideologically polarized society, it will not augur well with the existential realities of her time to look into any of the schools above for an authentic management practice and leadership styles model for Africa. Because this paper is designed to serve as a ‘general’ foundation for a more detailed and specialized philosophical and social study of the subject, it has not been possible to make it less general and more detailed than it stands. I am therefore aware that various concepts and issues it has discussed need to be treated at greater length. Future study on ubuntu and management in Africa may add to this present discussion by investigating this area of study in detail and directing research efforts towards examining the perceptions of Africans regarding crossvergence and the retrieval of ubuntu. It is equally important to assess the willingness of the Africans on such issues.

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