

A Literature Review on African Leadership and Ubuntu Philosophy

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Abstract

Africa is always called the cradle of humanity. Since the ages, Africa has had its particular way of exercising leadership, typically called “chiefdom” and “kingdom.” Unfortunately, with globalization, this leadership approach has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. Many have associated it with dictatorship, yet it is not necessarily the case; it all depends on the leader. The misinterpretations are mainly caused by the biases of the writers. Africa has many values, which are unique to Africa. One of the particularities is the Ubuntu philosophy. The daily practice of the Ubuntu philosophy has increased the unicity of Africa as manifested through generosity, love, care, and hospitality, especially to foreigners. If Africa is still standing today, it’s because of its leadership based on African culture. In Africa, leadership is not only limited to positions but also with high consideration with respect to age differences. Anyone older than I am is considered a role model, a mentor, and a coach. Using literature review method, this study explores the original African leadership in contrast with the modern Western leadership in Africa through the African lens.

Keywords: *Literature Review, African Leadership, Ubuntu Philosophy*

1.0 Introduction

Africa is always called the cradle of humanity. Since the ages, Africa has had its particular way of exercising leadership, typically called “chiefdom” and “kingdom.” Unfortunately, with globalization, this leadership approach has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. Many have associated it with dictatorship, yet it is not necessarily the case; it all depends on the leader. The misinterpretations are mainly caused by the biases of the writers. Masango (2002), observes that developed countries have always viewed Africa as a place plagued by corruption, dictatorship, military coups, rebellious leaders, greediness, misuse of power, incompetent leadership, and politically as well as economically ineffective and suspicious leaders who undermine their democracies. These issues are indeed real on the African continent, like in any other part of the world, but they are not the only things that depict Africa (Masango, 2002).

Many ignore or intentionally silence the beauty existing in African diversity. Africa is a compelling place. Measuring 5000 miles from north to south and as many as 4,600 miles from east to west, the continent comprises almost 12 million square miles. More than 1.1 billion people belong to several thousand ethnic groups, speak more than 1,500 languages, and live in 54 countries and 10 non-sovereign territories (Walsh, 2015). As the world’s youngest continent, with a median age of 20 years and 60 % of the population under the age of 25, Africa has the potential to shape geopolitics and world economics in the decades to come (Mendes, 2022). At the 28th summit of the African Union (AU), in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the United

Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said, “I am convinced that the world has much to gain from African wisdom, ideas, and solutions. I left the Summit more convinced than ever that all of humanity will benefit by listening, learning, and working with the people of Africa” (Guterres, 2017).

The causes of discrepancy in Africa’s richness and poverty are mostly from outside of Africa. In its explanatory statement, the European Parliament report says, “Due to the continued direction of the trade from colonial times, wealth is being transferred continuously from the African periphery to the industrialized and increasingly digitized centers. This has resulted in poverty for a huge share of the population in Africa” (Mendes, 2022). On the 35th Assembly of the Heads of State and Government of the Africa Union in Addis Ababa, the UN Secretary-General argued that injustice is deeply embedded in global systems, but it is Africans who are paying the heaviest price. The unethical inequalities that suffocate Africa, he continues, fuel armed conflict, political, economic, ethnic, and social tensions, human rights abuses, violence against women, terrorism, military coups, and sentiment of impunity (UN Affairs, 2022).

Additionally, Africa has many values, which are unique to Africa. One of the particularities is the Ubuntu philosophy. Desmond Tutu describes it as being about the essence of being human, it is part of the gift that Africa will give the world. It embraces hospitality, caring about others, and being willing to go the extra mile for the sake of another. We believe that a person is a person through other persons, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. Therefore, you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in the community, in belonging (Bolden & Kirk, 2005). The daily practice of the Ubuntu philosophy has increased the unicity of Africa as manifested through generosity, love, care, and hospitality, especially to foreigners. In this article, two main concepts will be developed in relation to African Leadership. The first concept is Ubuntu philosophy, and the second philosophy is patriarchalism.

2.0 Understanding African Leadership

If Africa is still standing today, it’s because of its leadership based on African culture. Throughout the history of Africa, Africans have had a uniqueness in their leadership. To help understand this better, I borrow Masango’s words explaining that Africa has a rich heritage of leadership, but it is not uniform. It has similarities, but there are also differences from time to time, from place to place, and from person to person (Masango, 2002). In an African village, elucidates (Masango, 2002), the hierarchical structures are formal and well-defined, with a king at the top of the structure, ruling and leading the villagers. In short, a leader is someone who influences individuals and groups within a community or a village. The leader helps them to establish goals, and then guides them through the whole process, allowing the community to be effective (if he or she is a good leader). In Africa, leadership is not only limited to positions but also with high consideration with respect to age differences. Anyone older than I am is considered a role model, a mentor, and a coach.

This chapter explores the original African leadership in contrast with the modern Western leadership in Africa through the African lens. In line with Bolden and Kirk, in this paper, the concept of “African leadership” is seen in an increasingly positive way that generates a sense of pride about what Africa is; what Africans have done and can do as leaders” (Bolden & Kirk, 2005).

3.0 Ubuntu Philosophy

The word “ubuntu” is from some southern African languages and it means “humanness” (Metz, 2019). Even though there is a diversity of African cultures, there are commonalities to be found among them in areas such as value systems, beliefs, practices, and others (Nzimakwe, 2014). As an ideal, Ubuntu means the opposite of being selfish and self-centered. It promotes cooperation between individuals, cultures, and nations. Ubuntu thus empowers all to be valued to reach their full potential in accord with all around them. Ubuntu is a cultural worldview common among the Bantu tribes of Africa that emphasizes the interconnectedness of self within society and the extension of humanness within a shared community (Nzimakwe, 2014). Ubuntu has been held up as an African worldview that has the potential to counteract the continent’s plague of genocide, patriarchy, autocratic leadership, corruption, and human suffering (Brubaker, 2013). Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) indicate that Ubuntu can best be described as an African philosophy that emphasizes “being self through others.” It is a form of humanism that can be expressed in the phrase “I am because of who we all are.”

Van Breda (2019) observes that Ubuntu gives expression to deeply-held African ideals of one’s personhood being rooted in one’s interconnectedness with others. But the term has, for the most part, been limited to the idea of mutual aid – people helping each other in a spirit of solidarity. At the heart of Ubuntu is the belief that we are all interconnected and belong to a greater whole. My success depends on you being successful. I cannot shine if you do not shine (Guest, 2015).

Various words have been used to describe the presence of Ubuntu. Some of these are sympathy, compassion, benevolence, solidarity, hospitality, generosity, sharing, openness, affirming, availability, kindness, caring, harmony, interdependence, obedience, collectivity, and consensus (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). Van Breda (2019) sets two distinct clusters of Ubuntu meaning. First, ubuntu refers to the moral qualities of a person, particularly features like generosity, empathy, forgiveness, and consideration. Some, he says, refer to ubuntu as the presence of the divine, directing a person away from bad behavior towards good. Second, ubuntu refers to a pattern of interconnectedness between people, in the form of a worldview or philosophy.

Samkange and Samkange highlight the three maxims of “hunhuism” or “ubuntuism.” The first maxim asserts that to be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them. And the second maxim means that if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life. The third maxim as a principle deeply embedded in traditional African political philosophy says that the king owed his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him. (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013).

Ubuntu is complex, and it has been applied to an array of different contexts, from politics, conflict management, education, law, and international diplomacy to ethics. At the normative level, Ubuntu ethics prescribes individuals to identify and exhibit solidarity with one another, by promoting behaviors that are more likely to improve the quality of life of others (Ewuoso et al., 2021).

Ubuntu Ethics

Ubuntu as an ethical perspective and way of life has been in existence for several hundred years among African peoples, even if written scholarship on the topic is new (Metz, 2019). Broadly, Ubuntu ethics is defined as a set of values central among which are reciprocity, common good, peaceful relations, emphasis on human dignity, and the value of human life as well as

consensus, tolerance, and mutual respect (Ujomudike, 2016). Ubuntu is not just a single moral value, but a fusion of normative ideas that largely inform beliefs, attitudes, and practices in Africa. Such moral values include prizing communal relationships, harmony, hospitality, social cohesion, friendliness, compassion, and interdependence. These beliefs, ideas, and practices are at the core of what it means to be human or a person (Ewuoso et al., 2021). It is observed that Ubuntu's ethics has been criticized “because of over-emphasizing the role of the community at the expense of the individual and practical reason, which are equally important in the African traditional societies” (Kayange, 2020).

Ubuntu Leadership

Laloo (2022) observes that the distinctive feature of Ubuntu governance is an indigenous democracy with very deep African cultures that had emerged from African traditional institutions and practices. The hallmark of African traditional governance is the focus on collective stewardship (collectivism), freedom of expression, grass-roots participation, consultation, discussion, and consensus to accommodate minority needs and views (holism). The emphasis was not just on majority views but also compromise and accommodation. The focus was on the need to reach an acceptable consensus through discussions to accommodate minority groups and views to avoid majority group dictatorship. This was essential because the traditional African political institution was characterized by the cultural diversity of tribes and clans, which did not disappear as a result of majority rule (Laloo, 2022).

The principles of Ubuntu as a leadership philosophy emphasize collectivism and relationships over material things, including ownership of opportunities, responsibilities, and challenges (Nzimakwe, 2014). Leaders with Ubuntu stress and model the importance of respecting the individual and place value on working as a team and supporting each other (Nzimakwe, 2014). In the leadership and philosophy of Ubuntu, in the African context, it is important to gain knowledge by listening to your fellow human beings (Nzimakwe, 2014). The principles of Ubuntu, such as sharing of opportunities, responsibilities, and challenges, participatory decision-making and leadership, and reconciliation as a goal of conflict management, are used as the point of departure in assessing a range of leadership and key governance issues debated in public and the private sectors (Nzimakwe, 2014).

As part of Ubuntu in Africa, there is an all-pervading sense of communalism. The land is held in trust by the chief, for the community. There is direct participation by all members of the community in decision-making, and settling disputes, through clan or tribal communal meetings. This may be considered as part of promoting good governance. From a leadership perspective, Ubuntu requires that leaders model the way for others. Ubuntu and principles of leadership and good governance are compatible and complementary (Nzimakwe, 2014). A leader who has a value-based style of leadership, and who could be aware of and appreciate the already existing value systems within the team can only achieve such role modeling. When implemented properly, Ubuntu values will increase team effectiveness and, ultimately, organizational and institutional effectiveness, and will promote good governance (Nzimakwe, 2014).

Literature on uniquely African leadership qualities and styles suggests that, in general, “Africans prefer leadership styles that are based on humanistic principles, and desire more participative leadership that values individuality, authenticity, and serving the community in line with the Ubuntu leadership philosophy which promotes leading by example and doing the right thing” (Poltera & Schreiner, 2019).

Ubuntu and servant leadership

A study conducted by Brubaker (2013) concludes that servant leadership and ubuntu are not significantly different in the strength of their relationships with leader effectiveness. Servant leadership models, he says, have been primarily developed and discussed in the American context. Accordingly, critics have accused it of being a primarily Western construct, and researchers have suggested that differences in cultures may limit the effectiveness of the servant leadership model (Brubaker, 2013). It is suggested that African organizations adopt a leadership approach that is consistent with the communal cultures in which they operate (Muller et al., 2019). Citing problems of post-colonial discrimination, leadership scandals, and extensive corruption, African leadership theorists suggest that the philosophy of ubuntu “holds promise for progressive and ethical change for Africa” (Brubaker, 2013). At the organizational level, Ubuntu and servant leadership are posited to positively influence organizational performance by increasing employee engagement (Muller et al., 2019). Nelson found that Patterson’s servant leadership model is a good fit with black South African leaders, particularly in light of the cultural concept of ubuntu (Nelson, 2003).

4.0 Patriarchalism

Mbah and Oti (2015) define patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. Patriarchy was originally used to describe the power of the father as head of the household and has also been used within post-1960s feminism to refer to the systematic organization of male supremacy and subordination (Mbah & Oti, 2015). Carbajal (2018) suggests that male and female characteristics are balanced when both are held together in harmony. One is not better than the other; rather, they are complementary (Carbajal, 2018). Generally, regarding the existence and origin of patriarchy, traditionalists believe that men are born to dominate and women to be subordinate. They believe that this hierarchy has always existed and will continue, and like other rules of nature, this one too cannot be changed. Others challenge these beliefs and say that patriarchy is not natural; it is man-made and, therefore, can be changed (Mbah & Oti, 2015).

Patriarchalism and Women’s Leadership

Poltera and Schreiner (2019) suggest that the concept of “women’s leadership in the African context” could be interpreted in a range of ways. At its most basic, “women’s leadership” is an umbrella term that includes both descriptive and normative assumptions. At a descriptive level, women’s leadership refers to women (as individuals or groups) in leadership positions (formal or informal) and focuses on outlining the experiences of women who enact leadership. Normative claims with respect to women’s leadership include the need to redress gaps in the number and earnings of women in appointed leadership positions relative to men, increase recognition of women’s leadership, and diversify mainstream leadership theory by increasing experiences of underrepresented groups such as women in Africa (Poltera & Schreiner, 2019).

Mbah and Oti (2015) state that men are being trained for leadership roles, while women are confined to domestic activities; roles ascribed to them by the culture which affect them later in life, thereby making them lose self-confidence/worth and have low self-esteem in their career in adult life, politics inclusive. In Africa, patriarchy has manifested itself in the socio-cultural, political, economic, and legal institutions (Oluyemo, 2014).

However, Agenda 2063 and The African Women’s Decade (2010-2020) demonstrate how the African context is being consciously shaped into a gender-sensitive continent, even though there remain significant challenges in the recognition of women as leaders (Poltera & Schreiner, 2019). The inclusion, representation, and participation of women in national politics

have increased over the years unlike centuries back when women were not allowed to vote or run for political offices. The representation of women in politics in Africa is gradually increasing, as women's representation in politics, increased by fivefold to 22% between 1980 and 2015 (Mambula, 2021).

Postcolonial Africa has also seen the rise of powerful female leaders – political and civic – as well as the rise of religious leadership to fill the void left by state failure (Pailey, 2014). In December 2021, Forbes listed the 100 most powerful women in the world, and three African women made it to the list. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala's appointment as World Trade Organization Director-General in March 2021 made her the first woman and the first African to hold this position at the global trade organization. Forbes ranks Mo Abudu 98th among the most powerful female figures in the world. The fact that she is the first entrepreneur to own a Pan-African network places her among the most powerful women in Africa. Samia Suluhu Hassan is without a doubt among the most powerful women in Africa. After the death of President John Magufuli in March 2021, Suluhu became Tanzania's sixth president. She entered the annals of history by becoming the first female President of Tanzania. She entered the political scene in 2015 after Magufuli picked her as his vice president. She made history in September 2021 when she became the fifth woman to ever address the United Nations General Assembly as a head of state or government from Africa (See Africa Today, 2022).

As leaders, priestesses, traders, cultivators, oracles, wives, and mothers, women have occupied key roles in the developments that have shaped the course of African history. Referring to Bortolot, the turbulent years following West and Central Africa's initial contact with Europe were marked by the emergence of women revered for their formidable political skills and social vision. We know of these women—women such as Ana Nzinga, queen of Ndongo; Dona Beatriz, Kongo prophet; and Idia, queen mother of Benin—largely today largely through oral histories, artworks, and, significantly, contemporaneous European documents. There can be no doubt that important and celebrated women existed in other periods of African history, but before the era of contact with Europe, written records of their names and achievements simply do not exist. Indigenous narratives about them have not survived to the present day, or have yet to be recognized and recorded. As the study of African history continues, however, the identities of other notable African women will surely be revealed (Bortolot, 2003).

There have so far been 22 women heads of state in Africa. Even in Africa, few citizens are aware that so many women have served as president or prime minister — some for brief terms, and many during times of war, famine, financial insecurity, and disease (Milano, 2022). As an illustration, intern and Watkins (2021) talk about Sylvie Kiningi, Acting President of Burundi (February – October 1993) when the incumbent President Melchior Ndadaye was shot together with 6 of his officials; Ivy Matsepe-Cassaburi, Acting President of South Africa (September 2005) when the President and his vice were out of the country for four days in September of 2005. She was also selected by the cabinet to serve as the constitutional and official head of state for an interim period of 14 hours on September 25, 2008. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia (January 2006 – January 2018). Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is Africa's first elected President who served two consecutive terms after winning the 2005 and 2011 Presidential elections. Rose Francine Rogombe, Interim President of Gabon (June 2009 – October 2009) after the death of President of Omar Bongo. Agnes Monique Ohsan Bellepeau, Acting President of Mauritius (March – July 2012 and May – June 2015) during the transition period between the resignation of the current President Anerood Jugnauth to the inauguration of the new President Kailash Purryag and between the resignation of Purryag and the inauguration of the new President, Ameenah Gurib. Joyce Hilda Banda, President of Malawi (April 2012 –

May 2014) following the death of President Bingu wa Mutharika. Catherine Samba, Acting President of Central African Republic (January 2014 – March 2016) when rebel leader Michael Djotodia resigned from his self-appointed Presidency. Before she took on this role, she was the mayor of the capital city of Bangui from 2013 to 2014. Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, President of Mauritius (June 2015 – March 2018) following the resignation of then President Kailash Purryag. She was unanimously elected President by the National Assembly. Sahle-Work Zewde, President of Ethiopia (October 2018 – Present). Before she was elected President, she worked as a Special Representative of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres to the African Union and as Head of the United Nations Office to the African Union. Samia Suluhu Hassan, President of Tanzania (March 2021 – Present) after the sudden passing of the former Tanzanian President, John Magufuli (intern & Watkins, 2021).

Women leaders of today are tenacious and diverse. They are mobilizing the global climate movement, pushing for social protection, addressing the COVID-19 crisis, and dismantling systemic racial discrimination. Across the continent, women leaders improve lives and inspire a better future for all (UN Women Africa, 2021).

5.0 Conclusion

When it comes to discussions of African leadership and, particularly women's leadership in the African context, Ubuntu can be used as a philosophical foundation on which to develop an African ideal of ethical, effective leadership which is characterized by care for others, relations between people, human dignity, communitarianism, and recognizing the importance of individual human rights (Poltera & Schreiner, 2019).

6.0 Recommendations

When people's culture is misunderstood, it is always misinterpreted. African leadership should be understood based on the African culture. The best way to understand African leadership is through the Ubuntu philosophy – I am because you are. This understanding is holistic. It does not exclude women because, in Africa, a woman is considered “the mother” of all. Africans should keep that cultural unicity consisting of respecting and honoring both men and women, unconditional and sacrificial love to any human being because all life matters, and promoting meritocracy at all levels without gender discrimination.

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