AOSIS

A meta-theory of *ubuntu*: Implications for responsible leadership in Africa

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Purpose: This study provides an outline of a meta-theory of *ubuntu* to illuminate how responsible leadership might be understood and enacted in African settings.

Design/methodology/approach: This study presents an initial theory on *ubuntu* and appeals to realist philosophical principles to provide an approach to understand the structures that make *ubuntu* possible. The study tests and refines that initial theory using evidence about reconciliation in Africa where *ubuntu* has been revealed. It then discusses the key concepts of responsible leadership using *ubuntu* as a lens.

Findings/results: *Ubuntu* is an important basis for responsible leadership in many African communities. It can manifest, to varying extents, when individuals engage with their environments and are exposed to an apology. Apology reveals the rights, privileges, obligations and responsibilities of individuals. It provides an environment for transformative conversations that improve understanding and promote harmony.

Practical implications: Theories of responsible leadership based on *ubuntu* will prioritise engagement with African cultures and issues in a holistic manner. Leaders who activate *ubuntu* will be less interested in stakeholder management and more in citizenship. This approach decentres organisations and foregrounds humanity.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the theory of *ubuntu* and proposes that it can support the conceptualisation and implementation of responsible leadership in African settings. It clarifies the nature of responsibility and indicates to whom that responsibility is owed. It helps bridge African and Western ideas to reverse the marginalisation of African systems of thought by positioning *ubuntu* as an important socio-philosophical idea.

Keywords: *ubuntu*; responsible leadership; ethics; Africa; reconciliation; apology.

Introduction

Organisations working in Africa are increasingly challenged to behave responsibly. Global mining companies, for example, balance choices about generating profit and benefitting local communities while considering the potential harm of their operations to community welfare and environmental degradation (Chuhan-Pole et al., 2017). One approach to achieving responsible behaviour has been to regulate their behaviour by installing better institutions and codes of governance at the national, community and local levels to improve decisions for community wellbeing, with less rent-seeking, corruption and conflict. However, these have been met with limited success (Besada & Martin, 2015).

Another has been to encourage self-regulation through responsible decision-making at the organisational level. The main theories about boards (Donaldson & Davis, 1991; Freeman, 1983; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) prioritise responsibility to the organisation and its owners with only some regard for other stakeholder needs, particularly those without a discernible stake in the organisation. Recent research indicates that the legal system in the UK, for instance, promotes focus on shareholders' interests as a whole and provides little incentive to champion social and environmental agendas (Lan & Wan, 2024). Reforms across Europe and the United States, that oblige directors to ensure their companies minimise harm to people and the environment, are challenging the status quo of shareholder primacy within large, limited liability companies and inspiring new theoretical approaches (Hayden & Bodie, 2020; Pietrancosta, 2022).

At the individual level, several morals-based concepts of leadership based on Western philosophy argue that individuals can model and promote responsible choices and support organisations to

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self-regulate. These include theories of responsible leadership (Freeman & Auster, 2011; Maak & Pless, 2006). They are concerned with the exchanges of those in strategic leadership roles in advancing the goals of a wide range of internal or external stakeholder groups beyond those the organisation may directly affect or be affected by. In this regard, responsible leadership has an interest in social and environmental outcomes and has the potential to resolve conflictual situations where stakeholder interests need to be balanced against organisational interests.

To support the understanding and enactment of responsible leadership in African settings, this research addresses two questions: what is the nature of responsibility in Africa, and to whom should those in strategic leadership roles owe their responsibility when operating in Africa? The questions delve into the very essence of responsibility, demanding a fresh perspective and a comprehensive understanding of the contextual nuances of Africa. By reimagining responsibility within an African context, we hope to forge a path towards inclusive decision-making and stakeholder engagement.

This article proposes an alternative ethical standard for responsible leadership. It proposes a meta-theory of *ubuntu*, which itself is an African ethical theory (Mungwini, 2019). An understanding of *ubuntu* can help Western scholars and decision-makers access African ideas about responsibility as a base upon which to understand and enact responsible leadership concepts and behaviour that are relevant to Africa. The intention is not to synthesise a new theory of responsible leadership but to provide a lens for understanding and implementing responsible leadership in Africa. In doing this, the article seeks to bridge Western and African ideas about leadership and to locate *ubuntu* in the Western debates on leadership theory. It aims to help reverse the marginalisation of African systems of thought by positioning *ubuntu* as an important socio-philosophical idea.

Ubuntu – An important socio-philosophical idea

Strickland and Wang (2023) explore the history of philosophy and explain that there has been a deliberate effort to exclude non-Western philosophy from philosophy, particularly after Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Consequently, philosophical ideas such as *ubuntu* are often denied status in the Western world, despite some non-Western ideas predating and being even more sophisticated than Western ideas (Van Norden, 2017).

Some critics of *ubuntu* take a slant that is moral neo-colonialist and ignores the asymmetric relations between people and diversity and, therefore, constrains alternative ideas. Moral neo-colonialism argues for universality, as opposed to difference, of dominant cultures as globally accepted norms and standards (Widdows, 2007). For these critics, ethics, morals and values are not unique to certain groups of people but are consistent across society (Hallen, 2015). They argue that what might differ is the definition

and implementation of some of these values in cultures with different customs. For them, *ubuntu* does not offer anything distinctive and can be studied using evidence from, for example, Western settings.

Alongside these critics are those such as West (2014) who maintain that the *ubuntu* concept already exists in Western literature, is already understood and has limited relevance in the modern world. They maintain that *ubuntu* is not worth studying separately. They advance the idea that African values are now no different to Western values, particularly as Western values have been imported by Africans, taught and are now maintained by African institutions. They point to evidence that the streets of Africa are littered with symbols of Western culture and that demand for Western ways suggests little need for African ways. They argue that *ubuntu* should be studied empirically as other Western concepts are studied, through surveys, comparative studies and other reductive ways. They see it as a characteristic, which one gains and loses, such that African rural dwellers can have more of it and African urban dwellers may have lost it. By their inference, *ubuntu* is something that has yet to find its place in research and society.

Partly as a consequence of such views, the aim of this article is emancipative. We are inspired by African philosopher Mungwini (2022) who emphasises that Africans have a responsibility to engage with their history to unravel and rediscover their voice. He argues that Africans can emancipate themselves by drawing on their own traditions of thought, setting aside the prejudices promoted by colonisation. He maintains that *ubuntu* presents a philosophical practice that can serve as a formidable catalyst for global transformation. This potential extends beyond human interactions, encompassing our profound relationship with the entire environment.

We are encouraged by the growing number of researchers who are using *ubuntu* to inform management practice (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). We believe that *ubuntu* will benefit from additional study and deserves its own agenda using methods that go beyond the experience of events and focusing on outputs such as symbols of Western culture and demand for Western ways. To study the philosophy of *ubuntu*, researchers must reject the intellectual imperialism that insists African philosophies are inferior and also escape the assumptions of moral neo-colonialism that suggest that *ubuntu* offers nothing new or different. *Ubuntu* is a distinct set of theories that underpins actual events. Accessing these theories requires a research approach where one can identify the theories, explain how they work and then test and refine them, paying particular attention to the influence of context. The section 'Principles for studying *ubuntu*' sets out the philosophical principles that we have selected to study *ubuntu* and bridge the gap between Western and non-Western ideas.

Principles for studying *ubuntu*

Realist researchers offer a language that can help explain the philosophical principles of African culture to Western scholars

and develop a meta-theory for *ubuntu*. We are particularly interested in the work of Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014) whose main contribution was to critical realism and, in the latter days of his research career, to Eastern traditions of philosophy and the philosophy of meta-reality (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2010). He was interested in the properties of society, the causes of social change, freedom and harmony. As a critical realist, Bhaskar did not see the world as a set of discrete events but as a complex of interconnected structures. He stood against methodological individualism, arguing that social behaviour is not explained by the behaviour of individuals in groups, but by relationships between individuals and the relations between these relationships. He argued that the world can be seen as three interconnected domains. There are causal powers, or mechanisms, that we cannot see but exist in what he called the real domain. They can lie dormant, be activated by the environment and counteracted by other mechanisms. Mechanisms give rise to events in the actual domain, which when apparent, become experiences in the empirical domain. They are theories in their own right, theories within the theories that explain the relationship between outcomes and their environments.

In the real domain, inactivated, or latent mechanisms are universal and enduring. However, when activated, mechanisms are modified by the context of manifestation; they become specific to that circumstance and generate particular outcomes (Pawson, 2013). Experiences, events and activities can be described in terms of this context-mechanism-outcome configuration. Realist research based on these principles is made more stringent by scientific realists who use abduction, an epistemological effort to imagine the existence of latent mechanisms and propose an initial theory (Jagosh, 2020). They aim to explain how something can potentially behave because of its causal powers. They then use retroduction, a form of retrospective theorising, to hypothesise about the initial theory using empirical evidence of activated mechanisms from certain settings.

To clarify the notion of mechanisms at the human level, Dalkin et al. (2015) have conceptualised mechanisms as consisting of a mechanistic resource and a response. A mechanistic resource is offered in a context that activates a specific response in individuals. The mechanistic resource-response interplay reveals the mechanism. Trust, for example, is a mechanism that emerges when two individuals continuously deliver on their promises to one another. It has its own real existence between two people rather than in any of them. The identification and exploration of mechanisms using realist principles can, therefore, support the development of a meta-theory for *ubuntu*, as it provides an analysis and explanation of how *ubuntu* works.

The ideas presented here seem compatible with African ideas about reality and can provide a language to explain the methodological concepts used in this study. The Shona, for example, have a stratified view of reality. They believe there are invisible forces, or spirits, that have causal powers. Spirits can influence other spirits and make changes in the lives of people (Gelfand, 1967; Mabvurira & Makhubele, 2018). Spirits live in their own world and are latent, existing as a potential force to be manifest at special events and under certain circumstances. In those conditions, a person is able to access spirits through a spirit medium and experience their manifestation in that context.

As a consequence of this explanatory potential, the realist-informed approach is applied to identify *ubuntu* as a causal power emerging in contingent conditions when activated by specific responses. In the section 'An initial meta-theory of *ubuntu*', applying a realist-informed synthesis of the literature (Wong et al., 2013), we use abduction to reframe what we understand about *ubuntu* as an initial theory, then use retroduction to test and refine the initial theory using data from the reconciliation literature. The realist-informed synthesis approach has guided the inclusion and ordering of the items in this article. It is particularly useful when there is limited empirical literature on a topic, as our scoping search revealed when exploring empirical literature on *ubuntu* and gender equality (Nyoni & Agbaje, 2022), disability (Mutanga, 2022) and other challenges identified for this Special Issue. In such situations, the approach encourages researchers to explore 'a broad range of sources that may cross traditional disciplinary, program and sector boundaries' (Wong et al., 2013, p. 8). The data used to test the initial theory may be from different domains; ours was from the reconciliation literature where *ubuntu* has revealed itself as a mechanism. This literature provides additional vocabulary and concepts for understanding *ubuntu*. The article here proposes a meta-theory of *ubuntu* to help explain how responsible leadership might be enacted and understood in African settings.

An initial meta-theory of *ubuntu*

Ubuntu is an African ethical theory that encapsulates the concept of morality. *Ubuntu* is a term used in Zulu, Xhosa, Kinyarwanda and Kirundi languages. It is referred to as *umunthu* in Chichewa, Chinyanja and Chewa, *hunhu* by the Shona, *umuntu* by the Ndebele, *botho* in Setswana and Sesotho, *omundu* by the Herero and Luhya, *igwebuike* by the Igbo and *eniyan* in the Akan and Yoruba languages. As a colloquial term, it refers to being a person who deserves respect from the community and suggests a range of characteristics that an individual should display. For instance, an individual with compassion, the ability to share and a strong sense of humanitarianism is sometimes said to embody *ubuntu*. However, this usage refers to outcomes related to *ubuntu*, rather than to an understanding of the ontology of *ubuntu*. To understand *ubuntu*, it is necessary to go beyond the qualities that an individual displays, or responses they make, to understand the various conditions necessary for its emergence.

The ontology of *ubuntu* has previously been explored. African philosopher, Mbiti (1931–2019) summarised it as follows: 'I am, because we are; and since we are therefore, I am'. He argued *ubuntu* was about a deep interconnection between individuals and their communities, which was the

basis of being, such that the individual cannot exist without the community. He does not deny the existence of individuals but argues that individuals become because the community enables them to be. Individuals exist as part of a greater whole and their purpose is to sustain that greater whole. There is an interdependence that promotes collective behaviour and rejects self-interest. This understanding of self that is presented by Mbiti contrasts with the Cogito argument of René Descartes (1596–1650): 'I am thinking, therefore I exist'. The Cogito argument explains that the self exists on its own because of our capacity to think. Unlike this Cartesian understanding, which is individualistic, *ubuntu* argues that the individual is not at the apex of the hierarchy of the natural world. *Ubuntu* is not anthropocentric, maintaining that individuals cannot be set apart from other aspects of nature and are not the most important part of it. It supports a strong connection between people and nature wherein people are encouraged to promote environmental sustainability (Etieyibo, 2017). *Ubuntu* forbids people to use natural resources in a way that compromises the ability of others, now and in the future, to do the same. Given this focus on social responsibility and sustainability, *ubuntu* has potential as an ethical theory for responsible leadership.

The context for *ubuntu*

Ubuntu is manifest in the traditions, social rules, principles and norms that can influence individuals to align with society (Mungwini, 2019). It helps people determine what is right or wrong for society and is concerned with promoting social harmony, human welfare, interdependence, reciprocity and social wellbeing. These outcomes are impacted by the context of individuals. Wiredu (2018) captures this context in the following way:

> An [*African*] is essentially the centre of a thick set of concentric circles of obligations and responsibilities matched by rights and privileges revolving round levels of relationships irradiating from the consanguinity of household kith and kin, through the 'blood' ties of lineage and clan, to the wider circumference of human familyhood based on the common possession of the divine spark. (p. 221)

Africans are an integral part of their social environment, which is of significant value and an inherent motivation. This social environment and its interconnections are the source of obligations and confers rights and privileges. If habitually, and over time, individuals fail to satisfy their obligations, they can lose their rights and privileges and their status in society becomes diminished. We posit that the nature of the social interconnections means that the context changes episodically and gradually meaning that *ubuntu* is manifested as a light connected to a dimmer switch rather than being gained and lost abruptly or completely. There is never a time when a person becomes so unworthy as to not deserve some rights (Wiredu, 2018). No matter how poor their social relations or behaviours, a person will always be deserving of some respect and sympathy because they are a person. We, therefore, see *ubuntu* existing from birth, with society offering benefits before that individual earns any.

In addition to the social environment, there are physical and biological environments that are understood in ways that influence the manifestation of *ubuntu*. The physical environment, which includes soil and rocks, has no internal motivations or genes but provides an opportunity for individuals to hoard and destroy the habitats of others in order to create their own (Aunger & Curtis, 2013). Individuals can lay claim to rights and privileges, often beyond those offered by society. They can exhibit obsessive-compulsive disorders and kleptomania which lead to disharmony and conflict. The biological environment, which includes trees and animals, has genes that are different to those of individuals. Some of these genes are seen as parasites or predators, while others are seen as a source of metabolic resources that are nurtured to satisfy hunger. The biological environment, and the understanding of it, can change such that, for instance, predators become metabolic resources. This new understanding can influence whether individuals kill, avoid or nurture animals and therefore affects what is considered ethical. These behaviours can be amplified by other social motivations such as hoarding, fear and disgust that lead to exploitation of the biological environment, and practices that are considered cruel and unethical. The biological and physical environments also interact and influence each other with the physical environment offering opportunities for trees and animals to survive. Together, the three environments are interdependent and provide each other with opportunities and constraints to which individuals can respond.

Figure 1 shows how the notion of responsibility is embedded in *ubuntu*. It reflects the traditions, social rules, principles and norms of *ubuntu* that affect an African. They are the multiple conditions necessary for *ubuntu* to emerge as a mechanism and generate outcomes such as compassion and humanitarianism. These conditions can sanction individual action that is socially desirable and also block undesirable
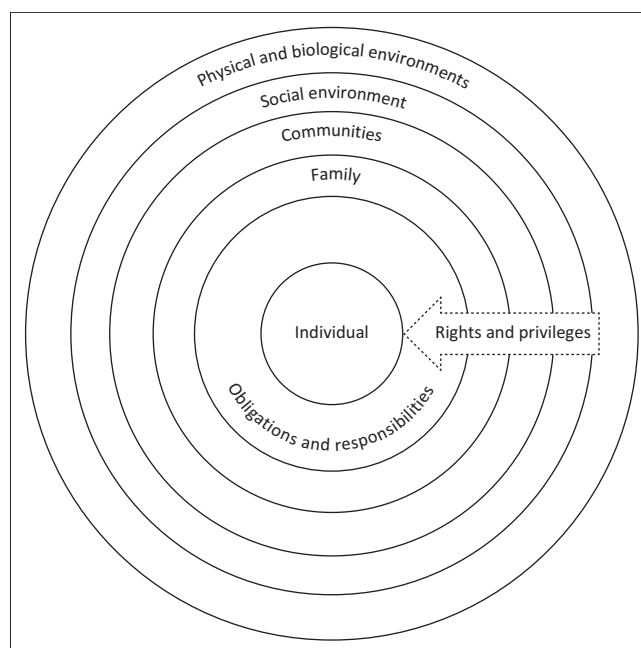

FIGURE 1: The contingent conditions for *ubuntu*.

action. The social environment, in particular, houses mechanisms to affect the exploitation of the physical and biological environments, and the emergence of *ubuntu*. Every individual has the potential to experience *ubuntu*. However, individuals who acquire significant rights, privileges, obligations and responsibilities, such as strategic decision-makers or political leaders, will have a greater potential to experience the generation of *ubuntu*. As rights and privileges ebb and flow, the extent of *ubuntu* can also change.

Ubuntu presents a holistic approach to understanding people and dealing with issues. To understand how *ubuntu* is activated, specifically what mechanistic resources enable it, it is necessary to find data with which to test the initial theory. The testing will reveal the *ubuntu* mechanism, a theory that can then be described independently of its context. For instance, it is possible to identify and refine our understanding of trust as a mechanism using literature on the relationship between two teenagers in love, a mother and baby or a teacher and student. Each reveals the same mechanism that can then be applied to theorise how trust works between other parties in other contexts. The section 'How *ubuntu* is activated' turns to the literature related to reconciliation in Africa that has been identified as a context where *ubuntu* can reveal itself. It also indicates the specific outcomes that result from those mechanistic resources when *ubuntu* emerges.

How *ubuntu* is activated

Ubuntu emerges as a reconciliatory theory when applied to situations of conflict. As a reconciliatory theory, it would go beyond outcomes such as conflict resolution 'to changing the motivations, goals, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions of the great majority of the society members regarding the conflict, the nature of the relationship between the parties, and the parties themselves' (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004, p. 12). *Ubuntu* has been particularly relevant to post-conflict resolution processes such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1931–2021) after the end of apartheid. It is also relevant to the reconciliation process principally between the Ndebele and the Shona ethnicities in Zimbabwe that remains unresolved. It is important for the process that seeks reconciliation mainly between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnicities in Rwanda to restore social equilibrium, which has progressed but faces multiple hurdles. Studying these reconciliation processes can help indicate how *ubuntu* is generated to various extents in different scenarios.

In South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu invoked the spirit of *ubuntu* for the TRC process to promote forgiveness, tolerance and harmony following a period of intense racial inequality and injustices. The TRC was based on 'the need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimisation' (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, p. 8). *Ubuntu* was a guiding philosophy that aimed to bring dignity to victims through restorative justice. For the TRC, *ubuntu* emphasised the significance of human dignity and a

shift from confrontation to conciliation. Over 7 years until 2002, the TRC heard testimony from approximately 21 000 people many in public. The testimonies covered historical accounts of violence and injustices perpetrated or experienced by various parties from about 1948 to 1990 when racial segregation was enforced in South Africa. The report from the TRC indicates the emergence of *ubuntu*. There are multiple accounts of forgiveness, compassion, harmony and acceptance that helped meet the needs of victims and offenders. The TRC received over 7112 applications for amnesty and granted 849. Other applications were refused and many were subsequently withdrawn. Reparations were offered to some of the victims and their families. While these outputs are evident, the experiences and outcomes are various and contested.

In Zimbabwe, the reconciliation process has had different effects. Between 1982 and 1987, the 5th Brigade of the army committed atrocities in Matabeleland North and Midlands provinces (Eppel, 2004). These provinces are inhabited by people with strong links to the Ndebele clan who were targeted because they supposedly supported the main opposition party at the time, Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), and were considered dissidents. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe and the Legal Resource Foundation (1999) reported massacres of thousands of people, beatings and destruction of property in an operation was called *Gukurahundi*, which means the first flash floods that wash away the chaff. The State Security Minister likened the dissidents to bugs and cockroaches that needed to be exterminated and whose infrastructure needed to be destroyed.

The atrocities stopped after a political power sharing agreement that is commemorated every 22 December as Unity Day. The power sharing reflects a set of structures instated to make material amends. Maedza (2019) argues that Unity Day, a joint project of the parties in conflict, is in effect a theatrical performance to reshape the meaning of *Gukurahundi*. The Zimbabwean government does not refute the atrocities; they just do provide an explanatory account indicating their role in it. Years after *Gukurahundi*, in a eulogy for Joshua Nkomo, the leader of ZAPU, the then President, Robert Mugabe offered a defence and an excuse, explaining it away as a 'moment of madness', then later blamed it on renegade soldiers (Maedza, 2019). *Gukurahundi* remains unreconciled with tension remaining between many Shona and Ndebele people. Few effects of *ubuntu* are observable though there is some harmony between the Shona and Ndebele supported by the structures installed.

The examples from South Africa and Zimbabwe assume a distinct perpetrator and victim. There are situations, such as the case in Rwanda, where the victim is also perceived as a perpetrator and vice-versa which are particularly difficult to reconcile. In April 1994, Tutsis and moderate Hutus suffered over 500 000 deaths at the hands of Hutu militia (Umutesi, 2006). In response, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which was a movement of Tutsis living in exile, killed more than 300 000

Hutus between July 1994 and July 1995. In the following year, an additional 200 000 Hutus refugees were killed during attacks on refugee camps in surrounding countries. As a consequence of the experiences on both sides, there are multiple efforts to promote reconciliation such as the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda where there are significant presentations from both sides (Nsanzuwera, 2005). However, the reconciliation efforts are struggling to progress because there is no clarity on the nature of the conflict. Both sides hold a different story about the recent history of Rwanda and there is a tendency to blame others for negative outcomes (Blouin & Mukand, 2022). The differences are amplified because the ethnic identities are significantly distinct and those involved in reconciliation actually experienced the conflict.

Apology as a mechanistic resource that activates *ubuntu*

The cases above highlight how *ubuntu* emerges when there are at least two parties, one of whom has experienced injury. *Ubuntu* surfaces within this relationship when the experiences that led to the injury are explained to the other party who can respond to establish harmony. It is sustained when structures are set up to support the process. This scenario foregrounds the significance of apology, which has been identified as a key mechanistic resource for those working to resolve long-standing disputes and human rights abuses (Zoodsma & Schaafsma, 2022). Apology is often defined in terms of an individual, an apologiser, who demonstrates regret and remorse by establishing that a common moral principle has been violated, and then affirming that they will take responsibility for the situation (Slocum et al., 2011). It can also be defined in terms of a defence or excuse (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002). However, the type of apology identified in the cases above that generate *ubuntu* is more a testimony – an explanatory account that includes the role of the apologiser, and reveals the conditions under which they acted. The opportunity to provide an apology is a privilege to the apologiser. It provides an environment for multiple transformative conversations between parties that improve understanding and promote harmony. It also provides those receiving the apology the right to repair and in some cases, reparations.

In their empirical research about gender inequality in higher education institutions in South Africa, Nyoni and Agbaje (2022) argue for such a holistic, *ubuntu*-inspired approach to encompass a broad range of issues that might be affecting women, not merely what appears to be the focal issue. This approach could address power imbalances and support system failures that result in women fearing to speak out against prejudices. The Shona call this type of conversation, *hurukuro paDare,* which means 'to discuss at the customary place' (Mutanga, 2022). The *Dare* system is the traditional court gathering of the Shona that tries to safeguard individual rights, establish human dignity and achieve a common good during the process of explanations (Masitera, 2019). The goal of the court is not to punish but to restore social equilibrium.

Punishment is the preserve of ancestors and their spirits who are believed to cause disability, ill fortune and other effects (Makamure, 2017). In this regard, the *Dare* system does not create offences or criminals but focuses on directing communities to live harmoniously. The African perspective, therefore, sees apology as a means to a social end. It is a necessary approach for broad engagement on an issue to trigger *ubuntu* and possibly benefit from its related distal outcomes. Triggering *ubuntu* is a first step that facilitates engagement, which may in turn promote compassion, trust and acceptance.

Ubuntu as a theory for responsible leadership
The nature of responsibility

The meta-theory of *ubuntu* has implications on understanding the moral standards to which responsible leaders act. Western literature explains these standards in terms of attributability, answerability and accountability (Shoemaker, 2011). Actions are attributable to an individual when they are fully reflective of the powers and capacity of the individual doing them. It is possible to attribute the hiring of a manager to a chief executive because they are able to make such decisions. Individuals are answerable if their actions have a rational connection to their evaluative judgement. The chief executive should be able to provide reasons to justify the hiring. However, as individuals do not always act rationally, they cannot always be held answerable for all actions. Accountability licenses explicit forms of sanctioning, blame, judgement and justice as foundational actions of morality (Haidt, 2008). It occurs when the actions of an individual flout the basic obligations to others. Accountability helps to prevent future injustices, promotes rights and welfare and can maximise individual freedom and pleasure. Further, in the Western literature, the moral standards that underlie leadership concepts such as responsible leadership, presume that leaders are individuals who can act freely and independently in making moral judgements (Lemoine et al., 2019). Thus, individuals are responsible for choices about moral imperatives in making decisions about what they should do to meet their obligations and responsibilities. They are variously motivated according to the degree of attributability, answerability and accountability towards stakeholders other than shareholders.

The meta-theory of *ubuntu* provides an alternative, holistic perspective. It argues that the powers and agency of an individual are derived from their community. Rather than adopt an individualistic or disaggregated approach, Africans prefer to integrate, live and work within strong social relationships that are based on family and ethnicity. Society offers them privileges and benefits from birth and also provides obligations and responsibilities. These African cultural influences will affect the notion of responsibility. People cannot be individually held accountable or answerable, and outcomes cannot be solely attributed to them. The implications of this are that success and failure

cannot be the result of the actions of one person but that of the community, and taking responsibility means committing to a process to restore social harmony. This also has implications on how employees are managed.

To whom do leaders owe their responsibility?

Theories of responsible leadership highlight that there are multiple perspectives about whom leaders show their concern for (Miska et al., 2014). One view is that a leader owes their responsibility to shareholders and that any response to stakeholder pressures should ultimately be of calculable benefit to shareholders. A second view, more aligned with stakeholders, argues that the decisions of leaders should address the needs of stakeholders such as environmentalists and staff, even if there is no calculable return to shareholders. A third view, more recent, sees responsible leaders in a convergent role where they reconcile multiple, conflicting stakeholder pressures with organisational imperatives (Waldman et al., 2020). With this perspective, responsible leadership goes beyond a focus on the owners of the organisation and the stakeholder focus, to encourage leader interactions with all who have a stake in the business, economy and environment.

Ubuntu offers an advance of this view. It positions individuals within a broader social and environmental context to which responsibility is owed. It recognises that family comes before other communities, including the communities of work, and that the environment is seen through the lens of the social such that people exploit or protect the environment according to their needs. *Ubuntu* emphasises the role of leaders as citizens. In their early research on responsible leadership, Maak and Pless (2006) argued that responsible leaders perform multiple roles. Voegtlin et al. (2020) focus on three of those roles, including the role of a leader as a citizen. In the citizen role, responsible leaders are interested in meeting moral obligations to society and the environment into the future. They suggest that leaders as citizens are highly valued and respected by society, especially when also performing other roles. *Ubuntu* clarifies what citizenship looks like in African settings. It explains that their value is because of the rights and privileges that they are accorded as they take on their responsibilities and obligations. So, instead of individuals who adopt a cosmopolitan mindset, have an interest in global issues and are interested in saving the world (Maak & Pless, 2009), citizens embed themselves within communities and work from the inside out. Responsibility becomes something leaders embrace because they belong to that community.

Implications for practice

The theory of *ubuntu* along with apology as a mechanistic resource, have several implications for responsible leadership practice. Firstly, given the importance of engagement for responsible leaders, apology provides an approach for the type of engagement that leads to an understanding of African cultures. It helps the leader, in their role of apologiser, to immerse themselves within stakeholder communities – including those of employees – and host dignified conversations that transform their relationships. It requires leaders to be reflexive and appreciate the cultural, political and social origins of their perspective. These conversations and actions build *ubuntu* where the leader is afforded rights and privileges, including legitimacy, and adopts responsibilities and obligations.

Secondly, *ubuntu* has less interest in the idea that society has a stake in the individual or organisational decision-making. Woermann and Engelbrecht (2019) suggest that *ubuntu* can instead be a lens through which organisational actions are conceptualised in terms of harmonious relations based on responsibilities and obligations, given that *ubuntu* pre-exists any stakeholder relationships. *Ubuntu* maintains that all individuals and their organisations are citizens of their society that are interested in social harmony. They perform their duties and meet their obligations because they are inherently motivated to do so as a consequence of their quest for belonging. As a theory of social capital (Maak, 2007), *ubuntu* redefines the role of a leader from one who secures natural resources to one who fulfils obligations to society so that rights and privileges, such as access to natural resources, can be bestowed upon them. They focus on addressing their obligations and responsibilities to society in everyday organisational decision-making and secure sustainable organisational performance as an effect. Measures of organisational performance therefore include the value delivered to society.

For organisations that are self-interested, *ubuntu* may seem somewhat idealistic and naïve. For, if there is no respect for the system of *ubuntu*, it leaves communities open to abuse by global and political actors that are solely interested in securing rights and natural resources. A key question that arises because of such situations is how does one regulate the behaviour of individuals and organisations that lay claim to rights and privileges beyond those offered by society? One response is to constrain their citizenship. Communities can withhold rights and privileges or, if they have the power, expel selfish individuals and organisations from among them. Disrespect for *ubuntu* can breed defiance of the type enacted by liberation movements and military coups.

Another response is to require a different structure for organisations working in Africa. There is a trend towards impact investing, social enterprise and purpose-driven organisations that addresses this to some extent (Clarkin & Cangioni, 2016). Leaders of these organisations are accustomed to grappling with balancing financial returns and social value. However, these organisations are susceptible to mission drift, where, over time, they tend towards prioritising donor and other stakeholder demands rather than their purpose (Sachikonye et al., 2021). There is room for the development and promotion of an organisational form that prioritises value to African society in a financially sustainable manner.

Thirdly, *ubuntu* decentres the organisation and foregrounds employees as important human beings. Traditional organisational theory emphasises empowering a manager to exert control over various aspects of the lives of employees and to establish the organisation as important during the productive phase of their lives. In contrast, *ubuntu* posits that the organisation does not occupy a central position in the lives of employees. Right from birth, employees bear non-organisational obligations, responsibilities and relationships, stemming from their affiliations with communities, which form the basis of their wellbeing. These social consignments are not left behind at the organisational door; rather, they accompany employees into organisational contexts. As a result, the social consignments shape employee interactions within the organisational realm and influence organisational performance. Leaders who understand and embrace people as social human beings rather than human resources as promoted by *ubuntu*, should be better able to affect their wellbeing and performance.

Conclusion: The spirit of *ubuntu*

We have argued that a meta-theory of *ubuntu* is important to help explain the nature of responsibility in African settings as they are different to Western settings. Responsible leadership based on *ubuntu* proposes that leaders belong to society and are obligated to act in certain ways to ensure belonging. They, and others they work with, are first and foremost human beings with responsibilities to their families, and then to communities including their organisation to which they belong. From this perspective, we posit that *ubuntu* has some alignment with the idea of responsible leaders as citizens but advances the idea in several ways.

Firstly, we clarify the concept of responsibility within African settings. Responsibility is a foundational concept for *ubuntu* and has widespread appeal in Africa. *Ubuntu* proposes alternative moral standards for responsible leadership that do not focus on blame and individual achievement but on a commitment to social harmony. Secondly, we illustrate that responsibility is owed to the wider society in which leaders should be embedded. Therefore, responsibility to wider society should be a fundamental aspect of decision-making about operations, financial and other assets, staff and customers, rather than an afterthought or remedial measure. This understanding could help unlock resources, prevent exploitation, empower individuals and communities, and promote sustainable development.

Lastly, we propose that responsible leaders can help generate *ubuntu* through apology and must, therefore, have a clear understanding of the communities, the historical relationships and their impact. Apology is a holistic approach to exploring issues that goes beyond the salient focal areas and allows exploration of multiple relations between and within the social, physical and biological environments. It discourages a disaggregated approach. When *ubuntu* is generated, it will be less important for society to have a stake in leadership decisions because under *ubuntu*, society welcomes responsible leaders as members rather than stakeholders and affords them permissions to act for society. They become what Woermann and Engelbrecht (2019) refer to as 'relationholders' and are encouraged to self-regulate. However, their membership can be withdrawn if they do not fulfil their obligations and responsibilities. These contributions decentre the organisation and elevate community welfare. They help global leaders understand the nature of leadership responsibility from an African perspective. Leadership based on *ubuntu* is less about what is best for organisations and more about creating sustainable communities.

In discussing *ubuntu* as a meta-theory, our main contribution is methodological. We have sought to help reverse the marginalisation of African systems of thought by appealing to the ideas of Roy Bhaskar and researchers inspired by critical realism. The exploration of *ubuntu* offers a platform for legitimising the perspectives of those interested in harnessing community assets to tackle crises, particularly those Africans whose traditions and culture have been significantly eroded by the dominance of Western religions, culture and organisational practices. For policy makers, this article highlights three opportunities. It is an opportunity to explore new organisational forms that prioritise communities, advance governance and management practice from shareholder primacy towards people-centred approaches and build bridges to indigenous knowledge systems. The essence of the bridging process should not lie in assimilation or privileging one system over another but in coexistence and complementarity.

Each of the concepts of *ubuntu* and their interrelationships present avenues for further research in settings with related cultural values. There is already the suggestion that developing a measurement framework for responsible leadership using non-Western theory and contexts will identify a unique set of antecedents and outcomes that can contribute to the international business literature. China, for example, emphasises collectivism propelled by concepts such as *guanxi*, *ganqing*, *renqing* and *xinren* which are about informal social obligations and relationships that can affect task and emotional conflict (Yen et al., 2017). The outcomes related to the Chinese and African environments will differ from those of European environments. Empirical research based on these frameworks can contribute to an understanding of the context that fosters socially responsible decision-making among business leaders from different cultural backgrounds working in various organisational forms.

Colloquially, *ubuntu* is sometimes said to reside in an individual or presented as something the individual possesses such as a belief or tradition that is uniquely African. It is also often acknowledged and referenced in discourse through its observable outcomes, where it is referred to as compassion, harmony, mutual recognition, trust, acceptance and cooperation. It is seen as a moral compass. These conceptualisations fail to appreciate its transformative power. *Ubuntu* is a latent mechanism

intrinsically embedded within relationships that is activated by certain conversations. The realisation of *ubuntu* is intertwined with the dynamics inherent in social and environmental interactions. *Ubuntu* is an important basis for understanding African societies. We contend that it is best understood as a spirit, akin to a psyche, wherein our intrinsic nature and energy reside ready to be released by certain triggers. This spirit of *ubuntu* can contribute to improved wellbeing, gender equality, dignity and inclusion of those with disabilities (Mutanga, 2022; Nyoni & Agbaje, 2022). It holds potential for resolving years of injurious interactions – such as those brought about by racial inequality and ethnic tensions, restoring relationships and laying the foundation for a more sustainable future.

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