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# **UBUNTU<sup>1</sup> AND LEADERSHIP? SOME PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES<sup>2</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

*In discourses on leadership within the African context one regularly finds that scholars draw a distinction between so-called Western and African approaches to leadership. African leadership approaches are then often linked to notions of an African value system in which one of the first concepts that surface is the loaded notion of 'Ubuntu'. Scholars then point to the fact that in the understanding of 'Ubuntu' one finds a preference for a kind of spiritual collectiveness rather than for individualism with rational thinking as a central feature of Western thought. Applied to leadership, one therefore finds a consensus-seeking and problem-solving approach in Africa, rather than dissension, which is typical of Western styles of leadership. The purpose of this article is firstly to illustrate that this dualistic approach to leadership not only underwrites considerable contestation over the notion of 'Ubuntu' leadership, but that such an oversimplified understanding of African leadership can easily contribute to gender discrimination. Secondly, this problematic situation will be illustrated by referring to a recent case study on the absence of women from leadership positions within a specific denomination in Malawi. Some of the underlying factors contributing to this problematic practice will be scrutinised. Lastly, the article concludes by voicing the trust that a more nuanced approach to leadership from an 'Ubuntu' perspective can indeed make a contribution to the position of women in leadership. According to the understanding of the researcher, this can happen if the notion of 'Ubuntu' is placed within the broader discourses of critical humanism where the focus is on shared humanity.*

**Key Words:** Ubuntu; African Leadership; Critical Humanism; Transformational Leadership; Malawi

## **Introduction**

The power and fascination with *Ubuntu* have a long history within academic and social discourses, both nationally and internationally. According to Praeg (2014:248), the use of the concept of *Ubuntu* gained momentum since the Cold War, when most of the other ideologies that were used as alternatives to capitalism lost their energy. In what he calls the 'global imaginaire', *Ubuntu* came to the fore as an ideology reminding us of our common humanity. In this regard, many different people contributed to the momentum gained by *Ubuntu*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ubuntu* is used with a capital letter in the initial part of the article. Later on, a distinction is made between use of the concept with a capital letter and a small letter, upper case and lower case.

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One of the main proponents was Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who wrote in his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (2012), that “Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language ... It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours’” (Tutu, 2012:34-35). Du Toit (2004:33) sums up this element in African thought when he writes: “In Africa, a person is identified by his or her interrelationships and not primarily by individualistic properties. The community identifies the person and not the person the community. The identity of the person is his or her place in the community. In Africa it is a matter of ‘I participate, therefore I am’ ... *Ubuntu* is the principle of ‘I am only because we are, and since we are, therefore I am’”.

The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between *Ubuntu* and leadership. The primary research question can be formulated as follows: Can one speak of *Ubuntu* leadership? If so, what does it entail and what might leadership discourses in Africa and South Africa gain by using the concept in this way? To answer the research question, I want to progress in the following way: Firstly, the focus will be on the way that scholars use the concept of *Ubuntu* leadership or leadership in the spirit of *Ubuntu* by exploring the semantic field of the concept and by comparing it with Western approaches to leadership. Secondly, a critical investigation of the concept by using alternative heuristic devices will reveal that the notion is indeed ambivalent and is therefore also open for misuse and can easily contribute to the exclusion of certain groups, specifically women, in social activities. Thirdly, a case study on the absence of women from positions of leadership in a specific denomination in Malawi will be discussed as an example of such exclusion. Lastly, the concept of *Ubuntu* will be revisited to see whether there are indeed possibilities for making use of the concept in national and international discourses on leadership.

### ***Ubuntu* versus Western Approaches to Leadership**

To gain a better understanding of what is meant when speaking about African leadership, Van Zyl (2009a, 30) maintains that it is necessary to take the changing context of Africa, the African value system and specifically *Ubuntu* into account. He makes use of the insights of Shonhiwa (2006) and Khoza (2005) to draft the following summary of the African cultural value system that includes *Ubuntu*. According to these scholars, one finds in Africa a preference for collectivism above individualism, where leadership enjoys respect from people, especially when seen from a spiritual point of view. There is huge emphasis on the seeking of consensus in cases where people are trying to solve complex problems, leading to a dislike of dissension. Humility and an attitude of service as part of the spirit of *Ubuntu* are expected from followers, rather than a critical attitude challenging decisions. The result is that one finds an inherent trust and faith in the just conduct of persons that are in positions of leadership, and therefore also an absence of critique. The forefathers and the history of a group play an important role in decisions concerning the future. The structure of society is quite often hierarchical, where the acceptance of authority plays an important role.

According to Mbigi (2005) and Khoza (2005), the Western worldview looks different. Within this worldview, the individual is the hero who acts as the saviour of communities and organisations through individual independence and courage. Van Zyl (2009a:33) summarises this approach with the following slogan: “I am because I, the individual hero, dream and do”. Such an attitude leads to the situation where the leader concentrates on his or her own interests and by doing so also serves society and the community in the best way. With the above emphasis on the individual, collective aspects such as independence and a critical attitude become of central concern. Within this worldview one also finds a

hierarchy that regulates conduct with strict rules about the interaction of people on the different levels within an organisation or group, with each level of leadership having strict and specific targets that have to be obtained. One also finds a very formal way of giving account of responsibilities and tasks.

Broodryk (2006:88), for example, describe the differences in the following way: “The difference between the African and Western life approaches is based on the ‘we’ (African inclusiveness) versus the ‘I’ (Western exclusiveness) styles. In Africa, group spirit is regarded as more valuable than individual aspirations. This explains the collective spirit or brotherhood of Africans”.

Although such comparisons immediately make sense and help one to understand something about the essence of *Ubuntu* in comparison with Western worldviews, it is also a case that dualistic approaches of this nature result in considerable contestation, even more so when it comes to linking it with leadership. It is also a case that an understanding of *Ubuntu* that operates with such a simplistic approach to the concept can easily lead to different forms of exclusion and even serious gender discrimination. When one starts to look at leadership practices it becomes even more visible, as I will try to indicate when I present a specific case study from Malawi. What is needed therefore is an alternative approach to *Ubuntu* and leadership that takes into account these hurdles on the long way to *Ubuntu* leadership. For this purpose, I will make use of the argument of Leonhard Praeg (2014) in his recent volume titled *A Report on Ubuntu*.

### **An Alternative Approach**

Praeg (2014, 12) is also interested in the question about the unique essence of *Ubuntu*, but makes an important distinction between what we *mean* (in terms of sense making) when we ask the question: What is *Ubuntu*? and what we *do* (acting) when we ask the question. For Praeg the focus should be on the last-mentioned, which is in my opinion also, where he contributes considerably to developing very useful heuristic devices, as used in the case study later on. Praeg’s (2014:12) attention on doing *ubuntu* relates to his conviction that the political nature of the question should have priority over the question concerning the different ways in which *Ubuntu* should be understood. It is not that the meaning of *Ubuntu* is not important, but that the meaning should be understood with specific reference to the nature of the political context.

For our reflection on *Ubuntu* and leadership, the distinction of Praeg (2014:20, 45, 47, 52) is of vital importance. Even in the spelling of the word he distinguishes between *ubuntu* with a lower-case u and *Ubuntu* with an upper-case U. When it concerns the “doing of *ubuntu*”, thus the cultural praxis, he uses the lower case for the word and relates it to the cultural practices that shape specific kinds of people, those with *ubuntu*. When it concerns the ‘philosophical practices’, thus theories and ideologies that try to make sense of the notion in different periods and places, he uses *Ubuntu* with the upper case. Praeg (2014:12) is therefore convinced that for a meaningful conversation about *Ubuntu* the political context of *ubuntu* should be foregrounded and explored.

For the purpose of this study it is important for different reasons that the political context should be the primary concern; in the first place, because this research took place within the field of practical theology and the cultural praxis of leadership in the light of *ubuntu* is at the centre of interest; and in the second place, because the case study will reveal in what ways the specific ‘political context’ contributes to the situation where a group of people (mostly women) is excluded from leadership because of a number of

factors. This situation then influences the broader philosophical discourses on *Ubuntu* when notions such as globalisation and secularisation in post-colonial Africa are discussed.

In the light of the analysis of the case study, the following two concepts of Praeg's approach (2014) and helpful distinctions will be discussed to see in what ways they can act as heuristic devices in the discussion of the case study. The first aspect that Praeg (2014:5) highlights is that the question about *Ubuntu*, both conceptually and practically, is not as straightforward as it might appear. In this regard he writes: "Ubuntu is never simply an intellectual investigation, a way of saying things, but first and foremost a way of conducting ... politics, of doing things ... or ... ubuntu is first and foremost a political act and ... our responsibility lies precisely in recognising this priority of the political" (2014:5).

According to him the question: "What is *Ubuntu*?" is not in the first place a question as such, but a statement about power, about domination in discourses, about representation and about suppression and exclusion (Praeg, 2014:15). In this regard he makes use of the slogan "Everything is politics", where scientific activities concerning *ubuntu* practices must be aware of the political nature that gives birth to conversations, epistemologies and ontological assumptions that accept certain understandings of *Ubuntu* and reject others (2014:11). One example he uses in this regard is the way in which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission produced a kind of 'Christianised *Ubuntu*' that portrayed African people as extremely human and forgiving. According to him, this took place at the cost of a past that was characterised by the hurt and pain of many of the victims of violence and by protecting the material status quo of many of the perpetrators during the years of apartheid (2014:18, 36).

A second and equally important aspect that Praeg (2014:102) discusses relates to the popular proverb, "I am because we are", which is ascribed to John Mbiti (1970, 141) and which was seen as an African response to the Western concept of personhood. In this regard Praeg (2014:102) states that it is interesting to see in what ways Mbiti and other intellectuals from Africa try to give meaning to what it means to be an African (in the sense of *Ubuntu*) and they do that in the light of a modernity that was responsible for the colonisation of Africa. Molefe (2014:159) writes in this regard: "in the process of distancing themselves from modernity and aspiring for decolonisation, Africans find themselves parasitic or complicit in the very modernity that corrupted their history and their conception of their humanity."

Following this logic in the footsteps of Mbiti (1970), Praeg (2014:102) maintains that it is first necessary for the African person to understand the Western mindset in order to construct an own identity as the 'other' over and against the Western concept of personhood. Arguing in this way one again falls into the trap of dualism, which was discussed earlier on, where the Western person is seen as individualistic and the African as communitarian. The net result is that the Western text becomes the real and original text for what it means to be a person in Africa. It is in this regard that Praeg (2014, 102) remarks: "the distinction between the fact and the copy has been so eroded to the point where it can no longer be invoked to assert a meaningful difference". The result of this way of argumentation is that many scholars from Africa are dependent upon Western archives in libraries to make sense of African personhood and identity.

In the following discussion, these two notions of Praeg's work will be used as multi-focal lenses to take a closer look at the research done by Chifungo (2014) on leadership within a specific denomination, namely the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). I will try to show in what ways the use of (U)ubuntu can lead to gender exclusion and illustrate how that can be countered by making use of critical humanism.

### **An African Case Study**

The title of Chifungo's study was *Women in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod: A practical theological study of their leadership roles* and the purpose was to take a closer look at the despairing position in which women find themselves concerning positions of leadership in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod in Malawi. Part of her study was an empirical analysis conducted among members of the so-called *Chigwirizano cha amai* (the Women's League) as well as some elders and ministers in different congregations that belong to this denomination.

In her research, Chifungo (2014:233) wanted to answer the following questions: "In what ways do historical and cultural factors as well as the way that the leaders interpret the Bible contribute to the situation of the absence of women from positions of leadership in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod?", "In what ways could these factors be recognised through some empirical research, well aware of the complexity of the situation?" and "What possible alternative ways exist in which the history, the culture and the Bible could be read and interpreted?" These questions were the impetus for the study in trying to gain a better understanding of the underlying reasons and motives relating to the central research questions.

Chifungo's research shows that women in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod are kept from positions of leadership because of a complex set of historical, cultural and Biblical factors. Historically, the first missionaries came from the Netherlands to Malawi, introducing a very patriarchal form of leadership that excluded women from positions of leadership from the start (Chifungo, 2014:34-38). Concerning factors relating to culture she came to the conclusion that traditional cultural beliefs were carried into church life, such as that men are superior to women, more powerful and in control, while women are weaker, inferior and passive (Chifungo, 2014:64).<sup>3</sup>

By making use of social identity theory, Chifungo (2014:72-89) found that these convictions and conduct of men concerning their perceived superiority are further enhanced through aspects such as self-categorisation and stereotyping. These activities contribute to the situation that the moment that men categorise themselves as leaders within their respective communities, they immediately compare themselves with other groups, and in this case with the women belonging to the *Chigwirizano cha amai*. This again leads to the further stereotyping of women in the sense that they are indeed weak and without power and therefore not suitable for positions of leadership.

Her research showed that the factor that made the biggest contribution to the reason why the church silenced the voices of women concerns the way in which people in positions of leadership read and interpreted the Bible (Chifungo, 2014:45). Texts such as 1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-12 were interpreted and used in a very fundamentalist way to keep women from living out and developing their God-given talents of leadership. This is why she proposes a new model for the interpretation of the Bible consisting of a combination of literary, socio-historical and theological-rhetorical aspects (Chifungo, 2014:165). However, Chifungo hopes that through a re-reading of the texts in this way the Chewa culture, the missionary and colonial past as well as the attitudes of people might be changed

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<sup>3</sup> It is especially in this context that one sees *ubuntu* (with a small letter and in the political sense) at work. In this regard it is important to understand that what is understood as *Ubuntu* in the Nguni language group in South Africa is translated in Malawi in the Chichewa language as *uMunthu*, but it operates within the same semantic field. Concerning the notion of *uMunthu*, Sindima (1995) did some ground-breaking work. Sharra (2010) writes: "The African worldview is about living as one family, belonging to God".

towards a more positive view of women in positions of leadership, well aware of the fact that it might still take considerable time and patience (2014:175).

### **Bifocal Heuristic Lenses**

When one uses the bifocal heuristic lenses of Praeg as previously discussed, it becomes clear how *ubuntu* in the political sense of the word, thus as cultural praxis in the form of power, domination and exclusion, can be found in the research results of Chifungo on the leadership practices and structures of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod. Historical factors, cultural factors and the way in which the leaders interpret the Bible will now be discussed briefly.

Historically, Chifungo (2014:9-10) describes the way in which the Christian faith came to Malawi as a male-dominated movement. The first missionaries that arrived in 1889 in the area of the Nkhoma Synod came from the Dutch Reformed Church, with its strong patriarchal tradition. She describes the way in which the missionaries forced their patriarchal theology upon the new converts, with the result that the women were kept from positions of leadership from very early on. They were not allowed to serve in any of the offices and it was only in 1982 that the office of deacon and in 1990 the office of elder were opened for women. It was also interesting for her to discover in what ways the missionaries undermined the strong leadership that existed among the women and did not want to allow girls to be schooled further than Grade 5.

Culturally, Chifungo (2014:10-11) shows in what ways a change occurred within the Chewa culture in the course of time. She uses the insights of Phiri (2000:23-40) to show how the Chewa culture was a strong matrilineal society with women occupying positions of leadership in both the political and religious spheres. As time progressed, this tradition had to make way for a patriarchal system because of numerous reasons. They include *inter alia* the influence of the slave trade since the start of the nineteenth century, when men preferred to marry slave women that were more obedient than the Chewa women, as well as the influence of other African ethnic groups with different practices and attitudes towards women.

Lastly, concerning the interpretation of the Bible, Chifungo (2014:14-15) shows that the interpretation of the Bible by members and leaders of the Nkhoma Synod, especially certain New Testament texts such as 1 Cor. 14:33-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-12, was done from the start in a very fundamentalist way. She shows that this practice relates to a very important hermeneutical problem that influenced many other practices. Where the underlying hermeneutical point of departure has already been influenced by historical and cultural factors, it becomes very difficult to interpret the Bible in any other way than in a fundamentalist way.

Such an interpretation of the Bible inevitably leads to the construction of an identity that is dependent upon Western texts. The text of colonisation spurred on by the missionary activities of churches from Western origins as well as the interpretation of the Bible with the help of fundamentalist Western methods leads to what Praeg (2014:65) describes as 'benevolent coercion'.

Both Praeg's bifocal heuristic lenses show how dangerous it is when *Ubuntu* (or *uMunthu*) is linked naively to leadership and how devastating the results can be if it is also viewed in a positive light. In fact, these lenses help one to be aware of the huge potholes on the long road to *Ubuntu* leadership. It even leaves one with the question of whether it is possible to link leadership with *Ubuntu* at all, and whether it is plausible to speak about *Ubuntu* leadership.

## **Ubuntu as Critical Humanism**

In Tutu's book, *God is Not a Christian: Speaking Truth in Times of Crisis* (2009), he writes: "*Ubuntu* teaches us that our worth is intrinsic to who we are. We matter because we are made in the image of God. *Ubuntu* reminds us that we belong in one family – God's family, the human family. In our African worldview, the greatest good is communal harmony. Anything that subverts or undermines this greatest good is ipso facto wrong, evil. Anger and desire for revenge are subversive of this good thing" (2009:24).

It is clear that the critical component for Tutu stems from his theological conviction that all people are created in the image of God and that we therefore belong to one human family. He regards anything that breaks the communal harmony as wrong and evil because it goes against the grain of human dignity as part of being human.

Praeg (2014:12) sees in critical humanism specifically the way in which the focus falls on the political praxis. He writes: "[W]ithin this frame (*Ubuntu* as critical humanism), the word 'critical' refers to the primacy of the political ... the relations of power that systematically exclude certain people from being considered human in the first instance". It is obvious that the discourse on *Ubuntu*, in any case in South Africa, developed within a context where the dignity of many people of colour was denied and where, in the words of Tutu, they therefore did not belong to the human family. What is obvious here is the linking of *Ubuntu* and power and the struggle of many people of colour for the recognition of their identity and legitimacy of existence, thus of personhood. Here we discover the positive and constructive way in which *Ubuntu* plays a role in the struggle for human dignity and the role that community plays in the formation of a person with *Ubuntu* and thus a person with certain moral values and virtues (Praeg, 2014:44).

Another advantage when *Ubuntu* is seen as part of critical humanism is where it is approached as a 'glocal phenomenon' (Praeg, 2014:37). Praeg (2014:37) states it in the following way: "To call *Ubuntu* a glocal phenomenon means recognising that global discourses (Christianity, human rights and so on) give a particular expression to the meaning of local traditions such as ubuntu, but in a way that also allows the resulting *Ubuntu* to feed back into the global discourse as a locally based critique and expansion of those very discourses".

According to Molefe (2014:163), in conversation with Praeg, the understanding of *Ubuntu* as a glocal phenomenon leads to the situation where both spellings of (*u*)*Ubuntu* can be African and un-African at the same time without being a contradiction. According to him, it is only *ubuntu* that can claim to be truly African, while *Ubuntu* can be at home in African as well as global discourses by way of response, critique and engagement. In this regard, Molefe (2014:163) makes the following meaningful observation, as also became clear in the study of Chifungo: "In the traditional lifestyle of a village or pre-colonial Africa, ubuntu was not a problem for thought, it was a lived experience supported by various technologies of power and symbols of community engagement. The breaking of this tradition and its recollection in the colonial space, as resistance and as expression of the struggle for liberation, plunge us into the glocality of *Ubuntu*".

When leadership is linked to (*u*)*Ubuntu* and enriched in this way, I am convinced that it also opens the door to approach the discourses on gender and leadership in new ways and to make sure that it stays on the agenda of churches and academic discourses in Africa.

## Conclusion

When the shared humanity of critical humanism is the starting point and *Ubuntu* contributes in the form of a response, critique and engagement both with modernity and with troublesome notions of *ubuntu* as ‘benevolent coercion’, because of historical and cultural factors supported by fundamentalist approaches to the interpretation of Biblical texts (Chifungo, 2014:8), then new and creative opportunities might arise to reflect on the important role of women in positions of leadership.

From the argument so far it is obvious that it is indeed “a long road to *Ubuntu* leadership”. Whoever is concerned about simplistic notions of (*u*)*Ubuntu* and the way in which *ubuntu* is very often used in exclusive and gender-insensitive ways in the form of perpetuating traditional practices will indeed take serious the notion of *Ubuntu* as a glocal phenomenon that might not enrich only the discourse on leadership, but especially the positions of women in roles of leadership within the African context.

Put in a different way, when the discourse on leadership and *Ubuntu* is seen within the broader context of critical humanism, one arrives at the same conclusion as Praeg (2014:47) when he states that “Ubuntu is neither here nor there, neither simply from ‘over here’ nor reducible to what is ‘over there’. It is at once here and there”. Seen from this angle, the discourse on *Ubuntu* leadership starts to become a rich experience and helps not only to shift the way of thinking in leadership discourses, but also to cultivate a consciousness among the younger generation of leaders concerning the complexity of leadership in the African context and the global world of which we are all part. With this contribution I hope that a more nuanced way of thinking about (*u*)*Ubuntu* and leadership will indeed be fruitful for the conversation on the role of women in positions of leadership within the African context.

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