

The African philosophy of Ubuntu and family businesses: a perspective article

The African
philosophy of
Ubuntu

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Abstract

Purpose – This perspective article underscores the importance of conducting studies that examine the African philosophy of Ubuntu among indigenous African family businesses. The article summarises the understanding of the role of Ubuntu in indigenous African family businesses and explores potential pathways for further investigations to understand existing cultural and economic differences that could contribute to family business heterogeneity.

Design/methodology/approach – The article adopts an analytical and interpretative approach to existing literature in family businesses and Ubuntu philosophy. The approach helps to evaluate the role of Ubuntu philosophy in indigenous African family businesses. Ubuntu was chosen for examination in this article because it is a fundamental African value commonly acceptable in Africa.

Findings – The article emphasises the need to deepen the current understanding of the African philosophy of Ubuntu, highlighting the role this philosophy could play in shaping and positioning indigenous African family businesses for long-term success. This perspective article calls for integrating indigenous African philosophies into other knowledge systems to advocate for a better understanding of the institutional structures in indigenous African family businesses. Additionally, as businesses increasingly operate in a global context and more indigenous family businesses enter the formal global economic environments, non-indigenous business stakeholders and practitioners must gain an understanding of a diverse cultural perspective, such as Ubuntu.

Originality/value – This article highlights the importance of African philosophies in understanding business organisations by highlighting the need for family business scholars to investigate the role of Ubuntu in indigenous African family businesses. The perspective article proposes sample research questions and areas for exploring Ubuntu in indigenous African family businesses, which could offer new avenues to understand the cultural and economic differences embedded in indigenous African family business context.

Keywords African philosophy, Indigenous African, Family business, Ubuntu, Indigenous knowledge

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The importance of family businesses to the growth and development of economies has been widely acknowledged in the literature (Ratten, 2023; Singh, 2023; Rachmawati *et al.*, 2022). Given this importance, it is not surprising that scholars are devoting significant efforts to investigating these businesses (e.g. Rachmawati *et al.*, 2022; Kohr *et al.*, 2019; Peake and Marshall, 2017). The interest in family business research has increased significantly over the years, as witnessed by the number of journals publishing family business research and published articles (Rovelli *et al.*, 2022). This increased interest could be attributed to the inimitable interaction between the family and the business, which Xi *et al.* (2015) argue



provides an interesting context for studying organisational phenomena. While the field has witnessed significant global growth, family business research in Africa has remained relatively stagnant (Urban and Nonkwelo, 2022). This is surprising given that Africa is poised to be one of the fastest-growing economies and is set to outperform the rest of the world in economic growth during the period 2022–2023 (ADB, 2023).

Several scholars (e.g. Chebanne, 2020; Lwoga *et al.*, 2020) highlight that indigenous African communities have highly developed knowledge systems and enshrine socio-historical and cultural knowledge systems that can be developed further. These systems present an interesting characterisation of the livelihood and the existence of indigenous African communities (Lwoga *et al.*, 2020). However, African scholars realise that much of what Africans know about themselves predominantly comes from Western and European perspectives because of the influence of colonialism on their histories (Murove, 2018). Due to different ontologies and epistemologies, Western and European perspectives do not cater to indigenous African philosophies (Metz, 2020) on several cultural aspects, such as identity, values, family, community and leadership. These differences offer a fertile ground for promoting the integration of indigenous African philosophies into other knowledge systems for socio-economic growth (Obiero *et al.*, 2023) and advocating for change in the institutional structures of business organisations (Lwoga *et al.*, 2020) such as indigenous African family businesses.

This perspective article examines the nature of Ubuntu, an indigenous African philosophy, and its potential role in family businesses operating in Africa. The article focuses specifically on how Ubuntu could shape and position indigenous African family businesses for long-term success by proposing sample research questions for exploring Ubuntu in these family businesses.

2. Extant literature – Ubuntu and family businesses

While studies conducted on family businesses in the African continent have increased (e.g. Berndt and Meintjies, 2023; Agyenim-Boateng *et al.*, 2022; Urban and Nonkwelo, 2022; Agyapong and Acquah, 2021), these studies do not explore the role of indigenous African philosophies, such as Ubuntu, in the context of African family businesses. This lack of research studies on Ubuntu is somewhat surprising given that Ubuntu is an African philosophical system regarded as relevant to all sectors and African communities (Shumbambiri, 2023). However, it is interesting to note that there are attempts by some scholars to investigate cultural and value systems in indigenous African family businesses. For example, Kupangwa *et al.* (2023) examine the role of values in enhancing the longevity of indigenous Black South African family businesses. Using a social work perspective, Bohwasi (2020) explores the role of culture and family in indigenous Zimbabwean family businesses. Another study that stands out is that of Igwe *et al.* (2020), which examines the cultural attributes of the Igbos in Eastern Nigeria and the underlying factors influencing their entrepreneurial behaviour. Yet, these studies have shortcomings, such as not comprehensively analysing Ubuntu in indigenous African family businesses. For example, Venter (2008) examines Ubuntu and social capital in large non-indigenous South African family businesses. Furthermore, except for the study of Lwango (2016), which extends the embeddedness perspective of African family businesses in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), most studies (e.g. Bohwasi, 2020; Ogola, 2018) examining Ubuntu philosophy are conceptual and fail to provide an empirical analysis of the role of Ubuntu and its manifestations in contributing to heterogeneity in indigenous African family businesses.

Described as a sense of humanity or the willingness of individuals and communities to care for and support one another (van Breda, 2019), Ubuntu emphasises solidarity among African communities (Shumbambiri, 2023). Ubuntu elucidates the interactions among African people and encapsulates their relational dynamics (Setlhodi, 2019). This relational approach to humanity significantly shapes the indigenous African way of living and thinking, embodying the philosophy of Ubuntu (Engelbrecht and Kasiram, 2012). An African maxim “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (in Nguni languages) or “*motho ke motho ka batho*” (Sesotho version) is often used to describe this social interdependence, which translates as “a person is a person through other persons” (Laher, 2013; Letseka, 2012). This African maxim provides several interpretations of how Ubuntu is applied to business organisations (Ogola, 2018), such as family businesses.

Although Ubuntu may not appeal to all prescriptive ideas of African philosophy in contemporary literature and traditional practices, there has been some consensus that Ubuntu provides a plausible theoretical explanation of communion, a fundamental African value (Metz, 2020). Koenane and Olatunji (2017) posit that even though Ubuntu originated from Southern Africa, Pan-Africans and African nationalists give credence to its application as not limited to Southern Africa. Some African scholars argue that Ubuntu is an African episteme of being a human being and transcends beyond a narrow view of individualism to a holistic African outlook concerning everybody (Fagunwa, 2019). The equivalent meaning of Ubuntu is also found among different African groups. As an illustration, in the East African region, particularly where the Swahili language predominates, individuals in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania commonly refer to Ubuntu as “*Utu*” (Fagunwa, 2019). In the DRC, among the Bobangi speakers, the term “*Bomoto*” is employed (Mupedziswa *et al.*, 2019). Shifting to the West African region, the Akan people of Ghana utilize the term “*Biakoye*,” encapsulating notions of unity, respect and communality. Similarly, among the Yoruba people in Southwestern Nigeria, the “*Ebi*” concept expresses Ubuntu’s sociological essence (Fagunwa, 2019).

The African philosophy of Ubuntu is considered appropriate in this perspective article because of its potential contributions to the family business context. First, adopting the Ubuntu philosophy can help family business owners and leaders foster a positive organisational culture characterised by collaboration and a sense of shared purpose among employees, which impacts organisational performance. In their study on servant leadership and employee engagement in the workplace, Muller *et al.* (2019) found that Ubuntu significantly influences organisational performance by increasing employee engagement. Second, Ubuntu’s philosophy encourages a culture that leads to better communication, empathy and a focus on collective well-being, positively impacting how family businesses interact with external stakeholders such as customers and their communities. As supported by Tladi (2021), at the organisational level, Ubuntu denotes serving stakeholders’ interests, which involves a commitment to a stakeholder-centred approach centred around African sociocultural values. Last, Ubuntu can act as a tool for organisational transformation that could potentially influence the survival and success of indigenous African family businesses in modern organisations (Bukusi, 2023). Mangaliso *et al.* (2022) conclude that managing business transformation using the Ubuntu philosophy can result in more sustainable business outcomes.

3. Future perspectives – Ubuntu in family businesses

With the growing involvement of indigenous African family businesses in the formal economic sector and value chains to seize local and international opportunities (Yenkey and Hill, 2022; World Bank, 2021), it is becoming imperative for non-indigenous stakeholders to

understand the African philosophies embraced by these organisations. This understanding is crucial for engaging effectively with them and fostering enhanced business relationships. Indeed, people's social and cultural practices generally have wider ramifications for their orientation towards entrepreneurial activities and business relationships (Hossain *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, there is a need to explore the nature of institutional logics (e.g. culture and values) within other institutional contexts (Murithi *et al.*, 2020), such as indigenous African contexts. The development of indigenous African business practices and philosophy should be rooted in the African culture, value system and beliefs (Ogola, 2018). This development of African business practices should provide practical ways for the efficient and effective running of organisations in Africa. In the context of family businesses, scholars need to conceptualise African philosophies in ways that reveal the distinctiveness of the epistemologies and ontologies (Ogola, 2018).

The major unanswered questions about Ubuntu in indigenous African family businesses revolve around its application and impact on various aspects of family businesses. Firstly, the role of cultural context in shaping the entrepreneurial behaviour of family businesses remains ambiguous (Alrubaihi *et al.*, 2021). Since family businesses are rooted in their cultures and value systems (Rau *et al.*, 2019; Binz Astrachan *et al.*, 2017; Tàpies and Fernández-Moya, 2012), this article posits that family businesses scholars must assess Ubuntu, a cultural philosophy, among indigenous African family businesses. Future research could evaluate the role of Ubuntu in shaping the entrepreneurial behaviours of indigenous African family business members. Several family business scholars (e.g. Agyapong and Acquah, 2021; Acquah, 2011) have indicated the need for expanded research on indigenous African family businesses, aiming to comprehensively capture the richness, complexity and diversity of entrepreneurial activities in the African context. Researching indigenous African family businesses benefits researchers and practitioners in understanding the existing cultural and economic differences in these contexts (Acquah, 2013). This perspective article contends that examining the philosophy of Ubuntu among indigenous African family businesses offers insights into diverse institutional contexts that may unveil distinctions and commonalities among various ethnic groups (Arregle *et al.*, 2007). Similarly, family business scholars, such as Rau *et al.* (2019), point out that African cultural settings differ from their Western and European counterparts because of different value sets and beliefs. Therefore, family business research should be conducted in different cultural settings to understand better the diversity of cultures and family business models (Gupta and Levenburg, 2012; Gupta *et al.*, 2010).

Secondly, while there have been studies on cultural and value systems in family businesses, there are still significant gaps in our understanding of the role of Ubuntu in indigenous African family businesses operating in Africa. Given that Ubuntu is a distinctly African philosophy that is rooted in the notion of kinship ties and social interdependence, which are central to the traditional African value system (Idang, 2015; Letseka, 2012), it presents an opportunity for future research to examine the interdependence of family members within the business structure and between family businesses and their stakeholders. In the African context, the ontological perspective regarding the nature of things asserts that individuals are beings with many relations and connections rooted in African traditions and the philosophy of Ubuntu (Maree, 2016; Kayira, 2015). Relations and connections are regarded as invaluable, scarce and challenging-to-replicate resources, serving as a pivotal competitive advantage for family businesses (Habbershon and Williams, 1999). Therefore, understanding the social interdependence among family business members and between family businesses and their stakeholders could enhance our understanding of how solidarity and shared purpose are formed and shaped in indigenous African family businesses through the inducement of Ubuntu values. This research avenue will underscore the significance of incorporating relationships and connections into family business research

(Waldkirch, 2020). Such relationships and connections may constitute a crucial source of competitive advantage for indigenous African family businesses. By using Ubuntu philosophy in indigenous African family businesses, scholars will provide more significant insights into social capital in the family and family business. The critical features in Ubuntu, such as interconnectedness, community, solidarity, survival and relational relationships, play an essential role in social relationships, interactions, and connections in indigenous African family businesses.

Furthermore, the role of Ubuntu in shaping organisational performance, particularly in turbulent environments, and its impact on corporate social responsibility (CSR) within indigenous African family businesses requires further exploration (Bukusi, 2023; Kayuni and Tambulasi, 2012). Given that Ubuntu values explain the interactions among indigenous African people and how they relate to each other (Setlhodi, 2019), future research could also probe the relationship between indigenous African family businesses and the communities they serve. The literature underscores various Ubuntu values that guide relationships among indigenous African people, including compassion, communalism, cooperation, love, togetherness, respect, generosity, hospitality, friendliness, openness, availability to others and affirmation of others (Ngubane and Gumede, 2018; Laher, 2013). These Ubuntu values are crucial in fostering social cohesion within a community or nation (Hlongwane *et al.*, 2018). As a result, indigenous African family businesses can embrace a sense of social responsibility by contributing to the well-being of the larger community. Such studies will likely lead to the discovery of shared prosperity in communities and reinforcement of the social interconnectedness of family businesses with the broader community. The integration of Ubuntu in family businesses will help scholars understand the influence Ubuntu values have in shaping and reinforcing the interconnectedness of indigenous African family businesses with their local communities. As highlighted in the literature, family businesses are commonly known for their embeddedness in their local communities through socially responsible initiatives and want a favourable reputation (Rau *et al.*, 2019; Venter, 2008).

Thirdly, the association of ethical behaviour and integrity with the philosophy of Ubuntu (Metz, 2020; Setlhodi, 2019; Laher, 2013) presents another avenue for future research. In this instance, future research could explore the use of Ubuntu in modelling ethical leadership and behaviours among family business leaders and employees. This avenue is significant given that the African continent has been labelled as one of the continents where unethical behaviours, corruption, poor governance and instability (Hossain *et al.*, 2023; Ellis *et al.*, 2022; Warf, 2017) are common. In line with this, researchers could examine how indigenous African family business leaders use the notion of desirable obedience, embedded in the Ubuntu philosophy, to cultivate attributes of discipline, hard work, loyalty and reliability among family and non-family members, ultimately influencing the success of their family businesses. Linked to this is the need to understand the role of Ubuntu in promoting a collective approach to open and transparent decision-making from family and non-family members to promote teamwork, collaboration and favourable employee working climate. Azoury *et al.* (2013) suggest that a climate of trust emerges due to having an open and collection approach to decision-making in a family business. Moreover, the influence of Ubuntu on decision-making processes, particularly in the context of management succession planning and its practical implications for the governance of indigenous African family businesses, remains an area that requires deeper investigation. The application of Ubuntu in indigenous African family businesses raises questions about its integration with existing management practices, such as coaching and mentoring, and its role in the transition of family businesses.

Indeed, the above discussion on Ubuntu philosophy and indigenous African family businesses is not exhaustive, as scholars could offer more domains where this philosophy could be applied in this context. Ubuntu is viewed as a distinct philosophy that, if adopted, shapes the organisational culture and operations, ultimately producing idiosyncratic business outcomes in African family businesses. Based on the above discussion, [Figure 1](#) proposes an Ubuntu-inspired management model for indigenous African family businesses.

Several sample research questions are proposed in [Table 1](#) that could provide opportunities to explore Ubuntu philosophy in indigenous African family businesses. Researchers could validate and refine the proposed model by examining the following questions.

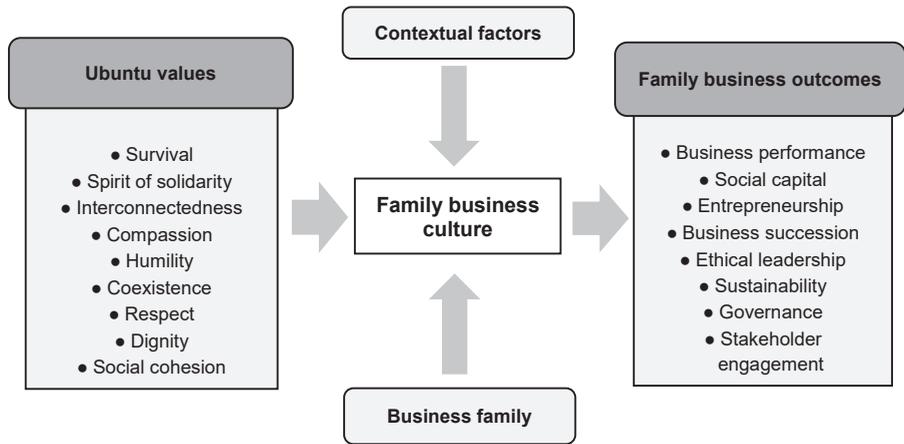


Figure 1.
A proposed Ubuntu-inspired management model for African family businesses

Source(s): Author's own work

Domain	Sample research questions relating to Ubuntu
Ethics (leadership, governance, organisational identity, social responsibility)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can the philosophy of Ubuntu be used to model ethical leadership and behaviours among family business leaders and employees? • Is there an association between the philosophy of Ubuntu and the organisational identities (reputation and values) of indigenous African family businesses? How does the philosophy of Ubuntu shape this organisational identity? • How does the philosophy of Ubuntu shape the social capital of indigenous African family businesses? • How is the collectivistic notion of Ubuntu practised in the corporate social responsibility initiatives of indigenous African family businesses? • How does the family extendedness notion of Ubuntu shape the governance structures and practices of indigenous African family businesses?

Table 1.
Sample research questions for future studies

(continued)

Domain	Sample research questions relating to Ubuntu
Stakeholder management (conflict management)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can the philosophy of Ubuntu be used as a resource to resolve conflict among indigenous African family businesses? • How do indigenous African business-owning families and their businesses nurture the notion of interconnectedness and interdependence among family business members and external stakeholders?
Strategy and sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can the indigenous epistemologies and ontologies contribute to developing sustainable African family businesses? • Does the philosophy of Ubuntu shape and influence the long-term orientation of indigenous African family businesses, and if so, how does this influence occur? • How is the notion of collectivism promoted in the decision-making processes of indigenous African family businesses? • How do indigenous African values shape the succession processes in family businesses?
Entrepreneurship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the philosophy of Ubuntu shape indigenous African business-owning families and the entrepreneurial behaviours of their members? • What influence does the philosophy of Ubuntu have on the entrepreneurial successes of indigenous African family businesses? • How can indigenous value systems shape the nature of entrepreneurship within the indigenous African family businesses?

Source(s): Author's construction; Author's own work

Table 1.

4. Conclusions

This perspective article highlights the need for more indigenous research and calls family business scholars to assess Ubuntu, a cultural philosophy, among indigenous African family businesses. When applied to the context of family businesses, Ubuntu can offer valuable insights and principles that align with the ethos of indigenous African family businesses. The philosophy of Ubuntu provides a rich foundation for conceptualising indigenous African family businesses in a way that emphasises interconnectedness, collective decision-making, ethical leadership, shared prosperity, community engagement and conflict resolution. The article asserts that integrating Ubuntu principles into the business culture can contribute to the long-term success and sustainability of family businesses. Furthermore, integrating Ubuntu contributes to the ongoing debate on family businesses' heterogeneity and provides more significant and new insights from an African context. The unanswered questions about Ubuntu in family businesses encompass its practical application, impact on organisational performance, decision-making processes and role in shaping ethical and responsible business practices. Addressing these questions will contribute to a deeper understanding of the potential benefits and challenges associated with integrating Ubuntu philosophy into indigenous African family business contexts.

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