Leadership for high performance in local councils in Cameroon and Nigeria: Examining deviant and concordant practices to the philosophy of Ubuntu

Joseph Ebot Eyong

Faculty of Business and Law;

People, Organization and Work Institute (POWI),

De Montfort University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

ABSTRACT

Emerging from indigenous communities in South Africa, Ubuntu has been heralded as a context-resonant approach to leadership practice befitting the African socio-cultural and institutional environment. Ubuntu privileges moral and humanistic consideration premised on collective endeavor and people-oriented preferences. These are much sought after aspects of leadership that should enable growth and expansion in Africa. Elusive, though, are empirical studies that explore the manifestation of Ubuntu in Africa and models that encapsulate key dimensions for managerial application. A question for the curious scholar is: if Ubuntu aligns to the African socio-economic and psycho-social work environment, why do African organizations continue to underperform? To address this dilemma, this study explores how Ubuntu leadership is practiced in a public service organization. Using interviewing and group discussion and exploring discursively from a constructionist perspective, the study analyses data from 12 council authorities in Cameroon and Nigeria. Contradiction, deviation and paradox are highlighted. The "seven-dimension" model of Ubuntu leadership embedding deviant and vital omissions for high performance is proposed.

Introduction

This article examines dominant discourses of leadership within an African public service organization. In particular, it explores how Ubuntu is practiced in local councils in two African countries. This follows a growing imperative within African public sector organizations to demonstrate effective leadership and to deliver high performance. However, this is not often achieved (Agulanna, 2006; Chukwuemeka & Aniche, 2016; Imuetinyan & Mustapha, 2017; Tantoh & Simatele, 2018). Rightly or wrongly, leadership has been associated with high performance with various concepts showcased as best practice (Antonakis, Bastardoz, Liu, & Schriesheim, 2014).

Ubuntu leadership practice has been heralded as depicting the fundamental elements of Afrocentric conceptualization of leadership. In recent years the concept of Ubuntu has emerged as the most cited Afrocentric leadership practice in Management Journals and books (Bertsch, 2012; Khoza, 2012: Sigger, Polak, & Pennink, 2010). Although there is no

clear disciplinary focus associated with the concept, there has been an escalating interest exploring the key tenets of the concept and how it differs from dominant Western concepts like transformational, charismatic and visionary leadership (Hailey, 2008; Northouse, 2018). Ubuntu privileges people-orientation, humanity, sociability, respect and interdependence (Mbigi, 2005). The theoretical roots of Ubuntu can be traced from indigenous African communities in pre-colonial South Africa. Hence, it is perceived as a replication of centuries of indigenous African philosophy, ideology and cultural value systems (Du Preez, 2012; Khoza, 2012; Msila, 2008). The term is now possibly best known internationally as the name of the Linux-based operating system used to distribute software.

Early African explorers and colonial administrators suggest that Ubuntu philosophy underpins an Afrocentric construction of leadership, (e.g. Mansfield, 1908; Park, 1799; Partridge, 1905; Ruel, 1969). Hence, it is contended that the realization of historical African kingdoms, including the mavericks of Egyptian civilization, might have been achieved through the application of Ubuntu (Nkomo, 2006). Scholars have argued in favor of the adoption of Ubuntu for application in organizational leadership in Africa (Inyang, 2009). However, empirical research examining how Ubuntu is manifested in organizations within and beyond South Africa is limited (Sigger et al., 2010). This is particularly the case for public service organizations in Africa such as local councils which are becoming central in social service provision to local populations. Given the increasing recognition that leaders influence the psychological capital of their followers (Rego, Sousa, Marques, & Cunha, 2012), improve performance (Antonakis & House, 2014) and enable commitment beyond job expectation (Piccolo et al., 2012), it is shocking that very little research exists in leadership practice in the African context (Bolden & Kirk, 2009).

In Cameroon and Nigeria, there is a growing interest in empowering local government councils for enhanced involvement in development. This follows an increasing realization that by virtue of proximity to local populations, councils could be more effective in reducing poverty as well as in augmenting social services in the areas of health care provision, clean water supply and primary education (Adeyemo, 2005; Imuetinyan & Mustapha, 2017; Tantoh & Simatele, 2018) This has led to government initiatives to devolve these services to local councils. For instance, when emphasizing this new government approach, Tantoh and Simatele (2018, p. 203) elaborates: "*there is now a shift in policy rhetoric towards adopting community-based approaches, for example, in water resource and environmental management in Cameroon*". However, it is argued that this policy shift would amount to nothing without intense research into leadership practice in local government councils in urban, semi-urban and rural communities (Chukwuemeka & Aniche, 2016).

The focus in a public service organization, local councils in particular – as opposed to private firms – is important for two reasons. First, councils are the most proximal unit of governance to local populations and thus strategically positioned to address immediate social problems. Second, councils serve as a regulatory and coordinating institution for small and medium size organizations (SMEs) in urban, semi-urban and rural areas. Thus, councils are partners to the wider development machinery of nations, not just in Africa but equally across the world (Adeyemo, 2005; Rogerson, 2018).

The importance of research into local councils has been made imperative by the recently initiated United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for which Cameroon and Nigeria are signatories. Through this initiative, the UN intends to achieve sixteen objectives, four of which lie within the services provided by local councils, notably: the

eradication of poverty, ensuring good health and improving well-being, and providing clean water and quality education (United Nations, 2016). If these goals are to be realized, effective leadership and improved council performance must be achieved. It is in consideration of the importance of these UN goals that this study finds its rationale.

The empirical focus in Cameroon and Nigeria is informed by two factors. First, the two countries are classified as poor in regulatory quality, high in corruption and low in government effectiveness (Adeyemi, 2012; Transparency International, 2017). Second, both countries are experiencing challenges relating to community and country leadership. In Cameroon, the two English-speaking regions are seeking a new country *Ambazonia*. Nigeria faces a resurging demand for the restoration of the defunct state of Biafra (Harnischfeger, 2019; Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2019). Besides these macro-level leadership challenges, numerous events relating to leadership have been witnessed at the micro-level of many states, regions and council communities in both countries (Alimba, 2014).

Giving consideration to the spirit of humanity that defines Ubuntu, it seems that the unfolding leadership in Cameroon and Nigeria espouse a reverse manifestation of this theory. Considering this perceived mismatch, the study considered that both countries and the specific regions of focus represented a prime terrain to unpack concordant and deviant practices that could enable theoretical critique and expansion of Ubuntu for improved credibility as a leadership and management concept. By exploring West and Central Africa, this study extends Ubuntu theorizing beyond South Africa where it originates. The hope is that this contribution will engender further reflection, conversation and theory development in the ongoing quest for effective leadership and performance by African public service organizations (Eyong, 2017; Gumede, 2014; Nkomo, 2017). Against this background, the study set one to address one key question. *How is Ubuntu leadership practiced in local council organizations in Cameroon and Nigeria?*

Theoretical Framework

The Afrocentric philosophy referred to as "Ubuntu" served as the controlling theoretical framework for the study. Ubuntu has been presented as an indigenous African leadership construct (Inyang, 2009; Khoza, 2012; Mangaliso, 2001; Msila, 2008; Sarpong, Bi, & Amankwah-Amoah, 2016). It is argued that this notion of leadership accords primacy to the reinforcement of social relations, encourages closer affinity and promotes collective rather than individual interest (Karsten & Illa, 2005; Mangaliso, 2001; Mbigi, 2005; Ncube, 2010).

The spirit of Ubuntu is captured within the expression "*Ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" meaning that the existence of every person is only possible through the existence of other persons. In other words, one lives with and in relation to others, rather than in isolation from others. Translated into English, the word Ubuntu would mean: "humanity or the habit of exhibiting humane behavior" (Karsten & Illa, 2005). Within the remit of Ubuntu therefore, leadership is constructed as a selfless service to one's community. Thus, interdependence defines leader-follower relationships as grounded in high consideration for humanity and dignity, and founded on mutual respect (Khoza, 2012; Nkomo, 2006; Sigger et al., 2010).

In order to determine the key theoretical dimensions of Ubuntu, qualitative content analysis was deployed within this study. The process involved running a search on the word Ubuntu and locating publications within management and organizational studies.

Table 1. Main dimensions or themes of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu philosophy	Description
Interdependence	Solidarity and team approaches; think as part of a community. Xhosa: Intaka *yakha ngoboya benye* translated as: "A bird builds with the other (bird's) feathers". Success as communal rather than individual.
People-Orientation	One cannot exist without the existence of others; mutual understanding and the active appreciation of the value of human difference. Love, for self and others. Leader engages with follower and vice versa.
Closer Affinity	Interconnectedness, selflessness through closer mutual social relationships. Xhosa: *Isandla sihlamba esinye* translated as: "Each hand washes the other". Enhanced work ethics due to solidarity and team work and reciprocity.
Humanity	Compassion, kindness, empathy, altruism and respect of the other. Transcendental outlook on life by caring about fellow workers. Leadership as service to others. Authoritative but paternalistic and humble.

By examining the frequency of words used to define Ubuntu, four main dimensions surfaced including: interdependence, people-orientation, closer affinity and humanity. These dimensions were adopted as main themes for empirical exploration. These four themes formed the basis of questions and topics explored in interviews and group discussions. The four dominant dimensions and how they are frequently described is summarized in Table 1.

It is worth recognizing that the above dimensions would be found in leadership in Western and Eastern cultures to various degrees (Bolden, 2014). However, it is considered that each dimension will be understood and enacted differently relative to the cultural and institutional context in which it is executed (Amaeshi, Adegbite, & Rajwani, 2016; Eyong, 2017; Ford, 2010). For instance, the importance of sharing, exhibiting brotherhood and humility has been suggested in servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1997). Similarly, the values of dignity and trust have also been raised in leadership practice in Western contexts (Prinsloo, 1998). Furthermore, collective practices that are similar in construct to Ubuntu such as participatory, collaborative and shared leadership have been proposed in contemporary literature. Even so, the meaning and application of these values within Ubuntu would look and feel different given its cultural origin amongst indigenous communities in Africa. Signifiers of difference could be how long it takes to engage in a conversation, or show concern in non-work-related family matters, between leaders and employees. Of course, one could argue that a smile is a smile, but one might want to ponder about how deep the African smile might be compared to the notion of a smiling face in the Western context. Differences are often in replication of specific cultural behavior in context. Even within the same country, this study establishes cultural and ideological differences between urban and rural communities in Africa, presenting a rather complex social strata even within countries (see illustration in Figure 2).

Research Context, Design and Methodology

Research Context

Cameroon and Nigeria represent Africa in miniature given the diversity of their populations, the ecological variation and richness and their unique location at the Central, West coast of the Atlantic. Their combined population of 220 million inhabitants represents about 20% of the entire population of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), currently

estimated at about 1.2 billion (WPF, 2019). Cameroon comprises approximately 250 ethnic groups, speaking 230 languages, while Nigeria has 250 ethnic groups, speaking 520 languages (WorldAtlas, 2018). Furthermore, both countries are marred by degrading health care infrastructure and the unemployment rate remains high particularly for youths, leading to declining incomes, lower education attainment and deepening poverty (CIA, 2018). It is in this context that this study undertook an exploratory study from a constructionist approach (Burr, 2006; Cunliffe, 2008) to examine how Ubuntu leadership is practiced in twelve selected councils.

Design and Methodology

Given that the study seeks to interpret the social life-worlds of leaders in local councils, an exploratory approach was thought to be appropriate. In the light of this, a qualitative research approach was adopted to gain insight into participants, experiences and perceptions of leadership (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002). Data included in the study were derived from 12 interviews and 4 group discussions. The study was interested in key "events", "activities", and "processes" characterizing leadership enactment in councils and therefrom constructing thick description in real life social research (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Van Maanen, 1988; Weick, 1979). Tracy (2010, p. 843) argues that thick description is "*the most important means of achieving credibility in qualitative research*". Geertz (1973) postulates thick description is best able to unearth in-depth illustration that explicates culturally situated meanings and abundant concrete detail (Bochner, 2000).

To achieve deeper knowledge, conversations took the form of inter-subjective interaction and co-creation (Cunliffe, 2008). Patton (2002, p. 238) argues that to make sense of tacit knowledge, researchers need to focus on narratives about key "manifestation and representation of main incidents, slices of life and time periods". Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2015) add that this technique is particularly fruitful in research with limited extant literature, as is the case for the sparse literature on leadership in public services in the African context.

A multi-case approach was preferred to widen the scope of exploration into four distinct regions, offering a wider understanding (Yin, 2014). Access was negotiated with council heads and plans agreed on content and process. Data collection lasted six months cumulatively, spanning (June 2017 – December 2018). Three purposeful sampling criteria were used to identify potential participants for the study (Patton, 2002). Firstly, only persons holding leadership positions in the councils formed part of the sample. In this respect, only Mayors, Chairmen/women, Councilors, Secretary General, and Managers of departments qualified as valid participants. Secondly, participants needed to have worked in those positions for no less than five years. Thirdly, they needed to be indigenes or persons originating from each of the four regions to check for good local knowledge of the local culture and traditions.

Interviews lasted between 60–90 min and were digitally recorded. Prior to the interviews, summary areas to be covered in interviews and group discussion were shared with participants. This initial contact and understanding helped to build trust and confidence between the researcher and participants and enabled better preparation (Bryman, 2016). Careful planning, reflective practice, and consistent questioning ensured credibility (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). Preliminary findings were shared with

Table 2. Sample questions.

1	What is your job or position/role in this council, and how long have you worked here?
2	What can you tell me about leadership in this council?
3	What makes a good or bad leader?
4	How do you relate with people under your leadership?
5	How and where did you learn to lead?
6	What motivates you and your followers?
7	Is there a vision and mission for your leaders and for the council?
8	Does your culture play any role in leadership?
9	What problems or challenges do you face and how do you solve them?
10	Tell me about your behavior and contacts with employees out of work?

interviewees for cross examination, crystallization, confirmation, and clarification, thus enhancing trustworthiness and reliability (Tracy, 2010).

Interview questions were piloted at a local council and streamlined for ease of understanding. Key areas covered in interviews and group discussions were those that relate to the four dimensions of Ubuntu. Particular attention was paid to cross-cultural leadership studies notably: the place of culture in leader-follower dynamics, motivations for leadership, and leadership preferences (Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Questions were framed to explore retrospective accounts of participants' involvement in the process of leadership in each council. A list of the guiding questions is presented in Table 2.

These *a priori* set questions mainly served as "*aide-memoire*" or guide for wider exploration, with follow-on questions further developing conversation beyond the set questions Bryman (2008:, p. 438). The 12 councils of focus are presented in Table 3.

The majority of participants were male and aged between 35 and 65 years. Participants' work experience spread from 5 to 15 years with the selected participants exercising leadership at various positions within the councils. A summary of the socio-demographic particulars of interviewees is presented in Tables 3–4.

The Interviews were complemented with four group discussion sessions. In Nigeria discussions were held at *Ikom* for Cross River state and *Takum* for Taraba state. For Cameroon these were held in *Bamenda*, North West and *Mamfe* for the South West region. Eight participants took part in all group discussion sessions, lasting 60–90 minutes and involving employees at different administrative levels. Group discussions afforded added impetus, offering opportunities for participants to reflect and react to the viewpoint of others. It also enabled cross-questioning and cross-positional conversation, generating deeper insight than would have been possible in interviews only.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was iterative and ongoing. During fieldwork, it involved immersion and co-creation (Cunliffe, 2008). Off the field analysis consisted of transcription,

Table 3. Councils, states and country.

Country	State or Region	Council name
Nigeria	Cross River state	Ikom, Etung, Obubura
Nigeria	Taraba state	Takum, Ussa, Akum
Cameroon	North West Region	Wum, Bamenda, Kumbo
Cameroon	South West Region	Kumba, Muyuka, Buea

Table 4. Summary of interviewee socio-demographic information.

No	pseudonym	Age	Job role	Nationality
1	Eta	35	Secretary General	Cameroon
2	Ndive	45	Deputy Mayor	Cameroon
3	Kumi	55	Secretary General	Cameroon
4	Ojong	62	Deputy Mayor	Cameroon
5	Takem	55	Mayor	Cameroon
6	Okon	48	Vice Chair	Nigeria
7	Obi	65	Finance Manager	Nigeria
8	Ishan	55	Council Chair	Nigeria
9	Afangha	52	HR Manager	Nigeria
10	Aguwa	44	Manager culture	Nigeria

reduction, and linking (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of data analysis required two stages. First, extant literature on Ubuntu was analyzed using template analysis to arrive at the elicited themes: "interdependence", "people-orientation" "closer affinity", and "humanity". The use of template analysis facilitated the integration of extant and empirical data by way of mapping themes developed in exploring extant literature on Ubuntu to empirical data collected in the field (King, 2018). The second stage involved the analysis of empirical data. Here, data reduction was undertaken to make a huge volume of words manageable. The data reduction process involved open coding consisting of high-lighting chunks from the transcript relating to the four dimensions of Ubuntu and the overarching research question manually. Different background and font colors enabled clearer demarcation. The next step involved the application of Template technique in action.

The application of template technique involved transferring relevant chunks of writings onto a spread sheet grid organized according to the four dimensions. Onto the different dimensions, corresponding information from participants including: *power quotes*, *key phrases* and *rich expressions* were annotated and assigned to each of the four dimensions of Ubuntu as located on the grid (King, 2012; Pratt, 2009). The objective at this stage was to link "hot spots", "glows", and "signifiers" of meaning as encountered during fieldwork and off-the-field analytical processes to the key questions and problematics underpinning the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; MacLure, 2013). Further inter-linkage of emerging categories transitioned the coding process from open to axial coding (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2018; Pratt, 2008; Silverman, 2015). The emerging codes revealed concordant and deviant expressions and meanings about how Ubuntu is practiced in context. Summary codes are illustrated in Figure 1.

The study turns next to the findings. In what follows, each of the four themes listed above is outlined with a focus in highlighting key signifiers of participants' narratives about how Ubuntu is practiced in the councils. The findings also unpack predominant problematics affecting the achievement of high performance as well as cultural clashes, convergences, and coalescences unfolding in leadership practice within the councils (Ladkin & Spiller, 2013).

Findings

This section is broadly organized to capture the first and second order themes developed from the lone research question. It explores a range of identified cultural and contextual

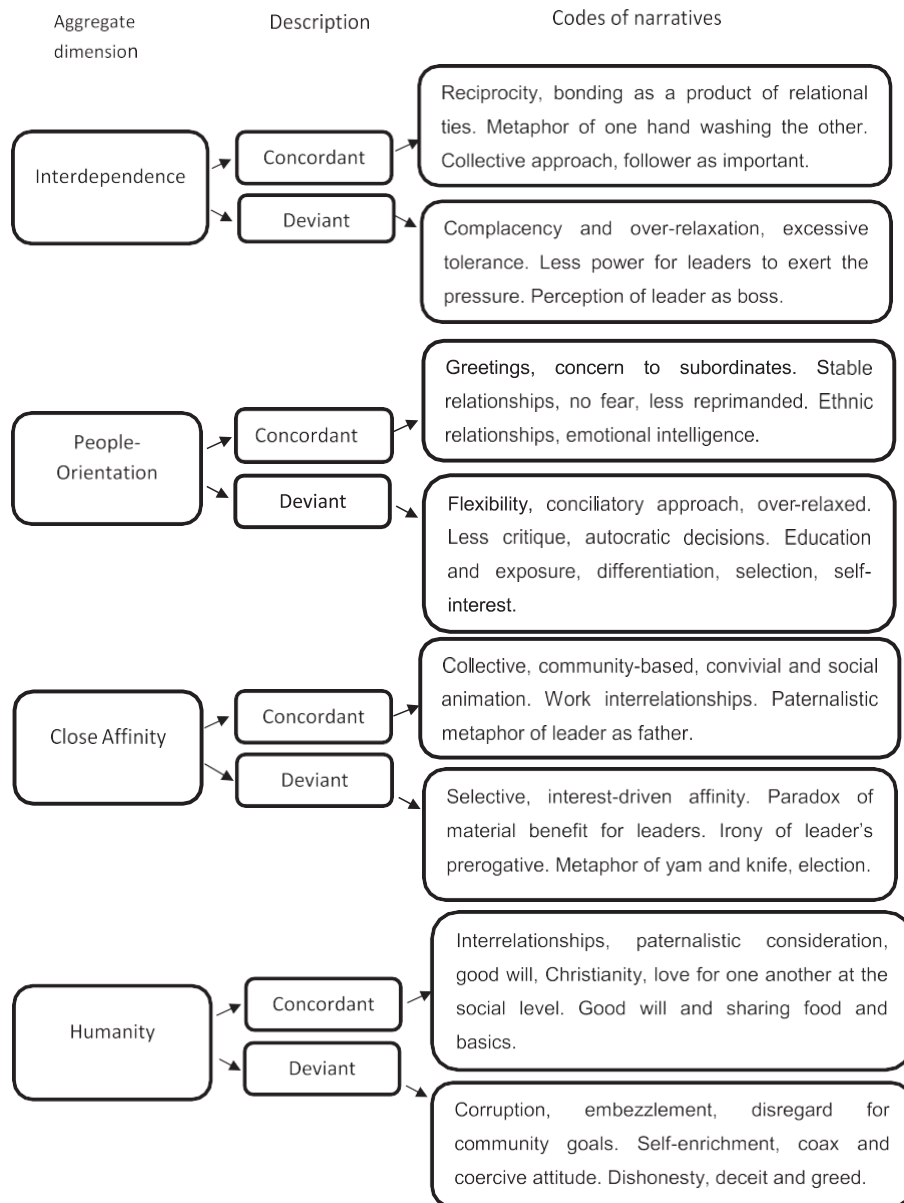| Aggregate dimension	Description	Codes of narratives
Interdependence	Concordant	Reciprocity, bonding as a product of relational ties. Metaphor of one hand washing the other. Collective approach, follower as important.
	Deviant	Complacency and over-relaxation, excessive tolerance. Less power for leaders to exert the pressure. Perception of leader as boss.
People-Orientation	Concordant	Greetings, concern to subordinates. Stable relationships, no fear, less reprimanded. Ethnic relationships, emotional intelligence.
	Deviant	Flexibility, conciliatory approach, over-relaxed. Less critique, autocratic decisions. Education and exposure, differentiation, selection, self-interest.
Close Affinity	Concordant	Collective, community-based, convivial and social animation. Work interrelationships. Paternalistic metaphor of leader as father.
	Deviant	Selective, interest-driven affinity. Paradox of material benefit for leaders. Irony of leader's prerogative. Metaphor of yam and knife, election.
Humanity	Concordant	Interrelationships, paternalistic consideration, good will, Christianity, love for one another at the social level. Good will and sharing food and basics.
	Deviant	Corruption, embezzlement, disregard for community goals. Self-enrichment, coax and coercive attitude. Dishonesty, deceit and greed.

Figure 1. Themes and codes.

realities that inform the leadership practices enacted and experienced by participants within the councils. Second order themes are presented as concordant and deviant aspects of practices in relation to the dimensions of Ubuntu. Implications of the findings are further interrogated in the discussion section. The findings are presented under each of the four dimensions representing first order themes: interdependence, people-orientation, closer affinity, and humanity.
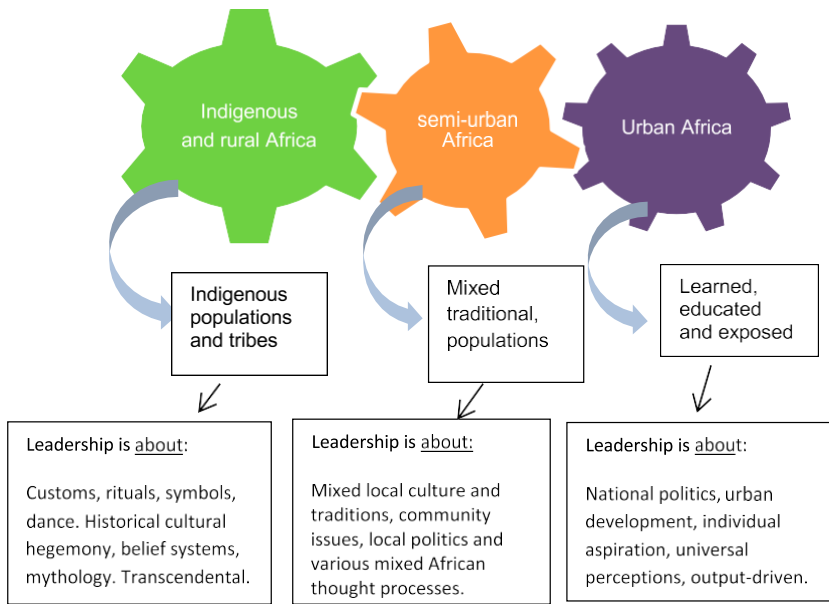
Figure 2. Three Africa model.

Interdependence

The dimension of interdependence was evident in leadership practice across all councils. Clearly leaders depended on followers for performance in the councils while followers expected leaders to appreciate their contribution in the jobs they undertook for the councils. Leader behavior, decision-making consideration, and interrelationships between leaders and followers emerged as grounded in the local cultural value systems. These cultural codes impose hegemony over leadership practice in ways that compel leaders to consider non-work-related cultural exigencies alongside the duties of employees as workers in the councils. In the absence of strong institutional frameworks, the principle of reciprocity surfaced as a key consideration in the leader-follower dynamic. In this process, the power exercised by leaders tended to be mediated by followers' own decision-making rights as well as privileges accorded followers in the interdependent relationship between leaders and followers. A recurrent expression was the need for both leaders and followers to comply with historical perceptions of leadership:

> We come together as brothers and work together. As a leader I have to show that I am working with people and then people will work with me because they rely on me and I rely on them. If I try to depend on myself and my own decisions, I cannot be their leader. In our culture we say, this hand washes this one and the other hand washes the other. (Manager, Nigeria)

It is important to note the strong role of culture in the unfolding interdependence between leaders and followers. It would seem therefore that interdependence is not necessarily created by leaders. Rather, it is more of an expectation within the culture of the people. In this respect, reference was consistently made to historical cultural value systems founded on tolerance and paternalistic considerations in the behavior and decisions of leaders and the response of followers.

> Our culture and the way we do things is what our forefathers have been doing since many centuries. This is the only way that is accepted by our people. You cannot make someone to suffer, you have a good heart as a father to a child. A leader must be someone who is loved by the people and who loves people. I can only be successful if I have people I can rely on and who also trust me to stand with them. (Deputy Chairman, Cameroon)

These contributions, explain the importance of interdependence in leadership practice in the councils. Nevertheless, a common problem observed within this inter-dependency is that it encouraged leaders and followers to be complacent and over- relaxed and tolerant of each other. Cultural imposition seemed to constrain leaders from being resolute and forcefully pressing followers for high commitment to task accomplishment. Hence, leadership emerged as a process of "social negotiation" without the necessary determined insistence on delivering output and engaging with the work of the councils in a committed manner. This observation corroborates the view that African Managers are good in establishing a socially intensive work environment and in better managing stakeholders Jackson (2004). However, as this study shows, although, there is evidence of interdependence, the social and friendly environment often hampers the application of the rudiments of formal organizational operations. All too often, leaders explained that they could not quite exert the necessary pressure to bear on followers even for the most desperate tasks. Rather than focus on planning, strategy, and target setting and implementation of projects or seek solutions to the challenges of the councils which is key for high performance achievement (Fu et al., 2017), leaders were more concerned with creating a socially vibrant work environment and leader-follower dynamic.

People-orientation

The dimension of people-orientation surfaced more in leader behavior. In the majority of councils, leaders demonstrated compassion and concern for followers. One way this came across was in the content of their greetings and the length of time leaders spent with their subordinates when they met at the start of the day and in many cases throughout the day. It seemed that both leaders and followers were more concerned with maintaining good jovial and stable relationships. However, it was clear that as a result of not wanting to cause pain to followers, leaders were reluctant to exert pressure or create an atmosphere where punitive action and reprimand where enforced as a means of accomplishing the objectives of the councils. Key signifiers of concordance to people-orientation observed include high propensity for tolerance, extensive flexibility, a conciliatory approach to conflict resolution and quite relaxed application of a work discipline ethic in time management as much as in focus. Whilst the social approach to leadership observed created good follower commitment and engagement, this was at the expense of dedication, delivery, and accountability.

In most councils, where employee discipline was relaxed, tasks remained unattained. There was also no clear sense of set targets and no clear task allocation' neither were there clear mechanisms for leader monitoring. Accordingly, leader and follower misconduct went unsanctioned and acts were most times not queried. The consequence of this was a general drag on service delivery. The relaxed atmosphere tended to be compounded by a rather complex web of co-ethnic relationships existing between leaders

and subordinates, bound by strong affinities and complex inter-relational ties. These close relationships shaped leader decision-making, leader behavior orientation and leader action:

> We are related in many ways; I am related to someone who is married to my family, I am married to another village. You cannot do anything even if he does the wrong thing. You cannot criticise your relative who is a Chairman of the council, anything he does is right, that is our culture here even in the council. (Vice Chairman, Nigeria)

The strength of co-ethnic social relationships emphasized in this interview excerpt along with the cultural codes about how leaders are expected to relate to followers who are also family members facilitates a people-oriented approach to leadership. However, approaches to people-orientation were manifest in different ways relative to personality and education. When demonstrating people-orientation, different narratives of practices and behaviors were articulated. These range from autocratic, relational, delegation, and laissez faire to culturally-driven humanistic approaches as further elucidated later. Education and level of exposure to other regions and cities, and previous leadership roles emerged as differentiating factors:

> For me, I think my education is also important. You know when you have been exposed to different people and places you become enlightened. Before I came to this council, I was in the private sector with the corporative bank. I have a degree in economics so I am not like politicians who just get elected. (Mayor, Cameroon)

Clearly, the extent of people-orientation exuded by leaders depended on their level of education. Thus, in addition to the cultural constraints elicited above, education influences the extent of people-orientation. It would seem that the more educated the leader was, the less people-oriented they were. This observation gives credence to the view that leaders draw on their own experience and intellectual capacity to meet the needs of followers by demonstrating ethical behavior and awareness (Goleman, 1998; Ladkin, 2015).

Closer Affinity

The importance of building closer affinity between leaders and followers was a dominant discourse. Most leaders spoke of leadership as a collective, community-based process. However, their expressions tended to be inward-looking and conservative in terms of where those affinities mattered to them. For work-related needs, the principle of closer affinity held firm and could be seen in the manner in which leaders and followers engaged in convivial and socially animated leader-follower work interrelationships (Nyamnjoh, 2017). Nevertheless, deviant aspects of this closer affinity dissipated when leaders took capital decisions involving material benefit. For decisions concerning contracts, finance, and other forms of action within the council that had the character of leading to some kind of benefit to leaders, closer affinity was not often considered as expressed in group conversations. The change from community-based, closer affinity to self-interest is striking and paradoxical and anti-thematic to the foundation of the culture underlying leadership meaning as articulated for the previous dimensions.

Most of the leaders confirmed that important decisions on finance, purchases, employment, and other forms of expenditure and income generation were their sole prerogative as heads of the councils. Group discussions further confirmed that financial decisions in

particular, were single-handedly decided by Mayors for the case for councils in Cameroon and Chairpersons for Nigeria. Considering the assumptions of close affinity as a principle of leadership in the inherited cultures of communities in Cameroon and Nigeria (Haruna, 2009), it is a paradox to uncover a rather *individualistic* and self-interest-driven leadership practice for decisions relating to financial benefits and gains of material value. A participant explained this deviant behavior in group discussion session saying:

> Leaders in this council assume that it is the head of the council who keeps all the finances and key resources. That is to say, you have a Chairman … who is the main leader and who decides what you can take and what you cannot take. After all, only one candidate won the election? The leader has the knife and the yam he decides when, where and how much of the yam he wants to cut. (Manager Culture, Nigeria)

It is interesting to note two influencing factors from this excerpt. First, the closer affinity enshrined in Ubuntu changes and becomes individualistic, deviating from the open consensus approach associated with indigenous African leadership practice as historically observed in communities in the two countries of focus (Mansfield, 1908; Park, 1799; Partridge, 1905; Ruel, 1969). Reflection on this dramatic change led to the realization that competitive democratic political party system of electing one individual rather than collective decision on the grounds of merit and fit for purpose could have orchestrated a gradual change process in which leadership practice within formal organization has become distinct from the cultural meaning of leadership.

The expression – the leader "*has the yam and the knife*" – made famous in Chinua Achebe's literary classic *Things Fall apart* suggests that even within indigenous leadership approaches leaders or elders do benefit from certain prerogatives. This individualist aspect of leadership in African cultural and social systems re-echoes the notion of patriarchy often associated with leadership in the African context (Muchiri, 2011). Having the yam and the knife further depicts the decision-making prerogatives retained by a *village* or *clan* leader in the culture and traditions of the indigenous *Igbo* language-speaking people of Eastern Nigeria (Achebe, 1958). Having the yam (an edible starchy tuber similar to potatoes but larger and heavily consumed in West and Central African populations) affirms some degree of individualism in conceptualizations of indigenous African leadership. What this means is that although the democratic process of selecting leaders "individually" for formal positions may be foreign to indigenous African systems (Haruna, 2009), antecedents can be found in indigenous communities in pre-colonial Africa (Nicholson, 2005). The key difference however, is that whilst patriarchal and other leadership prerogatives was aimed at empowering leaders to guarantee the humanist goal of inclusiveness, sharing, and fairness, in the councils, this objective changed to a more material-seeking aspiration for leaders.

It would seem therefore, that, the institutionalization of democratic principles within the councils has had a distorting effect on the local conceptualization of leadership which is in many ways different from the virtues of a collectivist society as encapsulated in Ubuntu leadership (Mbigi, 2005). The result has been the adoption of materialist perception of leadership where the image and possessions of the individual is paramount (Ford et al., 2017).

This shift from a more collective approach to individualized election processes was expressed as deviant to the traditional leader selection process which historically would

have been by consensus and on the basis of age and cultural astuteness and sagacity (Ruel, 1969). When speaking in group discussion sessions, it was obvious that this change has had constricting implications on the relationship between leaders and followers, with tension arising between leaders and collaborators in a number of councils. In three councils in Cameroon and two in Nigeria, Councilors and Secretary Generals expressed discomfort with the nature of their relationship with the heads of councils:

> For long, I have not sat like this to discuss with the Mayor. He has his own people that he works with. He thinks that some people are against him but all you want is that the head works with everybody in the same way with trust. For me, he thinks I am an enemy, we have so many problems but this in mainly down to communication. (Councilor, Cameroon)

What we find from this excerpt is an antithesis to the notion of closer affinity. Although this was not general, there is a sense that leaders prefer to work with certain individuals and not with others. This selective preference aligns with the notion of least preferred co-worker (LPW) highlighted in leadership literature (Rice, 1978) to indicate that the concept of LPW is not limited to Western work environments. However, the tension between leaders and followers or collaborators was more evident in councils with councilors from different political parties and where employees came from different linguistic or clan groups. Thus, clan origin, tribe specificity, and language emerged as factors that determine the extent of closer affinity within the councils. There was tendency for persons from the same language group to be more closely affiliated than when they came from different linguistic clusters or from different clans. Closer affinity also deferred between councils in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. Affinity between leaders and followers seemed closer in rural councils than in urban councils.

In councils where leaders enjoyed closer affinity with subordinates, such affinities took the form of a father–child relationship, thus, suggesting a more paternalistic approach to leadership (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). This paternalistic approach was buttressed by explanations from leaders, using the recurrent metaphor of "head of a family". Leaders perceive their role vis-à-vis leader-follower dynamic primarily as controlling, but also protecting and safeguarding followers and collaborators.

> The leader is the father of the house, even like in Cameroon now the President is the father of the Nation. When it comes to leadership of this council, it is the chairman who decides who will be employed and how much salary the person will be paid. Everything is in the hands of the chairman. As they say, he is like the father of everyone working here in the council. (Deputy Mayor, Cameroon)

In general, whilst almost all interviewees previously accepted that the virtues of closer affinity were desired and that closer affinity represented a key aspect of working relationships in the councils, they equally agreed that the execution of this was in reality imperfect. Thus, although there is evidence of closer affinity as a generally desired aspect of leadership, it is not often pursued by leaders for various reasons – ideological, political, and personal. In councils in urban areas, closer affinity was elusive – at times, non-existent, thus revealing a chasm between leadership practice in rural and urban areas, not just in the extent of closer affinity but equally for the other dimensions of Ubuntu. This raises the question of the significant social strata differentiation that defines rural councils and urban councils in Africa which, although in the same country emerged as dramatically different enough to warrant a separate understanding (Nicholson, 2005).

Humanity

Concordant aspects of humanity were mostly those aspects of co-ethnic interrelationships that exist between leaders and followers. Humanity was also exhibited through the paternalistic perception and general respect, closeness, and concern for one another at the social level. Two main factors accounted for the manifestation of humanity by leaders. First, the local culture elevates and appreciates the values of munificence and sharing between the stronger members of society and the weaker and feeble.

> You know, our people say that one tree cannot build a forest. When you have something, you have to share with others. As the leader of the council people come to me with different problems and I have to help with money, clothing, sometimes with food. This is the way our culture is and is how we work here in the council. You have to be generous or they will say you are a greedy man. (Mayor, Cameroon).

This cultural and moral value was quite frequently repeated in group discussions and interviews. Second, religion also emerged as an important influence in the consideration of humanity in the councils. Participants made reference to Bible passages that highlight the importance of sharing, loving one another and assisting one another in times of need.

> You know me as a Christian, I live by the word of God. So I treat everyone with love. The Bible says, love your neighbour as yourself. So here in the council, that is my principle, I try to be kind, welcoming and share all I have with others. At work, I also help others and develop others. (Chairman, Nigeria)

Whilst these general aspects of humane consideration associated with Ubuntu were evident, the study revealed a rather characteristically different manifestation which is perhaps the most deviant of all four dimensions under exploration. Narratives cultivated in group discussions in particular were quite animated as participants could speak freely. The result of all four group sessions on humanity revealed quite a dramatic unfolding, mimicking what Weick (2016, p. 333) refers to as "interim struggles", when participants reflected on their roles and active participation in the ubiquitous act of corruption either as leaders or collaborators.

Of the four dimensions under exploration, *humanity* seemed the most elusive. Humane consideration should normally uphold behaviors akin to compassion, kindness, empathy, altruism, and respect as proposed within the literature on Ubuntu. Common forms of inhumane, immoral, and unethical practice unearthed in the study were tribalism, favoritism, political patronage, nepotism, and corruption.

Corruption was the most highlighted form of unethical practice considered as a major impediment to the delivery of council objectives. Leaders showed little compassion or kindness to the local people in the communities with regards to delivering on expected social needs. Rather, they seemed to be motivated by personal gain at the detriment of populations. Discourses suggested that corruption is widespread in councils and in both countries. A participant highlighted the prevalence of corruption in a group discussion saying:

> It is not a secret that we are all corrupt; we live in a system where everybody wants the least opportunity to grab something. You see even the chairperson, all the heads everybody is looking for more money so there is bribery and corruption right up to the head of state. (Councillor Nigeria)

Various expressions or code words were employed to refer to the predominance of corrupt practices in leadership. The most repeated were *kunya-kunya* in the middle belt of Nigeria, and *roja-roja* and *applico* in Eastern Nigeria. In Cameroon the code words were: *choko* in the South West region and *nzama* in the North West region. A participant explained the prevailing corrupt practices in leadership in an interview, saying:

> Our world is now corrupt. When the mouth has eaten, the eyes become very shy. Leaders collect something and then injustice is effected – this is (*kunyaaaa-kunyaaa*) (laughter) … then you know that they have engaged in this corrupt behavior of embezzlement. (Department Manager, Nigeria)

Although it appeared as though corrupt practices were more associated with officials at the top level of the councils, lower level participants admitted in group discussions that this practice was happening across the council hierarchy. Lower level employees seemed to justify corruption on the grounds of low salaries, but condemned corrupt practices at the top of the councils as greedy:

> For the people who are down there who earn small salary – you can – kind of understand, the problem is with the big people – their own is simply greed because they are never satisfied, if they have a way to fill their houses with money, they will do it. (Secretary, Nigeria)

The general admittance of corruption in the councils re-echoes the problem of unethical practice in private and political leadership in Africa, a constant topical issue (see e.g. Agulanna, 2006; Dike, 2005; Hope, 2017; Liedong, 2017; Ogundiya, 2009; Rotberg, 2004). Although this topic was not part of the set questions, it emerged as unavoidable and rightly so, considering the immense impact it has on council performance and how closely it tends to be linked with leadership. This unethical practice was no doubt a continual concern due to the impunity with which it is enacted (Rotberg, 2016).

Widespread corruption is deviant to the spirit of Ubuntu. This deficit challenges the argument that the virtues of humanity, sharing, benevolence, and munifience necessarily underpins leadership practice in organizations in African as it often claimed (Hailey, 2008; Msila, 2008; Sarpong et al., 2016). The reality is that although the spirit of humanity underpins indigenous African cultures and traditions, these esteemed virtues become subdued and, in most cases, disregarded in formal organizations, with humanity giving way to aspirations of personal gain by leaders and followers alike.

What was even more striking is that participants spoke so openly about corruption as if it had become normal practice. When reflecting on the freedom with which participants engaged with the issues of corruption, one got the sense that this practice was perceived as foreign to the local culture and traditions and thus condoned, particularly when it was beneficial to one ethnic group. Thus, in councils dominated by employees from the same linguistic cluster, participants did not feel any sense of abnormally, neither did they necessarily condemn corrupt practices. Considering that this behavior would be reprimanded in a typical indigenous African traditional council where morality and leadership role is substitutional (Eyong, 2017), it was evident that the phenomenon of corruption in a public service has less cultural meaning and implication for the local people. This reflection would seem to concur with the argument of Wanasika, Howell, Littrell, and Dorfman (2011, p. 234) that one of the key negative legacies of Western colonial intervention in African leadership is the introduction of "corruption".

Our findings corroborate conclusions in extant literature on political leadership in Africa suggesting that corruption is the biggest challenge to Africa and – particularly to Cameroon and Nigeria (see e.g. Hope, 2017). It is not surprising that Nigeria ranks 148/180 and Cameroon 153/180 in corruption Index ranking (Transparency International, 2017). Based on this finding, it is clear that although there is some measure of humanity, the dimension of humanity is diminished.

Discussion: Contradiction, Ambiguity and Paradox

This study has revealed a degree of concordance with the fundamentals of Ubuntu. At the same time, it has highlighted contradiction, ambiguity, and paradox. These discontinuities give credence to the contested and complex nature of the phenomenon of leadership (Grint, 2005). This rather fragmented outcome reflects the complexity of the philosophy of Ubuntu (Nkomo, 2006). Nevertheless, the proposed framework advances common dominant dimensions in ways that allow for managerial application in global enterprise (Sigger et al., 2010). By empirically and theoretically materializing Ubuntu, scholars may be able to address Spivak's (1988) provocative questions as to whether the "*subaltern can speak*" (p.25), has become "*absent natives*" or is a "*vanishing present*" (p. 21). Perhaps a more compelling contribution is to unveil the inevitability of the notion of cultural "*hybridity*" that is common in colonized societies (Bhabha, 1994, p. 25). In doing so, the study draws attention to the effects of Western intervention and imposition (Nkomo, 2011). Our understanding of the deviant practices distilled within this work enables us to ponder over the possibility of African societies recovering a sense of "authenticity" and "self" in modern day Africa (Gumede, 2017). Whilst this study does not conspire to give easy answers to these questions, deviations from the fundamental philosophical constructs of Afro-indigenous thinking suggests that change is increasingly inevitable. Therefore, in order to gainfully respond, adjustments may be required in the conceptualization and practice of leadership in an increasingly global world into which Africa is solidly embedded.

In considering the above questions, this contribution amplifies this conversation by taking an introspective incision into the Afrocentric concept Ubuntu to argue that indeed the subaltern can speak its voice. Yes, Africa can re-edit its own book chapter in leadership and management discourses and equally recover a sense of itself for the very reason that it is a continent, separate and unique in many ways from other peoples and continents. Africa must speak differently, adopting a language of subjectivity, plurality, and complexity, yet holding onto the fundamentals of its worldview – whilst also considering the benefits of essentialism and determinism (Wright, 2002). The African context is fundamentally different in social structure and understanding of the world. This is evident in the often quite different narratives addressing a similar phenomenon such as leadership and governance, particularly between urban Africa, semi-urban Africa and rural and indigenous communities. The complex nature of SSA societies and this research field is illustrated in Figure 2.

It follows that, we cannot continue to explore the African context in the same way we do for Western countries. Whilst Western countries often speak the same language, enjoy similar standards of living, benefit from social welfare systems and are generally homogenous in many respects, the landscape of the regions studied is more complex, and differentiated by a multitude of languages, cultural ideologies, and life standards.

Expanding Ubuntu Leadership Theory

This study has shown that Ubuntu espouses positive social and humanistic ideals that could contribute to global management concerns at the human relations level. However, there is need for "theoretical upgrading" in three main areas, which are either missing, ostentatiously ignored or deviant to the spirit of the concept.

First, the ideals of humanity, honesty, and people-orientation are not often adhered to in similar ways, leading to the paradox of corruption in a culture and context assumed to be underpinned by shared interests and humanistic principles. This deviance calls for the inclusion of strong ethical principles.

Second, the more output-oriented aspects of leadership, referred to as strategic leadership, is omitted in Ubuntu leadership, even though it is widely considered as a necessity – alongside the endowed social aspects – to achieve organizational development, growth, and competitive advantage (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hitt, Ireland, Sirmon, & Trahms, 2011). Whilst retaining the humanistic aspects of Ubuntu, it is all the more imperative to advance a theory of Ubuntu that takes account of the need for leadership to deliver not just a sociable working environment but also responsive improved output. This would mean constructing leadership thinking around the virtues of leadership premised on culture and tradition but equally based on a clear vision, sense of direction, purpose, and ethical awareness. These aspects of leadership can become the mediating factors that ensure that balance is struck between sociability and humanity to give rise to organizational change, learning, innovation, and performance (Ireland, Hitt, & Vaidyanath, 2002; Vera & Crossan, 2004). These aspects of leadership practice were often missing in participants' narratives about their perceptions and experiences in leadership in most councils.

Third, the resource-based view argues that in order to gain competitive advantage, organizations need to effectively deploy three main capital resources: social capital (e.g. (Messersmith & Guthrie, 2010; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Takeuchi, Lepak, Wang, & Takeuchi, 2007), intellectual capital (Bontis, Ciambotti, Palazzi, & Sgro, 2018; McDowell, Peake, Coder, & Harris, 2018), and organizational capital (Subramaniam & Youndt, 2005; Youndt, Subramaniam, & Snell, 2004). Whilst Ubuntu does well in providing social capital, it lacks intellectual and organizational capital. This study suggests that these need to be embedded in the concept to provide gravitas for purposeful leadership destined to achieve the goals of the councils.

Drawing on complexity leadership theory, a framework of leadership in context, anchoring on omitted or less considered aspects of the notion of Ubuntu leadership practice is proposed. The integrated framework expands the concept of Ubuntu by incorporating three new components namely: ethical practice, vision and sensitivity to high performance. The re-theorized framework referred to as: the seven-dimension Ubuntu leadership model consist of: Interdependence, Closer affinity, People-orientation Humanity, Ethical Practice, Vision and purpose, and Performance as represented in Figure 3. The model is set as a starting point for the onward development and testing as well as further intellectual reflection.

The proposed framework has implication for leadership practice in the councils in three main areas: (1) Transforming leadership within the councils from the current situation where leaders have no clear mission, purpose or vision to *Action-cantered leadership* where leaders learn, develop, collaborate, and act on the basis of a clear vision and set objectives and performance targets (Braun, Avital, & Martz, 2012); (2) Movement from
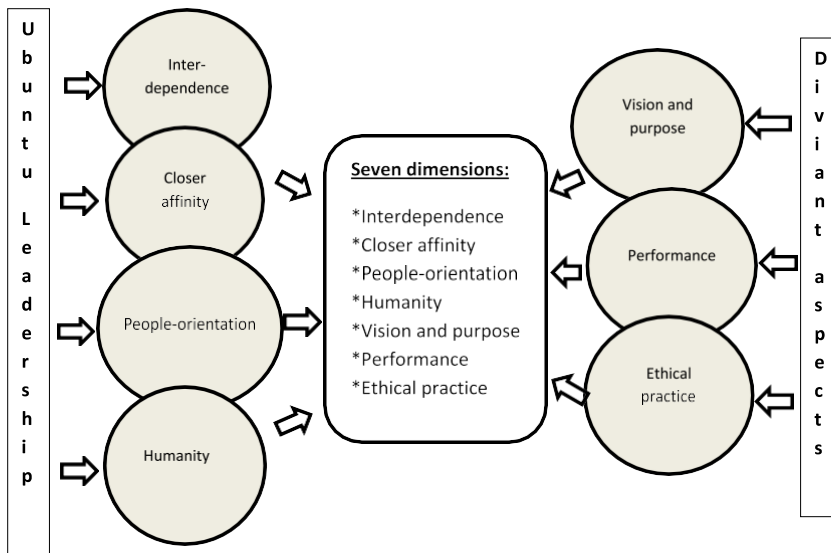
Figure 3. Seven-dimension model of Ubuntu leadership.

entrenchment to cultural and historical hegemony to *Adaptive leadership practice.* This way, leaders will become unlocked from cultural and ideological fixation and through this mind-set transformation they will become acquiescent to adapting to new ways of conceptualizing and enacting leadership (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009) and; (3) Create ethical conscientiousness, where the wider good of the local population is considered in leadership with emphasis on moral and honest practices that demonstrate ethical responsiveness (Ciulla, 2014). Embedded into leadership development programs, the model could be a useful tool that assists leaders to execute leadership practice that delivers on both the local cultural exigencies and the expected social goods that councils provide (Kuada, 2010; Rotberg & Gisselquist, 2009).

Conclusion

This study has explored how Ubuntu leadership is practiced in councils in Cameroon and Nigeria. It has illuminated on concordant but also deviant practices of Ubuntu. More recent writings have characterized leadership as a configuration of practices. The findings of this study affords credence to this notion of leadership as a complex interchanging manifestation of roles and behaviors from multiple influences (Chreim, 2015; Ford, Learmonth, & Harding, 2008; Gronn, 2015). The study has also unearthed inherent contradiction, ambiguity, and in particular, the paradox of unethical practice within a humanist cultural worldview. It would seem that legitimacy has been accorded to voices favoring a culture-inclusive emancipatory – yet Afrocentric – narrative in the conceptualization and practice of leadership in the African leadership discourse which holds what is African and also embraces modernization (Nkomo, 2011).

The seven-dimension model of Ubuntu proposed within this work considers culture as dynamic and leadership as contextual. Nevertheless, the African cultural premise remains at the core of conceptualization. The study increases awareness and sensitivity to the role

of leadership as a facilitating function within councils that should enable the achievement of the goals of the councils by factoring the elements of performance achievement (Byrne & Callaghan, 2013). In the light of these additions, the study makes a number of contributions. First, it expands the philosophy of Ubuntu beyond South Africa. Second, it triggers a process of theoretical testing which has been a key critique as to why Ubuntu might not qualify as a credible Management model (Sigger et al., 2010). Third, the deviant manifestations distilled within this work pose a challenge to the *generalization thesis* underpinning discourses around Ubuntu (Sarpong et al., 2016) and leadership in the African context (Nkomo, 2011). Finally, it offers novel insights around ways in which Ubuntu leadership theory can be re-examined and re-theorized to address theoretical deviations, limitations, and omissions for improved performance.

The findings of this study have implications for leadership practice and theoretical enhancement of Ubuntu as an Afrocentric model. The findings can lead to the institutionalization of purposefulness, vision, performance, and evaluation processes in the councils in adaptable ways. Leaders of councils may become receptive to novel leadership practices that encourage the realization of leadership for higher purpose, based on a clear vision, high motivation, and satisfaction in the delivery of community goals. This study argues affirmatively that – if the vital omissions and deviant practices are considered, then the seven-dimension model of Ubuntu can be adopted as an approach to leadership for performance (Iwowo, 2015; Kuada, 1994; Nkomo, 2017). The framework is only one step forward in the onerous process of achieving effective, appreciative, and sustainable leadership for organizations in Africa.

It is noteworthy nonetheless to highlight some limitations. For one, the study is limited to four regions in two countries in a wide continent consisting of 53 countries. To this extent, the study makes no generalization claims. Whilst there are certainly broad similarities in leadership practices in the councils explored and councils in other African countries, differences are inevitable. Finally, the term Africa has been used within this work to identify the geographical location of the two countries rather than assume homogeneity.

Future research should seek further expansion by quantitatively testing the proposed seven-dimension framework. Such efforts could outline specific positive actions and behaviors for leadership development that emphasize deviation from a mind-set of unethical practices as a means to address leadership development challenges in Africa (Kiggundu, 1991). Well-considered, training and education in this direction could materialize processes of cultural unlearning, willingness to adapt and a move towards ethical and purposeful leadership for wider benefit.

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Joseph Ebot Eyong is a lecturer and researcher in leadership, governance and research methods at De Monfort University Leicester, UK. He has published work in the areas of organization studies and HRM in journals, such as *Leadership*, European urban and regional studies and several research reports from small and medium size grants. Correspondence: joseph.eyong@dmu.ac.uk

ORCID

Joseph Ebot Eyong http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2095-3904

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