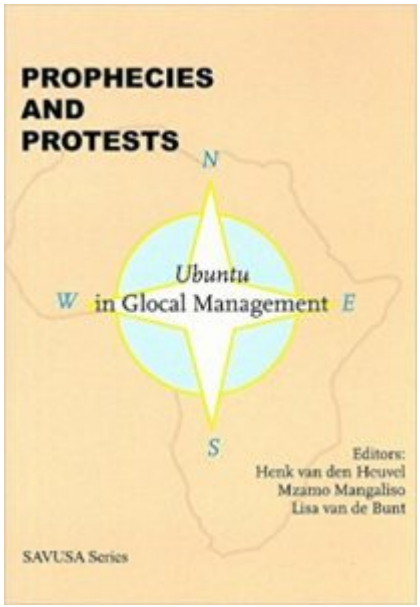
Prophecies And Protests ~ Eurocentric Versus Afrocentric Approaches: Management Thinking Beyond Dichotomies?



Introduction

In 2003 one of the authors of this article visited a historically disadvantaged university in South Africa where a colleague – a well known South African specialist on *ubuntu* – lectured in the Philosophy department at that time. The author gave a presentation on *Genomics and Africa* in one of the lecture rooms of the School of Molecular and Life Sciences of this university. On the wall outside the lecture hall there was a show case, containing a brochure of the school that stated:

Vision

The school of molecular and life sciences strives to be an internationally recognised afrocentric centre of excellence in biotechnology, arid zone studies, and related disciplines.

The author was struck by the use of the word 'afrocentric'. Surely, molecular biology as such cannot be Afrocentric. Or can it? In *Cell Biology International* 2001, an article written by Barry Fabian was published. The title of his article was *Cellular ubuntu: Umntu Ngumntu Ngabanye Abantu, and other problems for cell biologists in the new millennium*. Fabian looked at the self-organisation of developing cells. He noted that the complexity of cells is not only related to the cell itself but also to the functional whole of cells leading to an ordered operating system. Fabian concluded: 'To this end, cell and developmental biologists must continue to honour and explore the adage that "a cell only becomes a cell through other cells"'. So 'molecular *ubuntu*' in the metaphoric sense of the word is possible after all.

Afrocentricity is a concept that has gained popularity both in Africa and among African-Americans in North America. In this article we will first focus on the problems with regard to the definition of this concept. We will then argue that the popularity of the – loosely defined – concept is probably related to its metaphoric power, constructing an opposition to Eurocentric, and creating its own authenticity. We will try to demonstrate that this construction of opposition and authenticity, i.e. this construction of identity, can potentially mask other – possibly more relevant – dichotomies, notably the dichotomy between the rich and the poor.

Afrocentric: A definition problem

Trying to answer the question what afrocentric management is about, will undoubtedly induce problems of definition. Generally speaking, we find the term *afrocentric* difficult to handle because a clear and unambiguous definition of the concept seems to lack. Are we, for instance, talking about an African Afrocentrism or perhaps an African-American Afrocentrism, or are they both the same?

Afrocentricity is a concept that has a long history. It has been the subject of many discussions among African-American scholars in the United States for many years already. There is a wealth of literature related to this subject. One of its major advocates is the African-American scholar Molefi K. Asante. The Department of African American Studies of Temple University, where Asante has been working for many years, has been a leading place in spreading this concept. However, the concept of Afrocentricity has met with severe criticism from scholars, including Stephen Howe in his *Afrocentrism: Mythical pasts and imagined homes* (1999).

One of the African American scholars, Jerome H. Schiele, has tried to connect Afrocentricity explicitly with organisational theory. Back in 1990 he wrote an article entitled *Organisational theory from an Afrocentric perspective*.

Even if we agree that African and African-American Afrocentrism are identical, we are still faced with definition problems. What exactly do we mean by ‘Afro’? Does this part of the concept refer to a geographical entity, to a mental creation, or to a cultural trait of a given society? Is it at all possible to speak of ‘Africa’ as a unity?

We encounter the same problem when using the word ‘African’. Trying to define the adjective ‘African’ will take us into politically highly sensitive discussions.

Christopher Marx (2002) rightly points at the strategies of inclusion and exclusion when using concepts such as African or *ubuntu*. We argue that the concept Afrocentric necessarily indicates the exclusion of something that is not Afro. Does it perhaps mean that we want to exclude Eurocentric? Still, other questions can be raised. What exactly do we mean by Eurocentric? What do we refer to, if we use the concept 'Euro'? Does 'Euro' refer to the colonial period, or does it perhaps extend to a neo-colonial domination? It could also refer to a global spread and domination of a neo-liberal market-ideology, originating in the North Atlantic region. In this sense 'Euro' refers to both the (colonial) empire and to 'Empire' as defined by Hardt and Negri.

Centric' apparently wants us to put something in the centre. But in the centre of what exactly? 'Centric' may refer to a tendency of domination; i.e. domination of a periphery. What then would qualify to be the periphery to the 'Afrocentre'? From the perspective of reflective methodology (see Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000), we take a fundamentally critical stance with regard to the concept of Afrocentric, preventing us from essentialising and defining the 'true' and fixed essence of this concept. However, based on the literature it is still possible to detect some integrating notions that seem to claim a central position in the concept of afrocentricity. These concepts are integration, harmony, communality, consensus as opposed to difference, individualism, atomism, fragmentation, etc. This dichotomy seems to run parallel with the old opposition between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as formulated by Ferdinand Tönnies already in 1887. But using these concepts induces the danger of a strongly essentialist perspective.

Therefore, for us the more interesting and challenging question is related to strategy: why do people emphasize the use of the concept of Afrocentricity? In their contribution to the conference on *Afrocentric Management* in 2004, Karstens en Illa stated that 'the popularity of management concepts has much more to do with the quality of the source providing the concept than with its truth'. They put much emphasis on the importance of management concepts, concepts *that are full of ambiguity*. They call them *mental creations*.[i] For us this is a very important and interesting observation.

Following this line of reasoning, one may argue that afrocentric management is a mental creation. That means that the relevant research question is not so much related to content, to the 'what-is-afrocentric-management-all-about' question. The examples that we gave from the field of molecular biology lead us to suggest

that the instrumental use of labels such as ‘Afrocentric’ or, as it is fashionable in Southern Africa nowadays, *ubuntu*, is mainly due to metaphoric reasons. Let us take the following definition of metaphor: a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The famous French philosopher Paul Ricoeur wrote extensively about the function of metaphor. He commented that ‘[..] a discourse which makes use of metaphor has the extraordinary power of redescribing reality’ (Ricoeur 1973: 110). ‘[….] we must then assume that this reality as it is redescribed is itself novel reality’. According to Ricoeur the effect of using metaphors is ‘compared to stereoscopic vision. Several layers of meaning are noticed and recognised in the thickness of the text’. Following Ricoeur we need to look for another, almost hidden, meaning behind the use of the word afrocentric. The use of the concept of Afrocentrism may be another way of redescribing reality; of constructing a novel reality.

In this chapter we deal with the concept of Afrocentric management. It was Gareth Morgan, amongst others, who elaborated on the powerful use of metaphors in the way we conceptualise management and organisations. Morgan said: ‘Metaphor encourages us to think and act in new ways’ (Morgan 1997: 351). One of the metaphors he outlined is that of organisations as cultures; organisations ‘as in essence socially constructed realities’ (ibid.: 142). In the next paragraph we want to ask ourselves what this ‘novel reality’ (Ricoeur), or these ‘socially constructed realities’ (Morgan) might look like.

Power of opposition

Using the oppositional dichotomy of Afrocentric versus Eurocentric makes the ‘case’ of an afrocentric management look like a powerful one. It seems to give the concept of afrocentric management a prominent position.

This dichotomy consists of two sides of the same coin that reinforce each other. One side is that of *denial*, i.e. denial of the part that we want to exclude (see Marx 2002). The negative meaning of Afrocentrism is not-being-Eurocentric. The other, positive, part of the coin is (*re-)appropriation*. Using Afrocentrism means that Africans apparently want to (re)-appropriate their authentic identity.

In this sense the use of the concept of afrocentric management pertains to a long history of wanting to escape from a Eurocentric hegemony, combined with a long history of searching for an authentic African identity. Not without reason, the

subtitle of Howe's critical analysis of Afrocentricity reads as follows: *Mythical pasts and imagined homes*. Seen from this perspective there is continuity between concepts such as Pan-Africanism, *Négritude*, African Personality, *Ujamaa*, *Ubuntu*, Afrocentrism, African Renaissance, etc. Du Bois, Senghor, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Tutu and Mbeki meet in this 'Quest for the authentic African'.

In afrocentric management one can discern a strong tendency to search for authenticity. And this search for authenticity is at the same time a denial of a hegemonic colonial and neo-colonial past. There is a rejection of a Eurocentric hegemony and a re-appropriation of alleged authentic, African 'Mythical pasts and imagined homes'. According to Schiele (1990), mainstream organisational theories reflect the conceptual framework of Western social science, being derivates of Western ideology and thought, thereby negating the worldview of African people.

Afrocentricity serves as a tool for redescribing reality, for constructing a novel reality. Referring once more to Ricoeur, one may argue that 'afrocentric' could then well serve as a metaphor for liberation, liberation from a hegemonic Eurocentric science and technology; liberation from a hegemonic rationalist and instrumental organisational theory; liberation from a neo-liberal market ideology with the commercial interests of Global Big Business. In short, liberation from 'Empire', 'this new global form of sovereignty', 'Empire' with its 'lack of boundaries' (Hardt and Negri 2000: xii-xiv). Applying this line of arguing to the field of molecular biology, Afrocentric molecular biology would then mean a biotechnology that addresses the real needs of the people in Africa, irrespective of the commercial value of the scientific endeavour. In the sense of constructing an authentic African past, afrocentric molecular biology has one interesting and particularly strong case: advanced DNA-research techniques conclude irrefutably that human beings originate from 'Out of Africa'; a molecular African authenticity *par excellence*.

In the first part of this chapter we discussed the problematic nature of the definition of 'Afrocentric'. This problematic nature will become more and more salient in a globalising world; certainly in a field that is in the heart of 'Empire' (some may say the heart of 'Darkness'). One of the classics of postcolonial literature is entitled *The empire writes back*, by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin. Borrowing their title one could argue that afrocentric management is about *The empire that manages back*. Afrocentric management is a powerful tool, claiming

its own, authentic, place in the series of management-ideologies. At the same time, in the next part we will demonstrate that the use of this management-concept may have consequences that run counter to what it wants to accomplish.

The myth of opposition

We argue that putting an emphasis on the *ubuntu* concept potentially mystifies actual developments in southern Africa today. To what extent are present developments based in the opposition between African and western ways of thinking and doing? Taking a Marxist point of view, former Apartheid can be seen to be the highest form of capitalism. And although after 1994 major changes have occurred, the poor masses have hardly been favoured. In many comments we read that some progress has been made in the last ten years, but at the same time high levels of poverty and inequality appear to have persisted (see e.g. various contributions in the *State of the Nation, South Africa 2004-2005*, edited by Daniel, Southall and Lutchman, 2004). Bond states (2004: 2/3): 'South Africa has fitnessed the replacement of racial apartheid for what can be accurately described as class apartheid'. However, another thing that has become apparent after 1994 is 'the aspiration of the emerging black bourgeoisies' (Lazarus 2004: 9).

Ubuntu serves as a concept in management ideologies in the transnational stages of post-apartheid. The situation of post-apartheid is aptly characterized by Van Binsbergen (2002: 1) when he writes about:

Africa's most viable economy; a highly complex, largely urban and industrial society; an overdeveloped state apparatus originally geared to oppression of the majority of its population; caste-like intra societal divisions in terms of wealth, education, information, and concrete social power; the newly-gained constitutional equality of all South African citizens; the rising expectations among Black people who have historically been denied the White minority's privileges of class and colour; the majority's simmering resentment, both about past wrongs and about the slowness of present compensations and rewards; a drive among individual Blacks to gain financial and occupational security as quickly as possible; and the highest rates of violent crime in the world today.

It is in this present world of persisting structural inequalities that we should analyse the values of the *ubuntu* concept. Neglecting this world of different and fragmented meanings and interests in a highly urban and globalised economy by

pinpointing at the alleged historical-authentic background of all black Africans will probably rather favour the emerging rich and powerful ones instead of the have-nots.

Focusing too strongly on the *ubuntu* concept and the philosophy of the African Renaissance can result in a process of depoliticisation and thereby mystification of the everyday struggle of people living in a state of poverty. We argue that it is not so much the opposition between African and Western management concepts that is at stake but the opposition between the instrumental, individualistic, profit-seeking, managerial class and a more humanized social democratic form of living and working together. 'The attention is to reclaim conflicts suppressed in everyday life realities, meaning systems, and self-conceptions and the enhancement of local forms of resistance' (Deetz 1996; see also Grey 2005).

Some people speak about a 'caste of managers' that is mainly interested in measuring and controlling, thereby neglecting questions that deal with quality. This global discourse of a managerialism combined with a profit-seeking mentality will influence large sectors of society; a tendency that runs counter to the integrating concepts of *ubuntu* and its propagators.

Since this is a global phenomenon, the Western world and most of (South) Africa are part of the same neo-liberal market relations of 'Empire'. We argue that *ubuntu* concepts stressing African authenticity and Africa's imagined pasts – paradoxically – strengthen these existing relations, probably (and hopefully) against their intentions.

Conservative dimension of 'ubuntu'

In the work of authors including Mbigi, Mangaliso and Franks, the concept of *ubuntu* seems to be strongly related to a classical anthropological concept of culture. It is a concept that stresses shared values, harmony and consensus. It stresses the interest of the community, of the group, of the tribe (Louw 2001). Anthropologists have known for a long time that this use of the culture concept is one-sided, since it overlooks the many contradictions, ambiguities and power relations which are always part of cultures.

For Mbigi and Mangaliso, *ubuntu* as African philosophy *par excellence* serves as a basis for management. However, does the way they conceptualise the philosophy not fit seamlessly into the tradition of bestseller writers like Ouchi (1981), Peters

and Waterman (1982) and Deal and Kennedy (1982) when they articulate a form of corporate *Gemeinschaft* (community) that tells a lot about the myths of North American capitalism, not about what really happens in organisations, i.e., that is prescriptive instead of descriptive? (Parker 2000). These authors point at the importance of shared values, consensus, harmony and even mention the idea of corporate tribes.

Undoubtedly, an African context differs from a Western (or should we say Eurocentric?) one. But since we are all part of a global 'Empire', the differences match striking similarities. Both worlds strongly appeal to the managers' homogenizing credo, 'all noses in the same direction'. In some way, it is ironic to see that Mbigi, Mangaliso and others appeal for the same values as do their Western counterparts whom they criticize so badly.

In his polemical and critical article on *ubuntu*, Christopher Marx (2002: 59) writes:
Ubuntu is the self-description of a society that is in the wake of a transformation from an intimate pre-modern into an anonymised and urbanized industrial society, marked by a division of labour. Ubuntu is an invented tradition, whose task it is to minimize historical chasms and fractures. Ubuntu aims to contrast society and community, Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft.

According to Marx *ubuntu* suggests a cultural essentialism: the essence is the African village and chiefdom, a pre-modern, idyllic world with a community spirit of belonging and social security. In essence, that is what Africa is, contrary to 'the West', a world of egotism and emotional coldness, by definition. In general *ubuntu* refers to 'tradition', that world of belonging, security, solidarity, togetherness, etc. But does that tell the whole story about African villages and chiefdoms in former times? Idealizing community and communalism as the main signifiers of African identity (Marx 2002: 52) masks the real struggles of people in former days, like undemocratic power relations, poverty, and the like. Nation building positioned in such an image of the past is deeply conservative and naïve: it glorifies an imagined past.

Ubuntu adepts such as culturalists might fail to notice the implications of their political statements in the economic domain. Political statements deal with identities, the economic domain deals with interests. In their view politics 'centers around identities, which are to be expressed and represented, not around

interests, which compete for power and resources' (MacDonald 2004: 637). The take-over of power by the ANC administration did not harm the business elite too much so far, as has been indicated in many publications in recent years (Marais 2001; Lodge 2002; Daniel *et al*. 2004).

Racial solidarities do influence elections, in spite of formally 'non-racial' political institutions, and the ANC does trade on racial identity, representation, and politics. But what white liberals, whether culturalists or individualists, do not see is that the material interests of whites – at least of prosperous ones – benefit from emphasis on representing African identities, that Africanizing state leadership serves as the condition – the camouflage – for instating the material interests of prosperous South Africans (who are disproportionately white). Emphasizing racial identities allows the party of Africans to represent poor Africans symbolically, while putting them off economically (MacDonald 2004: 639).

Ubuntu philosophy informs us about many aspects of past and probably even of contemporary village life in Southern Africa. But the danger of stressing these traditional values of *Gemeinschaft* is that this mystifies and obscures ('camouflage') other conflicts in the present globalised South African *Gesellschaft*. The image of Africa is the paradox of deeply felt friendliness and hospitality of people versus the struggle for life and profound inequalities of resources, of power, in the past and today.

Ubuntu and the western management concept

Since the early 1980s many western organisations, more in particular the executives of these organisations, have been identifying new perspectives on management. Although not for the first time in organisational theories, culture and cultural differences became a key factor, not in the last place because of Japanese successes and management experiences. That the interpretation of these experiences is rather one-sided and distorted does not alter the fact that the Japanese success stories were very popular. Western managers find support in concepts such as consensus and harmony that (supposedly) exist in the Japanese business world (Ten Bos 2000). Looking back, it becomes clear that one may question the so-called lifetime employment and the element of collectiveness (Bax 1991). However, the culture concept offered relief to many in the sense of 'shared values' answering the pressing question: how do we achieve a situation in which everyone is pulling in the same direction?

This perspective has continued to dominate discussions until today, at first mainly in the business world, but later, in the 1990s, in the not-for-profit sector as well. Everyone started to look for shared values with which to re-determine and share deadlocked identities. Because of fundamental societal transformations, managers and executives are continuously struggling with change, complexity, differentiation, and fragmented meanings. Various management courses come up with the instruments and models with which to achieve this, both to identify conflict via a quick scan, and to change this into a more desirable situation. There is a continuous search for shared core values and a common identity as *the* expression. *Ubuntu* refers to (traditional) values. In that sense it is seen to be a concept of culture. It serves as a concept in management ideologies in the same manner as the integration perspective on (organisational) culture did in the West.

Just like the integration view on culture, the concept of *ubuntu* with regard to culture essentialises and thereby mystifies existing (cultural) differences. Any generalization on Western and on African management concepts necessarily misses out on the contradictions and conflicts in everyday life. Confronting these concepts with each other is only possible in a rather theoretical or abstract manner, not based on solid empirical research. Differences within the concepts probably outweigh differences between the concepts. And with respect to similarities, it may well be the other way around. Life in rural areas in the Netherlands is very different from urbanized life. The same holds for South Africa, as Franks shows in his comparison between Johannesburg and the countryside. Moreover,

… we must realize that in many other contexts, outside Southern Africa, the appeal to human-ness or humanity occurs in ways very similar to those proclaimed by ubuntu. The very term 'human rights' suggests so much: it defines not primarily – for such would be superfluous – the ontological entities to whom these rights apply (humans), but especially the extent of their application: universal, applying to all humans (Van Binsbergen 2002: 9).

We argue that, in principle, the discussion should not concentrate on further delineating differences between Western and African management concepts, but on management (concepts) and their pre-suppositions in general. Managerial *ubuntu* adepts fit in the tradition of publications that focus on the practitioners' perspective on (organisational) culture. This perspective has yielded a major quantity of so called 'how to' books from the early 1980s onwards (with first

bestsellers of Peters and Waterman and Deal and Kennedy). Parker (2000: 25) places these books in context, and concludes that
… the most relevant element of that context is that which frames the culturalist movement as an attempt to intervene in the identity of the employee just as all organisational control strategies from (at least) Taylor onwards have done.

He rightly warns that this should not be taken too seriously, as the claims made are, to a great extent, normative. These claims are far less about what actually happens in organisations: 'Most of this work is hence an amalgam of mythologizing and mystification couched in marketable quasi-anthropological language' (ibid.). It raises the question of whether the current (renewed) interest in diversity (like the supposed differences between Western and African management), identifications, commitment, loyalty and binding also contains a large degree of normativity, and wishes to provide managers with instruments with which to increase efficiency and productivity, and manageability. Cavanaugh (1997) talks about diversity's rhetorical contribution to the reproduction of organisation. He suggests that diversity may have more to do with 'affirming the given than changing it'.

Are management scholars perhaps more concerned with ideal and thereby intangible situations, or do they seek to express what everyday situations and experiences are? In the latter case it would be advisable not only to study organisational processes and management from an integration point of view, but also from a differentiation perspective and a fragmentation or even conflict perspective (Martin 1992; 2002).

Opposition is between rich and poor
If we claim that the opposition between Western and African management is nonexisting in the sense that it relates to novel realities, or at least is not relevant, we may focus on what concerned scholars (and management consultants) could better attend to. It is the dominance of the instrumental rationality model in the service of the powerful that is at the heart of organisational studies taught in most management and business schools in the USA and in Europe, and indeed even in many other parts of the world nowadays (Grey 2005). Studying organisations is inseparable from political choices. Focusing on cultural differences (*ubuntu*, traditional or otherwise) without explicit political choices is a way to conceal who controls the access to resources.

The increasing gap between rich and poor does not have its primary basis in cultural differences, between a 'Western' way of thinking and doing, and its African counterpart, but in the harshly unequal in access to, and control of resources. No one will deny the fact that structural power relations between the West and Africa are out of balance. But it is probably more important to recognise that in our globalised world the same inequality can be found within nation states, within institutions and within organisations.

Economists and the international institutions that employ them routinely ignore differences of power; by prioritizing poverty over inequality, relations of power, and responsibilities these entail, are eliminated from the picture (Nederveen Pieterse 2002: 1027).

Global capitalism and the market ideology of 'Empire' have replaced national market capitalism and their local impact is felt at every level transgressing the borders of nations and continents. Discussions about *ubuntu* can only be valued when placed within this view on structural power relations that relates to center and periphery. This implies that we need to look for comparable positions between people in the West and in Africa. Solidarity on the national level is important, but is necessarily seen in the context of relations between global inequality and domestic inequality, since the effects of globalising economies and their ideological legitimacies by (international) management and business schools and their gurus cannot be underestimated. At the heart of *ubuntu* lies solidarity. But what does solidarity mean when on the one hand people are expelled from their homes because they suffer from AIDS or live in deep poverty in slums, and on the other hand their 'brothers' drive around in their Mercedes or BMW and lock themselves every night in their palaces with huge walls and gates around it? Is this way of living simply copied from the West? Is it just an integral part of African culture as it is in the West as well? Therefore, if *ubuntu* adepts want to promote solidarity with poor masses and favour the democratic participation of all, they should point their arrows at the present South African political situation.

South Africa's version of capitalist democracy, as advanced by the ANC under President Thabo Mbeki, uses racial nationalism to undergird democratic government; uses democratic government to ratify capitalism; and completes the circle by using capitalism to materialize the significance of racial nationalism, the predicate for the ANC's strategy of legitimating democratic capitalism and capitalist inequality (MacDonald 2004: 632).

One may argue that the colour of the elites in South Africa is changing; it is 'blackening' bit by bit. And maybe on the other side, the colour of the poor masses is 'whitening' a little bit. But at the same time MacDonald points at the logic of the political economy:
The new African bourgeoisie, because it shares racial identities with the bulk of the poor and class interests with white economic elites, is in position to mediate the gap between rich and poor and black and white by creating cross-cutting cleavages. Cutting in the African bourgeoisie without providing for the African poor changes the racial character of economic inequality, but it does not narrow it much; it enlists new elites in collusive businesses, but it does not expose them to much new composition; and it rewards racialists political strategies of legitimization and stabilization, but it does not allow the African poor effective institutional recourse. It changes the beneficiaries of and justifications for the political economy, but not its logic (ibid.: 651).

The logic of structural inequality seems to be colour-blind. By focusing on so-called African traditional values like collectiveness, consensus and solidarity as a solid basis for African management, and in opposition to Western management, *ubuntu* culturalists miss the point that causes the ever-growing gap between poor and rich South Africans and withhold the poor masses from developing a higher standard of living. If they do not connect their cultural-philosophical discourse with the existing political-economical inequality, the trap of inequality will be sustained. In this respect, we agree with Christopher Marx when he writes:
All cultural and historical differences within Western societies are ignored, and, instead, 'the West' becomes an adversarial image, the 'other' against which a description of 'Africans' can be contrasted. A conservative critique of culture framed in these terms, and presented under the banner of ubuntu, is unable to use social historical analysis to learn more about the opposition between individualism and community in South Africa (2002: 62).

If African management, and *ubuntu* in particular, is going to make a difference to Western management, it needs to incorporate a broader analysis of structural political and cultural inequalities. This would imply solidarity with the poor and powerless masses in the first place. Such a human factor would add something that (western) management in general lack is in dire need of.

From dichotomy to dialogue?
Tom Lodge writes:

There is nothing wrong with codes of behaviour such as ubuntu. The concept expresses a compassionate social etiquette which, if everybody adhered to it, would make life most agreeable. It might prove quite difficult, though, to reconstruct a political order on the basis of collective solidarity rather than civil liberties. Besides, not all traditional belief systems are egalitarian or benign. What constitutes tradition is always a contestedissue, but tradition is often invoked to justify oppression and cruelty. Whether the tradition that is invoked existed or not is a rather academic question (Lodge 2002: 235).

Moreover, (South) Africa is changing and rapidly becoming part of a globalised world. *Ubuntu* codes, whatever their intrinsic values, can only be taken serious if they become a weapon in this changing arena with all its complexities. But is this what the *ubuntu* adepts strive for by means of reinforcing the concept? In such a world

… ubuntu may serve as a liberating transformative concept in the hands of those who wish to build the country, but it can also be wielded as a mystifying concept in the hands of those who, after the post-apartheid reshuffle, were able to personally cross over to the privileged side of the huge class divide, without being over-sensitive to the wider social costs of their individual economic and status advancement. This process is widely noticeable in South Africa today. It is what people euphemistically call the Africanisation of that country's economic and public sphere. Those using the concept of ubuntu selectively for their own private gain, seem to be saying to their fellow participants: 'How could you possibly question the way in which this specific situation is being handled by us, whereas it is clear that we appeal to our most cherished common African ancestral heritage, to our ubuntu! … (Van Binsbergen 2002: 16).

It is exactly this warning that is at stake here. Instead of longing for traditional values it would be advisable to analyse what is happening nowadays in South Africa (and elsewhere in Africa). As regular visitors, researchers and readers we see a deeply divided society in many ways on all levels, only partly informed by *ubuntu* values. Using concepts like meaning, power and context will show that society needs to be defined as a (multicultural) arena of multiple identities and interests, and so is every organisation within society. It will explain that consensus is lacking with regard to many issues and strategies because management and work floor for instance may have different interests. It will teach us that sometimes unexpected coalitions are formed between historically

strongly divided people. That poor people, like many of their 'brothers' are longing for the same fruits of present developments, if necessary at the cost of their neighbours or even relatives. It will, at the end of the day, show us that the similarities between western societies and African societies are probably stronger than the differences. The same goes for a comparison of 'African' management with 'Western' management, whether inspired by *ubuntu* or not.

Therefore we invite *ubuntu* culturalists to join hands with critical academics, both in the West and in Africa, who have been studying and discussing management and organisational processes for many years now. From an academic perspective it would be more accurate and more correct to concentrate on the analysis of current organisational processes and management concepts, without continually wishing to indicate how they could be different or better. This would prevent us from falling back into the pitfall of functionalism and normativity. It is our academic task to help those who want to increase their capacity to reflexivity, by teaching them, and by learning together to ask the relevant questions in organisational practices, whether they are consultants or managers themselves. Daily practice requires rapid decisions and changes. There is hardly time for reflection, or at least this time is rarely taken.

In the analysis of organisational and management processes, there should be a focus on the process of sense- and meaning-making, as this is the basis for collective actions. The analysis will thus have to concentrate on retrieving the origin of these meanings.

Meanings are formed by a mix of earlier experiences (like traditional values) and present (globalisation-informed) opportunities, and therefore continually (re)produced in interactions between people. At the same time, this sense- or meaning-making is a process of negotiation. Thus, what is necessary is an analysis of these interactions, realizing that it is an arena in which people take part who come from different positions and who have different (and possibly conflicting) interests.

We argue that we find ourselves present in an arena in which cooperation goes hand in hand with conflict, unmasking existing differences and inequalities, unveiling the illusion that organisational practice could be a haven of consensus and harmony in a heartless world of poverty and inequality, as *ubuntu* seems to suggest. We, as academics, argue that we need to be critical, by the nature of our

profession. ‘The dialogic outcome requires a constant dedifferentiation and redifferentiation for the sake of demythologizing and enriching natural language and consequently opening to reconsideration the most basic and certain experiences of everyday life’ (Deetz 2000: 136). The basic perspective is that of difference. It is not about resolving differences, but about the extent to which the struggle can be fought openly, and the extent to which the other is taken seriously, especially when the voice of the other is not heard otherwise. Therefore it is less important whether these differences have a Western or an African background.

We argue that *ubuntu* as a management tool cannot work in a ‘traditional’ environment of a ‘traditional’ community. We live in a world that is globalising, differentiated, fragmented, diverse, full of contradictions and paradoxes, etc. *Gemeinschaft*, referring to the authentic communal living, and *Gesellschaft*, referring to the modernist, rationalist society cannot be seen as separate things. We do not live in a world that is characterized by separate, essentialised, cultures that meet, including a Japanese, a North American, an African, but in a world characterized by different ‘cultural orientations’ (Van Binsbergen) that interact, that contradict, that reinforce, that should listen to each other. And in such a dialogue, *ubuntu* and Afrocentric management need to find their rightful place. Then both can be seen as integral parts of a process that Robertson has called ‘Glocalisation’. Only then can *ubuntu* perform its transformative role.

NOTES

i. See also Karsten and Illa 2001.

References

Alvesson, M. and Sköldberg, K. (2000) *Reflexive methodology, new vistas for qualitative research*, London: Sage.

Bax, E.H. (1991) *Organisatiecultuur, technologie en management in een veranderende*
samenleving, Utrecht: Het Spectrum.

Bond, P. (2004) South Africa tackles global Apartheid: Is the reform strategy working?, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103(4): 817-39.

Cavanaugh, J.M. (1997) (In)corporating the other? Managing the politics of workplace difference, in P. Prasad, A.J. Mills, M. Elmes and A. Prasad (Eds), *Managing the organisational melting pot*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc., pp. 31-53.

Daniel, J., Southall, R. and Lutchman, J. (2004) *State of the nation, South Africa 2004-2005*, Cape Town: HSRC Press.
Deetz, Stanley (2000) Describing differences in approaches to organisation science, in: P.J. Frost, A.Y. Lewin, R.L. Daft (Eds) *Talking about organisation science, debates and dialogue from crossroads*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.
Deal, T. and Kennedy, A. (1982) *Corporate cultures*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
Fabian, B. (2001) Cellular ubuntu: Umntu Ngumntu Ngabanye Abantu, and other problems for cell biologists in the new millenium, *Cell Biology International*.
Grey, C. (2005) *A very short, fairly interesting and reasonably cheap book about studying*
organisations, London: Sage.
Hardt, M., and Negri, A. (2000) *Empire*, Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
Karsten, L. and Illa, H. (2001) Ubuntu as a management concept, *Quest*, XV(1-2): 91-112.
Lazarus, N. (2004) The South African ideology: The myth of exceptionalism, the idea of
renaissance, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103(4): 607-28.
Lodge, T. (2002) *Politics in South Africa: From Mandela to Mbeki*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
Louw, D. (2001) Gemeenschapszin centraal in ubuntu-filosofie, *U-blad*, Universiteit Utrecht, p.6, 29 June.
Louw, D. (2002) *Ubuntu and the challenges of multiculturalism in post-apartheid South Africa*, Utrecht: EZA.
MacDonald, M. (2004) The political economy of identity politics, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103(4): 629-56.
Marais, H. (2001) *South Africa, limits to change, the political economy of transition*, Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.
Martin, J. (1992) *Cultures in organisations: Three perspectives*, New York: Oxford University Press.
Martin, J. (2002) *Organisational culture, mapping the terrain*, London: Sage.
Marx, Chr. (2002) Ubu and ubuntu: On the dialectics of apartheid and nation building, *Politikon*, 29(1): 49-69.
Morgan, G. (1997) *Images of organisation*, London: Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage
Pubications.

Nederveen Pieterse, J. (2002) Global inequality: Bringing politics back in, *Third World Quarterly*, 23(6): 1023-46.
Ouchi, W.G. (1981) *Theory Z*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
Parker, M. (2000) *Organisational culture and identity*, London: Sage.
Peters, T. and Waterman, M. (1982) *In search of excellence*, New York: Harper and Row.
Ramose, M.B. (1999) *African philosophy through ubuntu*, Harare: Mond Press.
Ricoeur, Paul (1973) Creativity in language: Word, polysemy, metaphor, *Philosophy Today*, 17(2): 97-111.
Schiele, J.H. (1990) Organisational theory from an Afrocentric perspective, *Journal of Black Studies*, 21(2): 145-61.
Ten Bos, R. (2000) *Fashion and utopia in management thinking*, Amsterdam: Benjamins
Publishing.
Van Binsbergen, W. (2002) *Ubuntu and the globalisation of Southern African thought and so*ciety, available at: http://www.shikanda.net/general/ubuntu.htm, pp.1-23.