

African Leadership

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African Leadership: Powerful Paradigms for the 21st Century

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This book is dedicated to Angela Volmink, who, through the dark years of Apartheid and in the bright democracy that followed, served as an exemplary leader! You showed strength balanced with kindness, courage balanced with humility, and shone light into darkness, thereby influencing the lives of so many to forge a different pathway, a better pathway. Your legacy of leadership lives on in your wonderful husband and your amazing family. They continue to lead as you did, thereby creating a better world for all.

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Foreword

John Volmink

This book appears at a time when the world is searching for courageous leaders – leaders who can make people more confident to face the future into which they are being hurtled. The leader of the future will need the skills to mobilize people to face tough problems and live into its opportunities, while at the same time retaining their humanity. It is the case that the world has been facing many challenges. Even before the arrival of Covid-19 we realized that we are in trouble because, for the most part, as people occupying this earth, we have been an uncaring people driven largely by self-interest and self-preservation. The realization of the dream of living together, in solidarity, as one global community has always eluded us.

At national and global levels our preference appears to be that of continuing to work separately, thus making cooperation and mutual support very difficult. It also places severe limitations on our ability to deal with chronic crises such as climate change, pandemics, financial crises and other crises that threaten world peace and heighten tensions in a fundamental way.

Of course, Covid-19 brought everything to a standstill and threw everything we knew as “normal” into disarray. It also laid bare the many contradictions in our society and the deep inequalities and divisions which prevent people from being participants in the choices that affect their lives. We now have an opportunity to re-imagine what leadership at all levels could be in this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world.

In his book *Let Africa Lead* (Khoza, 2005), the author, Reuel Khoza writes: The greatest leader of our era, Nelson Mandela, has set an example of African Leadership based on Ubuntu.

Two issues emerge from this statement. Firstly, it is important to understand this concept of Ubuntu – Africa’s gift to the world. It is rooted in a world view that says “I am because you are and we are.” In other words, it says “a person is a person by virtue of other persons.” By embracing the concept, we are recognizing that our humanity is inextricably bound up with each other. As long as we are alienated from each, we can never be complete as human beings.

Ubuntu reminds us that we are not only connected with each other, but we are dependent on each other. Ubuntu creates the possibility for us to see “otherness” not as something to avoid, but to celebrate as an opportunity for mutual growth.

A world that understands and respects Ubuntu is one in which “differences are celebrated as good news, as opportunities for learning.” It encourages a global

perspective, celebrating what is distinctly human in all cultures. It reminds us that it is through diversity that we express our ultimate unity.

The concept of Ubuntu challenges many aspects of Western leadership thought because it calls for a shift from individuality separate from the community toward individuality embedded in the community.

The second issue is highlighted by Khoza's statement is the quality of the leadership of Nelson Mandela – as an African leader, but also as a world leader. He writes: I simply cannot overstate how important Mandela's personal example is for all of us in the world today. He has written no book on the theory of leadership, no manual on how to lead. His life is that book and his actions are that manual (Khoza, 2005, p. 9).

Living in South Africa, I had the privilege of observing Madiba as a leader for little more 20 years after he was released from prison. Although he was in office as President for about five years, his impact as a leader spans his entire life. There are so many things that I have learned from Mandela as a leader and I mention only a few.

What I have learnt from Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela taught me that leaders must create hope. He gave the whole world hope in the dream that seems so unattainable: that we can overcome our prejudices and hate and embrace the power found in one community, one country, and, indeed, one global, human family.

So Mandela brought two issues to my attention within the context of Ubuntu: one was the concept of common humanity and the other is that of a common future. Nelson Mandela made me realize that a sense of community is absolutely essential, particularly in a society such as ours in South Africa.

Nelson Mandela taught me that good leaders do not divide. They bring people together. Nelson Mandela swept away the conventional signposts which were leading us only to greater injustice and pain, and gave us new hope of a future country that belongs to all its people. We have a long way to go to reach that future.

In 1990 when Nelson Mandela walked out of prison on his own terms, I completed my own understanding of who this incredible man really was. He stepped out of prison into a deeply divided society filled with conflict, hate, and injustice, and he immediately began to lay the foundation of a bridge of healing from a broken past to a new dynamic future. Nelson Mandela lead us away from hate and fear.

Nelson Mandela was a bridge-builder and he taught me that good leaders are bridge builders. We live in a world where we have allowed many issues to divide us: ideology, culture, religion, gender, race, and class, and even our response to the Covid-19 pandemic. So, today, the clarion call is for people who create relationships. Bridge builders are people who create relationships. They bring people who are disconnected from each other into community and forge ties that cut across borders, cultures, religions, etc.

Bridge builders help build trust between conflicting people and groups. Because bridge building is about creating community, it is fundamentally an Ubuntu activity. Understanding the logic of the narrative of the "other" involves

empathetic listening to the “other,” to imagine how their “enemies” must feel and to understand why they believe what they believe.

Bridge building is highly dependent on leadership. You cannot presume to influence others unless you have changed yourself.

Nelson Mandela taught me that leaders are people of action. Ubuntu acknowledges individuality not in the service of self but in the service of others and the community. Ubuntu helps us to understand that a basic moral reason for action is that action should always be for the greater good. In other words, action is seen as desirable if it helps to develop community, reduces discord, and produces harmony.

Nelson Mandela convinced me that we cannot overcome hate through hate but by empathy. He said: “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew that if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.” – Nelson Mandela.

Against expectation and despite all the hardship, pain and adversity he and his family experienced during his years in prison, he continued to believe that: “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.” – Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*

This book written in the Ubuntu paradigm would hopefully lead to a more humane society informed by an ethic of care. It will hopefully encourage a spirit of generosity: that unselfish concern for others in every sphere of human activity. It is that spirit that helps us to forgive, to understand and to support. It speaks to the personal pleasure derived from understanding and helping others.

The leadership for the twenty-first century is that of servant leadership. This kind of leadership requires new skills and values. This requires personal change to the process of unlearning certain ways of leading and to relearn new ways of being and leading. This book on African leadership will hopefully take us on a new, long walk to a new world.

I firmly believe that we do not have to live in a world full of hate, conflict and violence. We can change our world one person at a time. We can change the world only if we understand that Ubuntu is about being connected with each other and realizing that we are dependent on each other. And when we act on the world, we do so with kindness and compassion.

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Preface

Rob Elkington

Sawubona: Why this Book on African Leadership

Sawubona is a mighty Zulu greeting that highlights the importance of leadership acknowledging, validating, and understanding colleagues and followers in their commitment to shared goals (Caldwell & Atwijuka, 2018). In picking up this book on African leadership, you begin the transformative journey of thinking about leadership and followership differently. Why a book on African Leadership? Perhaps a more poignant question is why so few books are articulating the paradigmatic elements of African leadership. In a discussion recently with several colleagues from Africa, there appeared frustration that so much of the current articulation concerning leadership theory and praxis centers on Western notions of leadership. It is not that they see Western leadership paradigms as vacuous. Instead, they believe an intersection might enrich these notions of leadership with non-Western traditions such as those in African leadership. This book, *African Leadership: Powerful Paradigms for the 21st Century*, attempts to begin the journey of a wider interlocution of non-Western theories of leadership.

The Richness of African Leadership (And Followership) Paradigms

In recent years a wealth of discourse concerning the richness of African leadership and followership has emerged in academic circles within Africa and, to a lesser extent, beyond Africa. For instance, we have Ofumbi's research into followership among the Acholi people of Uganda (Ofumbi, 2017). Along similar lines is Hallowell's focus on courageous followership and leadership in West African political fiction (Hallowell, 2014). Perhaps ahead of his time is the Ghanaian scholar Michael Tagoe wrestling with the manifestation and vagaries of followership in his country (Tagoe, 2011). Authors such as Haruna and others seek a broader sweep of leadership and followership within sub-Saharan Africa (Colbry et al., 2015; Haruna, 2009). Another incisive work that draws back the curtain on the richness of African leadership and followership is Hotep's treatise which exemplifies the richness of an intersection between African and Western notions of leadership-followership (Hotep sees them as co-equal concepts in the leadership process) (Hotep, 2010). As an African born in Zimbabwe, and growing up

in Apartheid South Africa, my leadership–followership lens has been forged by the contextual realities of those countries as they emerged from colonialism and Apartheid.

For instance, there is the majestic treatise on the power of Ubuntu in the life and leadership of Nelson Mandela (Oppenheim, 2012). In her work, Oppenheim highlights that Ubuntu is multifaceted. However, at its core, Ubuntu animates the principle of mutual beneficence and communalism. Oppenheim highlights that Ubuntu was the philosophical driveshaft that shaped the leadership of Nelson Mandela. The philosophy of Ubuntu, embodied in the life and leadership of Mandela, set him apart. Ubuntu’s philosophy could enrich Western notions of leadership, especially the many aspects of Ubuntu as articulated in S. M. Kapwepwe’s *Shalapo Canicandala* (Mukuka, 2013). *Shalapo Canicandala* expresses the following Ubuntu-related values. Reflect on how these values could enrich Western notions of leadership and how they expressed themselves in the life and leadership of Nelson Mandela:

1. *Food generosity*: Never refuse to share food with both people you know and strangers.
2. *Always speak the truth*: The requirement to speak the truth had two dimensions, orality and safety and one goal (credibility of one’s spoken word).
3. *Never steal*: In communal philosophy, to steal from a person is to harm oneself.
4. *Never kill a human being*: In a communal mindset killing anyone meant weakening the family, community, and the kingdom.
5. *Be humble*: You are one of many, all have value and all contribute.
6. *Never covet another person’s spouse*: Marriage was not only a tie of two families but also the natural unit for “producing” abantu. Tampering with family had community-wide repercussions.

Mukuka (2013) highlights the practical value of leadership and followership marked by Ubuntu when he crystallizes these Ubuntu-related values by stating:

Truthfulness meant trust in one’s word of mouth, which translated into collective security should one spot the approaching enemy. The need to keep away from another person’s spouse meant the protection of the people-producing social unit. Forbidding theft encouraged hard work, which translated into having no one in need and ensured morality. Preservation of life meant more resources for the community and ensured the preservation of the community. Looking after vulnerable, though not young, members of the community meant unity and a cultivation of values of interdependence. Safeguarding the well-being of all God’s creatures meant people’s interdependence with nature was preserved.

As we conclude this brief introduction to this beautiful book on African leadership, there is one additional component to African leadership that we would be

remiss in not drawing to your attention. This critical concept is that of *Ukama* as a pivotal leadership ecosophy in a climate-threatened world (Le Grange, 2012). As LeGrange (2012) suggests:

In Shona there is a broader concept ukama, which means relatedness-relatedness to the entire cosmos. Murove (2009, p. 316) argues that *Ubuntu* (humanness) is the concrete form of *ukama* (relatedness) in the sense that “human interrelationship within society is a microcosm of the relationality within the universe.

Concerning leadership and followership in the twenty-first century, Ukama provides a rich grounding for human and ecological togetherness, an articulation that humanness is an expression of interconnectedness between people and the biophysical world. Cultivating Ubuntu through the mechanism of Ukama means the healing of self, society, and nature. That is leadership and followership at its best!

Concluding Thoughts and the Structure of this Book

This book drew upon the expertise of African editors who are specialists in their field. Having six editors also epitomized for us the principle of Ubuntu. We sought to illustrate and exemplify African leadership across various African sectors such as political, healthcare, business, grassroots, and diaspora. Each chapter begins with a poem highlighting another African tenet, art's beauty, and how art and leadership intersect within the African context. Each chapter ends with a series of thoughtful questions that seek to assist you in contemplating how African leadership and followership might enrich your praxis.

The design of this book is academically informed but practitioner-focused. We want the book to be helpful. At the same time, we understand that actual utility is grounded in solid research and evidence. We trust that your journey into African leadership through this book will be encouraging, uplifting, inspiring, and meaningful.

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Chapter 1

African Leadership: Where Powerful Paradigms are Unearthed Through Radical Scholarship and Scholar–Practitioner Dialogue

Faith Wambura Ngunjiri

Abstract

Whereas leadership has existed on the continent of Africa as long as African peoples therein, the study of the same is limited in scope, depth and availability. Even as African scholars decry this dearth of available literature, they are at the same time actively involved in remedying the situation. In this chapter, the author attempts to answer a couple of questions: what is African about African Leadership? How can we engage in radical scholarship of African leadership? The author concludes with an invitation to readers of the edited volume to answer those two questions for themselves, as well as allow the chapters to help them rethink their own position and practices, arguing that leadership scholarship is always about both theory building and enhanced practice.

Keywords: radical scholarship; african leadership; leadership theory; leadership practice

What comes to mind when we think about Africa in relation to leadership? Clearly, leadership has existed in the continent as long as there have been human beings living and working together. However, as a continent where traditions were passed down orally from one generation to the next, much has been lost about leadership in precolonial African societies. The advent of foreign religions and foreign rule in the form of Christianity and colonialism may have introduced

western-style education, but that also came with imperialist attitudes that treated indigenous systems as uncivilized and therefore, not as worthy of committing to the written word. However, as African scholars and practitioners continue to decry the lack of leadership scholarship, research and publications from the continent, they are also actively engaged in remedying the situation. [Abebe et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that the literature is still quite limited, and there is need for more studies, on themes such as indigenous leadership, leadership practice and, entrepreneurial leadership, if we are to gain a fuller understanding of leadership in Africa. Some of those themes are covered in this volume.

When I began my doctoral studies in 2003, I remember struggling to find literature on African leadership, and found myself often taking from other disciplinary areas and applying those themes, such as the status of women from political science, to interrogate the status of women and their experiences as leaders ([Ngunjiri, 2010](#)). Fortunately for scholars and practitioners alike, there have been a substantial number of published studies in the intervening two decades, some of which Abebe and colleagues review in their article. There are many dissertations as well as other studies that are published in non-management journals that were the focus of Abebe and colleagues' review. However, they are right in arguing that we are far from having a robust understanding of leadership in the African context.

What is African About African Leadership?

This is an important question that remains unsettled. As Stella Nkomo wrote, when she arrived after 20 years of teaching in the United States, she was anxious as to whether that was enough to prepare her to teach upon moving to South Africa. To her surprise, “that anxiety dissipated when I arrived only to find that there was little adjustment required as all the texts assigned” were from the United States and she was very familiar with them. However, this dissipating anxiety was replaced by the realization that those western texts were “grossly inadequate, embarrassingly so, for the kinds of questions students were raising” ([Nkomo, 2011](#), pp. 365–366). Unfortunately, the predominance of Western leadership ideals and texts remains true today, and the struggle continues to define and describe a leadership praxis that is contextually relevant for African realities.

In my view, there is such a domain as African leadership, even as we also interrogate and pursue an understanding of leadership in Africa. My commitment to this domain is why I agreed to co-edit the Palgrave Studies in African Leadership, initially started with Baba Jallow, and now with Nckeu Nyathi. That series has its main objective to curate and disseminate African leadership scholarship and practice from as many perspectives as possible, in order to enrich the teaching, training and development of African leaders. But, as Stella also argues, it is mighty challenging to define a leadership that is uniquely African in the context of Western hegemony over the canon.

In a bid to provide students in African institutions with a text that speaks to their lived realities, Ebben van Zyl invited several colleagues to publish *Leadership in the African Context*, a textbook where African scholars take some of the

best known leadership theories from the West, and adapt them toward African questions and concerns (van Zyl, 2022; van Zyl et al., 2016). The authors sought to explain each of the theories, critically analyze their applications using current and historical African case studies, and provide students with thoughtful questions to apply the same to their own leadership practice. Such books are necessary because, most of the students in African universities do not have access to the articles behind paywalls of journals from American and European institutions, but textbooks are more available, shareable and affordable.

In my view, African leadership is African in as much as it is enacted in Africa, by Africans, influenced by the conditions and concerns that prevail in their specific African contexts. I use the term “contexts” in plural here because Africa is not a uniform entity – it is diverse in terms of climates, cultures, languages, as well as geopolitical realities. What is common, however, is the fact that Africa as a whole has been marginalized in scholarly productivity, directly through the failures of African institutions and educational policies, as well as indirectly, through the white supremacists ideologies that pervade Western institutions who are gatekeepers to scholarship and publications. For those like myself who have pursued graduate education and worked in Euro-American institutions, we are keenly aware of the marginalization of African epistemologies, philosophies, and knowledges (Ngunjiri, 2020). However, we remain committed to producing and disseminating such knowledge, especially on leadership, through western publication outlets, as well as our own homegrown ones. The text I mentioned above *Leadership in the African Context* is published by Juta Press in South Africa, in a bid to ensure that it is affordable, available and accessible to African students. Professional associations such as Africa Academy of Management are ensuring a flow of scholarly articles to inform, interrogate, and describe African leadership and management.

So, what is African about African leadership – it pays attention to context, cultures, languages, and geopolitical realities in its ethos, theorizing and praxis. It is grounded in the experiences and the concerns of African actors. That means that, while the content may have some similarities with the canon of western leadership theories and literature, our scholars pay attention to the applicability [or not], and appropriateness of such to the context in which leadership is enacted.

Further, what makes African leadership African is that it is *invested* in answering the questions of concern to African actors. We ask ourselves the questions that are important to our primary audience – students, scholars and practitioners in Africa, whether or not such are deemed important to non-African audiences. This brings an anecdote to mind of my early years as an African scholar in an American institution. When I made clear that I was going to be focusing on African women’s leadership experiences, a senior faculty member asked me, “why would you do that? You will be marginalizing yourself.” Later on at my dissertation defense, he added, “why should a white middle class man such as myself be interested in a study such as yours? What makes it worth reading?” Suffice it to say that, these and other questions and comments did not dissuade me from undertaking my study, and his threats that I’d never get published due to the “marginality” of my topic turned out to be untrue. This was two decades ago,

and yet even today, one still hears of emerging scholars being discouraged from studying African leadership or leadership in Africa. Luckily for all of us, there are many who are committed to the discipline, irrespective of the costs associated with such work. This book you hold in your hands is a testament to the resiliency and persistence of seasoned scholars, as well as the tenacity and excitement of emerging scholars and younger practitioners who have contributed their theorizing and reflections on practice. We invite you to see how desk bound radicals and on-the-ground activists (Mitchell, 2008) ivory tower academics and government towers practitioners, all bring their collective wisdom to bear in this volume, in order to contribute to an understanding of African leadership and leadership in the African context.

How Can We Engage in Radical Scholarship on African Leadership?

The sub-title of this book, *Powerful Paradigms for the 21st Century* is a call to radical scholarship that uncovers the gems of “what works,” rather than merely focusing on the pathologizing that often follows discussions about Africa. We are not blind to the myriad of challenges, conflicts and chaos that exist in many African contexts – truth be told, challenges, conflicts and chaos exist the world over, not just in Africa. Indeed, it is why terms such as VUCA – volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, are relevant across the globe. What we are advocating through this work, however, is the elaboration and interrogation of what works in our particular brand of VUCA.

Radical scholarship – one that is invested in rooting out the epistemic tilt (Zoogah, 2021) of western hegemony, that is committed to re-covering indigenous knowledge and capturing the wisdom in our oral traditions, and one that interrogates practices on the ground with theories rooted in the same grounds – that kind of scholarship is our best hope for a robust leadership praxis in the continent. Radical scholarship happens by uncovering the powerful paradigms from the grassroots level – those men, women, and youth working in local communities to solve the challenges present on the ground, discovering what works for them, lessons that others can learn and emulate. Further, by unlocking the power of women’s participation in leading and serving their communities, we find lessons about courage, conviction and competent leadership in health, education, and political arenas. Radical scholarship calls forth a discovering and dissemination of local knowledges, grassroots practices, and contextualized epistemologies. Informed by the spirit of Ubuntu, we honor African ways of knowing and being in this work, as our act of resistance against any imperialist ideals and gate-keeping that still attempts to undermine and decenter such work (Elkington, 2022; Ngunjiri, 2016).

Further, in this volume, you will witness radical scholarship in the ways that our contributors’ transverse several countries, multiple disciplines, and philosophical perspectives. Whereas they are all joined as one by their love of Africa and her peoples, you will find scholars living and working in both Africa and the

diaspora, you will find political aspirants and actors, activists and government employees, all willing to share of their experiences, interrogate their particular contexts, and theorize as well as propose a way forward. Critique without hope is dangerous. What you find in these pages is critique plus recommendations, suggestions and examples of hopeful directions for the future of the continent.

An Invitation

As you read through the chapters in this book, do ask yourself this question – what is African about the leadership described in this chapter? Further, think about how what you are reading could contribute to your own leadership praxis, wherever you may be in the globe. We invite you to a radical engagement with leadership scholarship, theory building and practice, to a collective wisdom that truly says, where two or more scholars and practitioners are gathered, there is wisdom to be gained.

Secondly, as you engage with these chapters, I invite you to rethink your position and practices, wherever your sphere of influence is, how can you be a radical – one who is invested in change and transformation by rooting out injustices – and how can the testimonies herein fuel that activity? See, leadership is never just about theories, it is always also about practices. It is always about how people engage individuals and collectives, to change their own, or their neighbors status quo. Moreso in Africa, where Ubuntu, Ukama and other positive philosophies abound, leadership has to be about taking care of our people and our planet is our primary priorities. So, how can the ideas shared in this volume inform your own engagement in bettering communities, organizations and even the countries of Africa?

Indeed, my hope as one of the editors of this volume is that, this work will bear good fruit among the students, teachers, leaders and readers of all stripes who happen to engage with its pages. My hope is that the work that we have begun here of uncovering and sharing these powerful paradigms that are timely for our VUCA world, will germinate and grow as others pick up from where we have left off. Go, therefore, and lead powerfully, guided by the spirits of ubuntu and ukama, and the wisdom herein.

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