

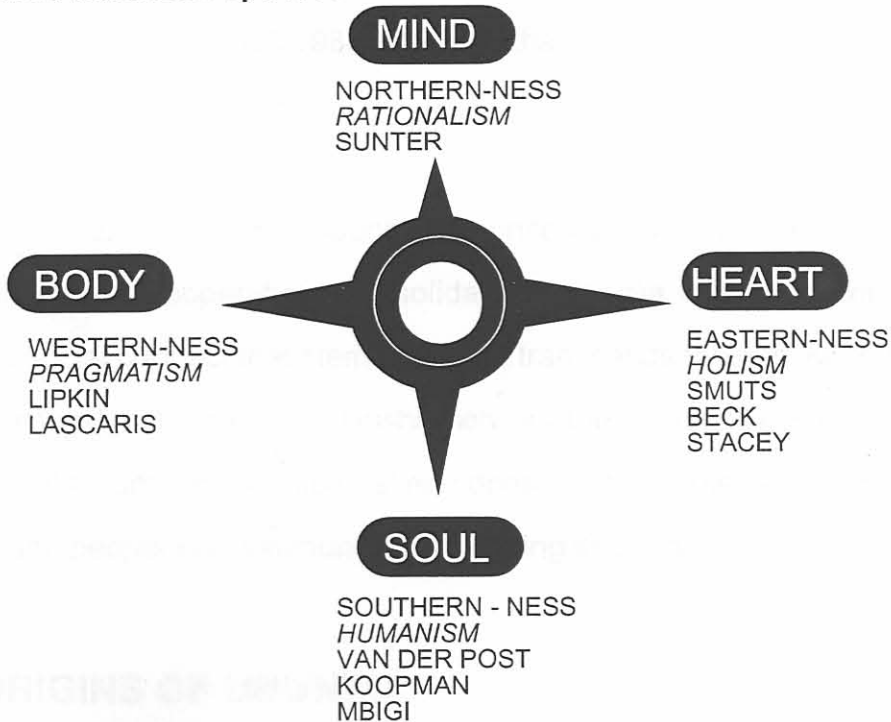
CHAPTER 4

UBUNTU

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 3, an overview of the relevant literature on Western, Japanese and African management was given, to form a theoretical framework for Ubuntu. This chapter will attempt to explore the basic principles of Ubuntu as it appears in the literature. As mentioned in Chapter 1, fewer than five primary authors were responsible for most of the literature on Ubuntu, concentrating the current thought and knowledge base. The exponents of Ubuntu are Van der Post, Koopman and Mbigi (Lessem and Nussbaum 1996:43) whose arguments will form the basis of this chapter. The other three business spheres as illustrated in Figure 4.1, will not be represented in this investigation, as it falls outside the parameters of Ubuntu.

Figure 4.1 The four business spheres



Source: Lessem & Nussbaum (1996: 36)

4.2 DEFINITION OF UBUNTU

Derived from the root, *ntu* (person), the Nguni word is best translated into “a man is a man”. In the Shona tribe this would be called *unhu* (hereafter referred to only as Ubuntu). Poor African societies thrive on the solidarity principle of Ubuntu (Mbigi and Maree 1995a:41; Dandala 1996:69; Groenewald 1996:21). This embraces the notion of group solidarity - *munhu munhu*, i.e. “a man is a man through others”, and is entitled to unconditional respect, dignity, acceptance and care from his significant relevant group or community. In return for the security offered by the group, the individual will have to conform on survival issues.

Vilakazi (1991) argues that Ubuntu is the belief in the central sacredness, and foremost priority of the human being in all his/her conduct, throughout his/her life. The value, dignity, safety, welfare, health, beauty, love and development of the human being, and respect for the human being, are to come first, and should be promoted to rank first before all other considerations, particularly before economic, financial, and political factors are taken into consideration.

Jabavu (as cited by Godsell 1983) describes Ubuntu as “human feeling” and Murray (as cited by Godsell 1983) “the link that binds man and man together simply because they are men”.

Khoza (1993:122) argues that Ubuntu is a concept that brings to the fore images of supportiveness, cooperation, and solidarity; *inter alia*, communalism. It is the basis of a social contract that stems from but transcends the narrow confines of the nuclear family to the extended kinship network, the community. Boon (1996:32) explains that Ubuntu is not empirical and does not exist unless there is interaction between people in a community, manifesting through the actions of people.

4.3 THE ORIGINS OF UBUNTU

Disadvantaged or marginalised groups anywhere in the world survive on collec-

tive unity or solidarity and consciousness. Due to the poverty of their material circumstances, they cannot survive on individual initiative alone. They have to stick together on selective survival issues and unquestioning conformity is expected from everyone on these issues. Loyalty and conformity become prized values for every member of the group. The ability to sacrifice, suffer and display a spirit of service with regard to certain selected survival issues, becomes a mark of heroism. The failure to conform on survival issues such as rent boycotts, mass action, strikes and liberation is met with ruthless measures (Mbigi and Maree 1995b:7).

Anthropologists can trace the historic origins of Ubuntu to the first groups of human beings. The groups were small with the most important link between members being the blood relation (Roux 1995:14).

The most important activity was the hunting of wild animals as sources of food and clothing and subsistence farming. When a tribe became too big, new tribes were formed (food became scarce). Labour was a collective activity and all food was shared equally amongst the community. Their survival therefore depended upon their collective unity (Roux 1995:14).

The principles of Ubuntu were already established in these societies. The importance of these principles is reflected in mythology and legends. Ubuntu was first brought to the philosophical table by Dr ZK Matthews and Prof Samukange, as well as by the African National Congress youth leader Lembede in the 1940s, and was popularised by Steve Biko and Abraham Tiro in the 1970s.

In the 1950s it had been expressed as the concept of negritude by the poet presidents Leopold Senghor and Augustino Neto (Mbigi and Maree 1995a:40). The conceptual difference between Ubuntu, Africanisation and Afrocentricity will be discussed below.

4.4 AFRICANISATION AND AFROCENTRICITY

Vorster (1996:13) argues that there is a considerable difference in opinion about the meaning of the term Africanisation and that the term means different things to different people. The origin of Africanisation can be linked to the rise of the Pan-African movement in protest to the European domination of Africa and African thought. From this emerged two lines of thought: The “negritude” movement and Africanisation. The “negritude” movement gathered impetus among aliens and exiles living in Europe and the US. Nationalist leaders in Africa took the basic ideas of the “negritude” movement and developed Africanisation in an effort to assert the rights of blacks against the claims of white supremacy.

Considering the origin of Africanisation, it can be stated that Africanisation primarily concerns Africans or blacks of African descent and Europeans or whites of European descent who have made their home in Africa - it concerns all people in Africa and people associated with Africa (Vorster 1996:18).

Within the South African context, Africanisation calls upon South Africans to:

- Regard Africa, specifically South Africa, as a basis from which and to which to grow and aspire;
- take pride in being South Africans;
- appreciate and cherish the South African cultural heritage;
- assert their own ideas, rights, interests and ideals;
- anticipate healthy self-concepts; and
- hold their own nationally in the South African and world-wide intercultural context (Vorster 1996:18).

Khoza (1993:118) describes Afrocentricity as Africans putting Africa at the centre of their existence and Africans anchoring themselves in their own continent;

its history, traditions, cultures, mythology, creative motif, ethos and value systems exemplifying the African collective will. It is both theoretical and practical. In its theoretical aspect it entails interpretation and analysis from the perspective of African people as subjects rather than objects on the periphery of the European or so-called Western experience. In its practical implications, Afrocentricity entails authentic Africa-based behaviour in the sociocultural, economic and political arena.

Khoza explains that Afrocentricity is not an attempt to impose an African worldview upon others, nor is it an attempt to develop black supremacy. Afrocentricity proposes that people of African descent or cultural orientation anchor their view and evaluation of the world within their own historical and ontological framework. It is about bold African self-assertion with Africa as a launch pad (Khoza 1993:118; Mosalakae 1996:16).

Africanisation can therefore be described as a philosophy resulting from the need of a group(s) of people to guard what is perceived to be their cultural heritage. It is a movement from the *outside-in* (pushing, re-active dynamism). Afrocentricity on the other hand is a philosophical approach with its emphasis on a pro-active pull dynamism where the movement is from the inside-out.

4.5 SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF UBUNTU

Ubuntu is a metaphor that describes the significance of group solidarity and is entitled to unconditional respect, dignity, acceptance and care from an individual's relevant group or community. In return for the security offered by the group, the individual has to conform on survival issues. This group compassion, care and conformity on survival challenges caused by poverty, war, famine, disease, suffering and change is what is called Ubuntu, and it is deeply rooted in African

morality and ethics. The issue is personhood and is the heart and soul of poor African societies, both urban and rural. In the current poor African communities, the freedom from want takes precedence over freedom from choice. A man is only a man through others. "I am because we are." One has to encounter the "we" before discovering the "I" (Mbigi and Maree 1995a:41). Boon (1996:48) argues that there is a massive movement of individuals turning their backs on their traditions and discipline and in so doing, the closeness of community of Ubuntu. They replace it not with the very best of the First World, but often with the very worst.

4.5.1 THE EMERGENCE OF UBUNTU IN AFRICAN ORGANISATIONS

The South African trade unions have been the most dynamic transformative force in South Africa during the past decade. It appears that they operate on the basis of the solidarity principle in the form of endless caucusing and continuous consulting of grassroots members through an ongoing process of mandates. They have also been quite effective in enforcing conformity among their members (Mbigi and Maree 1995a:41). Mbigi and Maree continue to argue that the trade unions have also been quite effective in enforcing conformity among those non-members who work for the same organisations when it comes to survival issues such as Black Liberation, strikes, sit-ins and stayaways. The unions have effectively competed against big business and the apartheid state on the basis of Ubuntu - *i.e.* the solidarity principle. The same can also be said about other liberation movements, such as the United Democratic Front. It is the solidarity, with its emphasis on group conformity on survival issues, that made "necklacing" (a murder ritual - putting a lighted, gasoline-soaked tyre around an individual's neck) possible, rightly or wrongly. The other organisations that came to realise the strategic importance of the solidarity principle were the churches, such as the

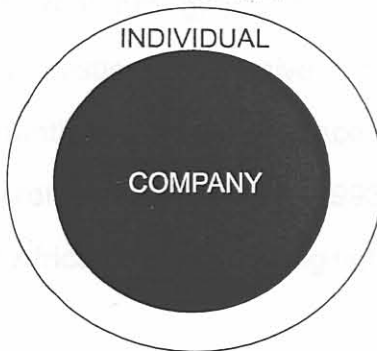
Source: Knopman (1991:32)

African Zionist Church and the Zionist Christian Church, which are perhaps the only truly authentic African organisations with limited Western influence (Mbigi and Maree, 1995a:41).

In South Africa, whites have primarily designed exclusive institutions which give primacy to the individual, his development and self-fulfilment, and which serve to foster liberal democracy. Blacks, on the other hand, believe that man is very much part of the societal fabric and see the need for each individual to find his place in a societal structure, to play his particular role in it and, to a large extent, subordinate himself to the societal needs. In other words, Koopman (1993:41) argues, he desires organisations to be inclusive. Koopman's argument is illustrated in figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2 Business and humanity

INDIVIDUAL CARES FOR THE COMPANY



COMPANY CARES FOR THE INDIVIDUAL



Source: Koopman (1991:32)

4.5.2 THE VALUE SYSTEMS

Everybody has a value system which shapes their worldview. It is based on a system of beliefs and human experiences within a framework of background education, environmental interaction, upbringing and culture. Language also influences worldview and will determine the way one responds to certain stimuli. Theories on left brain and right brain thinking have also evolved as a result of different value systems (Koopman 1993:43). Koopman uses the example of a well-educated first-world person that will think predominantly with his left brain - boxes, computers, numbers, logic ends instead of means, analytical instead of holistic.

A lesser educated person, in turn, focuses on right brain thinking - creative, survivalist, musical, improvement of process (means) and holistic. In Africa, this was the right equipment to use in order to survive. In right brain thinking greater consideration was given to social structures than technological breakthroughs. A mismatch now comes from forcing a predominantly holistic and inclusive right brain thinker into the straitjacket of a predominantly left brain workplace which has created analytical and exclusive environments (Koopman 1993:43). Koopman goes as far as to equate South African blacks to being right brained and whites left brained.

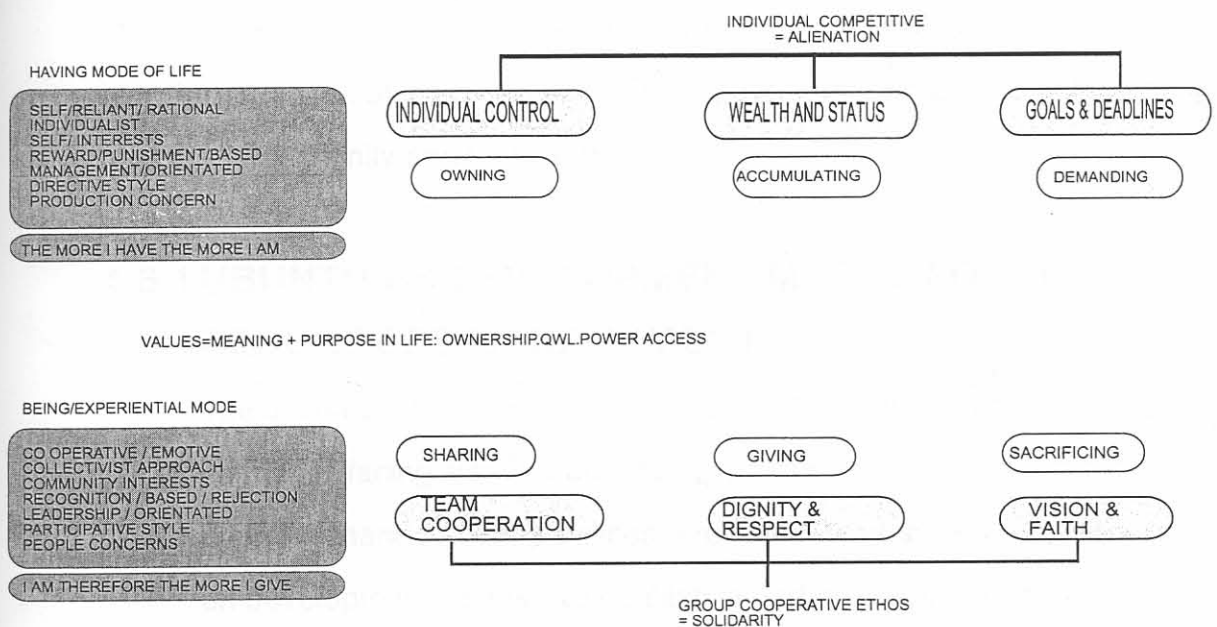
Self-reliant individualist drives are substituted by emotive collectivist drives. The focal objective of man's existence within the framework of self-reliant drives is therefore fulfilment of himself and securing of this hereafter. This can only be achieved through individual effort and merit which differentiates an individual from his fellow man. He becomes competitive, ambitious and achievement-oriented.

Man's existence, as perceived from group cooperative or collectivist drives

on the other hand, is the willing subordination of individuals to the communal good. Preponderant weight is given to man as a member of a community and his interaction with others. Koopman (1993:44) concludes that this individual has to find his roots within and amongst others, and if social organisational governance does not allow him to do this, the purpose of work and the worker's purpose will never be congruent.

Respect for elders, the extended family, an inclination to focus on morals rather than on roles and functions, as well as external loci of control are all examples of the inclusivist Ubuntu-based value system. Figure 4.4 illustrates the differentiating components of individualism versus communalism.

Figure 4.4 Individualism versus communalism



Source: Koopman (1993 : 44).

4.6 CAREER AND ATTITUDE TOWARD EMPLOYEES

Ubuntu requires the company to redefine performance relationships, roles and responsibilities of both managers and workers (Mbigi and Maree 1995a:42). The current performance relationships characterised by conflict, mistrust, bitterness, exploitation, alienation, polarisation, low morale and fear need to be transformed into the spirit of co-operation, trust, high morale, independence and co-creation. The manager-labour relationship is replaced by unity in diversity. This is the essence of Ubuntu and it can be an unshakeable basis of business competition and managing business renewal.

Mbigi and Maree argue that management can get access to the work spirit through business-critical awareness and must include a mythological, heroic and tragic narration of the collective experience of all the groups. "In order to know what we can become, we must first know who we are" (Mbigi and Maree 1995a:42). The managerial knowledge base has to be social anthropology and mythology and the organisation's agreed code of conduct must contain the values of respect, human dignity and teamwork.

4.6.1 UBUNTU AS DEVELOPMENT MODEL FOR HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

The assumption of Ubuntu as development model is that Africa is a poor continent facing tremendous development challenges; therefore any effective management practices, processes and systems have to focus on development issues. No qualitative and meaningful economic, social and political transformation will take place without the generation of effective management paradigms.

The focus of the developmental human resources model is holistic development. The model focuses on continuous improvement and

development of people, products, systems, structures, markets, productivity and quality, as well as performance. The essence of this approach is a single-minded dedication to total development and transformation. Business and economic transformation in Africa has to be driven by people and not technological innovation, because Africa does not have the resources (Mbigi and Maree 1995b:87).

Under this model, the human resources practitioner would be guided by four cardinal principles:

- The principle of morality
- The principle of interdependence
- The principle of the spirit of man
- The principle of totality

The role of the human resources function, then, becomes developmental and strategic, but rooted in the spirit of the Africa-based human dignity and the creation of an enterprising community (Mbigi and Maree 1995b:89).

4.7 DECISION-MAKING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The solidarity principle would require managers to preserve the collective unity of the workers by creating effective grassroots teams who are task-based. These have to meet during working hours for a minimum of 30 minutes and a maximum of one hour. The agenda should be set in terms of universal standards of quality, quantity, cost, time and performance relationships. This necessitates the creation of an operations forum, which is a meeting of representatives of the shop stewards' committee and management to look at burning and key strategic issues. These forums can only work if the parties involved are prepared to move beyond bargaining stances and horse-trading practices, so as to focus on com-

mon survival issues. This may necessitate flexibility of ideology and sloganeering, which may require the parties to undergo a fundamental paradigm shift. There has to be a need for a joint passion for co-creation and value-adding (Mbigi and Maree 1995a:41).

Ubuntu as a strategic tool requires managers to extract relevant empowering gut issues. The ability to continuously select relevant business themes and to manage them is crucial, for example downtime, disputes, wastage, rejection rate, set-up time, racism and efficiency rate. It is difficult to maintain solidarity or Ubuntu if there is no central task at hand or the absence of co-creation. The power of Ubuntu lies in its being task-aligned and must include survival issues. Perpetual process-mapping helps in the selection of the appropriate themes, like value chain analysis, with a view to eliminating constraints and enhancing value-adding (Mbigi and Maree 1995a:42).

Managing conflict is an “open” sum process involving immediate family supervisors, elders, and so forth within the framework of morals. This necessitates entering into a “dialogue” from which a sense of “fairness” and “unfairness” towards other members in society can emerge. Koopman (1993:48) argues that in contrast, whites alienate themselves within conflict situations leading them to enter into “negotiations” in order to control an outcome of “rightness” and “wrongness”.

4.8 SUMMARY

“A man is a man”, and is therefore entitled to unconditional respect and dignity. Ubuntu is not a racial or trivial concept. The concept of Ubuntu is both particularistic and universal, implicitly expressed elsewhere in the world.

Ubuntu can be reflected in both Africanisation and Afrocentricity and they are not mutually exclusive concepts.

Ubuntu shares its concern for people and represents African humanism in its indigenous essence. It upholds values such as respect, being treated with dignity, and also empathy. Ubuntu reflects group solidarity on survival issues that is essential to all dispossessed people wherever they are in the world.

The concept of Ubuntu emphasises the need to harness the solidarity tendency of the African people and is projected as a normative theory in literature for the development of management practices and approaches. The definition of Ubuntu as related to management, includes a number of elements, *i.e.* collectivism, communalism, team reward, developmental focus, shared values, and empowerment. A comparative analysis can now be formulated based on Ubuntu and the preceding chapter on Western, Japanese and African management practices.