The Philosophical Concept of "Ubuntu" as Business Ethic for African Socioeconomic Development

Samuel Uzo
Department of Philosophy
Pope John Paul II Seminary Awka.

Abstract

A critical evaluation of modern business trends in Africa portrays some spate of paradox in her socioeconomic development. There is a rapid increase of international corporations yet there is less accountability; there are lots of industrial and infrastructural developments yet there are eloquent cases of unemployment. Local companies transform into multinational corporations yet there is a clear absence of fundamental business ethic on which the indigenous morality that constitutes integral human development is rooted. While shareholder groups and government institutions take capricious interests in businesses, the human community and even the non-human environment are left in tatters. While the media advertises businesses in all intents and purposes, questions of moral values of individuals and companies and/or individuals in company are relegated to the background. Or why has the intervention of the government in businesses not contributed to the common good, which is regarded as the greatest good? Why have indigenous businesses not benefitted from foreign policies? Why has globalization not created the possibility for businesses to be simultaneously cross-cultural and more sensitive to cultural differences? Why do some inhuman phenomena such as racism, injustice, oppression, slavery, gender inequality; rear their ugly heads in modern multicultural business corporations? While modernity presents us with a future filled with hope in the business world, a sojourn to "Ubuntu", an African traditional philosophy of social existence is essential. The finding of this paper supports the thesis that integral human development remains an ethical ideal in an ever dynamic business corporation in Africa. The paper argues that African socioeconomic development is achievable only if "Ubuntu" constitute the ethic of businesses in most African countries.

1. Introduction

A well administered business organization sets a nation on the pathway to development. This is because the socio-economic hub of a nation is, in all intents and purposes, dependent on the way businesses both, public and private sector, have

contributed to a nation's GDP. At various levels, the question of how best to administer a business has occupied the mind of various scholars over the years. Various approaches have been adopted as a reliable panacea to the problems encountered by business corporations. Most prominent among those approaches is the stakeholder approach. A significant aspect of business ethics over the years is the protection of stakeholders. The absence of stakeholders in a given business organization sets such business on the path to underdevelopment. It suffices to know that Africa's socio-economic development is basically dependent on the extent to which partnership is established and enhanced among business corporations. Thus, there must be a business ethic that provides the moral imperative necessary for sustainable development of African economic institutions. But, it is no gainsaying that African socioeconomic development is still a mirage even in an era of the 'big idea'-NEPAD. NEPAD, that is, New Partnership for African Development has been argued to be "an opening for resources flows, both aid and trade-related, and an attempt to re-envision development partnership on the basis of good governance within Africa" (Waal, 2002:464). Being sensitive to the high rate of poverty, conflict, insecurity, unemployment, low level of capitalization, and even the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, NEPAD aims to achieve the overall 7 per cent annual growth necessary for Africa to meet one of the Millenium Development Goals which is to half poverty. Yet, it is an inexplicable paradox that in the face of this 'big idea, and in the midst of rich and endowed countries in the African continent, Africans are the poorest of the poor. To be sure, despite Botswana's strong economic growth which has sustained the world's highest real GDP growth and GDP per capita growth rates over the last 35 years (Leith, 2001), it is riddled with poverty whereby 47 per cent of her citizens live below poverty line. One of the reasons given for this is *unequal distribution* of resources. In recent times, Nigeria is encompassed by a deteriorating security situation which has a gruesome effect in

businesses. From endemic rural and urban poverty to high rate of unemployment; from debilitating youth unemployment to low industrial output; from unstable and deteriorating exchange to high inflation rate; from inadequate physical and social infrastructure to very large domestic debt and rising stock of external debt. (Ewetan, 2013). The near implication of this is a weak economic institutions and distressed corporate organizations. These poor socioeconomic conditions, more often than not, attract the intervention of multinational institutions, aid agencies, foreign governments, international NGOs and international donors. These institutions are essentially colonial in character and orientation. The terms and conditions by which they partner with Africa are apparently un-African and unequal. They play the piper and determine the tune while the Africans are subjected to mere spectatorship in a business partnership which is meant to be mutual. One can easily suspect a crisis of socioeconomic development as none of these foreign business agencies have come up with a lasting solution to the African economic predicament. By and large, a moral dilemma creeps in: Should Africa depend on a foreign business ethic or rely on her indigenous socio-cultural moral framework?

It is on this basis that we adopt '*Ubuntu*' as a business ethic that could salvage Africa from socio-economic underdevelopment. But, we shall first critically assess the relationship between business ethics and socio-economic development. It is in discovering the shortcomings of business ethics as not meeting the demands of most business corporations in Africa, that we shall propose 'Ubuntu' as a moral framework in understanding business activities in and with Africa.

2. Business Ethics and Socio-Economic Development in Africa

Central to the dynamism and vitality of marketing institutions in Africa is a business ethic which serves as a stepping stone to a nation's socioeconomic development. The concept of business ethics connotes an ethic in business as the business of ethics and also the fact that business in ethics entails applied ethics in which emphasis is laid on business ethics activities in the business world. Ethics, when applied to the business world is set to address the following questions:

> What endeavors of business people, companies and business associations have been undertaken? Setting up and dissemination of codes of conduct? Ethics training programmes? Position of ethics officers or the like? Public statements and publications of business leaders? Legislations? Are, and if so how are, domestic and foreign companies evaluated from an ethical point of view? By consumers, workers, investors and other groups and organizations? And so on.

These questions which business ethics sets out to address are geared towards the development of a business organization in particular and the economic development of a nation in general.

For a business to develop means that it seeks to include in its development goals some moral values that regulate human behaviour in such business environment. To this extent, business ethics has been defined as "the application of theories of right and wrong to activity within and between commercial enterprises, and between commercial enterprises and their broader environment. Its concern includes: The safety of working practices; the fairness of recruitment; the transparency of financial accounting; the promptness of payments to suppliers; the degree of permissible aggression between competitors; relations between businesses and consumers, local communities, national governments and ecosystem.

Etymol-analytically, the term 'business ethics' constitutes two words: 'business' and 'ethics'. But, the semantic function of 'business' is to describe ethics as applied to the business world in which business decisions are adjudged right or wrong. Ethics is derived from the Greek word *ethos* which means custom or habitual way of acting. Similarly, the Latin expression *mos; moris*, from which we derive the word *moral*, is attributed to this understanding of ethics. Hence, ethics is the branch of philosophy that studies the morality of human actions, that is, the way humans ought to behave, the norms of conduct to which human actions ought to conform. (Omoregbe, 1979:4). Thus, it is also conceived as moral judgments, standards and rules of human conduct, with an emphasis on the determination of what is right and wrong (Artur, 2018:2). When applied to business organizations, the idea of business ethics comes to play.

Business ethics can be traced back to antiquity in the writings of Plato and Aristotle extending to the modern philosophical reflections of Karl Marx and John Rawls. To be sure, the Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes that "traditional philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant discuss issues of the right and wrong in economic activity. They sometimes examine specific business ethics puzzles, including the ethics of the profit motive, just price in trade, usury in lending, and ethics in negotiation." (Donaldson, 2005). From this, it can be implied that business ethics suggests the study of the ethical dimensions of organizational activity on the systematic, organizational and intra-organizational levels. (Rossouw, 2010a). Moreover, business ethics focuses basically on what is good and right in a particular economic activity, where an organization engages in a moral analysis and assessment of such economic activities (Smith, 1790).

Business ethics can be understood in two senses: Narrow and Broad. In a narrow sense, business ethics is understood as 'corporate ethics' as applicable to business organizations. (Berenbeim, 1987). But, in the broad sense, business ethics covers the

socio-economic aspect of life. Here, "business ethics deals with the individual decision-making of economic actors (such as managers and employees), the shaping and conduct of economic organizations, business-related public policies, economic systems; and global economic and financial institutions. In this paper, the broad sense of business ethics is relevant.

3. Existing Frameworks of Business Ethics

Given that this study is aimed at proposing Ubuntu as a business ethic for Africa's socio-economic development, it is important to highlight existing frameworks of Business Ethics such as Classical Marxian Approach, Globalization, Ethical decision-making, Utilitarian Approach, Sternbergian Approach and Aristotelian Virtue Theory. As we progress in discussing these frameworks, we shall show their shortcomings which will then pave the way for an African socio-cultural framework: Ubuntu.

3.1. Classical Marxism

Classical Marxism is attributed to Karl Marx. It claims that specific forms of human agency (social labour and relations of production) and social structure (the forces and relations of production) have explanatory primacy in shaping the constitution and dynamics of social systems (Sean Creaven, 2000:1). It proposes that whatever we have as a socioeconomic system in general or business organization in particular stems from the dialectical interplay between human agency and social structure. Here, society is viewed as constituting the basic structures of inorganic matter to the higher strata of mind, self and society. The ontological status of each of these levels is understood by "its possession of discrete autonomous causal properties and conditional effects, and each arises once a given complexity of interaction at an anterior or underlying level of organization is reached." (Ibid.1). This suggests a dialectical materialism in which a given social organization reaches its full realization to the extent to which it creates a

balance between material needs and personal needs. In short, one's personal needs are attained as soon as one's material needs are addressed. This is because due attention is given to the balance of powers inherent in both socio-economic realities. While the human infrastructure is enamored and enhanced by fulfilling the individual's basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, security and employment, the material needs are, to a large extent, met. Moreover, the in-tendency towards these basic needs shapes the perception and behaviour of the individual and even determines socio-economic and particular business policies.

This classical Marxist approach ultimately promises some spate of holism in which "individuals are inserted involuntarily into patterned and enduring social relationships which exist independently of their will, which shape their actions and consciousness in determinate ways, and which offers resistance even to concerted collective efforts to alter or transform them" (Creaven, S. Ibid.).

3.2. Globalization

Economic policy makers, business managers and multinational corporations have unconsciously modeled their economic principles along the path of globalization. Here, globalization is considered to be a framework for upon which the economic destinies of nations rest. This is because as the linkages and interconnections of nation-states intensify owing to the process of modernization and technological progress in this era of globalization, the economic goals of individual nation-states homogenize and crystallize into a moral corpus that will serve self-same global interest.

In explaining the phenomenon of globalization, McGrew notes, "The multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that transcend the nation-state (and by implication the societies) which make up the modern world system. It defines a process through which events, decisions and activities in one part of the world can come to have significant

consequences for individuals and communities in quite distant parts of the globe" (McGrew, 1992:13-14). According to IMF, globalization means more integrated goods, services and capital markets. And, for Igho Natufe (2001:1), globalization is "the free movement of capital, goods and services across national boundaries."

However, situating Africa in the globalized economy portrays Africa as still basking in underdevelopment even in the globalization process. Being aware of this, Igbafen avers:

> Notable in the global space is the fact that the dominant nations of the world have technological, commercial capital resources and socio-political dominance over the dependent countries of Africa, Following from this, it is obvious that the developed countries set the rules in the world political economy structure that has been well planned and directed by transnational bodies. This advantage has essentially made it possible for dominant countries of the West to impose conditions of exploitation and extract part of the domestically produced surplus. (Igbafen, 2004:296).

So, although globalization enables freedom of various economies of the world, yet some economies are free but everywhere in chains. Here, one meets a paradox; a transition from global age to global cage! It is my view that the notion of liberalization of economies; an immediate or remote implication of globalization which involves allowing certain individuals to determine market prices, demands and supply of commodities, will lead to sundry forms of capitalism, global injustice, exploitation and economic imperialism. Some oil rich nations like Nigeria will produce yet bask in poverty. I wish to note immediately that Nigeria needs to reformulate its economic policies and philosophies to suit the poor masses and encourage what can be referred to as "democratic economy" not economic democracy. The former means that the people have the right to determine prices of commodities based on their immediate predicament with the aim of putting an end to poverty. The latter is largely political whereby the economic leaders based on their professionalism adopts a policy that they

consider suitable for the people. Here, one expects cases of ethnicity, religious sentiments, less accountability, arbitrary increments, class conflict and even gender politics to play out.

3.3. **Ethical Decision-making approach**

The ethical decision making approach claims that businesses thrive based on actions and decisions taken by the company which stresses the importance of accountability; the dauntless necessity of the force of moral principle governing large international corporations. The importance of the ethical decision making approach is that "the corporate ethics through which business organization conducts their affairs had considerable economic and social consequences." (Cadbury, 2002:11). This approach is conscious of the fact that given the internationalization of businesses, there tend to be less accountability. Business is "spread across the world and no longer rooted in a single community that can be held responsible by its singular jurisdiction." Thus, Cadbury views that "in a localized business there were very strong local pressures, providing feedback, more or less, on the actions and decisions taken by the company". Ethical decision-making is therefore essential for the growth of a particular business. According to Sternberg,

> failure to recognize and properly address ethical problems can lead to very substantial charges, both legal and financial; being unethical can cost a business its very life. Many of the most dramatic business failures and the most significant business losses of the last decade were the result of unethical conduct: consider the fates of Barings and BCCI, Polly Peck and the Robert Maxwell group. Normally, 'bad ethics is bad business': the short term gains which may be won by unethical conduct seldom pay in the end.

But, it does not mean that an ethical conduct necessarily leads to a successful business. There are cases where acting ethically has led to business losses. A bambara nut cake (okpa) trader who mixes various other condiments like flour (which is unethical) to

increase the quantity of the cake will of course have more customers than the honest trader who just bakes the bambara nut cake without any additives. The latter tends to lose more customers than the former. There are many such examples in the Nigerian market and business centers. Taking a moral decision is usually uncomfortable to some business people especially in an era of high competition in businesses.

Moreover, the ethical decision-making approach falls under the weight of its argument. If accountability is a moral principle that businesses must adopt, then the plausibility of accountability in large international corporations is questionable. How can one ascertain the accountability of the "ten largest corporations of the world that have about 4.3 million employees"?

Cadbury offers another reason for the failure of the ethical decision-making approach as "the occurrence of diverse interests shown by shareholder groups and by government themselves, in ethical and environmental issues." Cadbury notes an example of the passing of the Foreign and Corrupt Practice Act in the United States. This is an instance of government intervention on private businesses; a novel development in the business world. Cadbury concludes that "such intervention raises the problem for governments of trying to define limits on conduct, of settling what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, in a world where transactions are moving faster and becoming more complex all the time. It is very difficult for them to keep up." (Cadbury, 2002:10)

3.4. Sternbergian Approach

Sternberg's approach begins with a critique of the very idea of business ethics. She believes that there is no such thing as business ethics; that business ethics is either theoretically or impossible in practice. To justify this position, she asserts:

> Sometimes, of course, that criticism is wholly justified. [Thus if] 'business
> ethics' is taken to denote a separate business ethic, a set of ethical rules

that apply exclusively in business and nowhere else, then there is indeed no such thing. Equally, most of the sanctimonious criticisms of business that pass as business ethics fully deserve to be dismissed. But that is because much of what masquerades as business ethics is nothing of the sort, having little to do with either business or with ethics.

She then goes on to propose a model which is built on her analysis of the nature of business. It consists of 5 steps:

The first step is simply to identify what is actually being asked by determining who is asking? What has prompted the issue? What precisely is at stake? Who will be affected by the outcome? What sort of decision or action might be called for? Who is responsible for taking, implementing, reviewing the decision? And so on.

The second step entails determining whether it actually is a problem for the business. This involves three shades of inquiry: Is the issue relevant to business? Is it relevant to this business? And is it a problem for this business?

The third step is to identify the constraints which may limit solutions. Sternberg notes that business decisions are constrained not only by law and regulation, but also by contractual, cultural, economic, physical and technical considerations.

The fourth step is to see how alternative solutions measure up against the three key conditions of maximizing long-term owner value and respecting distributive justice and ordinary decency. This, according to Sternberg, is a straightforward business calculation because it takes into consideration all the potential costs and consequences including that which are distant, delayed and indirect.

The fifth and concluding step Sternberg gives is identifying the right course of action for the business.

Sternberg's approach is clearly contradictory. At first, she believes there is no such thing as business ethics yet she goes on to propose theses for a successful

business ethics which in themselves constitute the core of business ethics. Moreover, her theses have been found to lack flexibility and universal validity such that the possibility of their standing the test of time is quite slim.

3.5. Aristotelian Virtue Approach

One important focus of virtue ethicists is the desirability of one's character traits rather than one's personality trait. Virtue ethicists provide a list of virtues such as; courage, temperance, wisdom and justice. Virtue ethics has gained popular expression in the *Nichomachean Ethics* of Aristotle and (much later) Elizabeth Anscombe's *Modern Moral Philosophy* published in 1958.

In particular, the Aristotelian Virtue approach shows a connection between his concept of virtue (*arête*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*). Here, virtue is viewed as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of attaining a fulfilled life. For one to be fulfilled, one must always exhibit excellent character traits. These traits are what Aristotle understands as virtue. However, in *eudaimonia*, one seems to have attained a fulfilled life as a result of having achieved one's full potential (Aristotle: X, 7, 1177a11). Now, one's skill or virtue (arête) is needed for one to achieve one's full potential. In the *Ethics*, Aristotle distinguished between two kinds of virtue namely, moral virtue and intellectual virtue. For Aristotle, moral virtue was the balance between two vices calculated by the Golden Mean. According to Hughes (2001:10), "some belong to one's moral character (for example, courage, or generosity), and others to one's skill at thinking (such as being good at planning, or quick to grasp the point of something)." Of course, the latter refers to intellectual virtue.

The Aristotelian virtue ethics is relevant to the business world especially in terms of a statement of business values or code of conducts which involves complying with rules, regulations and general principles. In business organizations, virtues are construed as values established prohibiting behaviours that will give a bad reputation for the

business organization. To this extent, it places a check on individual character traits of employees, stakeholders, suppliers, consumers and the general management of the business organization.

A fundamental problem with this approach is that it is self-centered and/or one-sided in the sense that the codes of conduct are written based on the personal principles of the CEO, executives and other key stakeholders of the business. This gives room for arbitrariness in making business decisions and moral absolutism in determining the structure, content, development and application of the business ethics. Moreover, the self-centeredness of this approach tends to create a room for privatization policies which have been the focus of neoliberal economies. Their neo-liberalization economic policies include: free market system, privatization, globalization, deregulation, austerity and reduction of government spending in order to increase the role of the private sector in the economy and society. (Goldstein, 2011:30). These policies are appealing when viewed at the face level but they are ultimately rooted in the Western imperialistic agenda. This approach, at the long run, would lead to market fundamentalism, inequality, imperialism and political opposition. Scholars such as Amartya Sen, Noam Chomsky and Pope Francis I have strongly criticized neo-liberalism.

But, one problem with the aforementioned frameworks is that they engender economic policies that give room to economic superiorization whereby the logic of development of the wealthy is regarded as superior and acceptable at the detriment of the middle class and lower class. By and large, the rich get richer and the poor poorer. This can be found in some South American countries like Brazil, Argentina and Mexico as well as some European and Asian countries.

It is based on the shortcomings of the above existing frameworks and the need to situate African socio-economic reality on the path of positive development that I propose *Ubuntu*; an African socio-ethical framework for the development of business

corporations. It is my argument that if *Ubuntu* determines the socio-economic policies of business corporations in Africa, it will not only unify the activities of African business corporations but will address the concrete problems of hunger, poverty, unemployment, insecurity, disease, high mortality rate and ethnic and religious crises.

What is Ubuntu?

At first I shall attempt an etymological analysis. *Ubuntu* is derived from two Nguni (isiZulu) words *ubu* (action or capacity) and *ntu* (being). Hence, it is a unique and unifying capacity of being in which being is dynamic rather than static. Here, some form of action is implied but this action is positive, dialogical and persistent. This means that in the process of being, action is necessary in order to stir or trigger action in another being. This announces the reality of a being that is characterized with otherness because others are essential in the actualization of (one's) being. This actualization is a continuation of the preeminence of being. The preeminence of being is that through the activities of the human person the true meaning of being is realized. Hence, *Ubuntu* is linked to the Nguni aphorism: *Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*, which can be translated as "a person is a person because of or through others" (Moloketi, 2009; Tutu, 2004). According to Ramose, "….*ubuntu* in most African languages is a gerundive, a verbal noun denoting a particular state of being and becoming at the same time. It thus denotes a particular action already performed an enduring action or state of be-ing and the openness to yet another action or state of be-ing." (1992:792) Thus, *Ubuntu* can be described as the capacity in an African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring (Khoza, 2006; Luhabe, 2002; Mandela, 2006; Tutu, 1999). It is basically a humanistic philosophy which represents an African conception of the human being, and his/her relationship with the community that

embodies the ethics that define Africans and their social behaviours (Mbigi and Maree, 2005). It is to this extent an African philosophy of social existence from which socio-moral values are derived. In fact, *Ubuntu* is an ethical framework which aids the understanding of individuals at every level of society. Hence, it takes into consideration the complementarity inherent in the African life and being expressed in their constant dialogical relationships and social arrangement. Through this expression "we should also recognize that the forces of life manifest themselves in an infinite variety of content and form."(Ramose, 752). This means that the traditional African does not think independently. His/her thinking is characterized with manifold 'aboutness'. Hence,

> Africans are social beings that are in constant communion with one another; where a human being is regarded as a human being only through his or her relationships to other human beings. Therefore, the survival of a human being is dependent on other people, such as the community and society. Within an African environment, socio-cultural underpinnings are rigorously applied and the African *Umunthu* or *Ubuntu* (humanness) philosophies are omnipresent throughout the continent.

Therefore, the *Ubuntu* socio-cultural dimensions are applied and considered critical in any organization operating in Africa (Lutz, 2009; Mangaliso, 2001; Mbigi and Maree, 2005). The *Ubuntu* ethical framework thus takes into consideration that "Africa has its own unique socio-cultural settings, which have a direct impact on <u>people-centered</u> <u>systems</u> encompassing leadership, employee welfare, extended family systems, caring and sharing, and corporate governance. Thus, the socio-cultural diversity premised on the use of Western management systems would pose a great challenge within an Africa-based organization." (Khomba & Vermaac, 2012:3511).

Deriving its socio-economic orientation from the works of African scholars such as Leopold Senghor, Amilcar Cabral and Julius Nyerere, *Ubuntu* proposes an unbiased ethical paradigm that is not only concerned with African socio-economic wellbeing but

also extends to other regions of the world. In fact, "the [African] village is meant to be part of a virtuous circle of ever increasing exchanges between city and country; between industry and agriculture." (Saul, 2013:205). Here, *Ubuntu* envisions a global economic institution in which every individual is a stakeholder. This is because it is an "ethics of interrelationships, situated in a communitarian social fabric of caring and sharing, *ubuntu* may equal, and even exceed, socialist notions of a 'radical egalitarianism' (Cornell 2009; Cornell & Van Marle 2015).

From the foregoing, it is clear that adopting *Ubuntu* as a business ethic will help bridge the gap between the affluent and the poor; the shareholder and non-shareholding stakeholder; the elite and the common man; the developed and the underdeveloped; western individualism and African communalism. It will create a business corporation with a human face in which being takes precedence to having. This is because the wellbeing of the human person is considered to be central to any profitable business activity. With this, the growing consensus of private property (Caromba, 2014), capitalist relation (Van Norren, 2014) and pervasive inequality (Cornell &Van Marle, 2015), is brought to a halt while sundry economic predicaments like food insecurity, hunger, unemployment, disease, high mortality rate and inflation are adequately managed.

Conclusion

In this essay, I discovered that the thriving western business ethical frameworks are anti-African socio-economic development paradigms which have enveloped Africans and the African business corporations in utter stagnancy and economic regression. I think this must have influenced the founding of African Development Bank and various Afrocentric business institutions which supposedly incorporates the traditional socio-economic values. Although enamoured and coloured by modernity and the

superhighway technologies of the Western order, *Ubuntu* is found to instill an afrocentric business consciousness in business managers, stakeholders, shareholders, producers and even political leaders who are bent on a revivalist mission of their economy. What is business without love for the other; care for the wellbeing of the other; hospitality of the consumer? Should I enrich myself at the detriment of the customer or should I structure my business in such a way that both producer and consumer will benefit? *Ubuntu* will not only affect our socio-economic value but also our socio-economic psyche which will largely transform our behaviour within and without the business world.

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