

# WESTERN HUMANISM, AFRICAN HUMANISM AND WORK ORGANIZATIONS

H J PIETERSEN

pietersenh@ul.ac.za

Department of Human Resource Management  
School of Economics and Management  
University of Limpopo

## ABSTRACT

Comparison of Western (WH) and African humanism (AH) shows overlapping and complementary approaches to human nature in work organizations. The extant literature is conceptually, empirically and methodologically inadequate, and fails to consider 21st century employment realities. Shortcomings of WH and AH are presented. A dynamic and mutualistic approach to human nature, that includes both self-assertive (individualist) and self-transcending (collectivist) tendencies, is briefly outlined. It provides a more comprehensive approach to humanism, for better understanding of human behaviour at work. There is currently too much rhetoric in the field. More research, especially the use of qualitative and narrative-interpretive methodologies is required.

## OPSOMMING

Vergelyking van Westerse (WH) met Afrika (AH) opvattinge oor humanisme in werkorganisasies toon, verskille ten spyte, dat oorvleueling en aanvullende benaderingsmoontlikhede bestaan. Die betrokke literatuur is tans konseptueel, empiries en metodologies onvoldoende. Moderne indiensnemingsrealiteite word ook nie verreken nie. Tekortkominge in beide Westerse en Afrika humanisme word aangetoon. Navolging van 'n dinamiese en resiproke benadering wat beide self-gelding (individualisties) en self-transendering (kollektiwisties) in menslike natuur insluit, word voorgestel as 'n meer omvattende beskouing wat 'n beter begrip van gedrag in werkorganisasies bied. Daar is heelwat retoriek in aansprake betreffende Afrika humanisme. Verdere navorsing, veral begroonde en interpreterende studies, is noodsaaklik.

Humanism, in the broad sense of the term, already began to take shape with the gradual emancipation, more than twenty-six centuries ago, of the Greek mind from a dependency on Olympian gods and with the beginnings of scientific cosmology (Thales). With the awakening of Reason and the focus of Socratic and Hellenistic philosophy on the best way to conduct one's life and on the nature of the just human society, the stage was set for the later development of Western science and humanism.

In the main the term humanism has acquired two meanings: firstly, to refer to humankind's desire and increased ability to rely on its own resources, to master (discover, analyse and codify) the forces of nature and turn it to its own advantage (the domains of science and technology); and, secondly, its association with the moral sphere of human existence, in answer to the perennial question of how we should best live – as individuals and as communities.

In the modern era, especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, humanism came to refer to a broad and rising social movement (complemented by the social sciences) to promote humanistic values, substantially in reaction to and in order to counter the impersonal and destructive forces of humankind's inhumanity against itself (especially state-induced violence). Humanism is opposed to: war, tyranny, unjust and oppressive political systems, ecological over-exploitation, hierarchy, autocracy, inhumane treatment of people, and, generally, against any policy, rule, institution or form of conduct detrimental to human dignity, integrity and well-being.

But, it should be noted that both these tendencies – of treating people as *objects* of thought and desire, resources to be manipulated and controlled, as well as of treating and supporting people as valued *subjects* and fellow *human* beings – are part and parcel of the same phenomenon, called *homo sapiens*.

African humanism, as is generally known, is most often referred to in the Southern African context as *Ubuntu* (among the Zulu) or *Obotho* (among the Pedi). It is popularly equated with the communal values and customs of the traditional African village or ethnic community, and referred to as 'collectivism' (mostly by Western anthropologists and cross cultural researchers). Collectivism, in turn, then frequently becomes contrasted with generalised core characteristics of Western cultures, referred to as 'individualism'. There is, furthermore, also a tendency among Western scholars and management writers to focus on (and take for granted the superiority of) individualist values, and a tendency among African writers to focus on (and take for granted the superiority of) collectivist values.

In South Africa, democratic governance early on incorporated *ubuntu* as core social value, with which to hopefully elicit desired behaviours such as forgiveness, re-conciliation, friendliness, neighbourliness, helpfulness, and so on. Correctly understood (that is: in a non-hegemonic sense), it has the potential for bringing people closer together, for creating greater cohesion in our (transforming) society and as a common and super-ordinate value concept for dealing with differences, conflict and the ever-present destructive tendencies in human nature.

Although *ubuntu* has become a popular concept in society at large, from a scientific perspective and in the more circumscribed context of management and organizational research, the phenomenon requires further exploration. It should be noted that, unless indicated otherwise, the terms African humanism and Ubuntu are used interchangeably.

## PROBLEM

The management and organizational literature on humanism – specifically Western and African humanism, which is the focus of this paper – tends to be monocular, conceptually muddled and utopian.

Empirical studies that were done on the continent so far, though encouraging, do not provide clear indication as to the deeper nature, role, or impact of African humanism in the South African workplace. The studies that do exist are largely aimed at the local verification of non-local (Western) cultural models, especially the individualism-collectivism distinction made popular by Hofstede.

An inspection of the relevant literature shows that *Ubuntu* is a concept that has become burdened with multiple meanings and with sweeping comparisons to elements of Western society, political and business systems, such as: colonialism, industrialism, autocracy, lack of feeling, greed, materialism, selfishness, and so on. Speculation aside, it is still an open research question as to what *Ubuntu* (African humanism) actually means for the South African workplace.

### AIM

Given the existence of a multi-cultural South African society, with a predominantly first-world economy, public sector and system of governance, as well as the typically diverse composition of the SA workforce, the first aim is to determine the degree of conceptual compatibility between African humanism (hereafter: AH) and Western humanism (hereafter: WH) in management thought. Currently, no such comparison exists. Shortcomings of both AH and WH will also be highlighted.

Secondly, an inclusive approach to human nature is proposed, indicating that, although there are clear differences, both AH and WH are partially overlapping and complementary approaches. As one would expect from humanistic world views, both WH and AH have in common elements such as an opposition to inequality, hierarchy, and to impersonal, autocratic management policies and practices that treat employees as resources rather than human beings.

### WESTERN AND AFRICAN HUMANISM

The main approach in Western management and organizational thought has traditionally been individualist – despite the fact that the role of social-psychological factors and the value of good teamwork and cooperation in the workplace have been acknowledged early on (e.g., the Hawthorne studies of the 1920s and 30s).

In general, management thought emphasises and places a high value on: logic and rationality, individual development and growth, independence, creativity, performance, responsibility, and achievement, but often under-estimates the ongoing social and communal embedded-ness of human life, also as it affects the workplace. For many management theorists, behavioural scientists and organizational counsellors, *the well-being of the individual is primary, and the assumption is that what is good for individual growth and development is or will eventually be good for the organization and society*. Of course, from a management point of view, the matter is typically approached from the opposite corner: what is good for the bottom-line (efficient and effective work operations, profitability, market share) will also be to the benefit of workers and continued employment opportunity.

African management writers (for example: Nzelibe, 1986; Mbigi and Maree, 1995; Mangaliso and Damane, 2001), on the other hand, are largely focused on and, in turn, writes about the importance of group solidarity, of the benefit to the individual of enjoying the security ('protective umbrella') of the group, of conformity to group customs and norms, and of community spirit, as overriding forces in human life. *The well-being of the group is primary, and the assumption is that what is good for the life of the community or society is or will eventually be good for the*

*individual*. Nzelibe (1986) succinctly formulates the typical African interpretation as follows: "Whereas Western management thought advocates Eurocentricism, individualism, and modernity, African management thought emphasizes ethnocentrism, traditionalism, communalism, and cooperative teamwork" (1986; p. 10).

There is also the view that *Ubuntu* is a strategy of solidarity among the poor in any society, which also help people to survive in politically oppressive situations, whether in Africa or Harlem, New York (Mbigi and Maree, 1995, p. 1).

Blunt and Jones (1997) investigated the applicability of Western leadership theories in Africa and observed that:

- African societies tend to be egalitarian within age groups, but hierarchical between age groups;
- Leaders often behave, and are expected to behave, paternalistically (bestow favour and expect and receive obeisance or deference);
- Consensus is highly valued and decision-making within levels can therefore take a long time;
- The above is, however, in contrast to an alleged Darwinian Western management approach that is more concerned with economic considerations and weeding out of poor performers;
- There is a strong concern among African workers, including managers, with issues of security.

Jackson (1999) posits a conflict between Western and African management approaches, and states that: "...that there are major cultural differences between the instrumentalism of Western styles of management and the humanism of many non-Western cultures" (p. 307). In their turn, McFarlin and Coster (1999) wants: "South African firms to develop aggressive affirmative action programs and to embrace leadership and training approaches that better reflect African values" (p. 63). In similar vein, Mangaliso and Damane (2001) state that: "Incorporating *ubuntu* principles in management holds the promise of superior approaches to managing organizations. Organizations infused with humaneness, a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness will enjoy more sustainable competitive advantages" (p. 31).

Among Western management scholars, strongly influenced by Abraham Maslow's ideas on motivation, the social and community sphere of human existence tends to be treated as one among a number of *individual* needs, and hierarchically subordinated to the supreme values of psychological growth and 'self-actualization', of taking charge of one's own life and destiny (see Maslow, 1965). The ongoing influence (and importance) of the social/community dimension of human life has over a long period not been fully appreciated in this literature and perhaps even less so by management, whose primary concern regarding workers is what happens inside the organization in the workplace (not the family or other personal or social concerns of the employee as such).

In African writing, the individual person is of course acknowledged and respected, but by and large tends to be treated as someone whose existence and fate are not to be divorced from communal imperatives. The individual as person, in this view, is largely subordinated to meta-physical (spiritual) forces, and to the social values, customs, and rituals of the extended family, community and ethnic group. As Gyekye (1998) summarises it: "The human person does not voluntarily choose to enter into human community, that is, community life is not optional for any individual person; the human person is at once a cultural being..." (p. 320). Yet, he also emphasises the place of the individual in society: "Moderate or restricted communitarianism gives accommodation ...

to communal values as well as to values of individuality, to social commitments as well as to duties of self-attention ...” (Gyekye, 1998, p. 326)

African communitarian cosmology, which places such a high value on and conceives of human life as inextricable from the supportive, but also all-enveloping context of community (e.g., the extended family), is at the same time a thoroughly spiritualised and deterministic system of human existence.

It places a metaphysical God at the apex of the ‘chain of being’. But this God is an impersonal cosmic designer, separated from the living by the spiritual existence and ongoing interaction of departed ancestors with living relatives. As Teffo and Roux (1998) point out: “In spite of a strong sense of the goodwill of God, Africans do not accept ad hoc interventions by God in the order of nature. They have strong commitment to the reign of law in all spheres of existence ... God is not apart from the world....God is seen as Creator of the world, but because God is not outside the world, this cannot mean that he created the world out of nothing. God is seen as a kind of cosmic architect ...” (p. 140).

By contrast, in Christianised Western and European cultures, the triune God is conceived to be in a deeply meaningful personal relationship with believers (ancestral spirits do not really figure). Although Western cultures value an impersonal scientific rationality in dealing with life and world, a world in which religious convictions, sentiments and practices have been relegated to the sphere of an individual’s private life and to religious institutions, the individual’s spiritual life typically is deeply expressive and affect-laden. In times of personal distress, the individual will more likely turn to prayer for answers and spiritual re-assurance, in stead of appealing to ancestral spirits or cultural heroes (including heroes of science).

**Comparison of elements of Western and African humanism**

Figures 1 and 2 provide summarised descriptions of Western and African humanism and humanistic values, as it appears in the management literature. Inspection shows substantial agreement between WH and AH with respect to (see Figure 1): the importance of the group or team (although AH puts the emphasis more on group solidarity and support, rather than teamwork for the sake of better performance), self-expression, empathetic listening, trust, caring, fairness, consensus. Warren Bennis (1999), a pioneering management thinker also recently re-iterated the importance of the social/human dimension for effective management, stating that: “...exemplary leadership and organizational change are impossible without the full inclusion, initiatives and cooperation of followers” (p. 75).

Differences between WH and AH relate to the much stronger focus of WH on the achieving individual as opposed to the serving/self-sacrificing individual in AH; a de-emphasis on respect for elders (WH); seeking change (WH); influence based on technical competence (WH) rather than social factors (AH); a preference for dynamic leadership that provides direction and ensures performance (WH), versus a preference for kind and considerate, paternalistic leaders (AH), in stead of leadership that demands performance and productivity.

Much of the recent writing that promotes *Ubuntu* for business and work organizations is reminiscent of the beginnings of Western leadership and management thought. In the early part of the 20th century so-called trait theories and characterizations of leadership were widespread, but in the end led nowhere because so many good or desirable human qualities were subsumed under the heading ‘leadership’ that the concept itself became meaningless and impractical in the management and organizational setting.

<b>WESTERN APPROACH</b> (Argyris, McGregor, Maslow, Bennis, Handy, Blunt & Jones)	<b>AFRICAN APPROACH</b> (Nzelibe, Mbigi, Teffo, Ghosh, Mangaliso, Wariboke, Agbakoba, Gyekye)
<b>On the INDIVIDUAL</b> Self-actualizing, independence-seeking, aspiring to be superior, self-directed, self-controlled, commitment to rewarding objectives, achievement, seeks responsibility, solving problems creatively [TASK focus – the ACHIEVING INDIVIDUAL].  Individual ambition and distinction is important	<b>On the INDIVIDUAL</b> Respectful, dignity, kindness and good character, generosity, hard work, endurance, discipline, honour, patience, open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, loyalty, compassion [HUMAN focus – the SERVING INDIVIDUAL].  Acceptance/support by the group and conformity to group values and norms is important.
<b>On the COLLECTIVE</b> Good teamwork, friendship, good group spirit, good belongingness and group love are valued.  The young better adapted to change than elders and parents, create new customs, solutions (seek change).  Elders not highly valued as wise men.  Time as linear and a valued commodity	<b>On the COLLECTIVE</b> Group solidarity, conformity, cooperation, living in harmony, recognising the humanity of others, community spiritedness, involving alms-giving, sympathy, care and sensitivity for the needs of others, hospitality, conviviality, sociability.  Preserve stability and accepted social customs (do not seek change).  Elders valued as leaders/sages.  Time as cyclical, time as healer.

**Figure 1: Comparison of Western and African Humanism**

WESTERN management values	AFRICAN management values
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Full and free communication, regardless of rank and power.</li> <li>2. Reliance on consensus rather than on coercion to manage conflict.</li> <li>3. Influence based on technical competence and knowledge rather than on the vagaries of personal whims or prerogatives of power.</li> <li>4. An atmosphere that permits and even encourages emotional expression as well as task oriented behaviour.</li> <li>5. A human bias, one that accepts the inevitability of conflict between the organization and the individual but is willing to cope with and mediate this conflict on rational grounds.</li> <li>6. Trust: a combination of competence, constancy, caring, fairness, candour and authenticity.</li> <li>7. The organization as community (citizen contract).</li> <li>8. Freedom and the opportunity for self-expression</li> <li>9. Teamwork, empowerment, performance management, rationality, delegation, listening and learning.</li> <li>10. Prefers visionary, dynamic (transformational) leadership that provides direction and ensures performance.</li> <li>11. Concern with achievement.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Treat others with dignity and respect.</li> <li>2. Negotiate in good faith. Take time to listen with empathy.</li> <li>3. Provide opportunities for self expression, honouring achievement, self fulfilment (celebrations).</li> <li>4. Understand the beliefs and practices of indigenous people.</li> <li>5. Honour seniority, especially in leadership choices.</li> <li>6. Promote equity in the workplace (fairness).</li> <li>7. Be flexible and accommodative.</li> <li>8. Organizations infused with humaneness, a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness.</li> <li>9. Emphasis on social well being rather than on technical rationality.</li> <li>10. Equilibrium with other human beings and with the supernatural as guiding principles.</li> <li>11. Prefers a leader who is kind, considerate and understanding, to one who is too dynamic and productive and, possibly, too demanding (paternalism).</li> <li>12. Concern with security.</li> </ol>

**Figure 2: Humanistic values in Western and African management thought**

### Communitarian trends in Western management literature

Despite the predominantly individualist tendency in Western management thought (as noted above), there have also been more group-oriented, communitarian, developments, some of which are briefly indicated below.

### Participative management

There is a decades-old tradition of writing and research in the Western management literature, on the nature and benefits of having greater employee participation in organizational decision-making.

From a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective this may be seen as insufficient in promoting a communal type of business culture, yet at the time it represented a real advance away from the paternalistic Human Relations movement of the pre-WW II years. It also later in the 20th century led to an increasing emphasis on the importance of effective, cooperative work teams and of consensual decision-making. A recent example is the research of Kim (2002) into the relationship between participative management, strategic planning and job satisfaction in local government agencies. He also found positive relationships between participative management, job satisfaction and supervisory communication practices, and proposes that a culture of participative management replace the current hierarchical organization.

### Organizational citizenship

Starting in the late 1980s, and with the rising awareness of the need to view the organization as community, the emphasis shifted toward employee contributions 'beyond the call of duty', as an important organizational phenomenon.

This research trend was launched by Denis Organ (1988), who defined organizational citizenship (OCB) as: "...behaviour that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization . . . the behaviour is not an enforceable requirement of the role or the job description ... the behaviour is a matter of personal choice' (p. 4).

More recently, Acquah (2004) investigated the relationship between OCB and HRM practices in an African context, in an attempt to explain the causes of underdevelopment of human resources in Africa. He emphasises the importance of training and education in organizations that will develop the following leadership and management qualities and behaviours:

- Guaranteeing fairness or justice principles;
- Respect and demonstrated concern for the well-being and satisfaction of employees;
- Leadership qualities that exhibit transformational and supportive behavioural characteristics;
- Building and demonstrating long-term loyalty and commitment relationships with employees;
- Honouring psychological contracts with employees.

### Organizational democracy

There are also management writers concerned with the possible application of principles of political democracy to business and work organizations.

Manville and Ober (2003) review the idea of business organizations adopting democratic structures, but conclude that this may not be feasible given trends such as: a highly mobile (temporary) work force; globalisation of markets and labour; technological advances, and demographic shifts.

For Harrison and Freeman (2004) organizational democracy is associated with advantages such as: increased employee involvement and satisfaction, increased stakeholder commitment, and, organizational performance. The downside, however, is that democratic processes are time-consuming, will absorb significant organizational resources, and are likely to lead to lower efficiencies.

Kerr (2004) is adamant that the principles and processes of democratic governance (as typically found in the political sphere of society) are inappropriate for business organizations. He identifies the following limitations:

- The characteristics of political democracy – accountability to the governed, right of participation, free exchange of information, and right of representation – are rarely, if ever, supported in organizations;
- The basic function of political democracy – legitimisation of authority – has no counterpart in organizations;
- Managers are reluctant to share power, grant autonomy, disclose information, or include employees in substantive decision-making;
- Workers have not always been eager to participate in decision-making when doing so has resulted in greater task ambiguity and increased accountability for outcomes.

### Hofstede's Individualism-Collectivism

In the wake of Geert Hofstede's influential research on global categories of culture in the 1970s and early 80s (at IBM), many researchers worldwide conducted empirical studies using one or more of these categories (individualism, collectivism, power distance, masculine-feminine, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation). Although Hofstede's scheme still seems to enjoy much support, it also elicited criticism and his work is seen as deficient in a number of respects, such as:

- Varying empirical support for the categories from other researchers. For instance, Thomas and Bendixen (2000) found that both management culture and perceived management effectiveness were independent of both race and the dimensions of culture; with regard to individualism-collectivism, Theron and Strydom (1996), on the other hand, found that on the dimension of independence/conformity, Zulus research subjects were more inclined toward conformity than the White groups; Eaton and Louw (2000) found that, as were expected according to individualism-collectivism theory, African language speakers produced more interdependent and concrete self descriptions than did English speakers; Gray and Marshall's (1998) factor analytic study of Korean and Kenyan subjects, however, showed little agreement with Hofstede's culture categories; Chapman (1997) indicates that anthropological data do not readily fit Hofstede's questionnaire-based model.
- Conceptual and methodological flaws in Hofstede's work. Sondergaard (2004) summarises shortcomings as follows: surveys as inappropriate for measuring culture, the unit of analysis of nations is not the best unit suited for studying culture, one company cannot provide information about entire national cultures, the IBM data is old and obsolete, four dimensions are inadequate to describe culture (McSweeney, 2002; Singh, 2004; and Chapman 1997).

## SHORTCOMINGS IN WESTERN HUMANISM

Western humanism in the management sciences context early on in the 1950s and 60s became associated with Douglas McGregor's (1960) influential Theory Y. This theory, which heavily relied on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and especially his concept of individual self-actualization, presented the following humanistic assumptions about humans in the workplace:

1. *The expenditure of physical and mental effort is as natural as play or rest.* The average human being does not inherently dislike work.
2. *External control and the threat of punishment are not the only means for bringing about effort toward organizational objectives.* Man will exercise self-direction and self-control in the service of objectives to which he is committed.

3. *Commitment to objectives is a function of the rewards associated with their achievement.* The most significant of such rewards, e.g., the satisfaction of ego and self-actualization needs, can be direct products of effort directed toward organizational objectives.
4. *The average human being learns, under proper conditions, not only to accept but to seek responsibility.* Avoidance of responsibility, lack of ambition, and emphasis on security are generally consequences of experience, not inherent human characteristics.
5. *The capacity to exercise a relatively high degree of imagination, ingenuity, and creativity in the solution of organizational problems is widely, not narrowly, distributed in the population.*
6. *Under conditions of modern industrial life, the intellectual potentialities of the average human being are only partially utilized.* (McGregor, 1960; pp. 47 and 48)

From an African perspective the absence of any reference to the human group and the social/community setting by McGregor, is clearly noticeable. However, in the years and decades that followed, Theory Y assumptions of human nature were almost unanimously accepted in the community of management and organizational scholars and scientists.

Careful scrutiny shows that McGregor also tried to do justice to management (economic) objectives and concerns. Warren Bennis (1973), who early on regarded organizational democracy as inevitable, later had second thoughts about it, while Walter Nord (1978) expressed his pessimism about the chances of ever achieving a Theory Y organization, given the realities of power differences, hierarchy, conflicting goals and routine work that is ever-present in organizations. Abraham Maslow (1965), himself, doubted whether Theory Y assumptions could realistically be generalised to the wider population. As he expressed it: "... it is perfectly true that almost every human being has a tendency to grow toward self-actualization; but it is just as true that every human being has a trend toward regression, toward fear of growth, toward not wanting self-actualization ..." (Maslow, 1965; p. 30)

In summary: the following shortcomings or flaws in Western humanism (Theory Y approaches), seen from a management sciences perspective, may be noted:

- *One-sidedness.* Perhaps the single most important point that can be raised against Theory Y is that it represents an over-optimistic and one-sided picture of human nature;
- *Conceptual Ambiguity.* There is clear evidence (as shown above) of conceptual ambiguity in Theory Y (WH) ideas among the pioneers of this approach;
- *Neglecting the role of socialization and culture.* The social needs and cultural context of being human were not given explicit attention in Theory Y (WH);
- *Neglecting the dimension of power in organizational life.* Approaches based on Theory Y assume that managers will be willing to share power and access to resources with their subordinates. However, as management writers and researchers later pointed out (see, for instance, Nord, 1978), power equalization implies real sacrifices and risks to currently powerful people (managers). These people, furthermore, also have a higher need for power and control and will not likely surrender the powers and privileges of office for an egalitarian system of, say, management-by-Indaba, -Kgotla or -Bosberaad (although in the South African context these have become important supplementary forums for wider deliberation).
- *Neglecting the hierarchical nature of work organizations.* To complicate the picture for the optimistic theory Y (or WH) approach even further, organizations are structured as hierarchies, that is, according to different functions, sub-functions and levels of authority. Hierarchy is a fundamental characteristic of all living entities, which enable them to survive and successfully deal with

complexity. As Harold Leavitt (2003) reminds us in a recent article: "...multilevel hierarchies remain the best available mechanism for doing complex work. It is unrealistic to expect that we will do away with them in the foreseeable future. It seems more sensible to accept the reality that hierarchies are here to stay and work hard to reduce their highly noxious by-products, while making them more habitable for humans and more productive as well" (p. 102)

## SHORTCOMINGS IN AFRICAN HUMANISM

African humanism, with its emphasis on the group, complements Western humanism (with its focus on individual well-being in the workplace), yet it tends to suffer from the same deficiencies as WH (outlined above). Important shortcomings are:

- *One-sidedness.* Similar to Theory Y assumptions, AH presents and promotes a skewed and over-optimistic group orientation as the answer to the problems of human society and of work organizations;
- *Conceptual Ambiguity.* There is clear evidence (as indicated in previous sections) of conceptual ambiguity in the various descriptions and definitions of AH;
- *Neglecting the role of the individual in society and organization.* Whereas Western humanism (WH) suffers from a loss of contact with and of appreciation of the advantages of the ongoing group/community context of human existence, African humanism (AH), in the writings of most African theorists and scholars, does not sufficiently acknowledge and value the role of the individual in society and in work organizations;
- *Neglecting the dimension of power in organizational life.* As with Theory Y approaches, AH does not sufficiently acknowledge the existence and dynamics of the power differential in human relationships. It tends to assume that all will be fine in organizations as long as you have a harmonious, family-like, work culture and setting where everyone is accepted and treated as an equal, and where kind and considerate leaders are on stand-by to provide support, guidance and advice. Prinsloo (1998) points out that the application of Ubuntu in the workplace, as a system of management by consensus, is problematic. He writes: "The idea has been created that participatory management in terms of Ubuntu culture will always be consensus management because the aim is to eliminate conflict. But where people differ about important issues, consensus can be problematic (Prinsloo, 1998; p. 49)." Agbakoba (2004), in turn, emphasizes the fact that the authoritarian principle is central and more or less common to all African societies (p. 144).
- *Neglecting the hierarchical nature of society and work organizations.* AH also tends, rather idealistically (as with WH), to oppose, neglect or conveniently ignore the existence of hierarchy, whether in African society at large or in work organizations. However, African culture and society in general are thoroughly hierarchical, whether they are viewed in terms of spiritual hierarchies or in terms of different layers of headship and responsibility in the social structure of a tribe or village community.
- *Neglecting the first world-third world mix of African societies.* African humanism (AH) writers tend to present Ubuntu as the traditionalist (collectivist) answer to outweigh or replace a legacy of Western colonialism, industrialization and exploitative business practices. Yet, vast sections (the increasing majority) of South African citizens of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds are now becoming thoroughly urbanized, enjoying all or most of the fruits of an individualist Western life-style, technology, education and employment opportunities.

## CHANGING NATURE OF EMPLOYMENT

An important issue is that both WH and AH approaches do not seem to consider the radically changed nature of employment. Both forms of humanisms for the workplace tend to implicitly premise or assume steady employment, job security and the building of a career and long-term workplace relationships within one or a few organizations. But the reality of work and business today, namely: of frequent corporate failures, mergers and take-overs, organizational re-structuring, outsourcing, multiple and highly mobile careers, do not fit this picture.

The full implications of these trends for humanism in the employment situation (especially for establishing a sense of community at work) need to be determined and researched. Mumford (1995) highlights the contradiction between management thought and the actual employment situation: "Employees are expected to be loyal and highly motivated to achieve quality and performance standards, while their long-term employment prospects are being eroded with stress substituted for job satisfaction" (p. 59). Stum (1999), in a nationwide study in the USA, found that: "commitment declined within virtually every industry, age group, income group, and job classification" (p. 5); while Abraham's (2000) research indicate an increase in various forms of cynicism in organizations. Thus, Western and African approaches to humanism in work organizations will have to take note of these employment trends.

## SOLUTION

### The dialectic of human nature

Overall, the discussion above shows that current views of human nature in the management and organizational literature tend to be one-sided, narrow and cast in exclusionary terms.

It must, therefore, at once be emphasised that in the relationship: *self* and *others (community/group)* there can be no 'pure' self without community and no 'pure' community without individuals. This basic realization has, in various ways, been acknowledged since antiquity. For instance, the Socratic Plato's celebration of individual human reasoning (albeit in dialogue with others) co-existed with his strong preference for a political solution influenced by the close-knit, austere and collectivist example of Spartan society (already in decline in his time). In Plato's ideal society the needs and desires of the individual citizen (especially women and children) were to be subordinated to the 'good' of the State as interpreted and managed by an intellectual aristocracy (the philosopher-rulers) – thus effectively a form of collectivism.

During the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, individual creativity, freedom of expression and the autonomy of Reason increasingly became valued qualities in European and Western culture, as reflected later in the social contract and utilitarian (individualist) theories of society (e.g., Hobbes, Rousseau, Bentham, Mill). The concept democracy in the West eventually took shape in the keen realization that the well-being of the individual citizen and the common good both had to be accommodated in any blueprint for a viable society—with mutual checks and balances, of course. History shows that the tyranny of the hierarch (e.g., the divine right of Kings, Emperors, religious leaders, and of leaders succumbing to a God-complex) eventually becomes as destructive of basic rights and of the integrity and development of the human person and of the community, as is the tyranny of the masses (anarchy) under the sway of the forces of irrationality, passion and/or an unquestioning conformity to some totalitarian ideal.

*Self* and *society* may be juxtaposed intellectually but is in reality an inseparable whole and can neither component ever be disregarded or abolished, without consequently attenuating any meaningful discussion of the human condition. Both individualist and collectivist views of humans are necessary but insufficient explanations of the reality of human nature. In the context of the African continent, the dynamic mutualism of individual and collective needs and forces are clearly shown in the following narrative account (Figure 3) of life in the Kalabari tribe of Southern Nigeria.

Kalabari society ... encourages aggressive individualism and personal achievement ... [but] ... the individual in Kalabari is not conceived as a sovereign agent, individuated apart from or before his community experience, who has innate right to choose his ends. Obviously the two paradigms are in conflict with each other. Whilst the conscious [COLLECTIVIST/SOCIAL] paradigm submits to house authority and togetherness, the subterranean market paradigm [INDIVIDUALIST/ECONOMIC] hates and rejects it.

The major determinant of status is individual initiative, which may actually encourage flouting of community norms. To succeed he has to combine aggressive individualism with his community responsibilities. The aspiring trader is expected to live in harmony with both men and gods. This means he has to make personal sacrifices to promote the welfare of every house member. If he ignored this the spirits will punish him with sickness and misfortunes. Successful men – wealthy people – are those who have been able to master the forces of collectivism and individualism inherent in the Kalabari conceptual scheme.

One way Kalabari entrepreneurs handle the conflict between profits and society-legitimated welfare demands is by demarcating their value domain to emphasize one norm over the other. Occasionally, when confronted, the entrepreneur would say "*miye tubo, ani oru, duein, wari gbolomaa*," this is trading, not welfare, or issues of spirits, ancestors and house. One finds this approach even in their dealing with the gods. If the people have decided an issue in a way that is contrary to the revealed desires of gods, the Kalabari people would say, "what the people say the gods concur." If a Kalabari god becomes too demanding or more dangerous than useful, Kalabari would say *agu nsi owi baka kuma, en k'o karare sin en dugo k'o piri ba* – "when a spirit becomes too furious, people will tell him the wood he was carved from." That is, people can unanimously annul the power of a spirit by refusing to worship it. In this vein, the power of the welfare demand on a chief could be annulled if it becomes more dangerous than useful to the bottom line.

In summary, the Kalabari conceptual model stands on two legs: forces of society and forces of aggressive competition.

**Figure 3: Dialectic of the individual and community in Kalabari society**

Wariboke (1999: pp. 19–28)

The general premise of a dialectical approach to human nature is that two basic tendencies are always operative in a mutualistic (oppositional and complementary) manner: the *self-assertive* tendency and the *self-transcendent* tendency. Excessive self-assertion, whether by the person or the group (tribe or community) is destructive of life. Excessive self-transcendence, whether by the person or the group (tribe or community) is also destructive of life.

- The *self-assertive* tendency in humankind is manifested in, for example, authoritarianism, competition and *individualism* as dynamic expressions of a living entity's wholeness.
- The *self-transcending* tendency in human society finds expression in phenomena such as co-operation, "social fusion"; participation, nationalism and *communalism*, which indicate the part-ness of a living entity in relation to a larger, more inclusive form of life.

A dynamic approach to human nature (as sketched above), should assist in framing the WH and AH literature in a more comprehensive and realistic manner, and so add to our knowledge of human behaviour in work organizations.

## Conclusion

The management literature on Western and African humanism tends to be conceptually limiting, exclusionary and also lack consideration of present-day organizational and employment realities. Both WH and AH need to be considered conjointly for South African work organizations.

Any wholesale adoption of either African humanism (*ubuntu*) or Western humanism as a philosophy and practice of management will be problematic. No easy generalizations to the workplace in South Africa can be made at this stage. All in all it is probably safer to say that as the new democracy develops its own character and core values, so it will also be reflected within business and work organizations, being (in a sense) microcosms of the country at large.

The African cultural mindset and approach to life (broadly speaking) is an acknowledged fact, but how it impacts on the cultures of work organizations in South Africa is not yet as clear or unproblematic as some may think. It will most probably manifest itself in a multitude of different and unspoken pathways of new rules, customs and habits of behaviour in the workplace, over time. That is one reason why intuitively plausible but oversimplified and static models of management such as Hofstede's well-known five cultural categories, or Lessem's 'four worlds' model (1996) are limited and/or utopian.

Much more research is required on humanism in South African work organizations, especially the use of methodologies grounded in qualitative and interpretive approaches to knowledge. There is currently too much ideologically slanted speculation and rhetoric in this field. Neither an exclusively Western (Euro-centric) nor exclusively African (Afro-centric) model of society and organization is realistic or indeed advisable.

The bi-polar dynamic of the *individual* and the *organization/society*, of *freedom* and *authority*, remains fundamental. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that hierarchy (bureaucracy) is notoriously difficult to replace with egalitarian structures and policies, as hordes of management pundits, consultants, gurus and theorists have learnt over the past many decades (and are still learning today).

The complexities of human nature and of the psycho-dynamics of the individual argue against utopian attempts to re-engineer human societies and work organizations. The universal dialectic of *self-assertive* and *self-transcending* tendencies, of both regressive and growth forces in the human psyche, the joint and necessary co-existence of *individual* and *society* forbid any easy or one-sided solution, as a panacea for human well-being in the workplace.

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