

A critical analysis of ubuntu as the nexus of identity development in present-day Africa



Authors:

Benson O. Anofuechi¹ 
John S. Klaasen¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Religion and Theology, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

Corresponding author:

John Klaasen,
jsklaasen@uwc.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 01 Feb. 2023
Accepted: 08 Sept. 2023
Published: 16 Feb. 2024

How to cite this article:

Anofuechi, B.O. & Klaasen, J.S., 2024, 'A critical analysis of ubuntu as the nexus of identity development in present-day Africa', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a8507. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.8507>

Copyright:

© 2024. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

In African society today, ubuntu as a notion of African humanism has been, and still is, subject to critical discussion. In African literature, philosophy, ethics, anthropology and theology, ubuntu plays a vast role and scholars in Africa and globally find the notion highly debated. The concept of identity development on the African continent has been written about broadly. This article unpacks the ubuntu philosophies of Augustine Shutte, Kwame Gyekye and John Mbiti. The views of these scholars will be contrasted to critically engage the conceivable commonalities for identity development through cultures. The question addressed herein is: What are the similarities and dissimilarities of ubuntu as a cornerstone for identity development in modern Africa? This article also examines the divergent definition and historical development of ubuntu culture, ubuntu philosophy of identity development, environmental development and various thinkers' understanding of this African worldview in current Africa and further afield.

Contribution: This research contributes to African theological ethics of the new landscape identity and explores the ubuntu worldviews as a developmental process of identities across cultures. Since identity development across cultures is highly dynamic, the hermeneutical interpretation of the principles of ubuntu is crucial.

Keywords: Africa; cultures; Gyekye; identity development; Mbiti; Shutte; ubuntu.

Introduction

The notion of ubuntu as the essence of humanism has been and still is a topic open to critical scrutiny in African culture. As claimed by the South African Bishop Dandala (1996),

Ubuntu is not a concept easily distilled into a methodological procedure. It is rather a bedrock of a specific lifestyle or culture that seeks to honour human relationships as primary in any social, communal, or corporate activity. (p. 69)

Ubuntu remains a resource from which attitudes and actions develop. According to the maxim, '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person because of others) becomes a statement that levels all people' (Broodryk 2006:22). It basically means that no one is independent, and that interdependence is a reality for all. Ubuntu culture is an important part of personal identity, adding to the notion of people's perceptions of individualism and the community they are identified with. This ancient African way of life (ubuntu culture) can be defensible in contemporary society, based on the peculiar importance (regarding the notion of individualism in the Western ideology) of an all-encompassing practical engagement with all others and on life in a community with others.

Interestingly, ubuntu application is integrated into all aspects of everyday life all over Africa, such as during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process, environmental development, business management, education, moral renewal, politics, religion, nation-building and technology. Ubuntu is a value system shared among Bantu-speaking people in the East, West, Southern and Central African communities (Shutte 2001:viii). Etymologically, ubuntu, a Nguni term comprising the augmented preface *u-*, the abstract noun preface *bu* and the noun stem *-ntu*, means person. The term originated from many vernacular languages and shares the same concept, root, construction and linguistics. Numerous indigenous cultural groups use the linguistic variation of the term, but its worldview, meaning and application are universal to the native people of the African continent. For example, in Kenya, the Kikuyu use the term *Umundu*, and the Merians use *Umuntu*; in Tanzania, the Sukuma people use the term *Bumuntu*, and the Chagga use *Undu*; and in East Africa, the Swahili people use *Utu* (Asante, Miike & Yin 2013:114).

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Broodryk (2002:26) expressed the mutual worldview and culture of ubuntu as the broad old African philosophy founded on the fundamental values of profound humanism, humility, interdependence, hospitality, communalism, respect, caring, conviviality, solidarity and related values, guaranteeing equal coexistence among communities. According to Asante et al. (2013:114), ubuntu refers to the philosophy of multidimensionality, representing the fundamental values of African worldviews including collective shared responsibility and reverence to humanity. Similarly, Louw (2003:18) submits that ubuntu can be understood as an honest portrayal of social ethics and role-model behaviour.

This study examines the cultural identity development of the African philosophy called ubuntu as a common and shared humanity. It explores the contribution of Augustine Shutte's metaphysical notion of ubuntu humanism. A critical examination of Shutte's edited work entitled, *The Quest for Humanity in Science and Religion: The South African Experience* (ed. 2006) is undertaken herein. Shutte contends that the African traditional understanding of humanity, as the basis of identity development, could only be articulated through the African worldview of ubuntu. He contends that ubuntu ethics are applicable in different spheres of life, including politics, the TRC process, etc. Moreover, this study also surveys John Mbiti's normative approach to ubuntu philosophy. Mbiti (1990:106) describes ubuntu as a philosophy of pastoral care by stating that 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. Simply put, Mbiti claims that people are mutually connected to other people and are obligated to care for their welfare. This study further highlights the conceptual perspective of Kwame Gyekye's (1997) approach to identity development in a *person* and *community*. Gyekye's explanation of *moderate communitarianism* comprehends a person as an integral collective being of interdependence and shared common good. The notion of identity development of *person*, *personhood* and *human being* has been tested across cultures, social norms and religions within the new identity landscape. This study scrutinises the contradictory definition and historical development of ubuntu culture, ubuntu philosophy of identity development, environmental development and various scholars' perspectives of this African worldview in today's Africa and globally.

Definition of ubuntu as cultural development

It is well recognised that the term ubuntu is difficult to define. It has been variably described as an ancient and traditional African worldview, a common philosophy of life or a set of values that has a strong and substantial role in fostering social behaviour (Mokgoro 1997:2). Ubuntu serves as a 'unifying vision of community built upon compassionate, respectful, interdependent relationships, a rule of conduct, a social ethic, the moral and spiritual foundation for African societies' (Swartz 2006:560). In the majority of academic and philosophical communities, the definition of ubuntu is still

a hotly debated topic. According to some academics, this worldview cannot be adequately described using terms from outside of Africa. Yvonne Mokgoro (1997) articulated:

[T]he concept ubuntu, like many African concepts, is not easily definable. To define an African notion in a foreign language and from an abstract as opposed to a concrete approach is to defy the very essence of the African worldview and can also be particularly elusive ... because the African worldview cannot be neatly categorised and defined, any definition would only be a simplification of a more expansive, flexible and philosophically accommodative idea. (pp. 2–3)

However, Praeg and Magadla (2014:96–99) postulate that the ambiguity and controversy surrounding the definitions of ubuntu praxis as a concept of African humanism is still varied and exhibit striking similarity in principle. In their fights for survival and the establishment of a just society, African communitarianism, African renaissance, Pan-Africanism, identity development and African socialism have all used ubuntu as their guiding principle. Extraordinarily, Christian Gade, a Danish academic, traced the historical evolution of ubuntu in written dissertations (Gade 2011:303–330). Gade claims that from 1846, the concept of ubuntu has frequently occurred in academic publications and has been shown in five stages, namely:

During stage 1 (1846–1962): Gade demonstrates that throughout this period, the term ubuntu solely referred to a special human quality that raised a person to a place close to a deity. Ubuntu here alludes to people and their goodness.

During stage 2 (1962–1975): According to Gade, around this time new information began to surface in scholarly writing that tied ubuntu to philosophy in general. According to ubuntu philosophy, humankind in the living world must be viewed as *umuntu* (a person) in order to address the inherent instability of being. Gade submits that the philosophy of ubuntu was viewed as one that promoted the common welfare of humanity and featured an important element of identity formation.

During stage 3 (1975–1990s): Some authors identified ubuntu as African humanism. This term includes showing solidarity, charity, good living (*buen vivir*), forgiveness, conviviality, care, love, compassion and hope.

During stage 4 (1990s–2000): Ubuntu here was well defined as the lens through which Africans see reality. For example, according to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, it was ubuntu that forced many victims of apartheid in South Africa to choose amnesty rather than vengeance. Gade shows that scholars who identified ubuntu as a worldview believed that if ubuntu were protected and lived out, Africa and the world would not face climate change, social injustice, crime, racism, tribalism and ethnic conflict. Acknowledging ubuntu would free humanity from tremendous social problems, such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), malaria, coronavirus

disease 2019 (COVID-19), gender-based violence (GBV), soil erosion, inequality, unemployment, homelessness, fundamentalism, malnutrition, pollution, rape, corruption, polio, tuberculosis, religious conflict and poverty.

During stage 5 (2000–2011): Gade recognised that the term ubuntu was connected to the South African Zulu proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' ('a person is a person through other people'), used from 1993 to 1995. In a more philosophical sense, however, it means a belief in the universal bond of giving and sharing that unites all humankind.

Gade (2011) proves that since 1995 the proverb has acquired an important place in explaining the concept of ubuntu. Since then, the proverb has been quoted or mentioned in connection with human interconnectedness. Ubuntu ideology is a term widely used and applied in the context of Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). When we encounter ideologies, they are often difficult to explain because they are understood and applied differently in different situations.

Ubuntu philosophy and identity development

The philosophy of ubuntu culture respects the birth and development of human beings. According to ubuntu culture the stages of development do not end with physical childbirth. Mbiti (1969:107) claimed that 'nature brings the children into the world, but society creates the child into a social being, a communal person'. The communities nurture the ongoing formation of the children's identity development throughout the developmental stages. Children are aided by the person's formation in the community. Personhood is continually achieved by the standard of the community. Contrarily, Shutte (2001) argued:

Our deepest moral obligation is to become fully human. And this means entering more and more deeply into the community with others. So, although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded. (p. 30)

One of the reasons identity development is irreplaceable is that it is the path to becoming familiar with the community as revered with the soul of humanness (ubuntu philosophy). An individual who fails to sustain connections worthy to others is judged as uncaring. Society, in this way, perceives one as an individual first and after that as part of the community (Chuwa 2012:16).

Furthermore, each individual is abetted by the community and is expected to collaborate with the identity formation process of others. Gbadegesin (1991:65) indicated that 'every member is expected to consider him- or herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all'. This implies communality, since an individual understands personhood through other persons in their communities. Gyekye's perception of the pressure between the individual and community is in some extent distinctive. In contrast, Gyekye refers to Mbiti's community as a 'radical

community' and expresses the expression 'moderate community', accepting that the community supports that reason and individual goals, although Shutte's perception is similar to Gyekye's point of view of the community.

Moreover, Metz and Gaie (2010:275) suggest that 'African ethics is essentially relational in a way that other western approaches usually are not'. They compared the African philosophy for justice, neutrality and human rights perspective with present-day Western thinking. The clear constituent of the human rights rule and contention is restricted to the African knowledge of equity. Metz and Gaie (2010) explain that ubuntu comprises:

[A]n impartial element, part of which is a matter of individual rights. Traditional African societies have often thought of human life as having a dignity that implies recognition of certain universal human rights. (p. 275)

They further declare that,

[D]espite the moral prominence given to their community, native sub-Saharan societies are well-known for having welcomed a stranger to their villages, giving him food and shelter for at least a period of time. (Metz & Gaie 2010:283)

This ubuntu essence of human compassion recognised human dignity and egalitarianism for the sake of equality, fairness and justice.

However, Metz (2007) quotes comments by the Constitutional Court of South Africa that intermittently apply ubuntu and its knowledge of fundamental human rights in legal battles which correlate with Shutte's beliefs of rights. For example, Justice Yvonne Mokgoro (1997:2–3) maintains that '[H]uman rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human person ... is not different from what the Spirit of Ubuntu embraces'. Chiefly, Metz and Gaie (2010:283) advocate that the indigenous African development of justice, which is encapsulated in ubuntu, could be shortened, and surpasses Kohlberg's philosophy of justice (model of respect for equal rights of persons), and the ethical development of caring (model of mutuality and relationality of care).

Paradoxically, the core of African identity development that epitomises ubuntu is a human way of life. The philosophy of justice and care, thus ubuntu relationality, is a source of identity development, which is the ethical development of humanity. Onah (2008) suggests that the purpose of African ethics is that:

[A]t the center of traditional African ethics is human life. Africans have a sacred reverence for life ... to protect and nurture their lives; all human beings are inserted within a given community. The community, therefore, is a means to an end: human life. (p. 12)

Thus, the continuance of humanity is, consequently, the crucial figure (ubuntu principle) of African ethics and the developmental comfort of the community. Therefore, living cordially in the community is the ethical duty put in place by God for the continuance of humanity (Onah 2008:13).

Thaddeus Metz (2007) claimed ethical belief passionately agrees with the SSA position towards humanity:

[A]n action is right just insofar as it promotes the well-being of others without violating their rights; an action is wrong to the extent that it either violates rights or fails to enhance the welfare of one's fellows without violating rights. (p. 330)

Subsequently, the basic point of ubuntu is to protect the basic human rights of humankind. Relatively, Tutu (1999:35) specified, '[H]armony, friendliness, community are great goods; Social harmony is for people the *summum bonum* – the greatest good'. Tutu included that immoralities ought to be dodged since they either forecast or unsettle humankind. The ubuntu logic of identity development incorporates the nobility of other people, the acknowledgement of their personhood, the developmental process of the human relationship with others, the energetic respect for human rights and the implementation of justice for all (Chuwa 2012:19).

Shutte's metaphysical approach to ubuntu philosophy

Augustine Shutte's edited book, *The Quest for Humanity in Science and Religion: The South African Experience* (2006), indicates the modern experience and culture in South Africa:

[T]he scientific secular culture of Europe and the traditional religious culture of Africa, the dominant culture and the culture of the majority, did not interpenetrate and mingle as they did elsewhere. What we now have, therefore, is a situation where we are engaged, in every sphere of life, in intercultural contact, conversation and conflict. (Shutte 2006:xiii)

Shutte (2006:xiv) likewise describes the connection with the African ubuntu and European philosophy as '[E]uropean culture has taught us to see the self as something private, hidden within our bodies. The African image is very different: the self is outside the body, present and open to all'. This shows that an individual should not survive alone but, instead, depend on others for survival. He reiterates that the ideology of ubuntu is related to the fulfilment and happiness of humanity. It derives from our nature as humans and not just simple obedience to the arbitrary or conventional standards of society. It is important to say that:

[T]he traditional African idea of the extended family as something that includes far more than parents and children, is perhaps the most common and most powerful protection of the value of Ubuntu ... breathing together they have one breath, one spirit, one heart. A community is a unity of a uniquely personal kind. (Shutte 2006:xviii)

One could therefore argue that advocating for identity development is cardinaly important for all and not just significant others. It is through the sense of belonging to the community that a person becomes one in accord with the community. This shows that every person's and community's fundamental duty is lived by and abides by good with others in the spirit of ubuntu.

In South Africa, the TRC provided the best practical illustration of how ubuntu philosophy determines humans in relation to the community. The South African post-apartheid conflict resolution was interested in restorative processes of justice for all (Oetzel et al. 2006:549). Regarding the community and political environment, the TRC sought to find mutual understanding among all South Africans, and offered two specific possibilities, namely:

An attempt to achieve reconciliation through the punishment of wrongdoing,

and

A favoured position that sought to find ways to forgive the past actions of perpetrators across the political spectrum.

Nevertheless, the TRC consequently became an indicator of a new, reconciliatory national ethos, recalling aspects of ubuntu as it called for compromise and collaboration by all citizens. (Oetzel et al. 2006:550)

The narrative is fundamental to African culture and ubuntu; the TRC sought to connect its results with all the people and healing nationally. The TRC attained this by the propagation of exceedingly personalised accounts, which detailed the severe oppression of thousands of South African people during apartheid (Gibson 2006:409).

Furthermore, Thabo Mbeki's concept of the 'African Renaissance' which refers to the nonappearance of oppression, and the vitality of 'hybridity, heterogeneity, otherness, [and] difference' implies a new African identity that 'inserts ambiguity into the midst of hegemony and which does so both through image and act' (Cochrane 2009:21–23). There is an important wherewithal for the comprehensive vision of an African identity free from colonialism; there is no space for rigidity between foreignness and strangeness, and differences and otherness within the African Renaissance. Cochrane (2009) points to:

[I]dentities which embrace a Renaissance of a different kind, not yet recognised, but maybe [*sic*] present in a sublimated form in the burgeoning community that increasingly pervades the African new landscape, and beyond. (pp. 24–25)

Klaasen (2016) argues that the boundary-bound particularity of the discourse of ascertaining identity is beyond inflexibility with regards to class, gender, nationality, race, faith and various social economic status. Therefore, culture plays a significant role by affirming and shaping identity through the developmental stages of a person's life.

Gyekye's conceptualisation approach to ubuntu philosophy

Kwame Gyekye's (1997) notion of 'person and community' contested the interpretation that, in African belief, the community bestows selfhood on the person. Hence, self-identity is purely a duplicate of the community. Gyekye characterises this understanding with African philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti, and socialist political activists such as Kwame Nkrumah's ideology of *consciencism* in the democratic

state of Ghana; Léopold Senghor's ideology of *Négritude* in Senegal; Kenneth Kaunda's conception of *African humanism* in Zambia; and Julius Nyerere's institution of *Ujamaa* in Tanzania. Similar are Obafemi Awolowo of Nigeria and Tom Mboya of Kenya, as illustrations of leaders who cherished one socialism or the other. Gyekye claims that African beliefs ascribe specific norms to a person, and quoted the Akan maxim from West Africa that 'all persons are children of God; no one is a child of the earth, and a person is conceived as a theomorphic being, having in their nature an aspect of God' (Gyekye 1997:48). Consequently, he proclaimed that a person is more than just a visible entity, but a child of God, and thus mostly valued in the community.

Gyekye's perception of *African communitarianism* is comparable to and diverse from Mbiti's and Shutte's conceptions respectively. Matolino (2009) writes that Gyekye alleges that each thinker falls short of integrating the liberty and privileges of individuals within the community. In contrast, Gyekye viewed Mbiti's and Shutte's versions as *radical communitarianism* which is hypothetically vulnerable. Thus, Gyekye's *moderate communitarianism* refers to real community and not mainly a congregation of persons, which contributes to the African cultural identity development (Gyekye 1997:49).

Klaasen (2014:72–73) maintains that the aspect of selfhood in identity development from an African viewpoint could lead to selfhood and individual obligation for critical cultural development as the 'African notion of person is embedded within the ontological and epistemic community ... marked by various phenomena that impact the individual [and community]'. He similarly categorises three main philosophers or theologians who have common notions about selfhood within the African paradigm, viz.: Ifeanyi Menkiti's perception of *communitarianism*; Kwame Gyekye's concept of *interactionism*; and Desmond Tutu's idea of *interdependence*. The critical correlation of the role of selfhood towards identity development across cultures embraces the three approaches of scholars' new identity paradigm in contemporary Africa.

Mbiti's normative approach to ubuntu philosophy

John Samuel Mbiti (1931–2019) wrote extensively on African theology and the African practice of ubuntu philosophy. He was a resilient advocate of African theology and deeply acknowledged identity, heritage, religiosity and culture. He further recognised that African identity is deeply rooted in African culture. Mbiti (1969) confronted the normative recommendations of Pan-Africanism and African Unity, unlike some scholar's inadequacy to address the desires of native African societies. He provocatively claimed that:

All these political ideologies and economic attempts point to progress being made in Africa. But it is progress locked in search mode; it lacks concreteness, historical roots, and a clear and practical goal, at least for the individual to be able to find in it a sense of direction worthy of personal identification and dedication. (Mbiti 1969:260–265)

One of the shortcomings of these philosophies is the failure to infuse every sector of life, unlike religion. Nevertheless, Mbiti contended that the traditional African understanding of reality from a religious viewpoint is uniquely knotted to religious collaboration. Simplistically, local Africans may not construe their identity from either a secular or philosophical conception since religion forms a primary part of their identity or worldview. Mbiti (1969:263) recognised that contemporary vicissitudes (colonisation, modernisation, migration, enlightenment, urbanisation, civilisation and globalisation) have challenged this perspective in many traditions, and that perhaps religion continues to serve as the opium of the people of Africa.

Mbiti (1990:2–4) further asserts that African morality cherished personal identity, but that shared uniqueness exceeded the personal identity believably in sacred affairs. Traditional sacred principles are mutually believed since the community is the solitary supervisor of this African worldview (ubuntu principles). This principled practice is not printed, instead passed down from one generation to the next and exists in the mind of the people, thus:

[E]ach person is himself a living creed of his religion. Where the individual is, there is his religion, for he is a religious being. It is this that makes Africans so religious: religion is in their whole system of being. (Mbiti 1990:106)

Mbiti's notion of African philosophy is vital to the identity development of a person in the community. He alluded that the community demonstrates orientation by baptism, ritual celebrations, clan roots, marital relationship and mutual persecution. Furthermore, the community also embraces a harmonised non-human world, preferably based on the ubuntu worldview, where the nature of the sacred and humankind has to have a religious link to environmental development (Mbiti 1978:89).

Ubuntu application and environmental development

Environmental responsibility is also considered as one aspect of the ubuntu philosophy. Conservation therefore occupies a special place in today's African environmental community. In the eco-ubuntu worldview, humans and nature are invisible. Nature should, therefore, be treated in such a way as to provide, and always remain, a warm and friendly framework for developing identities between humans and the environment (Prinsloo 2000:42–43). It is therefore clear that humans and the environment are interdependent and co-exist.

Moreover, Ramose (2009) states that the basic ubuntu value of completeness applies to human relations and the bond between people and their physical environment, which the ubuntu notion envisages. Compassion for each other means caring for the environment, but when that caring is not demonstrated by damaging the physical environment, interdependence arises between people. From ubuntu's

perspective, the ideology of unity is overarching as it envisions stability in terms of the entire relationship between people and the physical environment.

Sadly, Africa today faces numerous environmental threats, including climate change, various forms of pollution, overexploited wastelands, scarce water supplies and extinction of native flora and fauna. Staying true to the ubuntu spirit, all citizens will save the world for future generations by recycling, buying eco-friendly products, and recognising the importance of nature conservation and development. Ubuntu's spirit of protection also operates on a broader level through interventions. The Ubuntu Institute is an organisation doing business in Africa. The non-profit sector includes related programmes focused on the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including environmental *sustainability* (Ubuntu Institute n.d. – a). The Ubuntu Institute's Environmental Sustainability Programme aims to mobilise community and traditional leaders in education, awareness and sustainability programmes that draw on indigenous African practices. Actions comprise building the coordination capacity of community leaders, education and raising awareness, advocacy and research. These programmes, thus, support the active development of environmental protection and management systems (Ubuntu Institute n.d. – b).

However, in view of the diversified beliefs about Mother Earth and noting the earthly roots of humankind, van Breda (2019:439) opines: 'We are persons through the earth' or 'We are because the earth is'. To put it differently, it appears realistic that the earth is an adherent of the community of persons and therefore part of the ubuntu community. In other words, ubuntu is expressed through dignity, mutuality, generosity and humanness towards other people in the community. Thus, ubuntu ideologies offer potent and fresh conducts to the development of eco-friendly executions in Africa, through native notions of understanding of the interdependence of humanity within the physical environment, and the adherence of the community to not being exploited because of injustices.

Most importantly, the three scholars – Mbiti, Gyekye and Shutte – argued that people could revitalise ubuntu as the foundation of identity development, by understanding the ubuntu principle as a pinnacle of moral leadership. The challenge is that the word ubuntu is not simple and is rather misunderstood or misused, regardless of communitarian and individualist versions of interpretation. Shutte's (2001) concept of the African communities and individuals, ubuntu, aims at careful stability where:

[E]ach individual of the community sees the community as themselves, as one with them in character and identity; each individual sees every other individual member as another person. Therefore, there is no room for a separation between the individual and the community. (p. 27)

In contrast, Anofuechi (2022) alluded to Gyekye's idea of moderate community – the kind of life lived for interdependent

and mutual reciprocity for fulfilment and rewards, compared to Mbiti's notion that African society contributes to forming the humanness of a person who cannot exist alone except with other individuals, family or community. Shutte's approach to identity development as a Catholic cleric (ubuntu ideology) is based on Aristotelian-Thomistic studies. Mbiti, as an Anglican cleric, questioned the Christian belief that traditional African religious philosophies were 'anti-Christian and demonic'; Gyekye, on the other hand, believed religion is an important aspect in the development of contemporary African philosophy, which shaped people's identities.

Conclusion

This article has aided in gaining a valuable understanding of ubuntu culture and identity development. Identity is dynamic in terms of development and growth in God's image, and is not static. Ubuntu culture has addressed the problem of African identity by arguing that it is derived from the community to which the individual belongs. African culture (Bantu) has seen the renewal of the African philosophy of *ubuntu* (humanness), especially because of the identity developments in much of Africa and globally. This transformation of ubuntu philosophy is vital since it offers Africans the wisdom of environmental development in dealing with the challenges of identity crisis in a positive manner. Shutte, Mbiti, and Gyekye shaped their views around the ethos and notion of ubuntu as the source of identity development: Shutte's approach focused on the *metaphysical* background of ubuntu; Mbiti adopted a *normative* understanding of ubuntu and the community; and Gyekye's *conceptual* perspective to ubuntu is of moderate community development. The commonalities of Shutte, Mbiti and Gyekye's philosophical understanding of the ideology of ubuntu from an African perspective offer a way of following the path of an emerging new landscape of diverse identity development across African cultures and beyond.

Acknowledgements

We thank every individual who contributed their expertise and assistance throughout this study and for their help in writing the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

B.O.A. and J.S.K. contributed equally to this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in public, commercial or not for profit sectors.

Data availability

Data availability is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of any affiliated agency of the authors, and the publisher.

References

- Anofuechi, O.B., 2022, 'A critical assessment of ubuntu as source of moral formation in contemporary Africa', Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town.
- Asante, M.K., Miike, Y. & Yin, J., 2013, *The global intercultural communication reader*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Broodryk, J., 2002, *Ubuntu: Life lessons from Africa*, Ubuntu School of Philosophy, Pretoria.
- Broodryk, J., 2006, *Ubuntu. Life-coping skills from Africa*, Knowres, Johannesburg.
- Chuwa, L.T., 2012, 'Interpreting the culture of Ubuntu: The contribution of a representative indigenous African ethics to global bioethics', Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh.
- Cochrane, J.C., 2009, 'On identity and faith in the global political economy', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 134, 14–31.
- Dandala, H.M., 1996, 'Cows never die: Embracing African cosmology in the process of economic growth', in R. Lessem & B. Nussbaum (eds.), *Sawubona Africa: Embracing four worlds in South African management*, pp. 69–85, Zebra Press, Johannesburg.
- Gade, C.B.N., 2011, 'The historical development of the written discourses on ubuntu', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30(3), 303–330. <https://doi.org/10.4314/sajpem.v30i3.69578>
- Gbadegesin, S., 1991, *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary African realities*, Peter Lang, New York, NY.
- Gibson, J.L., 2006, 'The contributions of truth to reconciliation', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50(3), 409–433. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002706287115>
- Gyekye, K., 1997, *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Klaasen, J., 2014, 'Towards an approach to development as mission: The category of personhood as addressed by Amartya Sen', *Missionalia* 42(1–2), 72–78. <https://doi.org/10.7832/42-1-2-49>
- Klaasen, J., 2016, 'Identity, race and faith: The role of faith in post-apartheid South Africa', *HTS Theological Studies* 72(2), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i2.3861>
- Louw, D.J., 2003, *Ubuntu and the challenges of multiculturalism in post-apartheid South Africa*, Utrecht University, Utrecht.
- Matolino, B., 2009, 'Radicals versus moderates: A critique of Gyekye's moderate communitarianism', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 28(2), 160–170. <https://doi.org/10.4314/sajpem.v28i2.46674>
- Mbiti, J.S., 1969, *African religions and philosophy*, 2nd edn., Heinemann Educational Books Inc., New Hampshire.
- Mbiti, J.S., 1978, 'An African answer', in H. Küng & J. Moltmann (eds.), *Why did God make me?*, pp. 88–90, Seabury, New York, NY.
- Mbiti, J.S., 1990, *African religions and philosophies*, Heinemann Educational Books Inc., New Hampshire.
- Metz, T., 2007, 'Toward an African moral theory', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15(3), 321–344. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2007.00280>
- Metz, T. & Gaïe, J.B., 2010, 'The African ethic of Ubuntu/Botho: Implications for research on morality', *Journal of Moral Education* 39(3), 273–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2010.497609>
- Mokgoro, K., 1997, 'Ubuntu and the law in South Africa', paper presented at the First Colloquium on Constitution and Law, Potchefstroom, 31st October, Unpublished Paper.
- Oetzel, J.G., Arcos, B., Mabizela, P., Weinman, A.M. & Zhang, Q., 2006, 'Historical, political, and spiritual factors of conflict: Understanding conflict perspectives and communication in the Muslim world, China, Colombia, and South Africa', in J.G. Oetzel & S. Ting-Toomey (eds.), *The SAGE handbook of conflict communication: Integrating theory, research and practice*, pp. 549–574, Sage, Los Angeles, CA.
- Onah, G., 2008, *The meaning of peace in African traditional religion and culture*, Pontifical Urban University, Rome.
- Praag, L. & Magadla S., 2014, *Ubuntu: Curating the archive*, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville, VA.
- Prinsloo, E.D., 2000, 'Ubuntu culture and participatory management', in P.H. Coetzee & A.P.J. Roux (eds.), *The philosophy from Africa. A text with readings*, pp. 41–51, Oxford Press, Scottsville.
- Ramose, M.B., 2009, 'Ecology through Ubuntu', in M.F. Murove (ed.), *African ethics. An anthology of comparative and applied ethics*, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Scottsville, VA.
- Shutte, A., 2001, *Ubuntu: An ethic for the new South Africa*, Cluster Publications, Cape Town.
- Shutte, A., 2006, *The quest for humanity in science and religion: The South African experience*, Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg.
- Swartz, S., 2006, 'A long walk to citizenship: Morality, justice and faith in the aftermath of apartheid', *Journal of Moral Education* 35(4), 551–560. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240601012287>
- Tutu, D., 1999, *No future without forgiveness*, Doubleday, New York, NY.
- Ubuntu Institute, n.d.a, *Achieving the millennium goals on step at a time*, viewed 19 February 2023, from <https://www.ubuntuinstitute.com>.
- Ubuntu Institute, n.d.b, *Environmental sustainability*, viewed 19 February 2023, from <https://www.ubuntuinstitute.com/index.php/programmes/environment>.
- Van Breda, A.D., 2019, 'Developing the notion of Ubuntu as African theory for social work practice', *Social Work* 55(4), 439–450. <https://doi.org/10.15270/55-4-762>