

Bridging the Gap of African Leadership Identity – Not Yet Uhuru

Syerramia Willoughby examines whether Africa's shared valued system of ubuntu can propel a new wave of African thought and leadership.

What is Ubuntu? Is it a radical or benign concept? Ubuntu is a traditional African philosophy which means “*I am, because we are*”. It seeks to convey “the humaneness of the human being”. Despite the geographic and socio-cultural diversity of the continent, the idea behind this philosophy is present in communities all over the land mass that is Africa. Can this value system shape a new brand of leadership for the African continent? That was the question under discussion at the 2015 Africa Utopia Festival by LSE academics Awol Allo, Vanessa Iwowo and Jason Hickel.

A key challenge to defining a new brand of leadership for Africa lies in examining the source of the knowledge we use to shape our values, myths and narratives. As Dr Awol Allo pointed out in the discussion, Europe is the “silent reference of all knowledge”.

For example, the conceptual categories and analytic frameworks that dominate almost all disciplines of international law – civilisation, progress, reason, secularism, humanism, universal freedom of trade, distinctions between public and private, religion and secularism – are European concepts with their own unique European teleology.

This is not to say that Europe and European thinkers are too Eurocentric or that they regard their world view as universal. Neither is there a desire to dismiss or condemn Western knowledge. Rather, as Dr Allo puts it, analysing the source of the knowledge we consume helps us become aware of “the silences, omissions, erasures and battle cries underneath the current international order.”

The prevalence of eurocentric ideas can also be seen within the economic narrative of Africa Rising. In fact, Dr Jason Hickel pointed out that it is often ignored that the strongest period of economic growth in Africa was during the 1960s and 1970s just after the end of colonialism. Development was proceeding apace along with a rapid reduction in poverty using strong state-led interventions in the economy. This was a time when Africa was genuinely rising without resorting to Western prescriptions, relying instead on visionary leadership from figures such as Julius Nyerere in Tanzania and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana. This era came to an end when African countries adopted **Structural Adjustment Policies in the 1980s and 1990s under pressure from the IMF and World Bank** and is now widely regarded as a disastrous period in the continent's history.



Drs Allo, Hickel and Iwowo discuss how ubuntu can evolve from being a cultural system to transforming African leadership Photo: Sharon Jackson

Africa is rising once more, but Dr Hickel contends that this is the wrong kind of growth. The buzz around the economy in a number of African countries is centred almost exclusively around resource extraction which instead of reducing inequality increases it. Dr Hickel put a number of questions to the audience: Who really benefits from this economic model? If Africa is rising, who is it rising for? Should Africans seek to groom its leaders based on a foreign model devoted to extraction, accumulation, materialism and consumption? Or should our economies be modelled on the principles of Ubuntu – on justice, equality and ecological responsibility?

The principles of ubuntu can have an impact not just economically, but also politically. Leadership is far from being a single universal absolute truth, as Dr Vanessa Iwowo argued. It is much more a social construct. As heterogeneous as Africa is, this strand of shared value systems which includes Ubuntu that runs along the continent can be crafted into a new brand of shared leadership values not only for the continent, but which can be exported beyond its shores.

Dr Iwowo believes the first step to achieving this would be to develop an understanding of cultural identity or what it means to be a member of contemporary African societies along with the accompanying implications, responsibilities and expectations.

Perennial conflict in East and Central Africa as well as periodic outbursts of xenophobia in South Africa shows that there still remains a gap to be bridged from rhetoric to reality. Yet, it is a bridge that must be crossed for Ubuntu to take its rightful place in the global scheme of affairs.

*This post is based on the presentations of Drs Awol Allo, Jason Hickel and Vanessa Iwowo at the Bridging the Gap of African Leadership Identity – Not Yet Uhuru panel, chaired by Imara Ajani Rolston at the **2015 Africa Utopia Festival** in association with Africa at LSE.*

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The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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