UBUNTU AS A MANAGEMENT CONCEPT

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> "*Chacun appelle barbarie ce qui n'est pas de son usage; comme de vrai, il semble que nous n'avons autre mine de la vérité et de la raison que l'exemple et idée des opinions et usances du pays où nous sommes''.*
> *Montaigne, Essais, Ch. XXXI. Tome I.*

Introduction

It is often claimed that developing countries can speed up their process of development by promoting the transfer of knowledge from developed countries. Defenders of this claim presuppose that if developing countries adapt themselves to the transferred knowledge, their economies will improve. However, Shahidullah (1999) underlines that this radical engagement of adoption of knowledge, as he calls it, is not being supported by everyone. Some are opposed to this engagement and prefer to defend either a radical disengagement or a limited version. The advocates of the radical disengagement assert that developing countries should not adopt western knowledge because it is embedded in cultural and intellectual traditions of the west and, therefore, are not compatible with the needs of the developing countries. Those who share a more moderate version believe that western knowledge is vital, but that the knowledge, which is to be adopted, should be in line with the development priorities, and social and cultural preferences of developing countries. This means that the knowledge to be transferred should be disengaged from the value orientations of the western industrial societies. Those defending this moderate perspective propagate an inward looking, self-reliant strategy.

The radical engagement perspective presupposes that adoption can only be realised if a proper infrastructure with social institutions and cultural mentalities has been put in place, which favours progress. Professionalism should be enhanced and policies promoted leading to a critical mass of people in developing countries, favouring an adequate knowledge transfer. The problem with this view, however, is the infrastructure, which might be a necessary condition but not a sufficient one to understand processes of knowledge transfer. The neo-institutionalists, Dimaggio & Powell (1983)[1] have developed a model that tried to resolve the second criterion.

They have differentiated three types of transfer mechanisms – coercive, mimetic and normative – through which a management concept can be diffused. A transfer mechanism is labelled coercive whenever the process of the transfer is being imposed rather than eagerly pursued whereas a transfer mechanism is labelled mimetic when imitation is at work and reflects a spontaneous decision locally to replicate appropriate foreign models. The third type of transfer takes place in an indirect way through the homogenisation of norms, values and rules. A normative transfer mechanism is neither voluntarily chosen nor forced in any direct way, but an unavoidable consequence of certain commitments such as, the establishment of international bodies for example, the World Bank, IMF, GATT, WHO, and the creation of professional associations.

Although it is difficult to completely separate the three sorts of mechanisms, as they are ideal types we, nevertheless, believe that within the radical engagement perspective in the domain of management knowledge, a switch from the second to the third mechanism can be noticed. It is notable that African managers who are properly trained embrace management models and approaches coming from elsewhere based on the fact that they share common norms and values about their professional identity. Dimaggio & Powell (1983), however, have neglected one important issue concerning the processes through which management concepts are absorbed in organisations. Managers not only share particular management concepts being part of the knowledge that belongs to their professionalism, but they have to reinterpret and translate these concepts into their own practice. There are only a few studies, which so far have focused on how concepts are translated (Czarniawska & Sevon 1996). This translation issue has been neglected for a very long time. Since the proliferation of management ideas in the USA during the 1980s and their apparent increasing transience as ‘fads’, research has endeavoured to examine the process of knowledge diffusion through knowledge management and organisational learning. Particular emphasis has been placed on the rhetorical, linguistic or dramaturgical performances and packing by diffusion agents (consultants and gurus) (Abrahamson 1991, Huczynski 1993, Clark 1995, Kieser 1997, Grint & Case 1998).

While the focus on the promotion and supply of ideas has provided an important contribution to understanding the diffusion of concepts, the recipients or audience are often neglected. Studying the culture or the norms and values of professional associations will be necessary but it is not sufficient enough to understand how management concepts are being translated. We will have to recognise that there is a sharp distinction between management concepts and their implementation as practices. There is still a lack of studies on the ways in which management concepts are reconstituted through social groups in organisations that perpetrate, use and apply them for various purposes. Management concepts are not single, uniform or relatively unchanging entities, but they are full of ambiguity (Abrahamson 1996). African managers will have to speak another language to turn management concepts into actionable knowledge that will be useful for their practice compared to Japanese or American managers. In this article, we will describe the main characteristics of management concepts and underline the processes to establish a proper translation.

Ubuntu has been embraced as an African value, which constitutes a specific societal background. *Ubuntu* is also embraced as a concept, which can improve social relations within organisations. *Ubuntu* as a management concept is nowadays propagated as comparable to similar concepts that have been developed in the Western world. It might be that with *Ubuntu,* the African business community is getting beyond the situation that coercive and mimetic mechanisms dominate when applying modern management approaches. Mbigi (1997, 38) even believes that "black managers should overcome their dependency on white management, thinking of developing their own afrocentric management ideas (i.e. concepts according to our view) and management practices". We agree that the promulgation of indigenous African management concepts is required in order to better understand African business practices and we believe that with the promotion of those concepts, the transfer of knowledge will develop into a two-way system of ***partners*** in order to enhance at least one partner's knowledge and expertise, and strengthen each partner's competitive position. *Ubuntu* as a management concept can play a crucial role for the improvement of knowledge transfer. To illustrate our point of view, we will start with a general description of the characteristics of management concepts. Next, we will position African management in its own context and position, *Ubuntu* as a management concept. In the last part of our contribution, we will raise the question to what extent the South and North can both learn from the development of African management concepts and how dialogues amongst partners can be improved.

Management concepts in practice

In 1990, the former McKinsey consultant R. Pascale published a book *Managing on the Edge* in which he expressed his surprise about the tremendous popularity of certain management concepts. Reviewing the prevailing management literature he noticed the ebbs and flows of many business fads. The sudden rise and fall of so many conflicting fads is alarming to his view. He had to admit however that some of the management concepts that became fads such as, Total Quality Management, stimulated serious consideration and have been adopted as an enduring way of doing business. K. Grint (1992) noticed in *Fuzzy Management* that the situation described by Pascale had been aggravated in the beginning of the 1990s. It turned out that for the business community, the issue was not whether management concepts are logical in the sense that they are scientifically substantiated but whether they secure business results that are currently accounted legitimate. Even if their academic value cannot be proven, management concepts should at least result in an increase in productivity, efficiency or profitability.

Apparently, management concepts seem to lack an in-depth grasp of their underlying foundation. However, it does not prevent new management concepts to be launched in the knowledge market where managers look for new ideas. We, therefore, have to raise the question, what makes management concepts so popular. Management concepts are mental creations, “constituents of thought” (Fodor 1998, 23), about specific processes in organisations. As mental creations, they express new ideas, which can support managers to do their jobs. Where these ideas exactly come from and how they turn into knowledge are complex issues. The Harvard Business School professors, Nohria & Eccles (1998, 279), concluded the following, “if asked, most people would tell an interesting story about the variety of sources that have contributed to the ways they act and think as managers. Indeed, management knowledge comes from everywhere: it comes from a manager’s own experience, from books and articles on a variety of topics […] and increasingly from consulting firms”. The most remarkable fact, however, is that the popularity of management concepts has much more to do with the quality of the *source* providing the concept than with its truth. “Managers are interested in ideas which are established by the reputation of a particular country (e.g. Japan), company (e.g. General Electric), manager (e.g. Jack Welch), consulting firm (e.g. McKinsey), educational institution (e.g. Stanford), or professor/consultant (e.g. Peter Drucker). That is the source of a particular concept” (Nohria &Eccles 1998, 289).

Considering the former, we can identify four characteristics of management concepts (Karsten &Van Veen 1998):

(a) Management concepts usually have a striking label such as, Total Quality Management (TQM), Business Process Reengineering (BPR), Core Competency, or Knowledge Management. Whenever possible these concepts are reduced into acronyms e.g. TQM or BPR, to make them convincing and persuasive within the language community of management, and help create specific networks of managers sharing the same discourse.

(b) Management concepts describe specific management issues in general terms, which cause an increase of costs or a loss of customers. Managers are then faced with an irresolute but pressing problem that calls for a new meaning and thus, they are compelled to develop a more probable course of action to improve the situation. Concepts can frame a particular organisational problem and make it recognisable for the managers involved. For example, BPR will be seen, as a useful analysis because it allows managers to identify the actual company structure, which has to be redesigned.

(c) Management concepts offer a general solution to identified problems. They do not offer rules, which prescribe relatively specific actions, but principles or guidelines that bring about mutual orientations between actors and only prescribe highly unspecific actions. Principles constitute a standard of conduct and propel action in a certain direction. They evolve from the values and practices of a specific community of actors where the concept has been developed. Guidelines do not have the degree of 'settledness', which principles possess. They are often issued as a provisional measure until more is known about the practical usefulness of a concept. For example, BPR will justify its interventionist principles by stating that companies with obsolete structures will become more efficient once the structure has been redesigned and modern information and communication technology has been introduced. In order to be persuaded by the quality of certain principles, another characteristic comes into play.

(d) The proposed solution will be promoted by referring to success stories about specific well-known firms, which already have implemented the concept. General Electric, IBM, Shell and Toyota are usually portrayed as convincing examples of the success of concepts. The examples are the narratives, which articulate the knowledge employed in situations that have created new 'best practices'. The advantage of the narration is that it facilitates social interaction. Readers are invited to share with each other the different meanings that can be given to the examples (Tsoukas, 1998). The examples illustrate how at the right time (kairos), these organisations offer the opportunity to introduce a new concept (Miller, 1992).

These four characteristics make a management concept recognisable and provide a certain kind of knowledge about a specific management practice. The fact remains, however, that the knowledge contained in a management concept does not provide rules according to which a successful implementation can logically be deduced.

Although the above characteristic b) and c) suggest that there are rules involved as impersonal, generic or temporal formulae to identify a problem and solve it, these are usually not made explicit.

Managers have to use their own judgement to derive what the relevant implications are for them and how they can apply these concepts to their own specific business context. In other words, concepts have to be translated into the local company discourse. If we perceive companies as linguistically constituted communities, we look at the translation process not as rendering the general formulation of the concept into another local formulation, but as a learning to speak another language[2].

Language

In *Beyond the Hype*, Nohria & Eccles (1992, 9) have come to the conclusion that "in a nutshell, managers live in a rhetorical universe where language is constantly used not only to communicate but also to **persuade**, and even to **create**. The first step in taking a fresh perspective toward management is to take language, and hence rhetoric, seriously". Managers have to foster action and then transfer the action to be meaningful for all participants within their organisation. With this statement, Nohria & Eccles (1992) have distanced themselves from the modernist view about language as the chief and neutral means by which we inform others about the results of our observations and thoughts. It was John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689, Book IV) who captured the Enlightenment view of language in which words are the carriers of truth and knowledge. Language in his view was able to represent the real, coupled as it was with the belief in reason and neutral observation. However, it was Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953, Part I, 43) who made the fundamental transition from the question of truth to the question of meaning and said that language does not gain its meaning from its reference but from <u>its use</u> in action (our emphasis). That use is embedded in the stream of human life. Since this 'linguistic turn' in philosophy we have become aware of the fact that language is not simply a representational device to inform others. We constantly influence others through language when we want to share with others the content that words and sentences express. Grice (1957) calls this the intentional communication. It involves the transmission of non-natural meaning (as distinguished from natural meaning as in 'smoke means fire') through the process by which a speaker, by saying X, communicates a specific communicative intent. When this intent is recognised by the hearer it becomes *mutual knowledge* (Blum-Kulka 1997, 39).

In his book, *How to do Things with Words*, Austin (1975) argued that words actually do things. They not just describe or facilitate practice, but assume the status of practice. He calls these words performatives, because they perform deeds. For example, phrases like 'I apologise', 'I request', 'I order you to', have practical effects on and of themselves, and thus, constitute deeds.

Managers use this performative language to get things done. They do this through what Searle (1969) has called speechacts. Speechacts are composed of three elements:

- The locutionary act contains the propositional part of a sentence;
- The illocutionary act: the intention through which the sentence is pronounced. For example, what you do by uttering a promise; and
- The perlocutionary act: the way the hearer understands the meaning of the sentence.

While Austin describes functions of speechacts emphasising on the speaker's intention, Searle includes the hearer's interpretation (Robinson 1985, 116). Speakers string speech acts together to generate activity (discourse) in the form of conversations, stories, reports, meeting and the like. It is through discourses that managers can acquaint each other with the value of a concept for their specific business practice. Through discourses, which socially construct and certify particular meaningful versions of their organisational reality with others, they make sense of what they do (Watson 1994). In these "dialogical acts" (Taylor 1999, 35), they look for justification of the translation of a specific concept and its implementation in their own practice. During the discourse, knowledge about the concept will be transferred, interpreted and agreed. The outcome of such distinct discourses with their own mode of engagement is an actionable version of a management concept.

Habermas (1980) has refined the speechact theory by identifying three aspects, which compose speech acts: the illocutionary; the propositional; and the expressive. We have to understand what is intended with a linguistic expression and how a linguistic expression is used in a speech act. "The propositional component is constructed by means of a sentence with propositional content. The illocutionary component is an illocutionary act carried out with the aid of a performative sentence. The expressive component remains implicit in the normal form but can always be expanded into an expressive sentence" (Cooke 1994, 55). These three components are connected with three validity claims: (i) a claim to propositional truth; (ii) a claim to normative rightness; and (iii) a claim to truthfulness. All three claims have to be taken into consideration when evaluating the usefulness of a management concept. With this pragmatic speech act theory, we can understand how managers use management concepts in order to co-ordinate and control organisations. The value of management concepts does not depend upon their factual content alone but upon their interpretative space for local contexts and their role for persuasion in local discourses. This persuasion, however, depends on the capability of the person (s) involved in speech acts and their interests. These interests reflect “the extant of social structures such that actors draw on discourses in different ways at different times in order to achieve their particular purposes” (Watson 1995, 817).

Habitus

Searle has demonstrated that the meaning of speechacts depends on the specific context in which they take place. This context or background is structured and enabled by social conditions, not the least of which is the socially learned practice of speaking a language (Shusterman 1999, 19). The French philosopher P. Bourdieu has introduced the concept habitus to provide a model with which we can understand linguistic practices in their broader social space. Habitus is “a set of dispositions acquired through experience”. This ‘feel for the game’ is what enables an infinite number of moves to be made and adapted to the infinite number of possible situations which no rule can foresee no matter how complex (Bourdieu 1990, 9). Habitus explains how agents share a culture and its practices, within asymmetrical social positions and relations of domination (Bohman 1999, 133). Composed by a set of dispositions that inclines subjects to act in certain ways, the habitus does not determine the action causally. "These dispositions may be said to motivate certain actions and to the extent that these actions are regularised to compel a set of practices. But practices are not unilaterally determined by the habitus" (Butler 1999, 202).

Management concepts are not maps that prescribe how to move around in an organisation. Even if concepts contain rules or principles (formulae), they still have to be enacted. They do not apply themselves but have to be applied. Based on their habitus, managers fill the gap between any principle and guideline of a management concept and its enactment. The enactment is called knowing by Cook & Brown (1999, 387). Explicit knowledge is something we can possess, transfer and share in a common way, whereas knowing is a concrete dynamic human action reflecting the habitus of a manager. This action has primarily to be understood as engaging in interaction i.e. discourses and afterwards checking how decisions (agreements)[3] have let to a better performance of the organisation. Over time, an organisation develops its own ways of knowing through its collective practices. A practice is the co-ordinated activities of groups and individuals within a group, carrying out their work as it is informed by a particular organisational context. This interaction is a bridging of knowledge and knowing. Knowing to use management concepts depends on the habitus of managers. Managers engage in communities of practice to provide meaning to concepts. Through these communities a joint understanding of what 'doing it this way' is negotiated and a shared meaning is constituted. Managers engage in a local company discourse to establish a common meaning of a particular concept. What they finally realise is not only 'talking the talk', but also 'walking the walk' (Ellerman 2000, 18). With the proper habitus at hand, management concepts will be enacted to enhance organisations to generate new practices and prevent any managers from just parroting the popular talk about management concepts. Cook & Brown (1999) are keen to promote the development of an epistemology of practice to better understand the processes of knowing. We believe that a pragmatic speech act theory is a key approach to develop such a new epistemology.

Life cycle of concepts

So far we have looked at management concepts and the way the knowledge these concepts contain is used in local situations. What we have described is how a transfer of knowledge actually takes place at the micro level of organisations where managers engage in local discourse. This micro perspective can be extended to a macro level where managers, consultants, gurus, and the media are often engaged in the continuous transfer of knowledge, which is captured in management concepts. Management concepts reflect a life cycle pattern. Broad dissemination of a concept gives it credibility. On the other hand, however, once a concept starts spreading, it will either be interpreted differently by people or it will be used to accomplish different things. Concepts have to be flexible to accommodate different interpretations. As such, they are appropriated and reconfigured selectively by different groups with different interests, which can lead to confusion and over time cause a degeneration of a concept into a buzzword or fad. The ultimate result can be that the discredited concept has to be replaced with a new one. This will set the entire process in motion over again (Nohria & Eccles 1998). Sometimes managers simply switch to a new concept to indicate that they are familiar with the latest and most leading-edge management ideas. Consultants and gurus are familiar with this peculiar human behaviour of managers and try to be creative in launching new management concepts to counter insecurity amongst managers. The transfer of knowledge they stimulate, however, is sometimes a redecoration of knowledge that has been around for some time. A new management concept turns out to be old wine in a politically correct new bottle. It can obtain a faddish character, suddenly rising in popularity and disappear. In this context, Pascale (1990, 20) came to the conclusion that the majority of "fads are largely an American phenomenon". When we look at the management literature of today this still seems to be the case. The normative mechanism of the transfer of knowledge helps to spread a concept through professional associations, which share common norms about management.

There are, however, a few cases where a management concept became integrated into the comprehensive terminology of the management language. This, for example, was the case with concepts like productivity, culture and quality, which promoted a strong commitment to managerial excellence. These issues initially were introduced as concepts, but have become an integral part of the common management language.

Management concepts in practice

Management practices clearly vary considerably between firms, industries and countries. Various studies of management in Africa have stressed the relevance of context. Blunt & Jones (1992, 1) emphasised in their book, *Managing Organisations in Africa*, that "whereas African organisations may find they can apply Western management concepts and practices to their technical core with few major modifications, these imported ideas and practices are generally found to be inadequate and/or inappropriate for the organisation's relationships with their environments". The discipline of management is full of concepts, which are firmly rooted in western social and cultural thought. Let us illustrate this with an example. Even the concept of 'quality', which was developed into an integral approach within Japanese firms, only became widespread once it had obtained an America translation and was reduced to a middle management project. Japanese quality control circles (QCC) were redefined into quality circles. Control itself had to stay in the hands of middle management and should not be given to teams of employees (Locke 1996, 189-190). Therefore, management concepts, which are attempted in other geographic areas, can contain potential barriers to successful implementation due to the cultural differences and contrasts.

This conclusion is as much valid for the private sector as for the public sector. Dia M. (1996) indicates that "the institutional crisis in Africa cannot be resolved by relying exclusively either on purely traditional institutions or on transplanted institutions operated by expatriate technical assistants and specialist". The solution is to encourage mergers between adapted formal institutions and renovated informal indigenous institutions. "In Africa, mutual legitimation, reconciliation, and harmonious convergence between formal and informal institutions are essential to institutional relevance, enforceability, sustainability and performance". This new perspective of institutional reconciliation is best captured by the French expression '*enracinement et ouverture*' coined by Leopold Sedar Senghor, former head of state of Senegal.

The point both Blunt & Jones (1992) and Dia M. (1996) make is that the transfer of management knowledge for both the African private business community and governmental bodies is highly complicated. Even if we embrace the normative transfer mechanism as the most appropriate one, it still is quite difficult to understand how management knowledge is applied. Within the African context, Western management models cannot simply be adopted or copied, but have to be translated. The question is how this takes place. There has been some academic tradition that Africa has to get rid of its traditional and old-fashioned management approaches, and adopt modern ones. Some management studies repeated a pessimistic point of view concerning the African culture. According to these studies, the African cultures have a negative impact on the co-ordination of organisations (Tidiani 1995). The African manager "draws from proverbial, social thought and organises his life in a system of reciprocal social relationships, where the family is the core unit" (Kamoche 2000, 55). Ouattara (1994), Mbigi (1997), and Kessy (1998) see this particular African cultural context as an undeniable dimension for the understanding of African management.

Kiggundu (1998, 226) states that "there is an acute shortage of quality leadership and management in Africa". Prevailing management styles are authoritarian, personalised, politicised, and "are not conducive for management development and the emergence of new leadership. Enterpreneurial creativity and development are suppressed in favour of bureaucratic risk-aversive administration based on absolute obedience". Hofstede (1993, 86) confirms that we are facing an acute problem of transfer of Western knowledge in the African context and says that "if one thing has become clear, it is that the export of Western-mostly American-management practices and theories to poor countries has contributed little to nothing to their development". Reviewing the statements developed by all these authors, it becomes clear that the cohesion between social groups does play a relevant role in African management practices. "The prototypical African business organisation often takes on attributes of a community, build on close interpersonal relationships and group interactions. […] The community concept affects choice of business objectives and management style, both of which must be congruent with existing social and cultural norms" (Choudhury, 1986 in Grzeda & Assogbavi 1999, 416).

The conjunction of an economic and social logic in the African method of co-ordinating organisations (Haudeville 1992) creates some to believe that incommensurable worldviews exist between the South and the North. "While Western management emphasises Eurocentrism, individualism, and modernity, African management emphasises ethnocentrism, traditionalism, communalism, and teamwork" (Nzelibe 1986, 11). We do not share this point of view for it implicitly embraces the radical disengagement approach. Although it has to be admitted that cultural differences do play an important role in the translation of management concepts, we should not use these differences as an argument or excuse not to cope with management concepts that originated elsewhere. American managers, for example, initially resisted Japanese quality approaches using cultural differences as an argument, which was 'bogus' (Locke 1996, 174). Statements about cultural incompatibility were used to prevent any discussion about the real source of resistance. "Japanese management ideas threatened vested interests" (Locke 1996, 174). We need to be involved in comparative studies to understand processes of convergence/divergence and pay attention "to both emic (culture-specific) and etic (culture-common) aspects of organisational phenomena" (Kamoche 2000, 56).

While discussing the appearance of an African management approach we should like to notice that nowadays a similar discourse is being developed concerning a particular European management approach. The upcoming realisation of a single European market in 1992 introduced the question whether a specific European management approach could be distinguished in contrast with American and Japanese management approaches. Thurley & Wirdenius (1989, XIII) emphasised the urgency of developing a European management approach while there was "a long-term decay in the viability of management within European firms". They were convinced that a distinct European approach should be developed, but they did not provide one. Calori & Woot (1994, 49) detected a few common characteristics like the capacity to manage international diversity, a strong orientation towards people, a focus on internal negotiation and a quality to manage between extremes. The advantages of promoting a specific European approach is that the transfer of management knowledge will no longer take place in a coercive nor a mimetic way, but in a normative way. European societal norms and values about management will constitute the habitus of the European manager and this habitus will constitute the proper way of translating management concepts within the European context.

The single European market itself, however, "has so far not resulted in standardised norms and rules governing economic activities across Europe, let alone the emergence of distinctly 'European' firms which operate quite differently from national ones" (Whitley 1999, 33). Despite the existence of the European Economic Community there is yet no clearly identifiable European management approach other than the recognition that the diversity amongst national institutional arrangements and national business systems has a strong influence on management practices within Europe. The Trans-European manager is still a chimera, but the fact that the issue draws a lot of attention makes clear that the identification of a European managerial habitus will preponderate in determining the processes of translating management concepts to local practices.

With the promotion of the economic development of Africa (the creation of a single market in West Africa, project of African Unity), a similar discussion about the features of an African management style will take place. The appropriateness of management concepts will reflect the tenacity of these national arrangements and systems.

The habitus of the African manager is ingrained in the African culture and a product of an ancestral heritage where life in a community, hospitality and trust play a principal role. The social group is essential to understand the African behaviour of individual members of the African society which is composed of so many different social groups. A social group usually comes from the same region, shares the same moral, its members have common habits, traditions and the same life style. The social group constitutes the founding stone for the African habitus. Within the social group solidarity plays an important role. Ouattara (1994) underlines how difficult it is to cut the 'cordon umbilical' between the enterprise and the family. The social cohesion within the group is fundamental for a proper understanding of the action of an individual African. The successful 'Caisses Populaires', which are traditional banks in West Africa based on the principle of group warrant called 'caution solidaire' is in this context a remarkable example.

Ubuntu as a management concept

In the African tradition, it is the community that defines the person as person. Ubuntu as a translation of the Xhosa expression 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' means the person is a person through other persons, and expresses a typical African conception of a person. Mbigi (1997) in *The African Dream in Management* has listed the following relevant principles of Ubuntu: the spirit of unconditional

African collective contribution, solidarity, acceptance, dignity, stewardship, compassion and care, hospitality and legitimacy. Ubuntu is an African cultural worldview that is rooted and anchored in people's daily life. The expression of a person as a person through persons is "common to all African languages and traditional cultures" (Shutte 1993, 46). Ubuntu is a symbol of an African common world-view even if the concept has namesakes in different terms in African countries. Mogobe B. Ramose (1999) made a relevant remark by saying: "African philosophy has long been established in and through Ubuntu. That here not only the Bantu speaking ethnic groups, who use the word Ubuntu or an equivalent for it, are referred to, but the whole population of Sub-Saharan Africa, is based on the argument that in this area 'there is a family atmosphere, that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa". For example, in West Africa, precisely in Senegal, the concept of 'Teranga' is used to express the spirit of collective hospitality between people. The Zimbabwe concept of 'Ubukhosi' also expresses itself metaphorically in the statement 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu'. So there are similarities between these concepts and the concept of Ubuntu, which reflects an African view on community, which is embodied in customs, institutions and traditions.

According to Shutte (1993), Ubuntu is not synonymous with either Western individualism, collectivism or an entity that can clearly be defined. Ubuntu expresses an African view of the world anchored in their culture, which is difficult to define in a Western context. Ubuntu is enacted in African day-to-day occupations, actions, feelings and thinking, and the African conception of community is still under construction. It is an attempt to shape indigenous social and political institutions, which will be able to develop African nations. According to Sanders (1999), the Zulu phrase 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' has an economy of singular and plural not captured in the banal 'people are people through other people'. The translation of Ubuntu can sound like "a human being is a human being through human beings or the being human of a human being is noticed through his or her being human through human beings" […] "The ontological figure of Ubuntu is commonly converted into an example and imperative for human conduct".

It can be noticed that Ubuntu represents a specific African worldview. Mbigi (1997) is convinced that this broad worldview can be translated to what he calls *The African Dream in Management*. Although Ubuntu refers to the collective solidarity in Africa, it can find its concrete expression in modern forms of enterpreneurship, business organisations and management. The introduction of Ubuntu as a management concept will not replace the transfer of knowledge from the Western world but will make possible the transfer of knowledge between partners. Mbigi (1997, 8) differentiates between three kinds of heritages that will constitute a modern version of African management thinking:

- the Northern (European) heritage will continue and contribute to issues such as, strategic planning and control, and the application of financial ratios;

- the Asian heritage will further support African managers in applying techniques to manage value adding processes, process-innovation and measurements of efficiency; and

- the third heritage is African, based on Ubuntu. Ubuntu will help improve the management of people and relationships. « Ubuntu will show a way to work together and will create a rainbow mentality in our organisations characterised by a high degree of cultural, racial, religious, tribal, and political tolerance ».

Based on the respect of these three heritages, African managers can improve their business practices.

It is interesting to see that Mbigi compares Ubuntu to the practice which Japanese firms have introduced in the 1970s under the umbrella of Total Quality Management (TQM). TQM is "a people-focused management system that aims at continual increase in customer satisfaction at continually lower costs. Total Quality (TQ) is a total system approach (not a separate area or program) and an integral part of high-level strategy. It works horizontally across functions and departments, involving all employees, top to bottom, and extend backwards and forwards to include the supply chain and the customers chain" (Lindsay & Patrick 1997, 20). As a management concept, TQM followed the life cycle as many other management concepts. Although the label itself disappeared from the management agenda, the issue of quality itself has been integrated into the comprehensive terminology of the management language. Although managers developed different interpretations of the concept to apply it to their local contexts, the issue itself did not disappear.

We believe that with Ubuntu the same might happen due to the fact that solidarity is a social value, which should be respected and reinforced in society as well as in organisations. Unfortunately, as Mangaliso (2001, 24) underlines, "with all the talk about Ubuntu, the philosophy has not been fully embraced in the workplace since its strategic advantages are not fully appreciated by managers". He is convinced that African managers have to reinforce their communicative abilities in order to translate Ubuntu into an integral part of business practices. "The traditional management training places greater emphasis on the efficiency of information transfer. Ideas must be translated quickly and accurately into words, the medium of exchange must be appropriate, and the receiver must accurately understand the message. In the Ubuntu context, however, the social effect of conversation is emphasised with primacy given to establishing and reinforcing relationships. Unity and understanding among affected group members is valued above efficiency and accuracy of languages" (Mangaliso 2001, 26). Mangaliso (2001, 32) is convinced that “Ubuntu can improve African business practices as long as they receive the embrace of their host cultures”.

Ubuntu as a management concept is more than just a popular version of an employee participation programme defined by the interest of management. We understand the reason Van der Wal & Ramotsehoa's (2001, 4) fear that Ubuntu is sometimes too popularised in business books. “Because of that the tendency is to align it with productivity improvement and worker motivation techniques, which reduces its significance to flavour of the month status”. They want to prevent Ubuntu from quickly obtaining a faddish character. They believe that “Ubuntu embraces a set of social behaviours like sharing, seeking consensus and interdependent helpfulness which if recognised, valued and willingly incorporated in the culture of organisations, could exert considerable positive outcomes on business results”. However, Van der Wal & Ramotschoa's fear should not be related to Ubuntu as a management concept, but to the context in which it is applied. The issue is whether managers will use it for strategic purposes or as the basis for communicative action. The purpose of Ubuntu as a societal value is to redefine social relations in society and in organisations. If managers, however, deny this purpose, they will indeed limit Ubuntu as a management concept to its usefulness for specific goals they have defined themselves. Habermas (1980) describes such a situation as strategic action where the diagnosis and the solution of a problem within the organisation is not being shared and commonly performed by all participants. Where management sets the objectives and forces others to accept them, management concepts are only used for strategic purposes. Ubuntu, however, promotes communicative action and managers embracing Ubuntu should support that kind of social interaction. In such a situation, Ubuntu can become a proper management concept that according to the characteristics we have described earlier:

- Ubuntu as a management concept has a striking label.

- Ubuntu already has raised in general terms a specific management issue. « Black managers and professionals need to develop a strong sense of collective social stewardship […]. We need a strong sense of collective, social citizenship »(Mbigi 1997, 38). The solidarity tendency to establish solidarity will build « a culture of empowerment and team work in the workplace » (Mbigi 1997, 5);

- Ubuntu, however, has not yet provided a general solution to the identified problem;

- Literature has yet to provide the decisive success stories. There are some fascinating stories about the implementation of Ubuntu in South African business corporations, but they do not seem yet to have reached the status of the key success story. There is the case of Durban Metrorail, which adopted Ubuntu as one of its guiding principles and made the company the Most Progressive Company in Kwazulu-Natal[4]. Patricia P. and A. Scheraga (1998) on the other hand consider the South African Airway to be the best example to illustrate how a major non-American corporation uses the various dimensions of Ubuntu. Another interesting case for the implementation of Ubuntu is CS Holdings[5]. The staff of CS Holdings believes that "the reputation of a company as perceived by the market is as important as the actual services rendered by the company". CS Holdings obtained this reputation and is a new South African IT company, which forms alliances with firms such as, Ubuntu Technologies, to provide "expertise and knowledge exchange as well as some infrastructure, enabling Ubuntu Technologies to tender for business from which they were previously excluded". The integration of Ubuntu principles made it possible for CS Holdings to improve its management.

We are aware of the fact that Ubuntu is itself still highly contested. Some have the opinion that it is being abused for political reasons, but we have to respect the fact that the concept Ubuntu is new and is developed in a South African context, which is still in a political turmoil. Others express their doubts about its factual content and others again mistrust its translation into a proper management concept. We, however, believe that if Ubuntu can be developed into a management concept as we have defined it, its usefulness to develop specific African management practices can be convincing. Some recent examples illustrate its implementation. Whether Ubuntu as a concept is ambiguous or idealises a specific African life is irrelevant as long as it can be translated into local practices that clearly provide new African 'best practices'. Hence, the task ahead is to develop it into a proper management concept, which might promote the issue of African solidarity in organisations and establish a novel practice of African business.

Dialogue between South and North

Ubuntu will make the Western world aware of the fact that the transfer of knowledge should no longer be defined in terms of ‘trading’ knowledge from the developed North to the developing South. We also cannot simply stick to a normative transfer of knowledge respecting cultural differences and diversity but upholding Western norms when it comes to management practices to which even African professional associations have to comply. We cannot simply transfer and translate one management idiom into another language, which is what we have illustrated earlier by underlining the crucial role of local discourses in firms in order to determine the meaning of a concept for local practices. We should be aware that Ubuntu has been introduced as a management concept at least in South Africa where a specific African idiom begins to develop to improve human relations in organisations based on indigenous African value systems. Managers and employees start to learn and speak another idiom, which makes it possible to recognise a specific African management approach.

In our description of the characteristics of management concepts, we have stressed that once a concept has obtained these qualities it becomes a knowledge product, which can be transferred to other geographical areas similar to the concepts such as, productivity and Management By Objectives (MBO) during the 1950’s and 1960’s when these American concepts where introduced in Europe. The same has happened with ‘quality’ in the 1970’s from Japan to the United States and Europe. Since the 1980’s, we have seen a remarkable upsurge of concepts in the field of management knowledge that generally originated from the United States. We presume that if Ubuntu reaches the stage of a proper management concept, it is apt to be transferred to other parts of the world. Those who wonder about the ways Europe could develop its own management approach will be interested in the development that takes place in Africa. Within Europe multicultural liberal societies have to deal with large diversities. Debates over multiculturalism have made it clear that the proper functioning of these liberal societies not only depends on the justice of its institutions but also on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens: “e.g. their sense of identity and how they view potentially competing forms of national, regional, ethnic or religions identities; their ability to tolerate and work together with others who are different from themselves; […] their willingness to show self-restraint and exercise personal responsibility in their economic demands and in personal choices that affect their health and the environment” (Kymlicka & Norman 2000, 6).

In the area of organisation studies, research is being undertaken to merge new views from political philosophy with organisation science to develop the concept of organisational citizenship that includes all relevant behaviours of individual organisation members. "This broader conceptualisation of **organisational citizenship** includes traditional in-role job performance behaviours, organisationally functional extra-role behaviours, and political behaviours, such as full and responsible organisational participation, that typically have been omitted from previous studies of citizenship" (Dyne & Graham 1994, 766). We believe that this new concept of organisational citizenship reflects issues, which are being raised by Ubuntu as well. Translations from one to the other concept and vice versa can strengthen the quality of both concepts. A dialogue, however, will be required to establish proper translations between South and North. A dialogue enables "a free flow of meaning" (Isaacs 1999, 395), because it is a conversation amongst peers. In such a case, everyone will be responsible equally and will create a better understanding of what both Ubuntu and organisational citizenship can mean in different contexts.

Instead of transferring knowledge based on presupposed norms and values about the professional identity of managers such as the normative transfer mechanism presupposes, we need to start a dialogue about the ways African and Western mangers use management concepts in practice. This dialogue will clarify how South and North as partners can improve the ways organisations are co-ordinated and challenge the idea that transfer of knowledge can only take place by 'trading'– in a one way direction, i.e. knowledge from the developed to the developing world. The dialogue steps away from forms of communication between South and North, which are based on asymmetrical power relations and distorted forms of knowledge transfer. "Knowledge is similar to light, weightless and intangible, it can easily travel the world, enlightening the lives of people everywhere" (World Development Report 1998/99, 13). A proper dialogue between those who defend the importance of Ubuntu and organisational citizenship will certainly enhance this travelling of knowledge.

Notes

[1] They call themselves neo-institutionalists while the original institutionalists had the opinion that in organisations « things are not as they seem » (Perrow 1986, 159). They assume that any organisation sold out its own goals in order to survive. The neo-institutionalists question the idea whether an organisation has a goal. They believe that it is necessary to find out how organisations construct their identities in order to legitimise their presence in relevant environments. They do not focus on socio-economic environment, but on the mechanisms for

diffusion ideas through whereby companies survive. Thus, they pay more attention to cultural than economic and technological development patterns.

[2] Space limits us to elaborate on our belief that this translation issue is not only an activity for managers but applies to all participants in an organisation. Therefore our analysis presupposes the validity of the critical theory stating that all participants participate in the construction of meanings that affect their lives (Ph. Johnson & J. Duberley 2000, chapter 6).

[3] Decisions are made necessary by an absence of rules that can be applied.

[4] Durban Metrorail is a South African company of public transport . It had received a success place during the Black Management Forum (1999) for the most Progressive Company in Kwazulu-Natal.

[5] CS Holdings is a South African IT firm. For more informations, please refer to: www.cs.co.za/reconstructionand_development.htm

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