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Abstract
Are the cultural values of ubuntu/botho culture relevant to the economic and business sphere, and in particular to the world of work? Can their integration into the workplace activities and strategies help to enhance improvement in work performance? If so, what would be an appropriate and viable approach to such integration? These questions emerge from the debate, which tough not necessarily new but has increased in momentum in the past decade or two, whereby strong claims are being made that ubuntu culture, as an indigenous African value system, can be harnessed into a transformative and developmental force if SA is to effectively address and meet both its internal and external challenges. It is therefore today common to hear in SA talk about moral regeneration, indigenisation, renewal and the volunteer spirit (vukuzensele) and many other related concepts seen to be inspired by and stemming from the ubuntu cultural values. This paper provides a critical review and analysis of this debate with the view to assessing the validity of the claims made, with specific focus on the workplace. I argue on the basis of this review that there is strong evidence in support of the claims made about the economic and business relevance of the ubuntu culture. While this presents an opportunity for ubuntu in the economic and business sphere, and in particular in the workplace, I however show that there are also some serious constraints that, if not addressed, would inhibit that potentially positive economic role of the ubuntu culture.

Introduction
Debate around the ubuntu/botho culture and its potential developmental role in SA occurred in the context of the post-colonial era and the subsequent challenges it presented for the African countries (see Gyeke, 1997). It was necessitated by imminent collapse of the colonial, apartheid political order became imminent in the late 1980s and the prospects of the creation of a democratic order were high; with the prospects of re-entry into the global community and markets were also high. The debate gained even greater momentum in the post-apartheid, democratic 1994 period and the end of the 20th century that marked the beginning of the 21st century as a new millennium. This is the period in which SA and most other African countries publicly declared the 21st century as the century for renewal and advancement of the African continent so that African countries become active and competitive players on the global stage (www.gov.org.za). Within this context and underlying the debate on the African indigenous culture of ubuntu, is the widely held view and claim that this culture has a key role to
play in the socio-economic growth and development of the post-apartheid democratic South Africa. Those holding this view believe that the strength of the botho culture, which would help to enhance this role, lies in its unique values and virtues. This paper provides a comprehensive and critical review of these debates with the view assessing the validity and strength of this viewpoint. In so doing both the opportunities and constraints, if any, are examined in order to determine the objective conditions under which the ubuntu culture could fulfil this role.

Ubuntu/Botho Culture – The Concept Examined
The first intellectual attempt to define and explain the ubuntu culture, which brought to light those key defining, unique features and virtues, was made by Jordan K Ngubane in the 1960s and 1970s in his texts respectively entitled *An African Explains Apartheid* and *Conflict of Minds*. According to Ngubane (1963), Ubuntu is a philosophy of life and the practice of being humane which gave content to life for African people long before the arrival of white settlers. He argues that this philosophy arose from the African supreme virtue or ethical code which attaches primacy to human personality as a sacred being. Showing how its roots lie in the word *Sudic or Nudic*, with *Su* or *Nu* constituting the rootword of *person* in most Sub-Saharan African languages, he describes it as a person-oriented cultures marking African or Sudic or Nudic Civilisation.

In the past decade and a half, and as part of ongoing debates around ubuntu/botho culture in SA, further attempts were made to define and describe this culture. While some referred to it as a “metaphor” (Mbigi and Maree, 1995), others described it as a “process and philosophy” (Makhudu, 1993 and Tongi, 1996)), and yet others as a “statement” (Dandala, 1996), a “collective consciousness” (Prinsloo, 1996), and a “collective solidarity” (Laden, 1997). Notwithstanding this diverse accounts of what the ubuntu concept entails, there is however a wide consensus that its core defining values and virtues are respect, group solidarity, conformity, compassion, human dignity and humaneness, collective unity and solidarity, sharing, universal brotherhood, communalism, interdependence, and hospitality (see Mdluli, 1987: 66-71; Mbigi and Maree, 1995: 2; and Kamwangamalu, 1999: 25-26). These definitions are consistent with that provided by Ngubane.

It is worth noting that, although these ubuntu values look numerous, they are all linked to one another and their meaningful influence on the society is dependent on that interlinkage. This interlink is clearly noticeable from the detailed discussions of its values and virtues such as the one provided by Kamwangamalu (1999) in which he pays particular attention to the virtues of communalism and interdependence. Drawing from assertions that Africa is fundamentally “communocratic” (see Sekou Toure in Gyeke, 1987), in terms

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1 Ngubane, 1979: 65-66. NB. To refer to this African person-oriented culture, I will in this study, employ both the Sotho word “Botho” and/or Nguni word “Ubuntu” interchangeably.
of which nobody is living for himself but for the community, Kamwangamalu argues that communalism is one of the core ubuntu virtues according to which the interest of the individual is subordinate to that of the group. Communalism, he argues, insists that the good of all determines the good of each or the welfare of each is dependent on the welfare of all. While communalism is the opposite of individualism, Kamwangamalu argues however that from the ubuntu perspective, communalism does not negate individualism. Rather, he argues, “communalism is the recognition of the limited character of the possibilities of the individual, which limited possibilities whittle away the individual’s self-sufficiency”.

Ubuntu thus rests on the cardinal belief that “motho ke motho ka batho” (a seSotho language version) and “umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye” (an isiZulu language version), the English equivalent is “I am because you are and you are because I am”. This interpersonal nature of the ubuntu culture embodies its other distinctive virtues such as patience, hospitality, loyalty, respect, conviviality, sociability, vitality, endurance, sympathy, obedience, compassion and sharing (see Kamwangamalu, 1999: 29, referencing from Shutte, 1996. See also Prinsloo, 1996; Mbigi and Maree, 1995, and Teffo, 1999). Kamwangamalu provides a sociolinguistic analysis of ubuntu and highlights language as an important dimension to the botho culture. This point is consistent with the theory that “culture is a socially learned, shared assemblage of practices, perceptions, attitudes, world view, value system and beliefs”. Based on this theory, he argues, the ubuntu cultural values “are not innate but are acquired in society and are transmitted from one generation to another by means of oral genres such as fables, proverbs, myths, riddles, and story-telling”.

Drawing from this, he argues that the acquisition, transmission and expression of the ubuntu values is achieved through amongst others the use of language.

The importance of language as a medium through which cultural values such as ubuntu culture’s are communicated and transmitted, is best explained by Mogobo Nokaneng(1985), a Northern Sotho author, in his grammar textbook entitled Segageso (a Northern Sotho word for Our Culture). According to Nokaneng, idioms or direto (in Northern Sotho language), as vital part of language (similar to izibongo in Zulu or praise poems in English), formulate an integral part of African culture. Hence, that they have major influence on the lives of the African people since they are about the life of black people; the world in which they live; things with which they share existence on earth; things that they know; and those that they have seen and experienced. He argues that diema, as a true reflection of African’s life and existence, constitute the word of ancestors and forefathers which is passed on to grandsons and great grand sons in life. They fulfil the function of advising and teaching people about life experiences of forefathers and thus constitute a vital source

3 See Ibid, 1999: 29 (Also see Togni, 1996: 112 for a similar view).
of life as they originate from life experiences of previous generations from which the current generations can learn important lessons of life. They teach about respect; strengthen families and extended family relationships; teach people on how to live peacefully with one another and/or good neighbourliness; and above all, they place a strong emphasis on ubuntu. Furthermore, they bring alert to and caution against bad habits and wrong doings; criminal acts; social problems; and bad influences or spitefulness\(^5\).

Similarly, Kamwangamalu illustrates the positive function that language plays in the promotion of ubuntu-type values by citing the use of proverbs in some of the African Bantu languages such as Ciluba. This he illustrates through proverbs which play a key role in the teaching and promotion of virtues communalism and interdependence such as:

- “**Tshidima umwe tshiadia bangi**” (English translation would be: “Harvested by one, eaten by many”)
- “**Bubedi bwa disu mbubedi bwa diulu**” (literal English translation: “The sickness of the eye is the sickness of the nose”) (Your neighbour’s problem is your problem)\(^6\).

While the above examples demonstrate how African languages promote and uphold the ubuntu values of communalism and interdependence, Kamwangamalu (1999) and Teffo (1999) have also shown that certain African language expressions serve to uphold the value of respect in the ubuntu culture. Such expressions take both the verbal and non-verbal forms. For instance, people using language for communication through “a careful choice and use of words and expressions…” Teffo cites the Northern Sotho language whereby respect for elders is encapsulated in certain speech markers such as the use of the prefix **bo-** which, although signify plural form, could be employed in the context of communication to express respect for a single person rather than necessarily indicating plurality. This way of communication could be used by a young person when addressing or talking to or about an elderly person such a father through the use of expression **botate**, or older sister **bosesi**, or even the chief **bokgosi** (See Teffo, 1999: p.159).

Non-verbal expressions of respect manifest themselves through physical gestures such as is the case with the Venda women who, when making an offer to husbands, would not look straight in the husband’s eyes and would crawl towards him with the face looking down until the offer has been done. Similarly, within most African communities, a man with a hat on, on entering a house and making greetings to either women or other men, or even when being offered food to eat by a wife or other women, would take off the hat as an indication of respect. The question though is what relevance does this person-oriented value system have to socio-economic growth and

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\(^5\) In fact these are translations into English from Nokaneng’s Northen Sotho text.

development, and in particular to work performance? This question is addressed in the review below.

Ubuntu/Botho Culture and the South African Workplace: What Role in Work Performance?
The ubuntu values, most proponents argue, if strategically and innovatively tapped, could contribute positively to the socio-economic development of post-apartheid SA and even give it a competitive edge in the world markets. Mbigi and Maree, who are amongst the main advocates this viewpoint, base it on their understanding of ubuntu as a “metaphor that describes the significance of group solidarity on survival issues amongst African communities that are subjected to poverty as a result of deprivation, and which is effected through brotherly group care as opposed to individual self-reliance” (Mbigi and Maree, 1995: 4). Hence that as a universal concept that is applicable to every marginalised and poor community in the world, ubuntu requires that for the poor and the marginalised to survive their desperate material conditions, they should stick together on certain selective survival issues and display unquestioning loyalty and conformity to each other as well as be ready to sacrifice, suffer and display the spirit of service and patriotism on those survival issues. They suggest that the ubuntu values can and should be harnessed into a transformative force by African countries around particular survival issues.

They believe that for the democratic South Africa to meet the challenges of reconstruction and development as well as to become economically competitive, its development structures, strategies and processes should harness the ubuntu values. This, they argue, should particularly be so with industrial, business enterprises since the Western and Eastern based techniques of management alone would remain inadequate to overcome the challenges they are faced with. If such techniques are not strategically fused with the innovative African practices and processes anchored in the ubuntu value system, they argue, they could only enhance the attainment of competitive parity as opposed to competitive advantage and space (Mbigi and Maree, 1995: 2-4). For similar argument see also Lessem (1996: 187). Mbigi (1997) sees this, what he calls South Africa’s “triple cultural heritage”, as a source of strength that needs to be tapped to not only reconcile the historical differences and conflicts but also to enhance the achievement of improved efficiency, productivity, profitability and competitiveness. Clearly the argument for the need to tap, integrate and fuse different cultural experiences and values to inform and enhance business management principles, practices and approaches is seen as an appropriate response to the challenges

presented by diversity in the new context of democracy and competitive
globalisation. Note, for instance, Lessem and Nussbaum (1996:11)’s argument
that “while management principles are universal, the context in which they
are implemented is critical to the form and shape they should take in any
particular environment”.

These assertions can best be explained in the context of Ray and Sayer (1999)’s
cultural turn or Thompson and Findlay (1999)’s cultural return phenomenon,
and are difficult to ignore. This is even so in view of Ngubane’s account that
points to the significance of the Ubuntu/Botho culture to the African people
in South Africa and its historical role in the liberation struggle. According to
Ngubane, the botho culture defined and shaped the lives of Africans long
before the arrival of white settlers and proved itself to be resilient by
surviving some of the harshest historical conditions. Ngubane’s view is
shared by Nzimande (1988: 4) who argued that, in spite of the changes that
the African traditional and cultural values and beliefs such as the explanation
and conceptualisation of mental health and approach to treating mental
disorders underwent, their core practices were maintained. The ubuntu
culture, Ngubane(1963 and 1979) argues, played an instrumental role in the
historical struggle against white colonial conquest and control in South
Africa, whose momentum picked up in the late nineteenth century and
increase in intensity throughout the twentieth century, by unifying the
African liberation front around the common goal of the Ideal of Nationhood
and rejecting the white imposed policies which sought to racially and tribally
divide people. This unity around a common objective, he argues, prevailed
despite differences between African-led liberation structures over the
strategies needed to pursuance of this ideal.

Other studies conducted on black workers, although not necessarily about
ubuntu culture, provide evidence that supports Ngubane(1963 and 1979)’s
account, as they reveal the positive influence of the ubuntu culture’s virtues
on black workers’ survival under the harsh compound or hostels conditions
of colonial and resistance to the apartheid-capitalist exploitation. For instance,
Gordon (1977)’s study of the black mineworkers in Namibia discovered that
the workers’ understanding of their situation as being oppressive, saw them
developing two distinct social worlds as a response. Those worlds are
described by Gordon as being the “public world” in which the workers
interact with white management for survival reasons and for coping with
exploitation and the “private world” within the interstices of the formal
organisational structure and grounded in the compound. The former world is
characterised by workers’ adherence and observing of certain rules of
etiquette during interaction with whites. Within this world, Gordon argues,
black workers embark on quota restriction or restriction of production output
as a coping and defence mechanism. As he points out, quota restriction
enabled workers to avoid fatigue by minimising rigours of work, control
work pace, exert some control over their own work targets, as well as streamlining the job without being blamed by white supervisors.

The private world, on the other hand, is characterised by the culture that he defines as ‘brotherhood’ in which “blacks can be ‘themselves’ and their ‘own’ actions (See Gordon, 1977, as quoted in Webster et al, 1994: 151). The influence of botho cultural values and principles on black worker’s attitudes, behaviour and actions is evident from Gordon’s explanation below of the ‘brotherhood’:

“Brotherhood is the means by which the blacks protect ‘their own people.’ It emphasises respect, trust, consultation and dignity…A ‘good’ brother uses the proper modes of address, participates freely in drinking both as a sponsor and a guest, has a large circle of friends, is generous, tries to help his fellow workers as far as possible through making or arranging loans, giving gifts and doing ‘favours’, does not pry into the private matters of others, strives within the situation to look after his own problems as much as possible before asking for assistance and regularly sends remittances home.”

Similarly, Moodie(1994:24) found the ‘myriad brotherhoods’ amongst black miners in South African gold mines characterised by social networks through which miners supported migrant cultures rooted in rural practice. Within those networks of sharing, he argues, cultures of solidarity and personal identities were maintained and recreated. These findings are echoed in Shula Marks (2001)’s remarks on experiences of black migrant mineworkers in South Africa between the late nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century. In those remarks, she argues “…their (i.e. black migrant miners) cultural baggage should have provided the framework for both the disciplinary order established within the mines and the strategies of survival of the miners themselves…the ancestors, their cattle, and home, a deep fear of witchcraft and recourse to protective folk medicines, remained as central to their lives as comradeship and the dignity of work, and consciousness of the brutality and exploitation of their lives” (see Marks, 2001: 23).

These forms of resistance and strategies for the protection of fellow brothers from white capitalist exploitation bear reflection on what Sitas (1996) calls “diffusional forms of control” in South African hostels “where people were treated like animals”. By “diffusional forms of control”, Sitas (1996:237) was describing a situation whereby the ability of municipal, township or administration boards to control and co-ordinate activities of hostel inmates were restricted. Although he does not make explicit mention that botho culture was at play, Sitas (1996)’s study implicitly reveals evidence that points to positive influence of the indigenous African cultural values and principles of ubuntu such as “solidarity”, “respect” and “compassion” and

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8 In Webster et al 1994: 151-152).
“interdependence” on the lives of black migrant metalworkers. Note here his argument:

“Inside the bricked and tawdry walls of the hostels a complex informal pattern of association was always in existence, deflecting and responding to urban pressures. These associations, or defensive combinations, spawned a variety of cultural formations that co-existed alongside each other. My study of the experiences of migrant metalworkers revealed that on the East rand, in the so-called Nguni hostels, most cultural formations (55 percent of the cases) subsisted on an area or regional basis: people from a specific rural area (e.g. Xolo, or Pongola) interacted actively together after work. To a lesser extent such forms of associations had an ethnic basis e.g. Zulu or Xhosa or Shangaan (25 per cent). Finally only some associations (15 per cent) cut across ethnicity. These cultural formations, I would like to argue, deflect ‘pressures’ and regulate behaviour within defined social spaces. They deflect what I would like to describe as processes of ‘alienation’, ‘disvaluation’, ‘disoralia’ and ‘degendering’... Over years, patterns of behaviour came to be regulated in the hostels of the East rand. New migrants would immediately be taken care of the moment they entered the hostel. People from the same region, or clansmen, would immediately organise the newcomer’s life along group lines. Without this form of combination, respect and exercising their knowledge and experience in the city provided counsel, leadership or advice.”

This evidence presents a challenge to the narrow materialist accounts of workers’ solidarities, collective behaviour and actions such as that of ‘brotherhood’ and ‘formal associations’, which attribute them to the dominant material economic conditions of exploitation by the property owning classes. Clearly, these forms of solidarity and behaviour cannot only be solely explained in terms of reference to the material forces but also in terms of the cultural forces that are obviously at play. They reveal both the material and cultural forces at work.

Not only does the above analysis and evidence presented by Ngubane (1963 and 1979), Gordon (1977), Moodie (1994) and Sitas (1996 and 1997) strengthen claims such as Mbigi and Maree’s that the ubuntu culture has a role to play in the socio-economic development of the contemporary SA society, especially at the workplace level, but also the strong evidence of the historical failure on the part of SA managements and successive governments under apartheid to successfully adopt and implement Western-based and Eastern-based strategies in the workplace in order to improve working relations, work performance, efficiency, productivity, as well as to introduce workplace democracy. While under the pre-1994 South Africa, the failure of these strategies was mainly attributable to the system of apartheid capitalism characterised by political and economic exclusion and marginalisation of the

black people, in the post-1994 period this was attributed to both the legacy of apartheid and the neo-liberal economic policy environment which gave rise to resistance on the part of trade unions. Research shows that under apartheid capitalism, concern with improving performance in the workplace was mainly a preoccupation of white employers, managements and the co-opted white workers (the latter constituting aristocratic working class that enjoyed privileges denied to black workers). Not only were black workers denied political rights as part of the broader black populace but also industrial citizenship rights in the workplace under racially discriminatory policies of apartheid. They were subjected to white oppression, domination and exploitation both in the workplace and beyond. This situation is best captured in Von Holdt (2003)’s concept of apartheid workplace regime, a concept he borrowed from Michael Burawoy (1985) and innovatively adapted to the South African context, to describe the racial structure of power in the workplace. This regime, he argues, “allocated skill and authority on a racial basis” and was “characterised by racial insults and racial assaults” (see Von Holdt, 2003: 27). The regime, he argues, gave rise to a “baaskap racial culture” which turned factories into places of white power (leading to notions such as “a white man’s factory”) and black powerlessness, and whereby any white person, whether an employee or a manager, could issue instruction to black workers. The regime and its baaskap racial culture, he also argues, were maintained through arbitrary dismissals of black workers for failure to comply, injection of fear and threat of violence.

The apartheid workplace regime should be understood within the broader context of the regulatory system of the industrial relations in pre-democratic South Africa which has its roots in the 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act (ICA). The legislative framework anchored in this 1924 Act created the dual system whereby black workers were denied labour rights and excluded from the industrial relations institutions such as industrial councils while their white, coloured and Indian counterparts enjoyed labour rights and their unions were legally recognised. Within this context of economic and political exclusion, black workers saw no point in cooperating with the white owned and run business sector, which was seen as simply an extension of the apartheid political regime. Thus, rather than seeking to work together with management in forging a common identity for the joint realisation of common goals, their main preoccupation came to be with the struggle to bring down the illegitimate system of apartheid and resistance to its attendant racial practices and measures in the workplace.

This is clearly illustrated in Von Holdt’s (1996 and 2003)’s study of transition in trade unionism in SA as part of the broader transition from apartheid to democracy using the case study of Steelco, a South African steel factory. Reporting on the findings from responses of the black workers and their shopfloor representatives belonging to the then Metal and Allied Workers’ Union (MAWU), today known as the National Union of Metal Workers of
South Africa (NUMSA), Von Holdt (1996) found high levels of resistance to the racially structured workplace and racist practices of white workers and managers. The resultant adversarial situation, which Von Holdt termed a “war of resistance”, became a major obstacle to any attempts by management to secure workers’ co-operation on productivity matters. In Von Holdt’s observation, “underlying the dramatic events of major strikes or stayaways was the daily challenge to the authority of the (the white) foreman, the superintendent, the divisional manager – the authority of the white man, the authority of apartheid (Von Holdt, 1996: 14).” This was further confirmed in interviews with the chairpersons of the Joint Shopsteward Committee and the Steel Works Committees, respectively, whose responses were as follows:

“The culture of resistance meant that at that time we were faced with the system of apartheid which was working hand-in-hand with the capitalist system, and naturally as the union we had to resist. One way of resisting was through industrial action ... At that time we were never concerned about the economy. In fact we wanted to see this economy suffering because it had no significance for us other than keeping the very system of apartheid alive”

“What you should preach to workers is that they must work as slowly as they can. They must not agree to do any other extra jobs, because we believe we are not paid.. Mandela is still in prison ... We’ll make sure that we work as slow as possible =, we don’t care, this is not our country”

Resistance and the struggle by black workers’ trade unions against the discriminatory systems were articulated through the concept of “social movement unionism” used to referred to the form of unionism in the 1980s in SA that linked production issues to wider political issues and facilitated active engagement with both the factory-based, production politics and the community and state power issues (see Lambert and Webster, 1988: 31).

The apartheid capitalist system not only divided black and white workers but also created an environment of mistrust, suspicion, tensions and conflicts which strained the relations between white employers/ managements, organised white workers, and organised black workers. This environment, which prevailed throughout the apartheid era stretching from 1948 to 1994, and its attendant factors served as major obstacles to finding and developing workplace strategies to both foster cooperative relations and improve performance and efficiency. This continued to be so throughout the 1980s and 1990s despite the extension of legal recognition of black trade unions following the Wiehahn Commission’s recommendations in 1980 as black people remained politically excluded. Strategies initiated within this period of apartheid by managements and government, but failed, include the 1950s and 1970s statutory works committees and liaison committees, the work study

techniques and incentive bonus schemes in the 1970s, the statutory works councils in the early 1980s and the non-statutory participatory schemes between the late 1980s and early 1990s (See Davies & Lewis, 1975: 65; Maree, 1985; Bethlehem, 1991; Maller, 1992; Barret, 1993; and Mapadimeng, 1998). Where success in participatory schemes was achieved, it was only in single instances (Maree and Godfrey, 1998) or in cases whereby workers were not unionised and thus resulting in the benefits accruing from participation going to management at the expense of labour (see Maller, 1992).

The question that needs to be addressed is whether the political change from apartheid to democracy has had any positive influence on the practices and attitudes in the SA workplaces and the broader labour relations? The post-apartheid era was marked by SA’s re-entry into the global world which exposed most local business organizations to outside pressures and competition as protectionist import-substitution policies were replaced with the neo-liberal outward-orientated policies under the macro-economic policy Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) promoting tariff reductions and free trade and limited state intervention. In a desperate attempt to respond to and counter competitive pressures associated with globalization under this policy environment, most SA major business organizations adopted cost-reduction strategies through labour market flexibility. While there is various forms of flexibility (see for instance Standing, 1999 and Bezuidenhout & Kenny, 1999), SA business enterprises tended to be adopting typologies that lead to job losses, job insecurity and intensified exploitation such as numerical, time and wage flexibility as was established by the 1995 South African Labour Market Flexibility Survey (SALFS). The survey, conducted on the manufacturing sector covering the metals, engineering, textiles and garments, chemicals, food processing, and the paper and printing sub-sectors, discovered that flexibility did not lead to growth in employment levels and that there was increase in employment of casual and contract labour (see Macun, 1987:4).

Labour market flexibility was also discovered to be at rapid increase within the SA mining sector during the 1990s. According to the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM)’s Report entitled “Outsourcing mine jobs reaches alarming proportions”, casualisation within the coal mining sub-sector has increased from 5% to 16% between 1987 and 1998, and in the gold sub-sector it has seen a rise from 3% to 10% of the total workforce between 1987 and 1997/98 (see www.num.org.za/news/num-minejobs.html, 10-04-2000:1-2). While companies are said to be citing a “drive for higher productivity, flexibility and cost cutting” as the reasons for utilizing sub-contracted or casual labour, research findings suggest that contrary to these claims, labour sub-contracting or casualisation is used by companies as a strategy for circumventing wages and unionized workers’ working conditions\(^\text{11}\) and also as a tool of control by managements over workers (see Kenny and

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 2000:1
Macun thus argues that these findings suggest that SA has a highly flexible labour market. Similarly, Standing argues “South Africa has a flexible labour market. In some respects it may be too flexible... It is almost comical to describe SA as having employment inflexibility. Many workers have little employment protection, retrenchments are fairly easy and widespread, notice periods are short or non-existent, and most firms can resort to temporary or casual labour and, if need be, labour contracting - the world’s most flexible labour system and spreading like wildfire” (see Business Day, 1996:12, quoted by Kenny and Bezuidenhout, 1999:2).

These labour market flexibility strategies used by business enterprises, encouraged and supported by the neo-liberal macro-economic policy environment, only served to aggravate the already highly adversarial relations and attitudes within SA workplaces. The past decade since the dawn of democracy in SA has witnessed an increase in labour militancy marked mainly by annual nationwide protests led by organised labour against unilateral industrial and workplace restructuring by employers. Examples of these massive resistances include the May 10, 2000 national strike against unilateral restructuring dubbed as “a war against poverty and joblessness”. During this strike, Cosatu demanded that to best address the unemployment problem, retrenchments should be made a mandatory issue for negotiations; that there should be protection of workers during liquidation; unilateral restructuring of government assets be halted; and that accelerated reduction of trade tariffs be reduced (see The Star, 11 May 2000:1 & 5). Cosatu’s president, Willie Madisha, also called for a halt to capital flight which he saw as being encouraged by the South African Chamber of Business (Sacob)’s affiliates which he claimed had invested R80 billion outside SA between 1994 and 1998 (The Star’s Business Report, 11 May 2000:1). While Tony Leon, the leader of the liberal opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, viewed the action as a “strike against labour flexibility and privatisation” necessary to “propel economic growth to a rate high enough to create more jobs”, the South African Communist Party (SACP) saw it as “a conscious offensive against capitalism”. A war of words also ensued between Cosatu and its ruling alliance partner, the ANC, during another national strike in October 2002. While the ANC-led government, as the employer in the public service, condemned the strike and claimed that it was not much of a success due to low turnout, and Cosatu issued challenged it, claiming that was in fact a success (see City Press, 6th October 2002). Recently, there has been similar industrial actions but at sectoral level, notably within the transport sector whereby trade unions organising within the sector embarked on a nationwide strike against the Transnet Group (a parastatal)’s plans to unilaterally restructure through privatisation (see http://www.satawu.co.za/news.htm last accessed on 12th April 2006).

12 Ibid, 11 May 2000:1&5
13 Ibid, 11 May 2000:5
Also worth noting is that racial attitudes and tensions remain pervasive within the SA workplaces. Note, for instance, the following remark by Cosatu member, Theo Matshiki, during strike action: “I wonder if the government can take action at floor level in private companies where there is a lot of exploitation. If a worker makes a mistake, they are quick to dismiss you. They then go to employment agencies for replacement, most of whom do not recommend black people for posts.” Also bearing evidence of continued racial tensions are Numsa’s press releases on the situation in the steel sector. In one press release entitled “Legal strike looming at Ferrometals and Columbus steel companies” developed as a response to these companies’ failure to address racism and implement the employment equity and their envisaged plans to close furnace divisions that could lead to job losses, Numsa’s national sector co-ordinator Stephen Nhlapo described the union’s planned strike action as “…the last remedy left to the workers to deal with baaskap and boer mafia attitudes” (Numsa Press Release, 25-May-1999). In another press release reacting to ISCOR’s restructuring programme called “Apollo” aimed to transform the head office, Numsa criticize it saying it is an attempt by the regrouping old “broederbond syndicate” running the company in a “boere Mafia” style to recreate “the old apartheid structure” in which white Afrikaner males dominate and blacks are marginalised (see Numsa Press Release, 17-November-1999).

This negative consequence of flexibility route chosen by business enterprises was met with criticism through which alternative strategies were put forward. Amongst those who levelled such criticism is Macun (1997) according to whom a viable alternative strategy for improved performance and productivity would be that developed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and described by Standing (1996) as “dynamic efficiency”. Its advantage, he argues, lies in the fact that pursuit of greater flexibility, improved productivity and profitability occurs through competition between two strong partners (in this case organised labour through trade unions and organised employers) who are simultaneously rivals and co-operative, and also in its emphasis on the need to strike a balance between competing interests of equity, job security and efficiency. Hence that this strategy would help to enhance reduction in conflicts as the concerns and views of both partners would have been considered during decision makings, would enable enterprises to overcome and transcend the apartheid workplace legacy, and above all, would enhance the realisation of the workers’ effort as a determinant of “how much activity workers engage in, the pace and the quality of work that goes into various activities” for improved labour productivity (Macun, 1995:8). This, he argues, should however be supported through incentives such as improved wages and profit-sharing schemes as motivation to work.
This evidence suggests that the gap between employers and trade unions remains wide and is thus likely to remain a major obstacle to workplace cooperation and possibilities of joint decision makings on issues of common interest with the view to working jointly towards improving performance, efficiency and productivity. It is against this background of the consistent failed efforts and strategies that it becomes imperative to explore alternative workplace interventions and strategies. Can the ubuntu values enhance such alternative? I have so far argued based on the preceding review that there is indeed a strong backing for the claims that the botho culture could be tapped into a developmental and transformative force. Notwithstanding this however, some serious concerns have been raised and potential constraints identified to the integration of ubuntu into the workplace. These will be examined in the next section.

**Constraints and Opportunities to Ubuntu/Botho in the Workplace**

Analysts such as Mdluli (1987), while agreeing with the viewpoint, have however raised some concerns with the idea. Mdluli’s main concern, which he presented in a form of criticism, is that the dominant groups such as political leaders have a tendency to manipulate the Ubuntu values to further their narrow interests, as was proven by past experiences under the apartheid South Africa. He argues that the Ubuntu value system is prone to manipulation by those in authority positions, in his words the “African bureaucratic petty bourgeoisie”, for furtherance of narrow interests that often disadvantages the poor. Basing his argument on the past experiences in South Africa under the apartheid Bantustan system, particularly in Zululand Bantusan, (today Kwa-Zulu Natal province) whereby Inkatha introduced Ubuntu-Botho school syllabus and on the anti-apartheid struggle’s experience, Mdluli warns against the dangers of the dominant groups’ tendency to use Ubuntu in the name of the poor masses to legitimize their own hegemonies. Such manipulative tendencies, he argues, are not any different from those that saw the use of Bible to justify “all shades of ideologies and practices” (Mdluli, 1987: 64-5. Also see Mdluli, 1990).

That such cultural abuses do occur can be seen from the account advanced by Sitas(1997) of what he terms a “peculiar colonial managerialism” that existed and was practised in industrial enterprises in the region of Natal (today known as KwaZulu-Natal). This form of managerialism which he gave rise to what he calls “benevolent dictatorship with a strict hierarchy of races” [the phrase borrowed from van den Berghe (1964)’s description], Sitas argues, was characterised by “the coexistence of ‘scientific management’ and bureaucratic forms of control alongside such ‘indirect rule’, ‘tribal’, or ‘traditional’ forms of consent and coercion”(Sitas, 1997: 102-103). Thus, pointing out to the challenge that faced sociologists and other social scientists interested in the field of industrial and labour studies, he argues:

“We thus needed to understand a managerialism which was bifocal: ‘there was the world of white managers, artisans and workers (and to a
lesser extent of “Indians” and “Coloureds”) which was governed by ‘modern’ statutes and collective bargaining. There was also the world of black workers and ‘Zulus’ which over and above the segregationist statute of the Apartheid years, was also governed by ‘traditional’ authorities. This style of governance of people at work, we can label ‘colonial managerialism’. A managerialism that ruled African workers differently and elicited traditional forms of control to maximise its modernised benefits”

In his critique of such cultural abuses, Mdluli drew particular attention to the ubuntu/botho culture’s virtue of Ukuhlonipha/respect which, as he rightly states, has a major influence on relationships between people at different levels in the society. This, he argues, it does by placing an emphasis on respect amongst people, including those that are unknown to each other as well as by stipulating the authority of the elderly over the young. Mdluli thus sees this value in Ubuntu as sanctioning and justifying superiority based on age, sex and social position with a good example being that of male’s authority over females. To support his point of concern that Ukuhlonipha value within Ubuntu culture is prone to manipulation by those in authority positions, he cites Inkatha’s Ubuntu/Botho syllabus during the apartheid era which discouraged any form of questioning and non-compliance to authority situations such as domination based on sex/gender, age and the laws.

That the authorities have a tendency to manipulate culture to justify and legitimize their authority and domination is supported by the research findings of Liz Gunner and Mafika Gwala in their analysis of the Zulu praise poems called “Izibongo” in Zulu in their book entitled “Musho! Zulu Popular Praises” (1991). Praise poems or Izibongo, it should be understood, differ from Western-type poetry/poems, and are a common cultural practice amongst the people in Southern Africa. While in Zulu they are called Izibomgo, in Tswana and Southern Sotho they are called maboko and lithoko respectively (see Gunner and Gwala, 1991:1) respectively. In Pedi they are known as direto. Gunner and Gwala made an interesting discovery in their investigation that while izibongo have a broad social base, they have often been, together with the Zulu ethnic ideologically manipulated by politicians in pursuance of narrow, sectional political interests and ambitions. Gunner and Gwala discovered that one of the key functions of izibongo is to identify and praise a person, embody his/her personality by naming and linking him/her with his/her community, lineage and origins. It is this aspect of izibongo, they argue, which exposed it to manipulation by those in leadership positions as Shaka to legitimize his right to rule through the elevation of praises of the Zulu royal line including that of himself.

Gunner and Gwala argue however that izibongo’s proneness to manipulation and linkage with authority tends to obscure their broader social base which far transcends his narrow perceived image. As they indicate, izibongo have always been performed by non-specialists although often highly skilled praise poets are used at a range of social activities for entertainment such as marriage ceremonies, football matches (where players and teams are given football praises – i.e. izibongo zebhola), and for weekend relaxation in cramped hostels and compounds by male migrants. While this proves that izibongo, as part of the broader African culture, are not a preserve of the elites, they have however always been open to manipulation and appropriation. As Sitas (1990) indicates, the manipulative tendencies by Inkatha in the 1970s of using izibongo for the narrow definition of the Zulu ethnic identity by linking them to the royal praises were challenged by black trade union poets who reclaimed izibongo back into the broader Zulu culture. This resulted in the conflicting usages of izibongo by Inkatha and Zulu political elites on the one hand and by the trade union movement led by the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), which later became known as the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Arguing that izibongo thus became a key art form within the South African political discourse, Sitas points out that they also found themselves at the centre of the contested terrain, especially in contemporary Natal.

Another response to the viewpoint that the ubuntu culture and its values have a significant role to play in the South African economy, and in particular in the business sector, came from Kamwangamalu (1999) who has some serious reservations about what he sees as premature attempts by business leaders to commercialize the concept of ubuntu. While he believes that the ubuntu culture and its value system has a great potential to contribute to the socio-economic reconstruction and development of the South Africa society, he however finds the current approach used to integrate ubuntu values into the business and employment relations management principles unviable. This approach, which focuses on the use of published literature, training courses and manuals on botho, seminars, workshops, and conferences to extol ubuntu, “risks remaining a pie in the sky....”(Kamwangamalu, 1999:35). Such an approach is advocated by, for instance Teffo (1999), who believes the most viable way to integrate the ubuntu virtues and principles into business management is through mentors employed or hired by companies to teach or preach ubuntu. His argument that ubuntu is first and foremost a social and not a business concept also poses a challenge to Teffo’s claims that ubuntu “is a theory of business co-operation” (Teffo, 1999: 164).

Kamwangamalu argues that rather than being a business concept, ubuntu is first and foremost a social concept. Based on this understanding, he doubts that attempts to integrate ubuntu values and virtues into business

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19 Quoted in Gunner and Gwala, 1991, p:12
management principles in the post-apartheid South Africa would yield any positive, desired outcomes, as the same virtues have been eroded under the apartheid system which has erected walls between communities. His view therefore is that in order for such attempts to become successful, the South Africans should first prioritise creating an awareness and revival of the apartheid-eroded ubuntu culture and its virtues at the grass roots level. Hence that “doing the opposite … is tantamount to building a house without first laying a foundation” (see Kamwangamalu, 1999: 31-32).

The need for such awareness was also raised by Memela, the former acting editor of Sowetan Sunday World, a South African daily newspaper, in his regular column titled *Mamelang*. Memela, one of the advocates for revival of African indigenous practices and value systems, wrote an article titled *Revive the ubuntu ethic or perish* (Sowetan Sunday World, 14 December 2003) in which he criticizes those he calls the “monied former township blacks” who have left the apartheid created black townships for their selfish individualism, their non-support and non-appreciation of the political, philosophical ethic of communalism - “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” /“I am because you are, you are because we are”, as well as for their obsession with material success, and lack of interest in establishing structures that promote and preserve the African spirit, heritage and culture. He notes with disturbance the absence of communal living or co-operative black communities in which Africans come together not only to “lift as they rise” but also to implement the philosophical meaning of ubuntu to build strong sociocultural and economic blocks for self-help and empowerment. In fact, he argues that even at household level, it is very easy to identify members who have moved away from townships to enjoy material success while their blood relatives and extended kinship are left behind in the state of poverty, starvation and hopelessness. For Memela, all of this is a signal of the tragic waning away of the spirit of ubuntu which has in the past united black people at the spiritual level and at the time when they should be consolidating their gains. The notion that prevails amongst these former black township residents, he argues, is “I am going to become a capitalist to pursue wealth for myself and my family” (Memela, 2003:19).

Perhaps other studies such as that by Pierre L van den Berghe conducted in the early 1960s on the community of the small town known as Caneville in today’s KwaZulu-Natal (then Natal), shed some light on earlier signs of what Kamwangamalu and Memela see as the fading away and/or the weakening of the ubuntu culture, as part of the wider indigenous African culture in SA due to historical pressures of the imposed white or western dominant system. In this study, van den Berghe (1961) found that while some African in Caneville continued to practise traditional customs such as bride wealth or lobola, to speak their language isiZulu, and to observe ‘stiff’ formality during proceedings at community meetings e.g. wearing coats and ties (which he sees as challenging the European stereotypes that Africans merely ‘ape’ whites); there was a sizeable number of Africans who detached themselves
from their traditional culture. These Africans, he argued, owing to the
dominance of Western culture over Africa culture, and despite their lack of
education, spoke a little of English and adopted Christianity as their religion
as well as displaying a sense of cultural shame\textsuperscript{20} towards their own culture, as
they perceived Westernisation as a process of cultural improvement from the
stage of backwardness to the one of civilization (see van den Berghe, 1961: 44-
49). While it is not very clear just how valid these points raised by van de
Berghe are, they should however be considered seriously as they are not
isolated. In 1988, Nzimande made a more or less similar argument in his
advocacy for the “progressive social services” and health services for the post-
apartheid, democratic SA. Such services, he argued, could only be achieved
through a critical dialogue in which progressive social service workers should
engage with African traditional discourses on health, and when people freely
and unashamedly express their beliefs and practices. His concern though was
that some categories amongst the black African people in SA such as youth
and sections of the middle class, tend to display what I would argue is closest
to van den Berghe’s ‘cultural shame’. Note here his remark in his call for
critical dialogue:

“The main reason why this should not be one way process also arises
out of, particularly, the contradictory attitude of the youth and sections
of the African middle classes towards traditional practices. The urban
youth for instance is finding many of the African cultural formations
problematic and display a certain measure of ambiguity towards them
and yet have not themselves resolved these into alternative
formations….The educated middle classes for instance would
‘publicly’ denounce much of traditional healing, and yet many of them
when faced with personal crises would secretly go for help to both
izangoma or izinyanga, and faith healers. So there is a dynamic of
repression on taking place here\textsuperscript{21}”

\textbf{Concluding Remarks}

Evidence developed in this paper supports the view that the indigenous
African culture of ubuntu could be tapped into a transformative,
developmental force for the contemporary post-apartheid South African
society, especially at the economic level through integration into the
workplace with the view to stabilising working and/or production relations
as well as to enhancing work performance. It was noted that ubuntu cultural
values not only influenced the broader anti-colonial and anti-apartheid
struggle but also black workers’ collective struggle against conditions of
exploitation and alienation at the workplace level. It was further observed
that this influence was enhanced by the resilient nature of the ubuntu culture
which has seen it surviving some of the harshest historical conditions of
colonialism and apartheid which threatened to undermine and dismantle it,
and above all proofing its continued relevance. This resilience, which suggest

\textsuperscript{20} My emphasis.

\textsuperscript{21} Nzimande, 1988: 9.
a possibility for ubuntu’s integration into the economic sphere, should however be considered against the potential constraint of erosion and the wearing away of the ubuntu culture and other related indigenous African practices and beliefs as evidenced by signs of cultural shame displayed black Africans, especially those within the middle class category. This could be aggravated by the colonial and apartheid system’s “social walls” which created racial divisions amongst South Africans. Given the importance of language to culture, and in this case the African languages to ubuntu, these inherited divisions, which have inhibited the development of multi-lingualism amongst the South Africans, could turn out to be a serious constraint to the integration ubuntu in the workplace. I thus concur with Kamwangamalu(1999) that until these ‘social walls’ are brought down, the idea of ubuntu being tapped into a transformative, unifying and developmental force, especially in the business sphere, would remain just a pipe dream. Thus, while the current approaches proposed by ubuntu/botho culture’s advocates such as Mbigi and Maree(1995) and Teffo (1999) that its integration can be achieved through published literature, seminars, conferences and workshops facilitated by consultants are essential, they would however remain inadequate and would only realise short-lived success.

The review in this paper has shown how ubuntu/botho cultural and other indigenous traditional practices and values were drawn into the workplace by both managements and black workers to achieve different conflicting goals. While the former did so to entrench control over workers, the latter used ubuntu values and symbols to strengthen their solidarity and collective resistance. The lesson to be learned here is that ubuntu values and other indigenous African traditional practices are no new to the SA workplaces or business world. Thus, while Kamwangamalu (1999) is correct that ubuntu is not a business but rather a social concept, it would however be incorrect to suggest that it is foreign to the business and workplace sphere. This would be dismissed on the basis of the view that humans are socio-cultural beings and also that while the cultural and the economic are different, autonomous spheres, they however are inseparable (see Swingewood, 1998; Cock and Bernstein, 1998; and Ray and Sayer, 1999).

Perhaps an even greater constraint is the current hegemonic global order of capitalism which thrives on a naked exploitation of the poor and the marginalised and the neo-liberal values and principles that underlie it. It has been noted that this system, which has manifested itself through economic and labour market liberalisation, saw businesses adopting cost-cutting measures such as retrenchments and casual, part-time and contract work arrangements, which led to increased labour conflicts and instability as well as growing gap between labour and business. As I have mentioned, this is incompatible with the person-centred values and principles of ubuntu culture. Rather, the ubuntu/botho cultural values and principles would work
best under a humane economic order such as the one often referred to as
capitalism with a human face or even more extreme under the non-capitalist
system.

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