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**Towards a Collective-Values Framework of Ubuntu: Implications for Workplace Commitment**

**Thembisile Molose, Geoff Goldman, Peta Thomas**

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| **A B S T R A C T** | | | |
| **Objective**: This paper proposes a theoretical framework for interpreting southern African cultural influences of Ubuntu for employee workplace commitment (EWC) to encourage organizational performance. | | | |
| **Research Design & Methods**: A literature review study was undertaken entailing a search of published empirical findings perusing online-databases both global and African was conducted covering the years 1960 to 2017. | | | |
| **Findings:** Factors such as Batho Pele, personal interactions, compassion and group solidarity are argued to relate affirmatively with a sense of workplace collectivism (Ubuntu). Findings suggest that the collective achievement of service quality performance goals through EWC could be enhanced if management understands the positive influence of Ubuntu as a regional collective culture and management philosophy. | | | |
| **Implications & Recommendations:** The influence of Ubuntu should be facilitated by managers as it encourages compassion, group solidarity, respect and dignity for other workers which in turn helps ensures organizational performance. | | | |
| **Contribution & Value Added:** A model based on the relationships between Ubuntu collective-values and EWC would be influential for management in the generation of accepting and applying an Ubuntu collective-values managerial framework. | | | |
| **Article type:** | Conceptual research paper | | |
| **Keywords:** | Batho Pele, performance improvement, South Africa, Ubuntu, workplace commitment | | |
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**INTRODUCTION**

Over the last decade, studies on organizational behavior (OB) in terms of what encourages employee workplace commitment (EWC), organizational commitment (OC) and consequently organizational performance improvements, have gained attention (Dhar, 2015; Jaiswal & Dhar, 2016) because globalization of markets, multi-national mergers and acquisitions bring a realisation that diversity in the workplace derived from a region’s culture, can have a profound effect on organizational performance potentials (Mangaliso, 2001; Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2003; Jackson, 2004; Meyer, Stanley, Jackson, McInnis, Maltin & Sheppard, 2012).

To-date empirical research has tended to overlook the influence of regional culture in management practice, in this case the southern African indigenous knowledge heritage of Ubuntu. For the purposes of this paper, Ubuntu is defined by Khoza (2005, p. 269) as “an African value system that means humanness which is characterized by caring, sharing, compassion, communocracy and related predispositions”. This is an African collective-value system and a factor that is argued here as influencing EWC and OB in organizations operating in southern Africa. We agree with Tett and Meyer (1993) who stated that regional culture is a determinant of EWC yet its influence is still a fairly un-researched area as to the effect on organizational performance.

The subjugation of African traditional knowledge systems and cultural influences such as Ubuntu values in the face of Western research about contemporary management and OB is rooted in colonialization, industrialization and resulting life changes for African people (Msengana, 2006, p. iv). However, what Mbigi and Maree (1995) and Mbigi (1997) intimate about the context of southern African regional culture and philosophy are appropriate to be considered in contemporary management practice. We argue here that the conceptualization of Ubuntu has importance in adapting currently accepted cultural frameworks as operationalized by individualism, collectivism and power distance dimensions for regional management application (Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004).

This paper proposes a theoretical framework for interpreting cultural influences viewing EWC through the paradigm of Ubuntu. The specific aims are to:

* Encourage an extension of current research on EWC by deepening understanding of the most common determinants of employee OC in the context of South Africa:
* Review the influence of culture differences associated with power distance and individualism-collectivism on EWC (e.g. supervisor, work team or co-workers):
* Contribute to the global body of knowledge of understanding of cultural influences in OB through examining the geographic cultural influences of Ubuntu in the realm of South African management.

**MATERIAL AND METHODS: A LITERATURE SEARCH**

Identifying literature associated with, and, appropriate for the argument and propositions presented in this paper, entailed a search of published empirical findings. Consistent with Cohen’s (1992, p. 1142) study, a manual search strategy was adopted, a system whereby the reference list of previous important studies is scanned.. Secondary literature sources were scanned to identify preliminary studies on the early writing of commitment and related variables from 1990 to 2002 (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Roodt, 1997; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002) was used to identify secondary research articles that referenced Becker (1960), Kanter (1968), Ritzer and Trice or Hrebiniak and Alutto (1972), Steers, (1977) and Mowday, Porter & Steers, (1979).

This strategy included perusing online databases both global and African for academic research (1960 to 2017). Google scholar sourced articles as well as the British and the South African Library catalogues of PhD theses, additionally reviewing databases including PSYCINFO, SABINET, EBSCOHOST, Elsevier Science Direct, SAGE, Emerald and, Taylor & Francis. The search acknowledged electronic versions of research articles published by peer-reviewed and refereed articles for the journals of Industrial and Applied Psychology, Academy of Management, Human Behaviour, Administrative Science Quarterly and Tourism and Hospitality Management Journals.

In the beginning the search placed only the restriction of identifying published work on EWC for different cultures and their influence on organizational outcome using the key words: organizational commitment, organizational behaviour, OB, management, cross-culture, African management and Ubuntu. The process yielded 300 empirical and conceptual research papers which were then read in order to reduce and rationalize the context of the found articles-filtered through by following conditions as ‘prescribed criteria’ (Zhao, 2016, p. 2437):

1. Reviewing the social citation index for the most cited studies in mainstream literature to identify the most pertinent explanations for this study of OC and OB;
2. Selecting studies that measured specific variables, especially those for culture values with an influence in OC relationships;
3. Identifying studies that discussed the most common predictors of OC;
4. Drawing explanations from various service business contexts studies like financial services, the banking sector, and tourism and hospitality examples related to culture in management practice.

**LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT**

**The development of culture as an influence in OB and OC**

OC was viewed by researchers such as Becker (I960, p. 33) and Scholl, (1981, p. 59) as a resultant of an employee’s tendency to “engage in consistent lines of activity” based on their recognition of the “costs' associated with discontinuing that activity”. This preliminary research identified employee recognition that their workplace commitment was largely to be associated with the magnitude of the costs for discontinuing his/ her current lines of action within an organization. These studies contended that employees weighed up workplace commitment in terms of the personal value attained from the time spent acquiring non-transferable skills on behalf of the organization against the resulting seniority privileges (status) that arose from these efforts. Employees demonstrated a desire to stay with the organization associated with his/her willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organization and his/her trust in and acceptance of the values and goals of that organization (Mowday *et al*., 1979, p. 226).

EWC research encouraged a more people-centered approach to articulating factors that positively influenced OC embedded in understanding the culturally-driven importance individuals attached to group membership (Meyer, Morin & Vandenberghe, 2015; Li, Kim & Zhao; 2017). Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe (2003) examined successful employee-supervisor linkage characteristics moving away from the traditional focus of the employer-OC. Perceived supervisor support (PSS) in supervisor-employee linkages was found to relate to how supervisor’s views and values could lead to improved EWC. It has been suggested by Mastrangelo, Eddy and Lorenzet (2004) that “negative workplace experiences of a supervisor seen as untrustworthy and uncaring by an employee, makes employees less committed to the work and to the organization” (p. 442).

Models of OC subsequently began to identify numerous employee proxy variables such as age, gender and number of years with the organization as having a role to play in OC (Meyer & Allen, 1991, Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Multidimensional models incorporating the components of OC and its influence on OB became widely accepted (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Roodt, 1997; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Gellatly, Meyer & Luchak, 2006). Research now sought to understand EWC in terms of regional culture and its influence on OB as initiated by Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions and their impact on leadership behaviours, and OB. Culture was described by Hofstede (1980, p. 43) “as the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group of people from another”. The link of Ubuntu as a notion of collectivism within African cultures was espoused by Hofstede (1980) who noted African culture is collective in nature because the group has more importance than the individual such that group success is more valued than individual success. Hofstede (1980) identified five cultural dimensions (individualism, collectivism and power distance, masculinity/feminism and uncertainty avoidance) as a common basis for measuring the influence of a regional culture in OC.

Three of the five cultural dimensions from Hofstede’s 1980 OC framework, viz: individualism, collectivism and power distance have particular relevance in this discussion of Ubuntu and are now described as underpinning Ubuntu cultural principles in this discussion:

1. Power distance: The extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1980, p. 52). Or, as alternatively stated by House *et al*. (2004, p. 30), is the degree to which members of a collective expects power to be distributed equally;
2. Individualism: The extent to which the identity of individuals in a society is based upon personal qualities;
3. Collectivism: The extent which the identity of individuals or group memberships is based upon the family and community or organization (Hofstede, 1980, p. 52). Both individualism and collectivism have been defined in terms of the attributes possessed by the people within a given culture of a country.

The Global Leadership, Organizational and Behavioral Effectiveness (GLOBE) study by House *et al*. (2004) advanced arguments that individualism-collectivism and power distance were culturally and universally applicable. This fundamentally implied that, to succeed in a global business context, managers need the flexibility to respond positively and effectively integrating to their employee supervision, practices and values that may be dramatically different from what they are accustomed to (House, *et al*. 2004).

These authors highlighted that management practice in countries within the sub-Saharan African cluster are known for a mentality of acknowledging the concept of humanness and interdependency as embedded in Ubuntu characterized by upholding group norms of reciprocity between group members, suppression of personal interest for the good of the group. House *et al*. (2004) acknowledged culturally-endorsed leadership noting it as a distinctive philosophical concept that the sub-Saharan Africa cluster of organizational managers should focus on when considering EWC. In the early 21st century, considerable research in the OB discipline has truly began to review the influence of regions and associated cultures on management in organizations (Gellatly *et al*., 2006; Fischer & Mansell, 2009; Meyer *et al*., 2012, 2015; Astakhova, 2016; Srivastava & Dhar, 2016; Li, Kim & Zhao; 2017; Limpanitgul, Boonchoo, Kulviseachana & Photiyarach, 2017). A review of Ubuntu as a culture in management, centred in an African interpretation of humanness followed by the collective fingers-theory of Ubuntu is now presented.

**Ubuntu as a Dimension of African Culture and Humanness**

As a culture, Ubuntu is attributed to the longings by African people for communal bonds that researchers aspire to explain. Christle, Lessem & Mbigi (1993) noted that Ubuntu bring forth images of supportiveness, co-operation and solidarity in the community or workplace. Both Ndaba (1994) and Battle (1996) propose that the culture of Ubuntu reflects both an ontological and an epistemological stance in the African thought of Bantu-speaking people. In this context, the ideal upheld by Ubuntu is that it allows a person to grow and prosper in a relational setting by providing ongoing contact and interaction with others. These authors suggest that Ubuntu as a group culture does not however support oppressive communalism.

This is why Mangaliso (2001, p. 31) argues that Ubuntu is often “mis-portrayed with many using it as a wholesale term for all African customs and practices including those that are not for the good of the group” whereas Ubuntu is a conventional wisdom that supports customs and practices that serve only the common good (Mangaliso, 2001). Nussbaum (2003) and Karsten and Illa (2005) argue further that Ubuntu cannot be considered synonymous with any existing paradigms applied in Western interpretations of individualism or collectivism noting Ubuntu expresses a unique African view of the world anchored in its very own person, culture and society which is difficult to define by current empirical Western contexts.

The defining of Ubuntu has not been restricted to the academic writers on this concept. South African public figures like Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former South African president Nelson Mandela have used the concept in public speeches encompassing a perspective thata person with Ubuntu as a culture sees others as fellow human beings in their community. Tutu (1995, p.15) described Ubuntu as the essence of practising a culture of being human and as an important part of the gift that Africa has to give to the world. A more practical example of Ubuntu was provided by Mandela during a television interview with South African journalist, Tim Modise (2006). [Mandela](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela) described Ubuntu with a story, “A traveler through a country would stop at a village and he didn't have to ask for food or for water; once he stops, the people give him food and entertain him”. Mandela further stated that this was only one aspect of Ubuntu and that Ubuntu will have various meanings as interpreted by each individual but always focuses ultimately on enabling other people in or through, the community.

The connection of Mandela’s sentiments with African traditions of hospitality is supported in academic treatise where Brotherton and Wood (2008) draw attention to African hosts who open his/her home to total strangers giving them a place to stay and a meal to eat although he/she knew nothing about them. This kind of hospitality exists as unlimited and is not guided by the parameters of laws and concepts (Westmoreland, 2008). From these famous orators to the academic writers, the denominators of Ubuntu seems to be principally concerned with actions that are welcoming/accommodating concerned principally with sharing and sustaining human relations. It can be argued that Ubuntu is derived from efforts that explicate how peoples’ actions interrelate to maintaining togetherness in a community and/or organization.

As an regards describing the meaning of African humanness in terms of individualism, collectivism and power distance, sub Saharan connotations are described by phrases such as the Zulu ‘Umu-ntu ngumu-ntu ngabantu’, which means “each individual’s humanity is expressed in relations with others” or ‘a person is a person through others’ (Battle, 1996, p. 99). Mbigi (1997) and Mertz (2007) support this suggesting among the Zulus and Xhosa people of South Africa, the notion that a person can only be a person through others is widely accepted. Many Zulu and Xhosa people also use terms like ‘Sawubona’ when they greet which means, ‘I see you (as human)’ and ‘Simunye’ meaning, ‘we are one’ as pre-proposed by Ubuntu.

This paper posits then that Ubuntu characteristics are in management terms:

* Describing humanness – that may well be unique to an African management context and specifically sub-Saharan contexts requiring the organization to capture the essence of what it means to be human in a management style resonating with employees in supporting their deeply held regional beliefs and cultural systems;
* Workplace commitment – that ensures burdens of the community of employees are shared such that no one is prejudiced;
* OC through OB as instigated by workplace manager behaviour - which needs to ensure the interest of the community of employees ahead of the interests of an individual support.

**Ubuntu as a Management Philosophy**

As a management philosophy Ubuntu has been gaining rapid prominence for recognizing the role of humanness that focuses on selflessness and commitment of an individual to one’s community more than individual achievement. In the domain of management the community is that of one’s daily work colleagues or team. An important articulation of the characteristics of Ubuntu as culture can be found in Mbigi and Maree’s (1995) conceptual framework of Ubuntu known as the Collective-Fingers’ theory. Here five values of Ubuntu are postulated as integral to its expression – survival, compassion, spirit of solidarity, respect and dignity. This theory is analogous to describing the principles of community and togetherness of Ubuntu culture as a human hand. Accordingly, a hand perfectly represents the Ubuntu concept as it requires the collective co-operation of all fingers and the thumb to function optimally (Mbingi & Maree, 1995). These authors’ draw on an African proverb in defining this model noting that a thumb, although it is strong, cannot kill on its own, inferring it needs support from the rest of the hand/group.

Mbingi and Maree (1995) then argue that this African proverb can be interpreted for a more generalized, managerial viewpoint, in two ways: firstly, the other fingers represent individual persons who act together in a collective manner in order to achieve a certain goal reflected in EWC to the organization. Secondly, the fingers represent key values that are necessary when managing to form and maintain a collective culture. These five values according to Mbigi (1997) have always been part and parcel of the African culture. Ubuntu therefore, can be seen as one of the indigenous knowledge mechanisms capable of promoting synergy and the creation of a whole that is larger than the sum of the individual parts which Mangaliso sees as an integral part of African culture (Mangaliso, 2001). The above is consistent with other African writers (Poovan, du Toit & Engelbrecht, 2006; Lutz, 2009) who have advocated that the five collective fingers could be compressed in to four broad characteristics useful to describe Ubuntu designated values described earlier.

Applying the collective-fingers theory to team management promotes what Tutu (2004) calls ‘a family or an organization’. Tutu (2004) attributes Ubuntu to a common understanding between the supervisor and team members so that they are able to help and care for each other as members of one family. Jackson (2004) remarks that Ubuntu’s point of departure should be centred on the leader’s actions (the thumb) as the driver of a cohesive force within the group promoting humanness to help define each team member’s interpersonal role.

Another trend distinguishable from the 1990s in empirical research is the use of the term Ubuntu as the connection between a leadership style and organizational management increasingly becoming important as a factor in the realm of South African management and organizational re-imagination (Mangaliso, 2001; Nussbaum, 2003; Karsten & Illa, 2005; Nyathi, 2008; Nkomo, 2011; Qobo & Nyathi, 2016). MacDonald *et al*. (2014) supports these views suggesting that managers must lead their subordinates to build solidarity and commitment as a function to building strong relationships, productive teamwork and strong loyalty to organizational goals.

From the discussion that has preceded the established broad collective-values of Ubuntu a theoretical framework is proposed that integrates a global view as it stands at this point. The proposed framework has received support by empirical research discussed in the follow up section. Figure 1 therefore, proposes the collective-values framework of Ubuntu to guide managers in developing leadership characteristics appropriate to supervising a collective team in a South African workplace.

Figure 1: The collective-values framework of Ubuntu (Molose, 2017)

**RESPECT AND DIGNITY**

* Considered the most important values in most societies and cultures.
* In Xhosa language respect means ‘Ukuhlonipha’ or (Unembeko lomntu);
* Involves valuing the worth of others
* A building block for managing diverse teams in southern Africa effectively.

Mangaliso (2001, p. 32); Yukl (2002, p. 18); Poovan *et al*. (2006:19).

**SURVIVAL**

* Ability to live in spite of difficulties;
* Survival achieved through brotherly care and concern for others;
* This principle capture statements like ‘an injury to one-is an injury to all’;
* A shared-will to survive and focus.

Mbingi and Maree (1995, p. 113) Poovan, *et al*. (2006, p. 19).

**COMPASSION**

* Human quality through which one understands dilemmas of others and wants to help;
* African milieu – of reaching out to other and Relationships are formed;
* Also expressed by a leader’s physical presence suffering with work teams through hardship and sorrow and good times (power distance).

(Broodryk, 2002, p. 14); (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 6)

**SOLIDARITY**

* Idea of ‘self’ - individual identity of an African person does not exist;
* Africans are socialized to understand that difficult goals can be achieved collectively;
* Organizations are viewed as a body existing to benefit the employee community.

Mbigi (1997, p. 99); Lutz (2009, p. 318).

**The Power Distance Mechanism of Ubuntu in Workplace Commitment**

Although there is limited empirical research examining the relationship between the influence of Ubuntu collective values and EWC and their influence on work behaviour, problems identified in the South African context appear to be centred on managers who do not have an understanding or knowledge of the various cultures and languages of the employees they lead (Nicolaides, 2010). The power distance mechanism acting between employees and their supervisor under Ubuntu collective values particularly, compassion and spirit of solidarity and their associated influence on EWC and behavior - are evident in very few studies. Mangaliso’ (2001) research was based on reviewing conceptions and reflections about experiences of Ubuntu found in South African private and state-owned enterprises. Mangaliso (2001) stated that Ubuntu might be slow to prove in terms of managerial effectiveness for OB in measurement of improved EWC by indicators, but greater commitment to the goals of the organization translating to long-run effectiveness and efficiency is generally possible. He highlights that Ubuntu principles in leadership from a supervisor, reinforces understanding among all employees which results in group solidarity, teamwork and collective pride in achieving organizational goals.

Mangaliso (2001) argued that helpfulness towards others in a work team creates a climate of collegiality based on sharing and caring. This is why Mangaliso postulates that African leadership which emphasises a culture of how African people should show compassion towards other human beings because their intrinsic understanding of all humans is interconnected. Poovan *et al*. (2006) provided support arguing for Ubuntu. Accordingly, they found in their own empirical research during one-on-one interviews with employees of several organizations in the Cape Town, South Africa that Ubuntu allows for workplace personal understanding and caring which enables team members to see themselves as belonging to a community even at work, and consequently are more willing and committed to help each other and the organization.

Within the same period in 2006, Browning (2006) published a research paper which found during the interviews with frontline-employees of retail car companies and hospitality organizations that the tendency and importance South African employees attach to building relationships, personal interaction and mutual respect emphasized ‘Ubuntu’ as an African culture. The essential message of Browning (2006) tells us that managers were failing to provide these employees with support (that is, being there physically and emotionally) when there were difficult guests. By implication, she concluded that managers who lead or behave in a way that contradicts the expectations of employees do not realise the limitation of the positive influence they can have through Ubuntu and influence how employees should interact with customers. The link between Ubuntu collective-values and workplace commitment is evident in Batho Pele principles (people first) which are embedded in Ubuntu paradigm in the South African government policy on serving all South African people first (Mangaliso, 2001; Yukl, 2002).

Examples of companies and institutions that have adapted Ubuntu via Batho Pele principles include amongst others the Department of Education (DOE), American express, First National Bank, Pick n Pay and South African Airways (SAA) (Oppenheim, 2012; Ngidi & Dorasamy, 2014). The philosophy of Ubuntu can be seen in the Sawubona magazine used by SAA. On the basis of the above linkages on Ubuntu collective-values and employment commitment, it can be said that Ubuntu has a potential interfacing between the challenges that hinder team productivity and performance because it enables team members to tolerate each other’s cultural differences that could result in low service delivery performance. Therefore, it is concluded in this article that while Ubuntu may be known for encouraging team members to strive towards the outlined values which in itself bring the team one step closer to being effective, loyal and commitment, it also can lead to a positive impact in the organization. However, empirical research which examines Ubuntu as an African heritage and knowledge system in influencing EWC and work behavior outcomes is still relatively unexplored terrain in contemporary management literature. It is in the course of this that this article now proposes the following regarding to management of the workplace in an Ubuntu centred community:

***Proposition 1:*** Employee commitment to co-worker and supervisor commitment profiles will be positively related to collective-values of Ubuntu which in turn lead to employee collective achievement of service quality performance goals.

***Proposition 2:*** Employee’s service quality behavior and OC will be mediated by Ubuntu values, facilitated by a management style that show compassion, group solidarity-being part of a team and respect and dignity.

**DISCUSSION OF THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE**

The current paper addresses two contemporary research issues, firstly the scarcity of research especially in the context of South Africa which presupposes that employees may experience commitment differently such that, OC may be conflicted as employees are prone to commit to a different referent in an Ubuntu collective sense for example, supervisor, work team or co-worker. Secondly, the growing realisation that cultural dimensions viz: individualism, collectivism and power distances exist among employees of different national cultures and sub-cultures in workplace commitment and so are very important for managers to be aware of in managing teams.

The implications of the proposed model for theory and practices therefore in this paper first and foremost suggest a theory to employee OC that extends from previous findings. The proposed model has several potential advantages. First, it takes a multidimensional approach in order to avoid the limitations of previous conceptions and models. The model also acknowledges that commitment has different meanings to different people, at different time periods based on one's experience and where they are in their career in an organization. Moreover, the model stresses the motivational forces as mechanisms behind EWC. It also highlights the affective and normative commitments as the highest and strongest components of OC across cultures exhibiting collectivist values. The proposed model (Figure 1) can be generalized to other forms of workplace commitment which might be applicable and relevant to other referents such as co-worker, teams and supervisor in South African multicultural populations.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it has become apparent that at the heart of individualism-collectivism and power distance operationalization of cultural dimensions framework, the group solidarity principle of Ubuntu is important to consider in future management research as it captures the concepts of the importance of understanding employee workplace group cohesion, togetherness, as related to optimizing OC and OB. Organizational productivity requirements by managers such as assuring service quality excellence where the employee workplace is inseparable from the customer should consider the implications of Ubuntu in the context of South African service business and contribution to the generation of accepted African cultural dimensions theories of individualism-collectivism and power distance.

It must also be mentioned that such advancement in African research with the intension to contribute to global knowledge would have to be accredited to the articulate writers on African culture who apply indigenous knowledge to academically interpret Ubuntu. Borrowing an eloquent message espoused in Nyathi (2008, p. 13):

Ubuntu is a well-developed system of knowledge that stands in contrast to the dominant Euro-American epistemology. Articulating this alternative epistemology in the white-western world of organizational studies is an extremely challenging task (in the ways it raises ‘lost in translation’ type issues), but for an African person this challenge is not entirely new. It is an extension of struggles to articulate the identity of Africa and the Africans dating back to the late eighteenth century.

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