

# Developing an African theory of good environmental leadership: Integrating *ukama* into Metz's African theory of good leadership

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## Abstract

The leadership model proposed by Metz, grounded in the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, provides a framework for understanding the traits of African leadership as can be applied in business. This article proposes an extension of these ideas by utilising the African concept of *ukama* to offer a conceptualisation of what constitutes environmental leadership in African business contexts. The article begins by drawing on key authors to outline the concept of *ukama* and highlights the focus *ukama* imparts on the interdependence between humans and the natural world. It then looks at the implications of *ukama*'s principles in the realm of business leadership, illustrating how the qualities of *ukama*-infused leadership can be translated into managing ecological challenges. The article motivates the importance of such a perspective, noting the environmental threats Africa faces, the importance of incorporating Indigenous frameworks into proposed solutions, and storytelling as a practical means of embedding these values.

## 1. Introduction

With the threats of pressing environmental challenges looming large, can the African concepts of *ubuntu* and *ukama* be used to ground a conception of (business) leadership that incorporates environmentally conscientious behaviour? Alongside the growing urgency of engaging with the planet in more sustainable ways, there is also a growing question of how to develop conceptions of leadership, including within the context of business, which reflect local values. This article addresses these questions by exploring the integration of African environmental ethics, particularly the concept of *ukama*, into existing leadership theories centred on *ubuntu*.

In particular, I build on Metz's (2018) work, in which he articulates an ethic of leadership grounded in Afro-communal values, incorporating the principles of *ubuntu*. His analysis lays out the philosophical underpinnings of what an Afro-communal conception of leadership may entail, particularly emphasising *ubuntu*'s focus on community and interconnectedness. I extend Metz's conception of leadership to also incorporate the Indigenous African notion of *ukama* and thereby demonstrate that *ukama*, which emphasises interconnectedness not only among people but also between humans and the natural world, can significantly inform an African conception of leadership.

This article contributes to the literature by offering a novel application of *ukama* to an African conception of leadership. Though the concept developed here could be applied to leadership more broadly, the article looks at it in the context of business leadership specifically. The application to other spheres of leadership, and the limitations thereof, is reserved for work elsewhere. This article instead helps to lay the groundwork for how *ukama* and *ubuntu* can enhance the role of corporations and their leaders in addressing environmental challenges. While *ubuntu*, at its core, maintains that enacting one's full humanness requires engaging in communal relations with other people in ways characterised by care, respect, empathy, and harmony, *ukama* encompasses the idea of relatedness, emphasising the interconnectedness of all entities in the universe.

In synthesising the notions of *ubuntu* and *ukama* into an African conception of leadership, the article aims to contribute to academic discourse and provide actionable insights for current and future business leaders who are navigating the pressing environmental challenges of our time. To this end, Section 7 introduces a discussion on how these principles can be actualised through storytelling, a key aspect of African moral education, and suggests practical methods – such as workshops and community initiatives – that firms can employ to embed these ethical frameworks in leadership development.

The article's aim is to underscore the necessity of leadership that is deeply rooted in African ethical philosophies, promoting approaches that are sustainable, community-focused, and responsible. This constitutes a valuable goal given the continent's acute vulnerability to environmental issues such as climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss and the ways in which these issues are deeply intertwined with social, economic, and cultural dimensions. I hope to illustrate the usefulness of adopting *ukama* in business leadership models to help address these environmental challenges effectively.

I do not claim to present a comprehensive conception of leadership that encompasses all dimensions of African ethics related to the natural environment. Instead, I aim to provide an initial overview by drawing on key authors in the field of African environmental ethics. This overview will nonetheless illustrate how certain elements can be appropriately applied to a leadership model that seriously considers the role of a business organisation within its larger human and non-human communities.

I also do not attempt to show that widening the ethical consideration incorporated into a conception of African leadership (to include the natural environment) is a more correct interpretation than a narrower one. I only hope to show that there are African foundations for making such an extension, and to show the implications of doing so.

This is similar to how Metz (2018:38) notes that while he employs one interpretation of sub-Saharan morality from among other plausible interpretations, he does not attempt to show that the version he adopts “is preferable to its rivals; it is advanced as merely one plausible philosophical interpretation of sub-Saharan mores”.

In terms of the article’s overarching structure, I follow a strategy akin to Metz’s (2018) paper in which he provides his conception of African leadership that draws on *ubuntu*. Metz begins by outlining a framework for Afro-communal ethics. He then provides an abstract description of leadership guided by this ethic and goes on to explore how it could be practically implemented in specific areas, such as decision-making within a company and the identification of stakeholders.

I follow a similar approach in my attempt to incorporate *ukama* into the foundational principles of an African conception of leadership. I first introduce the concept of *ukama* and its relevance to the African environmental ethical position. I then explore how these ethical principles can be translated into a conception of leadership and apply them to the same concrete matters as Metz (2018), including: the purpose of a firm from the perspective of an African environmental leader, whom a firm should assist, how a firm should make decisions, and how a workplace should be organised.

The corresponding sections of this article include an introduction to Metz’s work and the principles of *ubuntu* in leadership (sec. 2), a detailed examination of *ukama* and its application to African environmental ethics (sec. 3), and an analysis of how these ethical frameworks can be applied to a conception of leadership (sec. 4). I further offer a discussion on the implications of Afro-communal environmental leadership (sec. 5), the importance of developing and implementing African environmental leadership (sec. 6), and insight into how storytelling can serve as a practical mechanism for instilling these values (sec. 7). I then conclude (sec. 8).

## 2. Summary of Metz’s work

In his paper “An African theory of good leadership”, Metz (2018) delves into the fundamental African value of communion, aiming to articulate and ground a moral-philosophical theory of leadership rooted in the Indigenous African intellectual tradition. After outlining a leadership theory rooted in an Afro-communal ethic, he goes through a number of topics that business leaders tend to face, showing how this conception of leadership would deal with each topic.

Central to the Afro-communal ethic Metz draws on is the principle of communion, taken to be not just a means to an end but an end in itself. Metz (2018:38) introduces *ubuntu* as a foundational African value characterised by the maxims “I am because we are” and “A person is a person through other persons”, which express an ethical stance emphasising the importance of communal relationships. While other ethical frameworks, including other interpretations of sub-Saharan morality, may view communal relationships as a means of promoting well-being or life-force, in the interpretation Metz (2018:38) adopts, “relationality is, roughly, an end in itself”.

Metz (2018:39. Emphasis in original) notes that ethicists working in the African tradition commonly maintain, or suggest, “that the *only* comprehensive respect in which one can exhibit human excellence is by relating to others communally or harmoniously”. Metz continues that as this communal ethic is essential for developing a person’s humanness and personhood, it is set apart from those views that are individualistic in nature and which prioritise respect for autonomy.

By quoting a number of representative African theorists, Metz (2018) further sums up the aforementioned African idea that fostering communion plays a paramount role in enacting one’s humanness, saying that there are two aspects that characterise what it means to commune. Firstly, one must consider oneself as part of the whole, bound up with others. Secondly, one must strive to enhance the good of the community and of others, promoting the prosperity of all. So, according to this view, enacting one’s full humanness entails identifying with others through an attitude of care and solidarity and being committed to promoting their well-being.

As Metz (2018) points out, *ubuntu* highlights the intrinsic value of communal relationships and maintains that self-realisation and moral excellence are achieved through fostering harmonious community relations, which involves sharing a way of life and caring for others’ quality of life. In other words, if one is to uphold the values of *ubuntu*, one ought to strive to develop one’s humanness as fully as possible. This is done by prizing and fostering communal, harmonious relations with other people and enhancing their ability to do the same.

For Metz’s (2018) purposes, when caring for others’ quality of life, the ‘other’ is considered another person, who is, in turn, also capable of identity and solidarity. In other words,

[O]ne ought to develop personhood, which means honouring people by virtue of their dignified ability to be party to communal relationships of sharing a way of life and caring for others’ quality of life. (Metz, 2018:41)

Metz explains that this captures what is meant by the African maxim that “A person is a person through other persons”. Failing to properly respect those who can commune is an ethical failing, detracting from one’s attainment of human excellence.

This, however, leads to the question of who, in fact, should constitute the ‘others’ with whom one should commune:

There is much more that could be said to spell out and motivate this Afro-communal ethic. For example, the question of which others to commune with could use more discussion. Do they include imperceptible persons such as ancestors, or perhaps some non-persons such as animals? These are important issues, but they do not need to be addressed here... (Metz, 2018:42)

I hope to pick up on some of these points by investigating how the conception of an African leader that Metz puts forward could be expanded to include conceptions of communing with the broader natural environment and its non-human constituents.

In particular, I suggest that the conception of community that Metz adopts has alternative interpretations supported by African ethical standpoints. Focusing on these other interpretations may lay the basis for an African business leader prioritises communing with other people, and with the natural environment. I explain this further in the following section and will later highlight some benefits that may be afforded by adopting this way of leading. It may help in attempting to shift businesses in Africa (and elsewhere) towards adopting more sustainable practices and outlooks.

### 3. African environmental ethics and *ukama*

As shown in the previous section, Metz (2018) draws on certain elements of African moral thought to develop the Afro-communal ethic. I noted that there are also foundational assumptions and beliefs in African world views and ethical frameworks that could ground an ethic that considers non-human nature to be part of the community with whom humankind is entangled in morally relevant ways. I therefore suggest that these further concepts may ground what can be termed an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic. In particular, there is (a) an underlying relationality assumed within African world views which extends beyond humankind, and (b) this relationality has ethical implications.

Bringing these two together, an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic is rooted in an awareness of the intricate connections between humans and the natural environment, and fosters a moral obligation to cultivate and maintain these connections. In fact, “such interrelationality is what most scholars have observed as the feature that best sums up African ethics” (Murove, 2009a:26). To explain this in more detail, I will go through (a) and (b) in turn. I draw on various prominent authors in the field and offer an overview of the foundations and moral standpoint encapsulated by this ethical position.

#### 3.1 Relationality as captured by *ukama*

Central to how an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic conceives of humankind’s place in and responsibilities towards the world at large is the concept of *ukama* (relatedness/relationality), a term from the Shona language that captures the ontological interconnectedness and interdependence of all things – human, animal, and animate and inanimate nature. Chemhuru (2023:256) offers an interpretation of *ukama* based on its etymology “as a class 14 noun in the Shona language”, similar to other nouns of the same class that refer “to aspects of reality or things that are infinite and quantity-neutral”.<sup>1</sup> By doing so, Chemhuru (2023:258) notes that *ukama* refers to the state in which all components of the natural world exist, so it “can be taken to be omnipresent among all beings in the universe”.

Based on this view, *ukama* is an intrinsic element of existence. It is deeply rooted in the assumption that all elements of the natural world are part of a single, unified community, so “the African relational philosophy of *ukama* forms an integral basis for communitarian existence” (Chemhuru, 2023:258). *Ukama* fundamentally asserts an ontological claim

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1 Chemhuru’s interpretation is in contrast to Murove (2004), who sees *ukama* as an adjective.

about the nature of being, emphasising that existence itself is inherently relational and that every entity is intrinsically connected to the entire cosmos. As Nche and Michael (2024:4) also note, “African ontology is rooted in the interconnectedness of beings within the cosmos, emphasising a holistic and harmonious perspective”.

To make explicit *ukama*’s connection to *ubuntu*, *ukama* refers to the relatedness/relationality underlying reality that lays the ontological basis for flourishing as per *ubuntu*. It is our fundamental relatedness to the communities in which we find ourselves that provides the basis from which we can strive to cultivate and maintain harmonious relationships within these communities. As Le Grange (2012:338) explains, “*ubuntu* needs to be understood as microcosm of (or concrete expression of) a broader concept, *ukama*, which means relatedness – relatedness to the entire cosmos”.

Since this relatedness is pervasive, a proper expression of one’s humanness in the African view requires “an expression of interconnectedness between people and between people and the biophysical world” (Le Grange, 2012:333-334). This interconnectedness is foundational to African thought, emphasising that true human existence is intertwined with the entire environment. As such, when taken alongside *ubuntu*, these concepts entail that “human existence is only meaningful when seen as a continuum with all else that exists” (Murove, 2009b:324). Chemhuru (2023:254) also makes this point and suggests that *ukama* can be seen as “a relational notion that can be used to connect human beings with the entire environment, including non-human beings, that can also include past, present and future generations”.

This all stands to illustrate that *ukama* is not just about human relationships but extends to a broader ecological context. As Le Grange (2012:334) explains, “the fundamental relatedness of beings encapsulated by *ukama* includes a sense of relatedness with other natural entities, not just persons”. According to this African world view, as Murove (2009a:28) also notes, “relatedness is not restricted to human relations but extends to the natural environment, the past, the present and the future”.

This means that *ukama* gives rise to a deep sense of connection with all aspects of nature. Le Grange (2012:335) reinforces this by stating that “*ukama* means relatedness to all natural entities”. This broad understanding of relatedness underscores the interconnectedness and interdependence of all elements in the universe, positioning *ukama* as a central tenet in African ecological and ethical thought.

To further demonstrate the prominence of this idea in African thought, I refer to Nche and Michael’s (2024:1) review of “a wide range of online and offline materials, including books, book chapters, and journal articles”. By reviewing the work of over twenty authors in the field of African Indigenous Religion and environmental ethics, Nche and Michael (2024) illustrate that interconnectedness and our duties to nature are central tenets in African thought. Their review highlights that African ontology and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) are deeply rooted in the belief that all beings are interconnected and that human well-being is tied to the health of the natural environment. They note that this interconnectedness is reflected in various African cultural practices and beliefs, which

emphasise the importance of living in harmony with nature and recognising the moral status of non-human entities.

It is, however, worth pausing to note what is meant by ‘harmony’ in this context. A further feature of *ukama* that is relevant to highlight is its compatibility with diverse views of nature, including those that emphasise disharmony and disequilibrium. *Ukama*’s focus on relationality means that it does not necessarily take an ontological stance on whether nature is best viewed as harmonious or, as modern ecological science now suggests, in a state of constant flux, tension, and change. Instead, its ontological claim is that all entities exist in relationality, and the quality of those relationships shapes the ethical imperatives for action.

This flexibility allows *ukama* to align with the modern ecological understanding of natural systems as dynamic and adaptive. By accommodating the dynamism of nature, maintaining that all things exist in relation to each other and not necessarily in a state of fixed harmony, *ukama* can encourage responsibility and care within this ongoing flux. This fosters an approach that is adaptable to the complexities of ecological systems without being tied to static or idealised conceptions of harmony.

*Ukama*’s emphasis on relationality situates it within a branch of environmental ethics that advocates for relational value as a distinct category of value. This perspective seeks to address the limitations of the traditional duality between intrinsic and instrumental values by offering an alternative to the conventional approach of valuing nature either intrinsically (for its own sake) or instrumentally (for the benefit of humans). As Chan et al. (2016:1462) observe, “a cornerstone of environmental policy is the debate over protecting nature for human’s sake (instrumental value) or for nature’s (intrinsic values)”. However, they argue that this dichotomy fails to capture how people actually value the environment and often does not resonate with decision-makers.

To address these limitations, Chan et al. (2016:1462) propose a third class of values – relational values – describing them as values that “are not present in things but derivative of relationships and responsibilities to them”. This framework emphasises that people’s connections to nature may involve care, kinship, and expressions of personal or cultural identity. In their words (Chan et al., 2016:1463):

According to these views, the value of the land is not independent of humans (i.e., not intrinsic). Moreover, it may be treacherously reductionist, if not offensive, to suggest that nature exists to provide (instrumental) utility to humans.

Relational value reframes the human-nature relationship as an end in itself rather than reducing it to intrinsic or instrumental value. This understanding closely mirrors the ethical approach of *ukama*, which centres on relationships and responsibilities as fundamental to how value is understood and enacted.



### 3.2 *Ukama's ethical implications*

Though *ukama* is an ontological description of reality, spotlighting the interconnectedness and relatedness of all beings, it has ethical implications. This has been hinted at above, but in section 4, I will make explicit how this African concept is not purely descriptive but prescriptive too. *Ukama* underscores the idea that being ethical according to this line of African thought means recognising and respecting the interconnected nature of the world and upholding the moral imperatives that this gives rise to.

Murove (2009a:28) explains this by saying that “African ethics arises from an understanding of the world as an interconnected whole”. Chemhuru (2023:253) also notes that the foundational relationality captured by *ukama* has ethical implications, saying that “the ethics of *ukama* (‘relatedness’) forms an integral anchor of African philosophy and ethics”. Likewise, Francis (2016:9) notes that “the main thrust of African environmental ethics is to understand the ontology of man within the context of an environment he shares with non-humans and reveal the relational order that (ought to) govern being-in-the-world”.

Primarily, the world view of *ukama* fosters a sense of stewardship and moral responsibility towards nature, encapsulating a holistic approach to environmental ethics. It further challenges the dichotomy that separates humans from nature, instead promoting a vision where human actions have profound implications on the natural world, and vice versa. *Ukama*, therefore, implies that ethical behaviour extends beyond human society and that one’s moral landscape should include all forms of existence.

This is captured nicely by Ifeakor and Otteh’s (2017:183) term “obligatory anthropoholism”, which integrates the ideas of “the holistic concept of being in Africa, whereby all existing things intercompensates each other” and how humans are consequently imbued with an “obligation to care for the whole of [the] ecosystem”. This emphasises the interconnectedness of all beings, while also acknowledging humans as a privileged part of nature due to our unique capabilities. Such privilege comes with significant responsibility.

That humans occupy a privileged position within nature is a core element of African ontology. This idea may have slight variations in how it is specified, but the central idea that it fosters a sense of obligation to maintain harmony within the hierarchy – rather than giving humans dominion over or the right to exploit the rest of creation – is ubiquitous. This is noted by Nche and Michael (2024:5) who say, “different African cultures might have variations in their ontological hierarchies, but a common thread of interconnectedness and harmonious coexistence can be observed”.

Similarly, Bujo (2009:290) notes that although African world views often include the belief that God provides animals, plants, and the inanimate environment for human use, this does not grant humans the right to “treat the lesser forms of being arbitrarily”. While there is a recognised distinction between humans, animals, and plants, this difference does not confer a privilege to “subdue, dominate, and exploit the rest of creation” (Tangwa, 2006:390).



Ifeakor (2019:169) similarly clarifies that “humans are only one privileged part of the whole and this is because of her obligatory role to nature and the world as a result of her capabilities”. Based on this view, humans are obligated to care for, tend, and conserve the environment, not for their own benefit, but for the holistic well-being of the entire ecosystem.

In obligatory anthropoholism, obligation is not targeted at just human ends, for human benefit or for his economic enrichment, rather the African concept of holism; the interrelatedness, interconnectedness, intercompentration between both the seen and the unseen elements puts humans under obligation to tend, care and conserve the environment. (Ifeakor & Otteh, 2017:183)

This ethical perspective fosters an imperative that human actions should aim for the well-being of the entire environment, ensuring sustainability and harmony within the ecosystem as a whole.

When it comes to dilemmas – situations where moral objectives such as human well-being and environmental preservation may not align – *ukama* provides a framework for prioritisation. While *ukama* recognises a hierarchy of being that privileges human needs, this privilege is tempered by its commitment to relationality and interdependence. Unlike other anthropocentric views that may permit widespread exploitation of nature to satisfy excessive human wants, *ukama* emphasises restraint and responsibility. Preference is given to human well-being but within the bounds of necessity, ensuring that basic needs are met without unnecessarily compromising the health and integrity of the broader ecosystem.

This balance reflects *ukama*’s ethical commitment to respecting the environment as a relational partner rather than a resource to be dominated or exploited. For example, in scenarios where agricultural productivity, biodiversity conservation, and soil health cannot all be achieved simultaneously, *ukama* would encourage prioritising practices that meet essential human needs while minimising environmental harm. In this way, *ukama* fosters greater environmental respect and concern than anthropocentric models focused solely on human gain.

As has been shown, an ethic rooted in *ukama* would foster practices that aim to sustain the earth’s resources and promote biodiversity, reflecting a profound respect for the natural order. These would be considered as essential duties that honour the spiritual and moral connections between people and their environment. *Ukama*, along with *ubuntu*, provides a framework for understanding our identities as fundamentally intertwined with the environment. These philosophies extend ethical behaviour beyond human society to encompass all forms of life and non-life, advocating for harmony and balance. They stress that humans should live as respectful stewards of nature, contrasting sharply with those views that advocate dominance over it.

In summary, *ukama* and the Afro-communal *environmental* ethic it underpins provides an ethical framework that prompts us to see ourselves as integral parts of the intricate web of existence, not apart from it, emphasising the interconnectedness and mutual

dependence of all life. It should be becoming clear that a conception of leadership rooted in *ukama* would consequently involve making decisions that consider long-term ecological impacts and prioritise collective well-being, including plants, animals, and ecosystems. This approach contrasts with the short-term exploitation of natural resources for individual gain, promoting sustainable practices that ensure environmental health for future generations. The rest of the article aims to properly develop such an account of environmental leadership.

#### 4. From an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic to an account of leadership

As I have offered an initial discussion of an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic in the previous section, I now move on to, firstly, developing an understanding of leadership that is rooted in this ethical position and secondly, in section 5 and similarly to how Metz (2018) framed his discussion, I will suggest how this account of leadership would be applied to “several concrete matters, such as how to make decisions in a firm and whom to treat as a stakeholder” (Metz, 2018:42).

In developing an account of leadership rooted in an Afro-communal ethic, recall that Metz (2018:42) identifies the belief that a person’s identity and well-being are deeply entrenched in their relationships with others as core elements. This ethic gives rise to an instance of servant leadership, in which a leader is “one who does much to help others” (Metz, 2018:42). Accordingly, Metz continues by noting that a good leader helps others to succeed in their pursuit of communing properly with others, so that a good leader themselves and the people whom they lead can foster and nourish proper modes of communion. Such an outcome is pursued for its own sake on this view, such that “a good leader seeks out a certain way of relating for its own sake” (Metz, 2018:43).

To see what account of leadership an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic would give rise to, let us remember that this position maintains that the interconnectedness emphasised by *ubuntu* and *ukama* apply to the relationships between humans *and* the rest of the natural world. This would inform a holistic approach to leadership. Thus, leadership within the African context, rooted in an ontological understanding of *ukama*, is deeply committed to the ethos of interconnectedness and communal welfare for the human and non-human world. This involves recognising the value of relating properly with all components of the ecosphere and understanding the symbiotic relationships that sustain life and human excellence.

In practice, leaders who embrace *ukama* would prioritise policies and actions that promote ecological balance and sustainability. To offer an example, a leader influenced by *ukama* would advocate for land use practices that not only boost agricultural productivity but also conserve biodiversity and maintain soil health. This encompasses the essence of servant leadership that Metz also identified regarding leadership, such that the value of identity and solidarity derived from Afro-communalism suggests a model of leadership that is servant rather than master. In a similar vein, environmental leaders guided by

*ukama* act as stewards of the earth, serving the land and its people by safeguarding natural resources.

In doing so, leadership influenced by *ukama* offers new avenues for business ethics to integrate environmental considerations more robustly into corporate decision-making processes. *Ukama* requires leaders to make decisions that are economically and politically sound but also ethically justifiable. This means that environmental leaders must assess the long-term impacts of their decisions on the ecological and social fabric of their communities. Leaders adopting *ukama* would thus reject exploitative and unsustainable practices in favour of those that align with the principles of sustainable development.

Furthermore, in the face of climate change and other environmental threats, leaders guided by *ubuntu* and *ukama* need to foster resilience and adaptability within communities. This involves developing and implementing strategies that enhance the community's capacity to cope with environmental shocks and stresses. By leveraging traditional knowledge and combining it with modern scientific understanding, leaders can develop innovative solutions that are culturally appropriate and environmentally effective.

Lastly, leadership informed by an African commitment to communion (through *ubuntu* and *ukama*) would necessitate engaging communities and empowering them to take an active role in environmental conservation. Such an environmental leader ensures that environmental policies and initiatives are not imposed top-down but are developed through the active participation of the communities affected by such policies to inspire collective action towards environmental stewardship.

Metz (2018) also highlights the importance of consensus and inclusivity, noting that an ethical leader guided by *ubuntu* is one who fosters harmony and commonality, prioritising the communal good. Expanded to environmental concerns, leadership informed by *ukama* similarly emphasises the importance of community-driven initiatives, where decisions about resource management are made through inclusive dialogues that consider the welfare of all those involved, including the entire ecosystem.

In conclusion, leadership through *ukama* is about embodying the principles of interdependence, care, respect, and mutual responsibility for the natural world. It involves translating these values into actionable strategies that foster long-term sustainability and community well-being. By integrating the ethical insights of *ukama* with practical leadership actions, environmental leaders can help us move closer towards a harmonious and sustainable coexistence between humans and nature.

That said, while such an outcome would certainly be beneficial, we should remain cognisant of how *ukama*-leadership seeks to prioritise communing with the natural world as an inherently valuable mode of engagement. In other words, not (only) for the benefits it may afford. As Metz (2018:43) notes when drawing on *ubuntu*, “a good leader seeks out a certain way of relating for its own sake”. So too should leading with consideration for what it means to be in proper relation with the human and broader non-human community be pursued for its own sake under *ukama*-inspired leadership.

After having outlined the key principles of the leadership theory that would be supported by an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic, I proceed to explore how this conception of leadership might be applied to the concrete issues that Metz (2018) examines. Overall, this allows Metz (2018:43) to ask and answer, “What would a firm or other large organisation look like if it were guided by the Afro-communal conception of good leadership?” Now, let us ask: what would it look like if it were guided by *ukama* as well?

## 5. Implications of Afro-communal *environmental* leadership

### 5.1 What is the point of a firm from the perspective of an African environmental leader?

Metz (2018:43) notes that the point of a firm, if lead by Afro-communal ethics, would be to enable consumers “to live objectively better lives, particularly socio-moral ones”, since such a firm would exhibit solidarity with consumers as its ultimate aim would be to prize communion. Similarly, for an African environmental leader guided by the implications of *ukama*, the point of a firm extends well beyond the traditional business metrics of profitability and growth alone. Influenced by the value of relatedness inherent in *ukama* with regards to the human and non-human world, the focus shifts to how a business can serve as a steward of community and environmental well-being.

In this context, the purpose of a firm is re-envisioned to include the promotion of environmental sustainability and the well-being of the community it operates within. The point of a firm is thus not merely to maximise shareholder wealth but an environmental leader would view the firm as a platform for implementing sustainable practices that protect and restore the natural environment, while also ensuring economic and social benefits for the community.

Doing so includes adopting production methods that minimise environmental impact, using resources sustainably, and actively engaging in ecological restoration. A business led by an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic is expected to operate in a manner that is responsive to the needs of its community, including the broader ecosystem. Thus, a firm should become an active participant in local and broader environmental initiatives, fostering partnerships that enhance community and ecological resilience.

This perspective represents a departure from the traditional capitalist model, where profit and growth are often regarded as the primary objectives of a firm. Instead, it introduces a more relational understanding of business, where economic activities are embedded within ecological and social systems.<sup>2</sup>

In essence, for an African environmental leader influenced by *ukama*, the point of a firm is to harmonise business practices with ecological and community well-being.

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2 The approach here involves looking at how to adapt existing business structures to align with *ukama*-informed ethics (in line with the goals of the present article), but it would also be worthwhile to explore in future work how alternative, more community-centred organisational forms might better serve environmental and social well-being than the conventional business models offered by capitalism.

This approach seeks to mitigate the environmental impacts of business activities and leverages corporate capabilities to advance environmental integrity. This vision redefines the firm not just as an economic entity, but as an integral part of the ecological and social fabric it exists within, responsible for nurturing the environment that sustains us all.

## 5.2 Whom should a firm aid from the perspective of an African environmental leader?

Metz (2018:44) considers who should be a stakeholder for a firm led by Afro-communal ethics, where a stakeholder is someone that a firm has a moral obligation to aid. Extending beyond two moral reasons often offered in the Western tradition (helping those in desperate need of aid or those to whom aid has been promised), Metz (2018:44) continues by suggesting that from the perspective of African communal ethics, there also exists a moral duty to aid those “with whom it has shared a way of life in some respect, including its society”.

From the perspective of an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic, the question of whom a firm should aid also expands significantly beyond traditional stakeholders like shareholders and employees. Rooted in the importance of communal engagement, a firm should prioritise the well-being of its whole community. A brief example to illustrate this way of thinking in African life is a system of labour found in many central African societies called *likilemba* (in Lingala and Swahili) that is founded on a group sense of cooperation (Peterson, 2004:170).

The system of *likilemba* is put in place to ensure the village as a whole survives, and in it “labour rotates from one individual’s project (in this case usually garden cutting) to another’s” (Peterson, 2004:170). Thus, it seems reasonable to deduce that, according to an African ethical system, a firm may be expected to act in ways that benefit the community as a whole.

More specifically, however, once a firm is guided by the principles implied by *ukama*, which emphasises interconnectedness and mutual dependency of all the world’s entities, a firm is part of a larger community that includes human stakeholders, the natural environment, and non-human entities. This broadened perspective would require acknowledgement that the firm’s long-term success is intricately linked to the well-being of the ecological systems and non-human communities it interacts with.

For an environmental leader, this translates into business practices that not only minimise harm to the environment but actively contribute to its sustainability. This includes adopting green technologies, reducing waste, managing natural resources responsibly, and engaging in activities that restore and enhance natural habitats. Moreover, the firm under such leadership actively collaborates with environmental organisations, local communities, and governmental bodies to address ecological issues. A firm led in this way would recognise that it has a responsibility to maintain and improve the environment for current and future generations.

In essence, the African environmental leader, inspired by *ukama*, sees the firm as a community member with a moral obligation to support and sustain not only its human constituents but also the local and global ecosystems. This approach fosters a deeper sense of corporate responsibility that integrates environmental stewardship into the core operational strategies of the firm, ensuring that all actions contribute positively to the broader community of life that the firm serves.

### 5.3 How should a firm make decisions from the perspective of an African environmental leader?

Metz (2018:46) suggests that for an African leader operating under the ethical guidance of *ubuntu*, decision-making in a firm requires a process deeply rooted in the principles of inclusivity, transparency, and collective buy-in, noting that “all in the firm should usually be expected to agree to the essentials before going forward” with a particular decision. Metz emphasises the communal element of this decision-making methodology, noting that decisions in a firm, when guided by *ubuntu*, must be made collectively, involving all those affected by them. This collective decision-making should not only aim at consensus but should also actively seek to reconcile differing needs and expectations in a manner that respects and upholds the community’s values so that all members of a firm “genuinely *share* a way of life” (Metz, 2018:46. Emphasis in original).

This participatory approach would also be fundamental for an environmental leader guided by an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic, who would be required to include their employees’ and environmental interests. This would ensure that decision-making processes respect human and environmental considerations, emphasising the interdependence highlighted by *ukama*. Since the environment cannot be directly consulted in decision-making deliberations, the inclusion of environmental considerations might involve consultations with environmental experts and local community leaders, and engaging with global environmental standards as proxies for direct environmental engagement. This means decisions are not solely based on economic outcomes but consider long-term ecological impacts and aim to find a balance between development and conservation.

As such, decisions would need to be scrutinised for their potential impacts on ecological systems, and strategies that promote environmental health and resilience would be prioritised. This might involve choosing sustainable materials, investing in renewable energy, or adopting principles to minimise waste. In practice, this would also entail that an environmental leader ensures the decision-making process is transparent and accountable. Information about how decisions are made and their potential environmental impacts would be communicated openly to all stakeholders, allowing for informed discussions and feedback.

By adhering to the principles foundational to an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic, an African environmental leader ensures that the firm’s decision-making processes strengthen its role as a responsible member of the local and global community, committed to fostering an environment where nature and humanity can thrive together.



This is strongly contrasted with the process of making choices and decisions on the basis of promoting individual self-interest:

While the western philosophical ethical tradition has greatly emphasised individual autonomy in making choices and decisions, African ethics gives primacy to relationality as the main influence when doing so [...] the guiding question for decision making is how a particular decision will affect one's relations in the community of existence. (Murove, 2009a:29-30)

This approach underscores the importance of considering the interconnectedness of all beings, ensuring that decisions are made with a deep awareness of their impact on the broader web of life.

#### 5.4 How should a workplace be organised?

In addressing how a workplace should be organised, Metz (2018:46) contrasts managerialism with the leadership principles promoted by Afro-communal ethics. He notes how managerialism, prevalent in Eastern and Western contexts, prioritises efficiency through standardised outputs and measurable criteria, often using financial incentives and punitive measures to steer employees. This approach is justified on grounds of societal benefit or worker consent, but is critiqued by the African standpoint for its potential to undermine social cohesion and empathy among workers. As Metz (2018:46) says, “managerialism is on the face of it ‘anti-social’... [and] hardly fosters a sense of togetherness between these two groups of people”, that being managers and employees.

Furthermore, Metz (2018:47) suggests that managerialism tends to view workers as commodity-like assets rather than individuals with intrinsic value, saying that “managerialism is unlikely to foster sympathy, and probably encourages managers to view workers as human resources, not so much as people whose interests matter for their own sake”. Metz further suggests that this also results in a reduced spirit of camaraderie among workers due to enhanced competitive behaviour, thereby alienating workers from managers and each other.

Expanding on Metz's conclusion in this regard, an African environmental leader would likewise advocate for a paradigm shift in how *natural* resources are perceived and managed within organisational contexts. Just as employees should not be reduced to mere human resources, but valued as individuals with intrinsic worth when guided by *ubuntu*, the same should be applied to natural resources when one adopts the outlook engendered by *ukama*.

Natural resources should not be treated solely as economic assets or commodities. Instead, their inherent value and role within ecosystems should be recognised and respected. This perspective aligns with *ukama*, which emphasises the interconnectedness of all entities in the universe, including humans and nature, and consequently calls for a relational approach where the well-being of natural resources is intertwined with the well-being of communities and future generations.

This holistic view challenges the traditional notions of resource extraction and exploitation that prioritise short-term economic gains over long-term sustainability. African environmental leadership promotes sustainable practices that consider the long-term environmental, social, and economic impacts of resource use. It encourages business organisations to adopt strategies that conserve biodiversity, mitigate climate change, and promote ecological resilience.

## 6. The importance of developing and implementing African environmental leadership

Having reached the end of my discussion of an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic and the type of leadership it gives rise to, I would like to end by suggesting some reasons as to why developing such an account constitutes a valuable task and the benefits that may be afforded by adopting such a leadership style in practice. Overall, in the face of escalating environmental challenges such as climate change, habitat loss, and resource depletion, the necessity for better environmental leadership within business management has never been more critical. Despite the growing importance of this agenda, “environmental management practices as pursued in most corporations falls far short of requirements to attain any semblance of a sustainable planet” (Schuler et al., 2017:225). As such, we need to work on developing better frameworks and conceptions of leadership that can inform more sustainable business practices.

When doing so, there is good cause to develop accounts of leadership rooted in African world views and philosophies. As Murove (2009a:26) points out:

African ethics is one of the world’s ethical traditions with its own contribution to make towards a global ethic. A world that has become interconnected should express human connectedness and interconnectedness through learning and appreciating the ethic traditions of all its peoples.

We should make sure that we are giving sufficient consideration to theories and ethical frameworks stemming from traditionally African ways of thinking.

Furthermore, African environmental leaders, grounded in the ethos of *ubuntu* and *ukama*, would be uniquely positioned to understand and integrate local knowledge and cultural practices in their strategies, which are crucial for sustainable management and conservation efforts. This becomes even more compelling when we consider how African Indigenous ways of living in relation to nature often demonstrate success in practically fostering environmental sustainability.

For example, an empirical study conducted in Mali, Botswana, and Kenya found that local people are aware of the environmental indicators that can be successfully used “in evaluating the status of indigenous vegetation and changes in biodiversity at the landscape level” (Angassa et al., 2012:75). Local herders knew which landscapes were sensitive to grazing and organised their grazing accordingly, “herders do not continue to degrade their environment; they rather rotate their land use based on seasons” (Angassa et al., 2012:75).

Kaya and Koitsiwe (2016) also conducted a study exploring the IKS of the Batswana tribal grouping in the North-West province of South Africa. They found that the Batswana's Indigenous knowledge included early warning indicators of natural disasters. Through participatory interviews and focus groups with 180 community leaders, Kaya and Koitsiwe (2016:102) found that the Batswana people used the behaviours of certain trees, animals, birds, and insects to identify the onset of climatic events, and they would then implement precautionary measures accordingly. While colonialism disrupted many Indigenous practices (see Beinart, 2000), traditional African approaches to interacting with the environment are often found to achieve a high level of symbiosis with nature.

Responding as effectively as possible to environmental threats in Africa is crucial, given that the continent faces many environmental challenges that are further complicated by socio-economic issues such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, and political challenges. When operated exploitatively, businesses and corporations can exacerbate these challenges. Ijumba and Kaya (2016:98) note how in recent times multinational companies, particularly those dealing in oil and in search of low production costs, "have acted as economic predators in the continent, exploiting national resources [...] and committing environmental degradation".

As a result, and given the power they have to influence society and persuade governments, African business leaders should be doing more to contribute towards protecting Africa's people and environments:

It is the people of and the economies of Africa that are at stake and most vulnerable to the loss of livelihoods and future as a result of environmental degradation [...] the African private sector should take ownership of the issues, and demonstrate leadership in this arena, by moving environment up the African corporate responsibility agenda. (Hayes, 2006:99)

This remains true today, and so to help them in this regard, it would be valuable to present African business leaders with conceptions of leadership inspired by African ethics. Rooted in the notions of *ubuntu* and *ukama*, I believe the conception offered here represents a helpful contribution that can drive effective responses to Africa's environmental crises.

African environmental leadership would also be helpful in advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as outlined by the UNDP (2015), particularly those related to clean water and sanitation (Goal 6), affordable and clean energy (Goal 7), sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11), climate action (Goal 13), life below water (Goal 14), and life on land (Goal 15). Business leaders who embody African environmental ethics approach these goals holistically for their organisations and their surrounding communities, recognising the interconnectedness of these issues and the importance of tackling them.

African environmental leadership would accordingly prioritise empowering communities by engaging them in decision-making processes. This approach not only helps in building resilience against environmental impacts but also ensures that conservation efforts are maintained and advanced by the communities themselves. Their deep understanding of

local ecosystems will contribute to implementing adaptive management strategies that can respond dynamically to ecological feedbacks. This includes promoting Indigenous practices such as agroforestry, sustainable grazing, and community-based wildlife management.

Finally, African environmental leadership also stands ready to improve global environmental stewardship. As a continent rich in biodiversity and natural resources, Africa plays a crucial role in the global ecological balance. Leadership that is mindful of this global role ensures that development and conservation strategies contribute positively to global environmental health. Such ways of leading could also be utilised as guiding frameworks. After outlining the fundamental tenets of African environmental ethics, Kelbessa (2015:76) notes that when addressing the problem of climate change, “industrialized countries can learn from African ethics”. So too could industrialised leaders learn from African leadership.

The importance of developing, fostering, and implementing African environmental leadership is evident across various dimensions, from local to global scales. Leaders who draw from African environmental ethics can play an important role in transforming environmental challenges into opportunities for sustainable development, ensuring that current and future generations can enjoy a healthy, prosperous, and sustainable environment. This is an important task for business leaders in particular. As Hayes (2006:103) notes, “good environmental stewardship and sustainable use of natural resources are intrinsic to addressing human needs and ensuring the future of the people, ecosystems and businesses of Africa”.

## 7. Actualising *ubuntu* and *ukama* through storytelling: Practical pathways for corporate culture transformation

To integrate *ubuntu* and *ukama* into business leadership, it is crucial to examine how these ethical frameworks can be internalised and applied in practice. Such an inquiry should also address the practical realities of how values-based leadership is cultivated and why it often struggles to take root in contemporary firms. Here, I propose that storytelling – particularly as grounded in African moral traditions – can serve as a key medium through which *ubuntu* and *ukama* can be communicated, sustained, and instilled in business leaders and their firms.

### 7.1 Storytelling in African moral education

Storytelling has long been a cornerstone of African moral education, serving as a pedagogical tool for conveying ethical principles. African narratives – ranging from myths to folktales – embed moral lessons within a relational world view, reinforcing interconnectedness between humans, communities, and nature.

Taboos, for example, play a crucial role in regulating human behaviour towards nature, reflecting an eco-communal ethic. Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, taboos prohibit the abuse of water sources, as ancestral spirits are believed to be their custodians

(Chemhuru & Masaka, 2010:126). Such narratives embed sustainability within cultural consciousness, ensuring that environmental ethics are passed down through generations.

Schellnack-Kelly (2017:19) also highlights the broader role of oral traditions in fostering ecological awareness in Africa, stating that “oral tradition is an effective method of making people aware of animals and plants while encouraging efforts to protect the continent’s [Africa’s] fauna and flora”. This perspective underscores how African storytelling cultivates environmental stewardship, positioning conservation not as an external obligation but as an inherent moral duty.

McCallum (2005) similarly explores the role of storytelling in fostering ecological intelligence, arguing that myths and legends cultivate a deeper awareness of humanity’s interconnectedness with nature. He asserts: “Myths have a profound psychological significance. We are shaped and guided by them” (McCallum, 2005:23). Engaging with myths and other forms of storytelling would enable individuals to rekindle their intrinsic relationship with nature, complementing scientific understanding with a more holistic and emotional connection.

## 7.2 Instilling *ubuntu* and *ukama* in business leaders

Storytelling provides a strategic avenue for embedding *ubuntu* and *ukama* in business leadership. By integrating African moral narratives into corporate training, organisations can foster ethical leadership that prioritises communal well-being and ecological sustainability. Practical approaches could include:

- **Storytelling workshops:** Interactive sessions where leaders engage with narratives illustrating *ubuntu* and *ukama*, applying them to ethical decision-making.
- **Keynote presentations:** Scholars, storytellers, and community leaders share insights on relational ethics and sustainability through modes of storytelling.
- **Leadership reflection circles:** Inspired by African communal traditions, these forums facilitate discussions on ethical responsibilities to people and nature and could feature storytelling as a key mode of communication.

These initiatives could help leaders navigate the tension between profit-driven imperatives and ethical responsibilities, positioning sustainability as an intrinsic value rather than a regulatory obligation. By grounding leadership development in storytelling, business leaders can shift from being mere corporate agents to stewards of interconnected communities, human and ecological.

## 7.3 Storytelling as a bridge to sustainability

While storytelling fosters ethical awareness, structural barriers within firms – such as shareholder expectations and short-term financial pressures – can limit leaders’ ability to fully enact these principles. To overcome these challenges, leaders must strategically advocate for *ubuntu* and *ukama* at multiple levels. At the board level, they can reframe corporate purpose to balance financial performance with social and environmental well-being. With investors, they can highlight how relational ethics contribute to sustainable

value creation, using case studies and market data to demonstrate long-term benefits. With regulators, they can align *ubuntu* and *ukama* with broader policy priorities, advocating for ethical frameworks that support sustainability and equity.

Beyond storytelling, these values can also be reinforced through further practical mechanisms. Le Grange (2012) suggests that when trying to promote the values underpinned by *ubuntu* and *ukama*, “moral education should involve the *enactment* of moral responsibility – getting students involved in actions for (in the interest of) human and non-human communities” (Le Grange, 2012:336. Emphasis in the original). Business leaders can build on this suggestion by implementing hands-on sustainability initiatives within their organisation, such as ecological restoration projects, ethical sourcing policies, and corporate social responsibility programmes that prioritise environmental and communal well-being.

By leveraging storytelling and practical engagement, business leaders can help embed *ubuntu* and *ukama* within their firms, ensuring ethical responsibility is not merely theoretical but actively realised in business practice.

## 8. Conclusion

This article has explored the intersection of African philosophical concepts, particularly *ubuntu* and *ukama*, with contemporary environmental leadership and business ethics. By synthesising these Indigenous ethical frameworks with frameworks for business leadership, the article offers valuable insights into the potential for fostering environmentally conscientious behaviour within business leaders and firms.

Throughout the discussion, it has hopefully become evident that *ubuntu* and *ukama* provide a robust foundation for reimagining corporate ethics within the context of environmental sustainability. *Ubuntu*’s emphasis on communal relations, empathy, and harmony aligns closely with the principles of environmental stewardship and responsibility. Similarly, *ukama*’s recognition of the interconnectedness of all entities underscores the imperative for holistic approaches to environmental management that consider the well-being of humans and nature.

By expanding Metz’s (2018) conception of leadership as grounded in African moral thought to further incorporate African environmental values, this article has introduced a novel perspective on leadership – one that recognises the intrinsic link between ethical behaviour and environmental stewardship as captured by traditional African ways of thinking. It underscores the importance of integrating environmental considerations into corporate decision-making processes, not as an afterthought but as a fundamental aspect of ethical leadership.

Furthermore, the necessity of African environmental leadership has been highlighted, particularly in the face of escalating environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion on the continent. African leaders, guided by *ubuntu* and *ukama*, are uniquely positioned to address these challenges through



community engagement, innovation, and adaptive management strategies that draw upon Indigenous ontologies, cultural practices, and ethical standpoints.

The article finally suggested practical steps for implementing these principles in business leadership. I suggested storytelling as one method for instilling the values of *ubuntu* and *ukama*. By employing workshops, leadership training, and community-based initiatives that draw on storytelling as a mode of moral education, leaders can internalise and act upon the relational ethics at the heart of *ubuntu* and *ukama*.

In conclusion, African environmental leadership, guided by *ubuntu* and *ukama*, offers a holistic and culturally relevant approach to addressing the pressing environmental challenges of our time. By embracing these principles, businesses can fulfil their ethical responsibilities and drive positive change towards a more sustainable and equitable future for all.

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