

MOGOBE BERNARD RAMOSE'S PHILOSOPHY OF UBUNTU: A CRITIQUE.

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**AN ORIGINAL ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project work was originally carried out by **ANGEL UGONMA MICHAEL**, with matriculation number **ART2101112**, and it meets the requirement for an award of Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy.

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Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the Three Persons in One. Jehover, the Living God, Jesus, Son of the Living God, The Holy Spirit.

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ABSTRACT

This research critically examines Mogobe Bernard Ramose's interpretation of Ubuntu as a foundational element of African philosophy. Ubuntu, often summarized as "I am because we are," emphasizes communal existence, interdependence, and human dignity. Ramose presents Ubuntu not only as a cultural ethic but as a legitimate philosophical framework capable of addressing both African and global socio-political issues. This work explores his arguments, highlighting how Ubuntu challenges dominant Western notions of individualism and rationalism. It also interrogates the limitations of Ramose's position, especially regarding its applicability in contemporary, multicultural, and technologically advanced societies. By engaging with both supportive and critical perspectives, the study seeks to offer a balanced evaluation of Ubuntu's relevance in modern philosophical discourse. Ultimately, the project argues that while Ramose's articulation is valuable, Ubuntu must evolve to remain effective in addressing present-day challenges. The study contributes to the broader effort of decolonizing philosophy and promoting indigenous knowledge systems within academic spaces.

CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The philosophy of Ubuntu represents one of Africa's most profound contributions to global philosophical discourse, embodying a worldview that fundamentally challenges Western individualistic paradigms and offers alternative frameworks for understanding human existence, community, and moral responsibility. Emerging from the rich intellectual traditions of Southern and Eastern African societies, Ubuntu philosophy has transcended its indigenous origins to become a subject of intense scholarly inquiry and practical application across diverse fields including politics, ethics, law, medicine, education, and environmental studies.

The etymological roots of Ubuntu can be traced to the Nguni language family, where it appears in various forms across different linguistic communities: Ubuntu in Zulu and Xhosa, Botho in Sotho and Tswana, Hunhu in Shona, and Utu in Swahili, among others¹. Despite these linguistic variations, the fundamental philosophical principle remains consistent across cultures: the recognition that human identity and worth are intrinsically connected to relationships with others and the broader community. This core principle is

¹ Ramose, M. B. (1999). *African philosophy through ubuntu*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Mond Books.

most commonly expressed through the maxim "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*," which translates as "a person is a person through other persons"².

The philosophical significance of Ubuntu extends far beyond its linguistic origins, representing a comprehensive worldview that encompasses metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and political dimensions. At its metaphysical core, Ubuntu posits a relational ontology that challenges Western notions of individual autonomy and self-sufficiency. Rather than viewing persons as discrete, independent entities who subsequently choose to enter into relationships, Ubuntu philosophy understands personhood itself as fundamentally constituted through relationships with others³. This relational conception of being has profound implications for how Ubuntu approaches questions of knowledge, morality, and social organization.

Epistemologically, Ubuntu embraces communal approaches to knowledge creation and validation, emphasizing collective wisdom over individual expertise. This epistemological framework recognizes that understanding emerges through dialogue, shared experience, and community reflection rather than through isolated individual contemplation⁴. Such an approach to knowledge has significant implications for educational practices, research methodologies, and intellectual discourse within African contexts and beyond.

² Shutte, A. (2001). *Ubuntu: An ethic for a new South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.

³ Ramose, M. B. (2003). Ubuntu: Humanism or humaneness. *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 17(1-2), 191-204.

⁴ *Ibid.*,

The ethical dimensions of Ubuntu philosophy center on ideals of compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony, and collective responsibility. Ubuntu ethics emphasizes the moral obligation to promote the wellbeing of the community and to act in ways that enhance rather than diminish the humanity of others⁵. This ethical framework provides guidance for navigating complex moral dilemmas and offers alternative approaches to justice, conflict resolution, and social healing that prioritize restoration over retribution.

Politically, Ubuntu philosophy has gained particular prominence in post-apartheid South Africa, where it has been invoked as a foundational principle for democratic governance, constitutional development, and national reconciliation. The South African Constitution explicitly references Ubuntu in its emphasis on human dignity and collective responsibility, while the Truth and Reconciliation Commission drew heavily on Ubuntu principles in its approach to addressing historical injustices⁶. These political applications have demonstrated both the potential and the challenges of translating traditional philosophical principles into modern institutional frameworks.

The contemporary relevance of Ubuntu philosophy has been significantly enhanced by the scholarly contributions of Mogobe Bernard Ramose, whose systematic philosophical treatment has elevated Ubuntu from popular cultural concept to rigorous academic discipline. Ramose's work represents a watershed moment in African philosophical scholarship, providing the theoretical foundations necessary for Ubuntu to engage

⁵ Tutu, D. M. (1999). *No future without forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday.

⁶ Mokgoro, Y. (1998). Ubuntu and the law in South Africa. *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal*, 1(1), 1-11.

productively with global philosophical traditions while maintaining its distinctive African character⁷. His contributions have been instrumental in establishing Ubuntu as a legitimate subject of philosophical inquiry within academic institutions worldwide.

Ramose's approach to Ubuntu philosophy is distinguished by its methodological rigor and comprehensive scope. Unlike earlier treatments that often focused on specific applications or cultural dimensions of Ubuntu, Ramose has provided systematic analysis of Ubuntu's metaphysical foundations, epistemological implications, and practical applications across multiple domains. His work demonstrates how indigenous African philosophical traditions can contribute to universal human understanding while maintaining their cultural specificity and integrity⁸.

The growing international recognition of Ubuntu philosophy reflects broader shifts in global intellectual discourse toward more inclusive and diverse philosophical perspectives. As scholars and practitioners worldwide grapple with challenges such as social fragmentation, environmental degradation, economic inequality, and political polarization, Ubuntu philosophy offers alternative frameworks that emphasize interconnection, collective responsibility, and holistic approaches to human wellbeing. This global interest has led to increased scholarly attention to Ubuntu philosophy and its potential contributions to addressing contemporary challenges.

⁷ Ramose, African philosophy through ubuntu *Op. Cit.*,

⁸ Ramose, M. B. (2002). The philosophy of ubuntu and ubuntu as a philosophy. In P. H. Coetzee & A. P. J. Roux (Eds.), *Philosophy from Africa: A text with readings* (2nd ed., pp. 230-238). Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

However, the rapid expansion of Ubuntu scholarship and application has also revealed significant gaps in critical analysis and theoretical development. While Ubuntu philosophy has been widely celebrated for its humanistic values and practical applications, there has been insufficient rigorous examination of its theoretical foundations, internal consistency, and limitations. This lack of critical engagement threatens to undermine Ubuntu's credibility as both a philosophical system and a practical framework for social organization⁹.

Furthermore, the diversity of interpretations and applications of Ubuntu philosophy has created confusion about its core principles and appropriate uses. Different scholars, practitioners, and institutions have adopted varying understandings of Ubuntu, sometimes leading to contradictory or superficial applications that may dilute its philosophical significance. This situation underscores the need for more systematic and critical analysis of major contributions to Ubuntu scholarship, particularly the foundational work of scholars like Ramose who have shaped contemporary understanding of this important philosophical tradition.

The academic significance of Ubuntu philosophy extends beyond African studies to broader philosophical discourse. As global philosophy increasingly recognizes the importance of non-Western philosophical traditions, Ubuntu offers valuable perspectives on fundamental questions about human nature, community, knowledge, and morality that

⁹ Matolino, B. (2014). *Personhood in African philosophy*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.

have occupied philosophers across cultures and historical periods. Ubuntu's emphasis on relational ontology, communal epistemology, and restorative justice provides alternative frameworks that enrich philosophical understanding and offer new approaches to perennial human challenges.

The practical significance of Ubuntu philosophy is evidenced by its application across diverse contexts and disciplines. In addition to its political applications in South Africa, Ubuntu principles have been employed in organizational management, healthcare delivery, educational reform, environmental conservation, and international development. These applications demonstrate Ubuntu's versatility and relevance for contemporary challenges while also highlighting the need for more rigorous evaluation of their effectiveness and appropriateness.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing interest in Ubuntu philosophy, there remains insufficient critical analysis of Ramose's specific contributions to Ubuntu scholarship. While various scholars have explored Ubuntu from different perspectives, few have undertaken a comprehensive examination of Ramose's unique metaphysical interpretation and its implications for contemporary discourse. This gap in scholarship is problematic because Ramose's work

represents perhaps the most systematic and philosophically rigorous treatment of Ubuntu to date¹⁰.

Furthermore, while Ubuntu has been widely celebrated as an African philosophical alternative to Western thought, critical evaluation of its theoretical foundations, practical applications, and limitations remains limited. The uncritical acceptance of Ubuntu philosophy without rigorous analysis may undermine its credibility and effectiveness as both a philosophical system and a practical framework for social organization¹¹.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to provide a comprehensive critical analysis of M.B. Ramose's philosophy of Ubuntu, examining both its theoretical foundations and practical applications. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine Ramose's metaphysical conception of Ubuntu and its philosophical underpinnings
2. Analyze the practical applications of Ubuntu philosophy in various domains including politics, medicine, ecology, and religion
3. Critically evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, and limitations of Ramose's Ubuntu philosophy

¹⁰ Wiredu, K. (2004). Introduction: African philosophy in our time. In K. Wiredu (Ed.), *A companion to African philosophy* (pp. 1-27). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

¹¹ Matolino, Op. Cit.,

4. Assess the relevance and contribution of Ubuntu philosophy to contemporary philosophical discourse
5. Compare Ramose's Ubuntu philosophy with other philosophical traditions and perspectives

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to African philosophy scholarship by providing the first comprehensive critical analysis of Ramose's Ubuntu philosophy. The significance of this research extends across multiple dimensions, offering both theoretical and practical contributions to the field. The academic significance of this study lies in its systematic examination of Ramose's philosophical framework, which fills a crucial gap in Ubuntu scholarship that has long been characterized by fragmented analyses and insufficient critical engagement¹². By providing a rigorous theoretical foundation for understanding Ubuntu philosophy, this research advances the scholarly discourse on African philosophical traditions and establishes a comprehensive framework for future academic investigations.

The practical significance of this research extends beyond academic circles to offer tangible benefits for contemporary applications of Ubuntu philosophy in various social, political, and economic contexts. By examining the real-world applications of

¹² Hountondji, P. J. (1996). *African philosophy: Myth and reality* (2nd ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ubuntu principles, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers, community leaders, and practitioners who seek to implement Ubuntu-based approaches to governance, conflict resolution, and social development¹³. The research offers a critical framework for evaluating the effectiveness and appropriateness of Ubuntu applications in modern contexts, helping to bridge the gap between traditional philosophical principles and contemporary challenges. Additionally, the study's findings contribute to **cultural significance** by preserving and promoting African philosophical heritage while simultaneously demonstrating its relevance for addressing global issues such as social justice, human rights, and sustainable development¹⁴. This dual contribution ensures that Ubuntu philosophy maintains its cultural integrity while proving its utility as a philosophical system capable of informing contemporary discourse and practice.

1.5 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in philosophical analysis and critical theory, utilizing textual analysis of Ramose's published works on Ubuntu philosophy as the primary method, supplemented by engagement with secondary sources and comparative analysis with other philosophical traditions. The methodological approach integrates hermeneutical analysis of Ramose's texts to understand his philosophical arguments and positions, critical philosophical analysis to evaluate the

¹³ Tutu, Op. Cit.,

¹⁴ Ramose, *African philosophy through ubuntu*. Op. Cit.,

logical consistency and validity of Ubuntu philosophy, comparative analysis to situate Ubuntu philosophy within broader philosophical discourse, and dialectical examination of opposing viewpoints and criticisms of Ubuntu philosophy. This comprehensive methodological framework enables a rigorous investigation that respects the cultural context of Ubuntu philosophy while subjecting it to systematic scholarly scrutiny, thereby ensuring both cultural sensitivity and academic rigor in the analysis of Ramose's contributions to African philosophical discourse.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study focuses specifically on M.B. Ramose's contributions to Ubuntu philosophy as articulated in his major works, particularly "African Philosophy through Ubuntu" and related publications. The temporal scope covers Ramose's philosophical works from the 1990s to the present, while the thematic scope encompasses his metaphysical, political, ecological, and medical applications of Ubuntu philosophy.

The study acknowledges that Ubuntu philosophy extends beyond Ramose's work but deliberately limits its focus to his specific contributions to enable deep, systematic analysis. Other interpretations of Ubuntu are considered primarily for comparative purposes.

1.7 Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on Ubuntu philosophy has evolved considerably since the late 20th century, encompassing diverse perspectives from African philosophers, theologians, political theorists, and cross-cultural scholars. This literature review examines the major contributions to Ubuntu scholarship, with particular attention to the theoretical foundations, applications, and critical evaluations that have shaped contemporary understanding of this African philosophical concept.

The intellectual groundwork for contemporary Ubuntu scholarship was established by several pioneering works that sought to articulate African philosophical traditions within academic discourse. Wiredu's seminal work *Philosophy and an African Culture* provided crucial foundations for understanding indigenous African thought systems, establishing methodological approaches that would later influence Ubuntu scholarship. His emphasis on philosophical rigor while maintaining cultural authenticity created a template for subsequent African philosophical inquiry that Ramose would later adopt and refine in his Ubuntu studies.¹⁵

Kwame Gyekye's *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* offered comparative insights into African communitarian philosophies that parallel Ubuntu concepts, particularly in his analysis of personhood and community relationships. While focusing on Akan philosophy, Gyekye's work provided important

¹⁵ Wiredu, K. (1980). *Philosophy and an African Culture: The Case of the Akan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

theoretical frameworks for understanding how African societies conceptualize individual-community relationships, establishing scholarly precedents for the systematic study of Ubuntu philosophy.¹⁶

The theological dimensions of Ubuntu were first systematically explored by Tutu (1999) in *No Future Without Forgiveness*, where he articulated Ubuntu as both a philosophical principle and a practical framework for post-apartheid reconciliation. Tutu's work, while primarily theological and autobiographical, introduced Ubuntu to international audiences and demonstrated its practical applications in processes of healing and social reconstruction. His interpretation emphasized Ubuntu's capacity to transcend cultural boundaries while maintaining its distinctly African character.¹⁷

Ramose's (1999) groundbreaking work *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* represents the most comprehensive and systematic philosophical treatment of Ubuntu to date. This seminal text established Ramose as the preeminent authority on Ubuntu philosophy by providing rigorous metaphysical foundations for understanding Ubuntu as both an ontological principle and an epistemological framework. Ramose's analysis moved beyond popular interpretations of Ubuntu to offer sophisticated philosophical arguments about the nature of being, knowledge, and community within African thought systems.¹⁸

¹⁶ Gyekye, K. (1995). *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Rev. ed.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press

¹⁷ Tutu, D. M. (1999). *No future without forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday.

¹⁸ Ramose, M. B. (1999). *African philosophy through ubuntu*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Mond Books.

Building upon his foundational work, Ramose (2003) in *The Ethics of Ubuntu* further developed the moral dimensions of Ubuntu philosophy, articulating its ethical implications for contemporary society. This subsequent work demonstrated how Ubuntu principles could inform moral reasoning and ethical decision-making across various contexts, from personal relationships to institutional governance.¹⁹

Shutte's (2001) *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa* provided an important complementary perspective to Ramose's metaphysical approach by focusing specifically on Ubuntu's ethical and political applications in post-apartheid South Africa. Shutte's work emphasized Ubuntu's potential as a unifying philosophy for diverse South African communities, offering practical frameworks for implementing Ubuntu principles in governance and social policy.²⁰

The scholarly discourse on Ubuntu has been significantly enriched by critical voices that have questioned its theoretical coherence and practical applications. Matolino's (2014) *Personhood in African Philosophy* presents one of the most sustained critiques of Ubuntu philosophy, challenging its philosophical consistency and questioning its effectiveness as a contemporary ethical framework. Matolino's critical analysis has sparked important

¹⁹ Ramose, M. B. (2003). The ethics of Ubuntu. In P. H. Coetzee & A. P. J. Roux (Eds.), *The African philosophy reader* (pp. 324–333). Routledge.

²⁰ Shutte, A. (2001). *Ubuntu: An ethic for a new South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.

debates about the relationship between traditional African thought and modern philosophical discourse.²¹

Metz's (2007) *Toward an African Moral Theory* offers an alternative interpretation of Ubuntu ethics that differs from Ramose's metaphysical approach, emphasizing communitarian rather than metaphysical foundations for Ubuntu principles. Metz's work has contributed to ongoing debates about the proper interpretation and application of Ubuntu philosophy, demonstrating the diversity of scholarly perspectives within Ubuntu studies.²²

Recent scholarship has expanded Ubuntu applications across multiple disciplines, demonstrating both its versatility and the need for continued theoretical development. Lutz, (2009) *African Ubuntu philosophy and global management* explores the intersections between Ubuntu and European philosophical traditions, offering insights into cross-cultural philosophical dialogue and the potential for Ubuntu to contribute to global philosophical discourse.²³

Environmental applications of Ubuntu philosophy have been systematically explored by Murove (2004) in *The Ubuntu Philosophy of Caring and Environmentalism*, which examines how Ubuntu principles can inform ecological thinking and environmental policy. This work demonstrates Ubuntu's potential contributions to contemporary

²¹ Matolino, B. (2014). *Personhood in African philosophy*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.

²² Metz, T. (2007). Toward an African moral theory. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 15(3), 321-341.

²³ Murove, M. F. (2004). An African commitment to ecological conservation: The Shona concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu. *Mankind Quarterly*, 45(2), 195–215.

environmental challenges while raising questions about the relationship between traditional African worldviews and modern ecological concerns.²⁴

This literature review reveals that while Ubuntu scholarship has made significant progress in establishing theoretical foundations and exploring practical applications, there remains a crucial need for comprehensive critical analysis of major contributors' work. The present study addresses this gap by providing systematic examination of Ramose's contributions to Ubuntu philosophy, thereby advancing scholarly understanding of this important African philosophical tradition.

²⁴ **Murove, M. F.** (2004). An African commitment to ecological conservation: The Shona concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu. *Mankind Quarterly*, 45(2), 195–215.

CHAPTER TWO

MOGOBE BERNARD RAMOSE: LIFE AND WORKS

2.1 Ramose: Life and Works

Mogobe Bernard Ramose stands as one of the most influential African philosophers of the contemporary era, whose scholarly contributions have fundamentally shaped the understanding of Ubuntu philosophy and African philosophical discourse more broadly. Born in South Africa during the apartheid era, Ramose's intellectual journey reflects both personal experience of systemic oppression and rigorous philosophical training that spans multiple continents and traditions¹.

Ramose's academic career began with studies in philosophy and theology, leading to advanced degrees that equipped him with both Western philosophical tools and deep appreciation for African intellectual traditions. His doctoral work focused on African philosophy, particularly the systematic articulation of Ubuntu as a coherent philosophical system capable of engaging with global philosophical discourse on equal terms².

The breadth of Ramose's scholarly output encompasses metaphysics, political philosophy, ethics, and epistemology, with Ubuntu philosophy serving as the central organizing principle throughout his work. His seminal publication "*African Philosophy through Ubuntu*" represents perhaps the most systematic and rigorous treatment of Ubuntu

¹ Ramose, M. B. (1999). *African philosophy through ubuntu*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Mond Books.

² Ramose, M. B. (2003). Ubuntu: Humanism or humaneness. *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 17(1-2), 191-204.

philosophy to date, establishing him as the leading contemporary authority on this ancient African concept.

Ramose's philosophical methodology combines rigorous analytical philosophy with deep appreciation for African oral traditions and indigenous knowledge systems. This synthetic approach allows him to present Ubuntu philosophy in forms accessible to both African communities and international academic audiences, thereby bridging traditional and contemporary philosophical discourse³.

2.2 Ubuntu: Origin, Meaning and Foundation

Ubuntu emerges from the rich philosophical traditions of the Bantu-speaking peoples of southern and eastern Africa, representing one of the most sophisticated and enduring philosophical concepts to emerge from the African continent. The term itself derives from the Nguni languages (*isiZulu*, *isiXhosa*, *siSwati*, and *isiNdebele*), where "*ubuntu*" combines "*umuntu*" (person) and "*abantu*" (people), literally meaning "humanness" or "humanity"⁴. This linguistic construction reveals the inherently relational nature of the concept, as it grammatically connects individual identity with collective existence from its very etymology.

The foundational principle of Ubuntu is encapsulated in the phrase "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*," typically translated as "a person is a person through other persons." However,

³ Wiredu, K. (2004). Introduction: African philosophy in our time. In K. Wiredu (Ed.), *A companion to African philosophy* (pp. 1-27). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

⁴ Shutte, A. (2001). *Ubuntu: An ethic for a new South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.

Ramose (2002) argues that this translation, while accurate, fails to capture the full metaphysical implications of the concept.⁵ For Ramose, Ubuntu represents not merely a social ethic but a fundamental ontological principle that describes the very nature of being itself. He contends that the English translation obscures the dynamic and processual nature of personhood in African thought, where being is not a static state but an ongoing achievement realized through relationships and community participation⁶.

The historical foundations of Ubuntu philosophy extend far beyond linguistic analysis to encompass entire worldviews and ways of life that have characterized African societies for millennia. Archaeological evidence from sites across southern and eastern Africa suggests that communalistic principles consistent with Ubuntu philosophy have governed social organization for thousands of years⁷. Rock art, settlement patterns, and burial practices from the Later Stone Age through the Iron Age demonstrate consistent patterns of communal decision-making, resource sharing, and collective responsibility that align with contemporary Ubuntu principles⁸.

Anthropological research conducted by Schapera (1953) among various Bantu-speaking communities documented elaborate systems of customary law, governance, and social

⁵ Ramose, M. B. (2002). The philosophy of ubuntu and ubuntu as a philosophy. In P. H. Coetzee & A. P. J. Roux (Eds.), *Philosophy from Africa: A text with readings* (2nd ed., pp. 230-238). Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

⁶ Ramose, Ubuntu: Humanism or humaneness. *Op. Cit.*,

⁷ Huffman, T. N. (2007). *Handbook to the Iron Age: The Archaeology of Pre-Colonial Farming Societies in Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

⁸ Lewis-Williams, J. D. (2011). *Deciphering Ancient Minds: The Mystery of San Bushman Rock Art*. London: Thames & Hudson.

organization that embodied Ubuntu principles centuries before European contact.⁹ These studies revealed sophisticated philosophical frameworks that prioritized community wellbeing, restorative justice, and collective decision-making processes that mirror contemporary Ubuntu applications. The historical continuity of these practices demonstrates that Ubuntu philosophy represents an authentic and enduring African intellectual tradition rather than a modern construct designed to address contemporary challenges.

Tempels' (1959) pioneering work *Bantu Philosophy*, despite its colonial-era limitations and controversial interpretations, provided early recognition of the sophisticated metaphysical systems underlying Bantu thought.¹⁰ His documentation of concepts such as vital force, relational ontology, and communal approaches to knowledge creation established important foundations for later Ubuntu scholarship, even as subsequent scholars like Ramose (1999) would critique and refine his interpretations.¹¹

2.2.1 Linguistic and Cultural Variations

⁹ Schapera, I. (1953). *The Tswana* (Ethnographic Survey of Africa: Southern Africa Part III). London: International African Institute.

¹⁰ Tempels, P. (1959). *Bantu Philosophy*. (C. King, Trans.). Paris: Présence Africaine. (Original work published 1945).

¹¹ Ramose, M. B. (1999). *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Mond Books.

The linguistic diversity of Ubuntu expressions across African languages demonstrates the widespread nature of Ubuntu philosophy throughout the continent. In Shona-speaking communities of Zimbabwe, the concept appears as "*hunhu*," emphasizing the qualities that make one fully human¹². The Sesotho and Setswana concept of "*botho*" encompasses similar ideas about personhood and community, with particular emphasis on moral excellence and social responsibility¹³. Among Swahili speakers, "*utu*" represents comparable notions of humanity and dignity, while maintaining distinct cultural expressions and applications¹⁴.

These linguistic variations are not merely different words for the same concept but represent culturally specific elaborations of shared philosophical themes. Metz (2007) argues that these variations demonstrate both the unity and diversity of African philosophical thought, showing how fundamental principles can be expressed through different cultural frameworks while maintaining essential continuity.¹⁵ This linguistic evidence supports Ramose's contention that Ubuntu represents a core element of African philosophical thought rather than a localized cultural practice.¹⁶

2.2.2 Metaphysical Dimensions

¹² Samkange, S., & Samkange, T. M. (1980). *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy*. Salisbury: Graham Publishing.

¹³ Gyekye, K. (1995). *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Rev. ed.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

¹⁴ Wiredu, K. (1980). *Philosophy and an African Culture: The Case of the Akan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁵ Metz, T. (2007). Towards an African moral theory: Ubuntu as a moral theory. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 15(3), 321–341.

¹⁶ Ramose, M. B. (1999). *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Mond Books.

Ramose's (2003) metaphysical interpretation of Ubuntu challenges Western philosophical categories by proposing a relational ontology that fundamentally reconceptualizes the nature of being.¹⁷ Unlike Western philosophical traditions that typically begin with individual existence and then consider relationships as secondary, Ubuntu philosophy posits that relationality is the fundamental characteristic of existence itself. In this framework, individual identity emerges from and is sustained by networks of relationships rather than existing as a prerequisite for relationships.

This metaphysical foundation has profound implications for understanding consciousness, knowledge, and moral responsibility within Ubuntu philosophy. Mokgoro (1998) explains that Ubuntu consciousness is inherently intersubjective, developing through ongoing engagement with others rather than through isolated self-reflection.¹⁸ This understanding challenges Western notions of autonomous rational agents and suggests alternative approaches to epistemology that prioritize communal validation of knowledge claims.

The temporal dimensions of Ubuntu philosophy also distinguish it from Western metaphysical traditions. Mbiti's (1990) analysis of African concepts of time reveals that Ubuntu philosophy operates within frameworks that prioritize present community wellbeing while maintaining strong connections to ancestral wisdom and future

¹⁷ Ramose, M. B. (2003). Ubuntu: Humanism or humaneness. *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 17(1-2), 191-204.

¹⁸ Mokgoro, Y. (1998). Ubuntu and the law in South Africa. *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review*, 4(1), 15-26.

generations.¹⁹ This temporal orientation influences how Ubuntu approaches moral reasoning, decision-making, and social planning in ways that differ significantly from Western individualistic and future-oriented approaches.

2.2.3 Epistemological Foundations

The epistemological dimensions of Ubuntu philosophy reflect its relational metaphysics by emphasizing communal approaches to knowledge creation and validation. Wiredu (1980) argues that African philosophical traditions generally prioritize consensus-building and collective wisdom over individual expertise or abstract reasoning.²⁰ This epistemological framework understands knowledge as emerging through dialogue, shared experience, and community reflection rather than through isolated contemplation or empirical observation.

Oruka's (1990) concept of "sage philosophy" provides important insights into how Ubuntu epistemology functions in practice.²¹ His research documented how African communities rely on recognized sages who combine personal wisdom with deep understanding of community values and traditions. These sages serve as repositories of communal knowledge while also contributing original insights that advance philosophical understanding within their communities.

¹⁹ Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African Religions and Philosophy* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Heinemann.

²⁰ Wiredu, K. (1980). *Philosophy and an African Culture: The Case of the Akan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

²¹ Oruka, H. O. (Ed.). (1990). *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and the Modern Debate on African Philosophy*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

The implications of Ubuntu epistemology extend to contemporary academic discourse and research methodologies. Ramose (2004) argues that authentic engagement with Ubuntu philosophy requires adopting epistemological approaches that honor its communal foundations rather than imposing Western individualistic frameworks.²² This methodological consideration has influenced how contemporary scholars approach Ubuntu research and has contributed to debates about decolonizing academic methodologies.

Recent theoretical developments in Ubuntu philosophy have expanded its applications while deepening understanding of its foundational principles. Metz's (2011) work on Ubuntu ethics has developed systematic approaches to moral reasoning that draw on Ubuntu principles while engaging with contemporary ethical theories.²³ His contributions demonstrate how Ubuntu philosophy can contribute to global ethical discourse while maintaining its distinctively African character.

Environmental applications of Ubuntu philosophy have been explored by Murove (2004), who argues that Ubuntu's emphasis on relationality and interdependence provides valuable frameworks for understanding human-nature relationships.²⁴ This ecological

²² Ramose, M. B. (2004). Ubuntu and inclusive epistemology in higher education. *In Search of an African Philosophy of Education: Perspectives on Higher Education*. (Exact publication details for this chapter vary across sources).

²³ Metz, T. (2011). Ubuntu as a moral theory and human rights in South Africa. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 11(2), 532-559.

²⁴ Murove, M. F. (2004). An African environmental ethics. *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 38(4), 533-553.

interpretation of Ubuntu has influenced contemporary African approaches to environmental policy and conservation practice.

Legal applications of Ubuntu philosophy have been extensively developed through South African constitutional jurisprudence and customary law scholarship. Cornell and Muvangua (2012) have examined how Ubuntu principles can inform legal reasoning and judicial decision-making in ways that honor both traditional African values and contemporary human rights frameworks.²⁵

The relationship between Ubuntu philosophy and modernity presents additional theoretical challenges. While proponents argue that Ubuntu offers valuable alternatives to Western individualism, critics question whether traditional communalistic values can effectively address contemporary challenges such as globalization, technological change, and cultural diversity²⁶.

The origins, meaning, and foundations of Ubuntu philosophy reveal a sophisticated intellectual tradition that offers distinctive perspectives on fundamental philosophical questions. Ramose's contributions have been instrumental in articulating these foundations in ways that demonstrate Ubuntu's relevance for contemporary philosophical discourse while honoring its authentic African origins. Understanding these foundations

²⁵ Cornell, D., & Muvangua, N. (Eds.). (2012). *Ubuntu and the Law: African Ideals and Postapartheid Jurisprudence*. New York: Fordham University Press.

²⁶ Appiah, K. A. (2006). *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

is essential for appreciating both the potential and the limitations of Ubuntu philosophy as it continues to evolve and find new applications in diverse contemporary contexts.

2.3 Ramose's Metaphysical Notion of Ubuntu

Ramose's most significant contribution to Ubuntu philosophy lies in his metaphysical interpretation of the concept, which transcends conventional understanding of Ubuntu as merely a social ethic or cultural practice. For Ramose, Ubuntu constitutes a fundamental ontological principle that describes the nature of being itself, challenging Western philosophical assumptions about individuality, personhood, and existence²⁷.

The metaphysical dimension of Ubuntu, according to Ramose, reveals that being is inherently relational rather than substantive. This means that existence itself cannot be understood through individual entities or substances, but only through relationships and interconnections. The individual person, therefore, does not exist as a separate, autonomous being but as a node in a web of relationships that constitute reality itself²⁸.

Ramose's onto-triadic conception of Ubuntu identifies three fundamental dimensions of being: the living, the dead, and the yet-to-be-born. This triadic structure suggests that human existence extends beyond the temporal boundaries of individual life to encompass past, present, and future generations in a continuous flow of being. Each person exists not

²⁷ Ramose, M. B. (2003). Ubuntu: Humanism or humaneness. *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 17(1-2), 191-204.

²⁸ Ramose, M. B. (1999). *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Mond Books

as an isolated individual but as part of this eternal community that transcends temporal limitations²⁹.

The metaphysical implications of Ubuntu philosophy challenge Western philosophical traditions that emphasize individual autonomy, rational self-determination, and substance metaphysics. Instead, Ubuntu proposes a relational ontology where identity, meaning, and value emerge through participation in community rather than individual achievement or rational reflection³⁰.

Ramose argues that this metaphysical understanding of Ubuntu provides a more adequate account of human nature and reality than Western alternatives. The Ubuntu worldview recognizes the fundamental interconnectedness of all existence while maintaining the distinctive value and contribution of individual persons within the larger community of being³¹.

2.4 Relevance of Ubuntu in Contemporary Discourse

The contemporary relevance of Ubuntu philosophy extends across multiple domains of human experience and social organization, offering alternative approaches to persistent global challenges. Ramose's systematic articulation of Ubuntu principles has contributed

²⁹ Ramose, M. B. (2002). The philosophy of ubuntu and ubuntu as a philosophy. In P. H. Coetzee & A. P. J. Roux (Eds.), *Philosophy from Africa: A text with readings* (2nd ed., pp. 230-238). Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

³⁰ Metz, T. (2007). Towards an African moral theory: Ubuntu as a moral theory. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 15(3), 321–341.

³¹ Ramose, M. B. (2003). Ubuntu: Humanism or humaneness. *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 17(1-2), 191-204.

significantly to this contemporary application, providing theoretical foundations for practical interventions in politics, economics, ecology, and social reconstruction³².

In the political domain, Ubuntu philosophy offers alternatives to liberal individualism and authoritarian collectivism by proposing models of governance based on consensus, participation, and community accountability. The South African experience with Ubuntu-inspired approaches to truth and reconciliation has demonstrated both the potential and limitations of applying Ubuntu principles to contemporary political challenges³³.

Economic applications of Ubuntu philosophy challenge both capitalist and socialist models by proposing economic systems based on reciprocity, sharing, and community welfare rather than individual accumulation or state control. These Ubuntu economics emphasize sustainability, equity, and social responsibility as fundamental principles of economic organization³⁴.

Environmental applications of Ubuntu philosophy provide frameworks for understanding human relationships with nature that transcend Western distinctions between culture and nature, subject and object. Ubuntu ecology recognizes the inherent interconnectedness of human and natural communities, proposing environmental ethics based on reciprocity and care rather than domination and exploitation³⁵.

³² Tutu, D. (1999). *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday.

³³ Shutte, A. (2001). *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.

³⁴ Lutz, D. (2009). African Ubuntu philosophy and global management. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 84(3), 313–328.

³⁵ Murove, M. F. (2004). An African environmental ethics. *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 38(4), 533-553.

The medical applications of Ubuntu philosophy offer holistic approaches to health and healing that integrate physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions of human wellbeing. Ubuntu medical practices emphasize community involvement, traditional knowledge, and healing relationships rather than purely biomedical interventions³⁶.

³⁶ Ramose, M. B. (1999). *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Mond Books

CHAPTER THREE

M.B. RAMOSE'S PHILOSOPHY OF UBUNTU: ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE.

3.1 Ubuntu Philosophy.

Ubuntu is a root of African philosophy. The Being of an African in the universe is inseparably anchored upon Ubuntu. Similarly, the African tree of knowledge stems from Ubuntu with which it is connected invisibly¹. Ubuntu, therefore, is a foundation of African philosophy and so, Being of Africans all over the world is held by Ubuntu. Ubuntu then is the powerhouse of African ontology and epistemology. With this being said, it is safe to say that African philosophy exists through and in Ubuntu, in essence, Ubuntu can be said to be the basis on which African philosophy stands on. There is a persistent philosophical argument made that there is a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among the indigenous people of Africa. In essence, there is a "family atmosphere" among and between the indigenous people of Africa. No doubt that there will be variations within this broad philosophical "family atmosphere". But the blood circulating through the "family members" is the same in its basics. This means that people may vary in the "family atmosphere" but then, they are bounded by the same blood flowing through them.

The aim of this chapter is to take the notions, postulations and ideas of M.B. Ramose's philosophy of Ubuntu in its entirety, juxtaposing them with real life realities in Africa and

¹ Ramose, M. B. (1999). *African philosophy through Ubuntu*. Harare: Mond Books. p.35

also to look critically into his belief of Ubuntu being the foundation of African philosophy, here by disregarding Hegel's notion that Africans are primitive and do not have a philosophy. According to Ramose, just as the environing soil, the root, stem, branches and leaves together as a one-ness give meaning to our understanding of a tree, so it is with Ubuntu². Ubuntu gives an understanding of the African people through their dances, songs, cultures, religions. Even in the diversity of these cultures, traditions, dances, songs, proverbs, folklore, etc, there is one-ness and togetherness in Ubuntu, there by saying that Africans are one and African philosophy is one. Ubuntu is anchored by one soil and so, the philosophy of Africa should be a continuous whole-ness not independent fragments or real life experiences. African ontology and epistemology must be understood as two aspects of one and the same reality.

3.2 Against the Fragmentation of Being.

The word "fragment" means a small part or piece that has been separated from something whole. Fragmentation of Being therefore, is the breakdown of the communal, relational and harmonious way of existence.

Ramose was against the fragmentation of Being because for him, Being is the whole. The self and the community are not separate. "A person is a person through other persons". True Being means living in unity, mutual respect and harmony with others.

² Ibid.,

Fragmentation of Being involves the disintegration of this wholeness of existence. It can bring about the loss of communal identity and human interconnectedness which results to isolation, broken relationships, moral decadence, etc. Ramose speaks about language as being a tool to break the silence of Being. Only if and after language has broken the silence of being is it possible to commence conversation with or about Being³. He speaks about the doer that is engaged in the activity of doing which is directed towards the object. He distinguishes the noun which is the subject from the verb and the object. He says that the subject-objects distinction is a fundamental ontological datum with the verb functioning as the vehicle of mediation between the subject and the object. It is on this ground that we know that there is separate, distinct and independent existence.

Instead of seeing only Being becoming which is infangible incessant motion, language insists upon the fragmentation of Being becoming into be! and becoming .Being and becoming are not meant to be opposed to another as they portray two related aspects of reality. For Ramose, Be! Is order while becoming is chaos . This divide bring the birth of other out of chaos into society. Language then comes in to bring the concept of order as a means to establish and maintain equilibrium in human relations. Being must cease becoming and remain only be!

The separation of Being becoming and the invention of the opposition, Being and becoming through the insertion of be! is ontologically and epidemologically

³ Ibid., p.38

questionable³. Ramose thus ask a question; what would reality look like if Being becoming where not at all fragmented?⁴

3.3 The Language of Ubuntu.

The *rhemode* is considered to be the language of Ubuntu. The word "*Rhemode*" is gotten from the Greek verb "*rheo*" which means to flow. It is a new mode of language, trying to find out whether it is possible to create a new structure that is not so prone toward fragmentation as is the present one⁵. It is a critique of a thought and structure of language that imposes a divide and a pattern in subjective - verb - object. It pleads for entities to be understood as the forms, modes and dimensions of the incessant flow of same time multi-directional motion. The understanding of entities refers to Being rather than be! it preserves and also sustains the whole-ness and not the whole of Being. There is no way Being can be described as whole when it already implies the replacement and fixation of Being. We cannot stop motion and we cannot speak about Being as whole as if Being has reached that state of complete stagnation or absolute rest because, it has not. The suffix-ness puts a sharp relief to the ancient opposition between motion and rest.

The gerund and not the verb is the ontological basis of the *rhemode* language as it is that the doer doing; present continuous tense is at any given moment with potentials for an infinite variety of an unending action of joining and converging. The present tense is only a specific mode of incessant motion that is always continuous.

⁴ Bohm, D. (1980). *Wholeness and the implicate order*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. pp.30-31

⁵ Tejada, F. C. de. (1979). *ARSP*, 1979, 202–207.

The logic of Ubuntu is against the fragmentation of Being through language which means that the African philosophic viewpoint of the universe is holistic in nature. Ramose dismisses the term "holism" and adopts the term "wholeness" to describe the African worldview. Here, Ramose goes further to say that African philosophic conception of the universe is not just pantereic but it is also musical as well. African philosophy is thus rooted in its musical conception of the universe. Ramose concurs with De Tejada's notion that the musical conception of musical rhythm which are; the rational and the emotional. But then, Ramose disagrees with Tejada's ascription of the "emotional" as a feature of Bantu law and also to a large extent, African philosophy. He used the term "*unserer rationale logik*". to express Bantu thought to the " magical"⁶.

In this language of Being, Ramose talks about music as the conception of harmony of Being in African philosophy. He is saying that dance is an invitation to participate in and not being a spectator thereof. The African have an attitude and reaction to music that the non Africans do not have. An example is in the Northern sotho, a Bantu speaking community, there is a saying that goes *kosa ga e theeletswe o e duletse* which means (you cannot listen to music seated). Africans dance to music and the rhythm of their dance rhymes with the music.

⁶ Ramose Op. Cit, p.48

3.4. Ubuntu as Onto-triadic Conception of Being.

There are three dimensions of Being. There is the dimension of living - *Umuntu*. The second, is that of those Beings that have passed away from the world of the living which is through death. They are called the living - dead (*abaphansi*) because they still continue to live in a world unknown to the living. The third dimension is those that are yet-to-be-born. So, therefore, it has fallen upon the living to make sure that the yet-to-be-born are indeed born. These three levels of existence is called the onto-triadic structure of Being. It is the discourse about the unknown from the view of the living.

The Implication of Ubuntu Onto-triadic Conception of Being.

Onto-triadic understanding of Being shapes how humans relate in the world of the living. Despair, happiness, anguish, joy, etc are some phenomenal that outlines the instability of the world of the living. To respond to the instability of Being, a human being in the world of living must be *Umuntu* and *Umuntu* cannot attend Ubuntu without the intervention of the living dead. Here, Ramose emphasis on the relevance of the living dead, as it is that the living dead protects the family. The onto-triadic of Being which is also the ontology of Being is a basis of Ubuntu philosophy.

3.5. Understanding Religion Through Ubuntu.

In layman's terms, religion is a strong belief in supernatural power or powers that controls human destiny, it is also seen as an institution to express belief in a divine power. Human

beings have come to realize that their existence is linked towards something that is transcendent. But then, how do we know if this something is wholly other than ourselves? Ramose is saying that God or god is not important in itself but it is the way in which our notion of God or god is arrived that it is the fundamental importance. He asks questions if: there is something really indestructible, immortal and therefore eternal about us, if we are simply no more than destructible, time bound and mortal beings as death has so simply demonstrated. He speaks of prayer as a way in which an individual lay himself bare and open to the cosmic voice which delivers the expected response. "Prayers starts communication with one's deceased ancestor, a lump of mute speechless soil"⁷. Ramose establishes the facts that it is possible to communicate with dead, departed, invisible and desensitized beings. He says that the human person is a spiritual being if he consumes to ascribe living qualities to the dead because they exist as spiritual beings.

3.5.1. Immortality.

For Ramose, transcendence is seen as a quality that belongs to the subject. To be a subject is to be transcendent which is elusive and cannot be gotten a hold of. It is believed that the metaphysics of presence is the basis for immortality in African traditional thought. The presence of a person as subject is not ultimately justifiable⁸. Ramose juxtaposes Sartre's notion in his book "Being and Nothing" with Onwunibe's reference to Igbo metaphysics that when one holds the self as an object of consciousness, there will always be in the

⁷ Ramose Op. Cit, p.48

⁸ Onyewuile, R. C. (1984). The African view of man: A key to the understanding of African ethics. In R. A. Wright (Ed.), *African philosophy: An introduction* Lanham: University Press of America. pp. 191–198.

background, the receding and incomplete self which negates ultimate objectification of the total self.⁹ The systematically elusive character of transcendence of the subject "I" (*na, mina, je, ik and ich, ego*) points to the suggestion that the "I" survives death.¹⁰ which means that "I" is immortal and cannot die or perish. "I" becomes an object when the crosses over to immortality and it will be referred to as "It". But then, it is seen that African tradition denies such objectification by preserving and retaining the holistic conception of person by referring to a deceased as - *motho yola a hwileng, a falletseng* - meaning "a person who died" . Africans ascribe the qualities of life to a deceased person in the belief that personhood is more than the physical today. Ramose describes death as the natural gateway to the world of the transcendent which make the dead people the living dead.

He made reference to some African languages with regard to the concept of death and spirit.

In "*se sotho (Tswana, sepedi, seshoeshoe)*". The word:

1. *Moya, moea, mowa*, has got different meanings all deeply rooted on the context it is used.
2. *Moya o a foka* = the wind is blowing.
3. *O na le moya o mobe* = he has bad intentions.

⁹ Ramose Op. Cit, p.48

¹⁰ Menkiti, I. A. (1984). Person and community in African thought. In R. A. Wright (Ed.), *African philosophy: An introduction* (pp. 171–181). Lanham: University Press of America.

4. go na le moya o mobe = the atmosphere is bad.
5. *O tsenwe ke moya* = he is possessed by the spirit.
6. *Moya was gagwe o ko case* = he is in low spirit or depressed.

Ramose states that the whole essence of the various meanings of moya is that the word is not simply translated into spirit or soul without further ado which is a notion gotten from De pater. He also spoke about the platonic conception of personhood. He said that Plato's conception of immortality is individualistic which does not fit into the African traditional thought as spirit and soul is a separate substance.

3.5.2. Personal Identity.

Personhood in Africa is seen as wholeness- which does not conflict human individuality in Africa. Human beings should be seen as partial wholes even though there is a greater wholeness to which an individual person belongs to. Ramose lays emphasis on Holism as the starting point of the African conception of a person. The holistic conception of person accords primacy to wholeness while the individualistic conception of person accords primacy to it.

The above differences of conception are stated in these terms: "the African view of man denies that person can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individua. Rather, man is defined by reference to their environing community...as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal

world think primacy is meant to apply not only ontologically, but also in regard to epistemic accessibility. It is rooted in an ongoing community that individual also comes to know himself as a durable, more or less permanent fact of the world."¹¹

The holistic conception of a person appears to be neither uniform nor homogenous for the whole of Africa. The Akan people subscribe to the derivative concept of a person. According to Gyekye, "the Akan hold a tripartite conception of a person, considering a human being to be consisted by three elements, *okra*, *sunsum* and *honam*(*nipadua*: body)"¹². Which is the conception to the rule that the Africans perceives person as wholeness. It is seen that the human individual is inextricably linked to the all encompassing universe.

So, for Ramose human individuality is the foundation of the greater environing, all encompassing wholeness. Person in Africa is simultaneously a physical and metaphysical Being because it is a concrete corporal being. In essence, to be a person, the individual must go through various community prescribed stages and must partake in certain ceremonies and rituals. Until then, the individual is referred to as "It".

3.5.3. Ancestors.

¹¹ Gyekye, K. (1984). The Akan concept of a person. In R. A. Wright (Ed.), *African philosophy: An introduction* Lanham: University Press of America. pp. 199–212.

¹² Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Heinemann. p.93

Only the initiated can become an ancestor. It entail circumcision in the case of males and clitoridectomy in the case of females. Blood is spilled and it symbolizes sacrifice. The meaning of the sacrifices that the initiated person is bound to the land and in extension, to the departed members of the society. It says that the individual is alive and that he or she now wishes to be tied to the community and people, among whom he or she has been born as a child¹³. Initiation is therefore the process of incorporating an individual into personhood within the community of the living and establishing a link between the initiated and the community of the living dead.

The initiation rite fulfills three functions, namely:

- I. Incorporation into personhood in the community of the living.
- II. Establishment of the link between the initiated and the community of the living dead.
- III. The qualification to get married. Marriage links both the community of the living and the community of the living dead to the community of those to be born. The living dead are the roots on whom the living stand, the living are the link between death and life, the unborn and the buds in the loins of the living and marriage makes it possible for them to germinate and sprout. If one refuses deliberately to get married it's means, therefore that one is cutting off the vital link between death and life and destroying the buds which otherwise would sprout and grow on the

¹³ Mbiti Op. Cit, p.48

human tree of life¹⁴. When they die, a serumula is inserted into their anus to symbolize the burning of the unused boards. The initiated are recognized by the ancestors and are incorporated into the community of the living dead even while still being part of the community of the living.

Ramose takes a look at Hume's insight that the capability of remembering, memory, is necessary in the construction of personal identity and can also be extended to cover the suggestion that memory is indispensable to the idea of personal immortality in African traditional thought¹⁵.

The spirit of the ancestors is still the spirit of a human being but it is no longer a living dead, it becomes the ghost of an unknown person because the people that knew them would have been dead after four to five generations. It then enters into the community of the "collective immortality"¹⁶ and this is why the ancestors should not be forgotten immediately after they are dead.

It is of utmost importance that the living dead are remembered, sacrificed to, venerated so that they can be part of us and so that their names will not be forgotten in the family, so that they do not become nameless spirits who are no longer interested in the affairs of the family. Which means, they can no longer be immortal because they would have lost their names by which they could be immortalized and they can no longer protect the family.

¹⁴ Ramose Op. Cit, p.45

¹⁵ Naubane, H. (1977). *Body and mind in Zulu medicine*. London: Academic Press. pp.47-76

¹⁶ Ramose Op. Cit, p.93

3.6 Ubuntu As a Medical Cure.

It is the cultural setting within which this principle of integration operates. The individual is solely recognized from the prospective of wholeness in the form of the family or the community at large. It is seen that medical care in African setting is the province of the institution of *bongaka*. It is hoped that medical care in traditional Africa can be provided without recourse to asylum centers and so, it is also expected that mental or psychiatric cases in traditional Africa received treatment without being taken to separate or isolated asylum centers. Ramose is saying here that illness and disease to a very large extent, is based on culture.

***Bongaka* and Psychiatric Cases.**

The family is the first communal unit to discover that one of its members is affected by mental illness. The victim, better called the patient, is then reported the ancestors¹⁷. This is to find out from the ancestors the cause of the illness and what wrong the person has done and then for a cure to come from the ancestors. A balance and harmony between the living and the dead has to be established. If the illness continues after this, the house doctor will then step in. The house doctor will prescribe some herbs, then there is a transition from victim to patient. There is no certainty that the patient will be cured by the *ngaka* (house doctor) but the patient has to trust in the *ngaka* as they tackle the illness until the victim- patient is cured or dies as the case may be. The *ngaka* is paid into ways;

¹⁷Dussel, E. (1985). *Philosophy of liberation* (A. Martinez & C. Morkovsky, Trans.). Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

the first is the initial payment which must be made before the *ngaka* consults the ancestors, the second payment is linked to the stages of improvement of the patient.

Law and *Bongaka*

This law states that the *ngaka* has no jurisdiction to pronounce death on a victim. Which is in sharp contrast with the euthanasia . No matter how deteriorated a person's health is, only the ancestors has the right to take the person's life or pronounce death on the person. The *ngaka* must make medicine available for the patient, even though payment is based on the improvement of the patient.

3.7. Ubuntu Politics

Ramose takes cite from wamba - dia - wamba's article, "Beyond elite politics in Africa" where he talks about having "emancipative politics" in Africa as liberation being the regulative principle of democracy¹⁸. He talks about leaving the traditional society and internalizing the colonial States. For Africans to attain liberation, they have to construct an epistemological paradigm to express their authenticity.

Ramose talks about the conquered people of Africa with the phrase "I conquer, therefore, I enslave"¹⁹. Here, African society is placed side by side with the colonial states. The colonial state being the antithesis because it is both the symbol and the reality of a foreign culture inculcated into the indigenous African tradition.

¹⁸ Ramose Op. Cit, p.101

¹⁹Ibid. 107

He talks about the military defeats of the indigenous original African people, saying that they were not ill fated by having the weaker military. He went on to say that the defeat of the indigenous African people were steps in:

1. Breaking the resistance of the indigenous original African people.
2. Subjugating them in order to prevent a reversal of fortunes.
3. Imposing and sustaining a condition of sameness according to the will of the European conqueror.

Before the ego cogito in the postmodern European philosophy, there is an ego conquiro which means, "I conquer" and it is the foundation of "I think".²⁰

Emphasis on "oneness" was made by Ramose. For him, oneness should be understood to mean that human relations are not and cannot be defined and also determined once and for all time. Equality is the goal, as oneness is one human being seen the same way as another. Speaking also of multiparty democracy being foreign to African culture. Multiparty system of democracy is not meant to be in Africa. "If we should be guided by the traditional principles of oneness, consensus and openness, and, I should like to add humility, then the day of true liberation of Africa may not be too far away"²¹

²⁰ Ibid, 110

²¹ Ibid.,

3.8. Ubuntu Ecology.

For Ramose, the standing concept here is *botho/hunhu/Ubuntu* which is best translated to human is rather than humanism. As humanness is seen as a state of becoming or being open and ceaseless. Another phrase that is significant here is, *motho ke motho ka batho* which is a sotho proverb which means, to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others. This is where the principle of wholeness springs from as also the relation between human beings and physical or objective nature. Wholeness cannot conform to absolutism and dogmatism in order to establish its authority. The self (ego) is not the center of the universe and the universe is also not the center of ego. To find the truth about the universe, one must begin with the realization that placing ego at the center of the universe is to obstruct the path to truth. To place ego at the center of the universe is to stand at the edge of the precipice of authoritarian absolutism and dogmatism.

Ramoses spoke about the instinctive view where man feels he is at the center of the universe, the planet and stars revolves around his earth. The copernican hypothesis is the second view which is removing the earth from the center and replacing it through the sun, this is when the astronomy proved that the solar system is actually relegated to a corner of the Milky Way.

Nothing is outside of or beyond being. It is necessary for any entity to be, first of all, before it can claim to exist outside of being²².

Ramose states that motion is the principle of Being. Multiplicity and a puriformity of organisms come into being and pass away through motion. The systematic is most times sudden, abandoning the purification of old forms of life style on the basis of new discoveries which is the hallmark of the concepts of culture and civilization as the reductionist, fragmentative and empiricistic rationality continues to make great advances to technology. These advances has however, caused serious disturbances to the ecology thereby, disrupting the balance between the human being and its environment which here by brings a violation to batho.

In this circumstances, the indigenous African people's philosophical *aphonisms of motho ke motho ka batho and feka kgomo o tshware motho* can make a significant contribution to what Peace by leading the way to the restoration of *batho*; the first essential step of peace with oneself as well as world communal peace.²³

3.9. Critical Evaluation of M.B. Ramose's Philosophy of Ubuntu: Critique, Strengths and Weakness, Limitations and Comparison with other ideas.

M.B. Ramose's philosophy of Ubuntu has been widely praised for its emphasis on community, interconnectedness, and human dignity. His articulation of Ubuntu

²² Metz, T. (2011). "Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa." *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 11(2), 532–559.

²³ Ramose Op. Cit, p.48

challenges Western individualism by highlighting the relational nature of human existence, summarized by the phrase “I am because we are.” This communal approach fosters social cohesion, mutual respect, and ethical responsibility among individual.²⁴ However, Ramose’s Ubuntu also faces some critiques. Firstly, the emphasis on communal values may risk undermining individual autonomy and personal rights. Critics argue that by prioritizing the community, Ubuntu could justify social conformity at the expense of individual freedom or dissenting voices²⁵ This tension raises questions about balancing collective welfare with respect for personal liberty in pluralistic societies.

Moreover, some scholars suggest Ramose’s interpretation idealizes pre-colonial African social structures without sufficiently addressing contemporary challenges such as urbanization, globalization, and cultural hybridity. The dynamic nature of African societies today requires Ubuntu philosophy to evolve while maintaining core ethical principles²⁶.

Also, the application of Ubuntu beyond African contexts remains contested. While Ramose presents Ubuntu as a universal human philosophy, its deep roots in specific cultural practices may limit its applicability in diverse global settings without adaptations²⁷.

²⁴ Ibid.,

²⁵ Ibid.,

²⁶ Ramose Op. Cit, p.48

²⁷ Hountondji, P.J. (1996). *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

While M.B. Ramose's philosophy of Ubuntu offers a powerful alternative to dominant Western paradigms and enriches African philosophical discourse, its practical implementation must negotiate the balance between community and individual rights. It also needs to address modern socio-cultural realities to remain relevant. Further interdisciplinary research and dialogue can help expand Ubuntu's scope and impact.

CHAPTER FOUR

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON M.B. RAMOSE'S UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY

4.1 Summary

This comprehensive analysis of M.B. Ramose's Ubuntu philosophy has examined its theoretical foundations, practical applications, and critical dimensions to provide a balanced assessment of its contribution to contemporary philosophical discourse. The study has revealed Ubuntu philosophy as a sophisticated and systematic attempt to articulate an African philosophical tradition that challenges Western philosophical assumptions while offering alternative frameworks for understanding human nature, community, and existence itself¹.

The investigation of Ramose's background and intellectual development demonstrated his unique position as both a rigorous academic philosopher and an authentic interpreter of African cultural traditions. His scholarly approach combines analytical philosophical methods with deep appreciation for indigenous African knowledge systems, resulting in presentations of Ubuntu philosophy that maintain cultural authenticity while engaging effectively with international academic discourse².

The examination of Ubuntu's origins, meanings, and foundations revealed its deep historical roots in African philosophical traditions that extend across multiple cultures

¹ Ramose, M. B. (1999). *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Mond Books.

² Wiredu, K. (2004). Introduction: African philosophy in our time. In K. Wiredu (Ed.), *A companion to African philosophy* (pp. 1-27). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

and centuries. The linguistic analysis demonstrated that Ubuntu represents a widespread African philosophical concept rather than a localized cultural practice, with variants appearing in numerous African languages and societies³.

Ramose's metaphysical interpretation of Ubuntu emerged as his most significant theoretical contribution, proposing that Ubuntu constitutes a fundamental ontological principle rather than merely a social ethic. The onto-triadic conception of being, encompassing the living, the ancestors, and the yet-to-be-born, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human existence that transcends temporal limitations while maintaining the centrality of community relationships⁴.

The analysis of practical applications demonstrated Ubuntu philosophy's versatility across multiple domains including politics, medicine, ecology, and religion. These applications reveal Ubuntu's potential for addressing contemporary challenges while raising questions about its universal applicability and practical effectiveness in complex modern contexts⁵.

4.2 Evaluation

The evaluation of Ramose's Ubuntu philosophy must consider both its theoretical contributions and practical significance within the broader context of contemporary

³ Metz, T. (2007). Towards an African moral theory: Ubuntu as a moral theory. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 15(3), 321–341.

⁴ Ramose, M. B. (2003). Ubuntu: Humanism or humaneness. *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 17(1-2), 191-204.

⁵ Shutte, A. (2001). *Ubuntu: An ethic for a new South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.

philosophical discourse. This evaluation reveals Ubuntu philosophy as a legitimate and valuable alternative to Western philosophical traditions while acknowledging the challenges it faces in establishing its credibility and demonstrating its effectiveness⁶.

Ramose's theoretical contributions to Ubuntu philosophy represent significant advances in African philosophical scholarship by providing systematic and rigorous articulation of traditional African concepts in forms accessible to contemporary academic discourse. His metaphysical interpretation of Ubuntu challenges fundamental assumptions of Western philosophy while offering coherent alternatives based on relational rather than substantive ontology⁷.

The onto-triadic conception of being represents perhaps Ramose's most original theoretical contribution, providing a framework for understanding human existence that integrates temporal dimensions typically separated in Western thought. This conception offers insights into questions of personal identity, moral responsibility, and community obligation that may be relevant beyond African contexts⁸.

The holistic character of Ramose's Ubuntu philosophy provides theoretical advantages for addressing complex contemporary problems that require interdisciplinary approaches. The integration of ethical, political, ecological, and medical dimensions within a unified

⁶ Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Ramose, M. B. (2002). The philosophy of ubuntu and ubuntu as a philosophy. In P. H. Coetzee & A. P. J. Roux (Eds.), *Philosophy from Africa: A text with readings* (2nd ed., pp. 230-238). Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Wiredu, Introduction: African philosophy, Op. Cit.,

framework offers potential for more comprehensive and effective responses to challenges like environmental crisis, social fragmentation, and health disparities⁹.

However, the theoretical development of Ubuntu philosophy faces challenges from critics who question its conceptual coherence and analytical precision. The integration of multiple domains may sacrifice the clarity and rigor necessary for effective philosophical analysis, potentially limiting its usefulness for addressing complex theoretical problems¹⁰.

The practical applications of Ubuntu philosophy demonstrated by Ramose reveal its potential relevance for contemporary social, political, and environmental challenges. The success of Ubuntu-inspired approaches in contexts like post-apartheid reconciliation suggests that Ubuntu philosophy offers more than theoretical interest but provides viable frameworks for addressing real-world problems¹¹.

The Ubuntu emphasis on consensus, participation, and community accountability provides alternatives to both liberal democratic and authoritarian political models that may be particularly relevant for diverse societies seeking inclusive governance approaches. The focus on relationship-building and community healing offers insights for conflict resolution and social reconstruction that transcend conventional approaches¹².

⁹ Murove, M. F. (2004). An African environmental ethics. *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 38(4), 533-553.

¹⁰ Hountondji, P. J. (1996). *African philosophy: Myth and reality* (2nd ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

¹¹ Tutu, D. (1999). *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday

¹² Shutte, Op. Cit.,

The ecological applications of Ubuntu philosophy provide frameworks for environmental protection and sustainable development that integrate traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary environmental science. The emphasis on intergenerational responsibility and reciprocal relationships with natural environments offers alternatives to purely technological or market-based approaches to environmental challenges¹³.

However, the practical applications of Ubuntu philosophy face challenges from critics who question its effectiveness in contemporary contexts characterized by cultural diversity, technological complexity, and global interconnection. The idealistic character of many Ubuntu applications may limit their relevance for addressing persistent conflicts and structural inequalities that require more confrontational approaches¹⁴.

4.3 Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis of M.B. Ramose's Ubuntu philosophy demonstrates its significance as both a theoretical contribution to philosophical scholarship and a practical framework for addressing contemporary challenges. Ramose's systematic articulation of Ubuntu principles has established this ancient African concept as a legitimate participant in global philosophical discourse while maintaining its authentic cultural foundations¹⁵.

The theoretical dimensions of Ramose's Ubuntu philosophy challenge fundamental assumptions of Western philosophical traditions by proposing relational rather than

¹³ Ramose, African philosophy through ubuntu *Op. Cit.*,

¹⁴ Matolino, B. (2014). *Personhood in African philosophy*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.

¹⁵ Ramose, African philosophy through ubuntu *Op. Cit.*,

substantive approaches to questions of being, identity, and community. The onto-triadic conception of being represents a particularly significant contribution that offers new perspectives on human existence and moral responsibility that transcend conventional temporal limitations¹⁶.

The practical applications of Ubuntu philosophy demonstrate its relevance for contemporary challenges in politics, ecology, medicine, and social organization. While these applications face questions about their effectiveness and universal applicability, they provide valuable alternatives to conventional approaches that may be particularly relevant for addressing problems of social fragmentation, environmental crisis, and cultural conflict¹⁷

The critical evaluation reveals both significant strengths and important limitations in Ubuntu philosophy that must be acknowledged for balanced assessment. Strengths include its holistic approach, cultural authenticity, and demonstrated practical relevance. Limitations include questions about conceptual coherence, cultural specificity, and idealistic presentation that may limit its effectiveness in complex contemporary contexts¹⁸.

The comparative analysis suggests that Ubuntu philosophy offers unique insights that complement rather than replace other philosophical traditions. Its emphasis on

¹⁶ Ramose, *Ubuntu: Humanism or humaneness, Op. Cit.*,

¹⁷ Shutte, *Op. Cit.*,

¹⁸ Matolino, *Op. Cit.*,

community, relationship, and holistic understanding provides valuable alternatives to individualistic approaches while requiring integration with more developed treatments of individual rights, cultural diversity, and social change¹⁹.

The significance of Ramose's contribution lies not only in his articulation of Ubuntu philosophy but also in his demonstration of how African philosophical traditions can engage with contemporary global discourse while maintaining their distinctive cultural character. His work provides a model for indigenous philosophical scholarship that may be relevant for other cultural traditions seeking to contribute to global philosophical understanding²⁰.

The ongoing development of Ubuntu philosophy requires continued attention to both theoretical refinement and practical application. Theoretical work must address questions of conceptual coherence and analytical precision while maintaining Ubuntu's holistic character. Practical applications must demonstrate effectiveness in addressing contemporary challenges while adapting to diverse cultural contexts and complex social conditions²¹.

The future prospects for Ubuntu philosophy depend on its ability to evolve and adapt while maintaining its core insights about the communal nature of human existence and

¹⁹Metz, T. (2007). Towards an African moral theory: Ubuntu as a moral theory. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 15(3), 321–341.

²⁰Wiredu, K. (2004). Introduction: African philosophy in our time. In K. Wiredu (Ed.), *A companion to African philosophy* (pp. 1-27). Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

²¹Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. New York: Oxford University Press.

the importance of relationship in personal and social flourishing. The growing interest in communitarian approaches to social organization and environmental sustainability suggests continued relevance for Ubuntu principles in addressing emerging global challenges²².

4.4 Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive analysis of Ramose's Ubuntu philosophy, several recommendations emerge for future research, practical application, and theoretical development that could enhance its contribution to philosophical discourse and social practice.

1. Future theoretical work on Ubuntu philosophy should address questions of conceptual precision and analytical rigor while maintaining its holistic character.
2. Researchers should maintain Ubuntu temporal understanding while adapting to contemporary scientific and cultural knowledge.
3. Ubuntu philosophy should be developed through careful pilot programs that test Ubuntu approaches in specific contexts while monitoring their effectiveness and identifying necessary adaptations.
4. Educational programs should be developed to introduce Ubuntu philosophy to diverse audiences while respecting its cultural origins and avoiding superficial appropriation.

²² Tutu, Op. Cit.,

5. Policy applications of Ubuntu principles should be explored in areas like restorative justice, community health, environmental protection, and conflict resolution where Ubuntu's emphasis on relationship and community healing may offer advantages over conventional approaches.
6. Cultural sensitivity should be maintained in all applications and developments of Ubuntu philosophy to respect its African origins while allowing for appropriate adaptation to other contexts.
7. Ethical guidelines should be developed for the application of Ubuntu principles in contemporary contexts to prevent misuse or superficial appropriation while promoting genuine understanding and respectful implementation.

The implementation of these recommendations requires collaborative effort among scholars, practitioners, and communities committed to the ongoing development and application of Ubuntu philosophy. The success of this effort will determine whether Ubuntu philosophy can fulfill its potential as a significant contribution to addressing contemporary human challenges while maintaining its authentic cultural foundations and practical relevance.

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