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Is Ubuntu distinctly African? A comparative study of communal values in sub-Saharan Africa and the Anglo world

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Orientation: Ubuntu is often presented as an emic value system unique to sub-Saharan Africa, emphasising communalism and solidarity. It is typically contrasted with the individualism associated with the Anglo cultural cluster.

Research purpose: This study examines whether Ubuntu values are empirically more prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa than in Anglo cultures, testing assumptions about Ubuntu's cultural distinctiveness.

Motivation for the study: Debates on post-colonial identity and decolonisation increasingly emphasise the need to recognise indigenous worldviews. However, claims about Ubuntu's uniqueness are often untested. This study seeks to validate such claims using quantitative data.

Research approach/design and method: Using data from the 2025 World Values Survey, 19 items were selected as proxies for Ubuntu values. Responses from three sub-Saharan African countries were compared with those from three Anglo cluster countries through mean difference analysis.

Main findings: Ubuntu-aligned values were more prevalent in sub-Saharan countries in five cases, less prevalent in eight and showed no significant difference in six. Surprisingly, Anglo respondents endorsed more items consistent with Ubuntu values.

Practical/managerial implications: Findings challenge the uncritical use of Ubuntu in organisational and policy contexts as an authentically African leadership or value system. Ubuntu may represent one of several humane-oriented value systems that inform leadership.

Contribution/value-add: This study questions the assumption that Ubuntu is a unique and dominant framework in African societies. It provides a data-informed basis for evaluating cultural claims and contributes to more rigorous discussions about indigenous values in global comparative research.

Keywords: Ubuntu; sub-Saharan Africa; Anglo cluster; World Values Survey; emic values; cultural comparison.

Introduction

Ubuntu, an African philosophy emphasising communal relationships and shared humanity, posits that 'I am human only because you are human' (Tutu, 2000). This concept, strongly endorsed in sub-Saharan Africa (Gade, 2012), underscores the interdependence of individuals within a community, highlighting mutual respect and interconnectedness (Metz, 2011). In contrast, those individuals from an Anglo-Saxon cultural background, comprising mostly English-speaking countries, are characterised by individualism. Mainstream Anglo-Saxon culture prioritises personal goals and individual rights, viewing individuals as autonomous and self-reliant (House et al., 2004), while fostering competitiveness and a focus on personal achievement (Ashkanasy et al., 2001). A long tradition exists of comparing African and Western perspectives, typically through post-colonial analyses (Nkomo, 2011), Afrocentric versus Eurocentric frameworks (Akpan & Odohoedi, 2016), direct comparative studies (Molefe, 2024) and decolonisation scholarship (Getachew & Mantena, 2021), all of which implicitly engage with contrasts between African and Western worldviews. Recent discussions highlight a renewed appreciation for Ubuntu's principles as uniquely African solutions provided for African challenges

(Bhuda & Marumo, 2022; Molefe & Magam, 2019). However, sub-Saharan Africa's colonial history, particularly under British rule, promoted Western ideologies as superior, marginalising indigenous philosophies like Ubuntu, despite these beliefs' deep roots and influence (Nussbaum, 2003).

The question arises whether Ubuntu and its principles remain prevalent and influential in sub-Saharan Africa.

If Ubuntu is indeed emic to the region, steps should be taken to leverage its regionally rooted and beneficial principles, as emic systems are more likely to align with and effectively address local circumstances (Mazonde & Carmichael, 2020; Sadler & Fuller, 2020). The emic nature of Ubuntu will be examined in this study by comparing the values of individuals from sub-Saharan Africa with those from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds.

Ubuntu will be considered emic if values associated with the concept are more frequently endorsed by individuals from sub-Saharan Africa than by persons from the Anglo-Saxon world.

Literature review

Ubuntu is a Southern African philosophy emphasising communal relationships, interconnectedness and mutual respect. The term 'Ubuntu' is often encapsulated in the phrase, 'I am because we are', highlighting the belief that an individual's humanity is inextricably linked to the community (Tshivhase, 2023). Core principles of Ubuntu include compassion, dignity and shared humanity, which serve as foundational values in many sub-Saharan African societies (Mutanga, 2023). In a comprehensive definition, Steyn and Msweli (2026, p. 10) describe Ubuntu as:

> [O]riginating from the Nguni proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*', which translates to 'a person is a person through other persons', embodying an exemplary Southern African way of life or a philosophy, which places empathy, respect, community, generosity and harmony at the core of personal development as well as in structuring societal thinking.

As an emic construct, Ubuntu is deeply embedded within the cultural fabric of sub-Saharan Africa. It influences various aspects of life, including social norms, governance and ethical frameworks. The philosophy underscores the importance of collective well-being over individual gain, fostering a sense of community and social cohesion (Mutanga, 2023). Historically, Ubuntu has played a critical role in conflict resolution and restorative justice practices within African communities (Waghid, 2022).

The Anglo cultural cluster, encompassing countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, is predominantly characterised by individualism. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory identifies individualism versus collectivism as a key differentiator between cultures (Hofstede, 2001). In individualistic societies, personal achievements and autonomy are prioritised, whereas collectivist cultures, like those influenced by Ubuntu, emphasise group harmony and interdependence (Alqarni, 2022). These contrasting orientations manifest in various societal structures, including family dynamics, workplace relationships and governance systems.

The colonial history of sub-Saharan Africa has significantly impacted indigenous value systems. Colonial powers often imposed Western ideologies, undermining and marginalising local philosophies such as Ubuntu (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023). In response, decolonisation efforts have sought to reclaim and revitalise indigenous knowledge systems, advocating for the integration of Ubuntu principles into contemporary African governance and education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023). This movement aims to address the lingering effects of colonialism and promote a more authentic representation of African identity and values.

Quantifying culturally embedded constructs like Ubuntu presents methodological challenges. The World Values Survey (WVS) offers a comprehensive dataset that can be utilised to identify proxies for Ubuntu-related values (World Values Survey Association, 2020). However, researchers must exercise caution in selecting appropriate indicators that accurately reflect the multifaceted nature of Ubuntu. Previous studies have employed various survey items to approximate constructs such as communalism and social cohesion, yet the validity of these proxies remains a subject of ongoing debate (Mutanga, 2023). Ensuring cultural sensitivity and contextual relevance is paramount in the empirical examination of Ubuntu values.

Research design

Cross-sectional quantitative data from the WVS seventh wave (Haerpfer et al., 2022) were analysed. Data from the eighth wave are incomplete, as data collection is still ongoing.

Respondents

From the 77 countries included in the 2025 WVS, six countries were identified to be included in the study. Responses originated from Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, representing sub-Saharan African countries, and from Australia, Great Britain and the United States, representing the Anglo cluster. The selection of countries was based on the availability of data in the WVS, taking into account that South Africa did not contribute data to the seventh wave (2017–2022) (WVS, 2025). The clustering of countries followed the groupings outlined in the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004).

Measurement

The WVS includes a wide range of variables organised under 14 thematic headings. For this study, only 19 items, identified as potential proxies for Ubuntu or Ubuntu-related values, were selected for analysis.

Table 1 presents the selected questions along with aspects of Ubuntu it could represent. The criteria for the inclusion

of items were subjective. After several rounds of reading through the list of items in the WVS, items 'which places empathy, respect, community, generosity, and harmony at the core of personal development as well as in structuring societal thinking' (Steyn & Msweli, 2026) were included. The items used in the study include categorical, ordinal and continuous variables. Items with categorical and ordinal responses are bolded, as different analytical approaches were applied to these data types; accordingly, the results are reported in two separate tables. The final column indicates how each item relates to Ubuntu.

A valid critique of the use of these proxies presented in Table 1 is their conflation of communal values with national, political, ideological or institutional attitudes. While some proxies may capture nationalism, cosmopolitanism or exclusionary tendencies rather than Ubuntu's emphasis on inclusive community and shared humanity, they may nonetheless reflect Ubuntu-related values at a more abstract or societal level, extending beyond immediate community interactions. Despite these limitations, the selected proxies – though imperfect – represented the most appropriate available indicators of communal orientation within the constraints of the dataset.

The Ubuntu-related word appear in the text as follows: Community eight times, respect and generosity five times each, harmony four times and empathy once. This does not equate to a perfect representation of Ubuntu, as defined by Steyn and Msweli (2026), but it is still a reasonable representation.

TABLE 1: Selected World Values Survey items and their link with Ubuntu.

WVS #	Item	Format	Ubuntu is about …
12, 16	Here is a list of qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home. Which, if any, do you consider to be especially important? Please choose up to five! Q12 Tolerance and respect for other people Q16 Not being selfish (unselfishness)	Mentioned (1)/not mentioned (2)	Respect (Q12) and generosity (Q16)
45	I'm going to read out a list of various changes in our way of life that might take place in the near future. Please tell me for each one, if it were to happen, whether you think it would be a good thing, a bad thing, or don't you mind? Greater respect for authority	Good (1), Don't mind (2), Bad (3)	Respect
34	How would you feel about the following statements? Do you agree or disagree with them? When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to people of this country over immigrants	Strongly agree (1) to Strongly disagree (5)	Community
40	How would you feel about the following statements? Do you agree or disagree with them? Work is a duty towards society	Strongly agree (1) to Strongly disagree (5)	Community and generosity
59	I'd like to ask you how much you trust people from various groups. Could you tell me for each whether you trust people from this group completely, somewhat, not very much or not at all? Your neighbourhood	Trust completely (1) to Do not trust at all (4)	Community and harmony
71	I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all? The government	A great deal (1) to None at all (4)	Community
101	Now I am going to read off a list of voluntary organisations. For each organisation, could you tell me whether you are an active member, an inactive member or not a member of that type of organisation? Humanitarian or charitable organisation	Active member (2), inactive member (1), not a member (0)	Generosity
127	From your point of view, what have been the effects of immigration on the development of [this country]? For each of the following statements about the effects of immigration, please, tell me whether you agree or disagree with it: Offers people from poor countries a better living	Agree (2), Hard to say (1), Disagree (0)	Empathy
149	Most people consider both freedom and equality to be important, but if you had to choose between them, which one would you consider more important? Freedom (1) Equality (2)	Freedom (1) or Equality (2)	Harmony
156	And what would be the most important? A stable economy (1) Progress towards a less impersonal and more humane society (2) Progress towards a society in which ideas count more than money (3) The fight against crime (4)	1/2/3/4	Respect, community, generosity and harmony
179–180	Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between, using this card. Q179 Stealing property Q180 Cheating on taxes if you have a chance	Never Justifiable (1) to Always Justifiable (10)	Respect (Q179) and community (Q180)
213	What about these forms of political action and social activism that people can take? Please, tell me for each of them if you have done any of these things, whether you might do it or would never under any circumstances do it. Donating to a group or campaign	Have done (1), Might do (2), Would never do (3)	Generosity
241, 247, 249	Many things are desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy. Use this scale where one means 'not at all an essential characteristic of democracy' and ten means it definitely is 'an essential characteristic of democracy' Q241 Governments tax the rich and subsidise the poor. Q247 The state makes people's incomes equal. Q249 Women have the same rights as men.	Not an essential characteristic of democracy (1) to An essential characteristic of democracy (10)	Community (Q141 and Q147) and harmony (Q249)
253	Q253. How much respect is there for individual human rights nowadays in this country? Do you feel there is (read out and code one answer): A great deal of respect for individual human rights (1), Fairly much respect (2), Not much respect (3), No respect at all (4).	A great deal of respect for individual human rights (1), Fairly much respect (2), Not much respect (3), No respect at all (4)	Respect

WVS, World Values Survey.

Reliability and validity

The reliability and validity of the WVS data are not discussed in detail here, as it can be assumed given the Technical Report of World Values Survey Association (2020) and the wide use of the data: The dataset (Haerpfer et al., 2022) was cited in more than 500 articles. The wide use of the WVS database attests to the trust placed in the survey (see Koshy et al., 2023; Steyn, 2023; Van Bavel et al., 2022; Vo et al., 2022). However, this does not suggest that the survey is beyond critique. Several scholarly works have examined its limitations (see Alemán & Woods, 2016; Ndofirepi & Steyn, 2023; Steyn & Ndofirepi, 2022; Zanella, 2024).

Analyses

The data were analysed in two ways: For the continuous data, mean per cluster was calculated and the differences between the means were calculated, using Cohen's *d*-values (d = Mean1–Mean2/[SD1 + SD2]/2) (Cohen, 1988), to determine if the group means differed on a practical level, thus real-world significance (Kirk, 1996).

The guideline followed for effect sizes was that *d* smaller than 0.2 was considered negligible, *d* between 0.2 and 0.5 indicated subtle but real differences, *d* between 0.5 and 0.8 was classified as moderate, and *d* larger than 0.8 represented large and practically significant differences (Cohen, 1988). It was decided to select the option that *d*-values smaller than 0.2 would be deemed insignificant.

With the categorical data, a different approach was followed. For the categorical data, responses were converted into percentages and compared across clusters. A difference of approximately 10 percentage points was interpreted as practically meaningful, reflecting an emphasis on substantive rather than statistical significance when comparing categorical outcomes, in line with recommendations to prioritise interpretable probability differences in applied social research (Agresti, 2018; Ferguson, 2009; Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1996).

The data were then interpreted and a narrative constructed, based on the results of the study, to explore the portrayal of Ubuntu as an African emic value system, in contrast to values typically associated with the Anglo cultural cluster. This narrative broadly addresses the extent to which Ubuntu can be considered uniquely African, and examines the degree to which elements of Ubuntu, which are both complex and multidimensional, are reflected distinctively in the lived values of people in sub-Saharan Africa.

Results

Sample size and demographics

Because of the extensive number of items included in the survey, the number of respondents per item varied. However, as shown in Table 2, the sample size for each country never fell below 1000, with at least 3000 respondents per regional cluster. The national samples were representative of their respective populations. While detailed reporting on individual countries is beyond the scope and word limit of this article, it can reasonably be assumed that the results are comparable across countries, given the standardised data collection protocols employed (World Values Survey Association, 2020).

Results pertaining to ordinal and categorical data

Table 2 presents the results of the categorical data. The numbers presented in the table are percentages, and, where indicated, sample size (*N*). Of particular interest is the last column, where the percentage difference between the mean of the Anglo cluster and the sub-Saharan Africa cluster is presented.

Mean differences of less than 10% were regarded as insignificant. The interpretation of these results takes place in the discussion section of the article.

Results pertaining to continuous data

Results presented in Table 3 relate to continues variables (e.g. Items 179 and 180) and ordinal variables (e.g. Items 34 and 40) presented as continues variables. The focus is on the last row, where mean differences between Anglo versus sub-Saharan Africa clusters are presented.

Cohen *d*-values smaller than 0.2 were interpreted as insignificant. The results from this table will be presented in the discussion section of the article.

Discussion

The premise of this article was that Ubuntu values, as represented by selected items from the WVS, would reveal that Africans, at least more so than individuals from the Anglo-Saxon world, demonstrate alignment with Ubuntu principles. Table 4 presents the results from Table 2 and Table 3 alongside corresponding interpretations. The key question addressed is: Did Africans display more Ubuntu-aligned values than those from the Anglo cluster? The final column shows the results, while the penultimate column provides interpretations of these findings.

In Table 4, the outcomes from the hypothesis testing are presented. The table shows whether sub-Saharan Africa scored higher, lower or showed no significant difference compared to Anglo-Saxon countries on Ubuntu-related questions. An overall summary of the results shows that in five (5) instances, Ubuntu-aligned values were more prevalent in Africa; in eight (8) instances, they were less prevalent; and in five (5) instances, there were no significant differences. Returning to the elements of Ubuntu, empathy, respect, community, generosity and harmony (Steyn & Msweli, 2026), the results of Table 4 are discussed:

- Empathy: Empathy was measured with one question only. Empathy was less evident among African respondents, who were more unlikely to agree that

TABLE 2: Comparative statistics for categorical data from Anglo versus sub-Saharan African countries.

WVS#	Responses	Group								
		Anglo			Anglo Mean	Africa			Africa Mean	Delta Mean
		Auz	UK	US		Ken	Nig	Zim		
12	Important	82.7	77.8	69.4	76.7	54.4	61.8	72.7	63.0	13.7
	Not mentioned	17.3	22.2	30.6	23.3	45.6	38.2	27.3	37.0	-13.7
	N	1813	2573	2592	6978	1266	1237	1215	3718	10 696
16	Important	41.7	45.4	29.6	38.9	11.1	16.2	21.8	16.3	22.5
	Not mentioned	58.3	54.6	70.4	61.1	88.9	83.8	78.2	83.7	-22.5
	N	1813	2573	2592	6978	1266	1237	1215	3718	10 696
45	Good thing	58.2	56.1	55.7	56.7	78.6	90.8	87.0	85.5	-28.8
	Don't mind	30.4	30.0	32.1	30.8	16.2	8.3	8.8	11.1	19.7
	Bad thing	11.4	13.9	12.2	12.5	5.3	0.8	4.2	3.4	9.0
	N	1772	2561	2580	6913	1250	1234	1208	3692	10 605
101	Not a member	67.3	72.3	65.7	68.4	60.2	76.9	75.2	70.8	-2.3
	Inactive member	14.4	11.1	15.2	13.6	20.4	13.2	16.6	16.7	-3.2
	Active member	18.3	16.6	19.1	18.0	19.4	10.0	8.2	12.5	5.5
	N	1782	2584	2557	6923	1220	1216	1202	3638	10 561
127	Disagree	1.8	3.3	10.5	5.2	30.2	29.2	26.0	28.5	-23.3
	Hard to say	14.7	17.6	37.6	23.3	24.6	21.3	12.9	19.6	3.7
	Agree	83.5	79.2	51.9	71.5	45.2	49.5	61.2	52.0	19.6
	N	1791	2581	2557	6929	1196	1146	1198	3540	10 469
149	Freedom	76.7	70.1	76.7	74.5	68.7	71.7	79.7	73.4	1.1
	Equality	23.3	29.9	23.3	25.5	31.3	28.3	20.3	26.6	-1.1
	N	1789	2541	2572	6902	1251	1228	1212	3691	10 593
156	A stable economy	17.9	21.8	21.7	20.5	16.6	23.2	20.9	20.3	0.2
	Humane society	25.5	24.6	23.5	24.5	23.3	24.9	18.2	22.1	2.4
	Meritocracy	18.0	21.2	18.8	19.3	26.3	24.4	23.3	24.7	-5.4
	Combat crime	38.6	32.4	36.0	35.7	33.7	27.4	37.6	32.9	2.8
	N	1778	2467	2517	6762	1245	1227	1210	3682	10 444
213	Have done	49.3	48.1	45.5	47.6	19.1	16.0	15.6	16.9	30.7
	Might do	29.3	31.8	34.4	31.9	37.8	36.1	34.4	36.1	-4.3
	Would never do	21.4	20.1	20.1	20.5	43.1	48.0	50.0	47.0	-26.5
	N	1796	2582	2563	6941	1199	1203	1199	3601	10 542
253	A great deal	28.5	19.0	12.1	19.9	12.5	12.1	8.0	10.9	9.0
	Fairly respect	54.6	58.0	46.0	52.8	43.0	31.0	25.2	33.1	19.8
	Not much respect	14.1	19.7	36.4	23.4	32.2	31.8	36.0	33.3	-9.9
	No respect	2.8	3.3	5.5	3.9	12.2	25.1	30.9	22.7	-18.8
	N	1799	2563	2569	6931	1251	1220	1196	3667	10 598

Note: Humane Society = Progress toward a less impersonal and more humane society, Meritocracy = Progress toward a society in which ideas count more than money, Combat crime = Fight against crime.

Auz, Australia; UK, Great Britain; Ken, Kenya; Nig, Nigeria; Zim, Zimbabwe; WVS, World Values Survey; US, United States.

their country offers better living conditions to people from poorer countries. This lower endorsement indicates that empathy towards outsiders or strangers may be limited, contrasting with Ubuntu's ideal of compassionate inclusivity. This finding should be interpreted within the context that only a single item from the WVS was used to represent this concept. Moreover, this item constitutes a relatively distal proxy, relative far removed from the underlying construct it seeks to reflect.

- Respect: Sub-Saharan Africans showed a complex pattern regarding respect. They demonstrated greater respect for authority but reported lower tolerance and respect for other people. They tended to be more open to viewing certain instances of property theft as potentially justifiable. No significant differences were found regarding respect for individual human rights. These findings suggest that respect as a value may manifest uniquely in African contexts, emphasising authority but showing differences in other respects.
- Community: Community-related values varied widely. Africans showed stronger community orientation by prioritising locals over immigrants, trusting their neighbourhood and supporting income equalisation by the state. Conversely, they showed less confidence in government and expressed a lower level of disapproval towards tax evasion, suggesting a nuanced community ethic that values local and informal networks more than formal institutions.
- Generosity: Generosity indicators were mixed, with Africans showing less unselfishness and participation in donations or charitable organisations. However, they endorsed work as a duty towards society more strongly than their Anglo counterparts, reflecting a communal generosity. The inconsistent pattern suggests that generosity is expressed in specific social obligations rather than widespread voluntary acts.
- Harmony: There were no significant differences between sub-Saharan African and Anglo-Saxon respondents in valuing equality over freedom or progress towards a less

TABLE 3: Comparative statistics for continues data from Anglo versus sub-Saharan African countries.

Country	Statistic	WVS								
		Item 34	Item 40	Item 59	Item 71	Item 179	Item 180	Item 241	Item 247	Item 249
Auz	Mean	2.84	2.48	2.07	2.82	1.40	1.85	6.21	3.94	8.91
	N	1794	1813	1793	1796	1794	1791	1754	1736	1757
	SD	1.371	0.954	0.568	0.751	1.251	1.667	2.722	2.871	2.235
UK	Mean	3.33	2.56	1.97	3.04	1.48	1.79	6.44	4.61	9.05
	N	2572	2578	2578	2574	2588	2584	2499	2487	2545
	SD	1.258	1.003	0.672	0.788	1.228	1.581	2.479	2.761	1.888
US	Mean	2.89	2.44	2.24	2.92	1.89	2.11	5.67	4.03	8.45
	N	2589	2581	2584	2579	2568	2572	2547	2536	2554
	SD	0.870	0.971	0.703	0.913	1.771	1.920	2.544	2.725	2.281
Kenya	Mean	2.12	1.95	2.29	2.57	2.92	3.55	4.57	4.70	6.58
	N	1260	1259	1258	1244	1225	1231	1235	1234	1229
	SD	1.182	0.923	0.790	1.019	2.650	2.848	3.090	2.897	3.073
Nigeria	Mean	2.31	1.70	2.30	2.69	1.68	1.79	6.27	5.24	7.00
	N	1233	1235	1235	1233	1235	1234	1201	1209	1222
	SD	0.661	0.820	0.925	0.994	1.648	1.644	3.134	3.122	2.970
Zim	Mean	1.92	1.79	2.24	2.53	1.68	1.86	6.45	6.35	7.66
	N	1212	1214	1211	1208	1214	1215	1200	1201	1196
	SD	1.058	0.807	0.880	1.044	2.067	2.212	3.642	3.539	3.052
Anglo cluster	Mean	3.021	2.491	2.093	2.928	1.592	1.916	6.106	4.195	8.803
	N	6955	6972	6955	6949	6950	6947	6800	6759	6856
	SD	1.167	0.976	0.648	0.817	1.417	1.723	2.582	2.786	2.135
sub-Saharan Africa	Mean	2.117	1.816	2.277	2.597	2.092	2.397	5.763	5.429	7.081
	N	3705	3708	3704	3685	3674	3680	3636	3644	3647
	SD	0.967	0.850	0.865	1.019	2.122	2.235	3.289	3.186	3.032
	d	+ 0.847	+ 0.739	-0.244	+ 0.360	-0.283	-0.243	+ 0.117	-0.413	+ 0.667

Note: 34 = Jobs scarce: Employers should give priority to nationals rather than immigrants, 40 = Work is a duty towards society, 59 = Trust: Your neighbourhood, 71 = Confidence: The government, 179 = Justifiable: Stealing property, 180 = Justifiable: Cheating on taxes, 141 = Democracy: Governments tax the rich and subsidise the poor, 147 = Democracy: The state makes people's incomes equal, 149 = Democracy: Women have the same rights as men; *d* = Cohen *d*-value, with *d* = Anglo Cluster – sub-Saharan African Cluster/(SD Anglo Cluster + SD sub-Saharan Africa Cluster)/2); + reflects that the Anglo cluster had the higher score, – that the Anglo cluster had a lower score.

WVS, World Values Survey; Auz, Australia; UK, Great Britain; US, United States; Zim, Zimbabwe.

TABLE 4: Discussion of results.

WVS #	Item and hypothesis	Interpretation	Difference	
			%	*d*
12	If 'Tolerance and respect for other people' is mentioned, it would be a sign of Ubuntu – showing respect.	Africa shows less respect	13.7	-
16	If 'Not being selfish (unselfishness)' is mentioned, it would be a sign of Ubuntu – a sign of generosity.	Africa shows less generosity	22.5	-
34	If you strongly agree that 'When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to people of this country over immigrants', people show a strong sense of Ubuntu – as a sign of community.	Africa shows more community	-	0.847
40	If people strongly agree that 'Work is a duty towards society' it would be a sign of Ubuntu – demonstrating generosity and community.	Africa shows more generosity and community	-	0.739
45	If 'Greater respect for authority' is seen as good, it would be a sign of Ubuntu – showing respect.	Africa shows more respect	28.8	-
59	If people completely trust those in 'Your neighbourhood', it would be a sign of Ubuntu – demonstrating community and harmony.	Africa shows more community and harmony	-	0.739
71	If people have a great deal of confidence in 'The government', it would be a sign of Ubuntu – demonstrating community.	African shows less community	-	0.360
101	Being an active member of a 'Humanitarian or charitable organisation' would be a sign of Ubuntu – showing generosity.	No significant difference	5.5	-
127	If 'Offers people from poor countries a better living' is agreed upon, it would be a sign of Ubuntu – showing empathy.	Africa shows less empathy	19.6	-
149	If 'Equality' is selected above 'Freedom', it would be a sign of Ubuntu – showing harmony.	No significant difference	1.1	-
156	If 'Progress toward a less impersonal and more humane society' is selected, it would be a sign of Ubuntu – reflecting respect, community, generosity and harmony.	No significant difference	2.4	-
179	If 'Stealing property' is never justifiable, it would be a sign of Ubuntu – demonstrating respect.	Africa shows less respect	-	0.283
180	If 'Cheating on taxes if you have a chance' is never justifiable, it would be a sign of Ubuntu – reflecting community.	Africa shows less community	-	0.243
213	If you have done 'Donating to a group or campaign' it would be a sign of Ubuntu – showing generosity.	Africa shows less generosity	30.7	-
241	If you perceive 'Governments tax the rich and subsidise the poor' as an essential characteristics of democracy, it would be a sign of Ubuntu – showing a sense of community.	No significant difference	-	0.117
247	If you perceive 'The state makes people's incomes equal' as an essential characteristics of democracy, it would be a sign of Ubuntu – showing a sense of community.	Africa shows more community	-	0.413
249	If you perceive 'Women have the same rights as men' as an essential characteristics of democracy, a high score would be a sign of Ubuntu – showing a sense of harmony.	Africa shows less harmony	-	0.667
253	If people indicate that nowadays there is 'A great deal of respect for individual human rights' in their country, it could be a sign of active Ubuntu – reflective of the wide range respect for people.	No significant difference	9.0	-

Note: *d* refers to Cohen's *d*-values, where *d* > 0.20 was deemed practically significant; differences in percentages greater than 10% were deemed practically meaningful.

WVS, World Values Survey.

impersonal and more humane society. However, Africans showed less endorsement of gender equality, indicating less harmony in that respect. Overall, harmony-related values showed a mixed pattern, with some elements consistent across regions and others less embraced in Africa.

Overall, the findings reflect an uneven endorsement of Ubuntu-related values in sub-Saharan Africa. While some aspects, such as community, generosity and respect for authority are strongly represented, the key indicators of empathy, personal respect and harmony are less frequently endorsed. This mixed pattern suggests that Ubuntu's cultural presence may be uneven or contested, rather than uniformly dominant across the region.

Conclusion

In this study, the endorsement of Ubuntu-related values by individuals from sub-Saharan Africa was compared to those in an Anglo-Saxon cluster. Nineteen items from the WVS were used as proxies for Ubuntu. Data from over 3000 sub-Saharan Africans and more than 6000 individuals from Anglo-Saxon countries were analysed, with each cluster represented by three countries. Comparisons were made at the cluster level only.

The results indicate that Ubuntu-aligned values were more prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa in five instances, less prevalent in eight and showed no significant difference in five other countries. While respondents endorsed items that aligned with a general understanding of values such as community, generosity and respect for authority, other elements such as empathy, personal respect and harmony were less frequently endorsed by those living in sub-Saharan Africa. Based on these findings, Ubuntu may appear to be less prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa than in the Anglo-Saxon world. Using the Anglo-Saxon context as a reference point, this study revealed a mixed and inconsistent pattern of Ubuntu's cultural presence in the region, suggesting that the concept may be contested and far from universally upheld.

Such a finding presents a theoretical and philosophical dilemma, as claiming that Western (Anglo-Saxon) societies exhibit a greater prevalence of Ubuntu than African societies directly contradict the foundational premises of the concept. Ubuntu is, by definition, culturally situated (Gade, 2012; Metz, 2011; Molefe & Magam, 2019) and cannot be treated as a universal construct endorsed in non-African contexts without substantial reinterpretation. This apparent tension can, however, be mitigated when considering the use of proxies and the associated measurement challenges, particularly where the underlying concepts are not measured directly. If Ubuntu is understood as a humane or relational orientation, it is plausible that such values may manifest in Anglo-Saxon contexts as well as within sub-Saharan Africa, albeit through different cultural expressions.

Recent research on leadership provides a useful parallel. Eva et al. (2024) demonstrated that widely used leadership measures share substantial common variance, with limited unique effects attributable to individual leadership styles, indicating considerable conceptual overlap (see also Anderson & Sun, 2017). Although leadership is not the primary focus of the present study, these findings highlight broader challenges in measuring closely related value-based constructs. Meta-analytic evidence further points to empirical redundancy among positive leadership constructs (Hoch et al., 2016), and additional findings show that when leadership styles are examined concurrently, many lose their unique predictive value (DeRue et al., 2011).

Viewed in this light, Ubuntu, as a value-based philosophy assessed through indirect proxies, may have been operationalised in a manner that captures a broader humane or relational orientation rather than a culturally specific enactment of Ubuntu per se.

Ubuntu's core values like empathy, respect, generosity, community and harmony (Steyn & Msweli, 2026), were not consistently reflected, as interpreted in this study, in the attitudes or behaviours of the respondents. Instead of a cohesive ethical system, the data reveals selective adherence, internal contradictions and in some cases the absence of these ideals. Ubuntu seems to function more as a symbolic or aspirational identity marker than a coherent lived philosophy guiding everyday life. These findings challenge the uncritical acceptance of Ubuntu as Africa's moral compass and underscore the need for a more nuanced and perhaps more critical examination of African value systems as they actually exist. However, as alluded to above, any assertion that Ubuntu is 'less prevalent' in Africa risks misrepresenting the philosophy, overextending the construct and producing misleading cross-cultural comparisons. It should be considered that the proxies measure a more universal general construct, rather than then the materialisation of that construct in a specific geographical region. It should be considered that the proxies may measure a more general, universal construct rather than the materialisation of that construct within a specific geographical region.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study lies in the proxies used to represent Ubuntu (see Table 1). Some may question whether the selected variables are truly accurate reflections of Ubuntu principles. It would be reckless to claim that all were ideal proxies; however, most items could be reasonably identified as potential indicators. Some proxies, such as the reference to a humane society, align closely with core Ubuntu principles.

Another limitation concerns the WVS itself. While widely used, the instrument is not without flaws, and its validity has been questioned by various scholars. Nonetheless, given practical considerations and the lack of alternative freely available data, the use of the WVS data can be reasonably justified.

Future research

Ubuntu values were measured using items that served as proxies for the construct. Future researchers are encouraged to use instruments specifically developed to measure Ubuntu (see Molose, 2019; Steyn & Msweli, 2024; Terblanché-Greeff & Nel, 2023). Purpose-designed instruments may yield better

results in cross-cultural settings; however, caution should be exercised to ensure that the constructs are replicable across cultures. Tests of measurement invariance are essential to confirm the validity of cross-cultural comparisons (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000).

There may also be a need to identify what exactly African leadership entails, without using Ubuntu as a reference. Some efforts have been made in this direction (see Grobler & Singh, 2018; Lerutla & Steyn, 2022, 2024), and researchers are encouraged to find the emic moral compass which is representative of an African value system as it exists in reality.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Renier Steyn: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; Pumela Msweli: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

No data were collected specifically for this research. The WVS data used are publicly available and are referenced throughout (Haerpfer et al., 2022). Use of the secondary data was approved by the University of South Africa's Graduate School of Business Leadership Research Ethics Committee (Reference no. 2025_SBL_DBL_020_FA_5571).

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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