The Perceptions of the Traditional Leaders on the Role of Ubuntu in Conflict Resolution: The Case of Malamulele and Vuwani Conflict in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract

Study Purpose: Conflict erupted between Vatsonga of Malamulele and Vhavenda of Vuwani over service delivery since 2016 but to date the conflict has not been completely resolved. The Vatsonga claimed that critical services such as electricity, water, roads and sporting facilities and many more, which they needed for the enhancement of the quality of their lives, were being directed towards the Vhavenda communities at their expense by the Thulamela Local Municipality which they perceived to be dominated politically by Vhavenda-speaking municipal officials. The purpose of this paper is to explore the perceptions of the traditional leaders on the role and efficacy of ubuntu in the resolution of Vuwani-Malamulele conflict. The study was framed with the meta theory of ubuntu. This theory is encapsulated in the well-known adage munhui munhu hi vanhu vanwani loosely translated a person is a person because of other persons. **Materials and Methods**: A qualitative inquiry was undertaken, with a total of 10 traditional leaders sampled purposively for face-to-face interviews in this paper. They were selected on the basis of their active participation in conflict. **Results, Discussion and Conclusion**: The study found that while the traditional leaders of both groups continue to believe in the value of ubuntu's relevance in the resolution of conflict of this nature, the principles, values, and ideals of ubuntu were marginalised. The thinking which underpinned the attempts at resolving this problem was rooted in the modernist-colonial values and ideals imposed by apartheid system.

Keywords: *Ubuntu; Traditional Leadership; Colonialism; Apartheid; Conflict Resolution*

1. Introduction

This paper explores traditional leaders' perceptions on the role they played in the resolution between the Malamulele and Vuwani. According to the history of traditional leadership, the institution of

traditional leadership was a form of government with the highest authority. The leadership control of traditional leaders changed when the colonial authority and rulers introduced their authority to the landscape of traditional governance (SAHO, 2014). In the pre-colonial era, 1880 -1893, traditional authorities were important institutions which guided the traditional life. Traditional leaders played an important role in the everyday administration of their areas and the lives of traditional people. Traditional authorities provided political, societal, economic, cultural, and religious leadership for local communities. The relationship between the traditional community and traditional leader was very important and highly respected. The normal functioning and existence of each traditional community was the responsibility of the traditional leader. Traditional leaders were not elected, but the successor (most often, a son) would inherit the father or uncle's leadership position (SAHO: 2014). They prioritized Batho-Pele Principles in their leadership (Zondo, 2022).

Prior to the establishment of the apartheid system in South Africa the principles, ideals and values of *ubuntu* underpinned indigenous governance. *Ubuntu* as a theory and paradigm of life has exercised the minds of many academics (Tutu, 2004; Ramose, 1999, Dirk Louw, 2001; Obenga, 1997; Wim Van Binsbergen, 2003 Mkhize, 2004; Maramura et al., 2020). Southern African Communities were historically energised by the principles of communal harmony and order encapsulated in the proverb, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* in isiZulu, which loosely translates to "a person is a person through or by means of other people" (Mkhize, 2004). Surely, communities that subscribe to Maat/Ubuntu should have found, within themselves, ways and means of preventing the escalation of conflict which paralysed life in Thulamela Local Municipality. It may also be noted that the conflict took place 22 years in a South Africa supposedly governed by Western Liberal democratic principles and an African leadership – from Nelson Mandela to Jacob Zuma – who deployed the rhetoric of *Ubuntu* to pull South Africa out of three centuries of dehumanising and divisive apartheid Afrikaner white supremacist rule (Abrahams, 2016). The issue under investigation is centred on the problematic inability of Vatsonga and Vhavenda of Malamulele and Vuwani, all of whom have historically and culturally subscribed to *Ubuntu*, which in essence excludes violent conflict, to stop the conflict between them from escalating into destructive violence. The two groups continue to believe in the efficacy of *Ubuntu* principles as a set of mechanisms that can prevent and stop conflict that erupted between them.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether or not the traditional leaders foregrounded *ubuntu* in their involvement in the Malamulele-Vuwani conflict. To be specific this paper aims to explore the perceptions of traditional leaders relating their views about the role of *ubuntu* in Malamulele-Vuwani conflict. The first objective is to investigate their understanding of the notion and practice of *ubuntu*. The second objective of the paper is to find out whether the traditional leaders were guided by *ubuntu* in their engagement with the conflict? The last objective is to investigate their idea about the efficacy of *ubuntu* in conflict resolution in the current conjuncture.

2. Problem Statement

The violent conflict that erupted between the Vatsonga of Malamulele and the Vhavenda of Vuwani in 2016 was ostensibly over the delivery of services by the Thulamela Local Municipality in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The Vatsonga claimed that critical services such as electricity, water, roads and sporting facilities and many more, which they needed for the enhancement of the quality of their lives, were being directed towards the Vhavenda communities at their expense by the Thulamela Local Municipality which they perceived to be dominated politically by Vhavenda-speaking municipal officials. The researcher who grew up to adulthood and maturity in the area saw and experienced the unfolding of this destructive conflict and was naturally deeply concerned about the conflict. It is this deep concern which led to the decision to conduct this research and investigation.

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The Vatsonga and Vhavenda-speaking people subscribe to the same African-centred worldview and lived experiences, which at its core is grounded in the meta-theory of Ubuntu (Ramose, 1999; Mkhize, 2004; Tutu, 2004). Ubuntu, which is underpinned by spirituality and ethical concern, has led historically to the construction of societies and communities among both the Vatsonga and Vhavenda, organised around the virtues of balance, order, reciprocity, righteousness, complementarity of duality and sharing. It is these virtues and ethical ideals which sustained cordial relations among and between different groupings and nations in the Southern African region (Mkhize, 2004). This does not, however, imply that there were no conflicts in precolonial Africa. Conflicts existed but were tempered by an African humanism founded on the principles of sharing, cooperation, forgiveness and harmony, which kept at bay the principles of competition and aggression encoded in the Eurasian worldview (Obenga, 1997). It may be noted that Ubuntu in Southern Africa shared similarities with the divine principles of Maat-order, balance righteousness and levelness -which were deemed to be intrinsic to the creation of the universe by deep thinkers of classical Kemet (Ancient Egypt), Nubia and Meroe (Obenga, 1997). Southern African Communities were historically energised by the principles of communal harmony and order encapsulated in the proverb, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* in isiZulu, which loosely translates to "a person is a person through or by means of other people" (Mkhize, 2004).

Surely, communities that subscribe to Maat/Ubuntu should have found, within themselves, ways and means of preventing the escalation of conflict which paralysed life in Thulamela Local Municipality. It may also be noted that the conflict took place 22 years in a South Africa supposedly governed by Western Liberal democratic principles and an African leadership – from Nelson Mandela to Jacob Zuma – who deployed the rhetoric of Ubuntu to pull South Africa out of three centuries of dehumanising and divisive apartheid Afrikaner white supremacist rule (Abrahams, 2016). Furthermore, several task-teams composed of community members and government leaders drawn from all levels of the South African political system were sucked into the violent vortex of Malamulele-Vuwani conflict but failed to prevent it.

The issue under investigation is centred on the problematic inability of Vatsonga and Vhavenda of Malamulele and Vuwani, all of whom have historically and culturally subscribed to Ubuntu, which in essence excludes violent conflict, to stop the conflict between them from escalating into destructive violence. The two groups continue to believe in the efficacy of Ubuntu principles as a set of mechanisms that can prevent and stop conflict that erupted between them. What role did Ubuntu play in the process of conflict resolution in Malamulele and Vuwani?

3. Theoretical Perspective of the Study

The paper utilised the meta theory of *ubuntu*. Ubuntu is also observed in numerous African communities, albeit under different labels and names in terms of conceptual clarification from a linguistic perspective. The term Ubuntu comprises the *u-*, the abstract noun prefix *bu and* and the noun *-ntu*, meaning 'person,' or 'personhood' and 'humanness' (Kamwangamalu, 1999). The word is common in the Nguni languages of Southern Africa., and words with similar meanings occur throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Murithi, 2006). Examples include *botho* (Sesotho or Setswana), *bumuntu* (kiSukuma and Kihayi in Tanzania), *bomoto* (Bobangi in Congo), *gimuntu* (kiKongo and giKwese in Angola), *umundu* (Kikuyu in Kenya), *umuntu* (Uganda), *umunthu* (Malawi) and *vumunhu* (Xitsonga and shiTswa in Mozambique). Moreover, Murithi (2006) further observed that Ubuntu appears in diverse forms across all African societies, especially in the languages of East, Central and Southern Africa (Mapadimeng, 2009).

Furthermore, according to Mvuselelo (2009), Ubuntu has been interpreted in different ethnic groups. For example, Sesotho (Lesotho and South Africa) *Motho ke motho ka batho* 'A person is a person by other people'; IsiZulu (South Africa) *Umuntu ngabantu* 'A person is a person through or by means, of

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other people'; Xitsonga (Mozambique and South Africa) *Rintiho rinwe a rinusi hove* 'One finger cannot pick a grain'; Sesotho (Lesotho and South Africa) *A botho bag ago bon ne botho seshabeng* 'Let your welfare be the welfare of the nation'; Chichewa (Malawi) *Mwana wa nzako ndi wako yemwe* 'Someone's child is your child'; the Setswana (Botswana and South Africa) *Moeng goroga re je ka wema* 'Come guest, we feast through you'; and, lastly, Tshivenda (South Africa) *Muthu ndi muthu nga vhanwe* 'A person is a person through other people'. All these meanings from different societies and groups in Africa, therefore, convey the notion that a person becomes a person only through relationships with and recognition by others, with significant implications for day-to-day interaction between community members. Ubuntu is people-oriented, as opposed to the Western socio-political order that promotes elitism. Thus, Ubuntu is an ancient African metaphilosophy in sub-Saharan Africa that principally means 'I am myself through you.' Ubuntu is derived from the South African Bantu languages; its root being *ntu*, which signifies primal being. Ramose provided an analysis of the prefix (*ubu-*) and the stem (*ntu*). According to him, the prefix 'evokes the idea of be-ing in general.' *Ubu-* specifies a oneness, while *ntu* specifies a concreteness. *Ubu-* is oriented towards *ntu* as a being becoming whole. The concept of Ubuntu as a progression into wholeness is the basis of understanding Ubuntu as an ethical concept and provides a foundation from which to understand the various meanings that have been assigned to the word throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century (Tschaepe, 2013).

3.1 Ubuntu as Relevant for Conflict Resolution

The indigenous conflict resolution methods of the many ethnic groups that make up African states are distinct from one another due to the multi-ethnic nature of African states. According to Lutz (2009), the *Ubuntu* ideology recognises elders as the keepers of the culture and history of the land. As a result, persons who were appointed based on honour to settle disputes played an essential role in the process of conflict resolution. Even in modern times, many different ethnic groups still put these methods into practice to resolve conflict as well as a wide variety of other issues. The practice of Ubuntu in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa is the most interesting example because it is more than just a method for resolving conflicts; rather, it is a way of life that seeks to explain what it is to be human. This makes the practice the most intriguing example (Lutz, 2009). Therefore, a person who possesses *Ubuntu* is believed to be generous, hospitable, kind, loving and sympathetic towards others. According to Nabudere (2005), *Ubuntu* societies established systems for resolving disagreements, encouraging reconciliation and peacebuilding, and repairing past wrongs, all with the goal of preserving social coherence and harmony. Therefore, the entirety of society is actively engaged on a variety of fronts in pursuit of a solution to an issue that is perceived as posing a risk to the social cohesiveness of the community.

Additionally, the accomplishments and failures of a given community belong to each individual member of the community, which is another aspect of communal solidarity (Graham, 1999; Mbiti, 1970; Metz, 2011). Lutz (2009) compares this concept to that of a team sport, arguing that performing well for oneself also means performing well for the purpose of the team, and that if the team is successful, then each individual member of the team is successful as well. We "see our lives as bound up with the good of the particular community in which our identity has been established" when we live in this way (Nkondo, 2007:90). Based on this concept, the presumption is made that everything that is beneficial to the community is also beneficial to the individuals that comprise the community (Cornell & van Marle, 2005; Gyekye, 2010; Menkiti, 1984; Pietersen, 2005). As a direct consequence of this, the interests of the community are prioritised over those of the individual (Cornell & van Marle, 2005; Gyekye, 2010; Menkiti, 1984; Nkondo, 2007; Tschaepe, 2013). Therefore, according to this conception of personhood, an individual should act or behave in accordance with what is beneficial for his or her community, thereby displaying solidarity, valuable membership and thus Ubuntu (Gyekye, 2010; Metz, 2011; Ruch & Anyanwu, 1981).

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According to Metz (2011) and van Niekerk (2011), two expressions of communal solidarity are valuable activity in the community and membership in a valuable organisation. Because it demonstrates a commitment to the interests of the community and reciprocity with the community, both of which are requirements of communal personhood, solidarity is regarded as a fundamental component of what it means to be a person (Menkiti, 1984; Metz, 2011; van Niekerk, 2011; Tschaepe, 2013). One fails to demonstrate solidarity and, by extension, fails to be a person if they are uncaring, uninterested or hostile towards other members of the community or the community (Metz, 2011). This plays a significant role in the formation and preservation of a robust communal identity, which, in turn, assures the holonomy of the community and, as a result, its continued existence as a whole and that of all of its members (Metz, 2011; Osagie, 1985; van Niekerk, 2009). According to the definition provided by Menkiti (1984), a community is "not an addition "we," but a totally fused collective "we" (p. 179). Acts of solidarity, also known as *simunye,* are considered by some academics to be examples of Ubuntu, which is a manner of demonstrating one's personhood by demonstrating reciprocity with and dedication to the community (Ramose, 1999a; van Niekerk, 2009).

3.2 Ubuntu and Reconciliation

According to Hailey (2008), the former President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, said that Ubuntu encourages members of the community to act in solidarity with the vulnerable, the weak, and the destitute and helps them behave in certain ways for the common good. According to Hailey (2008), Ubuntu not only assists in the resolution of urgent problems but also plays a long-term role in the resolution of conflict. Tutu (2004) discovers in Ubuntu the basis for preferring restorative over retributive justice, which he expresses as "prioritising reconciliation over justice" (Graybill, 2004). Nelson Mandela, a former president of South Africa, is credited with interpreting the concept of Ubuntu as the profound African sense that one is only human through the humanity of others. Mandela believed that this concept should serve as the basis for building a better world (Metz, 2018). Mandela went on to say that the only way a society could be altered was by embracing reconciliation and cultivating understanding, and even love, amongst the many groups that make up the community (Akinola & Uzodike, 2018).

The majority of Africans share the common belief that a person who possesses Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, and does not feel threatened that others are able and good because they have a proper self-assurance that comes with knowing that they belong to a greater whole, which is diminished when others are humiliated, tortured, oppressed or treated as if they were less than who they are. This belief stems from the fact that most Africans share the common belief that a person should not dehumanize others (Tutu, 2004). The fact that Tutu is a believer in Ubuntu explains why it was used to mediate the settlement of fiercely contested interests in the immediate aftermath of apartheid and in the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Ubuntu is often thought of as a cultural concept; nevertheless, it may also be applied to politics, business, management and corporate governance. The interaction of these factors contributes to the incidence of conflicts in Africa.

Idoniboye-Obu and Whetho (2013:17) define Ubuntu as "a value system expected to inform human behavior in the context of the treatment of others, especially the treatment of the governed by political leaders." Ubuntu is a value system that is expected to inform human behaviour in the context of the treatment of others. In addition, Ubuntu is known as a "management and leadership philosophy," and as a result, the abandonment of its doctrine explains the avarice, corruption and kleptomania that have characterised the sociopolitical and economic realms of Africa (Idoniboye-Obu & Whetho, 2013:17). For instance, allocating resources according to the Ubuntu philosophy would not only assure the most effective use of those resources, but would also promote fairness and equity in the distribution of society values and the resources they provide. Khomba (2011) and Murithi (2006) added more credence to the idea that Ubuntu may be explored as a legitimate guiding philosophy for public administration in Africa. This resulted from the hypothesis that one of the primary causes of war in Africa is the inefficient

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administration of the continent's public resources. The research study conducted by Khomba pushes the boundaries of what is currently known by investigating how Ubuntu can contribute to management and organisations to realise what he refers to as "an African management system" (Khomba, 2011). Khomba (2011) went on to say that a community's practice of brotherly and sisterly concern, which is bolstered by collaboration, caring, and sharing, has the potential to tackle issues such as poverty, deprivation, and isolation, all of which are factors that contribute to conflict. Metz (2012; Metz, 2007) provides the following definition of Ubuntu with this theoretical formulation: "An act is wrong to the degree that it fails to establish community; an act is appropriate to the extent that it produces harmony and minimises disagreement" (Metz, 2019).

Reconciliation is an outcome that naturally follows from practicing Ubuntu, and it leads to authentic results. If it does not create genuine outcomes, then the person who is seeking for reconciliation is either doing so for political reasons or for reasons that are not socio-spiritually motivated. When we say that reconciliation is managed politically, we imply that it is handled in a manner that is connected to the government of a country or public affairs in that country, such as by following a policy or a rule established by the government. Therefore, the attempt at reconciliation in South Africa was unsuccessful since there was no genuine attempt at reconciliation based on the genuine Ubuntu principles. Metz (2017:221) mentioned the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is separate from the tales that South Africa's Constitutional Court and other philosophers have evoked. He believed that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) did help to bring about some reconciliation amongst the various racial groups in South Africa and that the people of South Africa were in a better position in terms of their relationships as a result of the TRC having been established. On the other hand, it is abundantly obvious that a communal reconciliation was by no means completely achieved, and that, if anything, during the most recent few years, there has been a regression. While I do think that the TRC could have accomplished more if it had taken a more holistic approach, I also hold that there were limits to what could have been realistically expected of it to do on its own. It was impossible for it to do everything that needed to be done. In this paper, I suggest that many additional agents, in particular big groups of white people and important enterprises, might and should have taken up the cause of achieving reconciliation in a much more active and engaged manner. Even if Metz is on the right track when he advocates for communal healing, I still believe that the way South Africa took towards reconciliation lacked a meaningful application of the Ubuntu philosophy. The ineffective educational system in place in the country is to blame for the erroneous application of Ubuntu because it continued to be taught rather than building the groundwork for the country's guiding concept.

4. Methodology

4.1 Study Area

The research was carried out in the Collins Chabane Local Municipality, which is in the Vhembe District of the Limpopo Province in South Africa. The investigation into the matter that included Malamulele and Vuwani, both of which are local communities that can be found in Collins Chabane Local Municipality, was carried out by the researcher. When the new municipality was being founded, there was friction between the Xitsonga-speaking people and the Vhavenda-speaking people who made up these settlements. These communities came into conflict with one another. The province of Limpopo is located at the very top of South Africa's peninsula. It shares boundaries with the countries of Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Mozambique on the international stage. In addition, the provinces of Gauteng, Mpumalanga, and the North-West surround it on all sides. It is located within the expansive valley that is formed by the Limpopo River. When entering the province from the north, one arrives in Polokwane, which is the provincial capital. Along with the Kruger National Park, the area to the east of the province is home to some of the most prestigious game reserves in Africa.

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4.2 Study Design

Exploratory case studies were used to get insights into a scenario that is not very obvious and that has not drawn substantial examination and research in the past. This was done to gain a better understanding of the problem (Yin, 2014). Methods of qualitative research such as case studies and ethnography are utilized in this work (Creswell, 2003; Creswell, 2013).

4.3 Participants

In this paper, I sampled 10 traditional leaders. They were selected for the sample on the basis of their direct participation in the Malamulele-Vuwani conflict. During this conflict, all the selected traditional leaders were male. There was no female traditional leader in the area. Their ages ranged from 43 to 80 years old. This provides us with the range of experience that the study could benefit from. This is because of the mixed bag of young and older experience of the conflict. Two of the traditional leaders were university graduate and four had matric qualification and the remaining four had no matric qualification.

4.4 Data Collection

4.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with ten (10) traditional leaders. A semi-structured interview was conducted without the use of a prepared plan or standardised questions such as an interview schedule; however, the researcher did have a list of topics and questions to cover during the interview. Because of the versatility of this style of interview, the interviewer was able to ask the interviewees questions about their perspectives while the group was having a conversation. These questions also brought insights into other avenues that had not been previously considered (Gray, 2004). The researcher was able to cut down on the amount of time spent conducting interviews while still gathering information that was correct thanks to this method.

When the researcher was speaking with high-level bureaucrats and elite members of a community—people who were accustomed to the efficient use of their time—semi-structured interviewing was more useful. This demonstrated that the researcher was fully in control of what was required of an interview, but it left both himself and his respondents free to follow new leads. People who were accustomed to the efficient use of their time found it more reassuring that the researcher was able to maximise the use of their time. A semi-structured interview was also able to demonstrate that the researcher was well-prepared and capable, while at the same time demonstrating that they were not seeking to exert an excessive amount of control over the process (Bernard, 2006). To this investigation, the researcher relied on a combination of the semi-structured interview approach and an interview guide. The interviewer was able to keep their attention on the interview's goals, and to maintain consistency over multiple interviews with participants thanks to the use of an interview guide (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

4.5 Data Analysis

The Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) method was deployed using a deductive approach to analyse data. This means that the researcher consulted the data with some preconceived themes anticipated to be found in the data, based on the research theory (Broun & Clarke, 2006). This method is a qualitative analytic tool used to categorise data. Afterwards, data were analysed and reporting themes that emerged from the data were noted (Broun & Clarke, 2006).

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The thematic approach makes considerable use of inductive reasoning, organising data into categories or themes and identifying patterns (relationships) between the categories (White, 2002). Thus, interviews and discussions were broken down into themes that were used in the analysis of data (Elliott, 2007). The following steps were taken in this study: step 1: familiarisation with the data; step 2: generating initial codes; step 3: searching for themes; step 4: reviewing themes; and step 5: defining and naming themes (Brown & Clarke, 2006).

5. Results

5.1 Understanding of the Notion and Practice of *Ubuntu*

5.1.1 The Meaning of Ubuntu

The traditional leaders had a particular understanding of *ubuntu* and its practice in the context of Malamulele-Vuwani conflict. One of the tenets demonstrated by traditional leader revealed traditional leadership in the following manner in which it grounded the basic principles of ubuntu as paramount:

> *Any traditional leadership during his/her inauguration is mandated with the rules and responsibilities which he/she must carry out as long as he lives as a traditional leader. Those rules can be summaries by one-word Ubuntu because, he would be expected to love all people of all races/ethnic groups, show mercy to the poor, orphans, and widows. Respect all people and show no favoritism and make sure that all his/her subjects do the same.*

5.1.2 Ubuntu as a Worldview

Other traditional leader perceived ubuntu as a worldview which governs a day-to-day life among the community. Participants established that Ubuntu is a key pillar for leadership in the community settings. It was found to be the key fabric in leading the day to day running of the business of villages across the social divide. The old traditional leader articulated this when he said:

> *African traditional leadership was designed in a way that observed Ubuntu worldview. For those who are poor, there was a cultural way in which they would be taken care of either by the royalty or by relatives. The whole social system would be pervaded by Ubuntu.*

5.1.3 Ubuntu Brings Reconciliation

While another traditional leader saw *ubuntu* in a way of resolving the conflicts and bringing reconciliation among the community member, this is what he said:

> *"The parents of the offender would sit down with him/her and question him/her to confirm the guilt. The family would make him/her admit his/her guilt before taking him/her to the traditional leader. The family of the offender would apply the process called u farelwa lufhanga – asking for forgiveness. But if the offence is big they would take the matter to the traditional leader and apply the process called tshipfumelo – taking an animal such as a goat or sheep as a of token of asking for forgiveness to the person who is offended".*

5.1.4 Ubuntu's Definition of a Human Being

Other traditional leaders went to the great length as including *ubuntu* as a cultural value which must shape the behavior of people towards one another. Most traditional leaders' participants share a similar sentiment as one said:

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> *"According to the culture of Vatsonga and Vhavenda, because they are here with us is that they share the same cultural beliefs on how they regard a human being. They regard a human being as a spiritual being that do not have color and its source is God."*

5.1.5 Ubuntu BINDS PEOPLE TOGETHER

In the same vein, the view of Ubuntu as cultural which binds ethnic groups together was uttered again:

> *"You know what, Bantu people share similar culture of Ubuntu. It is the spirit that lives in the conscience which constantly tell you that this one is my fellow brother or sister who I must love and take care of. They understood that we are from the same spiritual essence"*

5.2 *Ubuntu* and Engagement with the Conflict
5.2.1 Ubuntu and Negotiation

Traditional leaders provided the following interesting information indicating that Ubuntu could help to resolve conflicts. One of the pillars of *ubuntu* when a person or community is faced with the conflict with another person or community is negotiation. The following is what a participant said:

> '..... *negotiation played a vital role. Traditional leaders, the Malamulele Task Team, and Vuwani Task Team as an example, had to sit down and negotiate how Collins Chabane municipality would work with them. Negotiation has always worked among the indigenous people to prevent conflict".*

5.2.3 Ubuntu Generates Generosity and Respect

Above that, other traditional leaders had to bring other dimensions of how *ubuntu* can help when people had engaged with the conflict. A traditional leader shared valuable information when he talked about generosity and respect as some of the ideals of ubuntu, he said:

> *"If a person is greedy, he would attract enemies but if generous will attract friends, respect and people defend him from all criminal activities. This is why Vatsonga lived with Vhavenda in peace. A poor person trying to assist with his own hands is a wise way to forge peaceful relationships and end conflict"*

5.2.4 Ubuntu Produces Solidarity

Furthermore, another traditional leader saw the Ubuntu philosophy as a key to solidarity in conflict resolution given that its principles bring together people of different beliefs to promote peace. He said:

> *"Ubuntu strengthened solidarity back then. Because in the process of migration, people intermarried and become relatives. Because they are relatives they were bound to live in peace".*

5.3 The Efficacy of *Ubuntu* in Conflict Resolution in the Current Conjuncture
5.3.1 Reconciliation and Forgiveness

Some Tsonga traditional leaders believed that reconciliation and forgiveness show the worthiness of *ubuntu* in this current conjuncture. This conciliation and forgiveness can be made possible by the society, which is bound by the principles of *ubuntu*. Where *ubuntu* was systematically adhered to, it is easy to every member of the society to adhere to its principles. This means that from the top structure of

traditional leadership down to members of the society, people will honour the ideals of Ubuntu. Traditional leader said the following about forgiveness and conciliation:

> *"Reconciliation and forgiveness are what the South African blacks did in 1994 when they chose to forgive the brutal acts of white oppression. However, the government did not do much to sustain Ubuntu to benefit future generations".*

5.3.2 The Negligence of Ubuntu

To a very big extent, ubuntu was undermined by the Vhavenda traditional leaders who felt that their rights to land was ignored by the government. On the other hand, Vhavenda traditional leaders believe that reconciliation and forgiveness are ideals of *ubuntu* and that should be observed only in the true context of real ubuntu where there is no robing someone or where treatment for everyone is fair. So, in the case of Malamulele and Vuwani conflict, Vhavenda traditional leader are unsatisfied with the apartheid system which favoured the Vatsonga speaking in Malamulele. That is why they feel like neglect all the values of ubuntu and standing against the formation of the Collins Chabane Municipality. They believed that the formation of Luvuvhu ethnic border (an apartheid boundary dividing Venda and Malamulele and Venda) lacked *ubuntu* and was unfair to Vhavenda speaking and favoured the Vatsonga who reside in Malamulele. A learned Venda speaking traditional leader said:

> *We know all the efficacy of ubuntu and its appliances but in its totality. Where reciprocity is unfair there is no ubuntu and we are forced to stand against certain values of ubuntu such as sharing and caring. However, ubuntu remains important for the success of the nation.*

5.3.3 Maintenance of Ubuntu

Because of apartheid, which prevailed for many years, traditional leaders tended to adopt the ways of the capitalist government. In that, they showed their grievances in the manner that is against traditional leadership.   They were involved in the march against the formation of the Municipality. A traditional leader commented about the efficacy of *Ubuntu* in this current juncture, he said that:

> *"Ubuntu is not automatic, it is not obvious that all can have it, it can die and even forgotten if not cherished. The present-day South Africa is an example of a nation that has lost its best virtues of reconciliation and forgiveness which are re-known about throughout the world. The current conflict of Malamulele-Vuwani is a clear example, burning schools, vandalizing, and looting shops, barricading roads and destroying properties and killing of innocent lives etc."*

6. Discussion

Ubuntu means the opposite of selfishness and self-centredness. In indigenous politics and local leadership, it promotes cooperation between individuals and among cultures and nations. Ubuntu thus empowers traditional leaders to govern and to be valued to reach their full potential. From an African perspective, an Ubuntu style of government means a humane style of government based on collective solidarity and communality rather than individualism and particularity (Khosa & Mulovhedzi, 2020). Furthermore, the principles of Ubuntu as leadership philosophy emphasise collectivism and relationships over material things, including ownership of opportunities, responsibilities and challenges. A critical discussion of the findings on participants' understanding of the notion and practice of Ubuntu and humaneness based on the guiding assumption of the Ubuntu paradigm and theory suggests that overall, the older participants had a relatively clear grasp of the foundation of the Muntu/Bantu (person/persons) and the correlative cultural dictate spirituality. They drew a clear distinction between the spiritness of the

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Muntu (person) which in Bantu philosophical anthropology defines the nature of African human nature as spiritual, which underpins the relational dimension of Ubuntu as in the wisdom: 'I am because we are, since we are therefore, I am! Spirituality as a relational phenomenon anchors the self "I-Me" in the community; the "I-Me-We" nexus of self-hood or extended-self explicated by Azibo (2018) as well as Karenga's (2003) sociality of self-hood. We must note, however, that Ubuntu as conceptualised in South Africa does not negate individuality (Ramose, 1999). Individual excellence and intelligence are highly valued and are linked to the development of the community. What is negated is individualism, which is characteristic of the de-spiritualised and desacralised (Caucasian ethos and praxis (Ramose, 1999; Mkhize, 2004; Ani, 1994; Prinsloo, 1998).

According to studies on *ubuntu,* solidarity spirit is closely related to survival, and it is developed through the combined efforts of individuals in the service of their community (Rapatsa, 2014; Tirivangasi & Tirivangasi, 2015). Africans, from early childhood, are socialised to understand that difficult goals and tasks can only be accomplished collectively. Moreover, the bonds of solidarity, which to an African consist of interpersonal, biological and non-biological bonds, are created and maintained through spiritual values. Abraham and Prabha (2022) argued that the solidarity spirit permeates every aspect of an African's life and is collectively expressed through singing, initiation and collective worship, traditional dancing, hymns, storytelling, body painting, celebrations, hunting, rituals and family life. This gives the clear picture that both traditional leaders in both Malamulele-Vuwani understood ubuntu's role in conflict resolution. Traditional leaders understood reconciliation and knew how to facilitate it in a manner which people would reach true forgiveness. However, true reconciliation works well where there is fairness and transparency (ILO, 2017). In absence of fairness and transparency it is difficult for the communities to reconcile. That is why traditional leaders appeared supporting violence instead of peace in Malamulele-Vuwani conflict. Moreover, *ubuntu* can be neglected even forgotten completely if custodians of culture like traditional leaders are not doing enough to uphold it. What happened in Malamulele and Vuwani is an example of communities that have forgotten their worldview of Ubuntu. It was a demonstration of a rebellious society which denied its values. It has indeed shown that a lot needs to be done to keep alive the ideals of Ubuntu. There are plenty of advocates for the role of *Ubuntu* in conflict mediation, community reconciliation and peacekeeping. While some of this is concerned with its role in helping mediate immediate problems, much is about its longer-term role in resolving conflicts. Significantly, President Mandela's assessment was that a person could only transform a society or community by encouraging reconciliation, and promoting understanding, even love, between all the different constituents. He highlighted the connectedness and interdependence of all the different people in a community whether they are good or bad, alienated or oppressed. Most memorably he wrote that "the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed…. When I walked out of prison, that was my mission to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both…. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others" (Mandela 199: 544). The lengthy period of the apartheid regime has impacted the traditional leaders to adopt the way of the modernist-colonial system and abandon the indigenous ways of traditional leadership. Traditional leadership prioritizes Batho Pele principles (people first) which are framed along the values of *ubuntu* (Zondo, 2022).

7. Recommendation
- *The Firm Re-Establishment of Ubuntu*

The heightened tensions between communities are a result of lack of ubuntu. Traditional leaders can be vital instruments of establishment of *ubuntu* values in an effective way. That includes the royal gathering where all community members gather regularly to discuss community issues.

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• *Facilitation of Ethnic Groups Reconciliation*

The current government seems to ignore the reconciliation between black and black conflicts, for example, the Malamulele-Vuwani conflict between Vatsonga and Vhavenda. The governmental steps towards investigating the gist of the conflict were necessary in order to bring a fair and transparent reconciliation (ILO, 2017).

Conclusion

The present paper explores the Perceptions of the traditional leaders on the role of *ubuntu* in conflict resolution in the conflict that took place in Malamulele and Vuwani of Vhembe district in Limpopo province. The study results were the meaning of *ubuntu*; *ubuntu* as a worldview; *ubuntu* brings reconciliation; *ubuntu's* definition of a human being; *ubuntu* binds people together; *ubuntu* and negotiation; and maintenance of *ubuntu*. The traditional leaders appeared knowledgeable about the nature and role of ubuntu in conflict resolution, but they admitted the compromise of ubuntu in the current juncture because of two reasons namely, unfair and untransparent facilitation of ethnic group's reconciliation and the adoption of modernist-colonial system imposed by apartheid system. Traditional leaders maintained that ubuntu is not permanently rooted in the hearts of the African peoples it in fact dies if is not maintained by carrying out steps which can help it grow. It requires maintenance. The current Malamulele-Vuwani can be a better place to live in if it can be founded upon ideals of ubuntu. The two ethnic groups can live together in harmony like before and maintain peaceful interrelation with each other.

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