Review

of Mgr Doreen Basemera's PHD dissertation: "Ubuntu Philosophy: An Approach for Conflict Management in Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement in Uganda" by
Klaus Bachmann

Introduction

According to the Polish law **on Higher Education and Science from 2018 (**Consolidated text Dz.U. 2024 poz. 1571.), **Art. 186(1), a** doctoral dissertation must demonstrate the candidate's general theoretical knowledge in the discipline or disciplines, and the ability to conduct scientific or artistic work independently.

1. The subject of the dissertation is one of the following:
    - an original solution to a scientific problem;
    - an original solution in the application of the candidate's own research results in the economic or social sphere;
    - an original artistic achievement.
2. The dissertation may take any of these forms:
    - a written work, including a scientific monograph;
    - a collection of published, thematically related scientific articles;
    - a design work, including an architectural, artistic or technical design;
    - an artistic work;
    - an independent and separable part of a collective work.

    As is evident in the current case, Doreen Basemera's work constitutes a scientific monograph, which will subsequently be analyzed and evaluated.

    According to the Council for the Perfectioning of Science (RDN, *Recenzje w postępowaniach o awans naukowy. Poradnik* ("Reviews in academic promotion proceedings: a guide"), 2022, a doctoral dissertation should essentially consist of a reasoned assessment of the three art. 187 elements:

    - (i) general theoretical knowledge in the discipline;
    - (ii) the ability to conduct research independently;

- (iii) originality, meaning an original solution to a scientific problem, an original application of the candidate's own results, or an original artistic achievement.

As the last two issues mentioned under iii) are not relevant here, I shall limit my observations to the remaining ones, that is: general theoretical knowledge of the discipline (that is here: political science and public administration), the ability to conduct research independently and originality (is the dissertation an original contribution to a scientific problem.

1. The structure and content of the dissertation

The study has a size of more than 300 pages in five chapters, followed by a conclusion and nine appendices. Its central argument is that Ubuntu is a widely shared moral language in Rwamwanja but only weakly institutionalized. To address this, the author proposes an Ubuntu-Centric Hybrid Conflict Management Model that links community-based restorative practice with formal legal, policing and protection systems.

The dissertation starts from a policy–practice puzzle. Uganda hosts roughly 1.9 million refugees and asylum seekers, and its refugee regime is widely praised for promoting protection, inclusion, self-reliance and peaceful coexistence. Even so, conflicts over land, livelihoods, cultural difference, household relations, crime, institutional authority and scarce public services persist in its settlements. The author therefore asks why an apparently Ubuntu-compatible policy environment does not automatically produce Ubuntu-based conflict management in practice. Rwamwanja is presented as an especially instructive case. It was opened in 1964 for Rwandese refugees and closed after repatriation in 1995. It was reopened in 2012 for Congolese refugees fleeing violence in North and South Kivu. While it was closed, Ugandan nationals occupied parts of the land, so the reopening brought refugees, established land users, host communities and government authorities into renewed contact over contested boundaries and access rights. A 2019 REACH/NRC survey cited by the author found that a quarter of refugee households reported housing, land or property problems, including eviction, unusable plots and land grabbing. The overall research question asks how Ubuntu has been understood, interpreted and implemented as a conflict-management approach in Rwamwanja. Four sub-questions

follow from it. The first concerns the lived experience of refugees and host communities in applying Ubuntu. The second asks how policymakers perceive it, and the third how it could be integrated into settlement-level strategies. The fourth asks which other formal and informal mechanisms operate alongside it. Two propositions guide the inquiry. The first is that Ubuntu principles such as relational responsibility, dialogue, empathy, reconciliation and respect for human dignity can complement existing mechanisms and help restore relationships. The second is that their institutionalization is constrained by legal, bureaucratic, cultural, resource-related and practical factors, including the diversity of the settlement population.

The theoretical framework combines five lenses, which the author treats as complementary rather than competing. Ubuntu philosophy, drawn mainly from Ramose and Eze and summed up in the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* ("a person is a person through other persons"), provides the ethical core. It treats conflict as a rupture of relationships that calls for healing rather than punishment. Lederach's conflict transformation theory adds a process-oriented view in which conflict becomes an occasion for changing relationships, attitudes and structures. Neo-institutionalism, following Meyer and Rowan, DiMaggio and Powell, and Scott, is used to explain how formal rules, informal norms and legitimacy pressures shape what settlement institutions adopt. Galtung's ABC triangle separates attitudes, behaviour and structural contradictions such as unequal access to land, aid and shelter. Merton's middle-range theory serves as the overarching bridge that turns abstract Ubuntu values into observable indicators, such as mutual help, forgiveness, resource sharing and elder-led mediation.

The literature review traces Ubuntu from its linguistic and cultural roots to written philosophy and political discourse. It compares Ubuntu with other African restorative mechanisms and surveys Uganda's refugee law, its history of cross-border conflict and its indigenous traditions of dispute resolution. The review concludes that Ubuntu is a potent but little-applied philosophy in refugee contexts. Its application is limited by xenophobia, economic hardship and legal restrictions, and policymakers disagree about its real-world efficacy. No previous study had examined Ubuntu-based conflict management in Rwamwanja itself.

While the study contains numerous repetitions (especially when it comes to research methodology, the references to Popper, Ubuntu philosophy and the five theoretical approaches) it very precisely links the theories to the questions the author asked in the settlement and - this is according to my experience with PHD theses rather astonishing - it answers all research questions asked at the beginning with clear references to the research material (the interviews). One might complain that these answers are to language-based (a respondent's attitude towards Ubuntu may be reflected not only by a literal reference to it or by mentioning a Ubuntu-principle, but also by his behavior), but that does not change the positive surprise that we have here a study with a clear theoretical basis that serves as the starting point for empirical research which is based on those theories.

Methodologically, the study is a qualitative single-case study with ethnographic elements, grounded in an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm. Forty-five participants were selected purposively and by convenience. Eight key informant interviews covered a local council chairperson, an elder, NGO staff, UNHCR, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), the police, a Refugee Welfare Council representative and the reception office. Four focus groups of eight to ten people, mixed by age and gender, were held: two with refugees in Base Camps 1 and 2, and two with host-community members in the mixed Nkoma-Katalyeba zone and in host-only Mahani. These were complemented by two months of participant observation and by document analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in the original languages, translated and cross-checked in a seven-step procedure, and then analysed thematically. The coding is documented in the appendices, and the fieldwork was formally authorized by the OPM.

The findings show that refugees and host-community members understand Ubuntu as sharing, caring, mutual giving, moral guidance, forgiveness, dialogue and coexistence. The conflicts they reported concerned land, water and firewood, livelihoods and employment, household and gender relations, cultural and linguistic difference, youth relationships and crime. Minor disputes were usually handled through elders, local leaders, Refugee Welfare Councils, family intervention, apology and community dialogue. Policymakers and institutional actors considered Ubuntu relevant to community-based conflict management, although the term does not appear in the policy and operational documents they work with. They recognized

related values such as coexistence, dignity, dialogue and respect in everyday practice. At the same time, they pointed to bureaucratic procedures, donor-driven programming, international guidelines and the lack of training in indigenous approaches as constraints. Participants also had concrete ideas about how Ubuntu might be integrated.

Their proposals included recognizing and strengthening local peace committees, holding regular host–refugee dialogues, using cultural education and storytelling, and training community leaders and humanitarian staff. They also suggested adding explicit Ubuntu-related language to policy documents and building structured partnerships between community leaders and the OPM, UNHCR, NGOs and the police.

Alongside Ubuntu, participants identified formal channels, namely the police, courts, OPM, UNHCR and legal aid, and informal ones, namely Refugee Welfare Councils, elders, religious leaders, NGOs, counselling and community mediation. They consistently distinguished minor relational and resource disputes, which can be mediated locally, from serious criminal and protection cases, which must be referred to formal authorities. Across all four questions, the author highlights a gap between the strong grassroots embrace of Ubuntu and its limited institutional recognition, and a tendency of humanitarian systems to overlook local philosophies that could add legitimacy and durability to peace efforts.

The thesis's principal contribution is the Ubuntu-Centric Hybrid Conflict Management Model. It extends Mac Ginty's theory of hybrid peace by specifying the cultural principles that should guide how formal and local systems interact. It positions Ubuntu not as one informal mechanism among others but as the ethical foundation connecting community practice with formal institutions.

The model deliberately builds in external stressors such as poverty, donor-driven frameworks and resource competition, so that Ubuntu is not idealized. Ubuntu can offer a method for peace, but it cannot replace material resources or legal protection.

In the discussion and conclusion, the author finds both propositions supported, with important qualifications. Ubuntu is not absent from Rwamwanja. It lives on as an everyday moral resource, often practised

without being named. Refugees tend to frame it as survival and solidarity, while hosts frame it as hospitality extended despite their own hardship. Aid dependency and competition for resources can erode communal bonds, and serious crimes such as rape, murder and severe assault clearly require formal justice. The answer to the guiding question is therefore "yes, but only partially and under certain conditions." Ubuntu should be integrated with legal, humanitarian and community mechanisms rather than used to replace them. The author places the case alongside comparable African experiences such as Gacaca in Rwanda, Fambul Tok in Sierra Leone, Mato Oput among the Acholi, the Kgotla in Botswana and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The dissertation closes with recommendations for policy, practice and research.

Among these, the OPM and UNHCR should explicitly recognize indigenous approaches in policy. Refugee leaders, local council officials, mediators, religious leaders and humanitarian workers should be trained in Ubuntu-informed and restorative mediation, and locally legitimate practices should be documented. The author further calls for regular and inclusive host–refugee dialogue forums, with deliberate participation of women, youth, persons with disabilities and minorities, and for joint livelihood, cultural and sports activities. Clear referral partnerships and safeguards should link the police, courts, OPM and NGOs with elders and welfare councils. Finally, universities and research institutions should invest more in research on indigenous peacebuilding.

For future research, the author suggests comparative studies in other Ugandan settlements such as Nakivale, Kyangwali, Bidibidi, Rhino Camp and Palabek. Further suggestions are longitudinal and mixed-methods studies of impact, closer attention to gender, youth, disability and power relations, and practical field-testing of the model.

In addition, the author always is aware of the limitations of her method, her theoretical basis and her findings which shows a high level of maturity as a researcher.

2. General theoretical knowledge in political science and public administration

The theoretical framework combines five lenses, which the author treats as complementary rather than competing. Ubuntu philosophy, drawn mainly from Ramose and Eze and summed up in the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* ("a person is a person through other persons"), provides the ethical core. It treats conflict as a rupture of relationships that calls for healing rather than punishment. Lederach's conflict transformation theory adds a process-oriented view in which conflict becomes an occasion for changing relationships, attitudes and structures. Neo-institutionalism, following Meyer and Rowan, DiMaggio and Powell, and Scott, is used to explain how formal rules, informal norms and legitimacy pressures shape what settlement institutions adopt. Galtung's ABC triangle separates attitudes, behaviour and structural contradictions such as unequal access to land, aid and shelter. Merton's middle-range theory serves as the overarching bridge that turns abstract Ubuntu values into observable indicators, such as mutual help, forgiveness, resource sharing and elder-led mediation.

The author also has a good knowledge of the ontological, epistemic and ethical problems connected to her research, which pops up at various fragments of the text. Therefore, beside the necessary theoretical knowledge necessary for studying the specific case (the Rwamwanja refugee settelement in Uganda) she also has the appropriate theoretical knowledge from political science methodology.

3. The ability to conduct research independently

Doreen Basemera certainly is able to conduct research independently. To write her dissertation, she elaborated several theoretical approach which she then applied to her interviews and their interpretation. Conducting interviews with refugees in the aforementioned camp alone would have entitled her to such a qualification in so far as the interviewing was guided by a specific scientific objective and likely to lead to a scientifically usable outcome. Here, there can be no doubt, she elaborated her own theoretical framework (from acknowledged theoretical positions of the relevant literature) and applied to the interviews and their interpretation afterwards.

4. Originality

Rwamwanja is indeed a gap in the literature and empirical research, although it may not be the biggest, most important or most conflict-ridden settlement in Uganda. Nevertheless (and the author emphasizes this correctly) it is a good study object for her research because of the diversity of its inmates, the history of the settlement itself (first for Rwandans, then for Congolese with a break, when locals took possession of land plots, creating potential conflicts after the reopening of the camp). There is also not much research done on the practical application of Ubuntu on the ground (most of the literature focuses either on the philosophical roots and normative implications of Ubuntu or on other case studies like the South African TRC - but without a focus on practice) and even less on refugee settlements in this context. Therefore, together with the precise and meticulous research methodology, the thesis also fulfils the requirement of originality under the Polish law.

Therefore, there can be no doubt: Notwithstanding some minor shortcomings (like clerical errors on pp. 106 and 140, and repetitions in the text) the study fulfills all requirements of the law for a PHD and I wholeheartedly endorse it with a positive assessment.

Klaus Bachmann, 21.10.2026

