

2-2012

## Introduction: Leadership ethics in Africa

Joanne B. Ciulla

*University of Richmond*, [jciulla@richmond.edu](mailto:jciulla@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/jepson-faculty-publications>



Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), and the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ciulla, Joanne B. "Leadership Ethics in Africa." *Leadership* 8, no. 1 (2012): 3 - 6.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jepson School of Leadership Studies articles, book chapters and other publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

## Introduction: Leadership ethics in Africa

The idea for this special issue originated at the inaugural conference of the Center for Leadership Ethics in Africa, at the University of Fort Hare. The articles do not cover all of the various countries in Africa, but they touch on some of the common themes and challenges of leadership across the continent. Moreover, this volume brings the voices and perspectives of African scholars into the ongoing conversation of leadership studies.

Before we introduce the articles in this issue, we thought that we might say a few words about the University of Fort Hare and its role in developing some of Africa's most distinguished leaders. Fort Hare is the oldest black university in Southern Africa. Scottish missionaries founded it in 1916, and they supported a culture that was open to other religious denominations. The ecumenical nature of Fort Hare's beginnings gradually produced a culture of diversity and heterogeneity and an ethos of tolerance and intellectual creativity that generated progressive ideas on social justice, democracy, and reconciliation that eventually reverberated throughout the country, the continent of Africa, and around the globe. In 2005, Fort Hare became the only South African university ever to receive the Supreme Order of the Baobab (gold class) by State President Thabo Mbeki, in recognition of its exceptional contribution to the development of leaders in South Africa and Africa.

In keeping with its historical legacy that the university calls 'The Crucible of African Leadership', the Center for Leadership Ethics in Africa (CLEA) was established in 2008, with Petrus Strijdom as its founding director. The center focuses on curriculum development, courses, and research on leadership. In his address at the formal launch of the center in 2010, the current Vice-Chancellor, Dr Mvuyo Tom, noted that the university had already 'spawned leaders who took a leading role in the liberation of the continent'. Such leaders include Charles Njonjo in Kenya, Yusuf Lule in Uganda, Seretse Khama in Botswana, Ntsu Mokhehle in Lesotho, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. Many of the great South African leaders also studied or taught at the University of Fort Hare, such as ZK Matthews, Govan Mbeki, Oliver Tambo, Robert Sobukwe, Chris Hani, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Desmond Tutu, and of course, Nelson Mandela. What is striking about this list is that almost all of these leaders are admired as much for their integrity as for their accomplishments (with the exception of Mugabe in recent years).

The main campus of the University of Fort Hare is located in the Eastern Cape in the rural town of Alice, which is about 120 km west of East London. The local language there is

---

### Corresponding author:

Joanne B Ciulla, Professor and Coston Family Chair in Leadership and Ethics, University of Richmond, 28 Westhampton Way, Richmond, VA 23173 USA

Email: [jciulla@richmond.edu](mailto:jciulla@richmond.edu)

Xhosa. The campus sits in the Tyhume River valley with stunning views of the Amathole Mountains. Dotted on the rolling hills that surround the university are shacks and houses of the poor, most of whom are Xhosa. On a cold winter's morning, their cooking fires cast a blue haze over the land, and thin goats and cows forage along the road or among the dry scrub. The contrast between this vibrant university and the poverty of the local community exemplifies the challenges leaders face in South Africa and on the continent at large.

The legacy of great leaders is evident throughout the campus, from the Nelson R Mandela School of Law to the east campus buildings of the former Federal Theological Seminary where Desmond Tutu once taught; and from The Oliver Tambo and The Robert Sobukwe Walks to Freedom Square where Nelson Mandela, as a young student council leader, attended rallies about things that students perennially complain about, such as the quality of the food in the dining hall (Smith, 2010). Mandela attended Fort Hare in 1937–8 and studied English, anthropology, law, and a course called native administration, which would prepare him for a job in the Native Affairs Department. At the university, Mandela also ran track and went ballroom dancing. He played football with Oliver Tambo, who later became his law partner, collaborator in the struggle against apartheid and lifetime friend.

In his autobiographies, Mandela reminisces about his teachers and how they encouraged students to become leaders: 'We were told by our teachers, "Now you are at Fort Hare, you are going to be a *leader* of your people"' (Mandela, 2010: 26). Mandela felt privileged to be there: 'Fort Hare was a beacon for African scholars from all over Southern, Central and Eastern Africa. For young Black South Africans like myself, it was Oxford and Cambridge, Harvard and Yale, all rolled into one.' And he goes on to say, 'I felt that I was being groomed for success in the world' (Mandela, 1994: 43). Mandela acknowledges the profound effect that his professor DDT Jabavu's commitment to promoting African rights had on him. He describes the distinguished black scholar ZK Matthews, as 'the very model of the intellectual' (Mandela, 1994). Matthews taught the work of Booker T Washington, the Harlem Renaissance writers, and other black American civil rights leaders, and he encouraged his students to dissent when they saw social injustice (Smith, 2010).

The University of Fort Hare offers a compelling example of the role that education can play in developing moral and competent leaders who are willing to take on responsibility for leading in the diverse and often divided nations in the African continent. But it is not the only example. The first article in this issue, 'The socrates of Africa and his student: A case study of pre-colonial African leadership', is the story of a leadership academy operated over 200 years ago in central South Africa by Mohlomi. He was born in the early 1720s, and his wisdom and worldview emerged without any contact with the white world. He was a chief, a healer, a philosopher, and a teacher. Max du Preez's case study examines the leadership of Mohlomi and one of his most successful pupils, Moshoeshoe, a chief and king. Du Preez observes that Mohlomi's ideas about leadership, society, and morality are on a par with the great Western philosophers of his time, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant. If Mohlomi's ideas had been expressed in writing rather than through an oral tradition, we would be reading them today as part of the canon of great thinkers.

In 'The paradigm of ethical development for *civilized* leadership in Africa', Abiodun Salawu examines the lessons of ethics and leadership that are found in the African oral tradition. He argues that these lessons are 'indispensable for inculcating in Africans, right from childhood, the values of good citizenry and leadership, necessary to create a *civilization*'. Drawing from a variety of sources, such as Yoruba children's poems and Igbo

proverbs, Salawu demonstrates how the moral lessons found in the oral tradition of stories, poetry, and song can be applied in the modern world to teach morality to children and develop moral leadership in African societies.

Among the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa today, Botswana stands out as a success story about stability and economic progress. In their article, 'The critical role of leadership in Botswana's development: What lessons?' David Sebudubudu and Mokganedi Zara Botlhomilwe examine the history of leadership in Botswana. When Botswana gained independence, many doubted that this desperately poor region would survive as an independent country. Sebudubudu and Botlhomilwe analyze the qualities of its early leaders and how their ethical and effective leadership made a difference in the development of their country. They describe Botswana's first president, Seretse Khama (1965–80), as having 'an *ethic of performance and good governance*', and they tell us that Khama 'was determined to do better than the leaders next door in South Africa', who, at the time, oppressed the majority of their population. (Note that Khama received his BA from the University of Fort Hare in 1944.) The lessons in this article go beyond the qualities of Botswana's leaders to the ways in which they managed to incorporate traditional leadership into a modern nation state.

The last two articles in this issue are by philosophers – Osam Edim Temple from Nigeria and Abraham Olivier from South Africa. Temple explores the metaphysics of cults, religions, and clans as a means of understanding why ethical leadership in African countries is so difficult and why so many African countries have had bad leaders. He notes that, very often, people trace bad leadership in Africa to corruption, greed, poverty, ethnicity, or colonialism: 'Whenever we attempt to interrogate these perspectives we find ourselves sailing through a labyrinth. In the end, we are led into a vicious circle where we know not whether these factors are causes, or are, in themselves, effects of unethical leadership in Africa.' Temple shows how cults, clans, and religions cause many of the leadership problems in Africa because of their worldviews and ideas about reality.

In the last article, Olivier makes a unique contribution to leadership ethics with his idea of bearership or humane ethics as a viable alternative to the idea of ethical leadership. He raises the question: if leadership requires ethics does ethics require leadership? Olivier answers no—humane ethics does not necessarily require leaders to show people the way. Its goal is to recruit people who are willing to 'bear' their moral and practical problems with each other. Using examples from South Africa to illustrate his theory, Olivier shows how his model of bearership appeals to the justice of symmetrical power relations. He argues that in this model, people do not follow or represent each other, 'but rather they are all to take full responsibility to sustain the abode they share and bear together. Thus, each, according to his or her own interests and capacities, is to be empowered to participate as a bearer of sustainable justice.' Olivier's article is a fitting conclusion to this collection of papers. The ethical challenges facing leaders in Africa, and for that matter the rest of the world, are best met by educating citizens who are capable and willing to share the responsibility for creating just and prosperous societies with each other and with their leaders.

We would like to thank the University of Fort Hare and the Center for Leadership Ethics in Africa for sponsoring the conference where the idea for this issue was born. Our gratitude also goes out to all of the contributors of this special issue for the time and energy that they put into their papers and the unique insights that they have given us into the ethical challenges of leadership in Africa. Leadership is a fundamental part of the human condition and,

as such, can only be understood by learning how it works in all corners of the earth and hearing about it from the scholars who live there.

**The Editors**  
**September 22, 2011**

**References**

- Mandela NR (1994) *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Mandela NR (2010) *Conversations with Myself*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux.
- Smith DJ (2010) *Young Mandela: Revolutionary Years*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

**Joanne B Ciulla** is Professor and Coston Family Chair in Leadership and Ethics at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond. She is also an adjunct professor at the Center for Leadership Ethics in Africa at the University of Fort Hare and Visiting Professor at the European Institute of Business Ethics at Nyenrode Business Universiteit in the Netherlands. She has a BA, MA, and PhD in philosophy, and publishes on leadership ethics and business ethics.

**Vincent L Luizzi** is Chair and Professor of Philosophy at Texas State University-San Marcos, USA. He works in applied philosophy and ethics and was a Senior Fulbright Fellow at Fort Hare during the spring of 2007 before becoming an adjunct professor there. A member of the State Bar of Texas, he also serves as a municipal judge in San Marcos, TX.

**Petrus DF Strijdom** was born in Zambia to missionary parents and grew up in the Transkei. He obtained the degrees BA, BA Hons (Xhosa), BTh, the Licentiate in Theology, MTh and DTh in Old Testament from Stellenbosch University. At Fort Hare he taught theology and biblical studies and served as Dean of Theology, Special Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean of Research. In 2008 he became the founding Director of the Center for Leadership Ethics in Africa. He is the author of a variety of academic and popular publications and a part-time minister in the Uniting Reformed Church.