

## **African Philosophies and the Lasallian Teaching Tradition for Virtue and Character Education: Ubuntu, Ujamaa, and Harambee**

Amanuel Abraha Teklemariam, Ed.D.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Ubuntu, Ujamaa, and Harambee are prominent Sub-Saharan African philosophies increasingly recognized by scholars. This paper seeks to enhance global appreciation of these philosophical perspectives and their relevance as resources for addressing character education as well as moral and ethical issues. It begins by explaining the nature of each philosophy and exploring their resourcefulness to support the Lasallian educational traditions for social transformation. As will be discussed, African philosophies emphasize the interconnectedness of individuals within a community, encompassing the physical environment, living and non-living entities. They nurture values such as tolerance, humanity, respect, and compassion. When applied to character education, these values serve as a powerful resource not only for African educators but also for addressing contemporary social and environmental challenges globally. By fostering communal values and ethical behavior, they offer transformative insights for shaping human character and addressing universal issues.

The paper also discusses the relevance of these philosophies in educational settings, highlighting how they cultivate values like mutual accountability, cultural pride, and environmental stewardship. By integrating African philosophies and the Lasallian educational tradition, character education moves beyond individualistic paradigms to embrace a holistic, community-oriented approach. These frameworks not only preserve African cultural heritage but also align with the Lasallian commitment to faith, service, and social justice, addressing global issues like inequality, climate change, and ethical leadership, offering a pathway to nurture morally grounded, socially responsible individuals.

### **Ubuntu**

Shared by several Sub-Saharan African languages, Ubuntu means "humanity," which encompasses the body, spirit, emotions, soul, energy, heart, brain, intellect, and the communal aspect.<sup>2</sup> Ubuntu is not just a word but a philosophical concept, often depicted as "I am because we are," implying that a person becomes a person through positive relationships with other persons. It carries a strong moral implication: one cannot be truly human in isolation from others. In Sub-Saharan thinking, the expectation to be truly human is to seek out community or to live in harmony with others.

The concept of Ubuntu goes beyond relationships with fellow humans and extends to the entire environment, including the cosmos, plants, the land, animals, and spirits. Such harmonious relationships capture the past (e.g., history and ancestors), the present (fellow human beings and all that is in the vicinity), and the future (consideration and assurance of the continuity of life, e.g., offspring). This ecological interconnectedness and interdependence demonstrate the moral balance and oneness of life. Character education for the African and other colonized indigenous peoples should therefore be understood from this perspective, which the introduction of missionary Christian education in very large measure ignored (Gyeke, 1997; Bassey, 1999).<sup>3</sup> The character development of an individual cannot be understood or achieved if fellow human beings, the environment, the ancestors' spirits, and the ecosystem are suffering. Grange stated,

The self, community and nature are inextricably bound up with one another— healing/development in one results in healing in all dimensions, so suffering, too, is transversally witnessed in all three dimensions. African spirituality cannot be reduced to a category of anthropocentric.<sup>4</sup>

Relying on Ubuntu's teaching to solve societal problems, such as murder, would consider both the perpetrator and the victim instead of focusing on revenge or the remuneration of the victim alone. This is because Ubuntu is a philosophy grounded in the interconnectedness of humanity and looks at the benefit of the entire community; the victim and the perpetrator are part and parcel of the community, and need to be healed. By punishing one we punish the entire community and healing one member is also healing the whole community (Tutu, 1999).<sup>5</sup> Thus Ubuntu offers a transformative approach to character education by emphasizing communal values such as compassion, respect, and cooperation. Unlike individualistic frameworks, Ubuntu-based character education teaches that personal identity is intertwined with the well-being of others, encapsulated in the ethos, "I am because we are."<sup>6</sup>

Through this lens, learners are encouraged to see themselves as integral parts of a broader community, fostering values like empathy and mutual accountability (Letseka, 2012).<sup>7</sup> This aligns with the Lasallian educational tradition, which emphasizes togetherness and by association for wholistic learning.<sup>8</sup> For example, incorporating Ubuntu into classroom activities might involve collaborative projects that highlight teamwork, respect for diverse perspectives, and shared problem-solving, cultivating not just academic competence but ethical awareness.<sup>9</sup> Teachers, as facilitators of Ubuntu, embody the Lasallian commitment to inclusive education, modeling communal harmony and mutual care as foundational to personal and societal development (Christian Brothers University, 2025).<sup>10</sup>

Ubuntu promotes character and virtue education by assimilating moral lessons through African oral traditions, proverbs, and narratives that emphasize interconnectedness. Proverbs such as "a person is a person through other people" teach learners the importance of communal support and mutual upliftment.<sup>11</sup> This approach helps students understand that their actions affect not only themselves but their communities, encouraging them to act responsibly and with compassion.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Ubuntu's ecological aspect emphasizes care for the environment as part of the community, fostering holistic ethical development that extends to stewardship of nature.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Ubuntu-based character education prepares learners to become socially responsible, empathetic,

and community-oriented individuals who value their heritage while contributing to collective well-being.

The acknowledgment of the “living dead” or ancestors also strengthens respect and honor within the community and the environment, which Ubuntu emphasizes. Life should not be viewed as limited from birth to death but as everlasting.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Lasallian education is conducted within the existence and enlightenment of God, which cannot be separated from the mission of education (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2022).<sup>15</sup>

## **Ujamaa**

Ujamaa is another African philosophical resource for character and virtue education. The term *ujamaa* is a Swahili word meaning “familyhood,” “brotherhood,” or “togetherness.” At its core, it is a philosophy of communalism, promoted by the first Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere.<sup>16</sup> Based on traditional African heritage, Nyerere saw the future of African prosperity and progress in its past history of social system,<sup>17</sup> and advocated for equality, oneness, togetherness, and the rejection of class struggle and the overthrow of dominant classes, as seen in Marxist-Leninist philosophy or Western capitalist mentality. The principles of Ujamaa are based on self-reliance, collective ownership and responsibility, social justice, and using local resources to develop oneself with fellow Africans (Nyerere, 1967, 1978).<sup>18</sup> Ibhawoh and Dibua stated,<sup>19</sup>

The ideal society, Nyerere (1967: 16) argued, must always be based on these three essentials. According to him, there must be equality, because only on that basis will men work cooperatively. There must be freedom, because the individual is not served by society unless it is his. And there must be unity, because only when society is unified can its members live and work in peace, security and well-being. These three essentials, Nyerere further contended, are not new to Africa; they have always been part of the traditional social order.

Similar to Ubuntu philosophy, Ujamaa emphasizes interconnectedness. The individual finds their identity in the community, and whatever affects the community affects the individual. Similarly, Ujamaa envisions society as a collective unit where the well-being of one is tied to the welfare of all, reinforcing the Lasallian commitment to inclusive education and social solidarity.

The principles of Ujamaa promote unity, cooperation, community support, and friendship. Students can be introduced to philosophers like Nyerere as an alternative approach to discussing cultural values and personal worth, raising awareness of disadvantaged community members, and addressing social justice and equality.<sup>20</sup> In both Ujamaa and the Lasallian tradition, education is seen as a tool for empowerment and communal upliftment. Nyerere<sup>21</sup> argued that an ideal society must be based on equality, freedom, and unity—principles that align with Lasallian values of respect for all persons and concern for the poor and marginalized.<sup>22</sup> Just as Lasallian education fosters a sense of service and advocacy, Ujamaa teaches students to see themselves as integral members of their communities, responsible for contributing to the common good (Ibhawoh & Dibua, 2003).<sup>23</sup> By engaging in cooperative learning, group projects, and service-based education, students embody the spirit of Ujamaa while fulfilling the Lasallian mission of transformative education.

Ujamaa is a mindset, an ethical framework akin to democracy, that inspires individuals to view themselves as integral members of a community, fostering interdependence and personal responsibility.<sup>24</sup> This perspective nurtures security, support, and care, contrasting sharply with capitalist systems that isolate individuals and promote exploitation by reducing others to competitors or resources for personal gain. In African socialism, exemplified by Ujamaa, resources like land are considered communal property, a divine gift meant to support the collective well-being rather than individual ownership.

Ujamaa, rooted in the concept of “familyhood” emphasizes collective responsibility, equality, and unity. These principles offer a robust framework for character education, where learners are encouraged to see themselves as part of a broader community committed to mutual support and shared progress. In the classroom, Ujamaa can be discussed in group projects, cooperative learning, and service-based education that instill values of teamwork, accountability, and social justice. By promoting self-reliance and collective problem-solving, Ujamaa-based character education encourages learners to understand their roles as contributors to community welfare rather than as isolated individuals. This aligns moral development with communal values, fostering ethical behaviors such as fairness, altruism, and solidarity that extend beyond the individual to the collective good.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the Lasallian focus on social justice aligns with Ujamaa’s rejection of class divisions and materialism. In advocating for a communal approach to development, Ujamaa cultivates moral leadership that mirrors the Lasallian commitment to ethical citizenship and advocacy for justice.<sup>26</sup> By incorporating Ujamaa within Lasallian education, students develop a heightened ethical consciousness, recognizing that their individual success is interconnected with collective well-being. This synthesis of philosophies fosters a learning environment where character education is deeply rooted in solidarity, service, and moral responsibility, shaping students into compassionate and socially responsible leaders.

In morality and ethics, Ujamaa underscores the principle that an individual’s success is inseparable from the prosperity of the group. By emphasizing equality and rejecting societal divisions based on class or privilege, Ujamaa advocates for an ethical framework that prioritizes justice, inclusivity, and the equitable distribution of resources.<sup>27</sup> Educators and community leaders can use spirit of Ujamaa to nurture a sense of responsibility and care for others, cultivating moral agents who act not out of self-interest but with a commitment to the greater good. This philosophy also challenges materialism and individualism, promoting instead a moral ethos where ethical decisions are guided by their impact on communal harmony and social equity. Thus, Ujamaa provides a culturally relevant and morally grounded approach to character education, shaping learners who embody shared responsibility and ethical consciousness in service to their communities. Moreover, ujamaa, rooted in communalism and equality, offers a framework to combat racism and supremacy by fostering shared humanity and mutual respect. It rejects division and hierarchies, advocating for collective well-being and social justice. By emphasizing unity and interconnectedness, Ujamaa encourages collaborative efforts to dismantle systemic inequalities and promote inclusivity. Similarly, The Lasallian Resource Center states,

When a community is inclusive, it ceases to be overly loud about that fact. . . . One characteristic of such a community is that every person who is a member feels as if they are a genuine member. Their identity as a person and their identity as part of the community permeate one another. One shapes the other. . . . All are equally welcomed,

treated with an attention and respect that is a lived blessing. . . . Those in the community see it as simply what they do and as part of who they are. . . . De La Salle came to know that a genuine community is the most effective means of empowering education, and the quality of the relationships in community gave shape to the relationships in the school's daily life. That beehive locus of relationships within a school community deserved attention and constant vigilance. Rich and poor, upper and lower classes all sat on the same bench, and so it would remain.<sup>28</sup>

## **Harambee**

Harambee is another African ideology, meaning “pulling together” in Kiswahili, predominantly practiced in Kenya. The idea behind Harambee is about finding solutions by mobilizing resources and working together as a community,<sup>29</sup> whether for constructing a house, cultivating a field, or engaging in any other community project. Similar to the concept of Ubuntu, Harambee comprises four “elements”: African spirituality, personhood, interconnectedness, and communalism (Rotzinger, Jensen, Thalmayer, 2024).<sup>30</sup> In their qualitative research, Rotzinger, Jensen, and Thalmayer identified four themes describing Ubuntu and Harambee:

1. I am Because I am Connected—deeply interconnected with family, community, ancestors, spirituality, and nature, embodying the principles of Ubuntu and Harambee; these connections foster a strong sense of belonging, shared responsibility, and spiritual guidance.
2. Together We Do Better—this ensures success, emphasizing the value of working together, as it provides a safety net in various life areas, particularly in education and community challenges.
3. Following and Passing on Traditions—Emerging adults view respect for tribal, familial, and community traditions as essential, feeling obligated to follow and uphold these values for social order and success. They also see themselves as responsible for passing these traditions on to future generations, fostering continuity and positive role modeling.
4. Costs of Community—though it may lack freedom, following rules ensures continuity, cohesiveness, and order.

The Lasallian educational tradition and the African philosophy of Harambee share a commitment to community, service, and collective responsibility, which are essential for character and virtue education. Rooted in the teachings of St. John Baptist de La Salle, the Lasallian tradition emphasizes faith, service, and community engagement in fostering holistic development and moral leadership among learners.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Harambee promotes communal effort and shared responsibility to address societal challenges, reinforcing values such as solidarity, cooperation, and selflessness (Njoroge & Bennaars, 1986).<sup>32</sup>

The Harambee ideology provides a rich resource for character and virtue education. Its core principles are communal support, unity, and collective responsibility, which reinforce social bonds and ethical development. Harambee, rooted in Kenyan culture, reflects a philosophy where individual and communal success are interlinked, supporting the idea that community-oriented values strengthen character education by promoting empathy, cooperation, and mutual responsibility. In educational settings, when teachers, families, and communities collaborate,

they model these communal values, fostering a supportive environment for ethical behavior and shared problem-solving (Wandia, 2022).<sup>33</sup> This approach encourages students to view personal achievements as contributing to the greater good, aligning with the goal of virtue and character education to cultivate a socially responsible and morally grounded generation.

Harambee, meaning “pulling together,” provides a powerful resource for mobilizing communities to address societal challenges like healthcare, community development, justice, and education. By emphasizing collective responsibility and resource pooling, Harambee inspires individuals to unite in finding local solutions.<sup>34</sup> Harambee also help us to reflect communal effort in nation-building and education)<sup>35</sup> It parallels the Lasallian principle of faith and zeal, where educators work collaboratively to uplift students, especially the disadvantaged.<sup>36</sup> Harambee’s emphasis on collective progress resonates with the Lasallian focus on social justice and community service.

Another example is when communities can collectively fund and build clinics, organize health awareness campaigns, or provide support for those in need, initiatives such as community fundraising for schools, teacher support, and resource-sharing to ensure access for all (Corrado, 2022).<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in development it fosters teamwork to implement infrastructure projects like roads or clean water systems. This philosophy not only solves immediate challenges but also strengthens social bonds and instills a shared sense of purpose and responsibility.

Harambee embodies the philosophy of collective effort and community-driven action, making it a valuable tool within character education. By emphasizing teamwork, communal support, and shared responsibility, it fosters a sense of unity and mutual accountability among learners. In educational settings, Harambee can be a resource for collaborative projects, group service activities, and community engagement initiatives, where students actively participate in solving shared challenges. These practices teach values such as cooperation, empathy, and resilience, aligning character education with the broader goal of nurturing socially responsible individuals. For instance, schools in Kenya have successfully implemented Harambee-inspired activities such as communal fundraising for infrastructure or resources, which reinforce the principle that personal and collective achievements are interconnected.<sup>38</sup>

In morality and ethics, Harambee instills the importance of working for the collective good, promoting altruism and social justice. The philosophy underscores the ethical principle that success is most meaningful when achieved collectively, encouraging individuals to consider how their actions contribute to or detract from communal well-being. Harambee discourages selfishness and individualism, instead fostering ethical behavior rooted in mutual care and support. Its emphasis on shared responsibility can also address contemporary ethical challenges, such as environmental stewardship and social inequality, by mobilizing community efforts to address these issues. Harambee thus provides a culturally resonant ethical framework that inspires individuals to act with integrity, fairness, and a commitment to uplifting others.<sup>39</sup>

Both Harambee and the Lasallian educational tradition enhance character and virtue formation by instilling a sense of duty toward others. The Lasallian tradition encourages students to serve the marginalized, cultivating empathy and social justice awareness. Likewise, Harambee fosters moral responsibility by engaging individuals in collective action, ensuring that no one is left

behind.<sup>40</sup> This communal mindset aligns with virtue ethics, where moral excellence is developed through habitual practice in community life.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, Lasallian education promotes leadership rooted in humility and service, mirroring the Harambee spirit of inclusive leadership and participatory governance.<sup>42</sup> By drawing on these philosophies as foundational resources in educational settings, learners develop ethical awareness, civic responsibility, and a commitment to the common good. As Lasallian institutions strive to educate individuals for service-oriented leadership, incorporating Harambee reinforces the importance of collaboration and shared growth. Ultimately, both traditions offer a transformative approach to character and virtue education by fostering interconnectedness, ethical leadership, and communal resilience.

## **Conclusion**

Ubuntu, Ujamaa, and Harambee offer valuable philosophical foundations for character and virtue education by revitalizing African values in the learning environment. Teachers can use these principles to instill tolerance, respect, and a sense of shared humanity, shaping students not only as individuals but as responsible members of society. These philosophies serve as resources for addressing universal challenges such as climate change, social justice, and racism by emphasizing interconnectedness, communal responsibility, and harmony with both living and non-living entities.

These African philosophies align closely with the Lasallian tradition, which emphasizes social responsibility, inclusivity, and education for marginalized communities. Ubuntu, meaning “I am because we are,” highlights the interdependence of individuals within a community (Mbiti, 1969),<sup>43</sup> much like Lasallian education fosters fraternity and service to others.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Ujamaa, as introduced by Julius Nyerere, advocates for collective well-being and cooperative learning,<sup>45</sup> reflecting Lasallian commitments to holistic and inclusive education.<sup>46</sup>

By embracing Ubuntu, Ujamaa, and Harambee within the Lasallian framework, education becomes a tool for character and virtue education and societal transformation. These philosophies reinforce the idea that learning is a shared endeavor, cultivating individuals who contribute meaningfully to the common good—together and by association.

<sup>1</sup> Amanuel Abraha Teklemariam, Ed.D., is a Core Professor at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, where he teaches courses in ethics, global social justice, leadership, and qualitative research methods. He has twenty-eight years of experience in teaching and holding leadership positions in higher education, as well as in conducting research and publishing in the field of education. He is currently pursuing studies in character and virtue education at the Jubilee Center, University of Birmingham.

<sup>2</sup> L. L. Grange, "Ubuntu, Ukama, Environment, and Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 41, no. 3 (2012): 329–340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2012.691631>.

<sup>3</sup> K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); O. Bassey, *Western Education and Political Domination in Africa: A Study in Critical and Dialogical Pedagogy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Grange, "Ubuntu, Ukama, Environment, and Moral Education," page 335.

<sup>5</sup> D. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> M. Letseka, "In Defense of Ubuntu," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 31/1 (2012): 47–60. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-011-9267-2>.

<sup>8</sup> Brothers of the Christian Schools, *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission: Challenges, Convictions, and Hopes* (Rome: Generalate, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> C. B. N. Gade, "What Is Ubuntu? Different Interpretations among South Africans of African Descent," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31, no. 3 (2012): 484–503.

<sup>10</sup> Christian Brothers University "Five Core Lasallian Principles," *A Catholic Institution in the Lasallian Tradition*, <https://www.cbu.edu/about/lasallian-tradition/five-core-lasallian-principles/>.

<sup>11</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Waghid and P. Smeyers, "Reconsidering Ubuntu: On the Educational Potential of a Particular Ethic of Care," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44, no. S2 (2012): 6–20.

<sup>13</sup> Grange, "Ubuntu, Ukama, Environment, and Moral Education."

<sup>14</sup> M. K. Asante and A. Mazama, eds, "Ancestors," in *Encyclopedia of African Religion* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009), pages 45–51, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412964623>.

<sup>15</sup> Brothers of the Christian Schools, *Declaration*.

<sup>16</sup> S. I. Aliba, "Igwebuiké Philosophy and Ujamaa," *AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2016): .

<sup>17</sup> F. Hord and J. Lee, *I Am Because We Are: A Reading in African Philosophy*, rev. ed. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> J. K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); *Education for Self-Reliance*. (Tanzania: Government Printer, 1978).

<sup>19</sup> B. Ibhawoh and J. I. Dibua, "Deconstructing Ujamaa: The Legacy of Julius Nyerere in the Quest for Social and Economic Development in Africa," *African Journal of Political Science* (2003).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism*.

<sup>22</sup> Secretariat of Solidarity and Development, *Great things are possible: Lasallian Reflection* 5 (Christian Brothers Conference, 2019–2020), [https://www.lasalle.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/REFLEXION-LASALLISTA-5\\_EN\\_entregable-final.pdf](https://www.lasalle.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/REFLEXION-LASALLISTA-5_EN_entregable-final.pdf).

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- <sup>24</sup> Hord and Lee, *I Am Because We Are*.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibhawoh and Dibua, “Deconstructing Ujamaa.”
- <sup>26</sup> Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism*.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Lasallian Resource Center. (2018). *Inclusive Community, the five Core principles*. Available at <https://www.delasalle.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/FCP-PACKET-Inclusive-Community.pdf>
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<sup>45</sup> Nyerere, *Freedom and socialism*.

<sup>46</sup> Brothers of the Christian Schools, *Lasallian Spirituality Today*.