Ubuntuism in contemporary Uganda

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Although many African citizens have suffered the impact of xenophobic attacks and forced repatriation, the scope of this article is limited to Uganda. Ubuntuism is a philosophy that became particularly influential in post-apartheid South Africa, where it was promoted as the ethical foundation for reconciliation, nation-building, and peaceful coexistence among diverse communities. In this article, however, Ubuntuism will be discussed in a generic manner as an African ethic guiding communitarian living. Ubuntuism emerges from the Nguni maxim “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (“a person is a person through other persons”), which has long been celebrated as Africa’s moral philosophy of communal solidarity, compassion, reciprocity, and human dignity.[1] Ubuntu is understood as the concept of being human, embracing humane, respectful, and polite behaviour towards others.

Ramose emphasises that Ubuntuism is both a state of being and a process of becoming.[2] This automatically places relationships at the centre of humanity, sustaining the process of becoming humane and the interdependence that sustains it. Ubuntuism, with all its elements, has precisely been the basis of African socialisation. It underpins the curriculum of cyclical rituals and rites of passage, ensuring continuity. It is a form of banking where all investment is in people, building relationships that can be relied on during times of need and vulnerability. Social protection is thus grounded in the reality of interdependence, creating a relationship imperative through extended families and community solidarity, providing a safety net for individuals in times of need.

It is on this basis that migrants left their countries of origin to share their talents in South Africa and beyond. Through remittances, the livelihoods and social protection of many African countries and households have improved. This has been happening naturally, based on the principles of Ubuntu. During the colonial and apartheid eras in South Africa, many African countries and others beyond fought against apartheid and for independence, participating in various ways in the liberation and promotion of human dignity. Similarly, South African investments have been supported in many African countries. The Ubuntu philosophy and its moral ethics have successfully permeated political and socioeconomic frontiers beyond borders.

The fall of Ubuntuism

The decline of Ubuntu is evident in the waves of xenophobic, or more precisely, Afrophobic attacks in South Africa in recent years. In 2026, severe antimigrant unrest erupted in cities such as Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Durban. Vigilante groups set a 30 June deadline for undocumented migrants to leave, conducting door-to-door raids and assaulting foreign nationals. They also blocked migrants from receiving social services. In the process, lives were lost and many families were separated, businesses were destroyed, and livelihoods were affected in both South Africa and Uganda. The violence forced countries, including Uganda, to launch mass evacuation and repatriation programmes for their citizens.

Repatriation and rehabilitation of Ugandans

The repatriation of Ugandans from South Africa was a response to the 30 June 2026 deadline set by vigilantes for all African migrants working in South Africa to leave the country. Although this only applied to undocumented migrants, it affected all migrants. While some Ugandans returned on their own, others were collected in multiple groups. By 10 July 2026, a total of 1,130 people, including 331 children, had been evacuated from South Africa. On arrival, some of those evacuated could be seen kissing the ground at the airport, in a display of relief and reconnection with their ancestral land. However, much to the returnees' surprise, they were not allowed to go home or reunite with their families immediately. The government had organised a two-week mandatory rehabilitation and training session at the National Leadership Institute in Kyankwanzi. The returnees were driven directly from Entebbe Airport to Kyankwanzi for this session. At the end of the training, a certificate of participation and re-entry was given to each person.

While they were here, the evacuees were referred to as the "prodigal children of Uganda". Although this sounds a bit derogatory, in this context it was used humorously to mean that they had left a country rich in resources and opportunities and gone somewhere they were mistreated. Just like in the biblical story of the prodigal son,[3] the government received them with open arms. The local proverb, "An elephant never fails to carry its tusks", dominated the speeches during the repatriation and training programmes. The returnees underwent military drills and patriotism training to learn to love their country. They also received income generation training and skills development training and were introduced to various government initiatives, opportunities, and programmes in the country. These training sessions included live testimonies and videos of successful farmers and businesspeople in Uganda. The sessions also included health talks, medical check-ups, treatment, and counselling.

The emotional graduation ceremony from the National Leadership Institute

The graduation ceremony was honoured by the President of the Republic of Uganda. Through his spokesman, he narrated his ordeals of how they suffered, the troubles they went through. The ceremony culminated in a military parade featuring battalions of returnees, displays of military skills, music, dance, and drama. At the end, the president, with emotions mixed with pan-Africanism, nationalism, and a sense of parenting, addressed the returnees. As if to emphasise the "prodigal son" label given to the returnees, he started with a local Luganda proverb: "Nantabulirirwa … asabala gwa bumba …" ("A rebellious person ends up rowing in a boat made out of clay"). In other words, someone who does not heed a warning ends up in trouble. He officially welcomed the returnees and affirmed to them that Uganda is a good country and has opportunities for their prosperity. He showed them video documentaries of successful farmers in Uganda.

At the end of his speech, the president called upon the returnees to embrace the government initiatives for income generation projects and livelihood sources. He then said, "among us, in the spirit of humanness (Ubuntuism) when a person gets in trouble, he/she needs support to start over again". He therefore announced that each family (approximately 700 returnee families) was to leave Kyankwanzi with two million shillings (500 euros). In addition, since the returnees had already congregated and established their Savings and Credit Cooperative Organisation (SACCO), he offered to inject two billion shillings (459,453 euros) into their returnees' cooperative initiatives to boost them to reintegrate. Finally, he informed them that "I agree with President Ramaphosa, record all that you lost … but do not exaggerate or lie … Kasolo [the minister of foreign affairs] has already contacted the minister of foreign affairs in South Africa. But I also talked to President Ramaphosa …" This then reignited the Ubuntu philosophy and ethic in practice thus making reparation a humane action and moral obligation to implement.

The moral and legal basis for reparations

Reparations are measures designed to address the harm caused by serious human rights violations. These measures may include financial compensation, the restitution of property, rehabilitation, psychosocial support, official acknowledgement, apologies, and guarantees that the violations will not be repeated.[4] For Ugandans repatriated following xenophobic attacks, reparations can be justified on several grounds of economic loss, physical assault, and psychological torture. From the perspective of Ubuntu itself, reparations represent more than legal compensation. Genuine Ubuntu emphasises restoring broken relationships, rebuilding trust, and reaffirming shared humanity. Consequently, reparations should be understood as an ethical obligation arising from the philosophy that was violated by the xenophobic violence. If Ubuntu remains South Africa's guiding moral framework, then repairing the harm inflicted

upon fellow Africans becomes an essential expression of that philosophy.

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1. Christian B. N. Gade, *A Discourse on African Philosophy: A New Perspective on Ubuntu and Transitional Justice in South Africa* (Lexington Books, 2017), 5.

2. Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (Mond Books Publishers, 1999), 37.

3. Luke 15:11–32, The African Bible.

4. Pablo De Greiff, “Justice and Reparation,” in *The Handbook of Reparations*, ed. Pablo de Greiff, 451–477 (Oxford University Press, 2006), 452.

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