

**AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CONCEPT AND
PRACTICE OF *LOBOLA*: CONTINUITY OR DISCONNECT WITH *UBUNTU*?**

By

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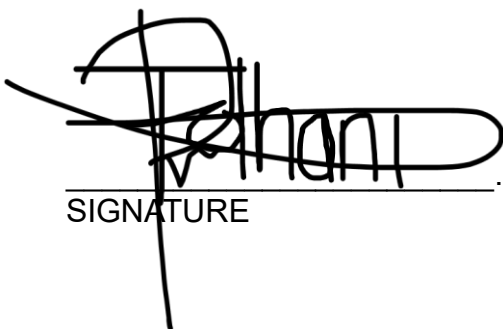
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ABSTRACT

This study explores the connection between the cultural practice of *lobola* and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. It sets out to excavate meanings, understandings and interpretations of the concept and practice of *lobola* as it was practised during pre-colonial times and how it is currently practised in the post-colonial Southern African context. Through an interpretive desktop design, and a critical engagement with literature, the study explored the manifestation of *Ubuntu* in the concept and practice of *lobola*, in its 'original form' and in its current form. The findings of this study indicate that there is a disconnect between the practice of *lobola* as it is currently practised and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. The study found that the practice of *lobola* hinders access to marriage due to the exorbitant amount of money required.

Key terms: *Lobola*, *Ubuntu*, *Botho*, Philosophy, African philosophy, Contemporary society, Culture, Communitarianism, Commercialisation, Brideprice, Marriage, Bridewealth.

NORTHERN SOTHO

KAKARETŠO

Nyakišišo ye e hlahloba kamano magareng ga mokgwa wa setšo wa *lobola* le filosofi ya Seafrika ya *Ubuntu*. E ikemišeditše go sekaseka ditlhalošo, dikwešišo le ditlhalošollo tše di amanago le kgopolo le mokgwa wa *lobola* bjalo ka ge e be di dirišwa mehleng ya pele ga bokoloniale, le ka fao e dirišwago ka gona mo maemong a Afrika Borwa bja ka Borwa ka morago ga bokoloniale.

Nyakišišo ye e dirišitše mokgwa wa nyakišišo wa tlhathollo wa deskthopo (interpretive desktop research design) gomme ya sekaseka dingwalo tša maleba ka tshekatsheko ye e tseneletšego. Ka mokgwa wo, nyakišišo e nyakišišitše tekanyo yeo filosofi ya *Ubuntu* e bonagatšwago ka yona ka gare ga kgopolo le mokgwa wa *lobola*, bobedi ka sebopego sa yona sa mathomo le ka sebopego sa yona sa lehono.

Diphihlelelo tša nyakišišo ye di bontšha gore go na le go se sepelelane magareng ga mokgwa wa lehono wa *lobola* le filosofi ya Seafrika ya *Ubuntu*. Nyakišišo e hweditše gore mokgwa wa lehono wa *lobola* o arogetšwe le metheo ya motheo le dikelo tša *Ubuntu*. Go feta moo, e hweditše gore mokgwa wa *lobola* ke lepheko go batho bao ba nyakago go tsena lenyalong ka lebaka la ditefelo tša tšhelete tše di godimo kudu tše di amanago le tefo ya *lobola*.

ISIZULU

ISIFINYEZO

Lolu cwaningo luhlola kabanzi ubudlelwano obuphakathi kwesiko lokulobola kanye nefilosofi yase-Afrika yoBuntu. Luhlose ukumba luphinde luhlaziye izincazelo, ukuqondwa kanye nokuhunyushwa komqondo nomkhuba wokulobola njengoba kwakwenziwa ngaphambi kwesikhathi sobukoloni, kanye nendlela okwenziwa ngayo njengamanje esimweni saseNingizimu ne-Afrika ngemva kobukoloni.

Lolu cwaningo lusebenzise indlela yokucwaninga ehunyushayo esekelwe ekuhlaziyweni kwemibhalo (*interpretive desktop design*), kanye nokuhlaziywa okubucayi kwemithombo yolwazi efanele. Ngale ndlela, ucwaningo luhlolisise indlela ifilosofi yoBuntu ebonakala ngayo emcabangweni nasemkhubeni wokulobola, kokubili esimweni sawo sokuqala kanye nasendleleni owenziwa ngayo esikhathini samanje.

Imiphumela yalolu cwaningo ikhombisa ukuthi kunokungahambisani phakathi komkhuba wokulobola njengoba wenziwa namuhla kanye nefilosofi yase-Afrika yoBuntu. Ucwaningo luthole ukuthi indlela yokulobola yanamuhla isiphambukile ezimisweni nasezimisweni eziyisisekelo zoBuntu. Luphinde lwathola ukuthi umkhuba wokulobola uvimbela abantu abaningi ekungeneni emshadweni ngenxa yemali eningi kakhulu edingekayo ukuze kukhokhwe ilobolo.

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Chapter 1

General introduction

1.1 Background to the study

The diverse nature of African philosophy makes provision for discourse on African cultural practices. Gutema (2015:140) argues: “As there is no culturally homogeneous Africa, African philosophy is culturally diverse.” As it shall be seen below, the interplay between African philosophy and African culture has been made immaculately clear by African scholars such as Ukwamedua (2011) and Gutema (2015) amongst others. African philosophy has progressed beyond debates and questions about its place in philosophy. The practice of African philosophy beyond the age of its ‘existential doubts’ ought to focus on the lived realities of African people. Wiredu (2004:23) underscores this point when he argues that “the psyche of a contemporary African philosopher is shaped by an African culture and imbued with a commitment to it.” Within this broad philosophical framework, this study explores a subject that has attracted much contention and attention in discourse on African culture, among African scholars and ‘ordinary’ members of society. However, it has to date received little attention in the discipline of African philosophy, a gap that this study attempts to bridge.

This study explores the concept and practice of *lobola* through the lens of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. In the same vein, this study acknowledges that African philosophy is much broader than *Ubuntu* and that not all Africans may necessarily subscribe to the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. The focus of the study is therefore confined to Southern Africa. The subject of *lobola* has been widely researched (Dlamini 1983; Posel and Rudwick 2011; Montle and Moleke 2021; Kgadima and Leburu 2022), as it shall be seen below, albeit it is yet to enter the space of African philosophy. It is a subject that has polarised African scholars and African people at large, partly due to its emotive nature and association with African culture and identity. It continues to receive attention in media circles and conversations on other platforms. A fundamental question that this study poses is centred on whether the concept and practice of *lobola*, in its ontological essence is harmonious with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. This is done in the context of studies that problematised the practice of *lobola*, as extensively

discussed in Chapter 2. Despite abundant literature about *lobola* (Dlamini 1983; Posel and Rudwick 2011; Montle and Moleke 2021; Kgadima and Leburu 2022), its relationship with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* remains an area that requires exploration in contemporary studies.

It is further crucial to note that research on the concept and practice of *lobola*, as we shall see, has been historically conducted by Anthropologists (Yates 1932; Jeffreys 1951; Gray 1960; Kuper 1982) with the European background in the early 1900s. It is for this reason that some scholars attribute the emerged 'ills of *lobola*' to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of *lobola* by missionaries and anthropologists of the time. That being the case, despite these contentions, anthropologists like Yates (1932), Jeffreys (1951), Gray (1960), and Kuper (1982) made a significant contribution to the literature on *lobola* which most post-colonial researchers relied on. For this study, the work of these researchers is crucial in painting the picture of how *lobola* as a concept was understood and therefore practised in pre-colonial times. This study will discuss the practice of *lobola* both in pre-colonial and post-colonial times and further highlights how the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* is reflected therein.

Lastly, because this study seeks to examine the continuity of the concept and practice of *lobola*, focus is equally given to whether this continuity facilitated disconnect with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Thus, *Ubuntu* as a philosophical perspective and a moral theory serves as the frame of reference against which the concept and practice of *lobola* is discussed. It is the contention of this study, broadly, that any practice and tradition that is practised in the name of African culture ought to be consistent with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. It is for this reason that African philosophers like Ramose (2005:35) strongly contend that *Ubuntu* is the foundation of African philosophy, such that there is no African philosophy without *Ubuntu*. Notwithstanding contemporary criticism about the practicality of *Ubuntu* in the contemporary society, applying *Ubuntu* seems to hold a positive promise to the cure for the reported abuse or misuse of the practice of *lobola*.

Various disciplines in the social sciences and humanities have showed an interest in the subject of *lobola* (Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:576). Accordingly, research on this subject can be found in Anthropology, Sociology, Education, Law, Psychology, Theology and Social Work. Arguably, it is still scant in the field of Philosophy. Perhaps this necessitates a question, why should *lobola* be researched in the field of Philosophy? Phrased differently, what does philosophy have to do with the subject of *lobola*? To answer these questions one can assert that it is inconceivable to disassociate the intricate link between a people's philosophy and their culture. As such, it could be argued that cultural experience and philosophical thought

are intertwined. Ukwamedua (2011:248) explains this plainly thus: “The interplay between culture, thought and philosophy is perennial, hence the triad cannot be alienated in the quest for a holistic appreciation of reality.” Thus, the enterprise of philosophy ought not to be limited to its traditional identity characterised by what Ukwamedua (2011:248) calls a “rational enterprise.” It ought not to be only confined to abstract ideas that have no practical essence. Serequeberhan in Mkhwanazi (2017:10) supports this view by contending that:

African philosophy should not be abstract rather it should reflect on verities of history in an attempt to resolve and explain problems experienced.

Indeed, philosophy in Africa ought to address social issues for the purpose of contributing meaningfully towards positive enhancement of the human condition. Ukwamedua (2011:248-249) maintains that “philosophy also has a cultural root, thus, being rooted in culture is what gives philosophy its distinctive and universal coloration.” Kanu (2014:93) opines that “African philosophy must speak to African problems and situations.” Wiredu (2004: 23) strongly contends that “the psyche of a contemporary African philosopher is shaped by an African culture and imbued with a commitment to it.”

This study conceptualises and uses philosophy as an intellectual instrument by which to influence a critical and rational reflection on and examination of the concept and practice of *lobola*. Makama (2020:67) posits that “approaching the concept of *lobola* using the methods and insights from an African-centred narrative approach will enable us to understand *lobola* as a dynamic and evolving practice.” In the context of this study, the African-centred philosophy of *Ubuntu* will be a useful moral instrument by which the ontological essence of the concept and practice of *lobola* can be explored.

The subject of *lobola* is arguably the most contentious in the social sciences’ scholarship (Parker 2015; Sennott, Madhavan and Nam 2021). It is a subject that successfully polarised scholars of African descent from time immemorial. Scholars whose research work seems to recommend amendment and/or abolishment of the *lobola* practice are considered to be entrenching a ‘European misunderstanding’ of the practice. There is a sense in which it can be argued that ‘anti-*lobola*’ studies and researchers are considered colonised. Such censorship should not find residence in academic discourse. Thus, the landscape of scholarship on the concept and practice of *lobola* depicts polarisation of thought, not that this is uncharacteristic of academic culture. It appears that ‘pro-*lobola*’ scholars are protective of the practice although, as we shall see, there is an emergence of research that exposes what Fothane (2020:135) calls the “sins of *lobola*.” Added to this polarised intellectual landscape is

a widespread shifting of blame regarding the evolution of *lobola* on colonisation (Kohler 1933:67), as though the concept and practice of *lobola* is incapable of organic mutation, as a cultural practice. The questions African scholars must inevitably wrestle with are:

- *Was lobola meant to be immune to evolution?*
- *Doesn't culture by its very nature evolve?*
- *Is the reported change in the concept and practice of lobola entirely attributable to misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the practice?*
- *Does it mean Africans misunderstand their own cultural practice?*
- *Can lobola be restored to a pre-colonial era?*
- *Who constructed a post-colonial version of lobola?*
- *Whose knowledge of the concept and practice of lobola is accurate and reliable?*
- *How does a genuine practice of lobola look like?*

Scholarship in the post-colonial epoch ought to focus on decolonising the concept and practice of *lobola*, or 're-Africanising' it, if it has indeed lost touch with its African essence, rather than to continue lamenting about how colonialists ruined it. This would give effect to what Montle and Moleke (2021:2) refer to as "a clarion call for the revival of the aboriginal cultural meaning of *lobola*..." It is the position of this study that re-Africanising *lobola* would require the application of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*.

What is *lobola*? This question is rather complex to answer. It is complex in the sense that *lobola*, as a concept and practice, is understood differently and practised differently on the African continent, although there are latent common characteristics (Ansell 2001:1). Makama (2020:25) asserts that "there is still a great deal of misunderstanding regarding *lobola*, its function and its significance in contemporary society." It could be argued that this misunderstanding stems from what people have learnt about the function of *lobola* as it evolved from generation to generation. Arguably, such knowledge would not have been passed from missionaries but from people who practised *lobola* previously. Thus, understanding informs practice. That said, debates about the concept and function, essence and significance of *lobola* have become a generational phenomenon. Sekudu in Montle and Moleke (2021:588) opines that "over the years, there have been conflicting debates about what *lobola* is and why this cultural practice should still be acknowledged." I contend that this 'conflicting debate' is twofold. First, it relates to the concept and second, its function. As a concept, *lobola*, sometimes or alternatively called *ilobolo* or *lobolo*, is a *Nguni* term derived from the verb *ukulobola*, (Dlamini 1983:3). In essence, *ukulobola* is to give, pay, or offer *ilobolo*.

Herein lies an area of much contention. Some African scholars contend that *ilobolo* is not paid, rather it is given or offered. African scholars who hold this view contend that the use of the word 'pay' emanates from a conceptual misunderstanding, misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the concept of *lobola* by European scholars. The essence of this debate is premised on the argument that the word 'pay' is directly derived from the difficulty about translating the word *lobola* into English, which led to constructions such as brideprice, bridewealth and marriage-payment which Nsereko (in Chisi 2018:21) calls "inaccurate and rooted in the notion of sale." Nsereko strongly contends that these concepts were constructed by foreigners who misunderstood African customs. Nsereko blames this on the introduction of what he calls the "cash economy." Koenane (2014:184) also condemns the use of words such as 'payment' because *lobola*, according to him, is an offering.

This debate further highlights the complex interplay between language and culture. For instance, cattle had a significant spiritual essence in the traditional African culture. In the context of the subject under investigation, *lobola* is cattle, such cattle were used to forge a bond between the living and the dead, hence its insistence for the purpose of validating marriage (Dlamini 1983:83). Dlamini maintains that cattle were used mainly for purposes of communicating with the ancestors. Thus, the insistence of *lobola* being settled in cattle had a spiritual significance. Everything considered, there is consensus in literature that the arrival of settlers disrupted social systems among Black people and introduced new ways of living (Dlamini 1983:88). Thus, the agricultural-pastoral economy where cattle were the primary medium of exchange dissipated and heralded the use of money, which is argued to have introduced the distortion of the practice of *lobola*.

In addition to the debate about the misunderstanding of *lobola* by Western scholars, the other challenge relates to the definition and function of *lobola*. Because *lobola* is practised in many African countries (Parker 2015:175), it inevitably carries different names, meanings and functions. The Recognition of Customary Marriages Act in South Africa (Act 120 of 1998) uses the word *lobolo* and most importantly mentions other equivalents that are used in South Africa. This study will use the word *lobola* given that it is widely used in literature (Semenya 2014:1).

As mentioned, the second area of debate relates to the function of *lobola*, in other words, what is the essential function of *lobola*? This too is a complex question to answer. The complexity of the concept of *lobola* in relation to its functions emanates from the school of thought that holds the view that the functions and meanings attached to *lobola* are constantly changing and not identical (Ansell 2001:1). Some scholars (Chireshe and Chireshe 2010; Chabata 2014; Sekudu 2019) have argued that the identity and function of *lobola* have shifted. This

considered, there is considerable consensus regarding the functions of *lobola* such as compensation for the loss of a woman's labour, appreciation to the parents of the woman for raising her, validation or legalisation of marriage, redistribution of scarce resources such as cattle and cash, facilitating formation of a relationship between the families, and showing man's capacity to support the family (Ansell 2001:3-12; Fothane 2022:127-133; Ngwenyama 2022:114). However, Dlamini (1983:204) suggests that there are various theories pertaining to the question of the original purpose of *lobola*. According to him, some of these theories have been based on idealistic and unfounded statements and others are based on misunderstanding the guiding principles underlying the concept and practice of *lobola*. Dlamini's ontological conception of the function of *lobola* is twofold. According to him, there is a primary original function of *lobola*, which is to validate a customary marriage and thus make it possible for the procreation of legitimate children. Dlamini argues that the secondary functions of *lobola* are incidental and have been acquired by *lobola* in its constant adaptation to changing conditions. According to his conception, some of the functions of *lobola* are "mere rationalisations of or justifications for the continued practice of *lobola*." Chapter two discusses at length the functions of *lobola*.

From a definition point of view, this study adopts the definition used in the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of South Africa (Act 120 of 1998). The Act defines *lobolo* as:

The property in cash or in kind, whether known as *lobolo*, *bogadi*, *bohali*, *lumalo*, *thaka*, *ikhazi*, *magadi*, *emabheka* or any other name, which a prospective husband or the head of his family undertakes to give to the head of the prospective wife's family in consideration of a customary marriage.

The choice of this definition is premised on the fact that it is a formal and legal definition. Equally important, the definition contained in this Act confines *lobola* to what, according to me is its fundamental function — marriage. For instance, Montle and Moleke (2021:591) opine that "*lobola* is the initial process towards marriage such that if it is not paid, the union is declared invalid." Moono, Thankiam, Menon, Mwaba and Menon (2020:390) add that "*lobola* marks the beginning of marriage." Fothane (2020:18) holds that "*lobola* exists because of marriage." It is also worth mentioning that the definition of *lobola* contained in the Act is somewhat insulated from controversies about its functions. This is important considering that the concept and practice of *lobola* is as varied as there are African cultural groups that practise it (Nkosi 2011:7).

The controversies, contentions and debates about the concept and practice of *lobola* have, to this end neglected the African philosophical perspective of *Ubuntu*. Parker (2015:178) is of the

view that “situating *lobola* in the philosophy of *Ubuntu* brings about an understanding of the importance of community in African life.” *Ubuntu* emphasises the critical role played by community and a sense of interdependence expressed through solidarity, caring for each other and sharing with each other (Gade 2012:489). Arguably, *Ubuntu* is, or ought to be at the centre of every African tradition, culture, practice, ritual and norms because, as Parker (2015:176) and Letseka (2013) contend, *Ubuntu* is “an African philosophy, and a way of life.” Letseka (2013) accentuates this view when he states that “the be-ing of an African in the universe is inseparably anchored upon the philosophy of *Ubuntu*.” What Letseka seems to imply is that an African’s way of life, thus, whatever they practise and how they practise what they practise, is unquestionably guided by, inspired by, influenced by, and rooted in the philosophy of *Ubuntu*.

Bolden (2014:1-2) and Metz (2011:537) describe the philosophy of *Ubuntu* as “a social and/or relational philosophy,” which is traditionally expressed by the adage: “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” in Nguni languages and “*Motho ke motho ka batho*” in Sesotho languages, translated to “a person is a person through other persons” in English. According to Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013:87), the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is attributable to black people of Africa, especially the sub-Sahara Africa. *Ubuntu* has equivalent words in some parts of Africa such as *bumuntu* in Tanzania, *bomoto* and *gimuntu* in Congo, *umunthu* in Malawi, *vumuntu* in Mozambique, *umundu* in Kenya and *umuntu* in Uganda (Gade 2012:486; Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013:85). At the heart of this adage (and *Ubuntu*) lies values such as social harmony, friendliness, shared identity, solidarity, respect, care for fellow human beings, exhibition of humanness, sympathy, community, cooperation, collaboration, responsiveness and hospitality (Metz 2011:539; Bolden 2014:1). According to Bolden (2014:1-2), these values express the fundamental interconnectedness of human existence. Metz (2011:538) is of the view that to exhibit solidarity, people engage in mutual aid and act in ways that are reasonably expected to benefit each other. Within this context, individuals are expected to consider themselves an integral part of the entire community system. Metz (2011:539) argues that *Ubuntu* promotes the spirit of living for each other. Thus, to use the phenomenological expression, the dominant mode of being for an African is that of ‘being-for-the other’ than the one of ‘being-with-the-other’. Thus, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* discourages egoistic tendencies wherein people seek their own good without consideration of fellow human beings. Gade (2012) argues that there are different meanings of *Ubuntu* namely (1) a human quality, (2) as either connected to, or identical to a philosophy or ethic, (3) as African humanism, (4) as a worldview, and (5) as connected to the proverb “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.” At the heart of these ‘meanings’ are essential attributes such as ‘humanness’, ‘interdependence’ and ‘community’. One could argue that ‘human relations’ is at the heart of these meanings. Thus, Metz (2007) opines that “the worldview of *Ubuntu* has been interpreted as giving the highest

regard to relationships.” It is for this purpose that *Ubuntu* is also construed as a “relational ethic” (Oelofsen 2018), a “foundation of community living” (Okoro 2015:2), a “social and humanistic ethic” (Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013:84) and an “African moral theory” (Metz 2007). Tschaepe (2013:49) is of the view that *Ubuntu* is oriented towards harmonious human relations. In Metz’s conception of an African moral theory, promoting harmony and solidarity are the conditions necessary for an action to be moral from the framework of *Ubuntu* — as a communalistic ethical concept. Tschaepe (2013:54) contends that harmony provides the community with stability and solidarity such that any action that betrays this outcome can be deemed immoral.

The framing of the title of this study, its focus and purpose is done cognizance of contentions around or about the term Africa(n). In this study, the term Africa is used to refer to the continent and African is used to refer to people of African descent. Equally, African philosophy is used in this study to refer to a “systematic search for truth and meaning arising from Africa’s experience of reality” (Mkhwanazi 2017:10). Mkhwanazi (2017:10) argues that “African experience does not make philosophy any less rigorous or scientific.” Thus, situating the concept and practice of *lobola* within African philosophy, to use Mkhwanazi’s phrase, “localises philosophy” and centres African philosophy at the heart of the lived and existing experience pertaining to the practice of *lobola*. Considering the notion that the concept and practice of *lobola* has been ‘misrepresented’ by Western scholars (Ngwenyama 2000:163; Ansell 2001:2; Makama 2020:66), there is certainly a need to explore the ‘original’ foundational assumptions underpinning the concept and practice of *lobola*. This approach acknowledges that the knowledge of and the truth about African reality is experienced by Africans and therefore ought to be understood by Africans themselves (Mkhwanazi 2017:13). In the same vein, the knowledge of and the truth about the concept and practice of *lobola* is arguably best understood by Africans because it has been a huge part of African culture and identity.

In view of the preceding discussions, this study seeks to explore the relationship between the concept and practice of *lobola* on one hand, and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* on another. The erstwhile and emerging contentions around the practice of *lobola*, namely: that it has been commercialised; that it is at war with human rights; and that it commodifies women necessitate the need to investigate whether *lobola* is ontologically connected with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. It is equally critical to explore whether the continuity of the practice of *lobola* is concomitant or disconnected with *Ubuntu*. To date, there is paucity of research that solely focuses on whether the concept and practice of *lobola* can be regarded as being consistent with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*.

1.2 Research problem

The current scholarship on *lobola* is replete with problematisation of the practice. Makama (2020:25) boldly contends that currently there is no deviation from the early scholarship that conceptualised and represented *lobola* as a problematic African practice that is being used to oppress women in the name of culture. Makama's assertion represents what I may coin 'the evolution conundrum' of the practice and concept of *lobola*. By this I imply that *lobola* was conceptualised at a time when discourse and the spotlight on human rights, women rights and feminism were not as heightened as is the case today. As such, the rise of emphasis on the rights of women meant that *lobola* found itself at war with the dispensation of rights as it evolved from generation to generation (Dlamini 1983:202). This considered, there is another school of thought that Makama's assertion does not include. This school of thought focuses on what could be termed the 'colonialisation of *lobola*'. This emanated from the introduction of cash to replace cattle, which led to reinterpretations of the concept and practice of *lobola*, gradually leading to 'commercialisation of *lobola*' and deliberate exploitation of the practice of *lobola*.

This study deviates from the two 'approaches' mentioned above and focuses on *Ubuntu* as an African philosophical perspective which ideally and arguably ought to guide how African practices such as *lobola* should be conceived and practised. Thus, this approach deviates from the blaming undertones of the current studies which tend to shift the blame on misunderstandings by the Western scholars. The study will explore the concept and practice of *lobola* in our contemporary times in Southern Africa to examine if there is a disconnect with *Ubuntu*.

1.3 Aims and objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to explore the connection between the concept and practice of *lobola* and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Thus, the objectives that flow from this aim are the following:

1.3.1 To critically analyse the fundamental function of the concept and practice of *lobola*.

1.3.2 To find out if the concept and practice of *lobola* is ontologically aligned with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*.

1.3.3 To highlight the interplay between African philosophy and African culture.

Through an interpretive and critical engagement with the literature, this study aims to establish whether the continuity of the practice of *lobola* facilitated a disconnect with *Ubuntu*.

1.4 Rationale for the study

The quest for preservation of African cultural practices and African identity has occupied the attention of African scholarship and those who consider themselves the custodians of African culture. Amidst what appears to be a gradual attack and erosion of African practices and identity, there has been calls to revert to the spirit of *Ubuntu*, as an African philosophical framework that guides how Africans conduct their affairs. The call for the abolition of practices such as *lobola* — a practice that some consider an essential part of the African identity and culture, necessitates a renewed focus on *Ubuntu* as a possible ‘cure’ for dealing with the ills associated with the practice of *lobola* in the post-colonial Southern Africa.

This study plays an instrumental role in closing the research gap that has to date paid less attention to the close relationship between the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* and African cultural practices, such as *lobola*. Thus, it is anticipated that this study will contribute to the body of literature on *Ubuntu* and an African practice such as *lobola*, especially in the discipline of African philosophy.

1.5 Research methodology

This study will use the hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm as it is a qualitative methodology. The hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm is rooted in the interpretive tradition and focuses on uncovering the meaning and essence of a given phenomenon. The hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm moves beyond mere description, which this study seeks to do; it engages in interpretive analysis to uncover underlying assumptions, meanings and socio-cultural constructions embedded within a phenomenon.

The concept and practice of *lobola* has been a subject of multiple interpretations both in academic circles and in communities that have been affected by its adherence. These interpretations often reflect historical developmental shifts, socio-economic transformations, and conceptual contestations. The paradigm adopted by this study will enable a critical analysis and interpretive engagement with the meanings attributed to the practice of *lobola*, rather than treating it as a static cultural artefact. Using this paradigm, the study seeks to interrogate dominant narratives, surface implicit assumptions, and examine how understandings of the practice of *lobola* have evolved over the years.

Owing to the extensive body of literature on the subject of *lobola*, the study adopts a qualitative desktop research design and draws from existing literature as primary data. Sources of data include books, journals, articles and other students' dissertations and theses. Thus, the study will critically analyse existing literature and extrapolate emerged and emerging themes in relation to the origin and evolution of the concept and practice of *lobola*. Analysis of data will be conducted through thematic analysis within a hermeneutic framework. This will entail close reading and identification of recurring patterns and themes pertaining to the origin, transformation, socio-cultural significance and post-colonial debates on the practice of *lobola*. The study will pay close attention to discursive tensions between traditional interpretations and contemporary reinterpretations, including issues of gender, power and economic exchange.

1.6 Literature review

Researchers seem to have consensus that the concept and practice of *lobola* has evolved and deviated from its original mandate (Chisi 2018:127; Montle and Moleke 2021:587; Sekudu and Malesa 2022:157, Ngwenyama 2022:67; Kgadima and Leburu 2022). Words such as 'traditionally' (Nduna 2021:18; Kgadima and Leburu 2022), 'historically' (Makama 2020:23; Posel and Rudwick 2011:1) and 'originally' (Olisa 2016:3; Montle and Moleke 2021:591) are replete in literature, indicating, or perhaps supporting the argument about the altered state of the concept and practice of *lobola* in its quest for continuity. Studies that support this view have constructed the notion that *lobola* has been commercialised, thus, it has become a money-making scheme, it violates the rights of women and therefore it has lost its 'traditional' or 'original' meaning. For instance, Chisi (2018) conducted a study in Zimbabwe which among other things sought to determine if *lobola* is still being observed as a custom that builds relationships and family structure in African families. The results of this study indicated that "sons-in-law regard their fathers-in-law as greedy, evil and exploiters while the fathers-in-law regard their sons-in-law as mean and ungrateful fellows" (Chisi 2018:127). This study further found that "some Shona girls of marriageable age are condemned to single life because prevailing *lobola* charges are beyond the reach of some young men," as a result, young women resort to bearing children out of wedlock while those who are employed resort to raising their own *lobola*. Commenting on the findings of this study, Chisi (2018:127) concludes that the practice of *lobola* no longer serves the original purpose of creating friendship between families. These findings go to the core of what *lobola* stands for and shake its foundation. Chisi's research is corroborated by a South African study conducted by Posel and Rudwick (2011). Posel and Rudwick (2011) conducted a study in Kwa-Zulu Natal titled 'Marriage and *ilobolo* in contemporary Zulu society.' In this study, it is reported that over 60% of male

respondents identified *lobola* as the main reason for not marrying. The researchers report that most females who wanted to marry considered *lobola* as a hindrance. Posel and Rudwick (2011) are of the view that the way *lobola* is practised and particularly the amount that is requested can contribute to delayed marriage and non-marriage in contemporary Zulu society. In a study conducted by Olisa (2016), some of the research participants cited *lobola* as the reason they could not enter marriage. A study conducted by Montle and Moleke (2021) explored the commercialisation of *lobola* in South Africa. This study found that commercialisation of *lobola* engenders reluctance to marry (Montle and Moleke 2021:1). These researchers suggest a correlation between commercialisation of *lobola* and the rise of cohabitation. This view is supported by Chisi (2018:130) who contends that cohabitation (*vat-en-sit* in Afrikaans) seems to be a solution for couples that want to stay together but cannot afford to pay *lobola*. Mohlabane, Gumede and Mokomane (2019) conducted a quantitative study to determine the attitudes towards marriage in post-apartheid South Africa. On the question about whether or not *lobola* is the main reason why people do not get married these days, 41% of their respondents agreed, while 40% disagreed, 10% were neutral and 9% uncertain of how to respond (Mohlabane, Gumede and Mokomane 2019:172). Ngwenyama (2022:68) conducted a study in Eswatini to explore male vulnerability through kinship making. This study found that the rate of unemployment in Eswatini is 46.22%; according to Ngwenyama (2022), this implied that many young men cannot afford the number of cattle that families ask for. Similar findings are reported in the study conducted in Uganda by Muthegheki, Crispus and Abrahams (2012). Muthegheki *et al.* (2012:13) report that the economic burden for men associated with paying *lobola* was a common theme expressed by all participants. It is reported that men are overcharged and therefore this leads to financial hardships for low-income men and the rise in pregnancies out of wedlock and elopement (Muthegheki *et al.* 2012:13-14). All these studies provide a premise for what has been termed 'commercialisation' of *lobola*, which is argued to have been necessitated by the 'loss of or deviation from its original meaning.'

As mentioned above, other studies focus on *lobola* and issues of human rights and equality (Moono *et al.* 2020; Malesa and Sekudu 2022) and gender and power (Nkosi 2011; Makama 2020). For instance, May (1987:41) argued that women will never be free and equal members of society if the practice of *lobola* is still in existence. This is an area in which some scholars call for the abolition and/or reconstruction of the practice of *lobola* (Hlophe 1984; Mamabolo 1945; Ngema 2012; Sibisi 2021) and the revival of the aboriginal meaning (Montle and Moleke 2021:591). Several studies linked *lobola* to violation of women's rights, abuse of women in marriage, and commodification of women (Thiara and Hague 2011; Fuseini 2013; Moono *et al.* 2020; Montle 2020; Sennott *et al.* 2021).

Moono *et al* (2020) conducted a qualitative study in Lusaka which focused on *lobola* and gender-based violence among married women. The results of their study indicate that payment of *lobola* translated into buying a wife and therefore the wife was perceived as her husband's property. It was also found that some fights among couples were linked to payment of *lobola*. The study conducted by Malesa and Sekudu (2020:162) in Limpopo province reports that some of their male participants stated that they do not understand why men should pay *lobola* and still be equal with women. Montle and Moleke's study (2021:1) found that payment of *lobola* fosters gender-based violence. Ngoma (2005) conducted a study that investigated Xhosa women in abusive relationships. This study reports that payment of *lobola* was among the reasons their respondents remained in abusive marriages. A study conducted by Chabata (2012) indicates that most women who participated in his study complained that their husbands abused them out of bitterness for the huge amounts of money they paid to their in-laws for *lobola*. Some of the male participants in the study felt entitled to take all decisions pertaining to sex, including forcing their wives to have sex. A Ugandan study conducted by Thiara and Hague (2011:2) found that *lobola* was considered by most of their informants as a practice that cements gender inequality, giving them little power and turning women into commodities that can be passed from family to family. This study further reports that 99% of the interviewees believed that *lobola* accounted for the violence they experienced. Fuseini (2013) conducted research in Ghana focusing on the effect of *lobola* on domestic violence. This study found that *lobola* influences domestic violence. The findings of this study indicate that a woman whose *lobola* has been paid in full was more likely to be abused than a woman whose *lobola* was not paid at all.

With the preceding discussions in mind, there is a view that contends that the practice of *lobola* does not have a problem (Ansell 2001:30). Thus, it does not lead to abuse and/or violation of the rights of women. It is contended that problems that are associated with the practice of *lobola* emanate from 'misunderstanding' and 'misinterpretation' of the concept and practice, which then lead to the abuse or incorrect use of *lobola* (Marwede 1945; Makama 2020; Malesa and Sekudu 2022). Some scholars hold that the change in human circumstances necessitates the change of certain cultural practices (Mamabolo 1945:17). Mamabolo (1945:18) strongly contends that:

Custom only justifies its continuance when the purpose it serves is good and big enough to outweigh the inconvenience accompanying its observance ... When change renders a particular custom a cumbersome obstacle to continued life, the custom should be waived aside, because

customs are not important in themselves but in the degree in which they help a particular society to exist.

Ansell (2001:28) seems to support this view by arguing that “the meanings and functions of all cultural practices change over time and cannot be understood without regard for the contemporary context in which they operate.” Ngwenyama (2022:68) adds that “*lobola* is not static and timeless, nor does it exist in a vacuum ... it changes, and it is influenced by socio-political changes.” In view of this, one could argue that, while in the process of continuity, *lobola* finds itself at the firing line of ‘time factors’ ... such as globalisation, human rights activism, individualism and socio-economic issues that wrestle against *lobola*. For instance, *lobola* was conceptualised at a time when gender equality was not on the agenda because an ancient African society was male dominated (Malesa and Sekudu 2022:158). This is discussed at length in Chapter 4.

Considering that research indicates that *lobola* is still regarded as an integral part of African culture (Ansell 2001; Mawere and Mawere 2010; Chiweshe 2016; Mohlabane *et al.* 2019; Msweli 2020) and despite calls to abolish it (Mamabolo 1945; Ncube 1987; Sithole 2005; Chireshe and Chireshe 2010; Moono 2019; Fothane 2020), there is a need to place *Ubuntu* at the centre of scholarship on the practice of *lobola* and cease from lamenting about its changes. It has become common knowledge that *lobola* has changed. Equally, literature sufficiently indicates that the introduction of the cash economy and the colonial project at large contributed to the adaptation of the concept and practice of *lobola*. Furthermore, to continue attributing the misuse or abuse of *lobola* to European misunderstanding and/or misinterpretation will gradually not hold. *Lobola* is a cultural practice, and it is in the nature of cultural practices to evolve and adapt to changing times. Parker (2015:178) opines that “situating *lobola* in the philosophy of *Ubuntu* brings about an understanding of the importance of community in African life.” The current study seeks to establish whether the concept and practice of *lobola* — in its pre-colonial form and current form is ontologically harmonious with the philosophy of *Ubuntu* and if, in its quest for continuity, has disconnected from *Ubuntu*.

1.7 Schematic outline

The dissertation will have the following outline:

Chapter One provides a general introduction, including the background to the study, the research problem, research methodology, the research questions, and the aim and objectives of the study.

Chapter Two discusses the concept and practice of *lobola*, thus, historicising the concept and practice of *lobola* among the *Bantu*-speaking people of Southern Africa. It highlights the functions of *lobola* and discusses major themes from existing literature.

Chapter Three covers the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* and shows how *Ubuntu* philosophy forms the nexus of African life and thinking. This chapter highlights the application of *Ubuntu* in practical settings. It further brings to surface the intricate link between African philosophy and African cultural practices. The chapter provides the basis for understanding the practice of *lobola* in the context of *Ubuntu*.

Chapter Four will attempt to answer the question of whether the concept and practice of *lobola* in contemporary Southern Africa is consistent with the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. The chapter critically examines existing literature and highlights key findings.

Chapter Five will provide a synthesis of the study and summarise the key findings. This chapter will provide concluding remarks, limitations of the study and recommendations.

Chapter 2

The concept and practice of *lobola*

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores relevant and available literature about the concept and practice of *lobola* and provides the historical background and its current landscape. The chapter further provides the definition of *lobola*. A contrast is made between how *lobola* was practised in ancient times (pre-colonial) and how it is currently practised in contemporary times in Southern Africa. Lastly, the chapter rationalises the relevance of this subject in the field of Philosophy, as *lobola* has traditionally been studied in other disciplines such as Theology, Psychology, Social Work and Anthropology. In this chapter, I review existing literature and provide some of the major themes and findings from contemporary research. At the end of the chapter, I hope to identify the gaps that exist in current literature, which my study aims to fill.

2.2 Marriage in the African context

The concept and practice of *lobola* is intricately intertwined with marriage in the African context such that it is difficult to discuss one without the other. For this reason, this section discusses marriage in the African context to preface discussions on *lobola*. Traditionally, marriage in the African context plays a significant role in many ways. First, it marks the onset of and transition into adulthood. Thus, it is deemed a rite of passage to adulthood. Seen from this point of view, marriage is linked or tied to identity. Being married is a 'big deal' among traditional Africans, such that, for instance, there are derogatory words such as *lefetwa* and *kgope* among the Northern Sotho speakers which are used to insult those who are of age but not married. The word *lefetwa* is rooted in *go fetwa*, which means being passed. In this context, it implies that the unmarried woman's time or age of marriage has passed and thus, chances are high that she will never be married. Baloyi and Manala (2019:2) are of the view that "singlehood or being unmarried is an abomination and marriage is expected of everyone in the African context." This assertion lays bare the significance of marriage. Second, marriage is linked to womanhood in that it creates a morally acceptable space for women to prove their capacity to give birth. This capacity to give birth is also linked with *lobola*, as discussed in the study. Even for men, there is a sense in which the manhood of a man is measured by the number of

children (and in some instances, wives) he has. Thus, marriage is linked to identity, and it affirms one's status of adulthood.

Additionally, in the African context, people do not marry for the fun of it. Marriage is intricately tied to continuation of lineage. It is primarily about procreation (Baloyi and Manala 2012:1) As shown in the study, in some cases, a marriage that does not have children is considered incomplete. Again, this is another area wherein marriage and the practice of *lobola* interface. Jeffreys (1951) strongly contends that *lobola* is childprice and not brideprice. According to him, it is intended to basically buy a woman's womb. Children born out of wedlock are considered illegitimate hence marriage must precede the birth of children (Marwede and Mamabolo 1945:7). Thus, marriage legitimises the birth of children.

What is further essential to mention is that in the African context, marriage is a family affair, as it were. In other words, two people cannot just go to the Department of Home Affairs to register their marriage without consent of their parents and the family system at large. It is for this reason that the practice of *lobola* involved family members, even the so-called 'extended family' in the Western context. No marriage exists outside the broader family context. It is for this reason, as we shall see, that even uncles and aunts could contribute to *lobola*, and this would make them a part of their nephew's marriage. When marital difficulties arise, the parents can convene uncles and aunts to help the couple resolve their challenges. In the context of this study, this is an area in which the principles of *Ubuntu* such as interdependence, solidarity, communality, cooperation and harmony manifest. Thus, even in matters of marriage, the adage '*motho ke motho ka batho*' found expression. One's marriage could not exist and subsist without the involvement of other family members.

2.3 Definition of *lobola*

What is *lobola*? This question is complex to answer, with a 'straightforward' definition. What makes it complex is that *lobola*, as a concept, is understood differently and practised differently on the African continent, although there are latent common characteristics (Ansell 2001:1). Makama (2020:25) asserts that, "There is still a great deal of misunderstanding regarding *lobola*, its function and its significance in contemporary society." Debates about the concept and function, essence and significance of *lobola* have become a generational phenomenon. Sekudu (2019:1) opines that, "Over the years, there have been conflicting debates about what *lobola* is and why this cultural practice should still be acknowledged." The assertions made by these, and other researchers point to the difficulty of defining *lobola*. I contend that the

'conflicting debates' mentioned by Sekudu are twofold. First, they relate to lobola as a concept and second, its function. Below I discuss the two debates in greater focus.

1. *The concept of lobola*

As a concept, *lobola*, sometimes or alternatively called *ilobolo* or *lobolo*, is a *Nguni* term derived from the word *loba* which implies to write or mark or register (Dlamini 1993:3). Dlamini asserts that the verb *ukulobola* could essentially imply an act of marking an unmarried woman who passes through a transition into marriage. Accordingly, Dlamini argues that *ilobolo* is the means by which marriage is registered. It is important to mention that Dlamini 'worked out' this characterisation from his interpretation of the minutes of a 1903 Commission. It is crucial to mention that there is no study in the survey literature that supports this characterisation. Equally, this study could not find such characterisation in Sesotho languages. *Lobola* is *magadi* in Northern Sotho. However, the word *magadi* does not express the act of giving or paying, although it relates to the word *bogadi*, which implies the home of the bride's in-laws. Thus, *bogadi* and *magadi* are connected to marriage but do not express the payment thereof, as in *ukulobola* in isiZulu. That said, *magadi* are interchangeably referred to as *dikgomo* (cattle), not the act of presenting or giving the cattle.

The word *ukulobola* means to give, pay, or offer *ilobolo* (Shope 2006:71). Herein lies an area of much contention. Some African scholars contend that *ilobolo* is not paid, rather, it is given or offered (Koenane 2024:184; Chisi 2018:21). African scholars who hold this view contend that the use of the word 'pay' emanates from a conceptual misunderstanding, misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the concept of *lobola* by European scholars, as shown by Mizinga and Chiweshe (cited in Makama 2020:163). The essence of this debate is premised on the argument that the word 'pay' is directly derived from the difficulty about translating the word *lobola* into English, which led to constructions such as brideprice, bridewealth and marriage-payment which Nsereko (1975:682) as cited in Chisi (2018:21) calls "inaccurate and rooted in the notion of sale." Nsereko strongly contends that these concepts were constructed by foreigners who misunderstood African customs. Nsereko blames this on the introduction of what he calls the "cash economy." Koenane (2014:184) condemns the use of words such as 'payment' because *lobola*, for them, is an offering. This debate further highlights the complex interplay between language and culture. There is a Sepedi song which is normally sung during the *lobola* (*magadi*) negotiations which says, '*Mosadi wa rekwa ka dikgomo*,' literally meaning a woman is bought with cattle. Certainly, it can't be argued that the composer/s of this song misunderstood the concept and practice of *lobola*, neither can it be argued that it was composed to perpetuate the misunderstanding of European scholars. The complexity about

the concept of *lobola* is further compounded by language, as there are different concepts used to imply *lobola* in different tribes and countries where it is practised. For instance, it is called *roora* in Zimbabwe (Montle and Moleke 2021:590), *lobola* or *ilobolo* among the Ngunis (Dlamini 1993), *bohali* in Lesotho (Ansell 2001), *magadi* among the Northern Sotho speakers, *lovola* among the Tsonga speakers, and *mamalo* among the Vhavenda (Montle and Moleke 2021:590). To use the English words 'Bridewealth', 'dowry', 'Brideprice' and 'marriage-payment' in an attempt to universalise the understanding of the concept of *lobola* is a futile undertaking because there are idiosyncratic factors that make it difficult to unify or harmonise all variants of the practice. The construction of these English words, combined, still misrepresents the concept and practice of *lobola*. What can be arguably concluded as factually correct is that the concept and practice of *lobola*, regardless of where it is practised and how is practised it is about marriage (Dlamini 1993:204; Montle and Moleke 2021:591).

This study will use the word *lobola* given that it is widely used in literature (Semenya 2014:1) and will adopt the definition used in the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of South Africa (No. 120 of 1998) as already indicated. There are instances where this study will use the terms '*ilobolo*', '*bohali*', '*magadi*' or '*lobola*' where direct quotations are used. It should be apparent from the preceding discussions that there is a 'conceptual clutter' around the definition of *lobola*, which renders it difficult to define *lobola* in a single sentence, as it is understood differently by different people.

2. The function of *lobola*

The function of *lobola* is well-captured in literature, albeit a subject of much contention. It must be stated that *lobola* has multiple functions, such that it may be incorrect to singularise its function. Dlamini (1993:204) captures this thus: "When the question is posed as to what the original purpose and function of *ilobolo* is, one gets various theories." According to Dlamini (1993:204), some of the theories are based on idealistic and baseless statements and others on misunderstanding the guiding principles that underly the practice of *lobola*. This considered, Dlamini (1993:204) categorised the functions of *lobola* into primary and secondary. According to him, the primary function of *lobola* is validation of a customary marriage and this makes possible the procreation of legitimate children. He further contends that the main reason for the continuation of the practice of *lobola* is due to black people's inability to conceive a relationship as a valid marriage without the delivery of *lobola*. Although Dlamini seems to be a proponent of what I may coin the 'legitimisation function', in the sense that *lobola* legitimises a relationship, he acknowledges that there are secondary functions that *lobola* "acquired" in its constant adaptation to changing conditions (Dlamini 1993:204). Perhaps this stance supports the argument I made earlier that any attempt to unify the concept of *lobola*, for

instance, that it is a 'brideprice', is a futile undertaking since the function of *lobola* is more than the price and money paid or cattle given to the family of the bride. It is for this reason that Jeffreys (1951) conceptualised *lobola* as a "child-price" given its legitimisation function. This stance makes sense considering that children who were born out of a relationship in which *lobola* was not paid were considered illegitimate (Marwede and Mamabolo 1945:7). It could even be coined 'bridepride' given the sense of pride and social status it gives women who get *lobola*'d (Rudwick and Posel 2014:129; van Niekerk 2017:134). It can also be coined 'bride-appreciation' as it is defined by some as a token of appreciation from the family of the groom to the family of the bride (Khomari, Tebele and Nel 2012:143). What I intend to make clear is that the concept of *lobola* is not one-dimensional such that it can be defined without consideration of its multiple functions. What further compounds our understanding and discussion on the concept and practice of *lobola* is that it seems to be vulnerable or prone to generational adaptations or mutations. Thus, when a question is asked, what is *lobola* and what are its functions, the response is likely to be coupled with words such as 'historically' (Makama 2020:23; Rudwick and Posel 2011:1), 'originally' (Olisa 2016:3; Montle and Moleke 2021:591) and 'traditionally' (Nduna 2021:18; Kgadima and Leburu 2022) indicating that time is imbedded in the definition, concept and practice of *lobola*. In other words, contrary to the sentiments of other researchers, the understanding of *lobola* and how it is practised in our contemporary society may not necessarily be incorrect but consistent with the material conditions of the time. As a cultural phenomenon, *lobola* is dynamic and not static (Ngwenyama 2023:68). Inevitably, it mutates as it is influenced by cultural, socio-political and economic changes, hence the functions and meanings attached to *lobola* are constantly changing and not identical (Ansell 2001:2). People who desire to keep it in the past, so-called 'original function', do not appreciate the dynamic nature of cultural phenomena.

It is clear from the preceding discussions that *lobola* is multi-faceted, complex and varied (Rudwick and Posel 2014:118; Van Niekerk 2017:134) such that, as I have argued above, it is not possible to singularise its functions. This considered, there is considerable consensus regarding what one may call the 'cardinal functions' of *lobola*, such as compensation for the loss of a woman's labour, appreciation to the parents of the woman for raising her, validation or legalisation of marriage, redistribution of scarce resources such as cattle and cash, and facilitating formation of a relationship between the families (Ansell 2001:3-12; Fothane 2022:127-133; Ngwenyama 2023:114). Fothane (2022:126-133) conceptualised what he calls the CAVES theory for the purpose of categorising and explaining the functions of *lobola*. The CAVES theory is an acronym for Compensation, Appreciation, Validation, Economic and Social, all these represent the functions of *lobola*, as discussed below.

Compensation function

Lobola is often conceptualised as compensation to the family of the bride. This compensation function is dual and rooted in the 'perception' that (1) the family of the bride loses her labour, and (2) she will bear children into her husband's family (Steyn and Rip 1968:505, Rudwick and Posel 2014:121). According to Guy (1990), *lobola* was originally rooted in a "women-cattle-labour power circle which compensated families for the transfer of women's productive and reproductive powers from fathers to husbands." The compensation function has over the years evolved into or included compensation for all their efforts in raising their daughter (Radcliffe-Brown 1934; Dlamini 1983; Parker 2015; Chiwesho 2016). It appears that compensation was made because the parents would have spent their time and resources on raising their daughter whom they 'lose' to marriage. Equally important is the fact that in some cases, the daughter played a critical role in performing household chores. Therefore, 'being taken' created a void in the family, the void for which compensation would be needed or required. Embedded in this function is the belief that the family of the groom gains an additional family member whose reproductive capability will ensure continuation of the family lineage. The centrality of *lobola* in relation to the reproductive capability of the wife is demonstrated by the fact that a portion of *lobola* would have to be paid back to the family of the groom if the wife was unable to bear children; alternatively, the sister of the wife would have to be 'taken' without *lobola* to assist with childbearing (Rudwick and Posel 2014:120). The assumption here (which may need to be deconstructed) is that even today, married women go to stay with their in-laws, which makes the assumption hold that the bride's family lose a family member while the groom's family gain an extra family member. A critical question that needs to be posed and answered is: Is this still true in our contemporary times? Newlyweds today stay at their own places immediately after *lobola* (and sometimes even before or during *lobola* proceedings). So, should we still talk of losing and or gaining a family member – an event that justifies *lobola*? Further, the begetting of children should also not be seen as something that benefits the groom's family alone. Contemporary understanding of family places the belongingness of children in both families (maternal and paternal). Equally, irrespective of the fact that the children in most African cultures bear the surname of their fathers. The observations above challenge the compensation function of *lobola*.

Appreciation function

Lobola is considered a token of appreciation (Marwede and Mamabolo 1945:4; Mizinga 2000:56; Parker 2015:177; van Niekerk 2017:134). According to this perspective, the family of the groom gives *lobola* to thank the family of the bride for raising her (Steyn and Rip 1968:505). Khomari *et al* (2012:145) are of the view that *lobola* is regarded as an act of appreciation to

the parents of the bride for bringing her up well. This view is supported by Malesa and Sekudu (2021:157) who regard *lobola* as a gesture of appreciation and gratitude from the bridegroom to his parents in-law. However, Dlamini (1983:177) argues that this function is prevalent among the Batswana as the bridegroom is allowed to give what he can afford, contrary to the Zulu society which demands the payment of *lobola* and considers it mandatory. It can be argued that this function is not necessarily regarded as what Dlamini (1983:204) calls the “main purpose and function” of *lobola*, which according to him is validating a customary marriage. The appreciation function is expressed in literature as one of the reasons for the existence of *lobola*, and there is reason to argue for its place in the multifaceted nature of the functions of *lobola*. The appreciation function should be distinguished from the compensation function. The latter acknowledges the social, practical, emotional and even economical void that the family of the bride encounters because of marriage. The former, if it is accepted and validated, is an act of appreciation and an acknowledgment of benefits that get accrued by the family of the groom because of having an added family member.

Validation function

The word ‘validation’ is used here to also mean ‘legitimisation’ and ‘recognition’. The practice of *lobola* was used to validate, legitimise and recognise a marriage relationship between a man and woman (De Haas 1987:43). As mentioned earlier, Dlamini (1983) is of the view that the main reason for the persistence of the practice of *lobola* is the inability of black people to conceive a relationship as a valid marriage without the delivery of *ilobolo*. Nkosi (2001:8) states that if a groom and his family do not pay *lobola* for whatever reason, their marriage would not be recognised by the bride’s family. The payment of *lobola* served as proof that the marriage was legally recognised and accepted by both the immediate families and the community at large (Olisa 2026:76). It appears that *lobola* was conceptualised as a mechanism to validate a relationship. Dlamini (1993:83) adds that *lobola* had the effect of legalising a marriage in a legal and religious sense. This effect is demonstrated by the view that children born out of a relationship in which *lobola* was not paid were considered illegitimate (Marwede and Mamabolo 1945:7). Legally speaking, the validation function of *lobola* holds, considering that the post-apartheid South Africa legally recognised the existence of *lobola* through the *Recognition of Customary Marriages Act* of South Africa (*Act 120 of 1998*). Of all the functions of *lobola*, the validation function is less contested and almost insulated from the controversies that are attached to other functions. It would be safe to argue that most researchers agree that *lobola* sought to validate a customary marriage. The validation function is considered the “main purpose and function” of *lobola* (Yates 1932:136; Dlamini 1983:204; Rudwick and Posel 2014:122; Mkize 2023:67). It is important to note here

that validation in this case has implications for what occurs in the case of infidelity too. When someone who has *lobola'd* finds themselves having a baby outside the marriage, that child automatically gets absorbed into the union and shares the same surname, rights and privileges as the other kids, even though they may biological be different to them.

Economic function

Earlier I mentioned a *Northern Sotho* wedding song that says “*Mosadi wa rekwa ka dikgomo*,” and explained what it means. *Lobola* is traditionally referred to as *dikgomo* (cattle) (Malesa and Sekudu 2021:157). Dlamini (1993:221) asserts that the use of cattle for the purpose of *lobola* can be attributed to the fact that in the erstwhile agricultural-pastoral economy, cattle were the primary means of exchange. It must be noted that the economic function of *lobola* has generated much contention in literature. The cause for contention is the conception of the giving of cattle or money ‘in exchange’ of a woman as possessing an economic benefit. Jeffreys (1951:153) blatantly calls *lobola* an economic institution. This conception of *lobola*, as an economic institution, cannot be entirely rebutted although some scholars are opposed to it (Rudwick and Posel 2014:121). I argue that *lobola* benefits the family of the bride materially or economically. Kuper (1982:11) supports this argument by citing a response by a witness during the 1883 Commission of Enquiry. The witness was asked: “Do you prefer sons or daughters?” to which he responded thus: “Both are good, the girls bring cattle, and the boy look after them.” This response represents a general attitude among the Bapedi tribe regarding the association of the birth of a baby girl with the acquisition of *dikgomo* (cattle). In pre-colonial times, cattle were important assets and a symbol of wealth and power (Mizinga 2000:64; Callinicos 1981:3). By inference, *lobola* circulated wealth in families (Callinicos 1981:3) such that cattle obtained through *lobola* would be used by the sister’s brother for his *lobola* (Kuper 1982:158). Dlamini (1983:250) argues that “although *lobola* is not a purely economic consideration, it had to be accommodated into the traditional economy, the use of cattle as a medium of *lobolo* had some religious, **economic** and legal implications.” One can hypothesise that, if ownership of cattle was deemed a source and symbol of wealth, and *lobola* was paid in cattle, then the exchange of cattle for a wife had an economic function. Ansell (2001:3) contends that *lobola* serves to redistribute resources. It is not that *lobola* has ‘acquired’ the commercial function as argued by Shope (2006:69); I argue that *lobola* has an ontological economic function, in addition to other functions attached to it. Ansell (2001:4) maintains that prior to colonial times, *lobola* was not purely symbolic as it could allow accumulation of wealth. However, this can be rebutted by the fact that in many South African cultures it is not mandatory for the bridegroom and his family to finish paying up the *lobola*. The little

(first instalment) that one would initially pay, in most cases would be all that they would have paid. This is also justified by the Setswana proverb that “*mosadi ga a fetswe go nyalwa*” (it is not mandatory to pay up everything you owe in *lobola*). I am also aware the other meaning to this proverb, which is equally contesting the meaning of the proverb, namely, that every time the groom visits the in-laws, material demands can be made on him, and he is expected to deliver on these requests as if he is still in the process of settling his *lobola* obligation, though informally this time. But the two meanings can be synchronised in the meaning of the following advice: the groom is often advised by his uncles not to consider settling all of his *lobola* demands because he will have the opportunity to settle it in kind and unofficially as he visits his in-laws, who would be making demands from him to buy them this or that. So, as he complies, he will be paying off his *lobola* piecemeal. If this observation is correct, *lobola* may carry a symbolic function. However, Murray (1981:146) strongly contends that “*bohali* is also ‘economic’ in that transfers in livestock and cash are substantial items of income and expenditure in household budgets.” It is worth noting that much contention surrounding the concept and practice of *lobola* is in relation to the economic function.

Social function

Lobola brings families together. Thus, through *lobola*, each side of the family convenes members of the family (uncles, aunts) to be informed about the intention of their son to marry. This also provides a platform for the family of the man to appoint delegates, who in the main are uncles and aunts. The same practice is done on the side of the family of the bridegroom. This could be termed ‘pre-*lobola* preparations’ on each side of the two families. It is during these preparations that the family of the bridegroom would discuss, in the case of money, the amount to be presented to the family of the groom. On the side of the family of the groom, the uncles establish how much money their nephew has saved up at a meeting convened by the family. This is one layer of the social function of *lobola*, in that it brings family members together.

Another layer central to the social function of *lobola* reported in literature is the merging of the two families involved (Khomari *et al* 2012:143). Thus, the practice of *lobola* creates what the *Zulus* call *ubuhlobo* (a kinship). This is a process by which two families establish and formalise their *ubuhlobo*, thus facilitating approval and acceptance of the relationship of the couple (Khomari *et al* 2012:143). It is important to note that the formalisation of *ubuhlobo* is not limited to the living family members; it extends to ancestors (Dlamini 1993:83, Khomari *et al* 2012:143). This function of *lobola* is premised on the idea that in African tradition, marriage is

a contract between families and not only the couple (Parker 2015:175). According to Bayi and Hawthorne (2018:583), the slaughtering of an animal and the exchange of halves at the conclusion of *lobola* negotiations signify that their blood is intermingled, and the two families and their ancestors have become one. The social function of *lobola* has an additional layer, which is the social status it confers to a woman. According to Van Niekerk (2017:134), a woman for whom *lobola* is paid gains respect from her new family and the community in which she lives.

2.4 Significance of *lobola*

Contemporary research indicates that the practice of *lobola* is a subject of contention (Parker 2015:176; Ansell 2001:13; Montle and Moleke 2021:588). The functions of *lobola*, discussed above, have each, to varying degrees, generated debates and inevitably generating different schools of thought among the scholars. These varying schools of thought and the contentions generated, do not, however, negate that the significance of the practice of *lobola* is centred on marriage, as Fothane (2020:19) argues, “*lobola* exists because of marriage.” Montle and Moleke (2021:590) emphasise that *lobola* was the “cornerstone of marriage during pre-colonial times.” Bayi and Hawthorne (2018:580) add that there was no distinction between *lobola* and marriage prior to colonisation. *Lobola* had (or has) its place of significance in the conception of marriage albeit it generated plurality of views about its functions. In other words, although contemporary researchers may be divided about the functions of the practice of *lobola*, and even call for its obliteration, this does not negate its place of significance in marriage. The very fact that it survived years of relentless disapproval by the missionaries, attempted regulation and the call for its abolishment provides ground for its place of significance in marriage. Guarding against repeating the discussion about the functions of *lobola* outlined above, in this section I point out what could be argued to be its essence.

The significance of *lobola* is demonstrated by the bringing together of the two families, represented by uncles and aunts (Semenya 2014:3). This gathering of the two families expresses the ontological conception of marriage in African culture, in the sense that marriage is not for and about the two individuals getting married, but the entire family system — the living and the dead (Parker 2015:171; Van Niekerk 2017:134; Mbewe 2021:218). Thus, according to this conception, marriage is a contract between the two families, not just the two individuals (Dlamini 1993:84; Parker 2015:175; Rudwick and Posel 2014:122). Accordingly, *lobola* was given by the family of the groom, not the groom himself, and it would be from his father and/or uncles (Kuper 1982:26; Dlamini 1993:85-86; Chitakure 2021: 54). This implies that *lobola* has a binary effect and function and hence contributes towards the ontology of persons in family life.

Another point of significance, flowing from the discussion above, is that marriage had to be recognised by the families. In this sense, the practice and concept of *lobola* sought to provide recognition and endorsement of the union. It is widely accepted in African metaphysics that parents have a spiritual authority over their children as their direct ancestors (Beyers 2010:4). As such, the two individuals getting married had to receive a 'blessing' from their parents so that their marriage can be successful (Parker 2015:176; Olisa 2016:96). Parker (2015:176) puts it precisely thus: "There is the belief held by both men and women that payment of *lobola* creates a greater value and strength in their marriage, if *lobola* is not paid, the marriage will not last." Some of the participants in the study conducted by Rudwick and Posel (2014:131-132) mentioned that "It is spiritually dangerous to marry without *lobola* as this would provoke the wrath of the ancestors." The complex and intricate interplay between the spiritual and physical worlds is well-argued in African metaphysics. It is important to note that 'recognition' in this context is not limited to its 'legal connotation'; it is a spiritual and social recognition, a way of conferring legitimacy to the union (Rudwick and Posel 2014:122). There is a ritual called '*go hlabiša*' among the Northern Sotho speakers which is done upon conclusion of the negotiations (Semenya 2014:3). This ritual involves slaughtering a sheep, cow or goat; the spilling of the blood of the slaughtered animal is believed to be a way of communicating with the ancestors, informing them about and inviting them into the union (Semenya 2014:3).

Within the conception of marriage in African tradition is the notion that the primary purpose of marriage is procreation (Abraham 2010:20). Thus, according to Abraham (2010:225), when a man marries a woman, he marries her primarily for her potential to produce children. The gravity of this significance is expressed by Jeffreys (1951:146) who re-conceptualised *lobola* as a "child-price". Also, it is argued that if the bride was unable to bear children, this provided justification for the groom to divorce or demand *lobola* back (Abraham 2010:22; Parker 2015:178). According to Abraham (2010:22), in societies where sororate is practised, the marriage could be saved by the provision of his wife's sister as his second wife without having to pay *lobola* again. Brandel (1958:35) goes as far as conceptualising *lobola* as tantamount to buying the womb. This argument highlights the significance of *lobola* in relation to the conception of marriage in African tradition. The preceding discussions indicate that Africans attach significance to the practice of *lobola* regardless of the politics hovering over it. Thus, the practice of *lobola* provides a social, legal and spiritual recognition.

Lastly, as argued by Bayi and Hawthorne (2018:580), the line between *lobola* and marriage was indistinct prior to colonisation. The other significance of *lobola* seems to be centred around the value it attaches to the importance of marriage and the worth marriage confers to individuals. For instance, Mbewe (2021:222) asserts that "having a sexual relationship with a

girl for whom *lobola* has not been paid is equal to belittling the family of that girl who took the trouble to look after her.” This position is emphasised by Marwede and Mamabolo (1945:12) who argued that “a woman who was known to have had intercourse before marriage did not get the same cattle (*lobola*) as a virgin; she was made to forfeit part of her value.” In the Sepedi tradition, an expression used for such a woman is that ‘*o wele letswele*’, literally meaning her breast has fallen (Montle and Moleke 2021:591). Dandla (2011) holds that most men would not marry a woman who already has a child. There is room to argue that, viewed from this perspective, *lobola* played a moral function of discouraging sex before marriage among young women as this would affect their worth and value when they are ready for marriage. Equally, it seems to have played a role for engendering commitment to marriage among men in the sense that if a man cohabited he would not be allowed to bury his dead girlfriend until he pays *lobola* (Mbewe 2021:220); hence there are instances where a man would have to pay the *lobola* before the corpse of his girlfriend could be buried (Baloyi 2014:135-143). Such a man would also not have custody over his children if *lobola* was not paid (Asiimwe 2013:24). There are spiritual implications as well, for instance, ancestors may fight over the children because they are not clearly assigned to one family. Also, the ancestors may not acknowledge or protect the children on an *unlobola’d* couple.

The make-up of *lobola*

The make-up of *lobola* varies according to where it is practised, albeit there are common essential components. *Lobola* consists of livestock, mainly cattle, although in some contexts goods and services could be offered (Steyn and Rip 1968:505). According to Dlamini (1983:83), *ukulobola* (the act of offering *ilobolo*) in Zululand before the reign of Ndaba is reported to have consisted of hoes and goats, cattle were used by rich people. Dlamini (1993:221) opines that “the use of cattle for *ilobolo* purposes is to be attributed to the fact that in an agricultural-pastoral economy, cattle were the primary means of exchange.” Kuper (1982:12) cites an assertion by Monica Hunter who said, “Goats are (and were) the poor man’s cattle, supplying food and clothing, being a means of acquiring wives.” Prior to colonial times, people had livestock for subsistence needs, spiritual purposes, economic reasons, status, success and power hence *lobola* was expressed in cattle (Dlamini 1993, Huffman 1998, Bayi and Hawthorne, 2018). Actually, to say ‘*lobola* consists of cattle’ as mentioned above, may somewhat be argued to be incorrect, as opposed to say ‘*lobola* is cattle’ (Steyn and Rip 1968:505; Malesa and Sekudu 2022:157). This is evident even in the post-colonial era wherein money is referred to as cattle even though it replaced cattle (Kohler 1993:67; Ansell 2001:12). Visibly, ownership of cattle in pre-colonial times was multilayered. Ownership of livestock had a spiritual significance in that both goats and cattle were also used for the purpose of

communicating with ancestors (Dlamini 1993:227) because cattle did not only represent wealth.

As mentioned before, cattle were not the only means through which *lobola* was given (Dlamini 1983:221). Literature indicates that other valuables such as grain, blankets, hoes and horses (among Basotho) could also be offered as *lobola* items (Dlamini 1983:221; Ansell 2011:4). Thus, there is no fixed rule that dictates what should form part of the make-up of *lobola* (Dlamini 1983:221). For instance, in biblical times, Jacob offered to work for Laban in exchange of his daughter Rachel (Fothane 2020:131). Although some may argue that this was not the 'African version' of *lobola*. Other researchers also mention that there are cases wherein a young man could offer 'whatever he could' as a token of appreciation for his would-be wife (Hammond-Tooke 1948:25; Dlamini 1983:84; Mkize 2023:20). This discussion further highlights the multilayered and multifunctional nature of the practice of *lobola*, and my argument that there is a 'time factor' attached to the debate on the concept and practice of *lobola*.

Linked to the make-up discussion is the process of offering *lobola*. As with other aspects of *lobola*, the process is also mediated by local variations, or where *lobola* is practised. However, in Southern Africa, the process is commonly characterised by negotiations between the family of the bride and groom at the family of the bride. The negotiations are conducted by delegates from the two families as parents and the would-be couple do not traditionally participate in the negotiations (Parker 2015:183). The purpose for these negotiations is mainly to determine the number of cattle to be 'given', and in the case of money, the amount to be 'paid' by the family of the groom 'in exchange' for the daughter. *Lobola* negotiations are characterised by offers and counter-offers, and in some settings there is no fixed or pre-determined number of cattle or amount of money (Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:579; Rudwick and Posel 2014:119), although arguably the family of the bride would have discussed their preferred amount upfront. The final amount to be paid, or number of cattle to be given will be an outcome of the financial situation of the groom, or his family and the negotiation skills of his delegates (Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:583). Different tribes in different localities have their own variations attached to the process. Literature shows that *lobola* was not paid in full at a single gathering (Kohler 1993:68; Dlamini 1983:84-85; Ansell 2011:7). It was paid in instalment and in certain localities it can never be paid in full for the duration of the marriage. According to Makama (2020:23), there was no prescribed period within which payment had to be settled.

Situating *lobola* in history

Some researchers have attempted to trace the genesis of *lobola* and place in history in its quest for excavating its origin (Marwede and Mamabolo 1945, Kohler 1933, Kuper 1982, Dlamini 1983, Parker 2015, Bayi and Hawthorne 2018, Ansell 2001). As it shall become be demonstrated, to attempt to locate the origin of social phenomena such as the practice of *lobola* within a specific period is a complex undertaking, if not an impossible one. One of the reasons it is a complex undertaking is this question: how far back in history can research possibly excavate the origin of such a practice as *lobola*? (Dlamini 1983:72). Linked to this issue is the challenge regarding documenting African practices, which in some cases have been poorly documented or not done at all. Owing to the reality that African traditions were orally transmitted from generation to generation, and largely written by anthropologists and colonial missionaries, the authenticity and historical originality of practices such as *lobola* is difficult to ascertain (Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:580). This challenge is further compounded by 'epistemic mistrust' emanating from the collectors and interpreters of data pertaining to the concept and practice of *lobola*, mainly European anthropologists. Hoernle (1925:482) admitted, as though representing other European anthropologists of her time, that, "We can never hope to understand the real and original function of such customs as the *lobola* transfer of cattle for a bride, or the sacrifices to the dead, until we realise that we are in contact with ideas of cattle radically different from our own." Thus, to argue that anthropologists' documentation of African tradition reflects the true intention of participants from whom data was collected will remain a subject of eternal academic contestation. To add, there is arguably paucity of empirical evidence regarding how this ancient concept and practice of *lobola* originated (Matambirofa 2021:33). It is certainly beyond dispute that *lobola* is an ancient practice that dates to the period before Christ (Dlamini 1983:72, Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:10). Huffman (1998:57) contends that *lobola* probably existed in some Early Iron Age societies, basing this on excavations that he says were done at Broederstroom. It is worth noting that research on the practice of *lobola* is recent, concentrating in the early 1900s. It is a subject that anthropologists 'bumped into' when they were conducting research on African marriage systems.

What is the rationale for tracing the historicity of the practice of lobola?

For the purpose of this study, one of the reasons for tracing the history of *lobola* emanates from the 'over-use' of the words 'original meaning', 'historically', 'traditionally' and 'originally' in the current literature (Nduna 2021:18; Kgadima and Leburu 2022; Makama 2020:23; Posel and Rudwick 2011:1; Olisa 2016:3; Montle and Moleke 2021:591). The use of these words seems to suggest that (1) *lobola* does have a traceable historical origin, (2) there is knowledge about how it was originally or historically conceptualised and practised, (3) there is a reliable source from which this knowledge resides, (4) *lobola* has lost its original meaning, (5) there is

a point in history at which *lobola* lost its original meaning, and (6) there is evidence of the loss of its original meaning.

It has already been discussed that *lobola* does have a historical origin as different studies report (Hoernle 1925, Kuper 1933, Dlamini 1983, Huffman 1998). Thus, *lobola* has a traceable origin, or has a place in history where it originated, albeit impossible to attach its origin to a specific time in history and to a specific originator or tribe. It must be stated that there seems to be lack of evidence regarding how the practice of *lobola* started (Matambirofa 2021:33), let alone the period at which it started. That said, Chitakure (2021:49) theorises that the origin of *lobola* was 'given birth', so to say, by the end of endogamy. According to him, during the time when endogamy was practised, *lobola* was not paid because there was no need to do so since women's services were retained by their kin, thus, nothing was lost, he argues. He maintains that *lobola* probably started when men started marrying outside their families or clans, thus, this abandoning of endogamy meant that the wife-givers would experience the loss of their daughter's services. Although there seems to be no evidence to support this theory, I would argue that it finds residence in logic.

At what point did the practice and concept of lobola lose its original meaning?

As discussed above, it can be argued that there is a point in history at which *lobola* lost its original meaning, and there must be evidence of the loss of its original meaning. There is consensus in literature that the concept and practice of *lobola* lost its meaning at the onset of the colonial era (Dlamini 1993:228; Chisi 2018:22; Nduna 2021:18; Montle and Moleke 2021:590; Matambirofa 2021:41). Chisi (2018:22) argues that the outlook of *lobola* got altered by colonialism. Accordingly, and inevitably, literature seems to suggest that there are two versions of *lobola*, namely pre-colonial and post-colonial *lobola*. The pre-colonial version of *lobola* is the one considered 'original'. This is demonstrated by using the words 'originally' (Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:580-581), 'historically' (Ansell 2001:23) and 'traditionally' (Parker 2015:178). Inevitably, this should suggest that there is unity of thought in terms of how *lobola* was conceptualised and practised in pre-colonial times in contrast with how it is currently practised. Below I discuss the two 'versions of *lobola*'.

Pre-colonial lobola

Lobola is an ancient practice that dates to the period before Christ (Dlamini 1983:72, Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:10). In their study titled 'Colonialisation of *lobolo*', Bayi and Hawthorne (2018:580) place *lobola* in the context of marriage and argue that prior to colonisation there was no distinction between *lobola* and marriage. Bayi and Hawthorne (2018:580) assert that

lobola has been a part of marriage in most African countries since pre-colonial times. During these times, the only marriage that existed was the customary marriage, and *lobola* constituted part of the process of concluding marriage (Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:580). Dlamini (1993:72) argues that “in investigating an institution like *ilobolo*, an institution of ancient origin, it is imperative to trace its historical development among the people who have practised it.” The challenge with this assertion is that people who practised *lobola* did not (or did not have the means to) document the practice due to the oral transmission of African traditions. Thus, the African way of life was transmitted from generation to generation by the spoken word and methods of communication other than writing (Wiredu 2009:9). This implies that much of the data we have on this subject was written by colonial missionaries and anthropologists (Wiredu 2009:9, Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:580). Added to this, Wiredu (2004:1) contends that the colonialists and their related personnel perceived Africans’ way of life and thinking as inferior. Wiredu (2009:9) seems to cast doubt on anthropological research conducted by foreign scholars, accusing them of using what he calls “hired informants” to collect their data. This accusation adds a layer of mistrust considering Hoernle’s admission (1925:482) that they could never hope to understand the real and original function of such customs as the *lobola*. To sum up this section, it is evident that the pre-colonial *lobola* was not ‘paid’ in money. Cattle were given to the family of the bridegroom. Equally important, the family of the groom to contribute to the *lobola* of their son or nephew in the case of uncles and aunts. In the main, fathers were responsible for the ‘payment’ of *lobola* for their sons. During this time, *lobola* was tied to the function of legitimizing a marriage union and creating *ubuhlobo* between families. The other functions such as compensation for the loss of the daughter, or her services was also the premise on which the practice of *lobola* rested. The economic function of *lobola*, discussed previously, was not explicit.

Post-colonial lobola

Much attention is devoted to the post-colonial ‘version’ of *lobola* and major themes in contemporary research. It must be stated that the demarcation between pre-colonial and post-colonial cannot necessarily be physically drawn. The constructs pre-colonial and post-colonial are used for the purpose of highlighting differences between how *lobola* was understood and practised prior to colonisation and how it has mutated post colonisation. Arguably, in the main, *lobola* continued to serve its purpose in relation to marriage matters, regardless of how it was, and it is currently practised. Some of the themes that contemporary research brought to the surface include: *lobola* and human rights, commercialisation of *lobola*, and commodification of women.

2.5 Major themes in contemporary studies

1. *The commercialisation argument*

Post-colonial researchers seem to agree that the concept and practice of *lobola* has evolved and deviated from its mandate (Chisi 2018:127; Montle and Moleke 2021:587; Sekudu and Malesa 2022:157, Ngwenyama 2023:67). Words such as ‘traditionally’ (Nduna 2021:18; Kgadima and Leburu 2022), ‘historically’ (Makama 2020:23; Posel and Rudwick 2011:1) and ‘originally’ (Mwamanda 2016:51; Olisa 2016:3; Montle and Moleke 2021:591) are replete in literature, indicating, or perhaps supporting the argument about the evolution of the concept and practice of *lobola*. Studies that support this view have constructed the notion that *lobola* has been commercialised, thus, it has become a money-making scheme and therefore it has lost its ‘traditional’ or ‘original’ meaning. For instance, Chisi (2018) conducted a study in Zimbabwe which among other things sought to determine if *lobola* is still being observed as a custom that builds relationships and family structure in African families. The results of this study indicated that “sons-in-law regard their fathers-in-law as greedy, evil and exploiters while the fathers-in-law regard their sons-in-law as mean and ungrateful fellows” (Chisi 2018:127). This study further found that “some Shona girls of marriageable age are condemned to single life because prevailing *lobola* charges are beyond the reach of some young men,” as a result, young women resort to bearing children out of wedlock while those who are employed resort to raising their own *lobola*. Commenting on the findings of this study, Chisi (2018:127) concludes that the practice of *lobola* no longer serves the original purpose of creating friendship between families. Chisi’s research is corroborated by a South African study conducted by Posel and Rudwick (2011). Posel and Rudwick (2011) conducted a study in Kwa-Zulu Natal titled “Marriage and *ilobolo* in contemporary Zulu society.” In this study, it is reported that over 60% of male respondents identified *lobola* as the main reason for not marrying. The researchers report that most females who wanted to marry considered *lobola* as a hindrance. Posel and Rudwick (2011) are of the view that the way *lobola* is practised and particularly the amount that is requested can contribute to delayed marriage and non-marriage in contemporary Zulu society. In a study conducted by Olisa (2016), some of the research participants cited *lobola* as the reason they could not enter marriage. A study conducted by Montle and Moleke (2021) explored the commercialisation of *lobola* in South Africa. This study found that commercialisation of *lobola* engenders reluctance to marry (Montle and Moleke 2021:1). These researchers suggest a correlation between commercialisation of *lobola* and the rise of cohabitation. This view is supported by Chisi (2018:130) who contends that cohabitation (*vat-en-sit – in Afrikaans*) seems to be a solution for couples that want to stay together but cannot afford to pay *lobola*. Mohlabane, Gumede and Mokomane (2019) conducted a quantitative study to determine the attitudes towards marriage in post-apartheid South Africa. On the question about whether or not *lobola* is the main reason why people do

not get married these days, 41% of their respondents agreed, while 40% disagreed, 10% were neutral and 9% uncertain of how to respond (Mohlabane, Gumede and Mokomane 2019:172). Ngwenyama (2023:68) conducted a study in Eswatini to explore male vulnerability through kinship making. This study found that the rate of unemployment in Eswatini is 46.22% and this implied that many young men cannot afford the number of cattle that families ask for. Similar findings are reported in the study conducted in Uganda by Muthegheki, Crispus and Abrahams (2012). Muthegheki *et al.* (2012:13) report that the economic burden for men associated with paying *lobola* was a common theme expressed by all participants. It is reported that men are overcharged and therefore this leads to financial hardships for low-income men and the rise in pregnancies out of wedlock and elopement (Muthegheki *et al.* 2012:13-14).

All these studies provide a premise for what has been termed 'commercialisation' of *lobola*, which is argued to have been necessitated by the 'loss of its original meaning'. By inference, *lobola* is no longer practised the way it was practised prior to colonialism, understood and conceptualised *inter alia* as a token of appreciation (Olisa 2016:150). It appears that in the pre-colonial era, the number of cattle required for *lobola* were not fixed and there was provision to accommodate the poor (Dlamini 1993:83; Ansell 2001:5). Literature shows that *lobola* has become profit-driven and clothed with a sense of personal enrichment (Chabata 2014:2; Parker 2015:178). Dlamini (1993:94) attributes the commercialisation of *lobola* to the disappearance of the social and spiritual tie that was inherent in the practice of *lobola*. Researchers seem to agree that the change from the use of cattle to money gave rise to commercialisation (Dlamini 1993:228; Matambirofa 2021:31; Montle and Moleke 2021:590). As I argued elsewhere, *lobola* could not be immune to natural evolution, just like any other cultural practice. It is not possible to isolate the material or economic aspect of *lobola* from its ontological essence because it transfers livestock (wealth) from one family to another.

2. *The violation of women's rights argument*

As mentioned above, other studies focus on *lobola* and issues of human rights and equality (Moono *et al.* 2020; Malesa and Sekudu 2022) and gender and power (Nkosi 2011; Makama 2020). This is an area in which some scholars call for the abolition and/or reconstruction of the practice of *lobola* (Mamabolo 1945:27; Mvududu 2000; Chireshe 2010) and the revival of the original meaning (Montle and Moleke 2021:591). Several studies linked *lobola* to violation of women's rights, abuse of women in marriage, and commodification of women (Thiara and Hague 2011; Fuseini 2013; Moono *et al.* 2020; Montle 2020; Sennott *et al.* 2021). Moono *et al.* (2020) conducted a qualitative study in Lusaka which focused on *lobola* and gender-based violence among married women. The results of their study indicate that payment of *lobola* was

perceived as buying a wife and therefore the wife was perceived as her husband's property. It was also found that some fights among couples were linked to payment of *lobola*. The study conducted by Malesa and Sekudu (2020:162) in Limpopo province reports that some of their male participants stated that they do not understand why men should pay *lobola* and still be equal with women. Montle and Moleke's study (2021:1) found that payment of *lobola* fosters gender-based violence. Ngoma (2005) conducted a study that investigated Xhosa women in abusive relationships. This study reports that payment of *lobola* was among the reasons their respondents remained in abusive marriages. A study conducted by Chabata (2011) indicates that most women who participated in his study complained that their husbands abused them out of bitterness for the huge amounts of money they paid to their in-laws for *lobola*. Some of the male participants in the study felt entitled to take all decisions pertaining to sex even to the extent of forcing their wives to have sex. A Ugandan study conducted by Thiara and Hague (2011:2) found that *lobola* was considered by the majority of their informants as a practice that cements gender inequality, giving them little power and turning women into commodities that can be passed from family to family. This study further reports that 99% of the interviewees believed that *lobola* accounted for the violence they experienced. Fuseini (2013) conducted research in Ghana focusing on the effect of *lobola* on domestic violence. This study found that *lobola* influences domestic violence. The findings of this study indicate that a woman whose *lobola* has been paid in full was more likely to be abused than a woman whose *lobola* was not paid at all.

As mentioned, the commercialisation argument and women rights argument are broad themes that occupied contemporary scholarship (Olisa 2016; Mubaiwa 2019; Montle and Moleke 2021; Malesa and Sekudu 2021). Within these broad themes emerged calls for the obliteration of the practice of *lobola* by some scholars and organisations that advocate for the rights of women. It must be stated that the call for the obliteration of the practice of *lobola* is not entirely a new phenomenon. Christian missionaries called for the obliteration of *lobola* on the ground that the practice perpetuated violence against women (Murray 1981; Dlamini 1983). Primarily, the call for the obliteration of the practice of *lobola* premises its position on the assumed correlation between the practice of *lobola* with oppression of women, violation of the rights of women, objectification of women and commercialisation of the practice. Some of the contemporary research work seems to have departed from a 'fault-finding' mission ... to find problems and faults in the concept and practice of *lobola*. For instance, some of the studies include: '*Exploring the commercialisation of lobola in South Africa*' (Montle and Moleke 2021), '*Brideprice (lobola) and gender-based violence among married women in Lusaka*' (Moono, Thankian, Menon, Mwaba and Menon 2020), '*Wives at the Market Place: Commercialisation of lobola and commodification of women's bodies in Zimbabwe*' (Chiweshe 2016),

'Conceptualising lobola as a perpetuator of gender-based violence in South Africa through Intsika' (Montle 2020), and *'Brideprice Syndrome and Dominance in Marriage: An expository analysis'* (Titi 2019). To this, Makama (2020:25) laments that contemporary scholarship about *lobola* has not deviated from the early scholarship that presented *lobola* as a problematic African practice that is used to oppress women under the guise of culture.

With the preceding discussions in mind, some scholars contend that the practice of *lobola* does not have a problem in itself (Ansell 2001:30). Thus, it does not lead to abuse and/or violation of the rights of women. They contend that problems that are associated with the practice of *lobola* emanate from 'misunderstanding' and 'misinterpretation' of the concept and practice, which then lead to the abuse or incorrect use of *lobola* (Marwede 1945; Makama 2020; Malesa and Sekudu 2022:165). It would seem as though the evolution of the concept and practice of *lobola* is also at the core of the debate. For instance, some scholars hold that the change in human circumstances necessitates the change of certain cultural practices (Mamabolo 1945:17). Mamabolo (1945:18) strongly contends that:

Custom only justifies its continuance when the purpose it serves is good and big enough to outweigh the inconvenience accompanying its observance ... When change renders a particular custom a cumbersome obstacle to continued life, the custom should be waived aside, because customs are not important in themselves but in the degree in which they help a particular society to exist.

Ansell (2001:28) opines that "the meanings and functions of all cultural practices change over time and cannot be understood without regard for the contemporary context in which they operate." Ngwenyama (2023:68) adds that *lobola* is not static and timeless, nor does it exist in a vacuum ... it changes, and it is influenced by socio-political changes." In view of this, one could argue that, while in the process of continuity, *lobola* finds itself at the firing line of 'time factors' ... such as globalisation, poverty, human rights activism, feminism, individualisation, socio-economic issues and opposition against patriarchy. For instance, *lobola* was conceptualised at a time when gender equality was not on the agenda because an ancient African society was male-dominated (Malesa and Sekudu 2022:158).

***Ubuntu* — a missing puzzle in contemporary research**

There has been an attempt, or there are attempts by some scholars to 'defend' the practice of *lobola* on the ground that it is a victim of misinterpretation by Europeans. Arguably, it does seem as though Africans themselves ascribe different meanings to the practice and concept of *lobola*. Consequently, these varied meanings absolve 'European misunderstanding'

because *lobola* is practised by Africans not Europeans. It is Africans who have ‘commercialised’ it. For instance, other researchers attribute the ‘abuse’ of *lobola* to greed and personal enrichment attitudes (Parker 2015:178; Posel and Rudwick 2011:12-13; Mbewe 2012: 220); hence the call by Mbewe (2012:221) to apply African values and principles in the application of *lobola*. The practice of *lobola* is also defended on the ground that it is part of African culture and identity (Ansell 2001:29; Chireshe and Chireshe 2010: 215; Mbewe 2012: 221). Notably, the call for the abolishment of the practice of *lobola* is found in studies conducted by African scholars whose data was collected from African participants. It may be argued that this call has nothing or little to do with European misunderstanding as scholars such as Matambirofa (2021:42) would want us to believe. De Haas’ study (1987) since asked this question: “Is there anything more to say about *lobolo*?” It does not seem like contemporary research has addressed this question, except to overly focus on the influence of colonialism on the concept and practice of *lobola*, and all the ills that emanated from this. What is visibly lacking in literature is focused scholarship on how Africans have probably abandoned the philosophy of *Ubuntu* in their application of *lobola*.

Considering that research indicates that *lobola* is still regarded as an integral part of African culture (Ansell 2001; Mawere and Mawere 2010; Chiweshe 2016; Mohlabane et al. 2019; Msweli 2020) ... and despite calls to abolish it (Mamabolo 1945; Chireshe and Chireshe 2010; Moono 2019; Fothane 2020), there is a need to focus scholarship on its continuity. The focus on continuity ought to employ the African philosophical perspective of *Ubuntu*, which is currently a missing puzzle in the current scholarship on the concept and practice of *lobola*. Parker (2015:178) opines that “situating *lobola* in the philosophy of *Ubuntu* brings about an understanding of the importance of community in African life.” The current study seeks to establish whether the concept and practice of *lobola* had ties with the philosophy of *Ubuntu* and if, in its quest for continuity, has disconnected from *Ubuntu*.

2.6 Situating the study of *lobola* in philosophy

This section seeks to rationalise the place of *lobola* in the field of philosophy. As mentioned, the subject of *lobola* has been mainly researched in the related disciplines such as Theology, Social Work, Law, Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology. First, it must be stated that *lobola* is a cultural practice and part of the gamut of identity among Black people (Matambirofa 2021:3; Nkosi 2021:36). Ukwamedua (2011:248) argues that “the interplay between culture, thought and philosophy is perennial hence the triad cannot be alienated in the quest for a holistic appreciation of reality.” Gyekye (1987:72) supports this argument when he contends

that “philosophy is a cultural phenomenon in that philosophical thought is grounded in cultural experience.” Philosophy is a tool for critical reflection on reality, and its use should not be confined to critical reflection on abstract issues that have no bearing on day-to-day life. I agree with Serequeberhan in Mkhwanazi (2017:10) when he opines that “African philosophy should not be abstract rather it should reflect on verities of history in an attempt to resolve and explain problems experienced.” Although the focus of this study is on African philosophy, I argue that philosophy as an intellectual enterprise ought to help reflect critically on real human issues. It is for the same reason that Socrates, the ancient Athenian philosopher is credited as having “called philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men and bring her also into their homes and compel her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil” (Berland 1986:300). In doing so, Socrates rerouted philosophy from focus on celestial reality to terrestrial and human life; thus, he humanised philosophy. Cultural practices such as *lobola* were arguably born out of a need to engender and/or restore morality in matters pertaining to marriage and order in the formulation of identity. Moral philosophy is concerned with judgment about what is wrong and right. The morality of the practice of *lobola* has been questioned by missionaries and some African post-colonial scholars. Inevitably, the discipline of philosophy cannot afford to distance itself from human affairs academic discourse, if indeed it is regarded as the ‘queen and mother of all disciplines’ (Lwiwa 2023). Philosophy is traditionally known to be hibernating in academism rather than in real life situations. So, Socrates and Aristotle in particular migrated philosophy from ivory towerism to real and concrete life situations. Lwiwa (2023:2) argues that “philosophy should stand as a foundation to guide a universal realm of all knowledge.” By its very nature, etymologically speaking, defined as ‘the love for wisdom’, philosophy is about human life issues as wisdom is about day-to-day human existence. Lwiwa (2023:2) contends that philosophy has always been deemed a “study about everything” from time immemorial. Thus, to question the relevance and place of the study of *lobola* in the field of philosophy is tantamount to dehumanising philosophy and taking it back to the era of the pre-Socratics who were ‘obsessed’ with non-human phenomena. Taken to the extremes, this stance feeds into the narrative that questions our ancestors’ capacity to philosophise, for, the inception of *lobola* must have been preceded by some degree of thinking and rationalisation.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter discussed marriage in the African context to preface discussions on the concept and practice of *lobola*. As demonstrated, marriage and *lobola* are intricately intertwined in traditional African context, such that one cannot discuss one and leave out the other. This chapter demonstrated that both marriage and the practice of *lobola* are family-oriented and

express the interdependence of the African family system. Owing to the focus of this study, the chapter extensively discussed the concept and practice of *lobola*, focusing on its history, developmental trajectory and how it is currently understood and practised in the Southern African context. It further highlighted major themes that emerged in literature and presented central arguments that characterise post-colonial discourse on the practice of *lobola*. The chapter also sought to situate the study of *lobola* in the discipline of philosophy, by demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between African culture and African philosophy.

Chapter 3

The African philosophy of *Ubuntu*

3.1 Introduction

This chapter unpacks the intricate and symbiotic link between *Ubuntu* and African philosophy and thus argues that *Ubuntu* is an African philosophy. In the chapter, African philosophy is discussed broadly although not in detail, to preface the detailed discussion on *Ubuntu*. The chapter argues that *Ubuntu* is rooted in African philosophy. I highlight the history of *Ubuntu* and how it is currently practised in multiple contexts in contemporary Southern Africa. This chapter further explores emerged and emerging schools of thought in the discourse on *Ubuntu*. I further discuss the link between African culture and African philosophy. Equally important is the role of African philosophy in the construction and re-construction of African culture. I argue that if a (any) culture is to be considered African, it has to be conceptualised, constructed and practised consistent with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. The chapter seeks to embed and locate this study within the context of African philosophy, considering the proximity of the subject of *lobola* to other disciplines, such as anthropology. Thus, the chapter surfaces and highlights the philosophical aspect of the topic under study. Opining on the role of philosophy, Ijekeye (in Kanu, Ndubisi and Onebunne 2022:115) writes: “Philosophy gives us the rationale lens that saves us from anachronism. It allows us to think, question, critic, and then accept or reject any thought.” This assertion is critical in the context in which some cultural practices were or are traditionally immunised from critical reflections in the name of preservation and pride.

This study sees philosophy as a rational mechanism through which humanity, in this context, African people, can be saved from cultural anachronism. For this reason, the ever-important interface between philosophy and culture cannot be ignored neither can it be over-emphasised. Ijekeye (in Kanu *et al* 2002:115) correctly argues that “there are elements of culture in philosophy and pieces of philosophy in every culture.” Ijekeye considers philosophy and culture to be interdependent concepts. Philosophy is a tool that can be used to define, refine and construct human reality. Seen from this perspective, it gets freed from being considered an abstract discipline that has no use in ‘real life’. Plato himself used philosophy in his construction of an ideal state. Ijekeye rightly contends that philosophy can be used to shape the current culture. Achonu and Negedu (2014:33) support this argument by stating that “philosophy is a tool that is necessarily needed to fine-tune culture in order to raise it to certain level of objectivity.” Culture is known to be an evolving phenomenon. It adapts naturally to the ever-changing conditions that the people who practise it encounter. Philosophy can be used

as a tool for helping culture in its process of evolution. Achonu and Negedu (2014:33) emphasise that “critically analysing certain concepts, we aver that preservation of culture is hinged on progressive discourse, lest our cultures face threat of extinction and remains a dormant tradition.”

As a discipline, Philosophy cannot, should not or can no longer afford to delegate its duty to other disciplines such as Anthropology, Law, Theology, Psychology, and Sociology, especially if it desires to maintain its identity and pride as the science of all sciences as well as the mother of all sciences (Khan and Tantray 2018:230).

Philosophy in general

An etymological perspective on the term ‘philosophy’

A look into the etymology of the word ‘philosophy’ is necessary. The word philosophy is a composition of two Greek words namely *philo* which means love and *sophia* which means wisdom. It is expressed thus, “*philosophia esti philia tes sophias*,” an expression translated as “philosophy is love of wisdom” (Kanu *et al* 2022:42). By inference, a philosopher is a lover of wisdom.

Philosophy is a rational enterprise. From time immemorial, human beings always sought and attempted to make sense of things around them, with them and to understanding the universe they found themselves in. Jaspers (1954:15) argues that “philosophy is always with us” such that there is no escape from it. According to Jaspers (1954:9), some questions that children ask are an indication of man’s innate disposition to philosophy. He provides an example of a child who, upon being told the Genesis story of creation asks, “What was before the beginning?” Jaspers contends that such a question indicates that “there is no end to questioning, that there is no stopping place for the mind, and that no conclusive answer is possible.”

Ascribing the origin of philosophy to a particular race and geographical location runs counter to the very essence of philosophy. Taken to the extremes, such an attitude dehumanises humanity and it is ontologically unphilosophical as it seeks to place race and geographical location before philosophy. I would even further assert that an attitude of this nature is rooted in what Anthropologists call ethnocentrism. Jaspers (1954:39) is of the view that an absolute beginning of philosophy cannot be found. Arguably, philosophy is as old as the humankind, a position that seems to support Jaspers’ argument. The use of adjectives such as ‘African’, ‘Western’, ‘Chinese’ and so forth ought to be purely for the purpose of helping us understand

the plurality of philosophy instead of the superiority of philosophy that is often implicitly attached to other races and geographical locations.

3.2 African culture and African philosophy

As mentioned under the introduction section, the link between African culture and African philosophy is central to the study, considering that *lobola* is an African cultural practice and *Ubuntu* is the cornerstone of African philosophy as already indicated. There is a sense in which people's culture as their way of life reflects their philosophy, if by philosophy in this case we refer to an outlook. It could therefore be reasoned that people's culture and philosophy are almost impossible to separate. Indeed, Okot (in Wiredu 2004:372) supports this view by stating that "a people's culture is their practical philosophy." This begs the question, does studying African culture lead to understanding African philosophy? The study of culture is predominantly the domain of Anthropology. That said, the proximity between culture and philosophy should not imply that the study and understanding of one lead to the understanding of the other. In other words, by studying Anthropology, one may not necessarily gain complete comprehension of philosophy. The opposite applies. These are mutually exclusive terms although they may show parallels.

3.3 *Ubuntu*

This section explores the ontology of *Ubuntu*, its history and how it is practised. The section further highlights concrete examples and various settings in which *Ubuntu* is practised. Emerging arguments are discussed, and the section concludes with a discussion on the continuity of *Ubuntu*. At the onset of the section, I discuss the history of *Ubuntu* as reflected in literature.

The history of Ubuntu

Ubuntu has been widely argued to be a way of life of the Bantu people (Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013). Gade (2012:486) supports this view and holds that *Ubuntu* mainly stems from and it is deeply rooted in African indigenous cultures. According to Gade, the origin of *Ubuntu* can be traced back to small-scale communities in pre-colonial Africa. Bennett (2011:31) is of the view that it is not possible to trace the exact denotation of the word *Ubuntu* in its vernacular origins. Any undertaking that seeks to trace the origin of *Ubuntu* is for me a futile attempt. Instead, there is a need to make peace with an assumption that *Ubuntu* is as old as the Bantu people. Such an assumption resonates with Bennett's contention that it is not known whether *Ubuntu* has always been a word in everyday usage. Bennett (2011:32)

speculates that *Ubuntu* seems to have been co-opted into a nation-wide public discourse in South Africa during the 1920s when the Zulu cultural movement, *Inkatha* used it as a slogan in its programme to revive respect for traditional Zulu values. Setiloane (in Gade 2011:306) reports that the “the term *Ubuntu* was first used in South African writing in an address to a conference which was held in Durban in 1960.” This considered, one can further speculate that even prior to this, *Ubuntu* always existed, especially considering that Gade’s study (2011:303) indicates that the term *Ubuntu* has frequently appeared in writing since 1846. Thus, its original time and location is the realm of speculation.

With the above in mind, Gade (2011) conducted a historical analysis of the various ways in which *Ubuntu* has been defined in written sources. According to Gade, such an analysis has never been undertaken before. Gade (2011:307) reports that prior to 1980, the concept of *Ubuntu* was mainly described as: “human nature”, “humanity”, “humanness”, “manhood”, “goodness of nature”, “good moral disposition”, “virtue”, “true humanity”, “personhood”, “good moral nature”, “the sense of common humanity”, “essential humanity”, “kindness”, “real humanity”, “the characteristic of being truly human”, and “capacity of social self-sacrifice on behalf of others.” Gade’s study demonstrates the historical conception of *Ubuntu*, thus, how it was framed, interpreted and understood prior to 1980. Another area of value from this study is that there is certainly a sense of unity of thought in how *Ubuntu* has always been understood. Gade himself opines that “the level of disagreement about the nature of *Ubuntu* does not seem to have been as great as it is today.”

The concept of Ubuntu

Some researchers like Gade (2012:487) and Anofuechil and Klaasen (2024:2) argue that it is difficult to define *Ubuntu* and there is no consensus on the meaning of its meaning. However, I contend that there are characterisations of *Ubuntu* that can be argued to hold convergence across various settings in which *Ubuntu* is practised. Thus, albeit it may be construed differently by different people, it can be established that there is a set of common assumptions that underline what constitutes *Ubuntu*. Some of characterisations of *Ubuntu* include, “African moral theory” (Metz 2011), “a humanistic ethic” (Tschaep 2013), “the African philosophy of social living” (Okoro 2015), “an African philosophy” (Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013). Discernibly, all these characterisations indicate fundamental convergence and/or ontological unity. Thus, by design, *Ubuntu* is rooted in, driven by, and oriented towards humanity, and it is indeed “the African philosophy of social living” as Okoro (2015) characterised it. Ramose (2005:35) accentuates this point when he argues that “*Ubuntu* is the root of African philosophy”. According to him, *Ubuntu* can be regarded as the base or foundation upon which

the structure of African philosophy rests. He maintains that “African philosophy has long been established in and through *Ubuntu*.” It seems, although contentious, that Ramose holds that there is no African philosophy without *Ubuntu*.

Some scholars have paid attention to the linguistic structure of the concept of *Ubuntu*. Firstly, the word *Ubuntu* is rooted in the Nguni and South African Bantu languages and indigenous cultures of Africa (Gade 2012; Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013; Tschaepe 2013). Anofuechi and Klaasen (2024) agree and add that the concept of *Ubuntu* originates from many vernacular languages that share the same concept, root and construction. Anofuechi and Klaasen (2024:1) indicate that in Kenya, the Kikuyu use the word *umundu*, and Merians use *umuntu*; in Tanzania, the Sukuma people use the term *bumuntu*, and Chagga use *undu*; and in East Africa, the Swahili people *utu*. Ramose (2005:36) puts attention to the structural arrangement of the word *Ubuntu* and argues that the word *Ubuntu* can be broken into two words, namely “*ubu*” and “*ntu*”. Ramose explains that “*ubu*” evokes the idea of be-ing in general whereas *ntu* is the nodal point at which be-ing assumes concrete form.

In Sesotho languages, *Ubuntu* is translated *botho*, which carries the same meaning and values discussed below under the characteristics of *Ubuntu*. Thus, the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu* is translated *motho ke motho ka batho*. One wonders whether Ramose’s structural arrangement of *Ubuntu* applies to Sesotho languages. In Sesotho languages, it may be inconceivable to break the word *botho* into two meaningful words, especially because in Northern Sotho, for instance, the prefix *bo* could be used as a prefix for different words that have different meanings. However, it can be used in related concepts to denote the status of being, for example, *bo-motho*, which does not entirely carry the same meaning as *botho*; *bo-modimo*, which could mean godliness, *bo-Sathane*, which could mean satanic, and *bo-loi* (witchcraft). Thus, in this context, the prefix *bo* expresses or explains the character or moral status of a human being, associated with the root word, for instance, *Modimo* (God), *Sathane* (Satan). The word ‘*tho*’ does not have an independent meaning when it is not preceded by another word. Thus, the prefix *bo* is not always oriented towards *tho* as in the case of *ubu-ntu* as Ramose argues. One acknowledges that this may be more of a philosophical construction than a linguistic one.

Characteristics of Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a relational philosophy. It is practical in the sense that it is practised and/or applicable in 'real life' relational settings. The adage "I am a person through other persons" binds the existence of one person with that of fellow human beings. Thus, *Ubuntu* can be construed as a relational contract that binds African humanity together, wherein the actions of one individual directly affect the entire ecosystem. As discussed in the section below, the self (or identity) of an African finds its definition and essence in the context of the community of other people, not only individuals. To emphasise this point, Ramose (2005:35) regards the being of an African as anchored on *Ubuntu* in a manner that is inseparable. Anofuechi and Klaasen (2024:1) assert that the application of *Ubuntu* is infused into the everyday life all over Africa. At the heart of *Ubuntu* lies fundamental values such as humanism, humility, interdependence, sharing, giving, hospitality, communalism, collectivity, respect, harmony, caring, solidarity, compassion, cooperation and shared responsibility (Okoro 2015; Anofuechi and Klaasen 2024:2). These are the key characteristics of *Ubuntu*. By inference, and in practice, the basic tenets of *Ubuntu* run counter to hostility, self-centredness, hatred, jealous, vengeance and confrontation. It is for this reason that Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and many other African leaders did not resort to retaliation at the inception of the democratic dispensation.

3.4 *Ubuntu* and African identity

Ubuntu is not just a philosophical outlook situated 'outside' the being of an African, waiting to be studied and assimilated. It can be considered the foundation of African identity. In other words, *Ubuntu* defines who Africans are or ought to be. According to Gade (2011:316), "Africans are a people whose identity is founded on *Ubuntu*." Ramose (2005:35) correctly holds that "to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others." According to this conception of being, a person *becomes* or is forever *becoming*. We could say he or she 'comes to be' a person through other persons. This is perfectly expressed by the adage "I am a person through other persons" (Okoro 2015:2). Thus, there is no 'I' without 'We'. In this sense, the definition of self becomes impossible, or perhaps inconceivable without inclusion of others. Okoro (2015:5) maintains that "Africans define themselves within the community of other people and not just as individuals." This conception is rooted in the view that being a human being cannot and should not be defined by and limited to possession of a physical body and operation of physiological processes (Wiredu 2004:17). Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear people in African communities say, "so and so ga se *motho*" (Fothane 2021:196), implying that so and so is not a person. The English translation of this phrase may not make sense as it means that a human being is not a person. What is meant by the phrase is that a human being can lose their status of a person, or their identity as an ethical human by virtue of conducting themselves in a manner that grossly contradicts personhood, or what

Ubuntu stands for. It is comparable to disbarment in the legal fraternity. Fothane (2021:198) argues that *motho* (human being) without *botho* (humanness) becomes *selo* (a thing). Ramose (Jenco, Idris and Thomas 2020:264) defines *selo* as “a physical entity outside the category of *motho*. To say “so and so *ga se motho*” is an expression that indicates the stripping off an individual’s identity as a human being. Thus, it is a conversion from *motho* to *selo*. The preceding discussion highlights what lies at the core of *ubuntu*, communitarianism. Thus, community and communal living are essential particles of the African social order. To this, Senghor (in Gyekye and Wiredu 2010:102) posits thus:

Negro-African society is collectivist or, more exactly communal, because it is rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals. Negro-African society puts more stress on the group than on the individuals, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy. Ours is a community society.

Within this socio-ethical framework, a human being is regarded as organically communal and communitarian in essence and orientation since he is born into an existing community, society and culture (Gyekye 2010:105). Gyekye (2010:107) maintains that communitarianism conceptualises community as a fundamental human good which fosters *ubuntu*-values such as harmonious co-existence, cooperation, interdependence and mutual consideration.

As can be inferred from the preceding discussions, the concept of identity in African culture is not exclusively and linearly confined to one’s personality traits, as in *cogito, ergo sum* propounded by Descartes (Grayling 2020:201). According to Mbiti (in Wiredu 2004: 337), in the African view of man, one can only say, “I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am.” This assertion accentuates the ‘we-ity’ of African identity, that’s to say it is rooted in collective, co-existence, community and solidarity. For instance, it is common among the Northern Sotho speakers to hear people say, “*Wa tla wa re dira batho*” literally meaning you have made us human beings. This expression is normally used when a family member has achieved something significant which benefits the family. It is also used in instances where an individual has assisted an indigent person. Essentially, the expression indicates that a human being is not only born into a human family. A human being is made or constructed. Equally, one’s identity is not only wired by physiological activities, but also made or constructed by fellow human beings within the moral framework of *Ubuntu*. Within this context, it is possible for one to be disowned by a family or community, if their conduct grossly violates the foundational principles of *Ubuntu*. A mother can say, “*ke paletšwe ke go belega*” meaning, I failed to give birth. However, this is used figuratively to indicate that their child’s conduct is a complete opposite of what an *Ubuntu*-identity looks like. Thus, *Ubuntu* is the kernel of African identity.

3.5 *Ubuntu* in practice

This section unpacks and discusses the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* as it applies in practical settings. The rationale for this section is to indicate the applicability of *Ubuntu* in practical life settings. It is also hoped that this will offset the notion that *Ubuntu* is abstract, vague and idealistic, thus, not practicable. To indicate how *Ubuntu* operates in multiple settings, the section is divided into two sub-sections, namely micro-level and macro-level. The micro level deals with the application of *Ubuntu* at the level of family, community and workplace. The macro level discusses *Ubuntu* at the political and governance level. At this level, I include the application and suitability of *Ubuntu* at corporate leadership and in the legal fraternity. All these 'levels of application' are indicative of the continued relevance of *Ubuntu* and in part an attempt to rebut the notion that *Ubuntu* was only applicable in ancient times and rural places. This section further intersects with a critical reflection on the emerged view that questions the existence of *Ubuntu* in the contemporary society (Matolino and Kwindigwi 2013).

Micro-level

Family and community

Several studies explored the 'practical manifestation' of the philosophy of *Ubuntu* in business, leadership, governance, workplace, politics, family life, law, education and other fields of study. In practice, the foundational assumptions and tenets that undergird the philosophy of *Ubuntu* are applicable to various issues and dimensions of socio-political life (Nghibi and Elechi 2022:225-226), thus, they can be integrated into all aspects of everyday life (Anofuechil and Klaasen 2024:1). According to Letseka (2012:16), "The meaning of *Ubuntu* becomes much clearer when we examine its practical effect on everyday life." At a micro level, one could argue that the meaning of *Ubuntu* is manifested in obligations that family members have to each other. Thus, in a family context, members of a family have an obligation to assist each other in practical ways to ensure subsistence. It must be considered that the concept of 'family' in the African context is much broader than one's immediate family; it includes what is commonly known as extended family. In the African context, the concept family refers to the clan; thus, it is not only limited to the household but the sum of all persons including the living and the dead (Okoro 2015:3).

There is a 'natural expectation' that the material needs of a family member ought to be met within the family setting. Put differently, the family is an enabler of fulfilment of the needs of family members. This line of thinking finds expression in the Northern Sotho saying that says "*Batho ke go šitelana*." Loosely translated, this could imply that people should help each other. However, the phrase '*go šitela*' invokes a sense of 'being inconvenienced, bothered or

troubled.’ Thus, this saying considers it normative for a family member to seek help from another family member even when doing so may be deemed an act of inconvenience. The application of this saying extends to neighbour relations. Growing up, it was purely normal to ask for salt, maize meal, sugar and related items from our neighbours. Added to this, there is also a practice of “*go tshwaela*” among the Northern Sotho people. The Setswana equivalent is called “*mafisa*.” These two practices are the same. In a situation where one’s neighbour is poor, their neighbour would take the initiative to offer a chicken to grow and nurture it so that eventually the neighbour will have hens of his or her own. In some cases, the poor neighbour’s son would be hired to herd the neighbour’s cattle after which he is given a calf to tender. According to Ramose (in Jenco *et al* 2020:274), the offer is based on the understanding that when the cattle of the neighbour increase in number, the original cow offered will be returned to the person who offered it. This concept is known as “*dikgomo tsa mafisa*,” basically cows that came because of the practice discussed above. Ngihbi and Elechi (2022:229) accentuate this point by asserting that “Africans are naturally generous people who frequently help out their neighbours.” In describing *Ubuntu*, Nelson Mandela is quoted as having said:

A traveller through a country would stop at a village and he did not have to ask for food or water. Once he stops, the people give him food and attend him...[Patel, Mohammed and Koen 2024:4].

The citation above provides a picture of *Ubuntu* in practice, in addition to other examples that have been discussed above. Herein lies some of the founding tenets of *Ubuntu* such as giving, sharing, care, family-centredness and neighbour-centredness. Evidently, self-centredness has no room within the framework of *Ubuntu*. Nkosi (2018:4) refers to two important adages that accentuate this point, namely: “*Molomo o tlhafunang o roga o mongwe*” and “*go fa ke go fega, ware go fa wa fegolla*.” The literal translation of the first adage is “a mouth that is chewing insults the one that is not chewing.” This adage discourages self-centredness in that one should not eat in the presence of others who do not have food. Thus, when one eats, they should be considerate of other people. The second adage is also centred on sharing and giving. It supposes that giving is a form of creating an enabling environment for one to be helped in return. For instance, Nkosi (2018:5) elaborates thus:

In many black communities, whenever a neighbour borrowed a hoe, a pot or a similar implement, it was incumbent on him or her to return it with some food, seedlings, or grain.

There are other manifestations of *Ubuntu* that indicate its applicability to social relations. For instance, *Ubuntu* engenders respect. Okogbe (2025:1) emphasises this point by arguing that

Ubuntu positions respect as a moral imperative and a foundational pillar that sustains communal life. Thus, within the framework of *Ubuntu*, respect is a moral obligation, not a thing that is done for the sake of itself. In African culture, respect finds expression in various aspects of life such as the choice of words, gestures, rituals and customs. As a kernel of social organisation, family plays a crucial role in instilling and exhibiting respect. To make this discussion plainer, one needs to consider the ontological fabric of family in traditional African cultures. As a point of departure, the structure of African families is hierarchical and consists of clear roles and responsibilities (Okogbe 2025:3). Within this structure, there is a distinction between a child and an adult. Elders are conferred the status of custodians of wisdom and as such accorded the highest level of respect (Okogbe 2025:3). Resultantly, there is an obligation for a child to respect an elderly person. For instance, when a child greets an elderly person, they are expected to use appropriate honorifics. As an example, among some Northern Sotho people, a child addresses their mother as '*bo-mma*'. The word *mma* means mother in English. The prefix *bo-* pluralises mother as though to mean 'mothers' in English, although referring to one mother. Thus, the rendering of mother in plural is a gesture of respect. Notably, the same gesture of respect is practised among the Vhavenda people. According to Hellen (2018:34), the use of the prefix *vho-* before a name as in *Vho Ditupa* is an expression of respect. Elderly people are seldom addressed by their personal names. Second, on a public transport like a bus or train, a young person may not occupy a seat while an elderly person is standing. In such a situation, the young person will voluntarily offer his or her seat to the elderly person as a sign of respect and acknowledgement of their eldership.

Another critical normative significance of the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is through what one may call 'collective parenting.' This is accurately captured by the adage: "It takes a community to raise a child." There is a sense in which family and community are intricately interwoven in African culture. Thus, for instance, a child does not only belong to their biological parents but to the community at large. In practice, what this means is that a child can be looked after by any parent or an elderly person such as a teacher at school. Growing up, teachers were an integral part of one's upbringing, not only in relation to scholarly matters but moral development as well. A teacher could visit a learner's family to discuss the moral conduct of the learner. Thus, childrearing was done collaboratively, in sync if I may add. This discussion can be elucidated by using the isiZulu saying: "*Ingane yami yingane yakho*", translated as "my child is your child" (Radebe and Phooko 2017:240). According to Fothane (2024:26), a child can be reprimanded by any adult even if they are not biologically related. Thus, he maintains, a child belongs to "a community of parents." Such an upbringing context naturally curbed the onset of certain societal ills because it frowned upon ill-discipline, such that even teenagers could not do certain things in the presence of adults. Thus, *Ubuntu* provides an enabling

context in which love and care for your neighbour's child can thrive. Additionally, it provides a community-based framework for moral development.

Another practical manifestation of *Ubuntu* is through communal help in that people help each other when one is experiencing some need, or they are in trouble (Radebe and Phooko 2017:242). There is a moral obligation to help each other where there is a funeral, wedding or any significant social gathering. The isiZulu saying “*Izandla ziyagezana*”, translated “hands wash each other” perfectly captures the spirit with which this is done. In most villages there are “*diphiri*” — a group of men who come together to dig a grave and close it at the funeral. Some of the men help with slaughtering a cow, pitching a tent, collecting firewood and to undertake many other activities that may require the ‘strength of men’ as it were. Women equally assist with cooking, washing dishes and cleaning. Some even contribute with their utensils and cooking equipment. Women also have stokvels and burial societies under the banner of “*masingwcabisane*”, which means let's help each other bury our loved ones. I should hasten to state that this form of help is not only happening in villages. Except for “*diphiri*”, this form of help can be observed in some townships and urban areas. In villages in particular, the entire community gets affected by the funeral and therefore respect and support this occasion by suspending all planned celebrations near the funeral (Radebe and Phooko 2017:242).

It should be stated that helping each other does not only take place where there is a funeral. As mentioned, also when there is a wedding or any other significant social gathering or when something significant happens in a family. For instance, when a child is born, neighbours seldom visit the parent/s' child with empty hands. They normally bring some useful items that the baby or the parent may need. Thus, not only do they celebrate together; they also contribute materially.

Ubuntu and community-driven economic development

Interdependence is one of the defining characteristics of *Ubuntu*. Within this context, life projects, such as farming and ploughing, including achievements such as harvesting are interdependent with community, thus creating an obligatory bond between persons and their communities (Tschaeppe 2013:53). The phrase ‘*ka batho*’ or ‘*nga bantu*’ as expressed in the adage “*motho ke motho **ka batho***” underscores interdependence of a nature that applies to various dimensions of life, one of which is community-driven economic development. I have bolded ***ka batho*** to accentuate the defining feature of this phrase. In practice, this implies that one achieves or accumulates wealth or material necessities *ka batho* — through members of the community or family. In Northern Sotho, there is an adage that says: “*Tau tša hloka seboka*

di šitwa ke nare e hlotša.” Loosely translated, this implies that lions that do not work together get defeated by a limping buffalo. The Sesotho equivalent says: “*Ntja pedi ha e hlolwe ke sebata,*” which according to Koenane (2019:115) means “in togetherness, success is guaranteed.” These adages emphasise the importance of collaboration, unity, interdependence and cooperation to achieve a target. The practice of *letsema* is another tangible manifestation of this interdependence and achieving through participation of the community. *Letsema* is a Sesotho word which means voluntarily working together (Resane 2023:1). Ramose (in Jenco *et al* 2020:273) adds that the practice of *letsema* involves participation of all able-bodied women and men who come together to help one another especially during the season of ploughing and reaping. Resane (2023:2) asserts that “*letsema* plays a crucial economic role and provides communal stability.” Resane (2023:2) maintains that through *letsema*, the community carries itself towards self-reliance; the line between the ‘haves and have-nots’ is very thin, if not invisible.” Notably, the ripple effect of *letsema* is enhanced collective ownership of the produce of the land, which in turn leads to collective protection and reduction of theft, jealousy and laziness. Resane (2023:2) opines that participating in *letsema* can potentially contribute towards the prevention of social ills such as crime, drug abuse, gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy and other related issues.

Letsema is one example of how *Ubuntu* is applicable to economic development. Arguably, as we shall see, *Ubuntu* is evolving in line with both rural and urban settings. This view is particularly relevant in the context of initiatives such as stokvel, which could be argued to be a typology of *letsema*. Verhoef (in Koenane 2019:113) describes a stokvel as:

An informal social structure, which comprises kinship, communalism, mutual agreement and trusted friendships. Members of this informal structure meet regularly to make contributions of a fixed amount of money to a common pool. Stokvels are a disciplined way of getting members to save the little money they get for a greater purpose.

From the description mentioned above, it is evident that a sense of community and *Ubuntu* can be inferred. Koenane (2019:114) agrees and asserts that “stokvels are organised in such a way that they are communal in character. According to Koenane (2019:114), “stokvels are a community-based saving scheme, the purpose of which is mainly to address the financial needs of a given community and thus alleviate poverty.” Koenane considers stokvels as a form of *Ubuntu*, which according to him is the indigenous way of providing an ethical framework for financial saving. Such an arrangement is inevitably built on trust, vulnerability, accountability, solidarity, interdependence and respect for people’s hard-earned money. All these are essential attributes of *Ubuntu*. I must hasten to indicate that stokvel is not only about money.

In Northern Sotho, the money-giving type is commonly referred to as “*mogodišano*”, conveying a sense of paying each other. There is also “*thušanang*”, which literally means ‘help each other’. Through *thušanang*, the money raised from contributions is used to buy food and other essentials in bulk. It must be stated that all these initiatives are currently practised both in rural and urban areas. This concerted effort to create a buying power through contributions gives expression to the role of *Ubuntu* in community development as it enables people to accomplish things that could otherwise not be done individually. Contrary to the view that stokvels assist poor people (Koenane 2019:120), it should be noted that even people who are employed and deemed financially stable do participate in stokvels. It must be stated that all these initiatives are not without risks, however, this is not the focus of this study.

Ubuntu and the workplace

Some researchers, for instance, Tladi (2021), Tauetsile (2021), Chetty and Price (2024), and Tayali (2025) investigated the importance and/or applicability of *Ubuntu* in the workplace. Tayali (2025) investigated the relevance of *Ubuntu* in conceptualising employee wellbeing. The study found out *inter alia* that (a) *Ubuntu*’s values of compassion and solidarity play a significant role in reducing workplace stress and enhancing employee comfort and (b) acts of compassion, such as contributions to help colleagues during bereavement or illnesses were cited as pivotal in alleviating stress (Tayali 2025:624). According to the study, participants frequently mentioned how practices like communal support during personal or family crises created a sense of belonging and reduced feelings of isolation. Tayali (2025 627) asserts that:

By adopting *Ubuntu* values, organisations can create a supportive culture that aligns with employee needs, improving their sense of value and understanding.

Chetty and Price (2024) explored *Ubuntu* leadership as a predictor of employee engagement. According to these researchers, leaders who embody the philosophy of *Ubuntu* actively listen to others, they value their perspectives and ensure that every voice is heard and respected. Their study also confirmed that there is a strong and positive correlation between *Ubuntu* leadership dimensions and dimensions of employee engagement. Tauetsile (2021:245) also found that *Ubuntu* enhances the strength of the relationship among supervisor support, colleague support and employee engagement. Tayali (2025:626) maintains that:

Ubuntu values of solidarity and survival facilitate knowledge sharing and skill development, which in turn foster employee personal growth. Thus, solidarity as an *Ubuntu* value is important and beneficial in the workplace context.

The studies cited above, and many similar studies are indicative of the applicability and relevance of *Ubuntu* in the workplace setting. What is worth noting is that these are not ‘ancient studies’ such that they could be rebutted that *Ubuntu* is no longer applicable in the contemporary societies as claimed by opponents of *Ubuntu*.

Macro level

At a macro level, *Ubuntu* manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it is acknowledged that some degree of un-*Ubuntu* tendencies such as stealing money, and over-inflating prices of protective equipment, the practical manifestation of *Ubuntu* was observable. Thani (in Dickinson, Yates, O’Flynn and Smith 2025:253) is of the view that the positive impact of *Ubuntu* was demonstrated at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic as countries needed each other to deal with the disaster. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the extent to which human beings need each other. It exposed how self-centred tendencies are detrimental to the survival of the humankind. Equally, the pandemic indicated how solidarity — as essential attribute of *Ubuntu* is critical for the survival of the humankind. According to Thabethe and Pulla (2022:42-43), emerging data indicates that *Ubuntu* has gained renewed interest during the COVID-19 recovery stage. These scholars maintain that “*Ubuntu* builds community solidarity and resilience at a time when it is most needed.” In their view,

The pandemic revealed that the spirit of *Ubuntu* is still active and alive in communities that were able to stand in solidarity against the pandemic. Community support networks have provided swift relief for those in need of food and other related necessities, particularly at the time when the country was in total national lockdown. COVID-19 re-affirmed the significance of *Ubuntu* as a fundamental philosophy and practice for building community solidarity in times of crisis.

COVID-19 highlighted that the world is but a community, particularly considering how the virus moved from person to person. Furthermore, it exposed the connectedness of human beings and the vulnerability thereof. It demonstrated how human beings need each other to thrive and survive. According to Koma (2020), “the outbreak of the COVID-19 in South Africa renewed the essence of *Ubuntu* and solidarity, manifesting through the contributions made by ordinary citizens from all walks of life to the Solidarity Fund.” The establishment of the Solidarity Fund was arguably a way of demonstrating *Ubuntu* in action, as solidarity is one of the fundamental pillars upon which *Ubuntu* stands. It could have been named the *Ubuntu* Fund because contributions that were made into the Fund were a demonstration of care, compassion, love and respect for human life, all these are the pillars of *Ubuntu*. COVID-19 exposed the insignificance of the racial, religious and cultural lines that often hinder the

progress of human beings. Most importantly, it provided a glimpse into what could become of an *Ubuntu*-driven country and leadership as the President, his cabinet and other parliamentarians pledged a portion of their salaries to the Solidarity Fund.

Ubuntu and politics

South Africa and many other African countries were in the past subjected to oppressive and inhumane political systems. At the onset and height of political transition from these inhumane and oppressive colonial political systems to liberation, some African leaders sought to construct a governance system that would resonate with the African worldview of *Ubuntu*. In their construction of a new societal order, African leaders consciously attempted to construct a governance approach that would be considered humanly noble (Eliastam 2015:1). What has been termed “a narrative of return” and “revivalism” by Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013:198) is to me an attempt to illustrate the applicability and suitability of an *Ubuntu*-based system of governance. Thus, this deliberate positioning of *Ubuntu* as an applicable alternative system of governance was not a mere nostalgia as some critics of *Ubuntu* attempt to persuade us. The invocation of *Ubuntu* at a time when retaliation was anticipated demonstrated that the philosophy of *Ubuntu* had roots in the thinking of the likes of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. Patel *et al* (2024:5) opine that:

Tutu’s methodology (of utilising *Ubuntu*) serves as a compelling illustration of the transformative potential of *Ubuntu*, as it advocates for the reintegration of both victims and perpetrators into the community, thereby facilitating forgiveness and reparative actions.

This view is supported by Wiredu (in Patel *et al* 2024:2) who argued that “in many post-independence contexts, it was expected of Africans to genuinely reassert their indigenous lifeways and culture.” Thus, in the words of Okogbe (2025:2): “*Ubuntu* provided a moral foundation for healing the divisions of the past and building a more inclusive society.” *Ubuntu* is therefore associated with the construct of “restorative justice” (Okogbe 2025:2) and “*Ubuntu* justice” (White and Ntlapo 2022:12) both of which are corrective in approach instead of punitive, and they emphasise forgiveness and reconciliation instead of retribution. They both place rehabilitation at the heart of justice. Such an approach to justice is rooted in the African justice system (Patel *et al* 2022:5), which according to White and Ntlapo (2022:11) is demonstrated through an assembly such as an *imbizo*, *pitso*, *lekgotla*, and *kgothekgothe*, which was epitomised by utmost fairness in the administration of justice. Although it was later removed, the inclusion of *Ubuntu* in the Interim Constitution of the Republic of South Africa

further accentuated the recognition of the practical guidance of *Ubuntu* at a macro level. It is stated in the Interim Constitution that:

... there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *Ubuntu* but not for victimisation.

Arguably, if *Ubuntu* was not representative of the worldview of South Africans and the Bantu people in general, it might have not featured in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Interim Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. *Ubuntu* was and is not a Tutu and Mandela theory. Although it is not mentioned in the current Constitution, its spirit finds expression in some of the foundational values of the Constitution such as unity in diversity, the right to life and human dignity to name a few. *Ubuntu* also finds expression in the *Chapter of Positive Values* of the Moral Regeneration Movement.

Batho Pele

Service delivery has been one of the focal points for the South African government post the dawn of democracy. The South African government embedded a sense of *Ubuntu* in their conceptualisation of an equitable and people-centred service delivery approach through the introduction of its mantra, namely *Batho Pele* (the people first). The objective of the *Batho Pele* approach to service delivery is to redress the injustices of the past. According to Skweyiya (in Bennett 2011:38), "*Batho Pele* gives practical expression to the constitutional value of *Ubuntu*." One of the defining normative and ethical maxims upon which *Ubuntu* is based is expressed thus: "*Kgoši ke kgoši ka batho*." *Batho Pele*, as a construct, acknowledges that government exists through *batho*. In practice, it is *batho* who participate in a process of electing a government through elections. Thus, it could be asserted that *batho* precede government, in that there is and would be no government without the active participation of *batho*. As stated in the Preamble to the Constitution (1996:1), "... government is based on the will of the people." By inference, *batho pele* means *batho* come first, thus indicating that "*kgoši* (government) *ke kgoši ka batho*." In Northern Sotho, the word government is translated "*mmušo*" which is connected to "*go buša*" which means to govern. Notably, the *Batho Pele* principles of consultation and courtesy are consonant with *Ubuntu*. In practice, consultation implies talking to citizens through meetings and *izimbizo* or *lekgotla*. Courtesy implies treating citizens with respect, dignity and empathy irrespective of their rank or status in life.

The extent to which the *Batho Pele* principles are prioritised when it comes to service delivery is a subject of ongoing debate. This discussion is centred on the fact that the Government

wired *batho pele* into its service delivery approach. There are studies that indicate that some citizens have not experienced the implementation of the *Batho Pele* principles. That said, the fault should not be attributed to the *Batho Pele* principles but individuals who have been tasked to serve the citizens. Fothane (2021:193) proposes what he calls *botho-pele*, not as a replacement of *batho pele* but as an *Ubuntu*-rooted socialisation framework for public servants. Fothane argues that the principles of *Batho Pele* cannot operate without socialisation to *botho-pele*. To remove *botho* from *batho* runs counter to what the principles of *Batho Pele* seek to achieve. To replace *batho* with *botho* changes the entire edifice and attitudinal composition of the *Batho Pele* principles. *Batho Pele* can be easily externalised, and its lack of application can be easily attributed to various external factors that exist outside the control of a human being. *Botho-pele* relocates service delivery back to the kernel of being. From *botho* flows a host of all human-centred attributes as espoused by the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. *Batho Pele* can be easily embraced as a ‘workplace attribute’, like a uniform, that a public servant wears at or to work and takes off when they knock off. By contrast, *botho-pele* is not a work-based principle or professional attire. *Botho-pele* is a moral character, *ethos*. Its orientation is from an internalised moral character to ‘serving people’. It is not only oriented towards delivery of a service, but it is driven or propelled by ‘the spirit of serving’ rooted in *Ubuntu*.

3.6 *Ubuntu* and continuity in contemporary Southern Africa

The continuity of the philosophy of *Ubuntu* in contemporary Southern Africa has recently been a subject of debate. Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013) sparked a debate on the continuity of *Ubuntu* in their paper titled “The end of *Ubuntu*.” One can argue that this paper has heralded what might become a generational discourse among the proponents and opponents of *Ubuntu* in the field of African philosophy and related disciplines. Prior to engaging the merits of their argument, one needs to hasten to assert that such an extreme stance is a necessity for the purpose of continuous reflections on *Ubuntu*. Their stance requires of us to ‘put on hold’ our glorification of *Ubuntu* while we reflect on its continuity. Such a discomfort is for me consistent with the spirit of philosophy and the act of philosophising. Arguably, the essence of philosophy gets compromised when philosophers get married to an ideal or idea from which they find it uncomfortable to step out and re-look at it. Here I agree with Jaspers (1954:12):

The essence of philosophy is not the possession of truth but the search for truth ... Philosophy means to be on the way. Its questions are more essential than its answers, and every answer becomes a new question.

From the era of Socrates, philosophy has always been a science that had courage to confront marriage with dogma and comfort. A philosopher is one who has room to accommodate and manage epistemic discomfort. Thus, discomfort is for me one of the markers of doing philosophy. The stance that Matolino and Kwindigwi took is in essence not *contra bonos mores* when judged against the practice of philosophy, as African philosophers in their own right. It is in keeping with what Socrates was accused of — encouraging the youth to question traditional values. If African philosophers do not question or critically reflect on African philosophy, they run the risk of perpetuating the stereotype that questioning of certain traditional practices is taboo. In other words, there are certain things that must be left unquestioned and unchallenged because their essence has been spiritualised. The philosophy of *Ubuntu* can certainly defend its continuity. Such a stance reminds us of the philosophical principle of playing the ball not the man. Matolino and Kwindigwi's paper holds a particular relevance to this study in that 'the end of *Ubuntu*' (if it has ended) implies that cultural practices such as *lobola* are inevitably prone to abuse, exploitation and commercialisation as some scholars have argued.

Having perused Matolino and Kwindigwi's paper, one can assert that the pillar upon which their argument rests is not firm enough to hold, given its extremeness. The paper is replete with generalisations that lack sufficient substantiation. According to my reading, there are mainly two pillars that seem to be the base of their argument(s), namely:

1. ***Ubuntu* has been politicised to advance the agenda of the elite.**
2. **The context that enabled *Ubuntu* to operate and thrive is now extinct.**

There are two specific instances that the above inferences are based on. The first inference is based on the scholars' argument that:

The success of *Ubuntu* largely depends on undifferentiated, small and tight-knit communities that are relatively undeveloped ... without the existence of such communities the notion of *Ubuntu* becomes only but an appendage to the political desires, wills and manipulations of the elite ... (Matolino and Kwindigwi 2013: 202).

Second, they argue that "*Ubuntu* is obsolete because the context in which its values could be recognised is now extinct" (Matolino and Kwindigwi 2013:203). In view of these arguments, one can postulate that it does not sit well with reason to conclude that *Ubuntu* is obsolete or dead and concurrently argue that the same *Ubuntu* exists but in certain communities. By conceding that *Ubuntu* exists in certain communities the impression this creates is that *Ubuntu* is not obsolete. What is even somewhat contradictory is the assertion that "... we seek to present some arguments aimed at showing that the project of *Ubuntu* **ought to reach its end**"

(bolded for emphasis). The phrase “ought to reach its end” does not accord well with the deathly spirit with which the paper was written. Also, what works to their disadvantage is using one example of a taxi driver in Bloemfontein who knocked down a pedestrian and the fact that onlookers of this incident appeared unbothered. As reported in the paper, the Minister of Police bemoaned the lack of *Ubuntu* in response to this incident. What the scholars seem to say without saying is that this incident is indicative of the end of *Ubuntu* and that this is representative of what is happening not only in Bloemfontein but country wide. Such a stance would patently contravene the art of philosophical thinking and at worst unscientific. To point out one incident to base that conclusion is fallacious. In his reply to Mantolino and Kwindigwi, Metz (2014:65) contends that the arguments proffered by these scholars are insufficient to draw their conclusion. Metz (2014:65) maintains:

Even if it were shown that some who believe in *Ubuntu*, or who appeal to the word *Ubuntu*, act wrongly or cause harm as a result of doing so, it would not follow that ‘*Ubuntu*’ as a theory about how one morally ought to treat others is false or epistemically unjustified.

I agree with Metz’s (2014:68) view that Matolino and Kwindigwi should have rather conducted a poll to determine what the majority of South Africans or academics think about the demonstration of *Ubuntu* in the contemporary South Africa and report on their findings. This could have provided some weight to their arguments. It is fallacious reasoning, in the absence of data, to conclusively argue that the context that enabled *Ubuntu* to operate is now extinct. My discussions under the section “*Ubuntu* in practice” provide various context-specific examples of how *Ubuntu* is still practised in contemporary South Africa. As shown in this study, the COVID-19 pandemic is the most recent context that showed the application of *Ubuntu* across different races, cultures and religions. Granted, there might have been reported ‘*un-Ubuntu* acts’ that took place during the time, this considered, the spirit of *Ubuntu* was demonstrated. Isolated ‘*un-Ubuntu* acts’ do not imply that *Ubuntu* is dead.

Another paper worth looking into is by Eliastam (2015), titled “*Exploring Ubuntu discourse in South Africa: Loss, liminality and hope.*” This paper poses several questions that his study explored. Some of the questions posed in the paper include:

- “Is the African social value of *Ubuntu* dead?”
- “Is *Ubuntu* still alive?”
- “Is it still expressed in South African society?”

Eliastam (2015:5) argues that “it (*Ubuntu*) is still alive and it is dead; it is seen and it is not seen. *Ubuntu* exists tightly interwoven with *un-Ubuntu*.” Although Eliastam does not expressly indicate his stance on Matolino and Kwindigwi’s view that *Ubuntu* is obsolete, it seems that ‘a part of him’ is inclined to this view. Eliastam (2015:5) argues thus:

There can be little doubt that the force and meaning of *Ubuntu* have been eroded in South Africa today, and in some cases even distorted to justify blatant corruption and nepotism.

It is possible that his stance that *Ubuntu* is dead was disrupted by some of the findings from his study. Some participants in his study expressed unity of thought in their conceptual understanding of *Ubuntu* and how they experienced *Ubuntu* in practical terms. Thus, he was forced to take a ‘dual stance’. His dual stance, however, should not be construed to imply cowardice. Contradictory stances are part of the act of doing philosophy.

Other researchers like Makhutso (2022) are of the view that *Ubuntu* is under attack. In his paper titled ‘*Ubuntu* under siege: A reflection on the challenges of South African then and now’ (2022), Makhutso remarks on Matolino and Kwindigwi and Eliastam; he seems to be in support of the stance that *Ubuntu* is dead and still alive (Makhutso 2022:3). Not only does Makhutso assert that *Ubuntu* is dead and still alive, but he further argues that the spirit of *Ubuntu* is slowly dying and becoming a thing of the past, and an irrelevant way of life under the current conditions. Some of the conditions that he cites include corruption, violent crimes like rape, murder, xenophobia and homophobia. Makhutso maintains that *Ubuntu* is dead because of media reports on stories of ethnic conflicts, racial tensions, corruption and high crime rates (Makhutso 2022:3). In my view, to argue that *Ubuntu* is dead based on media reports weakens the argument. *Ubuntu*-driven initiatives that people are engaged in and experiencing may not always attract media attention. The dual stance taken by Eliastam and Makhutso could be an indication that there is a lack of sufficient data to support each side of the argument.

Can Ubuntu die?

This is one question that researchers cited above do not ask. This question is not asked, partly because, if its answer is ‘no’, this may not accord with the nihilistic stance that *Ubuntu* is dead. In answering this question, I employ Ifeanyi Menkiti’s conception of personhood in African traditional thought. Menkiti (in Wiredu and Gyekye 2010:103) is of the view that:

- The notion of personhood is acquired

- Personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed
- Personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse

To Menkiti's conception of personhood one may add Ramose's description of *motho* as "A being with ethical sensitivity" (In Jenco *et al* 2020:264). According to Ramose's conception "*Motho* is incessantly in a state of becoming" (In Jenco *et al* 2020:263). Employing Menkiti's and Ramose's conceptions of personhood and *motho*, it can be argued that it is not *Ubuntu* that dies but it is people falling short of living up to what Menkiti calls "full personhood" (in Wiredu and Gyekye 2010:114). If we understand *motho* as being in an incessant state of becoming, as Ramose argues, it is plausible to argue that some people have (1) not yet attained the status of *motho* (or full personhood) — a being with ethical sensitivity, and/or (2) failed at being *motho* and thus fallen into the status of *selo* — "a physical entity outside the category of *motho*" (Ramose in Jenco *et al* 2020:264). Seeing from this vantage point, I hold that *Ubuntu* cannot die. Taken to the extremes, the death of *Ubuntu* would imply the death of *abantu* (people) as the two are intricately interwoven. *Ubuntu* is not a physical entity 'out there' outside the beings of people that it can die ... on its own or killed by forces. It is an error to interpret *Ubuntu* without consideration of what constitutes a human being in African traditional thought. It is a hermeneutic error to interpret *Ubuntu* without consideration of the 'becomingness' of people. People can become humane and regress to inhumane-ness, the latter being what some communities would say, 'So and so *gase motho*.' Ramose (2005:37) contends that the fundamental ethical, social and legal judgement of human worth and human conduct is based upon *ubu-ntu*." Thus, maintains Ramose, "The judgement pronounced with approval or disapproval respectively, is invariably expressed in these terms "*ke motho* or *gase motho*." It is incumbent upon the '*Ubuntu* pessimists' to consider this broad interpretive framework of *Ubuntu* in their conclusion that *Ubuntu* is dead and/or dying.

Another crucial layer to the debate on the perceived death of *Ubuntu* is geographic location. To argue that *Ubuntu* is dead based on incidents of xenophobia, homophobia, corruption and other acts of criminality that were or are observed at a particular place does not provide a weighty premise. How then do we account for places where such incidents are not, as it were, the order of the day? Equally, to use media reports as the premise upon which a conclusion is made that *Ubuntu* is dead is rather shaky. Media houses do not necessarily report on everything that is happening everywhere in the country. To add, positive and *Ubuntu*-driven initiatives may not be reported on because ordinarily such initiatives do not create a hype, or as it were, 'news breaking.' On a large scale, the work done by organisations such as *Gift of*

the Givers and other charity organisations is an expression of respect for human life and dignity. Giving, care, and compassion are all basic tenets of *Ubuntu*.

3.7 The future of *Ubuntu*

Diop (2017:74) asks, “Where does the *Ubuntu* philosophy go from here?” The big question that naturally flows from this question is, who is the question directed to? Diop himself does not respond to the question he is asking. That said, if the question is directed to Matalino, Kwindigwi and the scholars I have termed ‘*Ubuntu* pessimists’, the answer becomes obvious. Arguably, we are past the era of the “narratives of return” (Matalino and Kwindigwi 2013:198), and factually speaking, *Ubuntu* is still alive. I agree with Koenane and Olatunji’s (2017:263) assertion that “talks on *Ubuntu* have produced some of the most vibrant exchanges among scholars of African studies.” Debates on *Ubuntu* have laid bare contradictions that exist in philosophy as some scholars are both on the pessimistic side (Matalino and Kwindigwi 2013; Eliastam 2015; Makhutso 2022) and optimistic side of *Ubuntu* (Metz 2014, Koenane and Olatunji’s 2017; Ramose, Thabethe and Pulla 2022:43). The natural temptation is for ‘*Ubuntu*-ists’ to vilify *Ubuntu* pessimists in their attempt to defend *Ubuntu*. Here I invoke the assertion by Jaspers (1954:12) that “Philosophy means to be on the way.” Accordingly, those who hold that *Ubuntu* is dead and/or dying still have an opportunity to, through further analysis of literature, ‘make a U-turn’. Those who hold that *Ubuntu* is still alive equally have an opportunity to learn from the *Ubuntu* pessimists in order to enhance their stance.

Ubuntu is not dying, and it is not going to die, if by death it is meant complete obliteration. According to Metz (2014:71), “*Ubuntu* is far from being at an end, it is rather just getting started.” There is ample evidence shared under the section ‘*Ubuntu* in practice’ that indicates the continuity of *Ubuntu*. If anything, *Ubuntu* may acquire new meanings as it adapts to the evolution of the humankind. For instance, I argued that the notion of *stokvel* could be construed as a typology of *letsema*. Radebe and Phooko (2017:245) opine that ‘new age’ practice of “after-tears” may be construed as demonstrating the evolving concept of *Ubuntu* as it is understood by its supporters as a form of support for the mourning family. *Ubuntu* continues to be cited in the legal fraternity as influencing some judgements. It is also being embraced in some workplaces to enable productivity and employee wellbeing. It is explored to influence cooperative leadership. *Ubuntu* will continue to find expression in and through compassion-driven initiatives such as *Gift of the Givers* and many other non-profit charity organisations.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter sought to situate the study in the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Of critical importance, this chapter demonstrated the undeniable link between African philosophy and culture. As such, since *lobola* is, or can be regarded as a cultural practice for black people, it is logical to situate it within the broader framework of African philosophy, given the intricate interplay between culture and African philosophy. Okot's (in Wiredu 2004:372) assertion that "a people's culture is their practical philosophy" accentuated this point. Wiredu (2004:23) crystalised and concretised it by firmly arguing that "the psyche of a contemporary African philosopher is shaped by an African culture and imbued with a commitment to it." Thus, African philosophers cannot do a philosophy that is detached from African culture. Such a situation would be tantamount to a misrepresentation of life and reality as experienced by Africans.

The chapter discussed African philosophy broadly and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* in particular. I argued that any practice that is considered African must be practised within the framework of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. The chapter explored and discussed the concept of *Ubuntu*, its historicity and characteristics. I further demonstrated the applicability of the philosophy of *Ubuntu* in practical settings such as in the legal fraternity, leadership, governance, politics, family and community. Thus, the chapter amongst other things sought to argue that the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is not abstract but practicable in real life. I also discussed emerging arguments in the study of *Ubuntu*, with special attention to the views that *Ubuntu* is under siege, dying and dead. The chapter concluded with a discussion on the continuity of *Ubuntu*.

Chapter 4

Lobola and Ubuntu

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a comparative analysis of the concept and practice of *lobola* and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. It further analyses and discusses findings from literature and highlights areas where there is convergence between the concept and practice of *lobola* and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Equally important, the chapter demonstrates areas of disconnect between the practice of *lobola* and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. It is presented that the practice of *lobola* has undergone various changes and/or adaptations in its quest for continuity and thereby disconnected from *Ubuntu*.

4.2 The origin of *lobola*

Before I discuss continuity, it is crucial to first reflect on the commencement of the practice of *lobola* to foreground this discussion. It has already been established that *lobola* is an ancient practice whose genesis may not be traceable. Chitakure (in Togarasei and Chitando 2021:48) theorised that the inception of *lobola* was probably heralded by the end of endogamous marriages. According to Chitakure, during the era when endogamous marriages were still practised, *lobola* was not paid because there was no need to do so since the services of women were retained by their kin, thus, there was no sense of loss. He maintains that the practice of *lobola* probably commenced when men started marrying outside their family or clan systems, thus, this resulted in 'wife-givers' experience of the loss of their daughter's services. It is worth mentioning that there is no research from the sampled literature that corroborates this theory. That being the case, the existence of endogamous marriages is a matter of factual historicity. Chitakure's theory suggests that endogamous marriages do not incur a sense of loss when a daughter is married because such a marriage takes place within the same caste and/or kinship system. As such, *lobola*, or an equivalent practice would not be required to compensate for the loss, because there was no loss. While one understands Chitakure's proposition in theory, in practice, the absence of nuanced data makes it rather unsafe to conclusively rely on it. That being the case, there is room to accommodate his theory considering that in some African traditional societies, when a boy had reached the marriage age, his family would look for a suitable cousin to marry the young man (Matjila 2007:13), thus giving expression to an adage that says, "*dikgomo di boela sakeng*" — meaning "the family's

cattle would not be lost to a stranger. However, even within this marriage arrangement, the family of the groom would transfer some goods to the family of the bride (Matjila 2007:13). In this instance, it seems, the transfer of goods is for the purpose of expressing appreciation instead of compensation for loss, given that the bride is from and still within the same kinship system. In this instance, *lobola* was not a requirement that was demanded, without which marriage would not take place. Seeing from this vantage point, one understands where Chitakure is reasoning from. The function of *lobola* as a gesture of appreciation is a well-established proposition and it is extensively discussed in Chapter 2.

Although the origin of *lobola* remains nebulous (Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:576) and a subject of continued contestation, there is no doubt that in whatever form or shape, it is an ancient practice even recorded in the Bible (Fothane 2020:113). Literature on *lobola* is replete with theorisation of what it meant ‘traditionally’ (Nduna 2021:18; Kgadima and Leburu 2022), ‘historically’ (Posel and Rudwick 2011:1; Makama 2020:23) and ‘originally’ (Olisa 2016:3; Montle and Moleke 2021:591). What purpose does it serve to study the origin of *lobola*? In the context of this study, such an undertaking serves the purpose of exploring whether in its original conception *lobola*, was harmonious with the philosophy of *Ubuntu*.

4.3 Emerging themes in literature

There has been attempts, and there are still attempts by some scholars to ‘defend’ the practice of *lobola* on the ground that it is a victim of misunderstanding and/or misinterpretation by Europeans (Ansell 2001:2; Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:579). It has to be stated that even among the Southern Africans, there is varied understandings and interpretations of the concept and practice of *lobola* (Posel *et al* 2011:106; Rudwick and Posel 2014:118; Malesa and Sekudu 2021:166) with some studies indicating that *lobola* is misunderstood by people who practise it (Malesa and Sekudu 2021:162), Mbewe (in Togarasei and Chitando 2021:217), and Madlome (in Togarasei and Chitando 2021:231). It certainly cannot be argued that the misinterpretation by the Europeans influenced or affected how black people practise *lobola*. *Lobola* existed prior to colonialism. Consequently, these varied meanings absolve ‘European misunderstanding’ because *lobola* is practised by Africans not Europeans. Although all the ‘ills of *lobola*’ may be attributed to the misinterpretation by Europeans, it is Africans who have practise *lobola*. That said, there is some legitimacy to the ‘misinterpretation theory’ as the practice of *lobola* encountered some change because of colonialism (Krige 1936:14; Steyn and Rip 1968:501; Chisi 2018:22). Its change was in the main based on misunderstanding its function and essence. Thus, there is a view that there is nothing ‘morally wrong’ with the concept and practice of *lobola*, the problem is that it has been misunderstood (Ansell 2001:30).

Misinterpretation implies that there is a correct interpretation and there is someone who holds some epistemic authority on what the correct meaning of *lobola* is. Arguably, and interestingly, it does seem as though Africans themselves ascribe different meanings to the practice of *lobola*, which they deem 'their culture.' However, to entirely attribute the cause of the ills of *lobola* to misinterpretation is to undermine the plurality and diverse nature of Africans. Thus, although there are areas of commonalities in the concept and practice of *lobola*, there is also a plurality of views and diversity of thought and practice as Africans are a diverse people. Consequently, any attempt to suggest unity of thought and interpretation of the concept and practice of *lobola* is tantamount to homogenising African people and misinterpreting African reality. As shown above, *lobola* holds varied meanings and functions such that it is not possible to reduce it to one meaning, interpretation and function. It can be deemed a fundamental attribution error to entirely attribute the overt adaptation of the concept and practice of *lobola* to the misinterpretation theory.

Some studies show that practices such as initiation rituals have changed, and like *lobola*, commercialised. Arguably, commercialisation of initiation rituals has little or nothing to do with European misinterpretation or misunderstanding. It is Africans who commercialised these practices. There are researchers (Madlome in Togarasei and Chitando 2021:233; Mbewe in Togarasei and Chitando 2021:220) who indicate that greed entered the terrain of *lobola*, and this resulted in its commercialisation. Similarly, it is likely that the practice of initiation suffered the same fate. Thus, pointing the causation of the ills of *lobola* to colonisation partly or entirely misrepresents reality. Other researchers attribute the 'abuse' of *lobola* to greed and personal enrichment attitudes (Parker 2015:178; Posel and Rudwick 2011:12-13; Mbewe in Togarasei and Chitando 2012: 220); hence the call by Mbewe (in Togarasei and Chitando 2012:221) to apply African values and principles in the application of *lobola*. The practice of *lobola* is also defended on the ground that it is part of African culture and identity (Ansell 2001:29; Chireshe and Chireshe 2010:215; Mbewe in Togarasei and Chitando 2021:221). Notably, the call for the abolishment of the practice of *lobola* is found in studies conducted by African scholars. It may be argued that this call has nothing or little to do with European misunderstanding or misinterpretation as scholars such as Matambirofa (in Togarasei and Chitando 2021:42) would want us to believe.

In 1987 when De Haas asked, "Is there anything more to say about *lobolo*?" It would have seemed that research on *lobola* had exhausted every aspect of this subject. According to De Haas (1987:33-34), studies conducted by urban researchers of the 1950s could not answer questions such as whether payment of *lobola* was losing favour amongst educated black people, whether commercialisation was widespread and whether *lobola* was responsible for

protracted delays in marriage. De Haas (1987:33) seems to have conducted her study because, in her words: “there [was] little recent information on urban attitudes and practices relating to bridewealth.” Indeed, her study did not reveal any unexpected results and probably this influenced the title of her paper. If anything, there has not been a shortage of studies on attitudes and perceptions of students and learners on *lobola* and its relevance in contemporary times. Equally, there has been a propensity to problematise *lobola*, which inevitably perpetuated colonial attitudes towards it. Arguably, since De Haas posed this question in 1987, research on *lobola* has not responded, although there has been greater focus on this subject. An analysis of research studies on *lobola* shows little evidence on the focus on *Ubuntu* as an African philosophical perspective by which the practice and concept of *lobola* can be analysed. Parker (2015:177) opines that “*lobola* needs to be understood in relation to the concept of *Ubuntu* and the interconnectedness of the community.” It is rather strange that African scholars who conducted studies on *lobola* paid little or no attention to *Ubuntu*, even when their research findings revealed a possible disconnect between the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* and the contemporary practice of *lobola*. However, this ‘strange-ness’ can in part be attributed to the possibility that discussions on *lobola* barely entered the field of African philosophy. This being the case, the argument (and link) between African philosophy and African culture has been well established. Thus, *lobola* as an African cultural practice has a stake in matters of African philosophy. Returning and responding to De Haas’ question, there is indeed something else to be said about *lobola*, especially in the contemporary Southern African society. *Ubuntu* is the overt missing puzzle in the research on *lobola*.

4.4 The continuity of *lobola*

Several studies investigated the practice of *lobola* in the contemporary society (Chabata 2011, Rudwick and Posel 2014, Parker 2015, Msweli 2020). Even studies whose focus was not on how *lobola* is practised in the contemporary society contain the word contemporary (Mawere and Mawere 2010, Nduna 2021) and/or modern (Sithole 2005, Mkhize 2023). These concepts ‘contemporary’ and ‘modern’ have reference to time and are often used interchangeably. It does seem that some studies use the word ‘urban’ in the same light as contemporary and modern (Brandel 1958).

What is a contemporary society? This question is critical considering that what was contemporary and modern in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries may no longer be considered the same way in the 21st century. According to Zapletalova and Tuza (2012:541), a contemporary society is often described as post-modern or post-industrial. Thus, both concepts are fluid and time-bound, and, according to Zapletalova and Tuza (2012:541) cannot

be precisely defined in terms of a specific period. Zapletalova and Tuza (2012:539) are of the view that multiple changes occurred at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Zapletalova and Tuza (2012:539-540) mention that “the traditional morality and social values have been affected, or more precisely, the perception of morality and its observance, thus, the value systems of individuals and social groups have changed.” What is crucial, for the purpose of this study is the acknowledgment that dispensational changes do not leave humanity unscathed. Thus, urbanisation, industrialisation, modernisation, democratisation and globalisation necessitate change in various aspects of human existence. This discussion highlights the inevitability of change. As indicated above, social values and morality were affected by these factors. Zapletalova and Tuza (2012:540) maintain that society developed tolerance to issues that were in the past considered immoral. Steyn and Rib (1968:500-501) point out that:

The South African Bantu have increasingly been exposed to influences which had a disintegrating effect on their traditional way of life on general and their traditional family life in particular. The Bantu of South Africa came into contact with the Whites during the first half of the 18th century. This contact increased progressively and with the processes of urbanisation and integration of the Bantu into the differentiated economy of the Whites, most of them were eventually exposed to the western way of life in one way or another. Contact with Whites led to a gradual integration with their economic system, which contributed to a change in the traditional division of labour.

Dlamini (1983:88) adds that the arrival of settlers engendered social change among Black people as many had to seek work somewhere. Migration to industries, cities and urban areas became an inevitable process of change. Dlamini (1983:67) asserts that the colonial project and apartheid systematically made it difficult for African families to resist incorporation into the capitalist economy. According to Krige (1936:1), everywhere in Africa where there was contact with the Europeans there was change and disturbance, institutional dislocation and disintegration. Equally, access to educational opportunities became associated with enlightenment and concepts such as freedom which afforded people the new status of dignity (Zapletalova and Tuza 2012:541). With the preceding discussions in mind, it is evident that practices such as *lobola* could and would not be spared from undergoing some degree of change in its quest for continuity. Indeed, Dlamini (1983:228) contends that “the change from cattle to money has affected the value of *ilobolo*. It has injected the economic element into *ilobolo* and as a result defeats the purpose therefore.” According to Dlamini (1983:204), some of the functions of *lobola* have been acquired during its constant adaptation to changing conditions, thus, implying that *lobola* has undergone continuous adaptation due to changing

conditions. *Lobola*, as a human invention, could not and would never stay the same — in its original form, however it was, when human beings were undergoing periods of incessant changes. To lament its change and even call for a revert to its original form is a pure nostalgic and idealistic exercise, tantamount to the “narratives of return.” Society is not progressing backwards. Due to the changing nature of society, necessitated by the ‘change enablers’ discussed above, it would naturally be expected that the practice of *lobola* would inevitably undergo intermittent changes (Yarbrough 2018:54). The concept, meanings, interpretations and functions of all cultural practices change with time and should be understood in relation to the contemporary context in which they operate (Ansell 2001:28; Ngwenyama 2022:68). It can be argued that *lobola* does not have a static and fixed conception, meaning, interpretation and application. Thus, its meaning is influenced and shaped by socio-political and economic conditions in which it finds itself. Any attempt to render static its meaning is an expression of lack of appreciation of the ontological composition of any cultural practice. Here I agree with Bayi and Hawthorne’s view (2018:577) that “today different types of *lobola* co-exist” because of inevitable transformations that the concept and practice of *lobola* underwent throughout its developmental trajectory.

Mubaiwa (2019:56) points out that, “the previously communal society has changed a great deal, becoming more capitalist. As capitalism gradually replaced the communal nature of society, a shift to a more individualistic viewpoint took place, and ultimately, this brought about change in the payment of brideprice.” It’s not that *lobola* changed itself; people who practise it had and have to insert changes into the concept and practice of *lobola* to render it relevant to their time. One of the notable aftermaths of industrialisation and modernisation, as noted above, was the creation of townships, towns and cities (Yarbrough 2018:47). This phenomenon further created a sense in which a distinction was and could be made between urban (or city) and traditional (or rural) way of practising *lobola*. For instance, ordinarily livestock would not be found in urban areas or cities, thus, money would be used as a method of payment although it (money) is quantified or expressed in the language of cattle (Ansell 2001:12; Yarbrough 2018:956; Mubaiwa 2019:57). The continuation of the use of the ‘language of cattle’ when money is presented during the *lobola* negotiation is undoubtedly an attempt to adapt the practice of *lobola* to the present times. Psychologically (and emotionally), it detaches money from the practice and invokes the feeling of the ‘true’ meaning of the concept and practice of *lobola*, especially in urban areas. Practically, there are no kraals and grazing land in cities and urban areas. It makes sense that money is used instead of livestock. This change was necessitated by changed living conditions of Black people. That said, it is the use of money that attributed to *lobola*’s loss of the spiritual essence and the emergence of commercialisation (Dlamini 1983:94). The use of money, it seems, de-spiritualised the

concept and practice of *lobola* — money does not have blood after all. According to Dlamini (1983:228), in the past, cattle were largely used for the purpose of communicating with the ancestors.

There is another layer to the discussion above. There is a sense in which the attitude attached to the practice of *lobola* in cities and rural areas varies. For instance, there is a sense in which the practice of *lobola* is commercialised in the cities compared to rural areas (Steyn and Rip 1968:507; Mubaiwa 2019:40). Steyn and Rip (1968:508) contend that the conception of *lobola* in the city seems to be that of compensation for the expenses which the parents of the bride incurred in relation to her education and thus their loss of financial contributions. Although this is an established view in the current literature on *lobola*, it is inconceivable that parents would consider an investment in their daughter a loss when she gets married. Such an attitude demonstrates a need to gain from the proceedings of *lobola*. At any rate, *lobola* benefited the family of the groom from its inception (Malesa and Sekudu 2021:159). Thus, the attitude of gain is not necessarily a contemporary issue, if by contemporary we mean 21st century.

4.5 Findings

Manifestation of *Ubuntu* in the concept and practice of *lobola*

One of the critical questions that this study seeks to respond to is, was the original conceptualisation and conception of the practice of *lobola* harmonious with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*? In other words, was *lobola* in its original sense and essence aligned with the philosophy of *Ubuntu*? In the African context, its conceptualisation had to be done consistent with *Ubuntu*, and thus, there must not be any compositional, conceptual and practical contradictions. Regarded commonly as an African practice, *lobola* has to be practised under or within the framework of the African philosophy, *Ubuntu*. Fundamentally, every practice practised by Africans, or in the name of being African must observe the tenets of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, as it is the overarching moral and ethical philosophical framework. This section presents areas in which it could be argued that there was some degree of harmony between *Ubuntu* and the 'original' conception of the practice of *lobola*.

4.5.1 Accommodating the poor

In the context of *Ubuntu*, the poor are looked after and accommodated, not estranged or isolated. Thus, their plight is not put under the spotlight. As discussed in chapter 3, there were

Ubuntu-inspired initiatives such “*go tshwaela*” which sought to share resources with the poor. Values such as compassion, empathy, sharing, sympathy, kindness and benevolent are the cornerstone of *Ubuntu* (Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013:84; Okoro 2015:3; Nkosi 2018:4). Within this context, the poor are part of the community, and their socio-economic status is not looked down on. This is perfectly expressed by the adage “*molomo otlhafunang oroga o mongwe*,” translated as “a chewing mouth insults the one that is not chewing” (Nkosi 2018:4). Herein lies an acknowledgment of consideration of the needs of those who are in lack. Does the concept and practice of *lobola* accommodate the poor? It appears that semblances of *Ubuntu* were characteristic of the concept and practice of *lobola* in ancient times. For instance, in the past, even a poor person could give what he could afford even if he did not have cattle; thus, there was no blanket set amount of money or number of cattle required (Dlamini 1993:83-84; Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:583). This observation is supported by the fact that in antiquity, the payment of *lobola* was not only limited to cattle but other valuables such as hoes, grain, sheep or goats (Torday 1929:278; Dlamini 1993:221). Additionally, there was another provision for accommodating men who could not afford to pay *lobola*. A man could arrange to work for his would-be father-in-law if he had no means to pay *lobola* (Mubaiwa 2019:57). According to Chiweshe (2016:235), this arrangement, called bride-service, was traditionally used as an alternative in cases where a would-be son-in-law did not have the means to pay *lobola*; the father of the daughter would invite the son-in-law to live with his in-laws and compensate for the daughter through labour. These are the instances that indicate a sense of *Ubuntu* in how *lobola* was practised in that those who were needy could still be accommodated through various means. Notably, the writers of the definition of *lobola* in the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of South Africa (Act 120 of 1998) acknowledged that payment of *lobola* can also be done “in kind” — perhaps to indicate that there was provision for alternatives such as rendering services or anything of value instead of money. Thus, in its original form, *lobola* accommodated men who did not have cattle.

Another aspect of this discussion centres on the fact that in antiquity *lobola* was not expected to be a once-off payment (Kohler 1933:68, Dlamini 1993:84-85). In addition, according to Makama (2020:23), there was no specified period within which the outstanding money or cattle had to be settled and thus, the couple could still marry and remain in marriage without having to settle the full amount, although this had to be settled at some point. This arrangement gives the impression that there was some degree of understanding, trust, patience and tolerance from the family of the bride, and they were willing to accommodate the economic conditions of their would-be son-in-law. One can further infer that there was no ‘spirit’ of commercialisation attached to *lobola*. The provision for a ‘bit-by-bit’ payment arrangement demonstrates a

commitment to legitimise a union without placing a financial burden on the man. Evidently, this is a pro-marriage attitude, as opposed to a profit-making attitude.

4.5.2 Relationship Building

Collectivism, mutuality, consensus and solidarity are some of the fundamental values of *Ubuntu*, perfectly expressed through the adage “*motho ke motho ka batho*.” *Ubuntu* is family-oriented (Okoro 2025:2) and so is marriage. Ngihbi and Elechi (2022:226) underscore this sentiment thus:

The relationship that exists between marriage, and community is such that none can exist in isolation without the others. Marriage is beyond the physical; it is a spiritual union where all members of the family are involved both the living and the dead.

Lobola, marriage and *Ubuntu* are connected in and by the same spirit, thus, they all have a spiritual dimension. For the same reason, some regard the concept and practice of *lobola* as a mechanism that was used to forge a bond between the living and the dead (Dlamini 1993:83; Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:583). Hence there is a slaughtering of an animal and exchange of halves at the conclusion of negotiations to signify that their blood intermingled, and the two families and their ancestors have become one (Bayi and Hawthorne 2018:583).

Lastly, considering that *lobola* ontologically involves families, (and ‘extended families’), implies that it sought to, or it was designed to bring families together. Marwede and Mamabolo (1945:5) explain that *lobola* was shared among the family of the bride and thus each family member would receive their share. According to them, this sharing of *lobola* enabled creation of an intimate link between the bride’s marriage and her family. Evidently, *lobola* did not confine marriage and marrying only to the two people involved in the love relationship. It thus engendered a sense of communality and collective responsibility in that family members participated in the contribution towards *lobola* from the side of the man, and family members from the side of the woman had a share from the proceeds of *lobola*. Communality and collective responsibility are some of the cornerstones of the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. The practice of *lobola* clearly indicates that in the African context, there is no one who is independent. Practically, the adage of “I am a human being through other human beings” implies one cannot marry if other human beings (family) are not part of the marriage. By implication, one’s marriage is not theirs but their family’s marriage. Okoro (2015:5) asserts that “Africans define themselves within the community of other people and not just

individuals/atoms within a community.” This is the essence of the philosophy of *Ubuntu* — family building.

4.5.3 Interdependence

The adage “*motho ke motho ka batho*” is an expression of interdependence, which is one of the key defining features of *Ubuntu*. Within this framework, there is no family member who is independent; interdependence is a reality for all (Anofuechil and Klaasen 2024:1). Parker (2015:177) elaborates that:

African societies’ emphasis is on the interconnectedness of the individual with the group. What happens to the individual happens to the whole group and what happens to the whole group happens to the individual.

Family in this context goes broader than one’s immediate family. Thus, one’s uncles and aunts are central to the formation and composition of the family, hence they are usually delegated to represent the family during *lobola* negotiations (Mizinga 2000:56). Herein lies another crucial aspect of interdependence, trust. Because the ‘immediate family’ (father and mother) of both the man intending to marry and his would-be wife would not be part of the *lobola* negotiation, there was trust that their uncles and aunts would negotiate what would be best for them and their families (Mizinga 2000:56). Equally important, there is consensus in literature that in ancient times, the father was responsible for providing *lobola* for his son; and in some ethnic groups, even the uncle of the groom would contribute (Krige 1936:14; Kuper 1982:26). In the same vein, young men depended on their sisters’ *lobola* which they could use in turn for their *lobola* (Marwede and Mamabolo 1945:21; Kuper 1982:158; Ansell 2001:7). This view that *lobola* was given by the family arguably entrenched peaceful relations in the family and interdependence, which is one of the key pillars of *Ubuntu*. The involvement of the family (father, sisters, uncles) in the provision of *lobola* inevitably required harmony in the family system, which is what *Ubuntu* espouses. For a young man to benefit from this provision (or arrangement), he had to conduct himself in a manner that would be deemed worthy of assistance and support by or from his father and his entire family, from which the contribution towards *lobola* comes. Equally, this ‘*lobola* arrangement’ characterised by interdependence implies that one could not be self-centred about their marriage. In this sense, one’s marriage belongs to the family, not individuals. This further entrenched interdependence. It can therefore be inferred that built into the concept and practice of *lobola* were the *Ubuntu* values of interdependence, harmonious relations, respect, solidarity, cooperation, and mutuality.

Continuity and disconnect with *Ubuntu*

The continuity of *lobola* has been a subject of weighty contention both in academic circles and in society at large. Studies indicate that the practice of *lobola* is still supported (Shope 2006:65; Parker 2015:182; Sibisi 2021:58) and likely to remain alive and practised (Chae, Agadjanian and Hayford 2021:423) amidst intense criticism and the call to have it abolished (Hlophe 1984; Ngema 2012; Fothane 2020; Sibisi 2021). This section explores whether there are areas of disconnect between *Ubuntu* and *lobola* in its 'original form' and as it is currently practised. It must be stated that there are varied propositions on what the 'original form' and function of *lobola* entailed as discussed elsewhere (Posel, Rudwick and Casale 2011:106). However, there is some consensus on some of its functions. As discussed in chapter two, that the concept and practice of *lobola* has changed has become a matter of factual accuracy, as abundantly shown in literature (Chae *et al* 2021:411). That said, what literature has to date not explored is whether this overt change in the practice of *lobola* has facilitated a disconnect with *Ubuntu*, a gap that this study seeks to fill up. Below are enumerated areas that indicate the disconnect between *lobola* and *Ubuntu*.

4.5.4 Dehumanisation of women

It has already been established that human dignity and respect are some of the foundational pillars of *Ubuntu* (Okogbe 2025). Okogbe (2025:1) emphasises that, "It (respect) is an ethical principle that recognises and affirms the intrinsic worth of every individual, irrespective of their social standing, gender, or age." Thus, within the framework of *Ubuntu*, a person is accorded recognition as a person and as having an intrinsic worth, regardless of their socio-economic status. The very fabric of African identity is founded on *Ubuntu* (Gade 2011:316). Essentially, any African practice must be observed within the moral framework of the philosophy of *Ubuntu*.

With the above in mind, there is ample evidence in research that suggests that in ancient times, *lobola* was in the main linked with a woman's capacity to give birth (Jeffreys 1951:152; Chae *et al* 2021:410; Ansell 2001:8; Posel, Rudwick and Casale 2011:106). In other words, the essence of the concept and practice of *lobola* was primarily tied to the woman's reproductive capacity and secondarily to other functions that have been argued to define it, such as legitimising marriage. This needs to be understood in the context that among traditional African societies, the worth and value of marriage was (and is) judged on the basis of children such that if the wife was barren, her husband could seek to father a child with her sister without having to pay *lobola*, or the *lobola* would have to be returned (Rudwick and Posel 2014:120; Chae *et al* 2021:414). In some cases, this could result in the dissolution of

her marriage by divorce and the return of *lobola* (Parker 2015:178; Chae *et al* 2021:414). Parker (2015:177) emphasises that marriage and the woman's ability to have children are interconnected such that it is not possible to have the one without the other. Thus, a childless marriage was considered incomplete. Kuper (1982:26) explains:

The Southern Bantu emphasised particularly rights to a woman's children. Should a wife be childless, or should she die or desert her husband before bearing children, then either the bridewealth cattle had to be returned or her family had to replace her with another wife.

According to Steyn and Rip (1968:505), the practice of *lobola* necessitated the transferring of the rights to children by the family of the groom. Jeffreys (1951) deconstructed the concept of *lobola* and conceptualised it as "child-price". According to Jeffreys (1951:145), the central function of *lobola* is "to transfer the status of a child from its position in its mother's group to a status in its cultural father's group." Thus, according to him, *lobola* does not play any of its purported functions: compensation, validation of marriage, etc. By implication, women who had reproductive issues had a lesser value in that the essential value and worth of women were tied to their capacity to give birth. It is reported that in some cases, a wife who cannot bear her husband children her in-laws would have her womanhood questioned (Makama 2020:36). In some instances, girls resort to premarital conception because men do not marry a girl unless she has had a child to show that she is not barren (Krige 1936:5). By inference, being a woman was not enough; women had and have to prove their womanhood by their capacity to conceive.

It can be deduced that the concept and practice of *lobola* had a dehumanising effect on women. First, being *lobola'd* is attached to a woman's transition to adulthood, her pride, her value, respect, dignity and identity (Shope 2006:66; Rudwick and Posel 2014:128-129; Rudwick and Posel 2015:2-10; Moono *et al* 2020:39). Being unable to bear children is a reality beyond one's control and capacity as at times this may be because of medical conditions. If *lobola* confers value, dignity, identity, respect, and the status of adulthood, what then happens to a woman when her marriage gets dissolved, and she gets replaced by her sister due to a physiological challenge whose cause is not her own? A question to be posed regarding *Ubuntu* is, where does this leave the values of empathy, sympathy, love, compassion, respect, dignity, which are central to *Ubuntu*? It is conceptually and fundamentally irreconcilable to connect *Ubuntu* and *lobola* in this regard. In this instance, it seems, women were treated as mere reproduction or production machines which could be 'purchased' for childbearing and 'returned' to their manufacturers (parents) if they had factory faults. Also, their sisters could easily be used as replacement products with no or little consideration of psycho-social and

emotional conditions. The only thing that was crucial, it seems, was their reproductive capacity, not their intrinsic value as human beings worthy of respect and dignity in their own right. Thus, it did not matter how they felt about their not being able to bear children, the psycho-social and emotional effects brought about by the dissolution of their marriages and being replaced with their sisters. *Lobola* questioned and cast doubt on the womanhood (identity and dignity) of women who, out of the fault not of their own, could not bear children. Having your marriage dissolved on this basis, and being returned to one's family reverses the entire rite of passage to adulthood. This is an utter violation of the essence of being.

Another manifestation of dehumanisation is in the connection between the life of a woman as a means for wealth accumulation. *Lobola* was centred around the wealth value and worth of a woman. In other words, *lobola* was attached to the woman's fertility, virginity and lately her socio-economic status. All these features are commoditised to determine the worth and value of a human being to accrue wealth. Kuper (1982:11) cites a quote from a Commission of Enquiry held in 1883 where a witness was asked: "Do you prefer sons or daughters?" He replied: "Both are good, the girls bring cattle, and the boys look after them." Historically, having cattle was associated with wealth. There is an undeniable link between *lobola* and accumulation of wealth (cattle). Mackinnon (1999:99-101) and Mbewe (in Chitando 2021:219) confirm that in the pre-colonial era, cattle and agriculture were the pillars of economy and as such, Africans gauged their wealth in cattle; for this reason, *lobola* was paid in cattle as a primary source of wealth. Mizinga's (2000:54) might be correct in asserting that "the practice of *lobola* survived the forces of social change because it was supported by those who saw it as a source of wealth and a medium of property circulation." Kuper (1982:39) sums up this link thus:

The system of marriage and bridewealth rested on a simple and ineluctable principle of reciprocity. Cattle were exchanged for wives, wives for cattle [...] reciprocity was direct, wives were always exchanged for cattle.

A Sepedi wedding song titled "*mosadi wa rekwa ka dikgomo*" underscores this link. Arguably, this has been the most contested area in literature on *lobola*, attributed to the 'misinterpretation theory' discussed above. It could and would not have settled well with morality and humanness to conceptualise and frame the practice of *lobola* as purely transactional and mercantile. Granted, the settlers might have misunderstood the practice, however, *lobola* is indisputably transactional. There is an exchange of items, wealth (cattle, money) and a human being for the benefit of the recipient through a process of negotiation. And, as shown above, that which was exchanged through the process of *lobola* could be returned or exchanged if 'it' could not

live up to what 'it' was purchased for (reproduction and home chores). Schlegel and Eloul (1988:291) are of the view that "marriage transactions are means by which households attempt to maintain or augment their resources, these being labour, property or status." Chiweshe (2016:235) adds that demanding high rates of *lobola* provides for comfortable subsistence. According to them, the practice of *lobola* or its equivalent occurs where the economic value of women is high (Schegel and Eloul 1988:301). Mkize's findings (2023:ii) indicate that the practice of *lobola* is now about making money. Chiweshe (2016:235) and Chabata (2012:12) add that in the contemporary society, fathers ask for extremely high amounts of *lobola* and the practice has become a money-making endeavour. Arguably, this is not a 'now phenomenon,' the practice of *lobola* always had an economic benefit. According to Murray (1981:146):

It is impossible to isolate the material or economic aspect of *bohali* transfers from their ideological or cultural aspect, and to ascribe priority to one or the other [...] *Bohali* is also economic in that livestock and cash are substantial items of income and expenditure in household budgets.

Ansell (2001:4) argues that even in pre-colonial times, *lobola* was not purely symbolic. The very nature of *lobola* negotiations detaches a woman from her humanity, also because women had no say in the *lobola* exchange; it took place using a man's property (cattle) to be given to another man (the bride's father) to benefit a man (the husband). Consistent with the business world, during *lobola* negotiations, there are offers and counter-offers made by the delegation. What is being negotiated is nothing symbolic; it's real cattle and/or real money that are required and/or requested to be used for a practical purpose. As mentioned above, there are several factors that are considered when determining the price of *lobola*, such as virginity, fertility, level of education, beauty, whether she has a child and whether she has been married before. In their chapter titled "*An enquiry into the value of human life: the lobola perspective*," Zimunya and Hatendi (in Togarasei and Chitando 2021:322) argue:

A look at the practice of *lobola* reveals that women are in some sense considered having only extrinsic and instrumental value. It is our conviction that placing a certain value on a human being's hand in the name of *lobola* is just a confirmation of the extrinsic value placed on women.

According to them, *lobola* strips women of their intrinsic value (espoused by *Ubuntu*) and place emphasis on their extrinsic and instrumental value: their level of education, virginity, ability to bear children and duties that are expected of them once they are married. Zimunya and

Hatendi (in Togarasei and Chitando 2021:322) maintain that “when a girl is born, people often say *mombe dzawanda mudanga* (cows have been added to our herd).” Even among the Northern Sotho speakers, there is a sense in which the birth of a girl child represents accumulation of *dikgomo* (cattle). Thus, at the heart of this notion is that one day the daughter will be married and bring in cows through *lobola*. Chiweshe (2016:236) argues that having a daughter has become a worthwhile investment. The study by Moono *et al* (2020:39) reports that paying *lobola* was deemed by participants as tantamount to buying a wife and making her a property for her husband. This needs to be understood in the context of the patriarchal system that promotes the superiority of men (Chiweshe 2016:231). Zimunya and Hatendi (in Togarasei and Chitando 2021:325) contend:

It would be difficult to determine what amount of money or goods a person would be willing to pay in order to get another human being as a wife. Such a determination is only possible if we dehumanise the individual and equate them with some non-human item that can be bought on the free market such a bread or car. To argue that a human being is worth this amount of money or equal to some goods that a person is willing to give up would be to equate the person to an inanimate economic item.

Zimunya and Hatendi (in Togarasei and Chitando 2021:327) equate the practice of *lobola* with slave trade and human trafficking and consider the parents of the bride as the sellers and the family of the groom as buyers and the husband as the master to his wife. According to them, *lobola* is an immoral practice that should be abolished same as slave trade and human trafficking are immoral practices. In Northern Sotho, there is an adage that say *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*, which means a woman’s grave is at her in-laws. Although the adage might have been constructed to instil permanency in marriage, it further shows how dehumanising *lobola* was in that once it is paid, a woman would not have the means to return to her parents’ house even when she experienced abuse in marriage (Chiweshe 2016:239; Togarasei and Chitando 2021:220). Like a slave, she has been purchased to perform certain functions and therefore has no recourse to reclaim her dignity and sense of worth. Her fate is entirely in the hands of those who purchased her. In some cases, her *lobola* would have been used up by her family, thus, they would not be able to pay back the money should it be demanded by the family of her husband.

Several studies have suggested a link between payment of *lobola* and abuse of women (Thiara and Hague 2009; Muthegheki *et al* 2012; Chiweshe 2016; Moono 2019; Malesa and Sekudu 2021). This happens because *lobola* creates a power imbalance in marriage by dispossessing women of their rights to decisions on reproductive activities and it also reduces

them to an inferior position in the relationship with her husband and family in-law (Sithole 2005:5; Mmoledi 2016:5; Malesa and Sekudu 2021:154-155).

4.5.5 Classification of worth

The African philosophy of *Ubuntu* promotes the worth of human beings for who and what they are. *Ubuntu* recognises a person as a person detached from their social status. It is within this framework that according to Ramose (in Jenco *et al* 2020:266), even *kgoši* in their position of power recognises their rulership through *batho*. Ramose (in Jenco *et al* 2020:267) argues that the title of *kgoši* does not change the ontological character of the king as *motho*. It could therefore be argued that the philosophy of *Ubuntu* has a 'class equalising' effect. In other words, the foundational tenets of *Ubuntu* make it possible for 'socio-economic classification' to diminish, or to be controlled, in that those who have share and are able to co-exist with the needy. There is reason to hold that *lobola* engenders classification of worth and women. Although in ancient times there was some provision to accommodate the poor (Mubaiwa 2019:57), it would have been an insurmountable undertaking for the poor to marry from a wealthy family. According to Chiweshe (2016:237), commercialisation of *lobola* makes it difficult for men to marry women from a class above theirs. Kohler (1933:68) reports that there was no flat rate for the payment of *lobola*, as such, some women were *lobola'd* at a much higher price than others. For instance, a daughter of a chief was *lobola'd* with 20 head of cattle (Kohler 1933:68). Dlamini (1983:109) reports that in the late 1860s the payments increased to a possible 50 head of cattle for a commoner's daughter and 100 for a woman of royal blood. Mubaiwa (2019:40) reports that *lobola* tends to be more expensive in regions that are believed to be the most educated in Zimbabwe. The existence of varied and variations in the price of *lobola* suggests that women are classified differently according to various value or price-determinants. Thus, *lobola* unwittingly serves as a mechanism by which the worth of a human being can be quantified and commodified. Khomari *et al* (2012:145) report that 55% of their participants asserted that *lobola* is used to barter for a wife as a business transaction.

Another form of classification of worth manifests in *lobola* rates for virgins and non-virgin women. For instance, among the Northern Sotho speakers, it would be said of a non-virgin woman who has a child that "*o wele letswele*" which literally means 'her breast has fallen'. By inference, her value has dropped. Chiweshe (2016:233) is of the view that girls who lost their virginity are viewed as damaged goods. Such a view is not far from reality considering that there is a 'damages payment' or *intlawulo* made by a boy who impregnated an unmarried girl (Samukimba and Moore 2020:1). Marwede and Mamabolo (1945:12) add that a non-virgin woman did not get the same number of cattle as a virgin, thus, such a woman was made to

forfeit part of her value. According to Montle and Moleke (2021:591), such a woman is not paid a high *lobola*. By the same token, a woman who has a child is worth lesser than the one who does not have one (Montle and Moleke 2021:591). In other words, women are valued differently (Kohler 1933:68). Accordingly, it is not enough to be a woman and have value and worth. Classification of worth based on such factors as education, virginity, fertility, beauty and family socio-economic status runs counter to the spirit of *Ubuntu* which accords worth based on being.

4.5.6 Hindrance to marriage

The practice of *lobola* has been correlated with hindrance to marriage owing to exorbitant amounts demanded for *lobola* (Hlophe 1984:169; Dlamini 1985:365; Sibisi 2021:58). Thus, what was meant and argued to validate a union has ceased to create a relationship between families (Chisi 2018:127). Walker's study (1992:58) reports that due to the high cost of *lobola*, some research participants considered *lobola* as working against marriage. As a result, young men and women intending to marriage end up resorting to cohabitation, commonly known as *vat en sit* in Afrikaans. Steyn and Rip (1968:512) also point out that *lobola* contributes in large measure to cohabitation. Dlamini (1993:289) alludes to a phenomenon wherein young wage-earning women would make a financial contribution to their lovers for the purposes of settling their *lobola*. These early 1990s studies are corroborated by numerous 20th century studies. For instance, Posel *et al* (2011) conducted a study in KwaZulu-Natal exploring changes in marriage in the context of *lobola*. Looking at the question, is marriage a dying institution in South Africa, Posel *et al* (2011:103) report that a significant number of South African men and women view the current practice of *lobola* as a hindrance to marriage. Parker (2015:176) reports on the delay in young people getting marriage as a result of being unable to raise the *lobola* money due to unrealistic prices demanded by the bride's family. Montle and Moleke's study (2021) focused on the commercialisation of *lobola* in South Africa. Montle and Moleke (2021:588 and 591) report that:

The commercialisation of *lobola* has engendered dire consequences such as an appalling decline in marriages. This has ultimately stimulated the rise of cohabitation, rechristened *vat en sit* relationships. *Vat en sit* seems to be a solution for couples that want to stay together but cannot afford to pay *lobola*.

According to Statistics South Africa's *Cultural Dynamics in South Africa*, marriage for young couples has become financially onerous given the growing commercialisation of *lobola* and male unemployment in the post-apartheid period (Stats SA 2025:35). Indeed, Posel *et al*

(2011:106) maintain that high rates of *lobola* make marriage an unattainable goal for many young men.

Similar findings have been reported in some Southern African countries like Zimbabwe (Chisi 2018), Malawi (Mbewe 2021), Eswatini (Ngwenyama 2022), Namibia (Pauli 2019). In Malawi, Mbewe (in Chitando 2021:218-220) found that many young people are finding it difficult to marry as the demands of *lobola* have become strenuous such that some of the young men are forced to apply for loans from banks. Mbewe is of the view that *lobola* has become a threat to young men who are considering marriage. Ngwenyama (2022) conducted a study in Eswatini to examine how young people between the ages of 25 years and 35 years were creating family and kinship through their performance of *lobola* and marriage. Ngwenyama (2022:68) reflects on the youth unemployment rate in Eswatini and reports that many young people cannot afford the number of cattle that families are asking for.

These findings are to be read in consideration of the weighty price and the value that the philosophy of *Ubuntu* places on family. *Lobola* is interwoven with marriage, an institution from which reproduction of generations and lineage subsistence are hinged. *Lobola* is about marriage. It marks the onset of access to marriage (Nkosi 2011:7; Montle and Moleke 2021:591). Consequently, *lobola* as a hindrance to marriage is tantamount to extermination of the African society at worst, especially given the gravity of the intricate tie between marriage and reproduction (Ngihbi and Elechi 2022:228). The hindrance to marriage further implies that children will be born out of wedlock (Hlophe 1984:170). Actually, Hunter (2007:692) reports that there has been a growing number of women giving birth out of wedlock throughout the 20th century. Sadly, according to Hunter (2007:695), “marriage today is, in many respects, a middle-class institution.” Thus, *lobola* seems to perpetuate class formation and highlight the plight of the poor, a phenomenon one can characterise as anti-*Ubuntu*. The practice of *lobola* carries a weighty function in matters of marriage and subsistence of a lineage. Not only does *lobola* legitimise marriage, as discussed in Chapter 2, it also confers legitimacy on children (Marwede and Mamabolo 1945; Jeffreys 1951). Seen from this vantage point, it does seem that *lobola* deprives children born out of wedlock their sense of legitimacy and thereby expose them to ridicule and possible stigmatisation. Equally important, fathers may in some instances be denied access to their children because *lobola* has not been paid. It has been established that *lobola* was associated with transferring the rights to children (Steyn and Rip 1968:505). It is for the same purpose that Jeffreys (1951) strongly contends that *lobola* is actually child-price because of the legitimacy status it confers on the child and the access to the child it grants the father.

4.5.7 Individualism

As noted above, in ancient times, the practice of *lobola* was, as it were, a family affair. The groom's father and uncles could contribute to his *lobola* payment and thereby making formalisation of his marriage a product of collective efforts. A young man intending to marry would not embark on this journey without involving his family. However, *lobola* is now attached to an individual, although it is still paid by his family. Thus, that sense of interdependence and collectivism has been removed from the equation. Dlamini (1983:503) asserts that "the increased individualism brought by westernisation has weakened kinship ties and caused *lobola* to be the main concern of the bridegroom, rather than of the kin." Steyn and Rip (1968:506) report that individualism has crept into the concept and practice of *lobola*. Posel *et al* (2014:126) report that some men in their study evaluated their masculinity on the basis of how much they can pay *lobola*, thus; their orientation is more about the individual's pride. Also, that some women consider raising money to contribute to their own *lobola* points to a move away from family. In this instance, marriage gets individualised such that parents may no longer have a say in their children's marital issues. Posel and Rudwick (2015:5) report that many evaluated their own self-worth according to the value their would-be husbands would pay. Hlophe (1984:169) is of the view that the current society has changed fundamentally and has become highly individualistic, competitive and acquisitive. Within this context, the amount of *lobola* depends largely on status and wealth (Sibisi 2021:64).

Ubuntu is centred on the pillars of collectivism, togetherness, mutuality, collaboration, cooperation and a communal worldview. The concept and practice of *lobola* has disconnected with these pillars. *Lobola* has taken an individualised orientation as the involvement of family lessened over time.

4.5.8 Materialist orientation

A materialist proclivity is among the characterisations of the concept and practice of *lobola* in the post-apartheid era. Shope's study (2006:68) reports that men and women mentioned the tendency for families to use *lobola* for material advancement. A common feature in literature is the use of women's qualifications to determine their monetary value. Shope (2006:69) reports that "more and more parents argue that *lobola* is compensation for their daughters' upbringing and education." Mkize's study (2023:71) found that some female research participants believed that they deserved high rates of *lobola* because of their education and virginity. Mkize (2023:iii) argues that modern families are portrayed as using *lobola* for financial gain. Some participants opined that *lobola* is mostly monetised and it is now more about

making money. A materialist proclivity is characterised by an attitude of and propensity to gain. As reflected in the studies cited above, it would seem that there has emerged a tendency to benefit and/or make profit from a girl's educational status and virginity. This attitude masquerades as compensation. True to the spirit of materialism, such an attitude of making profit from a daughter's education and virginity is done at all costs, even if doing so may be a hindrance to her access to marriage and the social status (respect and dignity) that comes with being married. Chisi's study (2018:128) reports that in Zimbabwe, some Shona girls who have reached a marriage age found themselves condemned to single life because of the prevailing charges of *lobola* that are beyond the reach of some young men. Resultantly, there is a rise in children born out of wedlock and cohabitation. Chisi (2018:128) further reports that wage-earning young women resort to raising their own *lobola* money.

A materialist proclivity is linked to greed and selfishness, which are anti-*Ubuntu*. It has been reported that greed has found its way into the concept and practice of *lobola* (Madlome 2021:233; Mbewe 2021:220). It can be argued that greed and materialism are two sides of the same coin. *Lobola* is now about how much the family can profit or make. The focus has shifted from relationship-building to profit-making. For this reason, some studies report that there is tension during the negotiation resulting in sons-in-law developing hostility towards their in-laws. This can be attributed to the materialist orientation which propels family delegates to negotiate with profit in mind. Chiweshe (2016:235) asserts that the practice of *lobola* has become increasingly materialistic.

4.6 Conclusion

The practice of *lobola* certainly exhibited resilience over the years, from the period of misunderstandings, misinterpretations, demonisation and attempts to regulate and even abolish it by missionaries and colonialists (Nkosi 2011; Sibisi 2021). It further survived calls by some post-colonial African scholars and 'women's rights activists' who demanded the head of the practice on the basis that it is commercialised, not legally required and that it contributes to spousal abuse (Hlophe 1984:170; Montle and Moleke 2021: 588and591; Malesa and Sekudu 2021:154-155). Noticeably, the practice of *lobola* divides opinions and provokes varied emotions and feelings among some African scholars, traditionalists and 'ordinary people' on the ground (Dlamini 1984:367). Despite all these issues, the practice of *lobola* is still widely practised and it shows no signs of a looming demise.

This chapter discussed how *lobola* was practised prior to the colonial era and how it is currently practised in contemporary Southern Africa. The chapter demonstrated that in ancient times

there was a resemblance of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Thus, in precolonial times people who were poor could 'pay' *lobola* through other means than cattle, such as bride-service and instalment-based payment. And they were not rushed to pay up the money. It was further demonstrated that the practice of *lobola* engendered interdependence because it involved the entire family, thereby facilitating harmony, mutuality, and solidarity.

As shown above, there is evidence in literature that the concept and practice of *lobola* has changed. Although this change is adequately reported in the 20th century research, there is evidence that the concept and practice of *lobola* has been undergoing transformation throughout its developmental trajectory. Thus, it would be misleading to think that the change of *lobola* can and should be entirely attributed to 'our times'. It is anthropologically established that culture is not static; it is dynamic and constantly changing to adapt to the evolution of the humankind. Consequently, cultural practices are not immune to change. Logically, because *lobola* is a cultural practice, it changed, it changes, and it will continue to change.

It is apparent from the preceding discussions that there was some semblance of *Ubuntu* in the concept and practice of *lobola* as it was practised in ancient times, although there is currently a disconnect. The difficulty around this discussion will always centre around these questions: (a) how far back in history can research excavate to arrive at any conclusive stance on the concept and practice of *lobola*? (b) is there a specific period to which *lobola* lost connection with *Ubuntu*?, and (c) was the concept and practice of *lobola* aligned with *Ubuntu* in its entirety? This study hypothesises that the concept and practice of *lobola*, during its continuity trajectory in the post-colonial period, suffered a disconnect from the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. This is done with consideration of the complexity and plurality and aware that caution should be exercised before making superficial generalisations.

Chapter 5

General Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

In his book titled 'Way to Wisdom', Karl Jaspers (1954) conceived of the essence of philosophy as the search for truth as opposed to possession of truth. This conceptualisation of philosophy positions it as a science that is not obsessed with arriving at a point of epistemic finality. This study joined many other philosophy studies that embarked on a search, the findings of which potentially contribute to reinterpretation of human reality in various domains of life. The focus is not on coming out of the research site with a pile of facts and conclusive claims, but to reinterpret phenomena and share alternative lens through which human life can be enhanced. This chapter seeks to consolidate and synthesise the research project. In it key themes that emerged from the findings reiterated and concisely discussed. The chapter further shares limitations of the study and practical recommendations that can potentially contribute to existing literature, suggest possible areas of focus for future research and importantly, influence the current and future practice and evolution of *lobola*. Equally important, still at a practical level, the study will potentially contribute to discourse and initiatives that are geared towards recentring the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* in the day-to-day life of African people.

This study sets out to excavate meanings, understandings and interpretations of the concept and practice of *lobola* as it was practised during pre-colonial times and how it is currently practised in the post-colonial Southern African context. Having critically analysed literature, the study identified and discussed emerged and emerging themes in the study of the practice of *lobola*. As the subject of *lobola* has been widely studied in other social science disciplines, the study investigated the subject of *lobola* through the lens of an African philosophical perspective. This is an area that until now has not received sufficient attention of research. Thus, philosophy is a late-comer in this area, although much work has already been done that demonstrates the intricate link between African philosophy and African culture. The core object of this study was to explore the relationship between the concept and practice of *lobola* and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Importantly, this study highlighted the intricate interplay between African cultural practices, such as *lobola*, and African philosophy. Thus, it demonstrated the indisputable link between the two, because philosophising takes place within the philosopher's cultural experience. The study positioned philosophy as a reflective

and an intellectual mechanism by which cultural phenomena can be critically analysed, refined, redefined and enhanced. Particularly in the context of this study, the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* can play a critical role in helping us reconnect the concept and practice of *lobola* with humanity. Resultantly, this will preserve its essence and relevance in its trajectory of continuity.

Based on a body of literature, the study showed that the concept and practice of *lobola* has undergone changes in its quest for relevance and essence. Conditions that facilitate these changes were highlighted, which include industrialisation, acculturation, cultural imposition by colonisers, and misinterpretation by missionaries and colonisers. It is however acknowledged and argued that culture is subject to evolution by its very nature. Thus, it is not static and timeless. As a result, this research project cautions against obsession with the above-mentioned enablers of cultural change and the calls by other researchers to return to the original meaning of the concept and practice of *lobola* — as this is a far-fetched undertaking. One of the attributes of the altered state of *lobola* is commercialisation. It has been shown in this study that *lobola* has been commercialised. As shown in this research project, some studies that reported on this finding tended to attribute it to the introduction of the cash economy when colonisers settled in Southern Africa. Although there is some merit to this argument, this study strongly contends that at the heart of this commercialisation of the practice of *lobola* lies the disconnect with *Ubuntu*. For instance, it was shown that greed infiltrated the practice of *lobola*. Thus, it is not entirely correct to correlate commercialisation with the cash economy, at the complete exclusion of the human condition.

The study sought to

1. To critically analyse the fundamental function of the concept and practice of *lobola*.
2. To find out if the concept and practice of *lobola* is ontologically aligned with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*.
3. To establish whether the continuity of the practice of *lobola* facilitated a disconnect with *Ubuntu*.
4. To highlight the interplay between African philosophy and African culture.

Through an interpretive desktop design, and a critical engagement with literature, the study explored the manifestation of *Ubuntu* in the concept and practice of *lobola*, in its ‘original form’ and in its current form. It must be stated, as argued in the study, that the distinction between the ‘original’ and ‘current’ forms of the concept and practice of *lobola* is made possible by the periods in which *lobola* was or is practised. The study discussed the pre-colonial and post-

colonial versions of *lobola* to demarcate or differentiate the two forms. This differentiation is premised on consensus in literature that the concept and practice of *lobola* changed when the colonisers and missionaries entered the African continent. Thus, the onset of industrialisation and introduction of cash changed how *lobola* was practised as money gradually replaced the use of cattle as payment for *lobola*. This appears to be a point in time at which the concept and practice of *lobola* underwent change. Therefore, on this premise, there is reason to draw a distinction between a pre-colonial and post-colonial *lobola*.

One of the findings of this study is that the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* found expression in the 'original or pre-colonial form' of *lobola*. The study shows that during pre-colonial times the poor were accommodated and thus able to pay *lobola* 'in kind', or through a bride-service and that payment of *lobola* could be done in phases. Thus, the focus and priority were on building the in-laws relationship, which is a pro-*Ubuntu* orientation, as opposed to profit-making tendencies that are reported to be characteristic of the post-colonial times. It was not financially cumbersome for young men to get married as is the case in the post-colonial times. *Ubuntu* is relational in nature, and the pre-colonial approach which focused on relationship between in-laws on both side of the families could be argued to be aligned with *Ubuntu*.

Another critical finding regarding the manifestation of *Ubuntu* in the pre-colonial version of *lobola* was a sense of interdependence built into how it was practised. Sons depended on their fathers, siblings, uncles for *lobola* payment. This interdependence ensured harmonious relationships, solidarity, cooperation, respect and mutuality — all these are essential attributes of *Ubuntu*. As reported in the study, this sense of interdependence has been disrupted by the change in economic structures and system that were facilitated by industrialisation, urbanisation and the cash economy. Consequently, individualism crept into the practice of *lobola*.

Although some aspects of *Ubuntu* manifested in the practice of *lobola*, this study further showed that it conflicted with respect for human dignity in the manner in which women who could not bear children were dealt with. It is nearly common knowledge that marriage in traditional African society was largely defined by the capacity of a woman to bear children. It is for this reason that one Anthropologist, Jeffreys (1951) argued that *lobola* is essentially a "child-price", not a bride-price. Within this context, women had to prove their worth, value, essence and womanhood through their capacity to give birth, failure to which resulted in stigmatisation, being replaced with their sisters or being returned to their families and thus losing marriage. This study argued that this treatment is not aligned with *Ubuntu*, as it carries an undertone of dehumanisation.

The study further showed that the increasing monetisation and inflation of *lobola* demands act as a barrier to marriage for many couples. In the post-colonial era, the financial expectations associated with *lobola* have risen significantly, and thus facilitating delayed marriages for extended periods or, in some cases, contributing to the rise of cohabitation. This development is particularly significant when considered within the philosophical framework of *Ubuntu*, which emphasises family formation, and the strengthening of communal bonds. When the practice becomes a hindrance to marriage rather than a facilitator of familial unity, it appears to contradict the relational ethos and principles that *Ubuntu* seeks to promote and entrench.

The findings of this study suggest that while *lobola* continues to be widely practised as a cultural institution in many rural and urban African communities, certain post-colonial expressions of the practice raise concerns when evaluated through the philosophical lens of *Ubuntu*. The study demonstrated how *lobola* enables dehumanisation of women and how the increasing financial barriers to marriage highlight areas where the practice appears to diverge from *Ubuntu*'s emphasis on dignity, relational harmony, and communal flourishing.

5.2 Limitations

It is acknowledged that the findings of this study are not generalisable to the entire population of Southern African people who practise *lobola*. It is further acknowledged that it is near improbable to make conclusive claims about a social phenomenon like *lobola* which has varied interpretations, meanings, functions, and understandings among people who practise it. Additionally, *lobola* is a practice 'forever in transition.' These limitations are further propounded by what appears to be a skewed geographic representation of the concept and practice of *lobola*. *Lobola* has been widely and extensively conducted among the isiZulu speakers and in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Thus, this creates a limitation of the study in that there is no sufficient data from other populations in other parts of the country. The same trend appears within the SADC region; *lobola* has been extensively studied in Zimbabwe compared to other Southern African countries in the region.

This study employed a qualitative desktop approach which presented methodological limitations as it is prone to the researcher's subjectivity in the identification of themes. Equally, it may be difficult to replicate the findings of the study due to its interpretive nature, also considering the emotive nature of the subject of *lobola*. The paucity of research on the correlation between *lobola* and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* further creates a generalisability limitation in that there is no sufficient data from which conclusive inferences can be made.

Several studies on *lobola* collected data from students and learners. One wonders how much knowledge about *lobola* do students and learners have, considering that it is not taught in school. Similarly, research on *lobola* conducted in the early 1900s was mainly conducted by European Anthropologists who themselves had their own cultural bias.

5.3 Recommendations

This study on *lobola* has been extensively studied both in South Africa and the SADC region. Conceptual contestations about the 'original meaning' of the concept and practice of *lobola* surfaced in the surveyed literature, pointing to continued need for understanding this practice. This study makes the following recommendations:

5.3.1 Regulate the practice of *lobola*

Literature shows that there was an attempt by Theophilus Shepstone to regulate the practice of *lobola* in the erstwhile Natal. Although this was met with intense criticism by some scholars and custodians of African traditions, premising their criticism on the misinterpretation and misunderstanding by the Europeans and missionaries, a significant body of literature in post-colonial South Africa indicates that the practice of *lobola* has been commercialised. Resultantly, this commercialisation makes it difficult for young men who, in some cases, are underemployed, and unable to raise enough money for *lobola*. As reported in this study, the ripple effects of this reality are *inter alia*, the rise of out of wedlock children, and cohabitation (*vat en sit* – in Afrikaans). Essentially, this frustrates access to marriage, an institution of great significance among the Bantu people. Because the practice of *lobola* cannot regulate itself in its endless quest for relevance, the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of South Africa (Act 120 of 1998) can be strengthened to not only mention the definition of *lobola*, but to also impose or recommend valuation of sort (monetary or goods or services or even a combination of the above). However, due to the cultural heterogeneity of the South African population, traditional and tribal authorities can be empowered legally to determine the *lobola* costing in their specific communities. This would ensure that the pricing power is not left at the discretion of individual families. Consistent with *Ubuntu*, this would ensure that people who are underemployed or could render some service in place of money are also enabled to marry. If the practice of *lobola* is left unregulated, it is probable that it will continue to be accused of misinterpretation, misunderstanding, abuse or misuse. Consequently, it will continue to 'give birth' to its ills.

What could work to the advantage of this recommendation is that the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of South Africa (Act 120 of 1998) acknowledges the existence of

lobola and provides its definition. Equally, there is already in existence a dedicated government department that deals with traditional affairs. Additionally, the regulation of traditional initiation practices under the Customary Initiation Act of South Africa (Act No 2 of 2021) serves as a legal precedence to counter arguments that may condemn the regulation of the practice of *lobola*. Initiation practices were also unregulated at some point. However, the ills that emerged overtime, as is the case with the practice of *lobola*, necessitated the need to regulate it to save the lives of initiates.

As shown in this study, the practice of *lobola* has entered the terrain of discourse on women and human rights. If left unregulated, its associated ills will continue to draw attention from 'human rights activists' and it might ultimately be outlawed. Already there are calls to have it abolished, a reality that invokes a sense of loss among Africans who pride themselves in African practices and traditions.

5.3.2 Conduct community discourse

Ubuntu is oriented towards discourse, participation, interdependence, collaboration and collective sharing of thoughts and experiences. The studies survey in this research project indicates that there are varied meanings, interpretations and understandings on the concept and practice of *lobola*. This is understandable given that South Africa is not a homogeneous society. There is a greater need for discourse on African cultural practices such as *lobola*. This study recommends that public and community dialogue sessions be held to discuss the subject of *lobola*, in a coordinated manner — like the envisaged National Dialogue. African people have always been discursive from time immemorial. Discourse on *lobola* would be instructive and reflective. Regarding the former, community members, especially the youth would benefit epistemically from such discourses. Regarding the latter, this will provide communities with a platform to reflect on the significance of the practice of *lobola* in contemporary times. This is an area that could be spearheaded by Schools of Social Sciences/Humanities in universities, particularly scholars who specialise in African studies in collaboration with tribal authorities. Reports generated from these interactions could help communities, epistemically and potentially result in some shared understanding of the practice of *lobola*.

What can work to the advantage of this recommendation is the existence of the Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Rights Commission of South Africa (commonly known as the CRL Commission). The CRL has a Public Education and Engagement function which is designed

to promote community participation through cultural, religious and linguistic community structures.

5.3.3 Institutionalise *Ubuntu*

Institutionalisation of the *Batho Pele* principles implies, in part, that *Ubuntu* can be formally adopted as a philosophical perspective of the South African government. As argued by this study, the call for *Ubuntu* was made explicit and manifest during the Covid-19 period, leading to the creation of what was termed the Solidarity Fund. Equally, two of the three principles that underlined and defined the South African G20 Presidency were ‘solidarity’ and ‘equality.’ ‘Solidarity’ and ‘equality’ underpin the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Currently, *Ubuntu* is implied and referred to in many speeches by politicians, especially in moments of catastrophic nature, and this implies consciousness to the need to institutionalise *Ubuntu*. This recommendation is not far-fetched considering that *Ubuntu* was etched in the first Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.

5.3.4 Future research

It is recommended that further studies be conducted employing multiple methodologies to explore the correlation between the way *lobola* is practised and its alignment with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Owing to extensive research on this subject, it is recommended that future research focus on possible ‘solutions’ to curtailing the ‘ills’ associated with the practice of *lobola* in the post-colonial Southern Africa. This will contribute to the subsistence of the practice of *lobola* in its never-ending evolution and the quest for relevance. This is particularly crucial for philosophers invested in African studies and culture and people regarded as custodians of African culture and traditions such as traditional leaders. Thus, it is recommended that future research move beyond problematising the practice of *lobola*.

The practice of *lobola* has demonstrated resilience even when some call for its obliteration. Equally, the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* continues to attract scholarship, and it finds expression in political circles and day-to-day conversations. There seems to rise a resounding call to reconnect with the principles of *Ubuntu*. Ultimately, this study concludes that a critical re-examination of the practice of *lobola* has become necessary to ensure that it aligns with the moral values of *Ubuntu*. The re-examination of the practice of *lobola* through the lens of *Ubuntu* will bring onto surface broader questions about the relationship between cultural traditions and moral values in contemporary African societies. Such a reflective undertaking invites an ongoing dialogue about how cultural traditions can evolve in ways that preserve their symbolic significance while affirming the dignity and humanity of all persons. In this way, the continued existence of *lobola*, although its relevance is questioned, may depend on its

ability to align more closely with the moral essence of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which places human dignity, mutual respect, and community at the core of human life.

5.4 Concluding remarks

It is widely accepted that cultural practices are not static; they continuously evolve as people who practise them confront new social, economic, and moral realities. *Ubuntu*, as an African philosophical worldview, provides a framework through which such practices can be critically reflected upon while remaining grounded in African moral thought. In this sense, the purpose of this study is not to dismiss the cultural significance of *lobola*, but rather to invite a deeper moral engagement with the practice, notwithstanding plurality of thought regarding its existence and significance. By encouraging reflection on how *lobola* can better affirm human dignity, mutual respect, and relational harmony, this study contributes to ongoing conversations about how African cultural traditions can continue to flourish while remaining aligned with the humanistic ideals that lie at the heart of *Ubuntu*.

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