Ubuntu in Elephant Communities

ABSTRACT: *African (Bantu) philosophy conceptualizes morality through* ubuntu, *which emphasizes the role of community in producing moral agents. This community is characterized by practices that respond to and value interdependence, such as care, cooperation, and respect for elders and ancestral knowledge. While there have been attributions of morality to nonhuman animals in the interdisciplinary animal morality debate, this debate has focused on Western concepts. We argue that the* ubuntu *conception of morality as a communal practice applies to some nonhuman animals. African elephant communities are highly cooperative and structured around elders; they alloparent, protect their communities, mourn their dead, and pass on cultural knowledge between generations. Identifying these as important moral practices,* ubuntu *provides a theoretical framework to expand our* ethical concern *for elephants to their communities. In practice, this will deepen our understanding of the wrongness of atrocities like culling for population management or trophy hunting.*

KEYWORDS: African philosophy, animal ethics, animal rights, elephant conservation, animal morality

Introduction

In the 1990s, several African national parks saw a streak of gruesome massacres. For instance, between 1992 and 1997 Pilanesberg National Park, lost more than 40 white rhinos (Slotow et al. 2000), their bodies battered and with deep stab wounds. The unlikely perpetrators turned out to be adolescent male African elephants (henceforth: elephants) who had gone on a killing spree. While this behavior had been unheard of in elephants before, this was also a special generation of elephants in another regard: they were the first to reach adolescence after having been purposefully spared during the large-scale culling of elephants in previous decades (Slotow et al. 2000). As infants they witnessed the violent deaths of their mothers, aunts, and older siblings and were often also removed from their wider communities through relocation (Bradshaw and Schore 2007). In effect, they were not only traumatized, but also went on to miss the secondary socialization they would have normally received as youths from older males in

so-called bachelor herds (Poole and Moss 2008; Slotow et al. 2000). Left to their own devices, traumatized children turned into 'delinquent' teenagers (Slotow and Van Dyk 2001). In hopes of mitigating these unforeseen consequences of culling for population management, older elephant bulls were introduced into these populations, which immediately stopped the rhino killings and regulated aggression among the young elephants (Slotow et al. 2000).

According to the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), after widely shared objections put a stop to culling in the 90s (IFAW 2005), several African countries are revisiting debates about taking up culling for population management again (IFAW 2005; Muchinjo 2021), and some are considering lifting the ban on the international ivory trade (Stiles 2004; IFAW 2022). The commercial killing of elephants has also been used as a means to generate funds for conservation, rendering elephants into commodities serving a market-based, neoliberal global policy framework applied to biodiversity conservation (Batavia et al. 2019; Hewitson and Sullivan 2021). Welfare-oriented animal ethics has little to say against this. Suffering during killing is usually considered avoidable by implementing 'humane' methods, involving 'appropriate calibre weapons' targeting 'clean kill' spots in the frontal or temporal brain (Slotow et al. 2021). And the troubling case of traumatized survivors can be easily avoided—by leaving no survivors. Indeed, this has been recommended as a welfare-friendly strategy in conservation guidelines (Balfour et al. 2007: 60ff.).

In this paper, we make a case that suggests that elephant communities matter and ought to be entitled to collective protections beyond species conservation, including 'welfare-conscious' conservation. We argue that elephants form *moral communities* on an ubuntu account. These communities are characterized by practices that affirm interdependence, such as care, cooperation, and respect for elders and ancestral knowledge (e.g., Gyekye 2010a, 2010b; Samkange and Samkange 1980). Both ethical concern for individual welfare and valuing elephants primarily as a species fall short of capturing the full value such communities have. The recognition of ubuntu in elephants, in contrast, paves the way for deeper ethical concern for their communities as well as for individual elephants as irreplaceable community members, who arguably value and are valued by their communities.

Our application of ubuntu to elephant communities builds on other criticisms of the view that only human beings can be moral agents because morality allegedly requires moral reflection (e.g., Bekoff and Pierce 2009; Fitzpatrick 2017; Monsó and Andrews 2022; Rowlands 2012). The attribution of morality to nonhuman animals focuses on nonreflective capacities such as empathic care (Monsó 2015; Wrage 2022), normative thinking (Andrews 2020; Fitzpatrick 2020), or cooperation (Duguid and Melis 2020; Papadopoulos 2021). This debate, however, has not considered moral agency as a product of being part of a community, an idea central to ubuntu. If being in interdependent relationships, not the (reflective) rationality of autonomous individuals, leads to morality (Etieyibo 2017b; Metz 2012), this changes what we should look for in nonhuman animals when we search for morality.

Our investigation is structured as follows: In section 1 we outline the sense in which ubuntu describes human moral communities. Then, in section 2, we show

that, contrary to Kai Horsthemke's (2015) claim that ubuntu is inherently anthropocentric, ubuntu can in principle describe nonhuman moral communities as well. In section 3 we operationalize the account of ubuntu by identifying seven morally important practices that make a moral community and show that elephants participate in each of them. Therefore, the ubuntu conception of a moral community paints a *characteristic* picture of elephant communities. Finally, in section 4, we outline two major ethical upshots of applying ubuntu to elephants. First, it offers a decolonial way of imagining interspecies relations. Second, it offers a strong case against culling and other interventions that disrupt the integrity and vitality of the community.

1. What is Ubuntu?

Ubuntu is an African moral philosophy that emphasizes the role of the community in producing moral beings. The word 'ubuntu' comes from the Nguni Bantu languages and related, albeit not identical, concepts are found in linguistic communities from the Niger-Congo language family, e.g. *hunhu* in Shona communities, often used interchangeably with ubuntu (Samkange and Samkange 1980), or *vumuntu* in the Venda language, which picks out the specific in-context relationship a linguistic community has in their own place. Many African languages may have similar words, and the local specificity may be important in the establishment of local environmental or animal ethics (Gwaravanda 2019). Here we focus on ubuntu broadly construed as an established and politically important short-hand for many conceptions of moral community that prioritize duties individuals have to their communities. By striving to fulfill these duties, these individuals realize their moral agency.

1.1 Moral Community in Ubuntu

The term 'ubuntu' etymologically breaks down into word fragments '*ubu*', which signifies community, and '*ntu*', which signifies a sense of vitality (Ngangah 2019: 50). If we were to translate ubuntu we might call it 'community vitality'. Such a translation takes ubuntu to be a vital force that flows through interpersonal relationships creating and sustaining the community and its members. This creative activity is expressed in John Mbiti's (1990) famous claim: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am', which means:

> Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of [their] own being, [their] own duties, [their] privileges and responsibilities towards other people. When [one] suffers, [one] does not alone but with the corporate group; when [one] rejoices, [one] rejoices not alone but with [one's kin], [one's] neighbours and [one's] relatives whether dead or living. (Mbiti 1990: 106).

This account of being through community is simultaneously descriptive and normative. It is descriptive insofar as we understand ourselves, our suffering, and

our joy through relationships. It is normative because those relationships come with duties, privileges, and responsibilities, such that each of us is a moral being responsible to others in our community. The vitality of ubuntu is both necessary for a community to exist and something for which we strive, such that each of us must do what is needed for a thriving community.

In the descriptive sense, the vitality of communities creates and sustains their community members. Individuals are the biological creation of the communion of their parents, who are created by their parents and so on, leading to the ancestors. Noah Komla Dzobo (2010a) explains that even this literal procreation is part of what is meant by the fundamental creative force in African ontology—inclusive of many Niger-Congo language communities like the Akan, Ewe, and Yoruba. He relies on literal instances of creation and dependence (sowing seeds, giving birth, etc.) as ways of capturing how each human being depends on their community for their very existence. Each of us relies on the abundance of our communities to be sustained and supported. This includes relying on ecological resources, the activity of other community members, and the knowledge kept by one's community and passed down from one generation to the next.

The relationships in which we find ourselves carry with them a moral force. Our identification with others through relationships is coextensive with the opportunities to care for others and contribute to their lives (Metz 2013). We contribute to our communities in part because our relationships call on us to be someone and do something. Dzobo (2010a: 132) emphasizes that community leaders and elders are exemplars of the sort of person we should strive to become, because they 'achieved a creative personality and productive life and [are] able to maintain a productive relationship with others'. This productivity need not mean they have created wealth, but that they have been part of a community and maintained relationships, uniting in them the poles of 'self' and 'society'. Dzobo (2010b: 75) explains that elders typically have *nyansa*, a wisdom from experience that includes creative and supportive relationships as well as practicing good etiquette. With *nyansa*, elders maintain and cultivate the relationships that allow them to understand themselves as elders or leaders of a particular community.

The normative element of ubuntu emerges from the recognition that we are 'someone' relative to a community of others. If one recognizes they are a leader or elder, they are compelled to lead or guide; likewise, if we recognize we are a child or student, we are compelled to listen and learn. These identities are not static labels but associated with relationships and activities where understanding the relationship moves us toward the experience of being-in-a-community. When we fulfill duties that arise from community, 'the opportunity for friendship and goodwill opens, whereas emphasis on individual entitlements may not necessarily be compatible with harmony and goodwill' (Oyowe 2013: 121). Further, these duties do not necessarily follow from our analytic knowledge about deontic imperatives or the pursuit of good consequences. Instead, ubuntu-centered moral education emphasizes that our knowledge of our duties unfolds before us in the context of community life (Etieyibo 2017b).

1.2 *Muntu*: Moral Agents in Ubuntu

In ubuntu philosophy, membership in the moral community entails protection and support for all members. However, there is an emphasis on the duties of community members to contribute to the community's vitality. This is captured in the concept '*muntu*' that refers to the moral individual, whose morality comes from their social embeddedness. '*Muntu*' carries the '*ntu*' word fragment signifying vitality, suggesting that '*muntu*' indicates a person who is vital to their community (Ngangah 2019). This is often described in the language of a flow of vitality from community to individuals and back from individuals to community (Etieyibo 2017c). Following the descriptive sense of ubuntu, all community members are *muntu*, but some live up to this status better than others. This distinction leads some (e.g., Menkiti 1984; Metz 2012) to say that *muntu* comes in degrees. However, this does not mean that the duties owed to community members vary depending on their degree of virtuousness; all members of a moral community ought to be supported (Gyekye 2010a). We can still recognize that some especially virtuous community members contribute more to the vitality of the community than others. There are many ways to contribute including being a good leader, wise elder, skilled provider, good parent, or protector of the community.

2. Anthropocentrism in Ubuntu

Before we can apply ubuntu to nonhuman animals, we must address the potential objection that ubuntu is inherently anthropocentric and thus cannot be extended to nonhuman animals. Those familiar with the term may have heard it translated or explained as meaning 'humanness', or 'humanity'. This alone need not discourage us. While moral agency and responsibility are widely thought to be uniquely human qualities that set us apart from other animals (Delon, forthcoming; Korsgaard 2006; Nussbaum 2006), this assumption is what sparked the animal morality debate in the first place (e.g., Rowlands 2012). It is therefore not surprising to find ubuntu equated with humanity. But the implication that ubuntu excludes nonhuman animals can be challenged by looking at the capacities, practices, or relationships associated with ubuntu and at whether or not we find them in nonhuman animals.

Still, there has been explicit skepticism about the possibility of extending ubuntu to nonhuman animals on account of its anthropocentrism. Horsthemke (2015, 2017) argues that anthropocentrism inherent in ubuntu and related concepts precludes the possibility of a uniquely African conception of animal ethics based on ubuntu philosophy. He stresses that even where the traditions and stories of communities that live by ubuntu philosophy value other entities like nonhuman animals, ancestral spirits, or the ecosystems in which they live, they do so in an anthropocentric way (Horsthemke 2015: 68, 74). This anthropocentrism has two dimensions. First, the value of nonhuman animals, ancestors, and spirits, even when they are revered, is explained with reference to what they do, or have done, for the human community (Horsthemke 2017: 123). Second, there is a hierarchy

where God is at the top, ancestors and spirits are above living humans, who are above other animals, who are above inanimate things (Horsthemke 2017: 124-25). These features of ubuntu emphasize joint action as a community accompanied by reverence for elders, ancestors, and traditional practices. Horsthemke understands this as explicitly and exclusively valuing human communities, human ancestors, and human traditions, leaving little space to value nonhuman animals.

Horsthemke's (2015, 2017) criticism of ubuntu in animal ethics is, partly, a response to Thaddeus Metz's (2012, 2017) modal relationalism, which focuses on extending ubuntu to some nonhuman animals as members of the human moral community. Metz (2012) explains that as ubuntu philosophy treats relationships, like friendship, as constitutive of a moral community, nonhuman animals with whom we have close relationships ought to be included in our moral communities. He suggests that 'the more a being is capable of being part of a friendly or loving relationship with [human beings], the greater [their] moral status' (Metz 2012: 394). This would make our companion animals candidate members of our moral community on account of their capacity to form empathic or loving relationships with us. Therefore, we have a hierarchy where some animals are more worthy of membership in a moral community than others according to their capacity to have an interpersonal relationship with human beings (see also Samuel and Fayemi 2020).

We can see another way in which ubuntu might be anthropocentric in Motsamai Molefe's (2017) challenge to modal relationalism. Molefe asks us to imagine a Martian who has all the required moral capacities but no actual relationship with any human community; would they, therefore, lack moral standing despite moral capacity? Metz specifies that his view is about 'modal', in this case possible, relationships and not necessarily 'actual' relationships. As long as Martians with the relevant capacities *could* have relationships like friendship with human beings they would be worthy of moral consideration. However, this evaluation is still anthropocentric. By evaluating moral worth through someone's possible relationships with human beings, we center humanity as the sole standard for a moral community worthy of consideration. Such anthropocentric concerns may not be limited to modal relationalism but could extend to all ubuntu philosophy because actual relationships are often the ground on which communities determine their obligations.

However, there is another reading of ubuntu that escapes anthropocentrism. Instead of understanding the contributions of nonhuman animals, ancestors, and ecosystems as their source of value, Edwin Etieyibo suggests these contributions indicate interdependence and extend the sphere of what counts as 'community' beyond the contemporary human community (Etieyibo 2017a: 156–57). Ancestors are the progenitors of current individuals and provided us with the knowledge, traditions, and culture we now have. Simultaneously, a vital community depends on other living beings in numerous ways that cannot be reduced, for instance, to asymmetric relationships of use. Reducing this ontology of vital, causal relationships with ancestors and ecosystems to attributions of instrumental value by human beings misunderstands the causal ecological foundations of the vitality central to ubuntu. Taking ubuntu to be closely

connected to ecology has characterized a reclaiming of the concept. This sense of ubuntu highlights the traditional African ways of valuing the ecological world and calling for transgressive and critical ways to approach growing ecological crises (e.g., Muashekele et al. 2022; Mutekwa and Musanga 2013).

In this spirit we might reexamine the hierarchy Horsthemke proposed. Ubuntu is a community vitality that depends on creative force from above and below, the past and the future, the spiritual and ecological. It is not a hierarchy of rank but a collection that shows the many things around a community that constitute it. Lesley Le Grange (2015) contextualizes ubuntu as the normative element of what the Shona language calls *ukama*, or the relatedness of all things explicitly including nonhuman animals and ecosystems. *Ukama* emphasizes that the vitality of communities depends on respect for the larger whole. This limits the extent to which human communities might exploit the environment (Masaka 2019).

In addition to limiting exploitation by human beings, ubuntu grounded in *ukama* suggests a more radically nonanthropocentric proposition. In his criticism of anthropocentric interpretations of ubuntu, Filip Maj suggests reframing the question of the moral status of animals and asks: 'would it not be possible to grant animals a moral status based on their own capacity to commune, rather than our ability to commune with [them]?' (Maj 2020: 344). If we take it that the moral status provided by ubuntu requires a community's translation of ecological vitality into creative and supportive relationships, then there is no special reason to expect that human communities alone do this. We do not need to explore the capacities to engage with human communities, or even in human-like ways. Nonhuman animals also depend upon a larger world, so their behavior in their relationships and their ecological situation can inform us about their status as participants in a moral community. This status may exist pluralistically alongside other less socially dynamic but nonetheless valuable forms of life. However, where we find communities of participants who care for and respect one another, we ought to give them special moral consideration as a community, not just as individuals or a population.

3. Identifying Ubuntu Communities Across Species

Ubuntu offers a non-minimal way of conceptualizing a moral community. This means that we may find animals engaged in the relevant moral practices to varying degrees, but may still credit their community as a whole with ubuntu in some sense. Our goal in applying ubuntu to nonhuman animals then is to offer a theory that, first, accurately describes characteristic practices of that animal community and, second, reveals a bridge for respecting those communities as fellow moral communities. To evaluate whether or not a community is a moral community according to ubuntu we look for two clusters of characteristic practices based on two central values in ubuntu: care and respect. Together both clusters of practices recognize, respond to, and affirm interdependence, implicitly or explicitly acknowledging the profound connection between individual flourishing and community vitality.

First, in the care cluster we collate practices through which individuals contribute to the vitality of the community through caring for its members. Receiving, learning to provide, and providing care are crucial steps in one's moral becoming (Metz 2013). Thus, care means self-actualization as a moral being and enabling others in their moral becoming. Both sustain the community as a moral community. Practices in this cluster can also be understood as affirming dependence and echoing care-related values such as compassion, altruism, or generosity (Etieyibo 2017b; Gyekye 2010a; Metz 2013; Ngangah 2019).

Second, in the respect cluster we collate practices that imply or express appreciation of contributions to the community's vitality. An ubuntu community does not just ask one to contribute but also to recognize others' contributions. This is because as communal beings we never 'outgrow' being dependent; rather, we grow into the reciprocity of interdependence. Practices in the respect cluster can also be understood as embracing one's own dependence on the community and its key members, such as elders and ancestors.

There are a handful of candidate nonhuman animals who seem to form ubuntu-like moral communities characterized by communal care and respect, such as elephants, bonobos, cetaceans, and possibly others (Tokuyama and Furuichi 2017; Nolte, Sterck, and Van Leeuwen 2023; Fox, Muthukrishna, and Shultz 2017). However, a full exploration of the range of species that might live in ubuntu-like communities falls outside our scope. Instead, we focus on African elephants as a paradigm case to develop a model of the features and implications of ubuntu in nonhuman animal communities. For the care cluster we find that elephants (1) care cooperatively, especially for infants, (2) provide help, (3) care for a wider community, and (4) defend the community. For the respect cluster we find that elephants (5) practice noncoercive leadership enabled by respect for elders, (6) celebrate births, and (7) mourn the death of community members, especially widely known matriarchs.

3.1 Alloparenting

Alloparenting, that is, caring for infants regardless of kinship, is one form of extending care to the community. Ubuntu emphasizes this sense of community coming together, not just to care for your immediate loved ones, but all members of the community. Etieyibo (2017b) explains that on an ubuntu conception of moral education children develop a sense of morality through interaction with the community. It is neither abstract nor private. It need not be explicitly taught but is learned through living in a community, and so it is the community's duty to be an example and guide for all its children.

Female elephants—often sisters, sometimes friends—and their young live in tight-knit family units within large social networks of extended family, friends, and acquaintances, whom they flexibly join or temporarily separate from, depending on available resources or common interests (Poole and Moss 2008). Alloparenting plays a central role in these matriarchal family units, providing a chance for all to learn caregiving skills while also increasing care for everyone. Indeed, it is not just children who are cared for but also less experienced

caregivers; especially first-time mothers and their offspring receive extra support from more experienced group members (Poole and Moss 2008).

Elephant infants depend on extensive care from their mother, aunts, and older siblings for years, and either remain with this natal family (in the case of females) or keep in close contact even as adults (in the case of males; Bates et al. 2008: 206). Adult male elephants, in turn, take on the secondary socialization of the adolescent males in separate bull herds. However, compared to their female counterparts, male elephants generally live more individualistic lives competing with each other (Poole and Moss 2008).Thus, while male elephants play an important role in elephant communities, cooperation and care of infants is characteristic of the more tight-knit maternal family groups.

3.2 Helping Behavior

Helping others as a specific form of care can be viewed as an expression of generosity, leading to communal flourishing and moral development (Etieyibo 2017b). Elephants not only help each other in their care for offspring, but they also try to help disabled, injured, immobilized, and dying community members (Poole 1998; Douglas-Hamilton et al. 2006; Bates et al. 2008). For instance, they remove foreign objects, such as spears or tranquilizer darts, from conspecifics (Bates et al. 2008: 217f.), or assist mobility, helping others who are stuck in the mud or a ditch (Bates et al. 2008: 221). Assisting mobility is described by Bates et al. (2008: 221) as 'occur[ring] on a daily basis'. Other helping behaviors involve protective behaviors, such as chasing away predators or shielding vulnerable group members from conspecifics (Bates et al. 2008: 212f.).

In light of these findings, elephants are taken to be capable of cognitively sophisticated forms of empathy that involve a degree of perspective-taking (Bates et al. 2008; Poole and Moss 2008; Poole 1998). Aside from the deep emotional bonds that elephants form, this capacity will be highly conducive to the concern for all community members that ubuntu hails, and it may facilitate peaceful and cooperative relations with mere acquaintances and other communities.

3.3 Maintaining Relationships in a Wider Community

What we have noted about elephants so far may still be viewed as a rather narrow concern for (chosen) family, based on deep emotional bonds, rather than care for the community. However, elephants are not just concerned with the well-being of their core family unit but also with their wider social network as they associate in dynamic fission-fusion societies. Elephants stay in touch over long distances by low frequency calls and constantly keep track auditorily of the location of dispersed groups (Byrne, Bates, and Moss 2009; O'Connell-Rodwell 2007). Their alarm calls in response to danger, such as from bees or human beings, have been hypothesized to not just be expressions of emotional arousal but warnings to conspecifics in the area (Soltis et al. 2014). Some of these will be friends or distant family; some may rather be viewed as neighbors.

Such distinctions are facilitated by elephants' extraordinary working memory and hearing, and their ability for vocal recognition and discrimination (Byrne, Bates, and Moss 2009). Adult female elephants were found to be able to recognize and discriminate between around 100 conspecifics by their calls alone (McComb et al. 2000), which reflects the vastness of their social networks far beyond the core family. Crucially, these elephants know each other as individuals to whom they have distinct relationships, not merely as fellow elephants. For example, reunions with bonded groups will be celebrated in sometimes exuberant greeting ceremonies (Poole and Moss 2008: 87–88).

3.4 Protecting the Community

Care for the community and its members will not only be expressed within the community, but also in a generally peaceful but, where necessary, protective conduct in intercommunity relations. Colin Chasi (2021) explains that ubuntu is often described as pacifist, but that this fails to acknowledge the violence done in the name of ubuntu, especially counterviolence to protect communities and, in particular, the anticolonial revolutionary violence that was used to bring apartheid in South Africa to an end. Chasi describes cases where ubuntu is used to justify counterviolence, emphasizing a sense of community under attack. That is, willingness, at least by some, to protect the community is a necessary part of community flourishing.

Elephants cooperatively defend their communities and protect them preemptively against external threats (Archie, Moss, and Alberts 2011). For instance, elephants assume protective formations when they cross rivers (Zambezi Grande 2022) or open terrain where they may feel vulnerable (Elephantvoices 2022a; Poole and Granli 2021). Calves will be shielded by older herd members, who form a defensive circle around them when there is a threat (Elephantvoices 2022b). Elephants also cooperate to retrieve infants that have been kidnapped by other elephants (Poole and Moss 2008: 80; Bates et al. 2008: 215), and they fight off predators and retrieve group members that have been separated from the herd by predators or have got lost (Bates et al. 2008: 212f.).

Protective behavior may not be limited to spontaneous responses to potential or imminent danger. Elephants sometimes appear to retaliate in sophisticated ways against those who have harmed them. Bates et al. (2008: 211) describe elephant coalitions to retaliate against threats from other elephant groups. But also in conflict with other species, such as human beings, elephants are capable of fine-grained discrimination concerning who has harmed them in the past and therefore poses a threat (McComb et al. 2014). While elephants usually avoid human beings and human livestock, there have been reports of aggressive behavior in response to human activity (Kioko et al. 2022). Moreover, elephant communities that face predation from the Maasai, an indigenous Central-African community whose territory includes parts of Kenya and Tanzania, have been observed to attack their cattle, which seems to be a group-specific response to predation not observed elsewhere (Elephantvoices 2022c). If these are indeed retaliatory behaviors, for which elephants seem to have the necessary cognitive

capacities, it may be even more urgent that human beings understand elephants as invested in their own communities.

Taken together, elephant communities are characterized by care through a variety of practices that respond to the dependence of communal beings. Care is neither limited to parental care nor to the immediate relational level, but a practice the community as a whole is engaged in. Care is the practice through which infants are inducted into the moral community as they learn to care for others in turn. All members of the community receive care and grow into their individual role in the community through being engaged in care. The community stands together against external threats. While these practices respond to dependence with care, a moral community also engages in practices that imply respect for those we depend on.

3.5 Respecting the Role of Elders and Ancestral Knowledge

In ubuntu, our relationships call on us to respect those others upon whom we have depended. This includes our ancestors, our living parents and elders as well as those long passed (Gyekye 2010b). To evaluate whether community members respect the contributions of others we might assess whether or not the elders or knowledgeable and able community members are looked to for leadership as one form of recognizing their contributions. Specifically, we would expect as a characteristic feature of the community an orientation toward ancestral knowledge through noncoercive leadership by experienced elders.

Elephant communities rely on the leadership, experience, care, and social integration of their elders in many ways. As noted above, elephants form large social networks over their lifetimes (McComb et al. 2000). Shannon et al. (2013) found that the negative effects of social disruption in elephants persist for decades, and Shifra Goldenberg and George Wittemyer (2017, 2018) likewise found that orphaning and dispersal from the natal group are associated with social costs in female elephants that impact their fitness in the long term. Because elephants are so reliant on their communities, integration in a social network is not an automatic by-product of aging but largely dependent on previous integration of an elephant's mother and female relatives.

Experienced matriarchs have been described as 'repositories of social knowledge' in the literature (McComb et al. 2001). By virtue of their long-term memory and good cognitive mapping skills (Byrne, Bates, and Moss 2009) elephants are capable of accumulating vast knowledge over their extensive lifespans, for example, about the environment including other species, the location of remote and rarely frequented waterholes, seasonally accessible resources, migratory routes, the disabling of electric fences, the dangers associated with Land Cruisers, snares, helicopters, and so on (Poole 1998: 97–98). Elephants are also capable of highly sophisticated discrimination between individuals and social groups even in other species and can therefore relate to those others in highly specific ways. For instance, elephants were found to be capable of differentiating between two different ethnic groups, gender, and age in human beings based on acoustic cues in their voices alone (McComb et al. 2014). In one of those groups, but not the

other, men traditionally hunt elephants. Elephants were found to respond defensively to adult male voices in the former group (see also Poole 1998: 98).

This cultural knowledge held by experienced group members may be transferred in different ways. Naïve group members may learn through observation, from role models, or from what has been described as a rudimentary form of teaching. Indeed, elephants have to learn many things before they become adult members of their communities—what to eat, how to play, and even how to care for others (Poole 1998: 94–95). They socially learn about the locations of waterholes, including underground waterholes, and traditional migratory routes (Poole 1998: 97), tool-use to switch flies (Hart and Hart 1994), crop-raiding (Chiyo, Moss, and Alberts 2012), disabling of electric fences (Poole 1998: 97), or in one unique group the mining of salt (Bowell, Warren, and Redmond 1996). The case of the salt-mining elephants may be an especially striking example of preserving 'ancestral knowledge' in elephants, because this is a cultural practice that has shaped the environment for generations of elephants.

Knowledge that is acquired socially, and maybe even social norms, also inform the competitive behavior between males: Older elephants are more tolerant of inexperienced bulls who approach them during courtship and who observe and possibly learn from them (Poole and Moss 2008: 82; Poole 1998: 95). In turn, orphaned male elephants, who lacked the secondary socialization in a bull herd, were found to be dysfunctionally aggressive among each other and show abnormal sexual behavior toward rhinos; this aberrant behavior stopped when older bulls were reintroduced into the group (Bradshaw et al. 2005). Conversely, in what has been called an instance of 'rudimentary teaching', elephant mothers have been found to demonstrate proper courting behavior to their adolescent daughters approaching sexual maturity (Poole and Moss 2008: 81).

Importantly, this guidance by elders is not hierarchical. Experienced matriarchs are respected leaders in elephant communities, and this is not a matter of achieving dominance through strength, but of being respected for their leadership qualities. Long-time elephant researchers Phyllis Lee and Cynthia Moss found that 'wild female African elephants exhibit personality traits of leadership', meaning that they are competent negotiators of individual interests, capable of 'affect[ing] the behavior of others in the absence of aggressive dominance' (Lee and Moss 2012: 224). Their small study focused on 11 members of one especially successful family they had been observing for 38 years at the time. They found that 'unlike some other captive large mammals, the personality of wild female savannah elephants appears to be better described by traits of social engagement than by assertiveness, with aggressiveness negatively associated with social skills' (Lee and Moss 2012: 228). Lee and Moss view leadership in elephants as sustained by respect, which elephants gain for their problem-solving ability and social permissiveness (Lee and Moss 2012: 229).

The famous dictum, 'In Africa, when an old man dies, a library burns' (Hampâté Bâ 1960), seems apt for elephants as well. When a matriarch is prematurely taken from her family, the community loses wisdom that has been gained over a lifetime and can only be passed on over time and in stable relationships. In turn, the matriarch learned about the environment, its local geography, and how to survive

and lead from her ancestors, and so on for generations. This learning from elders is not enforced through dominance hierarchies, but involves the group members' assent. Knowledge transfer from, leadership by, and respect for elders show that in elephant communities a sense of togetherness or communal spirit produces respect for individuals through the interdependent practices and knowledge of that community.

3.6 Celebrating Birth

Ubuntu values not just the greatest contributors, leaders, and elders, but all community members as being through others is not unilateral (Metz 2013). Dzobo (2010a: 132) describes procreation as one of the ways people contribute to their communities in a profound way. Children are the embodied vitality of a community, and the community depends on them for its sustained existence, albeit in a different sense than it depends on its elders. The significance accorded to birth is thus at least partially grounded in the appreciation of and respect for the community as a whole.

We find that birth marks a special occasion in elephant communities. Joyce Poole (1998: 90–91, our emphases) writes:

> One of the extraordinary aspects of elephants' behavior is their emotionally demonstrative nature. It is hard to watch elephants' remarkable behavior during a family or bond group greeting ceremony, *the birth of a new family member,* a playful interaction, . . . and not imagine that they feel strong emotions which could best be described by words such as joy, happiness, love, feelings of friendship, exuberance, amusement, pleasure, compassion, relief, and respect. . . . I believe that *they are moved by complex emotional responses to situations that are important to the integrity of their society.*

As Poole suggests, celebrating the birth of a new community member may indeed be connected to respect. Don Ross (2023) describes how among free-foraging elephants he worked with in South Africa a new mother would present their newborn to trusted human beings. If the chosen person failed to 'fuss over' the baby for what was deemed the appropriate amount of time, that person would be given the cold shoulder by the mother for several months. It may be that celebrating the calf is a sign not just of respect for the calf or their mother, but also of inclusion in that moral community where it is presumed that the calf is cause for celebration.

3.7 Mourning Death

The connectedness to the community that is celebrated in the context of birth is mirrored in the mourning of death. Angela Roothaan (2019) describes mourning practices in an interspecies African context as a form of felt perception. A community with ubuntu has individuals who feel a relatedness to others, which

for humans is experienced partly in our shared affection for ancestors and departed loved ones (Gyekye 2010b).

Elephants generally show a high interest in the remains of all conspecifics (McComb, Baker, and Moss 2006; Douglas-Hamilton et al. 2006; Goldenberg and Wittemyer 2020), while they are uninterested in the remains of other nonhuman animals and show no preferential interest in the remains of relatives (McComb, Baker, and Moss 2006). Observations of close attention to dying and dead elephants have been widely reported. Douglas-Hamilton et al. (2006) observed the reactions of elephants to a dying matriarch: elephants that were not nearby and had a friendly relationship with the dying matriarch travelled to check on her and attempted to help her get back on her feet. After her death, elephants continued to visit and congregated around her and investigated her corpse with careful touch. Poole (1998: 99) observed similar attempts at helping dead or dying conspecifics and an interest in the bones of conspecifics as well as elephants picking up and carrying elephant remains back to the site of their death. Furthermore, Poole (1998: 99) notes the solemn atmosphere when an elephant has died: 'The behavior of elephants around their dead or around elephant bones is silent, gentle and contemplative'. Goldenberg and Wittemyer (2020: 119) conclude in their review on the matter: 'The apparent emotionality and widely reported inter-individual differences involved in elephant responses to the dead deserve further study'.

Since these observations there has been more conceptual work on animals' understanding of death (Monsó 2022; Monsó and Osuna-Mascaró 2021). Arguably, true mourning would require some concept of death. On Susana Monsó and Antonio Osuna-Mascaró's (2021) account, elephants will indeed be strong candidates for being able to acquire a concept of death, because they are cognitively complex and, unfortunately, likely to have repeated opportunity to witness the death of conspecifics and to interact with dead conspecifics to learn about their state. Moreover, elephants form deep social bonds, which could motivate grief.

While elephants may not engage in complex mourning practices, their behavior around their dead, on the backdrop of their complex socioemotional capacities and relationships, indicates an understanding of the significance of death, adding to the similarities between human and elephant moral communities.

4. Moral Standing for Elephant Communities

Elephants demonstrate a substantial investment in the flourishing of the community in various domains characteristic of ubuntu. Together, the individual practices we discuss suggest that elephants practice ubuntu, form moral communities, and therefore, at least as a group, practice a kind of moral agency. This indicates that elephants are not just worthy of respect as individuals as argued in debates on nonhuman personhood (Comstock et al. 2020; Nisha 2017), they are also part of moral communities valuable as a whole.

We think that ubuntu identifies an important moral truth with its appreciation of the community, a truth that has largely been neglected in mainstream Western moral philosophy. Specifically, ubuntu is suited to make a unique contribution to animal ethics because it provides a theoretical framework to consider the value of nonhuman animal communities that does not reduce to valuing species. Moreover, its emphasis on the community does not come at the cost of valuing individuals; rather, ubuntu calls us to value individuals as beings in particular relationships. We outline these implications here.

4.1 Ubuntu Interspecies Relationships

Ubuntu extended to nonhuman moral communities strongly resonates with recent claims for zoopolitical agency in wild nonhuman animals (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Meijer 2019). The finding that elephants (and likely other species) have ubuntu indicates a possible new imaginary for zoopolitical agency because it highlights the interdependence of agency and community. In this way ubuntu becomes an alternative or addition to animal politics based on 'citizenship', 'sovereignty' (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011), 'democracy' (Meijer 2019), or 'property' (Bradshaw 2020).

Ubuntu as vital thriving of and within the community is sustained through communal care and leadership by elders. This communal flourishing with informed leaders, in turn, depends on sustainable and stable relationships with the ecosystem and neighboring communities, including other species. This interdependent relationship means human beings ought to support and respect the community building, wisdom of age, and peaceful traditions of elephant communities.

Ubuntu and *ukama* have been employed in international relations (Chirindo 2016; Madise and Isike 2020). We conjecture that like other elements of international relations (Derham and Mathews 2019; Fougner 2021), ubuntu might also have the power to describe normative interspecies relations, between human and nonhuman moral communities. Ubuntu and *ukama* are already starting to be referred to in decolonial environmental conservation (Okpoko 2022; Mawere 2014). In addition to critiquing the power structures and targeting actual political decision-makers (Lanjouw 2021), ubuntu thus applied could help challenge the prevailing worldviews (Mabele et al. 2021) and 'diversify the Euro-centric knowledge landscape' (Mokuku 2017: 1) in conservation efforts.

4.2 Protecting the Integrity of the Community

Applied to elephant communities, integrating ubuntu into conservation might mean emphasizing conservation strategies that take into account the leadership, autonomous decision-making, and practices that elephants respect in their own communities (Mumby and Plotnik 2018; Ndlovu et al. 2016; Plotnik and Jacobson 2022). As our initial anecdote of the adolescent orphans on a killing spree indicates, peaceful coexistence of elephant communities and other species hinges on the integrity of elephant communities. While the mitigation strategy to

relocate older bulls as leaders superficially appears to have had the intended effect and even in some sense acknowledges the importance of elders, it remains reductive in light of the rich picture of elephant communal life we have painted.

For instance, 'rehabilitating' the orphans required severing the older bulls' previous social ties and likely impoverished their communities. Such a treatment of individuals as mere exchangeable specimens is a standard occurrence in our dealings with wild animals, especially in the context of traditional conservation with both wild and captive animals. Ethicists have argued that conservation assumes the right to sacrifice the lives and well-being of individuals for the sake of preserving their or other species (Benz-Schwarzburg 2020: 337–38; Castelló and Santiago-Ávila 2022) or maintaining 'highly valuable' captive breeding populations (ORF [Österreichischer Rundfunk] 2023). With ubuntu, we gain a more profound grasp of the irreplaceable value of individual community members.

Moreover, while the orphans' maladaptive social behavior stopped once older bulls were reintroduced into the population (Slotow et al. 2000), Gay Bradshaw and Allen Schore (2007: 429–30) have identified an increase of psychopathologies usually associated with captivity in wild populations that have suffered the disruption of social contexts due to poaching or culling. They explain: 'In all cases described, individuals exhibiting abnormal behaviors were either translocated cull orphans, progeny of cull survivors, or reared under highly irregular herd structures' (Bradshaw and Schore 2007: 431). The lasting negative impact of human beings and anthropogenic environmental changes on elephant communities and their interactions with the environment can hardly be overstated: 'Starvation, culls, poaching, habitat reduction and isolation, and translocation have significantly changed traditional socialization patterns and skewed elephant demographics' (Bradshaw and Schore 2007: 429). Many wild elephants now live without the guidance of experienced elders; many are single mothers (Bradshaw and Schore 2007: 429f.).

Ubuntu is then not just evident in thriving elephant communities. The disruption of elephant communities echoes the communal nature of elephants as well. Their integration in a wider world and their contributions to its vitality depend on their own community integrity and vice versa. Interspecies ubuntu further undermines the view that individual elephants are interchangeable. Each community member contributes in some form, is respected, and participates in affective and informative relationships that sustain the vitality of the community. Where this is made impossible through human intervention, such as in captivity, elephants live a diminished life as the kinds of beings they are. If we want to see thriving interspecies communities including elephants, then individuals and their relationships must not be sacrificed.

5. Conclusion

We have made the case that elephants form communities that have the core characteristics of a moral community according to ubuntu. Elephant communities are characterized by mutual care and cooperation, with respected elders at their heart whose loss is mourned and often has a lasting impact on the community.

Elephants behave in ways that show they individually value and contribute to their communities, and the intergenerational community contributes to the psychological health and well-being of individual elephants. An irregular community without elders is usually dysfunctional, tending to lead to needless violence and suffering. Elephants and their communities coconstitute each other in complex morally relevant ways.

The value of elephant communities as moral communities goes largely unacknowledged in human-elephant relations moderated by the predominant Western ethical frameworks. In addition to the familiar calls for the rights of individual animals, ubuntu calls on us to recognize families and communities whose autonomy, leadership, and vitality ought to be protected in their own right. Ubuntu already fosters intercommunity respect among human beings but may apply more broadly than generally imagined: elephants also ought to be considered under the umbrella of intrinsically valuable communities and be encountered accordingly.

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