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2008

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citation for published version (APA)

van den Heuvel, J. H. M. (2008). *Between Optimism and Opportunism: Deconstructing 'African Management' Discourse in South Africa*. Eigen Beheer.

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Between Optimism and Opportunism: Deconstructing 'African Management' Discourse in South Africa

This dissertation is about 'African management' in South Africa, an Afrocentric perspective on management and organisation that emerged in the early 1990s. The indigenous notion of *ubuntu* ('humane-ness') is a key concept in this regard. This dissertation provides an analysis of the emergence and evolution of 'African management' along three flows: emergence and externalisation, distribution and utilisation. Furthermore, the discourse is contextualised in a historical perspective (colonialism, apartheid and transition) and in a political perspective (e.g. strategies for business transformation) and subsequently interpreted in terms of identification. Although there is a consensus about the general principles of this management philosophy, the research shows that actors in South Africa attribute different meanings to 'African management' ranging from normative and optimistic interpretations to rather opportunistic versions. Overall, the debate around *ubuntu* and 'African management' is considerably polarised. Metaphysically, this management philosophy can also be read as a call for dialogue in organisations, both within South Africa and beyond.

Henk van den Heuvel was a researcher at the Department of Culture, Organisation and Management, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Currently, he is a researcher and lobbyist in the field of debt and development.

Henk van den Heuvel

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Deconstructing 'African Management' Discourse in South Africa

Henk van den Heuvel

'Leaders must not be masters'
(Julius Nyerere, 1998)

