



ISSN: 2230-9926

Available online at <http://www.journalijdr.com>

IJDR

International Journal of Development Research

Vol. 16 Issue, 04, pp. 70373-70376, April, 2026

<https://doi.org/10.37118/ijdr.30834.04.2026>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

BETWEEN TYRANNY AND INTEGRITY IN AFRICAN LEADERSHIP: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF VICIOUS AND VIRTUOUS LEADERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 17th January, 2026

Received in revised form

26th February, 2026

Accepted 11th March, 2026

Published online 30th April, 2026

Key Words:

African Leadership, Tyranny, Integrity, Vicious Leadership, Virtuous Leadership, Afro-communitarianism, Ubuntu, and Organizational ethics.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the ethical dichotomy between vicious and virtuous leadership within African organizational contexts, arguing that leadership in Africa stands at a critical juncture between tyranny and integrity. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Toxic Leadership, Destructive Leadership, and the Dark Triad, the paper examines how authoritarianism, manipulation, and self-interest have historically undermined governance and development across the continent. In contrast, it highlights models of virtuous leadership rooted in Afro-communitarianism, virtue ethics, and servant leadership, emphasizing traits such as humility, courage, and moral accountability. Through comparative analysis and case studies—including Zimbabwe under Mugabe, Zaire under Mobutu, and the ethical leadership of Nelson Mandela and a Nigerian pharmaceutical firm—the research illustrates the profound impact of leadership styles on organizational outcomes, social cohesion, and moral development. The paper concludes by advocating for a paradigm shift in African leadership culture, calling for the reclamation of indigenous ethics, reforms in leadership education, and institutional accountability as pathways to sustainable transformation.

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Citation: NKUSI Benjamin, 2026. "Between Tyranny and integrity in African Leadership: A Comparative Study of Vicious and Virtuous Leadership in Organizational Contexts". *International Journal of Development Research*, 16, (04), 70373-70376.

INTRODUCTION

Africa's leadership crisis is deeply rooted in systemic corruption, authoritarian governance, and moral erosion. These challenges have stifled development, eroded public trust, and perpetuated cycles of poverty and instability. Leadership, however, is not merely a managerial function—it is a moral and cultural force that shapes the trajectory of societies. This study explores the ethical divide between vicious and virtuous leadership in African organizational contexts. It examines how leadership styles grounded in tyranny or integrity influence governance, institutional outcomes, and societal well-being. The objective is to illuminate pathways for ethical transformation and sustainable development. Thesis Statement: African leadership is at a crossroads where tyranny undermines development, while integrity offers a path to sustainable transformation.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Vicious Leadership in African Contexts: White (2024) defines toxic leadership as behavior marked by authoritarianism, manipulation, and self-interest.¹ Leaders who exhibit this style often prioritize personal

gain over collective well-being, enforce rigid control, and exploit others to maintain power. This form of leadership undermines trust, fosters toxic environments, and erodes institutional integrity.² It thrives in environments of fear, patronage, and militarized control. Theoretical anchors include:

Jean Lipman-Blumen's theory of toxic leadership: Jean Lipman-Blumen's theory of toxic leadership explores how destructive leaders maintain power through charm, coercion, and manipulation, often exploiting followers' psychological needs and societal structures. She identifies toxic leaders as those who leave their followers worse off, deliberately feeding illusions, playing on fears, and undermining institutions for personal gain.³ Lipman-Blumen also emphasizes the role of followers in enabling such leaders, suggesting that toxic leadership is a relational dynamic rather than a one-sided pathology.⁴ This theory describes leaders who exploit followers' fears and dependencies for personal gain.⁵ In this article, the focus is on the neglect of followers who need a rightful place in leadership and how

²Barbara Kellerman, *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), 3–5.

³Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians—and How We Can Survive Them* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1–3.

⁴Jean Lipman-Blumen, p.15-18

⁵Ibid., 15–18.

¹White Eagle Vision, *Toxic Political Leadership: Understanding Its Impact on Society*, April 18, 2024, <https://whiteeaglevision.com/toxic-political-leadership-understanding-its-impact-on-society/>.

tyranny, as a part of toxic leadership, should be replaced by integrity for a thriving Africa.

Einarsen et al.'s model of destructive leadership: Einarsen, Aasland, and Skogstad's model of destructive leadership offers a nuanced framework for understanding how leaders can harm both their followers and the institutions they serve. This study applies it to the concept of tyranny and contrasts it with the principles of virtuous leadership. Einarsen et al. propose a two-dimensional model that categorizes leadership behavior based on its orientation toward subordinates and the organization. At one extreme lies constructive leadership, which benefits both followers and the institution. At the other end, destructive leadership manifests in two forms: tyrannical leadership, which pursues organizational goals at the expense of subordinates, and supportive-disloyal leadership, which protects followers while undermining institutional integrity. The most dangerous leaders are those who combine both tyrannical and disloyal tendencies, creating a toxic environment that corrodes morale, ethics, and performance.⁶ Tyrannical leadership is marked by authoritarianism, manipulation, and self-interest. It thrives on fear, suppresses dissent, and often cloaks itself in the rhetoric of efficiency or loyalty. Such leaders may achieve short-term results, but they do so by sacrificing the dignity and autonomy of their teams. The long-term consequences are severe: burnout, turnover, and a culture of silence.⁷ Tyranny, in this context, is not merely a political phenomenon—it is a behavioral pathology that can infect any organization, from corporations to classrooms. In contrast, virtuous leadership embodies humility, courage, and a sense of ethical responsibility. It aligns with what Aristotle might call *eudaimonia*—the flourishing of individuals and communities. Virtuous leaders prioritize the well-being of their followers, foster trust, and model integrity. They are not merely effective; they are good.⁸ Where tyrants command obedience, virtuous leaders inspire commitment. Avoiding destructive leadership requires both personal vigilance and institutional safeguards. Leaders must cultivate self-awareness, seek feedback, and commit to ethical reflection. Organizations should implement transparent accountability systems, promote psychological safety, and reward behaviors that reflect shared values. Leadership development programs must go beyond technical skills to address character and moral reasoning. Einarsen et al.'s model highlights abusive supervision and organizational sabotage.⁹ Based on this assertion, the author emphasizes that leadership is not neutral: it is either constructive or destructive. Tyranny may be seductive in its simplicity and control, but it is virtue that sustains and elevates. In choosing how to lead, one chooses what kind of world to build.

Paulhus and Williams' concept of the Dark Triad: Paulhus and Williams' concept of the Dark Triad provides a compelling perspective on understanding the psychological roots of destructive leadership. This triad, consisting of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, encapsulates manipulative, self-serving, and morally disengaged behaviors that often drive tyranny. The Dark Triad was introduced by Delroy L. Paulhus and Kevin M. Williams in 2002, who aimed to identify common traits among socially undesirable personalities.¹⁰ Their research showed that while narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are separate traits, they all involve a callous disregard for others and a tendency to manipulate for personal benefit. These traits are not limited to clinical environments. They appear in everyday leadership, often hidden

behind charisma and ambition. Narcissism involves grandiosity, entitlement, and a desire for admiration. Narcissistic leaders often see themselves as flawless and demand loyalty, not based on merit, but to boost their ego. Machiavellianism involves strategic manipulation, deception, and a cynical view of human nature. Leaders high in this trait are adept at political maneuvering, usually prioritizing power over principles. Psychopathy, in its mild form, includes impulsivity, lack of empathy, and antisocial tendencies. Such leaders might be charming but emotionally detached and prone to reckless decisions.¹¹ When these traits combine in leadership, they create conditions for tyranny, a style characterized by authoritarianism, coercion, and moral disengagement. Tyrannical leaders often exploit followers, suppress dissent, and pursue personal agendas under the guise of organizational success. The Dark Triad explains not only how such leaders emerge but also why they continue: their manipulative skills enable them to navigate systems that reward confidence and results, even at ethical costs. In contrast, virtuous leadership relies on humility, empathy, and moral clarity. It aligns with traditional virtue ethics, focusing on character over charisma. Virtuous leaders are self-aware, transparent, and dedicated to the common good. They cultivate trust, empower others, and lead with integrity—even when it's inconvenient.¹² Applying the Dark Triad framework in real-world leadership involves both recognizing and preventing these traits. Organizations should develop tools, such as behavioral interviews, 360-degree feedback, and ethical audits, to identify these tendencies early. Leadership development programs need to emphasize emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and servant leadership principles. Additionally, organizational culture must reward collaboration and integrity over just performance metrics. The author stresses that leadership is a moral act. Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are predictors of unethical leadership behavior.¹³ The Dark Triad warns all of us, leaders and followers, about the seductive allure of power without conscience. Tyranny may secure compliance, but only virtue can inspire true commitment. In selecting leaders—and in how we lead—we influence not just outcomes but the very soul of the organization.

Virtuous Leadership in African Contexts: The term virtuous leadership was popularized by Alexandre Havard, who defines it as leadership grounded in classical virtues such as prudence, courage, justice, and temperance.¹⁴ Drawing from Aristotelian ethics, emphasizing moral character and excellence¹⁵ and Christian moral philosophy focusing on the ethical principles found in Scripture, tradition, and reason, Havard argues that leadership is not merely a function of charisma or authority but a vocation rooted in personal excellence.¹⁶ Virtuous leaders are those who cultivate moral habits and inspire others through their character. Virtuous leadership emphasizes the development of moral character through the practice of virtues which list prudence as that sound judgement and foresight; justice, that is the fairness and respect for others; courage which refers to moral and physical bravery; temperance which the virtue of self-control and moderation, the magnanimity which refers to striving for greatness while serving others; and humility, that recognition of one's limitations and value of others.¹⁷ These virtues are not merely abstract ideals but practical tools for ethical decision-making and relational leadership.

In Africa, the concept of virtuous leadership resonates deeply with indigenous philosophies such as Ubuntu, which emphasizes

⁶Ståle Einarsen, Merethe Schanke Aasland, and Anders Skogstad, "Destructive Leadership Behavior: A Definition and Conceptual Model," *The Leadership Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (2007): 207–216

⁷White Eagle Vision, *Toxic Political Leadership: Understanding Its Impact on Society*, April 18, 2024, <https://whiteeaglevision.com/toxic-political-leadership-understanding-its-impact-on-society/>.

⁸Alexandre Havard, *Virtuous Leadership: An Agenda for Personal Excellence* (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2007).

⁹Ståle Einarsen et al., 2007, pp 207-216

¹⁰Delroy L. Paulhus and Kevin M. Williams, "The Dark Triad of Personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy," *Journal of Research in Personality* 36, no. 6 (2002): 556–563, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566\(02\)00505-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566(02)00505-6).

¹¹Peter K. Jonason and Gregory D. Webster, "The Dirty Dozen: A Concise Measure of the Dark Triad," *Psychological Assessment* 22, no. 2 (2010): 420–432, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019265>.

¹²Alexandre Havard, *Virtuous Leadership: An Agenda for Personal Excellence* (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2007).

¹³Delroy L. Paulhus and Kevin M. Williams, "The Dark Triad of Personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy," *Journal of Research in Personality* 36, no. 6 (2002): 556–563.

¹⁴Havard, 2007, p.15

¹⁵Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999).

¹⁶Havard, 2007, pp.22–30.

¹⁷Havard, 2007, pp.45–67.

communal identity and mutual respect.¹⁸ Ubuntu, often translated as "I am because we are," promotes leadership that is relational, compassionate, and accountable to the community.¹⁹ African scholars have expanded the virtuous leadership model by integrating Afro-communitarian ethics, which prioritize collective well-being over individual gain.²⁰ In post-genocide Rwanda, for example, leadership has focused on reconciliation, integrity, and restorative justice—principles aligned with virtuous leadership.²¹ Similarly, in Nigeria and South Africa, ethical leadership is increasingly viewed as a remedy to corruption and governance failures.²² The present study and from professional experience, left the author convinced that virtuous leadership offers, for sure, a transformative model for ethical governance and organizational excellence. By grounding leadership in moral character and communal values, African societies can foster leaders who serve with integrity, humility, and courage. As the continent navigates complex socio-political challenges, the cultivation of virtue in leadership remains both timely and essential.

Historical and Cultural Dimensions: African leadership has historically oscillated between tyranny and integrity, shaped by colonial legacies, indigenous governance systems, and post-independence struggles. Pre-colonial African societies often emphasized communal leadership rooted in consensus, ubuntu, communalism, and moral authority.²³ However, colonial rule disrupted these traditions, imposing hierarchical, bureaucratic, centralized, and authoritarian structures that often conflicted with indigenous ethics.²⁴ This historical rupture fostered a culture where vicious leadership—marked by corruption, repression, and patronage—became normalized in some organizational contexts.²⁵ Many post-independence leaders have inherited and perpetuated the same vicious models²⁶ such that the tension between imported governance structures and traditional values continues to shape leadership dynamics across the African continent. Conversely, virtuous leadership in Africa draws from traditional cultural values, such as Ubuntu, which emphasizes human dignity, empathy, and collective responsibility.²⁷ Leaders who embody integrity often leverage these values to foster inclusive governance and ethical organizational practices. The tension between tyranny and integrity reflects broader cultural dynamics: while some leaders exploit historical grievances to justify authoritarianism, others invoke cultural heritage to promote accountability and transformation.²⁸ Understanding this duality is essential for reimagining leadership paradigms that reconcile Africa's past with its aspirations for democratic and ethical governance.

Comparative Analysis: Leadership in African organizational contexts often reflects a tension between vicious and virtuous paradigms. Vicious leadership, characterized by authoritarianism, corruption, and

moral disengagement, undermines institutional trust and employee morale.²⁹ This model frequently stems from historical patterns of centralized power and postcolonial governance structures that prioritize control over collaboration. In contrast, virtuous leadership draws from Afro-communitarian ethics, emphasizing truthfulness, humility, courage, and humanity.³⁰ Leaders who embody these virtues foster inclusive cultures, moral development, and sustainable organizational growth.

Leadership Traits and Behaviors

Dimension	Vicious Leadership	Virtuous Leadership
Motivation	Power, control	Service, integrity
Communication	Coercive, deceptive	Transparent, empathetic
Decision-making	Self-serving	Inclusive, ethical
Impact	Fear, fragmentation	Trust, cohesion

Source: Primary data by the author, 2025

Organizational Outcomes: Vicious leadership in organizational contexts often results in low employee morale, diminished trust, corruption, brain drain, ethical decay, and institutional collapse. In contrast, virtuous leadership fosters psychological safety, ethical behavior, long-term performance, and community flourishing.³¹ Adewale's study of a Nigerian firm demonstrates that leaders who embody virtues such as humility and integrity inspire commitment and enhance organizational resilience.³² The comparative analysis reveals that while vicious leadership may achieve short-term control, virtuous leadership sustains innovation and ethical excellence.

Case Studies: Leadership in post-colonial Africa has often vacillated between tyranny and integrity, with Mobutu Sese Seko of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe serving as emblematic figures. Mobutu's rule (1965–1997) was marked by kleptocracy, repression, and the erosion of state institutions. He cultivated a cult of personality and institutionalized corruption, transforming the state into a vehicle for personal enrichment. Public trust and organizational integrity collapsed as bureaucracy became synonymous with patronage and inefficiency.³³ In contrast, Mugabe's early leadership (1980–2000) was initially celebrated for its emphasis on education and reconciliation. However, his later years saw a descent into authoritarianism, electoral manipulation, and economic mismanagement.³⁴ The politicization of institutions and chaotic land reforms undermined Zimbabwe's organizational capacity and public trust.³⁵ While Mobutu's tyranny was immediate and overt, Mugabe's trajectory illustrates how virtuous leadership can deteriorate when power is unchecked. Both leaders exemplify how the absence of integrity in governance leads to institutional decay, economic collapse, and societal fragmentation. Their legacies underscore the urgent need for ethical leadership rooted in accountability and transparency across African organizational contexts. These cases reveal the cultural resonance and legacy of leadership styles in shaping national and organizational outcomes.

Implications for Leadership Development in Africa: To foster ethical leadership, Africa must reclaim indigenous values such as Ubuntu and Afro-communitarianism. Leadership education should emphasize moral formation alongside technical competence. Institutional reforms must promote accountability, transparency, and participatory governance.³⁶

¹⁸ Adeyinka Adewale and Annie Ou Yang, "Virtuous Leadership in Africa: A Moral Compass for Transformational Governance," *Journal of Business Ethics* 162, no. 3 (2020): 590.

¹⁹ Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (New York: Seabury Books, 2009), 45.

²⁰ Thaddeus Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2007): 321–341.

²¹ Charles Kambanda, "Leadership and Ethics in Post-Genocide Rwanda," in *African Leadership: Perspectives and Practices*, ed. Bheki Nkosi Moyo (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2016), 112–130.

²² Adewale and Ou Yang, "Virtuous Leadership in Africa," 595.

²³ Bukunmi Deborah Ajitoni, "Ubuntu and the Philosophy of Community in African Thought: An Exploration of Collective Identity and Social Harmony," *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* (Association for the Promotion of African Studies), accessed September 30, 2025, https://www.apas.africa/journal/jassd_1730882881.pdf.

²⁴ Mbembe, Achille. *On the Post colony*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ekeh, Peter P. *Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement*. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, no. 1 (1975): 91–112.

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²⁸ Nkomo, Stella M., and Mangaliso, Mzamo P. "Ubuntu and the South African Business Context." *Academy of Management Perspectives* 20, no. 3 (2006): 24–33.

²⁹ Mbembe, 2001

³⁰ Tutu, 1999

³¹ Tutu, 1999.

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³³ Nzongola-Ntalaja, Georges. *The Congo: From Leopold to Kabila*. London: Zed Books, 2002.

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³⁶ Catherine Jendia. Leadership, Accountability, and Integrity: An African Perspective. *International Journal of Sciences: Basic and Applied Research (IJSBAR)* Vol. 24 No. 2 (2015)

CONCLUSION

Virtuous leadership is a moral imperative. Africa's future depends on a paradigm shift that prioritizes integrity over tyranny. This study calls for renewed commitment to ethical leadership and suggests further research into culturally grounded models that can transform African societies.

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