Managerial Leadership and Culture in Sub-Saharan Africa

Isaac Wanasika [a,*], Jon P. Howell [b,1], Romie Littrell [c,2], Peter Dorfman [b,3]

[a] Monfort College of Business, University of Northern Colorado, Campus Box 28, Greeley, CO 80639, USA
[b] Department of Management MSC 3DJ, College of Business, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM 88003, USA
[c] AUT Business School, Rm. WF805, Pvt. Bag 92006, 40-44 Wakefield St., Auckland University of Technology, Auckland 1142, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines managerial leadership and its cultural and historical foundations in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The analysis is based on existing literature, a qualitative analysis of African media reports, and quantitative results from the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) project. The five SSA countries studied were Nigeria, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa (black sample). Results yielded several common themes that characterize SSA leadership patterns across the region. In particular, a common cultural characteristic, *ubuntu*, was reflected in high levels of group solidarity, paternalistic leadership, and Humane Oriented leadership. Although the negative legacy of colonial dominance has contributed to a culture of corruption, poverty, tribalism and violence, charismatic leaders frequently invoke indigenous cultural values and means to overcome these problems. Implications for further development of global leadership theories are discussed.

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1. Managerial Leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa

As noted by South African management scholar Mangaliso (2001, p. 23), "much of management theory is based on the writings of 20th century Western scholars whose disciplinary orientations were heavily grounded in economics and classical sociology. Their writings depict people as being individualistic, utility maximizing, and transaction-oriented." Theories of management based on these assumptions frequently lead to mechanistic portrayals of human behavior that largely ignore cultural or regional differences. In point of fact, people are not just economic beings; they are also social and communal beings, and are often influenced more by emotions than presumed logic. Moreover, the relative balance of such factors in determining managerial and employee behavior can vary, often substantially, across cultures. As Mangaliso concludes, "by acknowledging this, global management discourse can evolve more holistic and inclusive theories" of management practices and leader behavior (p. 23).

In this spirit, this paper examines patterns of managerial leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Data from the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) project are integrated with an analysis of historical and media reports to produce a picture of culture and leadership patterns in five representative SSA countries: Nigeria, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa (black sample). Many cultural and historical similarities exist among the region's countries that allow us to treat them as a single entity. In particular, these societies share a common historical experience that includes early hunter-gatherer groups, ethnic and tribal loyalties, colonial dominance and exploitation of rich natural resources, subsequent independence, and efforts at responsible self-governance. There are differences among these countries that also will be explored. Diverse languages, religions, races and governments add to the complexity of this region. These help explain its uneven societal development and some of the difficulties facing SSA leaders. These similarities and contrasts present a complex system of problems that are explored in this paper.

2. Historical and cultural evolution

Africa is the second-largest continent with a total area of over 11 million square miles and 53 countries. A significant part of Sub-Saharan Africa is inhabited by a collection of related ethnic groups known as *Bantu*. The Bantu and other early hunter-gather societies appear to have lived first in small nomadic kinship groups that tended to be cooperative and relatively egalitarian. As time passed, the Bantu settled into hierarchically organized communities presided over by kings and stratified by age, gender and wealth

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 575 635 0114; fax: +1 970 351 1097.
E-mail addresses: isaac.wanasika@unco.edu (I. Wanasika), jhowell@nmsu.edu (J.P. Howell), Romie.Littrell@aut.ac.nz (R. Littrell), pdorfman@nmsu.edu (P. Dorfman).
[1] Tel.: +1 575 646 1201.
[2] Tel.: +64 09 921 9999x5805.
[3] Tel.: +1 575 646 4086.

signified by ownership of livestock. In these communities, traditional leadership was based on ascribed power passed on through patrilineal inheritance. Age was explicitly associated with seniority and accumulated wisdom. The leader was more of a mediator of disputes than a director of behavior, promoting consensus and adhering to a servant-leader model.

Coexistence among some ethnic groups in SSA was disrupted by commercial slave trade from the 18th century. In 1884, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck invited European countries, the United States and the Ottoman Empire to a conference in Berlin with the objective of sharing the African territory. This is what was later referred to as the "scramble for Africa". Bismarck's move had far-reaching and often unintended sociopolitical consequences that are still being felt. The demarcation of Africa ignored existing ethnic and historical boundaries and local sociopolitical dynamics.

Colonial governments established a variety of governance structures. The preferred mode of domination by the British colonial administrators was a policy of divide-and-rule, executed by adapting existing ethnic administration to enforce order and collect taxes. The most fundamental western influence in the colonization process was western education and customs. This pattern of conquest has been variously referred to as the three Cs: Christianity, Commerce and Civilization (Nkomazana, 1998). Immediately after colonization, resistance started to emerge in local communities. Emerging African leaders began organizing themselves into political unions and opposed discriminatory practices such as confinement to reservations, head taxes and inability to own property. Traditional chiefs, having been absorbed in colonial administrations, were often used to suppress political dissent among their subjects. The creation of African countries that split traditional ethnic geographic boundaries, colonial policies of "divide and rule," and the use of tribal chiefs as surrogate colonial rulers helped to establish ethnic rivalries that have become a common part of politics in post-colonial Africa.

The first wave of post-colonial African leaders came to power due to their elite education, accidents of birth, social status, and association with trade unions. These leaders often shared similar personal characteristics of soaring rhetorical skills and personal charisma.[4] However, none seemed prepared with the necessary leadership skills to deal with post-independence challenges. Leaders often retained power through a balance between acts of benevolence to supportive ethnic groups and brutal dictatorship against the opposition. Today, regional cultures share historically common characteristics. For instance, there is a common aspiration to seek harmony between human beings and the supernatural or other inanimate objects. Most groups in SSA are still patrilineal and patrimonial. There are strong power-distance relationships based on ascribed status, gender and age. Hofstede (2001) suggests that two dimensions of culture are particularly important: importance of religion and traditional wisdom. The first dimension supports the relevance of one's relationship with a higher power. The second dimension emphasizes the importance of being hospitable, discussing decisions rather than imposing them on others, and that wisdom comes from experience and time, not education. These two cultural dimensions clarify the critical role of *traditionalism* in many aspects of life in SSA.

3. Research literature on leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa

Studies on management and leadership practices in Sub-Saharan Africa are sparse compared to almost any other region of

the world (Steers, Sanchez-Runde & Nardon, 2010). Moreover, most studies have emphasized western theories and commentaries on political leadership, pre- and post-colonial leadership dynamics, or current leaders. These studies have not reflected indigenous dimensions and contexts that are critically important to African leadership (Blunt & Jones, 1997). Some SSA cultural dimensions are likely to contradict western managerial practices. These include: a deep respect for the elderly presumably due to oral traditions where age and wisdom are closely related, relationships between different age groups are markedly gerontocratic and generally paternalistic (Linquist & Adolph, 1996). The extended family serves as the building block for any organization and tolerance and forgiveness indicates the importance of interpersonal relations over individual achievements. Further, in African organizations, the importance of clan or ethnic interests over individual needs are manifested in different ways. African leaders feel duty-bound to satisfy social and even economic needs of their relatives (Dia, 1994). The distribution of scarce resources to clan and ethnic affiliates are natural responsibilities of leadership (Blunt & Jones, 1997). With this paternalistic orientation, leaders bestow favors and expect and receive obeisance or deference. This phenomenon offers a unique perspective on in-group collectivism and reflects a response to collective need rather than individual performance.

Attempts have been made to identify core values of African leaders. Mbigi (2002) identifies five core values: respect for the dignity of others, group solidarity, teamwork, service to others, and the spirit of harmony and interdependence (i.e., 'each one of us needs all of us'). The last dimension has been labeled the spirit of *ubuntu* (Mangaliso, 2001; Mbigi, 1997). *Ubuntu* is the basic philosophy that governs existence and social relations. It reflects "a family atmosphere… philosophical affinity and kinship among and between indigenous people of Africa" (Karsten & Illa, 2004). While some views of collectivism are associated with 'here and now' relationships, *ubuntu* is anchored in history and includes present and future obligations to the social entity. A contrasting view of decision-making is provided by Kiggundu (1989), describing African decision-making in the context of the high power distance relationship between management and ordinary workers. Respect for hierarchy is seen as unconditional obedience to instructions and directives. This is comparable to the autocratic leadership style displayed by many African political leaders and some managers that have been described by other scholars.

In summary, findings from the leadership literature are generally consistent with the description of the region's cultural evolution presented earlier. The importance of age and lineage resulting in the presumption of accumulated wisdom affect the selection and acceptance of leaders. Responsibilities of leaders to their extended families, tribes or ethnic groups supersede performance based reward systems and promote nepotism and paternalism. Consultative consensus oriented decision procedures are used among peers, but hierarchical authority appears to be dominant in reaching final decisions. Leaders are expected to be considerate, forgiving and supportive of followers' welfare and development and to maintain good relationships (*ubuntu*), although in-group expectations likely impinge on these relationships. These tentative conclusions will now be compared with a media analysis and results from the GLOBE research project.

4. Media analysis of leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa

To provide a qualitative assessment of leadership and culture in the region, a media analysis was conducted. Approximately 25,000 words from popular news and media publications in all the SSA countries were scanned for content reflecting societal culture and leadership themes over a period of two weeks. A detailed methodology and results of the media analysis is provided in

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[4] Virtually all SSA founding presidents shared similar characteristics of strong rhetorical skills and charisma. These leaders include Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigeria), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Sam Nujoma (Namibia) and Nelson Mandela (the first black president of South Africa). These skills are still highly valued for any type of leadership position in this cluster.