

Chapter 5

A Cultural Approach to African Management Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Despite acknowledging the existence of indigenous management capabilities and skills in Africa, management practice in precolonial African societies was seen by the colonizers as primitive management. Africans have ways of exercising power and authority at the workplace, ways of motivating and rewarding people to make them work harder. Neither the institutions nor the political structures put in place by the colonizers acknowledge these indigenous knowledge structures, but much of them have survived in the traditions and cultural values of the African people. However, unlike in Europe and most parts of Asia, the attempted modernization or Westernization after independence has completely neglected the indigenous sociocultural knowledge and tried to transplant western management theories and models to traditional African societies. This article draws attention to the relevance of cultures to management philosophy with the purpose of contributing to a culturally appropriate practice of management in Africa. It has been shown that the different management theories in the form that they have been developed in the West reflect western philosophical thoughts which may not fit culturally in Africa management practice. However, in developing theories and building models of management theories in Africa, it is unlikely to pay Africans to throw away all that the West has to offer. Rather, the approach to appropriate management theorizing is to reflect on assumptions of Western management theories, compare Western assumptions about sociocultural values with African cultural values to rebuild the theories and models. The use of anthropological and philosophical concepts in this context will help in the development of appropriate management practice.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of cultural values to management practices in Africa has become increasingly obvious in recent years as many expectations of African organizations and institutions created and managed along lines of Western textbooks and models have not achieved the expected results of sustainable economic development and growth. In Africa, we have very limited knowledge about its cultural values and the consequences it poses for African intellectuals and management practice in African organizations.

While the African intellectuals are very knowledgeable about accepted theories and models of the Western world, knowledge about cultural values of their society is limited. The African intellectuals are not equipped enough to understand the obligations imposed on them by Western cultural values in which they have been socialized and the traditional environment in which they were born and raised, thus, making their ability to contribute something original to the development of their society limited.

Because of failure of the Westernized African managers to identify and take advantage of the ‘growth-positive’ cultural values of their society for effective management practice that the relevancy of western management theories and models utilized in training managers in Universities and business schools to managing organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa comes into question.

Africans have ways of exercising power and authority at the workplace, ways of motivating and rewarding people to make them work harder. Neither the institutions nor the political structures put in place by the colonizers and the so-called African intellectuals to Westernized Africa have respected these indigenous knowledge structures, but much of them have survived in the traditions and cultural values of the African people. However, unlike in Europe and most part of Asia, the attempted modernization or Westernization after independence has completely neglected the native cultural traditions and tried to transfer or transplant ready-made western management theories and models to traditional African soil. The results of these transformations, in most cases, have been disappointing.

The objective of this paper is to draw attention to the relevance of cultural values in management philosophy with the purpose of contributing to a culturally viable and appropriate theories and practice of management in Sub-Saharan Africa. Management practice in Africa requires identification of “growth-positive” and “growth-negative” culture-based factors.

CULTURE STABILIZATION PATTERNS

The model of Figure 1, taken from Iguisi and Hofstede (1993), indicates how we assume culture patterns in a country to stabilize themselves through feedback loops, but also to change under the influence of outside forces.

The system of this model in Figure 1 implies that one cannot understand one element-such as, management practice philosophy within the local environment-without its societal and cultural value context.

In the center is a system of societal norms, consisting of the value systems shared by major groups of the population. Their origins are in a variety of ecological factors (in the sense of factors affecting the physical environment). The societal norms have led to the development and pattern maintenance of institutions in society with a particular philosophy, structure and way of functioning. These include the family, education systems, politics, and legislation. These institutions, once they have become facts, reinforce the societal norms and the ecological conditions that led to them. According to Hofstede, in a relatively closed society, such a system will hardly change at all. Institutions may change, but this does

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