

African Leadership Studies: Beyond Theoretical Exceptionalism

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The claim by leadership scholars like Geert Hofstede (1993) that leadership studies theories are not suitable for non-western leadership represents a form of theoretical exceptionalism. While context should always be taken into full consideration, valid leadership studies theory may be applied to the study of leadership in any human community. Using a few African case studies and drawing from the works of leading leadership studies scholars, this article demonstrates that leadership studies theory may usefully be employed in the study of African leadership and that the field itself stands to benefit from engagement with non-Western leadership cultures.

Some scholars de-contextualize Africa's leadership and developmental crises by attributing them to the mistaken and untested assumption that Western theories and styles of leadership are not appropriate for African and other non-Western cultures. Hofstede (1993) has argued that Western theories and styles of management/leadership are not appropriate for non-Western cultures. Hofstede claims that this is so because management/leadership studies theorists grew up in particular environments that inevitably limit the applicability and utility of their concepts of leadership to other environments. In essence, theory is culture-bound and for this reason tends to "guide our thinking toward our desired conclusion." In this formulation, attempts to apply leadership studies theory to non-western leadership will inevitably lead to teleological conclusions.

This proposition represents a form of theoretical exceptionalism that diminishes the globalizing potential of leadership studies scholarship. In this paper, I propose to demonstrate that situational, transformational, transactional, servant and other theories of leadership may usefully be applied to the study of African leaders. Using several case studies including Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, the former Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko and South Africa's Nelson Mandela, I argue that leadership studies theory is applicable to the study of leadership regardless of cultural idiosyncrasies. Theories of leadership do not need to be culture-free to be applicable to their subjects. What they do need to be is culture-conscious. Applying Western theories of leadership to African situations is not a problem so long as the investigator is alive to the nature and notions of African leadership and to the cultural context from which it emerges, within which it is embedded and within which it is exercised. Because Africa's chronic developmental failures reflect first and foremost a failure of leadership, the theoretical exceptionalism that theories of leadership studies are not suitable tools of analysis for African leadership should be rejected in favor of experimentation. Good theory is universal theory simply because theory may not be conceived outside of universal human society, which in no way diminishes the importance of human and cultural differences.

One may be forgiven for observing that the vast amount of leadership studies literature reads as if leadership exists only in the West. Western leadership studies scholars' preoccupation with their immediate environments and audiences obscures the presence of other environments and audiences

equally invested in solving leadership problems in their communities. Organizations and managers are studied as if they only exist in Western societies and remedies are suggested that are specifically designed to solve problems in Western leadership and organizational cultures. It is as if there is an implicit and all too obvious assumption that the world of leadership may be reduced to the world of Western leadership without any problems at all. The “we” we encounter in so many works on leadership studies often refers to “we” westerners, not we human beings. The University of San Diego’s Professor Bob Donmoyer speaks of a certain culture of “regionalism” in leadership studies that urgently needs to be addressed.¹ The rather myopic focus on Western leadership cultures in the field of leadership studies smacks of a level of reductionism not worthy of the field. Not only is there a need for African leadership studies, Asian leadership studies, Latin American leadership studies and Middle Eastern leadership studies; western leadership studies scholars may find much that is useful in looking at other leadership and organizational cultures beyond their immediate spatial and academic environments.

Leadership is a universal human process. It is found in all human societies. Since human beings are essentially similar in all the ways that really matter, it follows that theories used to understand and explain human motivation and behavior in one part of the world may be used to explain human motivation and behavior in other parts of the world. Of course, no theory of leadership may be applied wholesale in any part of the world without taking into due account human differences and cultural idiosyncrasies. But overall, we can safely argue that as valid generalizations on human nature, theories of leadership apply to their subjects regardless of spatial or temporal differences. Once created, knowledge becomes a universal artifact that recognizes no boundaries.

Organizational culture and leadership theory lends itself particularly well to the study of leadership in Africa. Edgar Schein’s (2010) insights help us visualize the African nation-state as an organizational “macro culture” within which exist levels of organizational “micro cultures”. Schein suggests that understanding the “shared assumptions” of group members is key to resolving intra-organizational conflict and maintains that “leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin” (2010, p. 3). Both insights are useful to an understanding of African leadership cultures. Culture, Schein writes, “is ultimately created . . . by leaders” (2010, p. 3). The cultures of material poverty and political intolerance in contemporary Africa are no mere accidents of history; neither are they manifestations of inherent African backwardness; or lasting immutable effects of the colonial encounter. They are in fact created and nurtured by African leaders. The saying that a people gets the leadership it deserves may perhaps more usefully be rendered a people’s leadership determines the nature of the culture they get. Leadership cannot be divorced from its cultural context, just as culture cannot help but be shaped by leadership.

Bolman and Deal speak of leaders as often incarcerated in a “psychic prison” that prevents them “from seeing old problems in a new light or finding more promising ways to work on perennial challenges” (2003, p. 7). This is a particularly useful insight into understanding the seemingly inscrutable antics of many post-colonial African leaders. Determined to hang on to power at all cost, many independent African leaders are perpetually in a state of denial; they claim progress and prosperity when their nations and people lack the barest necessities of life; they commit unspeakable crimes against their fellow citizens in the name of a national security that never was; they muzzle dissent and kill their opponents even while proclaiming their impeccable record of human rights and the rule of law. Bolman and Deal’s concept of the psychic prison might help us understand just why African leaders commit these crimes and break all rules of ethical behavior, often in broad daylight, before everyone’s eyes, and with a nonchalant attitude. African leaders of the post-colonial era often wield a “vision” in one hand and a club in the other. You either support them or shut up.

Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first prime minister and president was, on the one hand, a successful nationalist and pan-African leader who led his country to independence, initiated a number of important development projects, and contributed to the process of decolonization across Africa. He did a lot to propagate the idea of a united Africa and was instrumental in the formation of the Organization of African Unity, now African Union in 1963. He initiated a lot of important domestic development projects that continue to benefit the people of Ghana to this day. On the other hand, however, he was a power wielder who systematically monopolized the Ghanaian political space, criminalized his political opponents,

muzzled freedoms of expression, association and of the press, had himself declared president for life, and turned his newly independent country into a single-party dictatorship, thus stifling his people's creative and developmental potentials. His immediate political legacy was a quarter century of political turmoil that saw a series of failed experiments in civilian and military leadership in Ghana.

Nkrumah's domestic policy actions suggest that Machiavellian leadership theory is a useful lens through which to understand his transition from a freedom-loving nationalist leader to the dictator of a single party state. Between 1947 when he returned to Ghana (then called the Gold Coast) and 1966 when he was overthrown in a police-military coup, Nkrumah initiated a series of policy-action transformations that suggest the adoption of the twin Machiavellian personas of the lion and the fox. Let us illustrate:

In 1947, Nkrumah accepted an invitation from the United Gold Coast Convention to return to Ghana knowing, as he admits in his autobiography, that he could not possibly work with what he called the convention's "reactionary leadership." He admits that he knew "it was quite useless to associate myself with a movement backed almost entirely by reactionaries, middle class lawyers, and merchants, for my revolutionary background and ideas would make it impossible for me to work with them" (Nkrumah, 1957, p. 62). It could therefore be argued that he accepted the U.G.C.C.'s invitation for Machiavellian reasons: to use the U.G.C.C. as a means of furthering his own political ambitions. He admits that he had his own plans and would not hesitate to pursue them whether the U.G.C.C. leadership liked it or not (Nkrumah, 1957; Nugent, 2009 - 2010). And that is exactly what he did.

Europe's subjugation of African territories during the periods of the scramble and pacification was often effected by a combination of force and cunning, of military might and fraudulent treaties of friendship and protection, of Machiavellian lion and fox tactics. African states that resisted colonial encroachment were forcefully subjugated and pacified, while occasionally, African leaders unwittingly signed away their sovereignty to European powers. In order to satisfy the requirements of the Berlin Act that came out of the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, European powers had to demonstrate effective claim to and occupation of African territories. This they did either by force or by producing written evidence of African sovereigns' consent to submit to their protection or rule. Nkrumah translated these imperial strategies of force and fraud into his policies of Positive Action and Tactical Action, the former a show of nationalist muscle modeled on the Quit India campaign (Nugent, 2009-2010), the latter a show of nationalist cunning to effect the final push against colonial domination. In deploying these two approaches, Nkrumah used the same Machiavellian Lion-Fox strategies to fight British imperialism that Britain used to subjugate Africans.

Nkrumah's twin policies of Positive Action and Tactical Action were in line with Machiavelli's exhortation that the prince must be able to be both a lion and a fox. The prince, Machiavelli teaches, "must know that there are two kinds of combat; one with laws, the other with force. The first is proper to man, the second to beasts; but because the first is not often enough, one must have recourse to the second. Therefore it is necessary for a prince to know well how to use the beast and the man" (Prince Ch. 18). And "since a prince is compelled by necessity to know well how to use the beast, he should pick the fox and the lion . . . one needs to be a fox to recognize snares and a lion to frighten the wolves" (Prince Ch. 18).

From 1947 to 1949, Nkrumah played the fox to outsmart the U.G.C.C. leadership. From 1949 when he founded the C.P.P. to 1951 when he became Leader of Government Business, he played the lion through Positive Action. From 1951 to independence in 1957 he reverted to playing the fox through Tactical Action. Positive Action required him to seem tough and fearless as a lion in order to force the British government to grant internal self-government to the Gold Coast. Once internal self-government was achieved, he turned to Tactical Action, which he described as "a contest of wits" (Nkrumah, 1957) in order to convince the British government that his party was capable of ruling the country. In typical Machiavellian fashion, Nkrumah tricked London into believing that he had abandoned his hostility toward imperialism, even though that was furthest from his mind. After independence in 1957, Nkrumah eased back into the lion persona and renewed his relentless onslaught against imperialism, neocolonialism, and those he considered their local agents and stooges in Ghana. His hostile anti-capitalist rhetoric did not

deter Nkrumah from seeking financial assistance from the capitalist West in order to implement his most important development projects. Nkrumah was, in effect, a consummate Machiavellian.

The Congolese scholar Jean-Claude Willame (1998) has identified Machiavellian tendencies in the politics of former Zaire (DRC) dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Willame argues that Mobutu managed to remain in power for so long because he deployed the Machiavellian strategies of “ruling men” and “how to keep power” (1998, p. 38). Mobutu saw the chance to grab power in 1965 when the newly independent Belgian Congo was bedeviled by internal political factionalism and mired in cold war intrigues. Having captured power, Mobutu kept it by deploying a pattern of Machiavellian politics: “a sometimes unpredictable mix of threats . . . magnanimity, seduction, cunning, ‘make believe’, ‘double talk’ and ‘the frequent rotation and removal of bureaucrats, army officers, and ministers’” which created much uncertainty and insecurity in Zairian society and effectively precluded any organized threat to Mobutu’s power (Willame, 1998, pp. 39-40).

But if Mobutu was a Machiavellian leader, he was also a transactional leader. As a way of maintaining his grip on power, Mobutu rewarded his supporters with financial and other incentives that eventually bankrupted his country. Unlike Nkrumah however, Mobutu had no vision for his country or for Africa. His primary concern was amassing wealth and keeping power. Those who supported him were amply rewarded; those who opposed him were effectively neutralized either through force or lucrative persuasion.

Of our three case studies, South Africa’s Nelson Mandela lends himself more readily to contemporary leadership studies theory. As demonstrated by Robert Rotberg (1991), Chis Saunders (2014) and Daniel Lieberfeld (2014) Mandela was clearly a transformational leader, or perhaps more accurately, a transformational servant leader. Rotberg and Saunders have used transformational leadership theory to show how Mandela was able to transform his country from a violently divided society into a rainbow nation between 1990 when he was released from prison to 1999 when he stepped down as South Africa’s first Black president. Lieberfeld uses trait theory to highlight Mandela’s success as a transformational leader. According to Lieberfeld, Mandela possessed emotional self-control, empathy, a sense of self-efficacy, conceptual complexity and pragmatism that enabled him to perform the reconciliation-oriented leadership that transformed enemies into friends and made South Africa’s transition from Apartheid to democratic majority rule possible.

Ironically, Mandela has also been characterized as a Machiavellian leader. In a newspaper review of British journalist Anthony Sampson’s biography of Nelson Mandela, James Gump (1999) writes that the Mandela that emerges from Sampson’s book “is part Gandhi and part Machiavelli, moral statesman and consummate politician.” In response to an email request from me to elaborate, Gump wrote that his reference to Mandela’s Machiavellianism derived from Mandela’s pragmatism: While “Mandela turned to violence in the early 1960s as a tactical position . . . he was also prepared to negotiate with his enemies at any time” (Gump February 6, 2013). Gump also cites Mandela’s “posturing with guards” on Robben Island “to gain prisoner rights” and “to make the best of a bad situation” as a Machiavellian survival strategy (2013). But if Mandela was a Machiavellian leader, he put his Machiavellian skills to good use, to beat the Apartheid system at its own game.

In short, Hofstede’s claim that leadership studies theory is not applicable to studies of non-western leadership is flawed. As demonstrated in this paper and more comprehensively elsewhere (Jallow, 2014a; Jallow, 2014b), leadership studies theory may usefully be deployed in the study of African leadership. Organizational leadership theory as proposed by Edgar Schein, Bolman and Deal and many other scholars is a useful tool for the study of dysfunctional organizations in Africa. Information processing theory helps us understand the mentality of African leaders. Theories of transformational, transactional, servant leadership, among others are as suitable for the study of African leadership as they are for the study of Chinese, Japanese or American leadership. Machiavelli’s *Lion and the Fox* is a useful framework for the analysis of the leadership style of Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah and other African leaders. Situational and contingency theories are applicable to the study of any leadership context. It is high time that leadership studies scholarship moves beyond theoretical exceptionalism and academic regionalism to embrace the wealth of leadership potential around the world.

ENDNOTE

1. Personal communication.

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