Management Studies from Africa: A Cross-cultural Critique

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MANAGEMENT STUDIES FROM AFRICA: A CROSS-CULTURAL CRITIQUE

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This article presents a critical cross-cultural appraisal of management scholarship concerning Africa, considering differences between scholarship *on* Africa, scholarship *for* Africa, and scholarship *from* Africa. It looks at how Africa has been conceptualized and portrayed in the management literature from an outsider's pejorative perspective, how solutions for Africa, underlined by modernization theory, have been sought for Africa by management scholars, and the imperative for research that reflects indigenous approaches and the difficulties with this. It then goes on to look at two major aspects that affect the way we research, and should be researching Africa: the changing geopolitical context, specifically China in Africa, that provides a different perspective of scholarship *for* Africa; and, the political nature of concepts of indigenous African management and how this should be integrated into management scholarship.

Keywords: cross-cultural management; Africa; postcolonial theory; modernization theory; indigenous; China in Africa

INTRODUCTION

The "discovery" by Europeans of other lands and other peoples has always been contentious in setting the tone for the way they have been imagined in popular thought and conceptualized in scholarly activity. That Africa was "discovered" means that the ownership of the term "Africa" lies with the discoverers, rather than those who were discovered. Ahluwalia (2001, p.133) notes that "The very signifier 'Africa' is one that was constructed by the West, and one that is currently being reconstructed through Western institutions that decide and exert their power by 'knowing' what is best for Africa – namely development and modernity."

One of the problems of studying Africa is this appropriation by the West. It is the pejorative and obstructive influences on scholarship of the "developing-developed" world paradigm (itself a cultural construct, and one defined by the "developed" world and also adopted by intellectuals and elite in the "developing" world) which still seems to persist, and certainly hampered research well into the 1990s (see for example in Jaeger & Kanungo, 1990; and to a lesser degree in Blunt & Jones, 1992) and is probably still doing so. It also colors what managers and scholars "see" when they look at how to work in Africa or with Africans, including in research collaborations. This may have detrimental implications for scholarly production in this area, including potential contributions to the current journal.

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This article presents a critical cross-cultural appraisal of management scholarship concerning Africa, considering differences between scholarship *on* Africa, scholarship *for* Africa, and scholarship *from* Africa. This provides a springboard for interrogating how Africa has been conceptualized and portrayed in the management literature. Secondly, this article looks at some solutions offered as antidotes to problems raised, and the shortcomings of what may be purely palliative solutions. This, thirdly, leads us on to critiques of these solutions. So, fourthly, what is the future of management scholarship on, for, and from Africa? What should we study, and how should we study it?

MANAGEMENT SCHOLARSHIP *ON* AFRICA

Early management scholarship, from the 1960s, on Africa clearly came from the perspective of outsiders looking at Africa, often bemoaning the inadequacies of what was seen as "African" organization and management, even seeing shortcomings in African employees themselves. Hence Dumont (1960) conveyed the idea of the "lazy African". Noorderhaven, Vunderink, and Lincoln (1996) described how a number of observers saw the lack of initiative of African workers as a cultural factor, as well as a function of poor education and dealing with unfamiliar technologies. Further, they were seen as lacking a sense of individual responsibility, so that when a job was performed badly there was no feeling of guilt or failure (Dia, 1996). "African" management is seen as having centralized decision-making at a high managerial level (Mutizwa-Mangiza, 1991; Price, 1975); being unwilling to delegate authority or to share information with subordinates (Blunt & Jones, 1997; Vengroff, Belhaj, & Momar, 1991); spending too much time on routine work and experiencing work overload (Makoba, 1993; Onyemelukwe, 1973); and having little autonomy and decision-making power at lower levels where jobs are narrowly defined (Blunt & Jones, 1992; Kiggundu, 1989; Onyemelukwe, 1973). Often these negative views of African organization and management have been contrasted with the more efficient Western management style, yet Dia (1996) and Carlsson (1998) have argued a "disconnect" thesis where Western institutions (including work institutions) were imposed on African communities during colonial times. So, what we are seeing today are not "African" institutions, organization, and management, but the effects of an alienation from imposed systems and practices, manifested often by low motivation as a result of inappropriate management and organization (Jackson, 2004). It would seem important to clearly distinguish such systems and practices from those that might be considered indigenous to Africa, yet Jackson (2004) points to the problem of empirically distinguishing different management systems in Africa (Jackson, 2004), untangling indigenous management and organization (Jackson et al., 2008), and even defining indigenous management (Jackson, 2013).

The main point is, however, that it is this view of "Africa" that has largely laid the foundation for management scholarship in Africa to the present day. It has presented a view of Africa as a problem. Problems have to be solved. So the next stage for management scholars is to address the problem and move to finding solutions.

MANAGEMENT SCHOLARSHIP *FOR* AFRICA

More recent scholarship *for* Africa has therefore often been guided by perceived views of what is best for Africa. It is well meaning, and focuses on what can be done to overcome the weaknesses so heavily emphasized by previous "research". It is informed by

modernization theory that has had an extensive influence on international development, criticized over a number of years in other branches of the social sciences, yet hardly even articulated in management studies. This appears to be predominantly where we are now with management scholarship for Africa, largely uninformed by overarching and critical theory. This is the scholarly context in which this new journal is being launched.

It is problematic that management scholarship for Africa is uninformed by cross-cultural management theory. The origins of cross-cultural management scholarship in Hofstede's (1980) work, provide both a weak and a strong basis for a critical foundation to scholarship for Africa. One of Hofstede's major contributions was to introduce a cross-cultural critique of the transferability of Western (specifically American) management knowledge to non-Western countries. Yet Hofstede's work over the last few decades has led to a non-critical approach to cross-cultural management scholarship in stultifying thinking beyond his four (or five) value dimensions. Although easy to learn (and to teach), and indeed to research and to replicate, his approach has not been a good ambassador for the sub-discipline for non-believers. This appears particularly to be the case for those studying and researching Africa, as it provides such a blunt tool. Wider African studies have of course been informed by social and cultural anthropology, whose adherents must surely wonder (indeed if they are even familiar with it) at the value of such an over-simplistic theory. Even when cross-cultural management scholars have taken their theories beyond Hofstede's dimensions to consider areas such as cultural crossvergence (Ralston, Gaicalone, & Terpstra, 1994; Priem, Love, & Shaffer, 2000), this is still remarkably uninformed by wider social science theories such as those concerning power.

Yet management scholarship focusing on Africa would benefit by at least being critical about the appropriateness of Western management in Africa. African managers themselves, who for example learn through westernized MBA courses, must know this intuitively yet even this contradiction is difficult to understand without a concept of power dynamics built into theories of what happens when knowledge is transferred from an historically dominant society and integrated into a society that over a number of centuries has been subjected (with some opposition previously branded as terroristic) to the colonizing influence of a dominant society. Postcolonial theory, although adopted late by some critical management scholars, provides an explanation of why African scholars (and managers) accept Western thought as a dominant ideology. It is also difficult generally to develop a theory of management and organization in Africa without an understanding of the West's colonial engagement with Africa. This will be taken up later, after considering just one example of the lack of appropriateness of imposing Western management on African countries, an example that may well be counter-intuitive to the Western mind: introducing greater workplace democracy.

As early as 1997 Blunt and Jones had suggested that:

> Current theories of leadership … in the West place high value … on teamwork, empowerment … [and] … is more a construct of the rhetoric of management consultants than it is the reality of management practice … and this helps to disguise its discordance with most of the cultures in which its tenets are applied (Blunt & Jones, 1997, p.11).

From a simplistic point of view, using Hofstede's (1980) value dimension of power distance and an assumption that African cultures are somewhat high on this dimension (which can itself be doubted: Jackson, 2004), it could be surmised that these forms of

participative management may be discordant with said African cultures. Yet Taylor (2002) introduces a more sophisticated analysis in that

> … participatory discourse and practices are part of a wider attempt to obscure the relations of power and influence between elite interests and less powerful groups … (p.122) … I would argue, however, that participatory discourses are utilized in both the development and managerial contexts because they serve essentially the same purpose of giving the "sense" and warm emotional pull of participation without its substance, and are thus an attempt to placate those without power and obscure the real levers of power inherent in the social relations of global capitalism (p.125).

This may come across as somewhat cynical by management scholars who do not take account of global power dynamics in their work on international and cross-cultural management, but for those working in Africa, and studying organization in Africa, these dynamics are a constant and visible challenge that cannot be ignored. Hence, a more sophisticated cross-cultural view than using Hofstede's (or others') value dimensions, would incorporate the actual dynamics of cross-cultural interaction that are so heavily influenced across societies by global power relations, in which, since World War II, America in particular has been so dominant. Yet things have been changing over the last decades, slowly at first, but with an increasing pace over the last few years.

The presence of China in Africa demands a new perspective on management scholarship for Africa. Theories such as postcolonialism, which have only just begun to make an impression on more critical management scholars, are quickly becoming out of date. Postcolonial theory (PCT) is premised on the West's colonial history in a large proportion of that part of the world termed "developing", including Africa. Like all modes of thought, it is a cultural product, dependent on time and place, and indeed on prevailing geopolitical relations. Just as the presence of China (and other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) countries) is beginning to challenge the relevance of modernization theory, including the Washington Consensus that underlines many of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank policies on international development (Ritzer, 2011). China, for example, is challenging the precepts of conditional aid to African countries with a new non-conditionality, which Western commentators have charged as being tantamount to sanctioning dictatorial governments and abuses of human rights (Campbell, 2008). If the tenets of modernization theory are being challenged, one has to question the basis of theories like PCT that have been constructed to oppose such theories based on north–south relations.

Yet in the scheme of things China's presence in Africa has been challenged as the new imperialism. Hence, the theory might go, this can be critiqued through PCT and (another theory that challenges modernization theory) dependency theory (Jackson, 2012). However, this would seem inconsistent with the modern history of China in Africa. China's engagement with Africa appears qualitatively different from European involvement in the wake of the slave trade. Following the China-Russia split in 1956, many of the anti-colonial struggles in the Third World ideologically allied themselves with China, as a result of its "apparently disinterested substantive support to liberation movements or hard-pressed front line … states, particularly in Mozambique, South Africa, Southwest Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe, its populist orientation towards the peasantry and the need for an agrarian revolution, towards struggle from below, and its emphasis on guerrilla warfare and armed struggle against imperialism" (Young, 2001, p.188). Its role in the decolonization of Africa was significant (Thiam & Mulira, 1999). That is not to say

that China's current motive for being in Africa is not resource seeking, as it most certainly is (Gill, Huang, & Morrison, 2007). This, however, may well be tempered by its professed friendship with African countries, and indeed its recent anti-imperialist history.

Having said this, there is still little if any research on the attitudes of Chinese expatriate staff toward their African colleagues, and their perceptions of Africa, which might color any research and Chinese scholarship on or for Africa. With other countries such as India and Brazil having extensive involvement in Africa, and indeed European and other advanced economies, there is even more reason to begin to examine theories based on south-south relationship, such as "southern theory" proposed by Connell (2007).

Yet, so far, the literature and approaches examined in this article have focused on the way scholars from outside see Africa, where this is conceptualized as scholarship *on* or *for* Africa.

MANAGEMENT SCHOLARSHIP *FROM* AFRICA

Whether or not it is possible to construct an African indigenous management scholarship is contentious. Ayittey (1991) provides a good start in documenting African indigenous institutions, and this should be included in any recommended text. Yet more popular attempts at suggesting that much of what we know about indigenous African values can be encapsulated in the *Ubuntu* concept (such as Mbigi's 1997 work) are fraught with difficulties.

The whole issue of what is *indigenous*, what is *indigenous thought*, and what is *indigenous scholarship* is highly problematic, although this is an issue that international and cross-cultural management studies have not yet really grappled with (Jackson, 2013). An issue that has been discussed for several decades in other branches of the social sciences appears to be either misunderstood or simply not discussed in management studies. For example, a recent search on articles in one prominent management journal found reference to "indigenous" in 74 articles over 24 years, with not one definition or explanation of what was being referred to (Jackson, 2013). It appeared to be used as a synonym of "local" (see for example, Tsui, 2004, for an interpretation of indigenous). Another issue that has arisen with a growing interest in concepts such as *guanxi*, in the Chinese context, and Ubuntu, in the Africa context, is that of the commoditization of what might be thought of as "indigenous". Hence, in order to package and "sell" such concepts as a kind of new management idea, perhaps primarily in the consulting industry, Tsang (1998) asks in the title of his article: "Can guanxi be a source of sustained competitive advantage for doing business in China?", while Mangaliso (2001) titles his article in a Western journal "Building competitive advantage from ubuntu: Management lessons from South Africa". While this may not necessarily be negative, it may well submerge some very real issues in developing a more informed and critical study of the nature and role of indigenous management thought. It may serve to disguise the dynamic nature of the indigenous within a global and changing world arena. It does appear to do what Briggs and Sharp (2004) and Briggs (2005) have warned against: "indigenous" knowledge is not an artefact to be preserved or one that can easily be packaged for Western consumption. It is rather part of a dynamic within a cultural interface that constantly produces new knowledge and social forms (Jackson, 2011), albeit through geopolitical power dynamics that have a profound effect on this production.

So, where do we find evidence of "indigenous" management in Africa, how do we study it, and how can we term this scholarship *from* Africa? Jackson's (2004) in-depth

study of four sub-Saharan countries revealed little evidence of his "African Renaissance" management in any pure form, and he relied on an explanation of hybridization to explain this. Yet even elements from this management ideal type were illusive. It was only possible to point to one organization, Afriland First Bank in Cameroon, whose managers thought of themselves as employing African concepts and management practices. In later research he suggested that community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) growing out of local communities might be closer to African values and practices (Jackson & Haines, 2007). Generally, however, in the formal sectors, anything that could be regarded as indigenous appeared illusive.

Yet many aspects of the informal economy, which represents an estimated 42% of gross national income (GNI) (Verick, 2006) and 72% of total employment in sub-Saharan Africa (Liimatainen, 2002), mirror characteristics of indigenousness that can be identified from the wider social science literature. The informal economy is normally depicted as distinct from, while standing in relation to, the formal economy. As the informal sector is often seen as backward and needing to be brought into the formal sector (Potts, 2008), it is also marginalized from, while representing an alternative to, mainstream business and society. World Bank/IMF-imposed structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), economic liberalization, and a retreat by the state appear to have left huge gaps to be filled by local and community-based business initiatives in areas including housing, employment, law and order, transportation, refuse collection, trade, and household credit supply (Cheru, 2002), with the informal sector constituting "a dynamic and enduring force that has shaped African cities" and representing "an alternative society, with parallel social and religious institutions alongside the official ones" and "a node of resistance and defiance against state domination" (Cheru, 2002, pp.48–49). As such it plays a role in defending traditional modes of production and commerce as well as skills development, such as in traditional apprenticeships (Adams, 2008).

Indigenousness appears to be a function of place and context, of collective and common values (Dei, 2000) and often seen as part of ecological circumstance (social cohesion and harmony with nature) connected to place or localization (Neizen, 2004). Yet more significantly this is seen in contradistinction to colonial or global powers and a resistance to these powers (Neizen, 2004; Dei, 2000), including dominant modes of business, organizing, and managing in a context of globalization. This puts indigenous people in a marginal situation (Wiessner, 1999) from which they have a weak voice in the total global discourse (Smith, 1999), and from which there is a need to identify them both legally (Kingsbury, 1998) and politically (UN, 2010) in order to assert their right to be identified as "indigenous". These aspects appear to be mirrored in the informal sector, which may represent a useful site for investigating indigenous management, where indigenous businesses have developed and prospered, and perhaps where lessons can be learned for the formal sector where indigenous knowledge, values, and institutions may have been lost or submerged.

Major questions follow from an identification of what indigenous management and organization are: Who researches this? And, for what purpose?

RESEARCHING MANAGEMENT FROM AFRICA

Many of the concepts and definitions relating to indigenousness in the wider social sciences set it in relation to colonialism or globalization: that it is a weak voice in relation to the globalization of business, often at variance to it, and sometimes in opposition to it.

This in many respects makes indigenous research problematic. Concepts of this as based on indigenousness as a function of local context, drawing on local constructs, yet, one may assume, undertaken largely for the consumption of a Western audience, are inadequate. Porsanger (2004, p.108), who sees that "any research is indissolubly related to power and control" may see that indigenous research should not only be about "using local language, local subjects, and locally meaningful constructs" (Tsui, 2004, p.501) but also that "for indigenous peoples, this means being able to make decisions about the research agenda and methodologies for themselves without outside influence" (Porsanger, 2004, p.108).

It is thus possible to make a distinction between

(1)   Research about indigenous peoples, knowledge, and practices (scholarship *for* Africa); and,
(2)   Indigenous research for and by indigenous peoples (scholarship *from* Africa).

Smith (1999, p.104) perceives indigenous research as "a highly political activity … [which] … can be seen as a threatening activity". This may be because "knowledge is a key asset in securing control and thus any discussion about it must necessarily recognize the political dimensions of its use" (Marsden, 1991, p.37). The use that the product of international management research is going to be put to by multinational enterprises (MNEs) competing in Africa with local companies was an issue put to Jackson (2004) by local managers in Kenya being interviewed, where there was a concern that this knowledge could be used by foreign MNEs to control markets and to compete better with local firms. In this way *research about indigenous peoples and knowledge* is "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (Smith, 1999, p.1), where, for indigenous people the "collective memory of imperialism has been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then, through the eyes of the West, back to those who have been colonized" (Smith, 1999, pp.1–2). This is an issue that appears pertinent in Africa, and should be understood by management researchers.

Smith (1999, p.173) then goes on to marry up *indigenous research for and by indigenous peoples*, and *research about indigenous peoples and knowledge* when she talks about doing research in "the cross-cultural context", outlining the types of questions that need to be answered, such as: Who defines the research problem? For whom is this study worthy and relevant? Who says so? What knowledge will the community gain from this study? What knowledge will the researcher gain from this study? To whom is the researcher accountable? These are questions that should be carried over into management research both *for* and *from* Africa.

From the above discussion, research *on*, *for*, or *from* Africa has a political agenda. The concept of indigenousness that has emerged in the wider social sciences is a political one. Management scholars generally do not acknowledge the political nature of their work, and Jackson (2013) has suggested that they should use the term "endogenous" rather than indigenous. Hence, what may be termed "endogenous" knowledge and more appropriate to what has been referred to in the management literature as "indigenous", does not take cognizance of the political nature of a dominant global management discourse that marginalizes indigenous voices, that is, in the context of this article, scholarship and management thought and practice from Africa. Yet understanding the

nature of indigenous research may help us to understand the nature of research in Africa and its potentially political nature.

We can thus make a distinction between a research agenda that reflects *control* (done by outside researchers on indigenous people for purposes that reflect the need to understand and ultimately to inform international managers for their own purposes, including control) and an agenda that reflects *resistance* (done by indigenous people for their own purposes, which may ultimately affect the type of policy and business environment within which they operate, and may provide challenges to accepted ways of managing local people and resources by, for example, MNEs); with Smith (1999) suggesting that these two agendas may be brought together in cross-cultural research. These different agendas will ultimately reflect the way research is undertaken, and the way indigenous knowledge is represented in the outcomes of research, and integrated into international management scholarship. Here we can learn from postcolonial theory. Mohan (2002, p.157), for example, remarks that "Postcolonial studies alerts us to the epistemic violence of Eurocentric discourses of the non-West and the possibilities of recovering the voices of the marginalized." Postcolonial theory suggests that not only the West's representations of "the other" color how we see and research, and manage people and organizations in "developing" countries, but that "the other" adopts and internalizes such representations (Said, 1978). This leads to a wholesale adoption of Western education, knowledge, and technology, together with the disparaging of local management approaches and solutions, and perhaps even research methods and agendas. This follows Spivak's (1988) assertion that local people ("the subaltern") have lost their authentic voice. This has implications for the way management scholars research these "subjects", in the projection of Western representations of "the other", and the way these (negative) representations are reflected back to Western researchers. This really then begs the question, is it possible for "the other" to do research on and for itself without reflecting an image projected by Western scholars?

Bhabha (1994) focused on the hybrid nature of the "Third Space" culturally created by global power dynamics, through attempts of the colonizers to make the colonized mimic them, and through the resistance of the colonized. This is why it is difficult to conceptualize the indigenous and indigenous knowledge as static, as it is likely to be a result of a continuous process encapsulated previously by the term "colonization" and more commonly today termed "globalization" (Ritzer, 2011). The popularization and commoditization of concepts such as Ubuntu leads to a static view of indigenous (African) values, thought, and practices. Whereas we should be looking more at the processes involved in the production of indigenous thought. As discussed earlier in this article, this is no longer likely to be the product of a north-south dynamic involving just Western (governments, managers, researchers) and African parties, but including other players from the global south, for which a whole set of new conceptual tools may be necessary to understand an emerging south-north-south interaction (Jackson, 2012).

In sum, social research is a political activity. Management scholars often ignore this aspect of their work. Bringing to the fore and distinguishing research *on*, *for*, and *from* Africa may serve to underline this aspect. Researchers in Africa are faced with a dynamic, viewed simplistically, between local and global. More sophisticated theorizing about the changing nature of this dynamic to reflect a growing importance of south-south interaction on the one hand, and an interrogation of the nature of indigenous thought, values, and practices on the other hand is important in marrying up scholarship for and from Africa. To a certain extent this is what cross-cultural scholars refer to as *etic* (from

the outside) and *emic* (from the inside) modes of thought (Peterson & Pike, 2002), with an imperative to understand and analyze both aspects. Yet this does not really capture the power relationships involved. Conceptualizing the relationship between dominant and non-dominant modes of thought, which can be informed by the changing nature of geopolitical dynamics on the one hand, and how indigenousness identifies and re-identifies itself in relation to those changing global dynamics on the other hand, is essential in any scholarship concerned with Africa.

PCT appears initially to be an attractive and sophisticated antidote to a modernizing ethos that seems to prevail in international management studies generally, and scholarship *for* Africa specifically. Indeed this theory informs concepts and understanding of indigenousness in the wider social sciences (Smith, 1999). Yet the increasing importance of China and other BRICS countries in Africa requires new theories about how African values, thought, and practices lie in relation to these new global dynamics. It is therefore an exciting time for management scholars to be studying Africa. Not only is there an opportunity to further develop scholarship about Africa, there is also an opportunity to better inform and develop management studies itself.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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