

Indigenous African Leadership: Key differences from Anglo-centric thinking and writings

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Abstract

This article draws on historical explorers' accounts, ethnography and organisational approaches to examine practices, discourses and perceptions of leadership in 12 prototypical indigenous communities in West and Central Africa. By so doing, it highlights how leadership meanings from this context differ from Anglo-centric thinking and writings. Key to this contribution is an unravelling of ways in which historical cultural hegemonies impose particular discursive formations, constructed practices and mind-programming in a non-Anglo-Saxon socio-cultural context. Dramaturgical power arrangement, lucid role substitution and the notion of leadership as non-human emerge as dominant themes in the analysis. Also, featuring significantly are representations of leadership in symbols, mythology and as transcendental and metaphysical. These conceptualisations are different from predominant Anglo-Saxon writings that frequently present leadership as linear hierarchies, dyadic (leader-follower) relationship, acts and behaviours of heroic figures and as an essentially human action. An Afro-centric indigenous concept of leadership reflecting the context is proposed which challenges heroism, linearity, individualism and objectivism.

Keywords

Indigenous African, Anglo-centric, metaphysical, mythologies, hegemony, culture

Introduction

This article examines the phenomenon of leadership within an indigenous African cultural and traditional council context¹ in order to reflect upon and theorise Afro-centric² leadership within prototypical sub-Saharan African (SSA) indigenous community contexts. Focusing

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exploration in 12 specific communities, the empirical analysis explores the dominant perceptions, acts and discourses that encapsulate aspirations of leadership as enforced by historical cultural and philosophical hegemonies.³ Locations included for investigation are six indigenous communities located in the Cross River basin in Eastern Nigeria and South West region of Cameroon and six communities within the Mambila highlands in the middle belt areas of Nigeria and the North Western parts of Cameroon.

The rationale and motivation to explore indigenous African leadership are triggered by a growing imperative within leadership studies to extend leadership scholarship into non-Western contexts in an increasingly interweaving and complex global world (Turnbull et al., 2012). It is argued that expanding the scope of research into non-Anglo-Saxon contexts could promulgate cultural and linguistic inclusivity, thus, invigorating a theoretical modernisation discourse within leadership studies that takes account of linguistic and cultural differences (Schedlitzki et al., 2015). Accordingly, this article animates this discourse by illuminating and unpacking ways in which contextual, cultural and historicised mythology impose leadership peculiarities in contexts other than Anglo-Saxon. The dominant Anglo-Saxon writings present leadership with an essence around individualism, heroism, linearity and masculinity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Ford, 2010; Ford et al., 2008; Knights and McCabe, 2015). However, there has been an increasing interrogation and suspicion that the seemingly consented naturalisation of Anglo-centric perceptions of leadership might belie alternative constructions (Edwards, 2015; Ford, 2010; McElhatton and Jackson, 2012; Prince, 2005; Steyeart and Janssens, 2013; Sveiby, 2011; Turnbull et al., 2012).

Against this backdrop, this study explores leadership from the frame of mind of an African scholar⁴ researching the African indigenous community context. In doing so, the author draws on lived experience within various indigenous African communities in Africa and in England. From this multi-culturally lived experience, the subject matter of 'leadership' was engaged against a background of mobilising subject positioning and cascading identities. This eventuality might have mitigated pressures of emotionality and irrationality when articulating observations. Thus, the unfolding contribution is more of a polyphonic unpacking of the foundations of leadership within an indigenous African and an Anglo-Saxon context.

Central to this work is the adoption of a social constructionist epistemology and constructivist ontology that recognises the contextual and discursive nature of leadership (Alvesson, 1997; Collinson, 2011; Fairhurst, 2009). Also, embedded within this philosophy is the notion that knowledge is created and developed through processes of social interaction between people (Burr, 2015; Collinson, 2005; Cunliffe, 2008; Gergen, 1999; Harding, 2004). Concurring, with this view of reality, Bakhtin (1984) argues that we access truth from interactions with others, while Giddens (1984) asserts that we often make use of the available rules and resources embodied within our culturally and contextually determined dispositions or what Bourdieu (1984) has referred to as 'habitus' to internalise meanings and construct the realities of our social world.

The article is structured in four main sections. The following section explores the notion of indigeneity and some of the earliest writings on leadership in West and Central Africa. In the second section, the foundation of Anglo-Saxon leadership ideals is explored. The third section explains the methods and analytic approaches and presents a synoptic account of the principal findings. The fourth section provides interpretations of the empirical findings, discussions and conclusion.

Leadership thinking in SSA and indigeneity

The importance of de-naturalising Anglo-centric views around the phenomenon of leadership often dominated by individualism, masculinity and heroism has been a germane consideration for this special issue of '*Leadership*'. The thinking behind this work is founded on the need to theorise community-based, culturally coded understandings of leadership in alternative cultural and linguistic spaces other than Anglo-Saxon (Schedlitzki et al., 2015). Accordingly, the goal of this article is to remedy the dearth of research on leadership in SSA (Bolden and Kirk, 2009; Iwowo, 2015; Jackson, 2004; Zoogah, 2008). Diminished research in the African context has meant that Anglo-American taxonomical constructs are predominantly employed as material for scholarly instruction for leadership development in SSA even when these seldom fit the African context (Dorfman et al., 2012; Inyang, 2009; Nkomo, 2011). The vacuum of knowledge seems to have promulgated an assumption that Afro-centric leadership practices and ideals have become extinct or appropriated by Anglo-Saxon thinking. As a consequence, a number of scholars exploring the African context, referred to within this study as 'neo-pragmatic', have expressed serious doubts over the existence of Afro-centric leadership typologies. For instance, in their seminal work exploring meanings of leadership in Africa, Bolden and Kirk (2009) having unearthed a number of thoughts, wondered if one could still contemplate the existence of Afro-centric 'indigenous knowledge'. If such knowledge existed they questioned, how it could be researched, rediscovered, captured and conveyed to the modern day African.

The doubts expressed only revive contemporaneous provocative assumptions suggesting that the colonised subaltern might have become 'hybridised' and 'appropriated' (Bhabha, 1994). The doubts also regurgitate the near fallacy often advanced to the effect that indigenous communities may have become: 'absent natives' or are now a 'vanishing present' Spivak (1988). These kinds of unresearched proclamations could be considered obnoxious to Africans living and experiencing culturally influenced lifestyles even today. The scepticism often expressed by some writers is understandable, given the distinct demographic and geography between indigenous communities and urban centres in many SSA countries. The often dramatic distinction may construe a destabilisation of minds, creating a perception that Anglo-Saxon or Western practices have subsumed indigenous African way of life and unique meanings to phenomena. The reality, however, is that indigenous African cultural ideology and Anglo-Saxon leadership ideals are often in constant contestation for space, usefulness and legitimacy at different degrees within the heterogeneous and multi-layered communities in SSA (Owusu-Sarpong, 2003).

Rather than adopt the views of scholars who speculate about the existence of Afro-centric ideals, this study lends support to arguments presented by post-colonial African scholars. Such mainly Pan-Africanist scholars (Adeleye, 2011; Haruna, 2009; Inyang, 2009; Kuada, 2010; Mbeki, 1996; Ntibagirirwa, 2009; Nwagbara, 2012; Obiakor, 2004; Ugochukwu, 2011; Wanasika et al., 2011) argue in favour of the existence within African systems of distinct culturally constituted conceptualisations and practices akin to the SSA context. This later argument, in contrast to the former seems more credible given that a large majority of African populations continue to live in rural indigenous communities where leadership is conceptualised and enacted according to historical African traditions and customs (Asante and Abarry, 1996). The problem is not that Afro-centric dreaming and cultural-programming around the phenomenon of leadership has vanished, is extinct or has become appropriated by Western culture. On the contrary, interested scholars trying to study the African

indigenous context are faced with the almost insurmountable task of engaging with a vastly diverse, difficult and challenging research field. The challenge of studying the African reality is rendered even more complex in the aftermath of almost 600 years of Anglo-African interaction in which African cultural philosophies suffered enormous subjugation (Pakenham, 1992).

The starting point of Afro-European encounter is documented to have begun when *Hanno* the Carthaginian navigator and his crew dropped anchor off the Atlantic coast of West Africa for fresh drinking water around the sixth century (Dugard, 2003). It would be long before this relationship is formalised by agreements from Otto Von Bismarck's Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. These events have had quite a denting effect on the evolution of Afro-centric perceptions of leadership and organising (Inyang, 2009). The result is a cultural, linguistic and intellectual osmosis where a stronger European political, economic and sense of civilisation has attempted to assimilate the more docile and domitable African tradition, science and way of life. This domineering, constraining and destabilising history have divided, under-developed and rendered large parts of Africa difficult to access and thus under-researched. The persistent lack of funding, poor infrastructure and limited access to some communities has not helped matters (Bashour, 2016; UNESCO, 2010). The unfortunate consequence of these difficulties has been that the handful of empirical organisational research conducted in SSA (see, e.g. Bolden and Kirk, 2009; Iwowo, 2015; Jackson, 2004) has in the main, examined the more accessible organisations and participants – often in urban areas. However, urban African cities bear significant resemblances to Anglo-Saxon environments. To this extent, it is evident that the work of researching indigenous African leadership specifically remains an enduring challenge. Iwowo (2015: 418) acknowledges this when she declares: 'The question of what an African experience or an African mind would resemble is yet to be answered'.

What is apparent, however, is that there are indelible environmental, socio-cultural and philosophical differences between the Anglo-Saxon context and the SSA indigenous context (Jackson, 2004). What is also undeniable is that distinct social and cultural entities will always retain fundamental uniqueness even as change remains ubiquitous through unavoidable adaptation and modification from ancestral cultural hegemonies to emergent realities (Aguilar and Ghirlanda, 2015). This fundamental principle of cultural-self, and unified identity – albeit dynamic, was constantly expressed during fieldwork undertaken by the author. It is epitomised in tribal proverbs from *Besongabang*, a village community speaking the *Bayang* language in Cameroon in saying: 'A leopard only gives birth to a leopard' and 'An elephant does not become a monkey even when it has learned to climb a tree'.

In other words, what these proverbs emphasise is the argument that whatever semblance of unity, there may be between the manner in which leadership is conceptualised in one cultural and environmental context, fundamental differences will always exist. Accordingly, this article empirically examines discourses and practices of leadership in 12 indigenous communities to illuminate cultural, ontological and other sensitivities that underpin leadership in context and considers how these might differ from Anglo-Saxon writings.

This effort develops from more recent debates highlighting socio-cultural dissonance between the African environment and worldview and Anglo-centric preoccupation in leadership theorising (Haruna, 2009). This dissonance led Obiakor (2004) to advocate for indigenous African education that can evolve more patriotic leadership behaviours and response to the challenges faced by SSA countries saying: 'Proactive African-centered educational programs that could produce nationalistic and patriotic leadership willing to tackle Africa's endemic problems' (p. 402).

Another African scholar Bekker (2008) corroborates this vision when he declares: 'There is a desperate need for an indigenous, innovative, values-based leadership approach in Africa that will mobilise a wide variety of participants around a common goal' (p. 1).

Adding to the above sentiments is an increasing group of pan-African researchers who wonder how the distinct traditions and cultures exhibited in communities across SSA can possibly resonate with Anglo-Saxon writings and leadership practices when executed in the African context. A sense of discontinuity has engendered a growing sense in which analysts suspect that Afro-centric, rather than Anglo-Saxon leadership approaches could best address the economic predicament of the subcontinent. In this respect, Walumbwa et al. (2011: 425) argue: 'Ultimately a country's economic performance is contingent on the effectiveness of its leadership and management practices that serve to unlock the potential of its workforce to effectively implement the strategic goals of organizations'.

Nevertheless, some scholars have cautioned against the possibility of unwittingly romanticising the notion of 'one African culture' and homogenising it – as if Africa was one unified country that is similar in every respect (Iwowo, 2015; Nkomo, 2011). At the same time, Bolden and Kirk (2009) have argued that a better understanding of indigenous African leadership particularly by African researchers could have wider benefits and implication for scholarship. In order to gain this understanding, the present study draws on some of the very early written accounts of leadership in indigenous African communities before Western colonisation as a starting point for secondary exploration. These sources provide a window into leadership thinking in many parts of SSA preceding Western political, cultural and economic intervention in the sub-continent.

Writings on indigenous African leadership

This study introduces the very early written and documented accounts of indigenous African leadership by drawing on the diary notes of early European explorers of communities in West and Central Africa. This knowledge adds to the small but growing body of literature on indigenous African leadership (see, e.g. Malunga, 2006; Mazrui, 1970; Mbigi, 2005; Nwagbara, 2012; Obiakor, 2004). The most recognised indigenous African concept which has emerged in leadership studies is the philosophy of *Ubuntu* from South Africa (Mbigi, 2005). The general premise of this concept privileges inter-dependence, humanity, community-building, benevolence, respect and responsiveness (Mangaliso, 2001). It is argued that this cultural philosophy resonates across the SSA continent (Sarpong et al., 2016). Nevertheless, questions have been raised regarding its uniqueness, effectiveness and credibility as an acceptable management framework (Bolden, 2014; Khoza, 2012; Sigger et al., 2010). This study contributes other dimensions of leadership thinking in West and Central parts of Africa, building onto philosophies such as *Ubuntu* in a heterogeneous SSA sub-continent. There is therefore much more to be unravelled in this context particularly considering that whilst there is a growing interest in theorising leadership in Africa (Walumbwa et al., 2011), it is argued that most of the ideas developed often lack empirical sophistication (Zoogah, 2008).

Considering that The word 'leadership' itself has a cultural and grammatical history Raelin (2016), this study begins by analysing the monographs of early explorers in West and Central Africa dating back from the 17th century as recorded in their daily diaries (see, e.g. Denham and Clapperton, 1828; Kingsley, 1897; Lander and Lander, 1830; Livingstone, 1857; Park, 1799; Stanley, 1866). This is complemented by the ethnographies of early

colonial administrators: Charles Partridge within the Cross River region in Eastern Nigeria between 1900 and 1903. Also, those of Dr Mansfield amongst the Bayang tribes in Cross River Cameroon in 1905. Additional reading is extracted from the social anthropological findings of Malcolm Ruel's work in 1969 in the Cross region and the ethnographies of David Zeitlyn and Bruce Connell in the Mambila region between Cameroon and Middle Belt, Western Nigeria in 2003.

The 6 June 1795 entry in Mungo Park's notes from his maiden voyage into West Africa which were published upon his return to England in 1799 reads as follows:

It appeared to me that the government of all the Mandingo states near the Gambia is monarchical. The power of the sovereign is however by no means unlimited. In all affairs of importance, the king calls an assembly of all the important men, or elders by whose councils he is directed and without whose advice he can neither declare war nor conclude peace... [There is] firm attachment to the customs of their ancestors... The king was not to be distinguished from his subjects by any superiority... [A] bank of earth upon which was spread a leopards skin constituted the only mark of royal dignity. (Park, 1799: 14, 26, 46, 71)

It is important here to note Park's amazement when he observes that the king or leader is not distinguishable from his subjects in terms of hierarchical superiority. Elsewhere, Park explains that leadership effectiveness relied on the intervention of external forces such as gods and ancestors enacted through rituals and sacrifices based on the assumption that external forces formed part of the daily activities of the living.

Another early British explorer, Hugh Clapperton observing leadership and community governance amongst indigenous African communities within parts of the present day countries; Nigeria, Chad and the Cameroons wrote:

I found them, hospitable, kind-hearted, honest, and liberal: to the latest hour of my life I shall remember them with affectionate regard; and many are the untutored children of nature in central Africa, who possess feelings and principles that would do honour to the most civilized Christian... Here [in Akalou village] I found a black captain [leader/chief] in a leopard skin cloak, holding a palaver [open community session]. (Clapperton et al., 1829: 17)

Like Mungo Park in the Atlantic estuaries of Senegal, Mali and Gambia, it is important to stress the similarity of the symbol of the leopard and the collective open leadership style exhibited in practice observed by Clapperton and company.

In a third manuscript containing the diary notes of John and Richard Lander who explored the River Niger and met many communities along the river over thousands of kilometres, the brothers observed that leadership was conceptualised and practiced in a councillor and community-oriented manner. They observed that power and authority rested with various personalities and that the appointed leaders were hardly different from the ordinary person. The following statement from their notes elucidates their observation:

There is hardly any knowing who is monarch here or even what form of government prevails. Besides the king of kings himself, four fellows assume the title of royalty... Very little ceremony is observed by the people towards their sovereign, they converse with him with as little reserve as if he were no better than themselves. (Lander and Lander, 1830: 45, 47)

The indignation and utter consternation of the last part of this quote is of interest here. From their Anglo-Saxon reading and perception of leadership, they do not seem to comprehend why the leader has to be spoken to without reserve. They consider that the leader

must have better knowledge and superior power to other persons in the community. Also, the word 'sovereign' is interesting as it connotes: supremacy, paramountcy and unparalleled distinction all of which construct a sense of class and personality differentiation, a reality in Anglo-Saxon culture and society. The Lander brothers also highlight issues concerning the mythological thinking surrounding the phenomenon of leadership with various beliefs of metaphysical intervention of non-human forces invoked through various kinds of rituals. The monographs of other explorers in different parts of West and Central Africa in pre-colonial periods, including David Livingstone in 1863 and Henry Stanley around 1866 provide quite similar accounts (Dugard, 2003).

The above explorers' accounts reveal two important points. First, they highlight fundamental differences in the conceptualisation and practice of leadership in Anglo-Saxon Britain and leadership in indigenous African communities at the period of exploration which positions leadership as collective for the African context and leadership as individual action for the Anglo-centric. Second, the observations suggest that although indigenous African communities may be heterogeneous, there are aspects of broad commonality – an example of this is the symbol of the leopard which appears as a symbol of leadership in many separate communities.

The above accounts corroborate observations from early British and German colonial administrators in the Cameroons and Nigeria. For instance, Charles Partridge, a British colonial government secretary for the Cross River region in Eastern Nigeria between 1900 and 1903, notes that although each community had an appointed leader, other personalities took up different roles in the process of community leadership (Partridge, 1905). Partridge's detailed accounts are further corroborated by the ethnographic accounts of Dr Mansfield a German colonial administrator assigned to the Cross River plains of Southern Cameroons between 1900 and 1903. Mansfield's published manuscript provides a compelling narrative of leadership philosophy and practice within *Ejagham*⁵ communities in Manyu Division, South West of Cameroon (Mansfield, 1908). Drawing on an example of the decision to go to war against a neighbouring village, he explains that decision making relied more on non-human intelligence. An extract from the record reads as follows:

The chief of Mbegan gathered his people and asked the oracle – if we go to war, we will win or lose? The oracle answered you will be overcome by your enemies... Then, after another three days he gathered his people again and asked the oracle the same question again. This time the answer from the oracles was: You will win instantly. (Mansfield, 1908: 156)

Here, we see that the positive response of the oracle that led to a decision. What we learn from this event is the perception that effective decision making and community leadership within is based heavily on a function of non-human intervention. Mansfield's observation further corroborate Malcolm Ruel's ethnographic findings documented in his book *Leopards and Leaders* (Ruel, 1969), which report on the fundamentals of indigenous leadership and governance amongst communities in upper and lower clusters of the baying tribe in the Cross River. A key conclusion of his anthropological study is that metaphysical belief and the mythology of external spiritual intervention were an important consideration in the indigenous conceptualisation of leadership with objects such as stones and acts of ritual used to enact the non-human mythologies around leadership meaning (Ruel, 1969). These writings from early Western explorers, colonialists and anthropologists underpin the centrality of mythology, metaphysical belief, non-human intervention and symbolism in the way leadership is conceptualised in many communities in SSA.

Having explored the historical bearings of leadership thinking within selected communities and tribes in parts of West and Central Africa, the article will now turn its attention to the historical foundations of leadership thinking in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Foundations of Anglo-Saxon leadership thinking

For the sake of brevity, the foundation of Anglo-Saxon leadership thinking will be limited to the seminal work of Adair (1989) and Grint (1997). Adair (1989) traces the roots of British and Colonial American leadership thinking to Aristotle's teaching on leadership from the Athens of Socrates and Xenophon around the fourth century BC. Adair affords significance to Plato's assertion that 'professional and technical competence should be a prerequisite for holding a position of leadership' (Plato, cited in Adair, 1989:19). Adair further cites the writings of Roman historian Tracticus describing leadership amongst indigenous British tribes met by the Romans in Britain around the year 55 B.C. From Tracticus' writings, we learn that leadership within indigenous communities in Britain was one in which the king was crowned as the most powerful decision maker, followed by a chieftain and then a wise elder in this hierarchical order (Adair, 1989: 125). This hierarchical culture necessitated the appointment and elevations of powerful figures such as, Dukes, Knights and Lords, with such distinguished individuals benefiting from enormous prerogatives and wielding asymmetrical authority and power relative to the ordinary member of society. From this Anglo-Saxon culture in which inequality is privileged, leadership meaning derived more from what leaders did than from what the community achieved as a whole. This leader-centred and individualistic construct of leadership is apparent in the writings of Sir Thomas Eliot (1555–1615) when he describes the power position of leaders thus: 'leaders . . . sit on a pillar on top of the mountain where all people do behold them' (cited in Adair, 1997: 146). This depiction clearly places particular privileged individuals above the rest of society and ways a fundamental cultural principle at the time, and, arguably remains a dominant motif in Anglo-Saxon writing on leadership.

Another influence of Anglo-Saxon leadership thinking is the military. Grint (1997: 10) for example declares that: 'many of our models of leadership are drawn from the military'. Leadership in a military context emphasises personal attributes, abilities and rank based on strict hierarchical systems. Leaders are normally taken to be single individuals who are presumed to demonstrate superior capability – denoted by rank – generals, colonels, captains, etc. – and responsible for leading military groupings of varying sizes (Carpenter, 2004). A typical example of this system of military heroism was exhibited in the British Civil Wars of 1642–1651. Carpenter (2004) argues that the effectiveness of military leadership during these wars was assessed in terms of the talents of the commander in chief and troop obedience. Such military structuring and thinking continues to be dominant in Anglo-Saxon constructions of leadership.

A further, influence is the Christian religion. Thomas Carlyle's (1841) writings, which Adair (1989) cites, affirms the influence of Christian religion in Anglo-Saxon leadership thinking. Within this religious thinking, God is seen as the great man above the skies in heaven whilst the rest of mankind waits for knowledge and tidings on earth below.

The above influences and associated practices enforce a leaning of Anglo-Saxon conceptualisation of leadership towards a functionalist, individualistic and hierarchical system of linear order and power. They also designate a dyadic, relationship between the privileged 'leader' and subjugated follower. Hence, Collinson (2005: 1419) sums up Anglo-Saxon, and

Western writings on leadership in general, – thus: ‘In contemporary western societies leadership issues are frequently understood in binary terms’. What is observable from these taxonomies is that such foundational influences have been remodelled and popularised within organisational studies and have now expanded into other fields (Hogg et al., 2006). As a consequence of this one person-centred thinking, in Western organisations and communities, leaders are often viewed either as ‘heroes’ or ‘villains’, celebrated and elevated as architects of success or blamed and despised as agents of organisational failure (Bolden et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that there are variations in the degree of individualistic and collective consideration in Anglo-Saxon writings with an emergent move towards more inclusive, interactive and reciprocal models such as shared, distributed, collaborative and participatory leadership (Bolden, 2011; Lumby, 2013). Other thoughts such as leadership as discursive (Fairhurst, 2011), relational (Uhl-Bien, 2006) and the notion of co-leadership (Sally, 2002) amongst others have been advanced as alternative constructs to traditional views (Carroll et al., 2015; McManus and Perruci, 2015; Schedlitzki and Edwards, 2014). Notwithstanding these conceptual advancements, the predominant thinking around Anglo-centric leadership thinking still tends to be leader-centric (Kellerman, 1986). Thus, even as critical theorists have embarked on projects to recast leadership thinking in ways that reflect cultural and contextual diversity, antecedent Anglo-Saxon indigenous influences remain dominant in the leadership field (Ford et al., 2008).

Comparing Anglo-Saxon and Afro-centric ways of thinking about leadership from both literatures, it becomes clear that the notion of collective participation, multiple actors, metaphysicality and symbolism are keys to understanding meanings of leadership in African contexts. This vision of leadership contrasts with systems of hierarchy, individualism and concentrations of legitimate power in the hands of the few in Anglo-Saxon thinking. This notion is visible in such composite Anglo-Saxon definitions of leadership as : ‘a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal’ (Northouse (2016:6). Having explored the historical foundations of leadership thinking, the article will now turn its attention to an empirical consideration of constructions and meanings of leadership in 12 indigenous African communities.

The empirical study: Methods

The empirical research that informs this article formed part of author’s doctoral studies. It employed a qualitative case study design, informed by, social anthropological and organisational research approaches, to make sense of leadership in the context of an indigenous African community council. In the process, the researcher lived in the communities of focus for a cumulative period of six months with follow-up contact extending to two years. During this time, he became immersed into the day to day cultural and physical realities, lifestyles and in particular leadership meanings and constructs as well as their historical foundations. Accordingly, the main units of analysis are participants’ narratives, interpretations and co-constructed meanings collected through the use of unstructured interviewing, group discussion, language translation and the researcher’s auto-ethnographic experience.

Participants were selected purposively relative to their knowledge and understanding of the local indigenous culture and traditions. Twelve unstructured interviews were conducted – one in each of the twelve communities investigated. Interview participants included six

community leaders, four elders and two ordinary people. Four group discussion sessions were organised representing each of the four main language groups and tribal demarcations. Group discussions and interviews lasted between 30 min and 2 h. Participants for group discussions included a mixture of community leaders, elders, notables and ordinary members within the communities. Ten participants took part in each group discussion session. Thus, a total of 52 participants officially took part in the study. However, significant knowledge was also derived from informal discussions, interpretations and stories told by numerous individuals and social groups. Recruitment of participants evolved as a negotiated process in which the local people identified those participants they thought were most knowledgeable about the local culture and processes of community leadership.

In line with unstructured interviewing and group discussion in real life research, no set questions *a priori*. Rather, general open question prompts were used to develop and sustain conversations (Creswell, 2012; Gray, 2013; Robson, 2011). Nevertheless, following Bryman (2008), an *aide memoire* or list of topical areas to be explored was intermittently used to ensure that relevant topics were covered. A typical opening question used for inter-views and group discussion was: what can you tell me about leadership in your culture? Given that Pidgin English is commonly spoken across the research field, it served as a mediating language. The researcher only speaks the Bayang language – although he is familiar with the other languages from the Cross River region where he originates. The overarching motivation of the conversations was to remain open to new information and fresh knowledge for effective learning (Reichertz, 2004). Conditions often deemed to be necessary for robust qualitative research were met (see, e.g. Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Pratt, 2008; Savall et al., 2008; Tracy, 2010; Yin, 2013). Taking the most relevant factors into consideration, a meticulous process involving careful planning, concise fieldnotes and several returns to the field to cross-check findings with participants ensured a robust process was maintained throughout.

Data analysis

The analysis consisted of a continuous process of shifting back and forth from field notes to recorded data to the fully transcribed data, maintaining a circular process of checking, revising and confirming with the original data (Gray, 2013). The analysis progressed in three steps as often recommended (see, e.g. Pratt et al., 2006). The first step involved data reduction. This step proceeded by way of continuous reading, identifying recurring phrases, paragraphs and narratives, discarding repetitive contributions and merging contributing statements (Locke, 2001). In the second step, the relevant responses, phrases and meanings were manually coded by using different font colours and background for demarcation. Thereafter, a third step consisted of creating links and establishing relationships from the emerging categories. This process signalled the transition from open to axial coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Locke, 2001). Following Biddle et al. (2001), pertinent statements, sentences and power quotes were clustered to develop first-order themes and repeated to establish second-order themes.

Findings

The analysis of empirical data revealed three main differences between leadership conceptualisations in an indigenous African context and Anglo-Saxon writings. These areas of

difference are explored in more detail under the following the first-order themes: *substitutional leadership and non-linearity*, *leadership as symbol and mythology* and *leadership as non-human and metaphysical*.

Substitutional leadership and non-linearity

An apparent unfolding of leadership meaning from both the empirical data and historical accounts relating to leadership in context is that roles and power are simultaneously substituted in a non-linear process. Appointed leaders do not retain the overall power to act individually. Rather, at various times and for different events other people take up leadership roles. Often times, the appointed leader may not possess the status enabling them to undertake certain leadership functions. For functions such as that of communicating with the gods or pouring libation, the leadership of this aspect of the communities is often the prerogative of certain respected individuals rather than the appointed leader. For such functions, the appointed leader becomes a 'follower'. Therefore, rather than a linear hierarchy, as often portrayed in Anglo-Saxon writings, the practice within most indigenous communities is more of a periodic multi-leader exchange process whereby an appointed leader can become a follower whilst an ordinary person intermediately takes up an important leadership role. This reverse substitution between and amongst the different interveners in the leadership process constructs a substituted power dynamic. This indigenous African conceptualisation of leadership is best understood in the local languages in relation to the constituent interventions involved in the effective leadership of the community.

The two dominant languages in the communities explored in the Cross River region are the *Kenyang* and *Ejagham* languages. In *Kenyang* language, the translated word for leadership as a process is *kefor*. In *Ejagham* language, the process of leadership translates as – *otui*. Focusing more on *Kenyang* language (the researcher's native language), an interesting observation is that the word *kefor* or leadership is not expressed in isolation, neither is it to refer to the appointed community leader only. Rather, it is attached to other leadership interventions that constitute the overall process of leadership. The most prominent of these other leadership interventions include: *kennem* (the authority for leadership by right of nobility); *bafor-etok* (authority for leadership earned as heads or representatives of foundational family lines); *Sessekou* authority for leadership gained by attaining the highest rank in a traditional institution; *bafor-nereket* (authority and right for leadership accorded to individuals on the basis of one's playing a leading role within a family group); *basiency-etok* (authority gained through advanced age or elderhood) and *bo-enebe* (power to lead as a seer or clairvoyant in the community). These leadership interventions are normally simultaneously and intermittently undertaken by several people benefiting from these legitimacies. All of these actors must be active in order for the community to find its balance and be lead effective. Without these interventions, leadership would have no meaning. Community leadership will thus be impossible.

What we see from this leadership practice is that the power, authority and right to partake in leadership positions within this cultural setting normally rotates between and amongst various persons at different times. It follows that contrary to Anglo-Saxon thinking, an appointed leader is not necessarily the most powerful, intelligent or most respected in the community. Indeed, it is common to observe that the power and authority of certain individuals in the community often supersedes that of the appointed leader. A participant

bearing the pseudonym 'Tabe' explained this dramaturgically rotating power architecture and multiple leader exchange leadership construct in Cross River region saying:

Kefor (leadership) is bigger than one person or the position of the appointed chief of the village because the nfor-etok, (appointed leader) is only there as the central figure and face of the village. In our culture, everyone is involved in leadership...it is more about who you are in the community that matters. You can have more respect and authority than the chief...some people who are wise in the cultural practices and who can communicate with the gods and spirits of our community have far more power than the leader – it is just that there must be somebody that you recognise as the general leader for many reasons but it is not that that person has more power or intelligence

Tabe's explanation above underlines the fundamental condition of non-linearity in leadership thinking in this context. When comparing this construct to Anglo-Saxon leadership thinking, a clear difference emerges. For instance, a dominant understanding of leadership in Anglo-Saxon writings, places emphasis and primacy to the individual at the head of an organisation or community. Therefore, from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, it is less perceivable that an appointed leader can periodically become ordinary and powerless while an ordinary person assumes elevated roles, power and authority to act as leader. In Anglo-Saxon working practices, managers might encourage dispersion of control and collective decision-making (Raelin, 2011b). However, the leadership practice whereby ordinary individuals working in an organisation or a community are able to exercise superior power and authority, assume a distinct role, responsibility and hierarchy than the established structure remains uncommon in Anglo-Saxon leadership thinking where the quest for the number one spot remains dominant (Vine et al., 2008). The accounts and response of the explorers examined above demonstrate fundamental principles of Anglo-Saxon thinking. Key differences can be found around the perception of power, authority and in the meaning of leadership. With respect to power, for instance, the explorers expected the indigenous African leaders they encountered to embody superior capabilities and competence more than ordinary members of the communities they explored. This popular Anglo-Saxon vision where leaders are seen as different in status and distinct in knowledge, ability and power remains evident in mainstream concepts such as transformational, charismatic and visionary leadership theories (Bass, 1985; Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Knight, 2016). Within this Anglo-centric vision, leadership is constructed as an outcome of the actions of a single or handful of individuals benefiting from legitimate authority, knowledge or charisma. Such individuals are perceived to deploy these aspects that distinguish them from the ordinary members of a group to dictate the actions of passive followers (Spillane et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, challenging this centralised and leader-centred perception of leadership that underpins Anglo-Saxon writings, what we find within indigenous conceptualisations reported here is a strong sense in which leadership is expressed and practiced by multiple partakers benefiting from various sources of authority. Within this context, this collective participation is a prerequisite for leadership effectiveness as well as the achievement of social equilibrium. What is also worth noting is that the roles, sources of power and legitimacy are not decided by any individual. Rather, it is historically and culturally bequeathed and thus ingrained in the local reality. It follows that the psychic texture, programmed self-experience and cultural identifiers of the local inhabitants impose peculiarities that mainly reflect and resonate with the immediate context of the actors exhibiting or discussing leadership in context (Bollas, 1993; Ford, 2010; Hofstede, 2003). The learning that could result from

this cultural conceptualisation mirrors the findings of Mead (1934), and her concept of social pragmatism – a social process of reflexiveness in which one learns to take the attitude of the other towards oneself. A further learning could be that leaders are able to accept the subordination of their own impulses (Raeling, 2016) or to see themselves from a third person's perspective. In other words, this indigenous view of leadership highlights the acceptance of inter-subjectivity, humility and plurality in the way we construct leadership meanings (Cunliffe, 2008; Morris et al., 2005; Sugarman and Sokol, 2012). The unfolding Afro-centric perception and practice is in many ways different from the demands of Anglo-Saxon thinking where legitimacy, coordination, control and order prevail (Ford and Harding, 2007). These considerations have essentially developed from the kinds of pyramidal and centralised systems characteristic of Anglo-Saxon history – military, religion and societal (Adair, 1989; Carlyle, 1841; Carpenter, 2004).

Leadership as symbols and mythology

A second level of differentiation is that leadership meaning and the resultant enactment is often drawn from symbols, stories and mythologies. The empirical data revealed three dominant mythologies. The first myth relates to the community tree. Located in the majority of the communities at the centre court of the village, the community tree is perceived as a point of connection between leaders and external forces. In the communities, it is assumed that external ancestors and other forces partake in leadership by means of direction and decision-making orientation. When required, the community leader speaks to these transcendental forces through the tree to request providence, good health, healing, assistance with child birth and other community needs. Therefore, the community tree is thought to play a part in community leadership effectiveness. In some communities, the eldest active male performed rituals of intercession while in others, a clairvoyant *or* seer communicates with the world of 'savants' through various incantations and libations to make necessary requests. One community leader in Mambila region named 'Mua' explained this myth as follows:

This tree you see, the leaves bring the birth of children . . . when the need arises women will cut the leaves of this tree . . . After, we perform the rituals and they take the leaves home, they will be pregnant and many children are born after the ritual . . . the gods, our forefathers and ancestors speak to me and the other leaders through this tree . . . err . . . so without them . . . err . . . we cannot do anything because the gods know more than us and have the power and wisdom . . . they are the leaders for problems that we cannot handle

The explanation from Mua, corroborates the explanations of another participant an ordinary member of the community named 'Kumi' who stated:

You see these two trees, they are not ordinary trees. If somebody should enter this community with any bad medicine or to cause evil, he will just fall down here and die. It is here that the leader of the community, the 'batum' comes to gain the power to ask the gods to help us in war with another community or to punish anybody who has done something wrong to our people . . . - so there is power in these trees and without the trees nobody can have the power to lead all these villages.

Various similar narratives upholding the virtues of this myth were expressed in all but two communities. In the two communities which did not associate leadership with the mythology surrounding the tree, it was revealed that the practice existed in the past, but such practices

had been discontinued for many years. The fact that some communities no longer accept the myth associated with the community tree suggests ongoing change in the manner in which some indigenous communities might be re-conceptualising leadership. It also challenges the veracity of the associated assumptions. Nevertheless, historical practices remain predominantly entrenched in the cultural mind-framing of the locals, instilling substantial fear factor and angst suggesting a devastating wrath would befall the locals if the historical rituals and beliefs were completely abandoned.

Another symbol clearly apparent in conversations and visibly displayed to stress its relevance is that of the leopard. In virtually, all 12 communities the symbol of the leopard emerged as a key descriptor and symbolic emblem depicting the meaning of leadership in context. The general myth or assumption connecting the symbol of the leopard to leadership is the perception that it is endowed with multiple spiritual powers. Accordingly, it is thought that effective leadership should reflect the spiritual astuteness of the leopard as much as the physical abilities and attributes it exhibits. A research participant named *Agbor* from the Cross River region explained why the symbol of the leopard was important to the *Bayang* cultural perception of leadership:

The leopard is the symbol of leadership in our *Manyu* culture of *Ekpe* and even more generally... Leadership should be like the leopard but also spiritually strong like the leopard. The leopard can swim, climb a tree and is fast, intelligent and cautious... so from the ways of the leopard we know leadership because it is a good example of leadership in many ways.

Agbor's narrative highlights the dominant attributes and behaviour construct for acceptable leadership in context, and more importantly, it elevates spirituality as an important consideration in indigenous African leadership thinking. For this reason, the symbol of the leopard remains an enduring symbol associated with leadership in many communities in SSA. The reverence of this symbol at the present time suggest a continuation of indigenous African thinking from medieval African times to present day indigenous ideals as evident in writings of Park (1799), Denham and Clapperton (1828) and Ruel's (1969) more recent ethnographic findings.

Leadership as non-human and metaphysical

Related to the prevalence of symbolism and mythology articulated above is the perception that leadership involves both human and non-human intervention and that the non-human interveners present another level of extra-human metaphysical intelligence that makes leadership work. In this respect, there is a strong sense in which non-living actors were thought to intervene in decision-making and in the overall leadership process. In some communities in the *Mambila* region, it is generally believed that leadership would be impossible without non-human intervention. This thinking was a popular discourse in participants' narratives. When participants were gently teased by the author about what might happen if the presumed non-human actors (gods and ancestors) were ignored, many feared that a significant wrath will befall the entire community resulting to annihilation. The extent of firmness and fixation by the locals to transcendental and metaphysical belief is reflected in the explanations of a participant *Tama* from a community within the *Mambila* region.

Until the end of time, we cannot cut relationship with the ancestors. If you do that wouldn't you die? ... We can never change to say we snub these people down here [hits right leg on the ground three times].

Tama's body language and the vehemence of his stance are important here as it reflects the extent to which participants feel provoked when one questions the perception that non-human actors intervene in leadership in their cultural and traditional context. Central to this thinking is the firm belief that living beings are able to communicate with an external intelligence and gain intelligence and direction. However, when challenged on the foundations of such claims, a less than enthusiastic response was demonstrated by some participants who privately expressed profound doubt. In spite of such doubts, in practice, leadership often involves consultation with non-human agency through various forms of appeasing rituals. Thus, a key difference here compared to Anglo-Saxon writings is the inclusion of non-human intervention in leadership thinking – in particular, the conceptualisation of leadership on the basis of a transcendental and metaphysical ontology as opposed to Western scientific functionalism (Rost, 1993).

Taking into account, the knowledge developed from the empirical research process and the analysis of the accounts of explorers, early colonial administrators and anthropologists, this study proposes a conception of indigenous leadership in context as:

A collective socio-cultural process based on historical hegemony, mythology and metaphysical belief systems where multiple actors; human and non-human intermittently substitute power and roles to achieve social coherence and secure wider community goals.

Discussion and implication

This work set out to explore discourses and practices of indigenous African leadership with a focus on 12 communities in West and Central Africa. The goal was to identify aspects of local leadership thinking and practice that contrasts with the assumptions and tenets of Anglo-Saxon writings. Three main differences were delineated. First, the power dynamics can be characterised as: dramaturgical, substitutive, non-linear and collective. Second, leadership meaning is constructed in mythology and knowing is symbolically and materially embodied in trees and the animals. Third, leadership located within metaphysical and transcendental ontologies that implicate both human and non-human actors in context-specific ways. The perceived manifestation of non-human actors in the day to day life of communities in SSA has been reiterated in African philosophy. It highlights a reliance of Africans upon spiritual, cosmic and supernatural forces whose manifestation defies scientific explanation (Omoregbe, 1990; Ozumba, 2004; Temple, 2012). This commitment has been referred to as a 'mythology of African metaphysics' (Ozumba, 2004). These writers argue that it is by relying on the mythologies that underpin this science that locals are able to make sense of the uncertainties of their world (Asouzou, 2004) and attain ontological settlement (Temple, 2012).

These constructions are quite different from dominant Anglo-centric thinking typically represented in political, cross-cultural and in organisational studies. The inherent differences support the view that leadership is culturally and contextually contingent (Collinson, 2011). In this context, leadership is undergirded by a mind-set and discursive frame that derive from particular Afro-centric cultural history and which have constructed contextually aligned conceptualisations, enactments and discourses. The unique aspects of this construct are inextricably entwined to the immediate context and therefore undetachable from the cultural codes from which they materialise (Ford, 2010; Hofstede, 1991; Turnbull et al., 2012).

The findings developed within this work have theoretical implication for leadership studies in two respects. First, they support the cultural and contextual contingency theses of

leadership by exposing inherent multilingual, multicultural and other differentiated expressions of leadership in non-Anglo-Saxon worlds. Accordingly, the findings add to existing voices raised in respect to the need to scrutinise Anglo-centric perceptions of leadership in order to unpack possible limitations and give voice to alternative constructs (Jepson, 2010; Prince, 2005; Steyeart and Janssens, 2013). Second, empirical observations reported in this article challenge Anglo-Saxon theories and writings and expand our knowledge of leadership phenomenon within a previously under-researched context.

Conclusion

This article has presented alternative non-Anglo-centric conceptualisations, dreaming and thinking on leadership from 12 indigenous communities in West and Central parts of SSA. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the exploration of culture, traditions and language is always a provisional matter and subject to multiple interpretations (Ford and Harding, 2007). To this extent, this study does not purport to make absolute truth claims, and the findings are neither generalisable nor transferable to other contexts. It is also important to acknowledge some limitations to the study. One limitation relates to the focus exclusively on two regions in SSA. While this placed restrictions on the scope of the findings, the regional focus nonetheless afforded the opportunity for deeper rather than wider exploration. Another potential limitation concerns the potential caricaturing of Anglo-Saxon leadership literature as being overly individualised and heroic. While efforts were made in the literature review, above, to acknowledge the recent emergence of heterodox critiques of heroic leadership thinking within the Western tradition, for rhetorical purposes, it was convenient to emphasise dominant mainstream concepts in organisational studies and other areas of leadership study. This enabled a stronger contrast to be drawn between Anglo-Saxon assumptions and the African leadership cosmologies reported on in this article.

Finally, it is worth noting that the conception of indigenous African leadership distilled from this study is reflective of particular empirical setting and focus. However, although not purporting to offer a theory of leadership for the entire SSA sub-continent, there may well be similarities between and across communities. An example of this is the symbol of the leopard which emerged as a common symbol for leadership in many parts of SSA. Furthermore, empirical work is needed to expand the scope of understanding and establish commonalities if and where these occur.

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Notes

1. By indigenous African, the author refers to communities and tribal areas that are detached from urban and semi-urban locations. Such communities often practice, conceptualise and articulate leadership according to ancient African culture and traditions. The rural communities are often governed through indigenous African laws, institutions and way of life – most of which feature significant differences with practices in urban areas and formal government institutions in SSA countries.
2. The terms Africa and Afro-centric are used more as a geographical location in the southern hemisphere rather than a homogenous country or cultural entity. The African continent is clearly heterogeneous comprising 43 countries exhibiting quite different cultures, languages and constituting similar and contrasting demographics, socio-cultural formations and various histories.
3. Hegemony as used within this article denotes espoused beliefs, values, explanations and perceptions imposed by the historical experience and events which become accepted cultural and traditional ways of knowing and doing.
4. The researcher originates from the village of *Besongabang*, an indigenous community within the Cross River basin, South West region of Cameroon and Eastern Nigeria. He has studied and worked in the Netherlands and England in the past 15 years. During these years, he has kept close ties with family in West and Central Africa through regular visits to Cameroon and Nigeria.
5. *Ejagham* is a language spoken within the lower Cross River Basin. Communities speaking this language can be found in the South West region of Cameroon in Central Africa and along the eastern coast of Nigeria in West Africa.

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Author biography

Joseph Ebot Eyong (BSc, PGCE, MA (Ed) MRes, MBA, PhD Leeds) is a researcher and lecturer in the areas of Leadership, Culture and Research Methods. Joseph is currently employed at the University of the West of England (UWE) Bristol, UK where he teaches, Leadership, Change Management and Organisation and People at graduate and undergraduate level. Joseph is passionate about indigenous African culture, traditions and way of life with the goal of highlighting inherent unorthodoxy, difference and thus, triggering radical reflection that challenge conventional wisdom and enabling alternative theorising. Alongside leadership, Joseph's more recent interest in the area of education has been to explore processes of students' changing learning behaviour in the 21st century as influenced by the intervention of social media as platforms for formal university learning managed by students.