

Leadership in the African context

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ABSTRACT

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The Western world has always viewed the African continent as plagued by corruption; dictatorship; military coups; rebellious leaders; greediness; misuse of power; and incompetent, politically unstable leaders - in effect, suspicious leaders who undermine their own democracies. This paper analyzes African leadership and its impact by concentrating on three historical eras, namely; the African Religious era; the Christian era, and the era of Globalization. These affected African leadership. In addition, many brilliant minds left the continent in search of greener pastures. A review of these three eras will help us understand how leadership shifted from African values into Western concepts. The role of missionaries lead African people to live with both an African and a Western concept of life. In spite of the above problems, our past leaders did their best in addressing the difficulties they faced during the three eras. African concepts of leadership were often regarded as barbaric and uncultured. Structures were evaluated by Western standards. Due to globalisation, African leaders, through programmes like NEPAD, are going back to basics, drawing on African concepts of unity among its leadership. Effectiveness or life-giving leadership is emerging and empowering villagers/communities in the continent. This type of leadership is innovative and has brought new hope for the continent.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Western world and its values affected Africans deeply. Developed countries have always viewed our continent as a place plagued by corruption, dictatorship, military coups, rebellious leaders, greediness, misuse of power, incompetent leadership, politically as well as economically ineffective and suspicious leaders who undermine their own democracies. Right now Zimbabwe is used as a classic case of this by the Western world. People are often not aware, though, that land is an important part of the problem, where, for example, the 80% of Africans in South Africa used to live on 13% of the land. We also need to know that powerful or developed countries have contributed to this crisis. As a

result of the above, African leaders spent their time reacting (instead of responding) to the Western world.

The past has affected the continent in such a way that our best minds left the continent in search of greener pastures. We are still experiencing this brain drain. All we have is the legacy of the old colonialism. We are now faced with a challenge of nurturing and shaping new models of leadership. Our heritage is important as we develop new concepts of African leadership.

2 AFRICAN HERITAGE AND ITS LEADERSHIP

Africa has a rich heritage of leadership, but it is not uniform. It has similarities, but there are also differences from time to time, from place to place, and from people to people. The differences of leadership were affected by the Christian and Muslim faiths, as they were introduced in Africa. As a result of the above, three types of leadership emerged and moulded African leaders in different styles. The three historical eras - namely the African religious era, the Christian era, and our time of Globalization - brought tremendous changes in the life of communities. Each era is characterised by distinct contributions to our understanding of leadership.

What then is leadership? Woolf (1981:647) defines leadership as: “Guiding and directing on the course and as serving as a channel”.

Leadership has to do with someone who has commanding authority or influence within a group. In Africa, a leader is viewed as someone who is a servant to the clan, tribe, community or group. In other words, African people treat a leader by virtue of being a king, priest or ruler chosen by virtue of the office in order to serve the nation. Nahavandi (2000) when exploring the topic of leadership, suggests the following elements:

- “Leadership is a group phenomenon.’ In other words, there are no leaders without followers. As such he continues to say: ‘Leadership always involves interpersonal influence or persuasion.’”
- “Leaders use influence to guide groups of people through a certain course of actions or towards the achievement of certain goals”. In other words, leadership is goal directed, and plays a significant part in the life of a group, tribe or community.”
- “The presence of leaders assumes some form of hierarchy within a group.”

These three concepts explain to us the power of leadership, which governs a life of a community. In an African village, the hierarchical structures are formal and well defined, with a king at the top of the

structure, ruling and leading the villagers. In short, a leader is someone who influences individuals and groups within a community or a village. The leader helps them to establish goals, and then guide them through the whole process, allowing the community to be effective (if he or she is a good leader).

Africa has also experienced dictatorship in areas of leadership (e.g. Idi Amin, Mabuto Se Seseko). Those opposed to them were killed. With the new leadership that is emerging, we hope we will experience leaders who are sensitive to the needs of the people. We need leaders that will help Africa to become innovative. The only way African leaders can be effective, is when they address the problems that are affecting their followers. Let us now analyse the three different eras which influenced leadership in Africa.

3 AFRICAN RELIGIONS ERA

During this era, Africans experienced powerful leadership from kings, priests and rulers. Religious symbols and music played an important part in guiding the community or villagers. Talking drums were played by indunas in order to summon people to a meeting. Music, especially drums were used in all activities of the life of a community. African people are religious by nature. Prior to Christianity, African religious ceremonies in the community or village were led by leaders who held offices in a powerful way. Their leadership was effective and it touched the hearts of people. Their wisdom in leading and helping the villagers/community opened up new relationships between leaders and the people. These leaders were the human keepers of the religious heritage. Mbiti (1977:12) had this to say about these leaders:

“They formulated religious beliefs, they observed religious ceremonies, and rituals, they told proverbs and myths which carried religious meanings, and they evolved laws and customs which safeguarded the life of the individual and his (sic) community or villagers.”

In other words, the life and care of the villagers was directed by them. They were also accountable to the whole community/village. When a leader was out of focus or misbehaving, the villagers/community did not care for him or her. Throughout the ages, religion has been a normal way of looking at the world for Africans, while they were experiencing life itself. This type of living governed the life of African people, and gave the followers a sense of security in life. The leaders knew who they were, how to act in different situations, and how to solve their problems. In short, religious leaders provided the villagers/community answers and

directed them in their life. When the community/villagers were satisfied with their leaders, they rewarded them. Nahavandi shares some insights about an effective leader in the following way. He (Navahandi 2000:4) says:

“A leader is effective when his or her group performs well... [L]eaders are effective when their followers are satisfied.”

On the other hand, integrity generates a number of important results in a community. Nelson (1993:35) says:

“Integrity builds trust, it influences others, it facilitates high standards, it creates a solid reputation over against merely an image, and it produce credibility rather than cleaviness.”

In other words, leadership is earned, it is earned by consistently demonstrating competency, compassion, justice, and wholeness. The qualities or values prove the genuine sense of care for people, and an awareness of ultimate accountability. The above quotations remind us of a servant leader, that is, someone who serves other, and allows growth from grass root people to develop. In this area, success is measured by outcomes. Some of the powerful leaders, like king Chaka, spent time communicating with villagers/community members, managing conflict, training armies, developing young leaders and protecting the weak within a community/village. Lala shares some of the good ingredients of an effective leader; especially when he analyses a president of a country as an effective leader. He (Lala 1999:16) says:

“A president has to establish moral authority based on public trust. Indeed, the whole art of governing a democracy lies in mustering popular consent on a vast scale. A president must have convictions, a vision of where the nation should travel; he (sic) must summon the national mood and push it in the right direction. If he (sic) fails to give his (sic) people a sense of participation in crucial decisions, his (sic) policies may be doomed from the start.”

In my view, an effective leader is a person who is always caring, supportive and not controlling. As he or she leads, the threats diminish, and the leader becomes accepted as a member of the village/community. The person becomes a resource for the group and a co-worker in building up the community or village. In Africa, leadership became a function to be shared by all villagers or community members, rather than a leadership invested in one person. There were occasions where this norm was

broken because of dictatorship. African people were dependent on each other, building on the gift of various members, to challenge, to struggle, to share, and to achieve. The leader then becomes a life giving person to the whole group. Powers suggests a wonderful way of leading a group. He (1979:68) suggests that:

“A life giving leadership will naturally encourage movement through the various stages; the influence of the leader will generally be greater at the beginning and gradually decrease as the group begins to mature.”

The whole aim of an effective or life giving leader is to uplift the villagers/community in such a way that they progress. This will help people to express their own gifts within the village/community. As leaders share their gift of leadership, in return the people will honour them. As they continue to share in African religious ceremonies, which is an essential part of the way of life of each person, the villagers/community will join in celebration. Their influence on leadership covers all of life, from before the birth (if a person is a king) to long after he or she has died. If a leader were effective or good, he or she would be remembered, especially when other leaders are following wrong values. The community will continue teaching their children through conversation, proverbs and myths, as well as through practice. Hence leaders like king Moshoeshoe, king Chaka, president Nyerere, president Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, to name a few, are remembered by African communities or villagers in the continent.

Finally, African religion has contributed a lot in moulding leaders of the continent. It unified Africans and their leaders together, but when one was out of step with the rest of the community/villagers, he or she was isolated, and cut off from the total life of the people. When a leader repents from his or her sins, certain rituals were performed by leaders in order to restore the person back into the life of villagers/community.

4 CHRISTIAN ERA

Colonialism arrived under the banner of Christianity, and affected African people and their leaders, because missionaries introduced western concepts of life. At first it was in a limited way, later on it affected them in a more profound way. Leadership shifted from kings, priests, rulers and diviners to teachers, nurses and ministers of religion. The effects of colonialism forced our traditional leaders to choose collaboration with colonial leaders, and they lost their powers among the villagers/community. This way of conquering brought confusion. Kurtz

offers a refreshing insight about this kind of confusion. He (Chris 1998: 44) says that:

“Our ancient ancestors sat around the fire and heard stories about the forebears- about the time when life first emerged in the universe, about lessons for living their lives. When people gather today, the flickering light comes from the television rather than a fire, but we will still hear stories about the nature of reality as it is perceived in our culture.”

Africans had a very helpful model of moulding leaders around the fire. Young boys would listen in the evening to powerful stories of brave men at war, and as they listened, they developed leadership skills. Unfortunately television does not mould people in the same way. It is a tool that does not allow dialogue among people. It only effects changes in the lives of young and old. This kind of change affected African people in the most profound way. Mbiti is helpful in exploring how this change affected African people. He (Mbiti 1977:15) says:

“...where one society fought and conquered another and ruled it, no doubt the religious life of the conquerors often left its mark on the life of the conquered people.”

African religion and its leaders were challenged by the missionaries, especially in a way that they brought change, and used western concepts, which finally confused them. The leaders and the people adapted to western concepts, and some abandoned their African religious values, customs and their own culture.

A Njoroge had this to say about accepting Christianity, which was brought by missionaries. She (Njoroge 1994:17) says:

“Their emphasis was on giving up our African way of life which was considered evil and turning to Jesus Christ as our personal savior and author of our lives.”

This new concept confused African people, as they continued to embrace the new faith. Their confusion continued because African religion had no sacred scriptures. People depended on leaders as they related the values of their African religion orally. From this time onward, the concept of African leadership changed towards professionalism. These concepts guided new leaders to operate in colonialist style. Change came as a result of leadership being shaped by missionary education. Africans were then evaluated according to western concepts or standards. In other

words, to be civil you had to use western concepts of leadership styles. African leaders who used traditional method of leadership were viewed by some westerners as barbaric. Njoroge (1994:17) analyses this journey by saying that:

“This experience provoked me to look back at the history of my people. If the missionaries came to save and ‘civilize’ my people, why then all the extreme suffering?... [T]he colonial history was hidden from us in the classroom, and church teaching and sermons, although we experienced its evils in our daily lives.”

The evils she speaks about are those of divide and rule, and using African leadership to do their work. Among Christian leaders some rose to prophetic ministry. They challenged western concepts in such a way that the followers critically evaluated these concepts of leadership. For example, Archbishop D M Tutu (Reamonn 1994:21) reminded the African community by saying the following:

“African Leadership in a community should focus on promoting love, truth, freedom, peace, reconciliation, justice, and right relations in the world.”

In other words, leadership of those who are chosen to serve, must focus on restoring relationships in the Kingdom of God, that is, in giving life among villagers/community. This is the central message of the gospel. Powers (1979:69) on the other hand, reminds us that:

“Leadership responsibility includes calling for reflection and evaluation whenever appropriate.”

Because of the circumstances African leaders found themselves in, they were forced to operate with these western concepts, and had to adjust as the situation demanded. They were always seeking to provide the opportunity for personal and corporate growth among their people. During this era, they developed mentorship as a way of grooming future leaders. For example, those who were educated began helping others to climb up the ladder. As a result they became effective or life giving leaders. Accountability of their success was held by the whole community. White (1986:35) reminds us that:

“In the world around us, excellence is defined by success, and success is measured by outperforming one’s competitors in pursuit of money growth and power.”

The above quotation indirectly suggests that we can learn models of leadership from the business world. The writer thinks that we should be careful when dealing with business concepts, because the world in which they operate does not respect human concepts, especially where money is involved. Good examples are the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. African Religious concepts differs tremendously from those operating in business. With the above in mind, as unhealthy situations arise, leaders must become responsible in initiating deliberate actions which are designed to protect the integrity and the purpose of the community. They must also ensure growth potential, justice and peace for all involved. Finally, they must intervene on behalf of all who are oppressed. When the community is dissatisfied, and leaders fail them, sometimes a coup occurs, which is operated by military leaders. Then potential dictatorship by military rulers develops.

The beauty about Christianity is in the way it introduced concepts such as: “people being created in image of God”; “the body of Christ”; “love your neighbor as yourself”.

These concepts brought unity among communities and villagers, because you would have to do unto others as you would like them to do unto you. So it was easy for Christian leaders to follow the above concepts, especially when they were committed to Christ’s way of life. In other words, the principles and guidelines of Christianity, when followed with a covenant of serving, always produce life-giving growth within the body of Christ or community or village. Their style of leadership is that of a pilgrim follower, always striving to live in the image of Christ, but never quite able. In conclusion, Christianity introduces both good and bad concepts among African people. It made us abandon some of the good African values, but also introduced concepts that we were all created in the image and likeness of God, hence, we needed to treat each other with care and love.

5 GLOBALISATION

Douglas (Stackhouse 2000:202) explains globalisation as: “an act of making something global, worldwide in scope and application.” When dealing with globalisation in a secular world, it is important to note that the process of making something worldwide often refers to the spread of economic and cultural realities generally associated with the capitalist, and free market forces of the industrialised West. Globalisation is directed by leaders who have a vision that goes far beyond their borders. Today the new world order has opened greater participation of Africans in a global village. New leaders are sharing, discussing and working for this new order, even though they are not equal, because of economic

circumstances. The western leaders, by virtue of their economic power, are leading, while others are following. Mugambi (1997:23) supports the above statement by reminding us that:

“African countries are already threatened with cleavages. ‘The haves’ on the one side, and ‘the have nots’, on the other. These who control political and economic machinery as opposed to those who marginalized. Those who can speak and others who are silent. Those who work for transformation of their societies and others who keep the status quo. Those who are well informed and others who are ill informed. Guidance is needed and church and their leaders are in a good position to provide leadership.”

In other words, when leaders through the church rise to the challenge and care for the people, prophetic ministry is developed. they then speak on behalf of the voiceless and finally become the voice for the marginalized. In short, new ministry of serving leadership must be defined in view of emerging challenges seen through the demands of justice. In Africa, the challenges are enormous. For example South Africa, being the last country in the continent to be liberated, has brought Africa and its leadership back on the centre stage. The creation of the African Union has set a new direction of leadership in Africa. A new wind is blowing on our continent. Leaders are concentrating on development. Once again, Mugambi (1997:7) says that:

“In country after country, Africa’s growth has been confined to cities where the tiny middle class lives. Development, which benefits people in the rural areas, is still to come. If Africa is to face the future realistically, the word development must be revisited and the African cultural dimensions of life emphasized much more than in the past. There will be no future for the majority of our people without serious appreciation of God’s religio-cultural gifts to Africa.”

The word development is crucial to the lives of Africans, hence NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa’s Development) is trying to address problems of development and changes that are taking place in our continent. This organisation is not the saviour, but a step in the right direction. It challenges all Africans to participate in their future by holding their leaders accountable. Now the politicians are joining church leaders in addressing African problems. President Mbeki, in particular, in his dream to deliver a developed and progressive Africa to the people of the

continent, said the following to a meeting of church leaders in South Africa (*Challenge magazine* 2002:3):

“Humanity as a whole could not allow a situation where the rest of the world progressed and Africa regressed. ... [E]verybody accepted that something new must happen; what must happen next? Africans themselves must decide what should happen next.”

The vehicle we and other African leaders hope to use in achieving this vision, is NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa’s Development). This new creation has broken the chains of competition among African leaders. This dream took shape when African leaders met to launch the African Union. A new philosophy and ethos has emerged, and African leaders articulated a new vision for Africa. On July 9th 2002 Mbeki (*Challenge magazine*, 2002:3) said that for NEPAD to succeed:

“it should be driven by the new philosophy and ethos of good governance and accountability as determined by the newly formed African Union. This kind of leadership is sharing a dream that will bring life into the continent and its people. Hopefully Africa will begin to function as a body connected to each other.”

Bruce (Powers 1997:61) on the other hand reminds us that: “life giving leadership does not function in isolation; it is with, for, and through people.”

The African leaders are now focusing the energy of Africans on achieving common goals. Through African Union, leaders will ensure that the member states are held accountable, and live up to the strict demands of accountability and good governance. In Durban, for example, some African countries were not invited, because of their leaders took power without being elected. NEPAD felt that these leaders who took power on their own will not be able to serve the interests of their people. This is a new step that needs to be commended. Mbeki (*Star* July 9, 2002) reminded them that:

“We have to overcome a problem of good decisions that are not implemented. We cannot avoid a rating system. Even if we do not rate ourselves, others will do it. The success of NEPAD must depend on the succession of hostilities and conflict in a continent.”

These are the new challenges that are facing Africa and their leaders. On the day of the launch, African people were reminded about the question of stability and security. We could never get development with the

present regimes, especially parts that are experiencing conflict and war. If the above were important ingredients to ensure that NEPAD and its leadership became successful, then it would be equally true that the continent's development cannot be financed on loans. The new leaders need to address issues of structural adjustment programmes, World Bank and International Monetary Fund. I also want to remind African leaders that we produce raw material, food and other commodities that are valuable, but bought cheaper by developed countries. Good leaders and good governance must address the above problems that continue to impoverish Africa. Leaders, therefore, must become a voice of the voiceless in a global village.

Given the above problems, one realises that globalisation through its brutal harsh realities has forced African leaders to re-evaluate their leadership and governance. The introduction of a new order has forced African leaders to a method of deconstruction. This identity that has been forced upon them by developed countries and their powers, has become a blessing, because African leaders have started redefining their leadership according to their own African values. This act of rediscovering the self has been more than just empowering, it has brought a new re-awakening, an African Renaissance, akin to Europe's era of enlightenment. The road to recovery would not be easy, but the journey of freedom has begun. When the continent begins to address some of the challenges faced by African leaders, Africa will begin to emerge as a power, which I hope will serve the continent.

6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, African leaders have rediscovered, in the first place, the power of unity and dialogue, which has opened a door to examine African problems. The second discovery is that of building an infrastructure of new leaders, where older leaders share their wisdom and pass on good African values to the next generation. Good leadership in Africa always shares life to others. This sharing of life can be gathered from medicine people. Medicine people always teach other about their wisdom and healing powers before they die. They share their healing wisdom with others. There is an African idiom which reminds adults or senior citizens to "share their herbs and healing powers with the young ones, so that when they die, the young ones will continue the work of healing among their people" (Mbiti 1977:164).

In short, sharing of knowledge gives power, not only to the one who knows, but also to the one who receives. One who shares knowledge with the villagers or community is the best leader. This concept moulds future leaders through learning experiences. As a new and developing community, we expect good governance from the new leaders, especially

in the area of interpersonal care and service to others. Good governance requires that African leaders should lead and give direction for the benefit of the community/villagers. This kind of leadership will lead others back to the basics of African Renaissance. It should be rooted in the moral African virtues that produce lasting benefits for the continent.

Finally, if Africa is to produce leaders who are honest, competent and committed, the continent needs to embark on an educational process which will nature their leaders. This process will ensure that they continue addressing the interest of African people as they engage in the global life.

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