



African Cultural Concepts and Their Influence on Management

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3.1 INTRODUCING AFRICAN CULTURAL CONCEPTS

The growth in Chinese-African interactions, which have over the years seen China as Africa's biggest trade partner (Visser, McIntosh, & Middleton, 2017), necessitates an improved mutual cultural appreciation. Conducting business requires sensitivity to cultural nuances and effective intercultural communication skills as essential ingredients of business etiquette to avoid offensive behaviour. In the context of international trade, any offensive behaviour may have serious implications not only for business prosperity and sustainability but also, more significantly, for diplomatic relations.

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Culture may be defined as “a totality of traits and characters that are peculiar to a people to the extent that it marks them out from other peoples or societies” (Idang, 2015, p. 97). While the concept of culture is very broad, for the purpose of this chapter, two related concepts that elaborate on culture—values and world view (philosophical outlook)—are used. It is within the context of a value system that notions like *Ubuntu* (Etieyibo, 2016) are discussed later in the chapter, paying particular attention to social culture, kinship relationships, consensus in decision-making and deferment to responsible authority. We also discuss African Renaissance, together with its retrospective, current and prospective constituents, namely Afrotopia, Africentrism and Afrofuturism. However, first, we discuss some challenges regarding the title of this chapter and associated terminology.

3.2 PROBLEMATISING AFRICAN CULTURAL CONCEPTS

Mudimbe (1988) aptly captures the paradox that Africa represents in terms of traditional thought systems in relation to normative epistemologies. He argues that “Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order” (Mudimbe, 1988, x). This makes it difficult to describe Africa in what may be considered original or collective terms. While we can comfortably refer to Chinese culture and, by extension, Chinese cultural concepts, the same cannot be said of African culture without courting controversy. Unlike China, Africa is not a country but an expansive continent with complex internal diversity.

The cultural landscape of Africa, just like its politics and political economy, has been shaped by colonial conquests whose vestiges remain very strong decades after the hoisting of post-colonial flags. Closely associated with political domination of Africa by outsiders is the crucial element of imported religions, mainly Christianity and Islam, that have become defining and sacrosanct features of many Africans. In terms of languages, Africa is now divided into Maghreb Africa, Francophone Africa, Lusophone Africa and Anglophone Africa. These descriptions define modern Africa in terms of exogenous official languages, which the majority citizens lack proficiency in (Kadenge & Nkomo, 2011; Wolff, 2016). The current geographical outlook of the continent is an enduring legacy of political, historical and cultural demarcations that would defy any idea of a collective African culture.

Furthermore, in the context of what Vertovec (2007) terms “superdiversity” (see also Foner, Duyvendak, & Kasinitz, 2019; Vertovec, 2019),

culminating from globalisation, increased migration and digital technologies which have influenced various aspects of social, cultural, political and economic life, it is also difficult to say who or what is African. Citizenship is no longer a simple matter of birthright but is now an issue of complex, sometimes convenient, identity politics. Even corporate citizenship in Africa cannot afford to be insular to issues of culture, however defined. Owing to the growth of the former, the latter is in constant flux. Indeed, Africa needs to draw lessons from the past in order to chart pathways to future interactions (Visser et al., 2017) with the rest of the world, China included.

Also crucially important when it comes to intellectual engagement on issues related to African culture is a point made by Nussbaum (2003, p. 21): “Africa’s traditional culture is inaccessible because most of it is oral rather than written and lived rather than formally communicated in books or journals; it is difficult to learn about from a distance”.

Academics, for whom aspects of African culture constitute their lived experiences, sometimes struggle to have their experiences accepted in formal academic forums, since these experiences fail to conform to the established epistemological orders cited earlier. Nevertheless, there is still a reality out there faced by those interacting with Africans who will definitely feel the need to approach Africa differently from Europe, America or Asia. It is that peculiarly complex African experience that this chapter attempts to characterise, albeit in simplistic terms.

3.3 IMPACT OF AFRICA’S HISTORY ON INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS AND INTERCULTURAL COOPERATION

As alluded to earlier, the indelible stamp of colonial history and slavery continues to influence Africa’s intercultural business etiquette and intercultural cooperation. Europe’s cultural imperialism, which was couched as a “civilising mission”, tried to obliterate African institutions and thought systems that were perceived not only as primitive and backwards but also as heathen (Asante, 2001). Formal education and church teaching became vital instruments of Westernisation such that the emerging African elite identified culturally more with Europe than with Africa (Diop, 2012; Ranger, 1986; Ranger & Kimambo, 1976).

Consequently, the Western model of business practices was set as the yardstick of doing business generally. However, the colonists had no intention nor desire to teach the colonised any business acumen. Colonised

Africans were legally excluded from the commercial sphere, only involved as objects to further colonial interests. It is in this respect that the metaphor of robots and other technological inventions is evoked to caricature slaves and colonial labourers (Elia, 2014, pp. 85–90). After independence, the Africans had to concoct a business model imitating the former coloniser and book education. Yet the changing reality on the ground would force the Africans to “wake up” (Elia, 2014, p. 91). Needless to say, local and ethnic nuances would also loom large from the background, thereby creating conditions for leadership and management styles that could be loosely described as African (see 3.4). China is dealing with a different Africa from the one that Western colonisers dealt with.

With little research available in languages other than Chinese Mandarin on Chinese culture and hence work ethics, Africans tend to rely on Western notions of the Chinese, together with the associated stereotypes and distortions (see Geerts, Xinwa, & Rossouw, 2014). Similarly, the most likely information on Africa available to the Chinese came from European writings—which were ill-conceived, not only from ignorance but also from the arrogance of a perceived cultural superiority. China and Africa therefore need to heed Amadiume’s warning (1997, p. 185) that

[o]ne of the dangers of having our feet stuck in Western-produced literature is the tendency to use European terms and expressions uncritically when addressing non-European cultures and experiences. The history of European imperialism and racism means that the language which aided that project is loaded with generalized terms which do not necessarily have a general meaning, but serve a particularistic interest.

In order not to jeopardise her interests in Africa and the developing Chinese-African relations, China would be advised to take note of Africa’s anti-colonial discourses such as the African Renaissance and defining philosophical foundations of *Ubuntu*. Likewise, Africa needs to learn about the Chinese, including the learning of Chinese language and culture. Convenient shortcuts of using the West as the middleman should be avoided. Increased cultural exchange and scholarship programmes between China and African countries over the past recent decades, as well as the establishment of Confucius institutes in Africa, have certainly increased cultural relations between China and Africa (Gillespie, 2014; Jiang, Li, Rønning, & Tjønneland, 2016; Meibo & Xie, 2012).

3.4 AFRICAN MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Inasmuch as modern African management and leadership are heavily influenced by Western practices, there are discernible management and leadership styles and practices that could be loosely described as typically African (Bolden & Kirk, 2009; Nkomo, 2011; Van der Colff, 2003). While there is a general tendency to attribute such practices to culture (Van der Colff, 2003, p. 257), there are also structural features that partly explain these. For example, much of sub-Saharan Africa—with the exception of South Africa—remains largely rural, with sparse colonial infrastructure that hampers efficient communication, production and transportation. The situation continues to be dire despite patchy prospects ushered by the so-called industrial revolution (Murphy & Carmody, 2015). The issue of differentiating structural from cultural issues is aptly argued and exemplified by Simons (2012) in the following manner: If someone told you that it is cool for people to be late for meetings in Nigeria, as a random example, they are a joker. One of the qualities fast gaining universal credibility is punctuality. But the truth is that in Nigeria, as in many parts of the developing world, road transport looks like the Augean stables. Traffic is completely unpredictable, and there are rarely support systems when things go wrong.

It is often these structural factors that typify developing economies which reinforce prejudices against African business people in particular and Africans in general as less time-conscious (Simons, 2012). According to Nkomo (2011, p. 366), only “dangerous reductionism” will conveniently ignore the fact that “Africa’s problems are rooted in her colonial past” and will associate African leadership and management with utter disregard for punctuality, attendance, performance output and all integral elements of business success and sustainability.

Generally African leadership, be it in business, sports or politics, is underpinned by consideration of the collective good rather than by individualism (Nkomo, 2011, p. 369). That does not mean that individuals do not desire personal glory and benefits. What it implies is that one can be individualistic in a leadership position, but most likely there will be resistance from rank and file in cases of deviance. Societal expectations tend to push for compliance with group rather than personal interests. Of course, invariably, the individualistic tendencies seem to override common interests. As is explained in the following sections, society expects those in

authority not only to be magnanimous but to act in a manner that, according to Mbigi (1997, p. 2, in Nkomo, 2011, p. 376) captures “collective personhood and collective morality”. However, various studies (such as Wanasika, Howell, Littrell, & Dorfman, 2011; Littrell et al., 2013) highlight some equally strong inherited individualistic and capitalist tendencies that are characteristic of colonial leadership. Inevitably, one must concede that some “African political leaders betrayed the philosophical and humanitarian principles on which African culture is based”, thereby vindicating the generally negative views of many Western-orientated scholars (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 21) on the irrelevance or unhelpfulness of African cultural values in contemporary leadership and management.

The practice of leadership or management by consensus-building is definitely not peculiarly African (see Wodak, Kwon, & Clarke, 2011). However, it can be safely claimed that it is more pronounced in African societies and hence businesses. Africans generally detest rigidity; flexibility is consequently embedded in most African systems and processes. This flexibility manifests itself in disciplinary matters (Bolden & Kirk, 2009; Nkomo, 2011; Van der Colff, 2003). If a manager strictly adheres to agreed regulations and implements them mechanically at the expense of collegiality and humaneness, they might be met with hostility from colleagues and rank and file. So each case must be handled differently and should allow for the accused to explain themselves. Similarly, when one pleads for clemency, it is generally considered cruel not to concede. As demonstrated by Mqhayi, a legendary Xhosa writer in his classic drama text, *Ityala Lamawele* (the matter of twins), precolonial African societies had sophisticated legal and justice systems (Mqhayi, 1914), and some African leaders and managers continue to draw unconsciously and perhaps even consciously from such systems in modern business dealings. In politics, Mandela’s reconciliatory approach to leadership post-apartheid South Africa is probably a fitting example (Lieberfeld, 2014).

Contemporary Africa has a number of challenges that business leaders have to factor into their management style. Generally, high levels of unemployment, increasing precariousness and dearth of special skills lead to intense competition in the job market in many African countries. Managers therefore tend to face challenges of income disparities: On the one hand, there is a need to retain the few skills available, and on the other, to keep the majority of workers on low wages, which demotivates workers. This is a colonial legacy issue, in that African economies have barely shifted from primarily extractive industries with relatively little value addition. While

the colonial bosses could impose their will, contemporary managers no longer have that prerogative due to the changed political landscape and improved labour laws. African managers must be sensitive to workers' rights, and their Chinese partners ought to be mindful of that too. Most African countries recognise the eight-hour work day which is inclusive of tea and lunch breaks, and workers tend to be sensitive to violations of these rights, as was the case in the Zambian mineworkers' strike in Chinese-owned copper mines (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

3.5 PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUNDS AND THEIR IMPACT ON AFRICAN MANAGEMENT CULTURE

3.5.1 *Ubuntu*

The notion of *Ubuntu* has been subjected to many interpretations, and rightly so, considering that it does not mean exactly the same thing in the diverse languages, traditions and practices that constitute African culture (see Gade, 2012; Nkomo, 2011). The notion has often been taken at its literal level of meaning as “a person is a person through other persons” (*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* in Nguni languages like isiZulu, isiXhosa or isiNdebele). A closely related expression regarding leadership is: “a king is a king because of the people” (*inkosi yinkosi ngabantu* in Nguni languages). Both expressions denote what *Ubuntu* represents, but it is through the second expression that we may perhaps understand the deeper meaning of the first.

In attempts to use the notion of *Ubuntu* to derive African philosophical ethics, Metz came up with a principle which reads: “an action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community” (Metz, 2007a, p. 334). Unfortunately, the values encapsulated by *Ubuntu* have been taken superficially by writers like Metz (2007b, p. 2011), to create a binary that privileges the collective and, by implication, suppresses individual rights. The debates on *Ubuntu* by philosophers tend to be polarised between those who purportedly view African culture and philosophy through a Western lens and those said to be taking an Africentric view. In the latter group, the African scholars Appiah (1992), Eze (2010a, 2010b), Oyowe (2013) and Etieyibo (2015) are the leading proponents, who see the Metz notion of *Ubuntu* as a perpetuation of cultural imperialism.

We mention these polemics around *Ubuntu* to show that the concept is not a given; it is part of the ideological contestation that typifies charac-

terisation of most things African, be they history, music, religion or philosophy. Nevertheless, there are positives to be derived from *Ubuntu* that could help shed light on intercultural communication and doing business in the African context. Far from promoting the community at the expense of the individual, *Ubuntu* promotes respect of human dignity and its priority ahead of preoccupation, for example, with profits and most systems and processes. This flexibility perhaps manifests itself in disciplinary matters (Nkomo, 2011; Van der Colff, 2003). If the concept of *Ubuntu* were to be adhered to in business, surely, the high levels of poverty, environmental degradation and pollution of rivers would be contained. But, as many would agree, the dog-eat-dog competitive spirit of capitalism has eroded most of these cultural values in business.

Ubuntu carries within it values of sharing as opposed to greed, and honesty as opposed to dishonesty (Nkomo, 2011; Van der Colff, 2003). The basis of African sharing, especially in traditional and communal societies, was the sharing of labour as well as the fruits of that labour. Villagers could be invited by one household to spend a day cultivating the fields, or fencing or any other activity requiring intensive labour (Wanyama, Develtere, & Pollet, 2009). Similarly, during difficult times like funerals, all adults in the surrounding community were, and still are, expected to attend and participate in the burial. The same spirit of cooperation would extend to happy events like weddings and celebrations where all community members are welcome. No formal, selective invitations to or payments for participation would be required, as has become the case among the African elite. To say “a person is a person because of other persons” implies that whatever you do or have succeeded in, one must acknowledge the sacrificial participation and contribution of others directly or indirectly (Nussabaum, 2003). This may include them foregoing their own welfare, including work, in solidarity and support of their fellow community members. African business leaders and managers would need no reminder as to the significance of this communal spirit, but their Chinese counterparts and business partners might struggle to be convinced.

Respect and appropriate decorum among Africans could also be explained within the broad notion of *Ubuntu* (Gade, 2012, p. 485). Most often the issue of respect is misconstrued to imply that it is only to be directed to the elderly. In essence, the young should respect the elders, and they in return are obliged to respect the young. The same would apply in the context of professional or administrative seniority in workplace environment.

Respect is usually interlinked with many taboos (Mawere & Kadenge, 2010). For example, a father may not normally enter his daughter's bedroom, particularly when the daughter is adolescent and older. That is part of respect inasmuch as the daughter might kneel when giving her father food. It is considered disrespectful for men to wear hats in a house, but not for women. Unfortunately, some such forms of expressing respect may be deemed backwards and incompatible with the requirements of modern-day business etiquette. More so given that very little is written about them from an African perspective. As Nkomo (2011, p. 366) avers, African leadership and management is now characterised by tensions and contradictions.

Generally, the way one conducts oneself in dress, greetings, eye contact and voice projection in particular contexts could be interpreted as good or bad behaviour. Certain expectations are associated with age, gender, marital status, occupation and social standing. Even jokes could be considered inappropriate depending on who is in that audience and the nature of the joke. One of the sources of discontent against colonialists by African workers was the feeling that they were treated like children (Dei, 2013), as captured by Ferdinand Oyono's (1990) novel *Houseboy*. Because of the way they interacted with Africans, colonialists were perceived as lacking *Ubuntu*. Africans are generally receptive and accommodative of foreigners who show respect and willingness to learn some basics of the host society. Indeed, Chinese managers or workers should avoid being perceived in the same way as colonial whites (see Geerts et al., 2014; Jauch, 2011; Lumumba-Kasongo, 2011).

3.5.2 *African Renaissance*

A cultural appreciation of contemporary Africa, as well as its political and economic aspirations, would be incomplete without reference to the African Renaissance. Without even dwelling on the contestations around this concept—or even the appropriateness of “renaissance” to describe an African condition, it is helpful to place the concept into a background, at least in its current application in Africa. Reference to more dedicated and comprehensive works, such as, among others, Bongmba (2004), Mangu (2006), Patterson and Winston (2017) is advised.

The point of departure in understanding the notion of the African Renaissance is Africa's history of conquest, subjugation and oppression at the hands of the West. Asante (2001, p. 226) reckons that slavery and

colonialism in Africa are “real times in which Africans were brutalised physically, psychologically and historically”. The legacy of colonialism continues to haunt Africa and her prospects of economic, political, technological and cultural progress. According to Bell (2002), “the slave trade, introduction of new diseases, forced colonisation, foreign language and religious impositions, and new administration threw most of the continent into social, religious, political, and cultural confusion”.

The net effect of that cultural confusion is what Kodjo describes about the African as “the deformed image of others” (Ravindran, 2016, p. 1). This unfolding tragedy has manifested itself in post-colonial Africa’s apparent penchant for political violence such as civil wars, coups, ethnic cleansing and xenophobia. Buri Mboup (2008) and Ebegbulem (2012), for instance, characterise African leadership in terms of bad governance, corruption and human rights abuses, as well as erosion of constitutionalism and rule of law. In the midst of all this unethical leadership, African wealth is siphoned out of the continent through business deals, most often with complicit of government leaders, resulting in unrelenting poverty levels, hunger and citizens perishing from otherwise curable diseases. It is against this background that Buri Mboup (2008, p. 94) echoes the clarion call for an African Renaissance.

Far from being a “re-traditionalisation” of Africa—to use Chabal’s (1996) terminology to describe a misconception among many Western-orientated scholars that “to Africans time is a matter of past and present” (Winston, 2017, p. 185)—African Renaissance should be seen as “a revival of an Africa of hope and prosperity” (Louw, 2000, p. 4). We consider it to be a composite concept of perspectives that are historical (i.e. Afrotopia), current (i.e. Africentrism) and futuristic (i.e. Afrofuturism). Thus the Renaissance should be a futuristic re-imagining of an African society to redress the current social, cultural, economic and political distortions inflicted upon it by centuries of foreign domination. It is partly informed by and resonates with Aime Cesaire’s *Return to the Native Land* and Amílca Cabral’s *Return to the Source*, which both give primacy to African dignity. Understandably, the African Renaissance has also been described as “an expression of the quest for African self-pride, identity and dignity” (More, 2002, p. 64). While the issue of the politics of identity is paramount in the concept of an African Renaissance, following Thabo Mbeki’s 1996 speech, “I am an African”, it is nevertheless not the only defining feature, let alone thrust of an African Renaissance.

Asante (2001) rejects hypocritical and superficial interests in Africa as definitive of whatever political or intellectual allegiance to Africa one may claim. This is especially relevant for outsiders with vested interests in Africa projecting themselves as having a messianic role in saving Africa from herself. Instead, emphasis must be placed on “African agency, centeredness, psychic integrity, and cultural fidelity as the vital tenets of Africentrism” (Asante, 2001, p. 228) and, by implication, Afrotopia and Afrofuturism. “The African is no longer a loser” (Elia, 2014, p. 94) nor a victim. Africans are survivors who are determined to reclaim themselves from a position of equal potential, despite their disadvantaged past. The futuristic conception of African Renaissance, therefore,

still looks back at the past in order to re-evaluate it, but it primarily seeks to overcome this demoralising future scenario by showing a positive outlook on the potential of Africa and of the people of the African diaspora in the world. (Elia, 2014, p. 85)

The renewal and reinvention of an African dream is as economic as it is political and cultural. Writing on this matter, Moeletsi Mbeki says: “This renewal should, however, be built on a growing and sustainable economy capable of assimilating the best characteristics, contribute to and take advantage of the real flows of the economic activities around the world” (Mbeki, 1999, pp. 210–211). Thabo Mbeki, a recent proponent of African Renaissance, called upon African intellectuals residing in the West to return and

add to the African pool of brain power, to enquire into and find solutions for Africa’s problems and challenges, to open the African door to the world of knowledge [and] to elevate Africa’s place within the universe of research, the formation of new knowledge, education and information. (Mbeki, 1998, p. 299)

For example, the Economic Freedom Fighters’ implicit evocation of the African Renaissance has contributed to their fortunes—despite being described as “a paradox” (Nieftagodien, 2015, p. 446) and a party whose rapid rise in South African politics presents a case of the world’s turn towards the politics of populism (Mbete, 2015).

How then does African Renaissance relate to understanding of intercultural communication and doing business in Africa? First, it is important to

appreciate that African Renaissance as articulated by Thabo Mbeki did not just remain as a slogan. An economic plan accompanied its implementation in the form of *the New African Initiative* as adopted by the African Union in 2001. Second, it is necessary to consider the new thinking by African political leaders, at least concerning Africa's economic trajectory or its aspirations. Africans have realised that economic development and prosperity for Africa's citizens would require, as a matter of urgency, peace and political stability. With varying degrees of success, Africa has tried to arrest civil wars and coups and promote peaceful transfer of power. Non-interference in Africa's internal affairs is a principle advanced within the broader African Renaissance. Hence, Mbeki (1999, p. 212) speaks of: "the mobilisation of the people of Africa to take their destiny in their own hands and thus preventing the continent being seen as a place for the attainment of the geo-political and strategic interests of the world's most powerful countries". Peace-building and political stability are inseparable from economic development.

With South Africa setting the tone of opening up the economy to competition and efforts to "increase the proportion of exports that consisted of competitive, value-added manufactured goods as opposed to commodities" (Barrell, 2000, p. 88), Africa's business priorities include attracting foreign direct investments, technology transfer and infrastructure development. Other priorities include "investment in people and improvement of the quality of life of Africans" (Nkuhlu, 2001, p. 1). Perhaps the New African Initiative's focus was aptly described by Fabricius as: "a human resource development initiative, a diversification of production and exports initiative, a rehabilitation of infrastructure initiative, a market access (for African products) initiative, a capital flow initiative and an environmental (protection) initiative" (Louw, 2000, p. 15).

Therefore, apart from identity issues of Africans' self-assertion and dignity, the African Renaissance articulates Africa's economic development aspirations and trajectory in addition to political and governance matters. An appreciation of African management and leadership in business interactions is a necessity for long-term business relations and mutual benefits. It is positive to note that already China has played a significant role in Africa in both energy and infrastructure development. Of course, the African Renaissance faces a number of challenges whose discussion would be beyond the scope and purpose of this chapter.

3.6 CULTURE-SPECIFIC CONCEPTS IN INTERCULTURAL MANAGEMENT

3.6.1 *Social Culture: Socialising and Greetings*

Initial contact tends to create lasting impressions. In most African communities, the first contact would normally be initiated with a greeting and the common greeting is “How are you?” or *Bonjour, Jambo* or in the country’s local language *Unjani? Makadini? Ukae?* (Ravindran, 2016). Greetings play an important role in communities and may give good or bad impressions about the interlocutors (Sibadela, 2002). Africans greet strangers and friends alike. In a typical African city when one boards a commuter taxi, one greets those who are already inside, otherwise they would find your behaviour unbecoming. Similarly, when you walk approaching a person from the other direction, both of you give space and greet as you pass.

In a home environment and even in workplaces, the greetings could be more formalised; the time taken to greet varies according to ethnic and linguistic groups. Based on a study conducted in Nigeria, Chiluba (2010, p. 126) observes that Nigerians generally devote considerable time to greeting, making “particular references to the family, where ‘family’ (in the traditional sense) represents the nuclear and the extended family, the ancestors and the children yet unborn”. Most often, unless otherwise stated, the greetings are accompanied by handshakes and even hugging. To reiterate, Yorubas are considered social greeters, even in formal business interactions (Chiluba, 2010, p. 117). Doing so may be considered as an expression of *Ubuntu* in many African contexts, since, as Waldvogel (2007, p. 747) professes, “[t]he importance of greetings ... as a linguistic resource lies in the affective role they play”. Waldvogel (2007, p. 471) considers lack of affectionate greetings as a suggestion of a “business-first, people-second culture” in typically Western workplace environments such as in Sweden.

Robinson (2014) extends the courtesies even to the wording of email: It often boils down to an understanding of how cultural standpoints differ between Western rule-based and African relations-based communication, so how you word an email can make or break a nascent business relationship. A Western direct approach in writing with minimal greetings and an emphasis on rules and deadlines is not necessarily acceptable in many

African cultures. You will get better results with indirect communication with emphasis on polite greeting and perhaps enquiries about the person's health and family (Robinson, 2014, p. 1).

Nussbaum (2003, p. 22) observes that those who are unfamiliar with the African values that underpin social practices such as greetings may fail to see their value and associate the practices with the lack of a sense of urgency and timeliness. Socialising is not a waste of time among Africans, and in planning meetings and events, it would be wise to allocate reasonable time for greetings, which are part of the agenda. Building and nurturing a relationship begins in the greetings and pleasantries accompanying it, and this helps build trust, which is important in doing business in Africa (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 22). Therefore, closely linked to the social practices associated with greeting is establishing lasting relationships as if they were kinship ties.

3.6.2 *Building Kinship-Type Relationships*

There is a belief that people do business with those they know. To an extent, that is true. Most African communities still value kinship, even urbanised communities. However, what has not been carefully interrogated is how these kinship ties are created, sustained and utilised beyond seeing them as blood ties—which is often not the case. Undoubtedly in traditional societies, kinship ties could have correlated to blood ties but not necessarily so in contemporary Africa. One's circle of kinship relations would include school mates, church mates, work mates, neighbours and perhaps even WhatsApp group associations.

There is a tendency drawn from traditional practices to create apparently familial relations with people in general. Hence, when one refers to the other as sister, uncle, grandmother or nephew, it does not always mean these are relatives at all. It is an extension of kinship relationships to facilitate the friendships that would have developed. In a similar way, outsiders should endeavour to be part of this familial relationship which Africans tend to be comfortable with. Making business links and contacts would be a lot easier should one, for instance, say, "So-and-so is my uncle, so-and-so's friend". Rarely do people concern themselves about even the authenticity of the claimed kinship, yet it plays an important role in cultivating relationships and also in doing business. It builds business confidence and trust (Luke & Munshi, 2006; Nussbaum, 2003), although, without sufficient care, it may be linked with nepotistic business and leadership tendencies that have not spared Africa.

3.6.3 *Consensus in Decision-Making*

Those not familiar with the consultative approach to decision-making based on a consensus have often felt that African business leaders and managers were either slow in decision-making or indecisive (Bolden & Kirk, 2009; Nkomo, 2011; Van der Colff, 2003). Far from it, making hasty decisions is frowned upon among Africans. Apart from the need to consult widely on an issue, it is also a common practice to sleep over the matter before a final decision is communicated. As observed by Ravindran (2016), it is “the cultural significance of consensus and consultation, which tend to guide the decision-making process in Africa’s group-oriented cultures”. The values and practices bequeathed from communalism seem to have permeated contemporary African societies as well as management practices.

Generally, Africans do not like vacillation, and when they give you their word, they normally feel obliged to stick to it. It is considered bad behaviour and being untrustworthy to make a promise and fail to fulfil it. Therefore, decision-making tends to be a protracted process, in that all angles to the matter are considered and weighed. Besides, any decision is not just for an individual but for the common good (Handley & Louw, 2016).

What also should be appreciated is that in most African communities, once relationships are established, they are expected to last long. Building trust and confidence are essential in any business interface, and hence decision-making is of necessity built on consensus (Luke & Munshi, 2006). The African value system as enunciated by *Ubuntu* demands honesty, trustworthiness and truthfulness (Bolden & Kirk, 2009; Nkomo, 2011; Van der Colff, 2003). By consulting before making a decision, the leader would be drawing in witnesses to an agreement. Actually, “successful African leadership is thus not about holding a position of power in the organisational hierarchy, but concerns personal power that enables individuals to create their own future and quality of life” (Handley & Louw, 2016, p. 139). Consensus in decision-making is essential in promoting collective participation in the affairs of an organisation.

3.6.4 *Deferment to Responsible Authority*

Most traditional societies, African included, were patriarchal, with males wielding relatively more but not absolute power. In fact, power tended to

reside in elderly males as head of families and hence controlling household wealth. The vestiges of traditional culture survive and permeate business leadership too, as generally a disproportionate number of males are in business leadership positions compared to females. Instead of referring to deference to elders, which is the case anyway, we opted to refer to deference to responsible authority. So much distortion has been done to African traditions, practices and value systems that caution should always be taken to avoid perpetuating negative stereotypes (Asante, 2001).

Our position here is that, generally, age is a distinguishing feature in African societies, and one is expected to show respect to those older than oneself. Normally, the elder person cannot be addressed by the younger using a first name. Similarly, those in authority are treated with respect reserved for that status and even addressed accordingly. A manager in a company, whether young or female, will be respected because of the authority associated with that position. This respect for authority has been misconstrued and even abused as dictatorship on the part of leaders or docility on the part of subordinates. Normally in many communities you would not speak back to your superior, especially when that person is admonishing you.

When certain decisions are left to the leadership to decide, the subordinates would actually be expecting a decision that is fair and that takes into account their own interests. A good leader would first ask for the opinion of subordinates before making a final ruling so that the decision taken resonates with the general mood. By deferring to authority, the intention would not be to create dictators but to honour the leader. Even at a domestic level, the wife would normally defer to the husband as head of the family, but only a reckless man would make a decision without the consent of his wife. Of course, deference to authority has been open to abuse as leaders have manipulated their authority for personal gain. Therefore, in a business interaction, certain information can only be released by the most senior manager, even if known by everyone in the organisation. It is important to know what to expect and even to ask from people in an organisation, depending on their hierarchy in the organisational structure. Respect of authority is not necessarily fear of authority, but it is based on an assumption and belief that those in authority would reciprocate respect to subordinates (Handley & Louw, 2016).

3.7 CONCLUSION

There is a need to understand the dynamics of Chinese-African intercultural engagement (Handley & Louw, 2016, p. 139), considering the growing presence of Chinese companies in Africa. This chapter outlined what we consider salient African cultural features that are likely to impact on business and management practices. In any case, variation in managerial practices, approaches and conceptualisations occurs across countries (Bird & Fang, 2009; Bräutigam, 2009). As already discussed, there is much diversity in African culture inasmuch as there is barely consensus on what constitutes “African”. Nonetheless, there are trends and practices that are peculiarly associated with Africa. Besides, the growing presence of the Chinese in Africa necessitates the understanding of Africa from African perspectives and not from the Western viewpoint with perceived colonial bias.

While Africa still carries the burden of a colonial legacy that has left imprints on business practices, it is noteworthy that the world of business is rapidly changing with globalisation. Africa too is undergoing change, and African culture, whichever way it is defined, is not static. Increased Chinese-African cultural and business contact would, in the long run, create shared cultural and business practices, considering that in any cultural contact, blending is unavoidable. Cross-cultural and intercultural awareness largely depends on attitudes of the interlocutors. Since most of what is publicly known about Africa comes through a Western lens, African and Chinese people need to create their own knowledge of one another, not tainted by Western perspectives.

Considering the vast size of Africa and the cultural diversity within it, what we have presented here of necessity, are generalisations, largely drawn from the Zulu, Ndebele, Shona, Tswana and Bemba cultures. Therefore, it is imperative for Chinese business people and workers in Africa to pay particular attention to local cultures wherever they are. Coming to Africa with preconceived ideas and generalised understandings could actually complicate relations, as Africa is as culturally diverse as is complex. Similarly, it should be in the interests of Africans to help the Chinese—and any foreigners for that matter—to understand them from their own standpoint. With enhanced intercultural awareness, the mutual benefits to Africans and Chinese could be great, especially for both groups to learn to reciprocate respect and make conscious efforts to understand and appreciate local cultures.

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