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Review

Theorising human resource management in Africa: Beyond cultural relativism

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This paper provides a critical review of the emerging literature on African management, which is dominated by cultural relativism. In particular, the weaknesses and limitations of the assumptions and arguments of this view are extensively examined. One of the key issues relate to the homogeneous conceptualization of "national" and African culture, which is inappropriate given the cultural diversities and complexities that characterize the continent. Second, the generalizations that often characterize the literature do not acknowledge the varieties of business types and organizations that exist, an apparent lack of attention to context and firm-specificity. Furthermore, cultural relativism often overestimates the stability and long-term resilience of cultural values. Due to these fundamental weaknesses of the culturalist conceptual approach, this paper argues that there is a need for richer and fuller theoretical approaches that emphasize the market and institutional embeddedness of organizations.

Key words: Cultural relativism, African management, cross-cultural management.

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades or so, there has been a renewed emphasis on the importance of people management in organizations, triggered in part by claims that human resources are a firm's core competence, and that of all the resources of the firm, it can be the most important source of sustained competitive advantage (Cappelli and Crocker-Hefter, 1996; Chew and Horwitz, 2004: 54). This renewed emphasis has coincided with the emergence of the concept of Human Resource Management (HRM), whose protagonists claim represents "a distinctive approach to employment management which seeks to achieve competitive advantage through the strategic deployment of a highly committed and capable workforce using an array of cultural, structural and personnel techniques" (Storey, 1995: 5). The so-called HRM model, it is argued, provides the cost-effectiveness, agility and flexibility required in managing modern organizations which are faced with an increasingly competitive and dynamic business environment (Boxall and Purcell, 2008: 11).

Interestingly, there has also been an unprecedented globalization of the world economy in recent years. Characterized in part by a dramatic increase in the reach and power of multinational corporations (MNCs), the rise of supra-national bodies, and relatively easy cross-border diffusion of knowledge and innovation, there is the view that globalization poses a threat to the continued existence of national employment systems and practices (Debrah and Smith, 2002). For developing countries in particular, where globalization has been characterized by progressive economic liberalization and a significant rise in the number of MNCs (most of which are Western), one of the key issues is whether this trend will necessitate the adoption of new, Western-style HRM practices. Thus, in this paper our overarching objective is to provide a critique of the extant literature which had been dominated by culturalist frameworks, and argue for more robust theoretical explanations which can enrich our understanding of management in Africa.

Although an extensive literature has emerged in the field of international and comparative management on the diffusion of HRM practices, as earlier mentioned, several authors have pointed out that as scholars continue to focus mainly on the industrialized nations of the "West" and the emerging economies of the "East", empirical evidence based on African countries is hard to find (Horwitz, 2008: 462; Kamoche, 1997, 2002; Jackson, 2002c). On a positive note, there has been a significant growth in the

the breadth of coverage of the literature on HRM in Africa in recent years, owing largely to two books edited by Budhwar and Debrah (2001) - HRM in Developing Countries covering five countries, and Kamoche et al. (2004) Managing Human Resources in Africa, covering fourteen countries. There has also been a special issue (13:7) of the International Journal of HRM in 2002 on HRM in Africa. Nevertheless, due to the dynamic nature of the national and international environment, it is important to continuously update the available stock of knowledge. One issue that has come to the fore is whether in the face of these globalizing pressures organizations would depart from the bureaucratic and tactical personnel management approach which has been predominant in many firms across the continent, and embrace new, "Western-style" HRM practices (Debrah et al., 2004; Webster and Wood, 2005).

Indeed, many Western HRM practices have diffused rapidly across the globe in recent years, their diffusion facilitated, at least partially, by the proliferation of various best practice "models". These so-called best practice models, which are also referred to as high performance work practices and high commitment work practices, often include bundles of HR practices which their proponents argue have the potential to improve organizational performance. Of interest therefore is the issue of what factors facilitate or hinder the diffusion of these HRM practices. From the cultural relativist viewpoint, which we review extensively in this paper, it is neither appropriate nor beneficial for firms in an African context to adopt these practices. Our objective is to understand the usefulness and limitations of cultural relativism in this context. Below, we provide a brief characterization of the African institutional context, followed by a critique of the African management literature.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE AFRICAN CONTEXT: ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC

Africa is probably the least studied of the continents, a gap which is obvious in the international and comparative management literature. It is therefore not surprising that there are several misconceptions about the continent. Perhaps nowhere is this misunderstanding more evident than in the tendency to regard all of Africa's 54 states as more or less homogeneous entities. Undoubtedly, Africa is a continent characterized by diversity on several dimensions (Horwitz, 2008: 462). These diversities reflect the European colonization legacy in Africa, the level of economic development, the state of political development, the cultural and ethnic groupings and religious affiliations.

Of all the dimensions of diversity on the continent, perhaps the most obvious is the legacy of European colonialism. Beyond the linguistic divide, the British and French continue to have an overarching influence on the political economy of Africa, fuelling rivalry between the Anglophone and Francophone blocs. Some authors have even attributed the failure of regional and sub-regional integration initiatives (for example, the African Union, West African Monetary Union) to the interference of these two imperial powers, as they sometimes support different and often competing integration projects (Adebajo and Rashid, 2004). The consequence of this divide is that institutional arrangements often differ considerably between countries in the two blocs. Besides the existence of the Anglophone and Francophone blocs, there is the less powerful Lusophone bloc which comprises of six countries.

On the economic terrain, there are huge inequalities in wealth and income across the continent. For instance, the GDP per capita of the wealthiest 10% of African countries was 18.5 times that of the poorest 10% in 2005, with South Africa and Nigeria's GDP alone accounting for over 5o per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's GDP (World Bank, 2007a). The major distinction between the richer and the poorer nations typically is the level of endowment of natural resources. Nigeria, with its vast oil and gas resources, and Botswana, with its huge diamond deposits, stand out in the group of resource-rich countries. On the other hand, there are many countries like Malawi with few natural resources and predominantly agriculture-based economies.

Further, Africa is a continent of cultural diversity. Its 800 million people belong to about 2,000 different ethnic groups, and many states on the continent can be rightly regarded as having a considerable degree of "domestic multiculturalism" (Adigun, 1995). For example, Ghana with a population of about 20 million has 20 ethno-linguistic groups while Kenya's 29 million people belong to 43 ethno-linguistic groups (which include Africans, Arabs, Europeans and Indians) (Nyambegera et al., 2000).

Given these multiple diversities that characterize the continent, any overview of the African context must certainly begin with caveats. Two caveats are necessary at this point. First, the overview provided in this section, as well as much of the literature review in this paper excludes the North African countries which are usually grouped with the Middle Eastern countries as a distinct Arab group. Second, most of the literature available (in English Language) focuses on Anglophone countries, particularly Ghana, South Africa, Tanzania, Nigeria and Kenya. Although some non-Anglophone countries such as Ivory Coast, Mozambique and Ethiopia are included on a few occasions, this review covers mainly Anglophone, sub-Saharan Africa.

In the rest of this section, a brief outline of salient developments in the "modern" history of Africa is provided. Three key episodes can be identified: colonisation in the late nineteenth century until the 1960s, independence and nationalization in the 1960s and 1970s, and liberalization since the 1980s. Although many countries have similar experiences in all three periods, it must be noted that not all African countries fit neatly into these timelines.

In the colonial era, which was preceded by the infamous Scramble for Africa between 1880 and 1914, virtually all of Africa was claimed by European powers. The European colonialists perpetuated a “legacy of under-skilling largely through a concentration on export-led primary production and low development of consumer economies” (Jackson, 2002a: 999). In most countries, the primary objective of the colonial authorities was to extract natural resources for international trade, with European settlers dominating both the export and domestic markets for these goods. European settlers also engaged in large-scale agriculture for the export market, and successfully lobbied colonial governments to ensure that African peasants did not compete with them in terms of local production and access to foreign markets (Engberg-Pedersen et al., 1996). As a result of the focus on primary production, industrial sectors were largely undeveloped or non-existent. In countries where they existed, they were typically controlled by colonial companies, many of whom enjoyed monopoly status and considerable economic protection. Undoubtedly, this gave colonial companies an overwhelming advantage in African markets. In many African countries, the business landscape continues to be dominated by colonial-era companies that have now become huge multinational corporations with operations across the continent and beyond.

At independence from colonial rule, typically in the 1960s and 1970s, most countries lacked the necessary human capital and infrastructure to develop their economies. Agriculture was the mainstay of many economies, with about half of national GDP accounted for by subsistence agriculture and over 70% of the population engaged in this sector (Engberg-Pedersen et al., 1996). However, the industrial sectors of the economy were still largely dominated by colonial companies. Hence, most states embarked on nationalization and indigenization programmes to effect the “Africanization” of ownership and control of these sectors. In Nigeria, for instance, two indigenization decrees in the 1970s ensured that the government took 40 to 60% equity in most colonial companies. Most of these nationalized companies were handed over to local managers, many of whom lacked the skills and experience to manage such firms. Coupled with political interference in management activities, the performance of many of these nationalized companies dropped significantly.

Inevitably, the “Africanization” project was a colossal failure across the continent. Faced with the threat of economic collapse, most countries made a “U-turn” and embarked on “neo-liberalizing global modernization projects” (Cooke, 2004: 605), under the auspices of the World Bank in the 1980s and 1990s. By 1990, forty countries in sub-Saharan Africa had adopted neo-liberal policy measures such as devaluation of national currencies, removal of price controls and consumer subsidies, deregulation of the financial sector and privatization of state-owned enterprises. Africa was made to open up its markets to international competition but competing in the global economy was difficult, if not impossible. African businesses had to bear the brunt of globalization, resulting in economic recession in many countries (Ayittey, 2005). With privatization of state-owned enterprises and deregulation of several industries taking place across the continent, redundancies and retrenchment exercises became rife as new private investors embarked on various “restructuring” programmes (Brewster and Wood 2007). By the end of the 1990s, it was quite clear that the neo-liberal reforms had failed to accomplish their objectives, and in several states the economic situation became worse than the pre-reform era. For instance, most currencies lost an average of 50 per cent of their value, severely constraining the purchasing power of both nations and their citizens (Naiman and Watkins, 1990).

As the new millennium was ushered in, there was a new sense of urgency from within and outside Africa to effect political and economic change on the continent. On the political terrain, some progress has been recorded with the (re) turn to multi-party democracy in several African countries after years of single party rule and military dictatorships (Southall, 2003). Nigeria, for example, returned to democratic rule in 1999 after decades of successive military dictatorships, and is experiencing an unprecedented third continuous democratic term. Africa’s political leaders also created the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) to place African economies on a path of sustainable growth and development and to halt the marginalization of Africa in the globalization process (NEPAD, 2005).

From outside the continent, initiatives such as Bob Geldof’s Make Poverty History campaign, the UK’s Commission for Africa and the World Bank’s Highly Indebted Poor Countries programme (HIPC) have also tried to address the continent’s huge debt burden and the trade imbalance between Africa and the developed world. So far, it appears that these initiatives are having a positive impact. In 2005, G8 countries agreed to write off about US$40 billion debt owed by 18 of the world’s poorest countries, most of them in Africa (BBC, 2005b). With the HIPC programme, the debt burden of 27 countries has reduced from US$80 billion to US$28 billion (World Bank, 2008). At the macroeconomic level, the sub-Saharan Africa region is experiencing its strongest economic growth since the 1970s with an annual GDP growth rate of between 5 and 6% since 2003 (UNECA, 2007).

This review illustrates that Africa is a land of diversity on many fronts - economically, politically, socially and culturally. Consequently, the tendency to make broad generalizations on cultural and management issues is quite misleading. In addition, it is pertinent to note that many African countries through their "modern" history have been faced with colossal changes and a quite dynamic institutional environment. In the context of these immense reforms and changes taking place across the continent, static theoretical frameworks and analyses may be somewhat inappropriate for gaining a deep understanding of the field of management. Drawing from these critical issues, a critique of the culturalist African management literature is provided below. First, the homogeneous conceptualization of "national" and African culture is inappropriate given the cultural diversities and complexities that characterize the continent. Second, the generalizations that often characterize the literature do not acknowledge the varieties of business types and organizations that exist; an apparent lack of attention to context and firm-specificity.

WEAK CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CULTURE AND PERPETUATION OF CULTURAL STEREOTYPES

As earlier mentioned, the African management literature has been dominated by culturalist explanations, particularly Hofstede's (1980) four cultural dimensions. These dimensions include: power distance - the degree of equality (or inequality) between people; individualism - the extent to which individual or collective achievements and interpersonal relationships are reinforced; masculinity - the degree to which the masculine work role model of male achievement, control, and power is reinforced; and uncertainty avoidance - the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity within the society. With respect to the concept of HRM (in contrast to Personnel Management), the cultural relativist account of its "emergence" questions the feasibility and extent to which HRM practices can be transferred outside the American cultural context from which it emerged. Based on Hofstede's dimensions, four cultural prerequisites underpinning HRM have been identified (Clark and Mallory, 1996).

First, a willingness to delegate power and a belief that people should be encouraged to take ownership of their performance (low power distance). Second, a realisation that there are risks associated with delegating responsibility and empowering employees (low uncertainty avoidance). Third, an emphasis on individualization, arising from a desire to maximize the potential in every employee (high individualism). Fourth, a belief that people management practices significantly impact on organizational effectiveness and performance (high masculinity). In a similar vein, several cultural theorists have attempted to characterize African culture (and management system), using various "dimensions" and "levels".

Three distinct levels of analysis can be identified in the literature: the hemispheric, continental and national levels. Given the considerable intra- and inter-national cultural diversity that characterizes Africa, it is argued that the homogenous conceptualizations of "the African culture" at whatever level are inappropriate. Besides, Hofstede's cultural constructs have considerable conceptual weaknesses, which are inherently "transferred" to African management theory due to the unquestioning acceptance of his work. Furthermore, the static description of culture provided by cultural relativists is questioned, because it tends to overestimate the durability of cultural values and practices, which in turn leads to an unsatisfactory perpetuation of cultural stereotypes.

At the hemispheric level of analysis, management theory in Africa has largely been influenced by cultural explanations based on the developed-developing world paradigm (Blunt and Jones, 1992; 1997). The basis of this dichotomy is that the socio-cultural characteristics of the predominantly developed countries of the northern hemisphere are fundamentally different from those of the developing countries of Africa, Latin America, and Asia in the southern hemisphere. The developing-developed world paradigm is exemplified in the work of Kanungo and Jaeger (1990). To describe the internal culture of organizations in developing countries, they developed a cultural framework that explains managerial assumptions about work attitudes.

This framework, which is largely based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, suggests that the cultural environment of developing countries is characterized by relatively high uncertainty avoidance and power distance and relatively low individualism and masculinity – compared to developed countries. They included a fifth construct, associative thinking, which describes the differences in "rationalist" thinking patterns. On this dimension, developing countries are relatively low on abstractive thinking and high on associative thinking. Following the logic of cultural prerequisites (that management practices can only be successfully transferred to countries that are culturally proximal), they (Kanungo and Jaeger, 1990; Blunt and Jones, 1997) question the applicability of Western management practices - that evolved in the developed world - in the developing world. Consequently, they call for the adoption of "indigenous management practices" in developing countries.

The developing-developed world paradigm can be criticized for being simplistic, and for its failure to account for the diverse cultural, historical and economic factors that influence management practices in the African context. Moreover, there are no evidence-based reasons for the dichotomy between developed and developing countries, other than Hofstede's prior work on national culture differences, which has its own theoretical and methodological weaknesses (McSweeney, 2002) for a comprehensive critique of Hofstede's work; some of these weaknesses are discussed below in this section. On the contrary, comparative research evidence from Africa and Asia does not lend credence to the idea that cultural preferences and HRM systems in these "developing countries" are homogeneous (see for example, Warner 2000). Further, there is evidence that "Western HRM" practices have been successfully adopted by some organizations in many developing countries (Rowley and Bae, 2002; Cooke, 2005; Sett, 2004; Ovadje and Ankomah, 2001; Bae et al., 2001).

At the continental level of analysis, much of the cross cultural management literature has sought to make a distinction between "African management thought" (Nzelibe, 1986), "African thought-system" (Ahiauzu, 1986), "African culture and traditional values" (Dia, 1996) and "African locus of human value" on the one hand, and "Western" management values on the other hand (Jackson, 2002b). These distinctions are based on Hofstede-type cultural constructs (Jackson, 2002b; Hath and Sadhu, 1998). Again, following the cultural prerequisites logic, since African and North American cultural values are diametrically opposed, the feasibility and extent to which management practices can be successfully transferred across the regions is questioned.

Some aspects of the Hofstede-type characterizations of African culture have been challenged by scholars. For example, the claim that in Africa there is a strong people orientation (low masculinity) - as opposed to an achievement orientation (high masculinity), since individual achievements are much less valued than inter-personal relationships (Blunt and Jones, 1997; Hofstede, 1993).

> "The value of economic transactions [in Africa] lies as much, if not more, in the ritual surrounding them and their capacity to reinforce group ties as it does in their worth to the parties involved" (Blunt and Jones, 1997: 18).

Jackson's (2002b) locus of human value framework also supports this notion. The central thesis of this framework is that people are valued differently in organizations across cultures, which in turn impacts on how they should be managed. Jackson's bi-polar framework uses the instrumentalism and humanism construct. In the instrumentalist view of people, there is a strong emphasis on individualism, control and achievement orientation. Hence, the HR preferences in instrumentalist cultures are: job measurement, performance-related pay, job descriptions, and competence management. Conversely, in the humanist culture which is characterized by collectivism, loyal commitment, people orientation, and a strong relationship orientation, it is only feasible to adopt employment practices that promote participatory management, personal development, social welfare, and job commitment:

> "African employees appear to be team workers. Reward systems may be better developed that reflects this group orientation, and rewards team rather than individual effort…Avoid rewarding communally oriented staff on an individual basis that will separate them into classes by money and grading systems, and avoid the principle of capitalistic meritocracy, as it does not apply in Africa" (Jackson, 2004: 167).

However, in Alo's (1999: 157) study of human resource management practices in Nigeria a completely different situation is depicted.

> "Achievement orientation is another cultural value widely shared by Nigerians. The quest to achieve success and be seen by one's colleagues (or significant others) to have achieved success could be exploited within a well structured staff appraisal and reward management system".

In a similar vein, other scholars have pointed out that a culture of "high performance" is emerging in organizations across the continent. For example, Kamoche (2000) observes that individual merit pay systems have become increasingly popular in Kenyan organizations. Also, in South Africa Horwitz et al. (2004) report that there is a high rate of adoption of variable pay, share options and profit sharing schemes. In Botswana as well, Mpabanga (2004) observes that the use of performance pay and bonuses has increased significantly in many private organizations. These do not lend credence to the culturalist claim that the concept of employee performance management is alien to African workplaces.

Further, many recent studies report that with the pervasive adoption of neo-liberal economic policies and the intensification of competitive pressures, many organizations are embracing "hard HRM" practices which are associated with instrumentalism. Studies on employment practices in the six Southern African states of Lesotho, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe, (for example, Bodibe, 2006; Webster and Wood, 2005) indicate that there is an increasing prevalence of a "low-trust, numerically-flexible paradigm" (Brewster and Wood, 2007: 10). These studies demonstrate that the relatively static analyses provided by culturalist frameworks are incapable of providing a rich understanding of the prevailing dynamic institutional and environmental context.

Going beyond the continental level, it may also be inappropriate to speak of a "national" culture in the African context, primarily because many African countries are a collection of diverse ethnic groups struggling to establish a "national" identity following their forced "amalgamation" by European colonialists (Kamoche et al., 2004). However, the underlying assumption of many cross cultural studies is that the state (country) and the nation (culture) are the same. While this assumption of homogeneous nation-states may not be inappropriate in some Asian, European and Middle Eastern countries, it is problematic in the African context. For instance, the Asian country of Bangladesh's 153 million people speaks one language (Bengali) and over 83% of the populace are Muslims (Mahmood, 2004). In contrast, Nigeria with a population of about 140 million people has 3 major cultural groups, over 200 ethno-linguistic groups and three major religions (Adigun, 1995). This diversity also characterizes many African countries, such as Kenya and Ghana. However, in much of the (theoretical) management literature in Africa, an unquestioning acceptance of Hofstede's work, with its notion of cultural homogeneity, persists.

> "According to Hofstede (1993), West Africa (of which Ivory Coast is a part) ranks high on power distance, low on individualism, and long-term orientation, but moderate on both quantity of life and uncertainty avoidance. These cultural values, undoubtedly, influence human resource practices in business organizations in the country" Beugre, 2004: 136.

Beugre refers to Hofstede's (1993) dimensions for West Africa, one of many "countries" listed (other countries include: United States, Germany, Japan, France, Netherlands, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Russia and China). He (Beugre) then proposes a "triadic framework" for understanding cultural value orientations. His framework asserts that there are substantial differences among the three major cultural groups, particularly on the power distance dimension. Beugre's work epitomizes the tendency in the wider African management literature to accept Hofstede's cultural dimensions as the point of departure. However, the underlying assumption of these constructs and dimensions is quite inappropriate, clearly failing to distinguish between a state (country) and a cultural group (nation). As McSweeney (2008: 63) aptly put it: "A state is a political unit. It is inappropriate to use citizenship as a proxy for sampling an unwarrantedly supposed cultural unity". The cultural diversity within nations and the existence of "multi-nation" states is not acknowledged by these constructs/studies.

So far, the critique of cultural relativism has dwelt on the homogeneous conceptualization of culture as contained in Hofstede and Jackson's works on African cultural values. A central argument is that culturalist claims of uniformity at the hemispheric, continental and national levels are inappropriate given the intra- and international diversities that characterize robust African societies. These "sophisticated stereotypes" (Osland and Bird, 1998) of culture have had a paradoxical impact. While they have sought (and appear) to facilitate a better understanding of the cultural complexities, their reductionist approach actually constrains the understanding of the (critical) diversities and idiosyncrasies that exist in reality. As McSweeney (2002) has argued, gaining a deep understanding of national values and institutions requires openness to the richness and diversities that exists in most states.

However, the cross cultural management literature (particularly Hofstede's cultural dimensions) has more fundamental weaknesses. These include: the use of narrow and confined bi-polar constructs, the limited practicability of cross cultural theory in workplaces with contrasting (bipolar) cultural groups, and the static description of cultural values. These are discussed below.

The pervasive use of bi-polar constructs by cultural relativists has being criticized for being too narrow and confined (McSweeney, 2002; Eckhardt, 2002). McSweeney argues that in individuals, two contrasting cultural value orientations can coexist, with one being more (or less) dominant under different circumstances. Similarly, Eckhardt (2002) asserts that within countries, several distinct sub-cultures may exist. Gooderham et al.'s (1999) study of HRM practices in Europe lends some credence to this view as well. They found that HRM practices associated with (Hofstede's) "individualism" and "collectivism" cultural construct were widespread in organizations in "individualist" Britain.

Gooderham et al.'s study has another interesting finding. In "individualist" Denmark and Norway, organizations largely adopted HRM practices associated with "collectivism". Further, they find that countries with similar "national cultures" may have different approaches to people management due to differences in national institutional arrangements. These findings question the entire credibility and usefulness of Hofstede's and other cultural constructs. The key point here is that national institutions, and not national culture, may be the key determining factor in shaping employment policy and people management practices.

Cultural relativism can also be criticized for being of limited practicability in workplaces with contrasting (bi-polar) cultural groups. The cardinal objective of cross cultural management theory is for organizations to embrace particularistic -rather than universalistic - management practices. The underlying assumption of a single national cultural orientation makes this is a relatively straightforward issue. Organizations can simply design and implement people management practices to suit the (homogeneous) preferences of their employees. However in countries and organizations with a multi-cultural workforce, who have diametrically opposed cultural preferences, cross cultural management theory may have some challenges coping.

Jackson's (2004: 205) survey of cultural value orientations of managers from the three major cultural groups in Nigeria vividly illustrates the challenges of domestic multiculturalism to cross cultural management theory.

> "Hausa-Fulani managers in our study were more accepting of a coercive control than the Yoruba and Igbo managers. Their lack of interest in a steady job and getting promoted is reflected in their having the lowest scores for "preferring the security of a steady job" and "very ambitious to reach the top". The Yoruba and Igbo managers" higher scores for "very ambitious to reach the top" also reflect the description that Adigun (1995) presents of ambition for these two groupings.''

Jackson further notes that there is "evidence of a lack of managing diversity" in organizations, making a case for particularistic management practices. The challenge here, not surprisingly, is with the implementation. Several questions arise. Since there are supposedly differences in motivational factors between the Hausa-Fulani on one hand, and the Yoruba and Igbo on the other, should separate training, reward, performance management and employee relations practices be designed for them? Should organizations focus on motivating their "very ambitious" Yoruba and Igbo managers through fast-track career management programmes and look for alternative ways of motivating their Hausa-Fulani managers who are not "interested" in getting promoted? Should employers save recruitment costs by not recruiting Hausa-Fulani managers since it is certain they are not interested in keeping a steady job? Should employers searching for "ambitious" executives not bother interviewing Hausa-Fulani candidates since they are not "ambitious to reach the top"? In spite of Jackson's identification of substantial differences in the cultural values of Nigerian managers, his recommendation is that organizations should appreciate the differences between Western and "African expectations and ideals", and adopt management systems that focus on "inter-ethnic similarities", not differences. Further, Jackson's position here on the existence of sub-national cultures appears to contradict his locus of human value framework which suggests that a pan-African culture exists. Clearly, the key challenge for cross cultural management theory in workplaces with diametrically opposed cultural value orientations is how to operationalize diversity management.

The next critique of cultural relativism relates to its presumption that cultural values are static. The fundamental flaw with this conceptualization of culture lies in its failure to acknowledge that "cultural systems" are "open systems" which are responsive to changes in the "external environment" (Gamble, 2003; Thompson and McHugh, 2002). In the African context, given the significant changes that have taken place in the last century, particularly in the last two decades or so (see section 2.1), it is not unreasonable to expect changes in work and cultural values. As Horwitz (2008: 462) asserts, "with modernity, economic development and growth and increased urbanization, there is evidence of a shift towards stronger individualism and instrumental values". In Nigeria, for instance, there have been changes in the established seniority and gerontocratic leadership system as increasingly younger people (in their 30s and 40s) are assuming senior management positions in large organizations (Mgbe, 2005). In Kenya, Kamoche et al. (2004a) report that there have been significant changes from the traditional collectivist orientation as employees now expect individual-based incentive systems.

Studies from outside Africa also report substantial changes in cultural values over time. In China (Cooke, 2005) and Taiwan (Bae et al., 2001) work values are rapidly changing from the established Confucian principles, particularly in the younger generation of workers. Khiliji's (2004) study of Pakistani organizations depicts a similar scenario. The findings also bring an interesting debate to the fore:

> "At least two distinct dimensions of values have emerged: national values remain rooted in tradition, while employees' work-related values reveal changes reflecting a modern market economy… Findings validate that a younger cohort of employees, in particular, has experienced a transition in their value system; and that they expect a different set of HR practices. Organizations that are responsive to these changes appear to achieve greater HR satisfaction" (Khiliji's, 2004).

This debate relates to whether (or not) "work-related" values and "national" values are distinct phenomena, and independent of each other. This has been a contentious issue since Hofstede's (1980) first major study. While Hofstede's claims to be investigating international differences in "work-related" values, he seems to equate national values with work-related values: "The values of employees cannot be changed by an employer, because they were acquired when the employees were children" (Hofstede, 1994: 9).

The presumption here is that whatever obtains in the "nation" certainly obtains in the workplace. Jackson's (2004) humanism-instrumentalism framework makes a similar assumption. However this position has been widely criticized (Sorge, 1983; McSweeney, 2002). Sorge, for instance, has questioned the notion that a high power distance in interpersonal relationships in organizations necessarily implies a corresponding high power distance in family relationships. This is a fairly reasonable position and takes us back to the earlier critique of cultural relativists' weak conceptualization of culture. Beyond the definitional debate, what Khiliji's findings clearly demonstrate is that the HR preferences of employees are largely influenced by values which are amenable to change, and not static as advocated by cultural relativists. As Gamble (2003: 384) succinctly put it: "we should be wary of over-essentializing 'culture': it should be considered not as a static monolith but as a shifting and changeable repertoire".

In summary, this section demonstrates the elusiveness of the concept of culture. Such is the elusiveness of culture that some have argued that existing cultural constructs such as Hofstede's are a "misguided attempt to measure the immeasurable (McSweeney, 2002: 90). Although this may be an exaggerated view, it is clear that there are fundamental weaknesses in the assumptions made in deriving these cultural constructs.

THE LACK OF ATTENTION TO CONTEXT AND FIRM-SPECIFICITY

Another discernible weakness of the African cross cultural management literature is the underestimation of the impact of contextual and organization-specific factors on work values and management practices. This weakness is exemplified in Hofstede's work. His analysis of the work values of IBM employees largely ignores some possibly idiosyncratic features of these workers and their employer: the middle class profile of the managers, the "hi-tech" nature of IBM's business, and the relatively young age of the managers (McSweeney, 2002). This weakness is inherent in the African manage-ment literature since Hofstede's work is widely cited and has become an integral part of it.

In the African management literature as well, many scholars have presented overarching "national" and "regional" models of (human resource) management without regards for contextual variables. These factors include size, age and life cycle stage of an organization (Budhwar and Debrah, 2001; Weinstein and Kochan, 1995). The lack of attention to context has resulted in inappropriate generalizations of findings, which in turn limits our understanding of management in Africa.

One major manifestation of this lack of attention to contextual factors is the failure to distinguish between the different types of business organizations. Some scholars have asserted that there are often significant differences in work values as well as approaches to managing the employment relationship between different types of firms: the formal versus informal sectors, private versus public sectors, and locally-owned versus foreign-owned firms. Muuka and Mwenda (2004), for example, identify distinct patterns of people management in Zambia in four firm-types: public sector, local corporations, (Western) multinational companies and South Africa multinational companies.

While these differences in firm-type are often quite apparent, many studies - which cover only one or two firm-types in this figure - often claim to be representative of national or regional models of management. One of the most common mistakes of these inappropriate generalizations is the failure to distinguish between firms that operate in the "modern" or formal sector with those in the traditional, usually agricultural and trading economy. In several African countries the micro, small (and sometimes medium) enterprises in the informal sector are the main "employers" of labour (Debrah, 2007).

In Tanzania, for example, 80 per cent of the population are engaged in the agricultural sector, most of them as rural peasants (Debrah, 2004). Also, in Nigeria, more than 65% of the labour force is employed in the informal sector, particularly in agriculture (Otobo, 2007). Given the importance of the informal sector, it is understandable that many of the earlier studies on management in Africa have focused on this sector. Most of the extant charac-terizations of "African management" are empirical studies undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s of organizational behaviour in the informal economy. For example, Ahiauzu's (1986) study on the work behaviour of "the African industrial man" was based on an ethnographic investigation of management practices in a traditional workplace in Nigeria.

The study then concludes that the "African thought-system" is characterized by collectivism, paternalistic leadership style, team-working, seniority and geronto-cratic leadership. While these findings may hold for the traditional, informal workplaces, extending it to the formal, "modern" sector will be overstretching the claim. Kamoche et al.'s (2004b), for example, have observed that employees in formal sector organizations in urban Kenya have a preference for individualistic employment practices (compared to the collectivism characteristic of rural areas). This demonstrates the utility of making a distinction between organizations in the formal and informal sectors of the economy.

There also appears to be differences in work values and the organization of employment between public sector and private sector organizations that are not sufficiently accounted for in the literature. While the public sector has traditionally been the biggest employer of labour in the formal sector of most African countries, the private sector has been expanding rapidly as a result of neo-liberal reforms introduced across the continent. Some studies, however, report that public sector reforms introduced as part of the Structural Adjustment Programme are not wide-ranging as the sector remains largely inefficient, bureaucratic and corrupt (Otobo, 2007). In Zambia, for example, Muuka and Mwenda (2004) report of the pervasiveness of the Wako-ni-Wako employment culture, the practice of recruiting and promoting relatives and members of the same ethnic group, in the public sector. Also, in Mauritius (Ramgutty-Wong, 2004), Ethiopia (Mekonnen and Mamman, 2004) as well as Botswana (Mpabanga, 2004) there are indications that nepotism and political interference are particularly prevalent in the public sector. It is often argued that these practices are responsible for the low morale and productivity in the public sector compared to private sector organizations. However, Tanzania appears to be an exception in this regard as public sector HR reforms have been successfully implemented there (Debrah, 2004).

Also, there is a widespread failure in the African management literature to make a distinction between work values and employment practices in local and multinational organizations. This weakness is apparent in Hofstede's study, and is manifested in the under-estimation of the impact of parent company or global corporate culture on work values in each of the subsidiaries of IBM studied (McSweeney, 2002). While Hofstede claims to have discovered dimensions of "national" culture, the data he obtained were based on responses from managers in only one firm, IBM. Hence, he discounted the impact of the extensive contacts local managers had with other managers at the corporate headquarters, as well as the regular international training undergone by managers in the subsidiaries (McSweeney, 2002). The key point here is that the American ownership, control and management systems in these subsidiaries may have differentiated IBM employees from workers in local companies as well as other foreign corporations in their respective host countries. In other words, Hofstede failed to distinguish between the "cultural effect" and the "organizational effect" within the context of this multinational corporation (Mueller, 1994).

The need for researchers to be sensitive to (potential) differences in norms and employment practices between local and multinational corporations cannot be over-emphasized. This is particularly important in the context of developing countries where local, often family-owned enterprises compete alongside multinational corporations from the West (and increasingly from the East). A burgeoning literature exists in this area. One of the very few in the African context, Horwitz and Smith's (1998: 590) investigation of the adoption of flexible HRM systems in South Africa reveals that foreign-owned firms adopted flexible HRM systems to a greater extent than their local counterparts. In a similar vein, Venkata Ratnam (1998) and Som's (2007) Indian study reports that MNC subsidiaries have successfully introduced "innovative" HRM practices many of which are at odds with the traditional pluralist and collectivist approach to employment relations in local organizations. Arias' (1993) study of the pharmaceutical industry in Ecuador also reports that while the multinational firms adopted modern HR practices, the local, family-owned companies continued with their traditional employment practices. In China as well, Bjorkman (2002: 47) observes that performance and reward systems in Western multinational firms differ considerably from local and state-owned enterprises.

Although it is not always the case that differences exist between the HR practices of local firms and multinational corporations (Chen et al., 2005), a pertinent question still arises as to what are the factors that account for these differences in levels or patterns of adoption of new or innovative HRM practices. Following the culturalist approach, these differences should not exist since the local and multinational firms are both subject to the same national or cultural effect or pressures. Given this limitation of the culturalist approach, three factors from alternative conceptual approaches from the wider field of international management are cited. First, MNC subsidiaries may actually be coerced into adopting certain practices due to rigorous global benchmarking and the need for internal consistency within their global network. Second, MNC subsidiaries with their enormous economic power often have a competitive advantage and are more profitable than their local counterparts. This product market power that they possess, it has been argued, provides a suitable context for the implementation of HRM practices (Sett, 2004). Citing the Singaporean case, Chew and Horwitz (2004: 53), for example, assert that:

> "The [eight] MNCs studied show that regardless of location, the use of globally diffused HR strategies and particular systems create and reinforce a strong and differentiated corporate culture and core values, even where the host country culture may differ."

Third, MNC subsidiaries - due to their power and influence - may be more willing and able to take the risks by introducing employment practices that are institutionally or culturally contested. In this regard, MNCS may be regarded as "courageous adopters" of new HRM practices (Sanders and Tuschke, 2007: 33).

These explanations suggest that institutional approaches may be more useful and appropriate in explaining the diffusion of HRM practices than culturalist frameworks, a notion strongly supported by Chow's (2004) study of HR practices in three Chinese societies: China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Although the three countries had broadly similar Confucian Chinese culture and values, there were substantial differences in their staffing, training and development and performance and compensation management practices, owing largely to variations in the level of government involvement/regulatory regime, level of economic development, dynamics of the labour market and the presence and power of trade unions.

> "Firms in the three Chinese societies are operating under different institutional environments, so it is logical to posit that their HR practices are different. The results of this study provide evidence that the relationship between HR practices and the effectiveness of these practices depends on the degree of fit with the institutional environment" Chow (2004: 638).

Chow argues that Hong Kong's relatively high level of adoption of Western HR practices was shaped by the British colonial legacy - evident in the country's voluntaristic industrial relations system; and further, that this liberal system is partly responsible for the emphasis on individualism and a situation where union power remains weak, thereby allowing greater autonomy and flexibility for employers in the determination of their HR practices. Further, Chow argues that that the presence and dominance of Western multinational firms is Hong Kong has facilitated the intra-MNC as well as cross-national diffusion of Western HR practices there (pp 629 - 630). The key point here is that institutional factors may play a far more important role in the determination of HR practices than cultural factors.

In conclusion, it is clear from the review in this paper that the rapid changes and industrial restructuring taking place across Africa does not lend credence to the static descriptions and analyses provided by cultural relativists. Further, that given the multiple diversities that characterize the continent and its nations, the homogeneous conceptualization of culture by cultural relativists is stereotypical and inappropriate.

Moreover, with the successful transfer of HRM practices across diverse cultures, it appears that the impact of cultural differences on HRM practices may have been exaggerated and overemphasized (Gamble, 2003). Rather than continuing to focus narrowly on providing cultural descriptions based on the notion that a national or African culture exists, there is an urgent need to engage with and use more sophisticated theories that can cope with change, variety and multiple influences (McSweeney, 2002). Such theoretical approaches emphasize the market and institutional embeddedness of organizations, for instance rationalism and institutionalism.

From the rationalist perspective, organizations' choice of HRM practices is essentially determined by "technically efficiency" considerations such as their economic utility and alignment with the firm's business strategy (Subramony, 2006). The rationalist perspective is particularly useful since the very notion of rationality is implicitly assumed in the strategic human resource management (SHRM) literature, where there have been several attempts to provide linkages between people management practices and organizational strategy (Wright, McMahan and McWilliams, 1994; Kamoche, 1996). Many of these studies draw extensively from the resource-based view of the firm in the strategic management literature. According to the resource-based view, a firm can achieve a sustainable competitive advantage from its internal resources if these resources are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991).

Many researchers have argued that human resources (potentially) meet these four criteria (Snell et al., 1996). Therefore to gain a competitive advantage through people, firms should seek to integrate their HR competencies (the skills, abilities and talents of their employees) into unique organizational capabilities (Kamoche, 1996). In the African context, rationalist explanations are a useful antidote to culturalist explanations which have dominated much of the African management literature. Kamoche's (2000) "processual, strategic model of HRM for Africa", which draws on the resource-based view, provides a prescriptive framework for aligning people management practices and competencies with a firm's business strategy.

In contrast, institutionalist approaches - somewhat similar to culturalist approaches - emphasize the critical role of societal rules and norms, as well as political and economic structures, in shaping HRM practices. This approach is critical of resource-based models due to their so-called unitarist and internally-focused orientation (Khan and Ackers, 2004). The core of their critique is that the emphasis on organizational differentiation or idiosyncrasy is impracticable since all firms need some degree of uniformity to meet the standard (sectoral) expectations of their customers, employees, critical resource providers, regulators and other key stakeholders. Although these two approaches provide somewhat contrasting viewpoints, they provide a fresher and fuller conceptual framework for understanding and theorising human resource management in Africa.

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