Theory A: Preliminary Perspectives on an African Model of Leadership

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

Over the past century, numerous theories and models of leadership have been explored, expounded and promulgated by businessmen and women, management gurus and organizational consultants. These theories have typically been based on the wisdom accumulated in Western societies, usually American and Northern European. The one notable exception to this tradition is the so-called "Theory Z" concept of leadership which was based on Japanese management practices. (Ouchi, 1981) Many of the so-called "Japanese" strategies of leadership and management that Ouchi proposed in his book on "Theory Z" actually originally came from American consultants who were working in Japanese companies. However, there was a sufficiently unique perspective being offered by Ouchi to make his work valuable to leaders in American and European institutions.

Theories X to Z

Ouchi's "Theory Z" built on the work of Douglas McGregor (1960). In his now-classic book on the "professional manager," McGregor proposed that most American managers operate from a "Theory X' perspective which, in tum, builds on the assumption that workers are inherently nonmotivated and that leaders and managers should be engaged primarily in monitoring work and motivating employees. McGregor offered a second perspective on management and leadership, which he labeled "Theory Y." This perspective is founded on the assumption that workers are inherently interested in their work, that employees take pride in high quality performance, and that leaders and managers need only provide direction and support. Ouchi expanded on McGregor's Theory Y by introducing the concept of team and collaborative organizational culture-- characteristics that are prevalent in many Japanese organizations.

Obviously, there are many other societies and cultures in the world from which we can gain wisdom regarding effective leadership and management. This breadth of wisdom is particularly important given the movement to globalization in both the nature of resources that are available to contemporary organizations and the threats that are being faced by organizations and societies. It is imperative that we gain a clearer sense of how leaders operate in other parts of the world.

We must avail ourselves of the distinctive wisdom and enlightening perspectives that can be found in all societies. We should focus, in particular, on non-Western societies that share with Japanese society the sensitivity to collective productivity and the role to be played by leaders in identifying and supporting the dynamic energy that accompanies this collective productivity. Just as Ouchi built upon McGregor's Theory Y, so might a new perspective be offered that explores leadership in other non-Western societies building on Ouchi's Theory Z. I have prepared this very preliminary perspective on the models of leadership to be found in sub-Sahara Africa and will capture the essence of these models in a new "Theory A."

While I personally am not the person to prepare a definitive exploration of Theory A—being an American of Northern European heritage—I can lean heavily on written work that has been presented by those from Africa, as well as relate to my own experience of doing work as a consultant in South Africa during its early post-apartheid years. I have already discovered in the initial reading I have done that several preliminary themes can be identified. These themes, in tum, point to the rich insights that are likely to emerge from a more in-depth study and analysis that should be conducted. Five preliminary themes have been identified: (I) leadership in a nomadic world, (2) leadership within a community context, (3) leadership in a communitarian society. (4) leadership in an oral/constructivist tradition, and (5) leadership as a sacred engagement deeply embedded in community.

The Sacred Communities of Africa

In setting the stage for the brief exploration of these five themes, I wish to set a broader cultural context that anticipates the fifth and final theme I will be exploring. In essence, it seems that with all the differences to be found in the many societal structures and cultural traditions of Africa, there is a deeply embedded religiosity in Africa. The important distinction made in Western societies between the sacred and the secular does not exist in most of South-Sahara Africa. Religion and culture are interwoven and provide the foundation for all aspects of life among Africans—including leadership. Jacob Olupona (2021, p. 23) states it this way:

> African religion and cultures provide the language, the ethos, the knowledge, and the ontology that enable the proper formation of African personhood, communal identity, and values that constitute kernels of African ethnic assemblages.

Collapsing Boundaries

The usual barriers that exist between heaven and earth do not exist, nor do the distinctions between self and community hold up when one is considering the role of leadership in African organizations. Furthermore, the boundaries between an organization and the community in which it is located also are very unclear or fluid. It seems that Theory A Leadership ultimately is all about interconnectedness. We now know that all trees in a forest are interconnected with one another through the *mycorrhizai* network (fungi) that reside in the forest floor (MacFarlane, 2019; Sheldrake, 2021). In a similar manner, we can conceive of leadership in an African organization as being fully interconnected with the needs and functions of the community. Beyond that, the African leader is connected with and works in consort with all aspects of the world and heaven in which the leader is operating. Theory A leadership is sacred in nature and systemic in operation. Just as the fungi serve as the conduit for transmission of energy and nutrients between the trees of the forest, so the religion, culture and heritage of African societies serves as the conduit of effective organizational and community functioning—and leadership— in African societies.

In many ways, this theory of leadership is quite alien from those theories of leadership that prevail in most Western societies –and even many Asian societies (especially those that have been Westernized). Our traditional theories of leadership emphasize the secular nature of organizational life—cleaning out the old and often repressive goblins and ghosts of our medieval past. Organizations should operate as well-oiled machines, with clearly defined operations and criteria of effectiveness.

The modern notions of leadership require that lines of authority and supervision be established and sustained despite the person in charge or the nature of relationships existing among member of the organization (Bergquist, 1993). There is no room in a modern organization for communion with nature. Sloppy and inconsistent boundaries between ones' organization and one's community are to be avoided at all costs. Yes, as Western leaders we should be concerned about the environment in which we live and operate. We should keep up good relations with other members of the community in which we reside and operate. But we should never mistake what is occurring inside our organization with what is occurring outside. Theory A challenges these modern day, Western assumption.

Living in a Three-Tier Cosmology

One might best understand and appreciate the distinctive features of Theory A by gaining a sense of the world (actually the cosmology) of African culture and history. I turn again to Jacob Olupona.

> First, there is a supreme being who created the universe and every living and nonliving thing to be found within the universe. Second, spirit beings occupy the next tier in the cosmology and constitute a pantheon of deities who often assist the supreme God in performing different functions. John Mbiti divides spirit beings into two types, nature spirits and human spirits. Each has a life force but no concrete physical form. Nature spirits are associated with objects seen in nature, such as mountains, the sun or trees, or natural forces such as wind and rain. Human spirits represent people who have died, usually ancestors, in the recent or distant past. Third, the world of the ancestors occupies a large part of African cosmology. As spirits, the ancestors are more powerful than living humans, and they continue to play a role in community affairs after their deaths, acting as intermediaries between God and those still living. Finally, I would add that Africans live their faith rather than compartmentalize it into something to pe practiced on certain days or in particular places. Catholic moral theologian Laurenti Magesa argues that, unlike clothes, which one can wear and take off, for Africans, religion is like skin that cannot be so easily abandoned.

Members of an African community find their place in this cosmology over time. This is the process of learning and of maturing in an African society. Everyone has an important role to play in this world, and all beings (even inanimate objects) are infused with spiritual energy and purpose. All beasts of the field and flowers of the garden are to be honored and appreciated – as are all human members of the community. Just as there is a "wood-wide-web" in the forest, so there is a "spirit-wide-web" in the human communities of Africa. Olupona puts it this way:

> Although it is difficult to generalize about African traditional cosmology and worldviews, a common denominator among them is a three-tiered model in which the human world exists sandwiched between the sky and the earth (including the underworld) a schema that is not unique to Africa but is found in many of the world's

religious systems as well. A porous border exists between the human realm and the sky, which belongs to the gods. Similarly, although ancestors dwell inside the earth, their activities also interject into human life, which is why they are referred to as the living dead. African cosmologies, therefore, portray the universe as a fluid, active, and impressionable space, with agents from each realm bearing the capabilities of traveling from one realm to another at will. In this way, the visible and invisible are in tandem, leading practitioners to speak about all objects, whether animate or inanimate, as potentially sacred on some level.

Thus, we find that the sacred world of African communities—and I would suggest African organizations—is filled with animating spirits that are interconnected in a way that produces a setting which, as Olupona suggests, is "flued, active and impressionable." With this broad framework in place, I turn to five themes that are specific to Theory A. It is worth pondering how each of these themes might be engaged in the engagement of leadership in our own Western—but also postmodern (Bergquist, 1993)—organizations of the mid-21st Century.

Nomadic Leadership

The current Sub-Sahara Black population originally came from West Africa (what is now Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone) (McEvedy, 1995). These West Africans, called "Bantus," built a migrant (hunting and gathering) society, in contrast with the sedentary (agricultural) societies of many African people whom they conquered. As migrant people, the Bantus were rooted in family and clan, rather than in organizations or nation states.

Wandering About

This form of nomadic leadership in many ways parallels forms of leadership that are found in Judaic societies. A great diaspora is to be found in the history of both Jews and Bantus. While the early movement of the Bantus often came with the conquest of other African people, we are all clearly aware that the later dispersion to other parts of the world (particular North America) came with the trading of vanquished African people as slaves. Partly compelled by the forced movement as a result of persecution and slavery, the populations (and culture) of both the Jewish and African population are quite notable, with major populations of Jews and many African descendants living in Europe and the United States.

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It is not only the people from Jewish and African communities who found a new home in other lands. It is also their culture and heritage that was transported to these foreign societies. We find a strong Jewish community residing in many North American cities. Small enclaves of African descendants living in the United States have preserved much of the African culture and heritage. This African imprint is particularly observable among the Gullah people who are living on the Carolina coastline. Represented with some accuracy in Pat Conroy's novel, *The Water is Wide*, and in a subsequent movie (*Conrack*), as well as in a more fanciful way in the Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*, the Gullah communities represent Theory A in many respects (as I shall note later in this essay).

The Ties that Bind

Given this nomadic heritage among both the Bantu and Jewish communities, leadership is based in familial and clan relationships and traditions rather than in institutions. When a group of people are often "on the move" then the burden of large institutional structures is too great to carry along with them. When traveling "light", the size of the operating group must remain small, though it must also provide continuity. In the case of the nomadic Jews this would mean finding continuity and leadership in one's family and one's local synagogue—not in governmental institutions (that were not only large and entrenched but also the frequent source of abuse against the Jewish population). Bantu and later African communities found that they could remain nimble by building their communities around kinship structures. John Jackson (1994, p. 84-85) offers the following description of this structure:

> The key feature of tribal society is the classificatory system of relationship, and the basic principle of this system is that kinship is reckoned between groups rather than between individuals. Under this system a man calls father, not only his actual father, but all men who according to tribal custom might have been his father. He names as his mother, not only his actual mother, but an entire group of women, any one of which might have been his mother under the tribal customs. He designates as his wife, not only his real wife, but also all of the women he might have married in agreement with the marital laws of the tribe. He gives the names of sons and daughters not only to his own children, but to the children of

all of the women of the tribe which he might have married.

While Johnson speculates that this structure might be a remnant of the former group marriage practices of many African community, I would suggest that this structure was sustained at least in part because it could remain in place even if the community was in motion.

We also find that the physical possessions of nomadic people—such as the Jews and Bantu—could easily be moved. Among the Jews this often meant purchasing fine jewelry or works of art rather than buildings. Similarly, for the Bantu and later African communities there was no "possession" of the land nor was there any building of permanent buildings. Everything had to move. Furthermore, there was often the sense that nothing had to be permanent. African sculptures, for instance, were often carved from wood rather than from stone (as was the case with Roman and Greek sculptures). That is why we don't have as many African works of art today as we do works of art from the Greco-Roman world.

Perhaps of greatest relevance for our current analysis is the portability of leadership competencies. Nomadic leaders have relied on "portable" assets (such as knowledge, reputation, and problem-solving skills) rather than on "tangible" and immovable assets (such as land, buildings or institutional position). Power and respect come not from possessions in a nomadic society but from one's competencies and capacity to build community. As we will see later, African leaders carry their authority and power with them as they move through life. They didn't (and still don't) need a palace nor large number of deputies to show their strength.

There were many attempts to push Sub-Sahara people into institutional forms. Modem nation-states have often failed, as have modern management principles. Land-holding societies are more easily moved to modem institution-based models of leadership than are nomadic societies. Nomadic societies, however, may be much more appropriate to our emerging postmodern world, with its highly flexible boundaries, shifting alliances, and "troubling ambiguity." (Jameson, 1991)

Contextual Leadership

African leadership exists within a specific context. Contextual leadership requires trust—and it is trust of three kinds (Bergquist, Between and Meuhl, 1995). Trust within an African community is built on shared perspectives, as well as the tangible demonstration of competence

and sustained commitment to certain intentions. It is what you do that counts in Sub-Sahara Africa, not just what you say or who you know.

Contextual leadership is also a multi-media phenomenon. One's physical presence is important, as are the skills of non-verbal communication: eye contact, tone of voice, posture. I experienced this phenomenon myself when consulting in South Africa. One of the managers of the secretarial pool in the corporation where I was working held a powerful presence when entering the room. As a tall, Black African man he held little formal power in this organization. Yet, he exuded great power in his physical presence. Everyone seemed to look up to him—even those who held a higher position in this organization. I was soon to find out that this gentleman was a chief among chiefs in the Zulu community. His tribal leadership and stately presentation carried over to this modern corporation.

Context defines the way in which one should present themselves to other people. Context also defines how one's behavior is viewed and interpreted. Low-context societies (such as are found in most Northern European and American communities) tend to emphasize universal codes of conduct and interpretation, whereas high-context societies (such as are found in Africa) tend to emphasize codes and interpretations that are specific to certain settings and relationships.

The Context of Action: Ceremony and Ritual

Being specific to certain settings and relationships, contextual leadership is engaged through actions taken in a specific moment. While this often means that leaders are "unpredictable" and appear spontaneous, it also means that specific behaviors and patterns of action can be enacted frequently or at specific times and in specific places. This is the role that ritual and celebration can play in a community and organization: adaptability and flexibility are offset by continuity and repetition.

We find this balancing of spontaneity and continuity in many displays of African culture – ranging from its art and sculptures to its music and dance. For instance, we find spontaneity in the improvisational nature of Africa-centric Jazz. Free-form improvisation is balanced off by and anchored in the continuity to be found in repetitive and driving rhythmic structures that accompany the improvisation. Freedom is interwoven with order. This is a powerful and compelling blend—and an important element in a Theory A model of leadership.

The context for enactment of something immediate yet predictable is perhaps most clearly evident in the African's frequent use of ritual and ceremony in their communities and organizations. It is in the enactment of ritual and ceremony that Theory A once again requires a breaking down of barriers—in this instance the barriers between thought and action. It is in the enactment of thought and beliefs through rituals that a community and an organization sustain their direction and sense of purpose.

The rituals of an African community are embedded in the three-tier cosmology identified by Olupona. Attention is paid to and honor is bestowed upon all constituencies (past and present) of the universe in which members of the community dwell:

> Ritual practices are central to the performance of African religion. Ceremonies of naming, rites of passage, death, and other calendrical rites embody, enact, and reinforce the sacred values communicated in myths. They often dictate when the community honors a particular divinity or   observes particular taboos. Divinities and ancestors have personalized annual festivals during which devotees and adepts offer sacrificial animals, libations, and favored foods to propitiate them. Ritual enables supernatural beings to bless individuals and the community with sustenance, prosperity, and fecundity. Rites of passage, such as initiation ceremonies, are rituals marking personal transitions recognized and celebrated by the community. Each ceremony denotes passage from one social status to another and is an opportunity to celebrate the initiates on their journey.

We can refer to another African scholar to further expand on the role played by contextual action in the African community. Patric Somé (1999, p. 88) offers the following insights regarding the African world of ceremony, ritual and continuity:

> . . . elaborate greeting rituals ending with paying homage at the ancestral altar, reveal something of the concerns and values governing the village as a community. The village is organized as a commonwealth under the guidance and supervision of the ancestors, whose laws must be carefully followed to avoid trouble. One of the overarching structures of the village is the clan. In the village every person belongs to a clan that is named after one of the elements of the cosmology. Thus we have water people, fire people, earth people, mineral people, and nature people. . . . Each group has a keeper or a chief and the chef of all the chiefs is the head of the earth group. The chief remains the

chief until he dies. Then he is succeeded by someone else in his family. The criteria for the succession is not clear; shamans take care of it in divination. The entire structure is divided along gender lines, allowing male groups to be separate from female groups. Thus the ultimate power base is the council of elders, female and male. Usually there are five of them corresponding to the five groups.

The Ancestral Context

Somé (1999, pp. 88-89) goes on to note that the foundation of these ceremonies (and clan structure) is to be found in the presence of ancestors in the life of the African community. All conflict and crisis is mediated on behalf of the ancestors (and they are consulted when conflict and crisis endures). As already noted, the cosmology of African life is not only expansive in space (including both heaven and earth), but also expansive in time (with those who are dead still being alive and active in the community):

> The responsibility of each chief is to maintain the shrine of the group as well as to ensure that crises are ha:1dled the proper way. Each time a crisis occurs between two people. i · i.5 resolved by ritual in the presence of everyone else and only after i has been examined through divination to ensure that it is just a conflict and not something deeper affecting more people, like a plague. The parties in the conflict come together in an ash circle. They sit facing each other, and the defendant listens to the story of his accuser first. The accuser speaks about how the action of the other made him feel, and the crowd, led by the chief, guides the two parties along. The whole crisis usually ends up looking like an unpleasant misunderstanding, and the two opponents become friends with the applause of everyone witnessing.

This is where the ancestors most actively enter the affairs of the community (Somé, 1999, p. 89):

> Of course things may not always work out like this. It may be that the crisis, because it has been simmering for a long time, does not cool off in the circle of ash. At this point healers are brought in to make an offering to the ancestors so that they can tune up the energies of the two parties in order to allow for a healing ash circle. So a failed ash-circle ritual means that healers have a job to do--to reduce the heat between the two people before they meet again. Should none of this work, it shows that one of the parties is not

doing his part. At such a time, the chiefs of all the elements will deliver their warning to the renegade party, making him responsible for the lingering of the crisis.

We see in these examples offered by Olupona and Somé that a context-based model of leadership requires something more than the physical presence and actions taken by leader at a specific time and place. It also requires the presence of heritage, values and deeply embedded commitments if the actions being taken are to be supported by other members of the community (or organization) and can, as a result, be successful. The ancestors are "present" to ensure that all members of the community are being treated in a caring and equitable manner. I return to Somé (1999, p. 89):

> In Africa people's welfare and rights are safeguarded by the ancestors. It is the ancestors who ultimately punish wrongdoing, by sending trouble or illness, even death, to the transgressor. When trouble comes, the diviners inquire as to the reason and are able to determine which of the ancestral laws has been broken. In this way abuses are corrected and people are given an opportunity to make amends and turn their lives around.

Homo Celebratus

Is it not possible that ceremony and ritual-based processes are also sustained in contemporary Western communities and organizations? Are thought and action also coupled in the West when commitment is being renewed—and perhaps even when conflicts and disagreements are to be addressed? Are not the parades and fireworks associated with national holidays in many Western (and Asian) countries exemplifying Theory A? Ceremonial enactments request that we honor the past and ensure the continuing commitment to justice and sacrifice on behalf of the community and nation. Are not the holiday celebrations and 25th Anniversary celebrations of an employee's tenure in a 21st Century organization similarly hinting of the power that ceremonies and rituals possess in bringing people together (Bergquist, 1993)? There are also marriage ceremonies, funerals and christenings.

Do the appreciative perspectives offered by David Cooperrider and his colleagues (Srivastvava, Cooperrider and Associates, 1990) reflect the same purpose and perhaps even orientation of the African community. Does the act of appreciation held to build and sustain meaningful relationships? Cooperrider and others offering an appreciative perspective suggest that this is

the case (Bergquist and Mura, 2011; Bergquist, 2004).. Should appreciative perspectives be included in Theory A?

We can even point to more formal institutionally-based processes in most Western societies—such as the transfer of governmental power and graduation of students from a school, college or university. What about the ceremonial way in which judicial systems operate in many Western societies—including robes (and sometimes even wigs), the use of gavels and formal titles, and the presence of the judge sitting above everyone else on something called the "bench" (almost like a pedestal)? The work is even being done in a building called the "courthouse" and a room called the "court room." Judicial systems are not very modern in sound or process. Perhaps ceremony and ritual ae required by all societies when dealing with conflict and injustice.

Somé (1999, p. 95) speaks directly to this issue in his own closing words regarding the nature of a caring and healing community—wherever it exists in the world:

> These examples suggest that what is required for the maintenance and growth of a community is not corporate altruism or a government program, but a villagelike atmosphere that allows people to drop their masks. A sense of community grows where behavior is based on trust and where no one has to hide anything. There are certain human powers that cannot be unleashed without such a supportive atmosphere, powers such as the one that enables us to believe in ancestors and to believe in our ability to unlock potentials in ourselves and others far beyond what is commonly known. When an individual feels connected to an entire community, this connection can extend far beyond the living world. This suggests that a healthy connection with one another will spill over into a connection with the ancestors and with nature. Similarly, the struggle to connect in this world will extend itself to the Other World.

I would suggest that these closing words offered by Somé can contribute to the foundation of a Theory A model of leadership. Perhaps at the heart of Theory A is a fundamental assumption that people like to celebrate and participate in rituals. Many years ago, Johan Huizinga (1968) proposed that human beings like to play—and he coined the term *homo ludens* to capture this inclination. We might make up our own term—*homo celebratus*—to identify a complementary inclination to act upon one's thought and feelings via ceremony and ritual. We can add this term to the Theory A lexicon.

Communitarian Leadership

Most Sub-Sahara African societies and organizations embrace what might best be called a "communitarian" spirit (Gyekye, 1997). Communitarianism represents a balance between individual rights and collective responsibility (Lodge,1995). The property and respect of each member of the community is protected and respected (individual rights). However, each member of the community is also expected to contribute to the overall welfare of the community even if this means the sacrifice of personal wealth or privilege (collective responsibility).

As Somé (1999, p. 100) observes in reflecting on the character of all indigenous communities (not just those in Africa):

> In an indigenous community, each person is precious. No one is born on this earth without a reason, a special purpose. Failure or inability to perform one's function in the village places a person in a constant state of crisis. So crises from either of these two sources--the embodiment of a new spirit wanting to emerge, and the impossibility of doing what one came into the village to do—must be addressed by the community.

Identity in a communitarian society is vested in two places. The identity and worth of individual is set initially within a group context. Members of a communitarian society are dropped into an existing group and community when they are born. They take on the identity of the community and the collective identity of the heritage and all the ancestors of this community. Newborns initially hold no life or identity independent of group. However, as members of the community mature and assume increasing responsibility for the overall welfare of the community, they assume distinctive roles, forge distinctive and complementary identities, and create their own unique life path.

Leading the Individuals and the Community

Leadership in a communitarian society, such as is commonly found in Africa, is defined by obligations taken on by individuals on behalf of community. While leaders have considerable power and influence in an African community, it is essential that these leaders always act in consultation with the elders of their community—who represent, in turn, the values and commitments of their ancestors. Leaders in an African community also play a critical role in

overseeing the initiation of young men and women into their community. It is in the role of mentor (to use a Western term) and wise counselor that African leaders forge the vital linkage for their young initiates between individual identity and rights and collective identity and responsibility.

Somé (1999, p. 276) frames it this way:

> Initiation focuses on and is a response to some basic existential questions faced by human beings since the dawn of time. Everyone wonders. Who am I? Where do I come from? What am I here for? and Where am I going?

> We have already noted that indigenous people see humans as born with a purpose, a mission they must carry out because it is the reason their coming to this world. In order to deliver the gift of their mission purpose, certain conditions must be present, such as the community's recognizing the gift that is being delivered to them.

There are mutual obligations that are sustained through the community of care and trust—not formal contractual agreements. This brings us to another important dynamic operating in African societies (and in Theory A). Behavioral economists draw a distinction between an interaction between two or more people that is based on a "market exchange" and an interaction that is based on a "social exchange." The market exchange requires an agreement that some product or service is provided in exchange for money or some other form of direct compensation. Conversely, social exchange requires that a beneficial action taken by one person is acknowledged and rewarded by the other person in a manner that is symbolic, intangible and "heart felt."

For example, if a son or daughter is invited to their parent's home for Thanksgiving dinner (in the United States or Canada), then they could determine the probable cost of the dinner per guest and hand their parent a check for this amount for themselves (or anyone they are bringing with them to the dinner). If this were to occur, then the parent is likely to respond not by thanking their child for this considerate gesture, but to feel hurt and wonder why their child no longer loves them! Instead, the son or daughter can bring a bottle of wine, a dish to accompany the turkey, or a bouquet of flowers. This exchange is likely to be much more pleasant for all

involved. It is a social exchange, whereas the offering of money is a market exchange—and definitely not aligned with a family gathering.

We find that most of the transactions in African societies are ultimately based on social exchanges and that market exchanges (which are more common in Western societies) are viewed with suspicion ("What is really going on here?") or even resentment ("I am offended that this person doesn't respect or honor me. Am I not their equal?"). There is very little room for market exchange in a community of care and trust—and only limited space for market exchange in a Theory A leadership repertoire.

Mandela and Agape

It is in the midst of this communitarian spirit that we find the charismatic power held by someone like Nelson Mandela. For this legendary figure in African history, the critical stance to be taken was one of finding identify and power within the context of the collective rather than in any distinctive, individual identity. Anthony Sampson (2000, p. 406), Mandela's official biographer framed it this way:

> Mandela seemed instinctively aware of the power of his icon: he could provide "a symbolic expression of the confused desire of the people." But he guarded against the personality cult which had bedeviled so many young African states; he was careful to avoid the word "I." He realized . . . : "The magic hands are finally only the hands of the people." He was always stressing that he was the servant of the ANC [African National Congress]. " They may say: well, you are a man of seventy-one, you require a pension; or, look, we don't like your face, please go. I will obey them." "His life was never the struggle"; as Mac Maharaj said. "The I never supplanted the organization."

It must have been quite tempting for Mandela to absorb and claim the powerful spirit associated with his work and accomplishments. He could easily have taken full credit for what was done and could have embraced a fair amount of justifiable narcissism. Yet, he chose instead to not take himself too seriously and to always turn away from "I" to "Us". Sampson (2000, p. 415) offers the following vignette:

> [Nelson] seemed to enjoy and adjust his own icon, while not being fooled by it, as though he were watching a play with himself as the hero. He liked to tell stories about

being cut down to size: about the American tourist in the Bahamas who recognized him but then asked: "What are you famous for?" Or about the two white women in South Africa who asked for his signature and then said: "By the way, what is your name?" His aides tired of the repeated anecdotes, but they were part of Mandela's determination to remain an ordinary man, and they delighted his audiences, particularly children. He loved telling stories about being put down by children. "You know what the kids at school say about you?" a·girl of thirteen asked him. "That when you were young you were handsome. They say you are now old and ugly." When a. girl of five asked him why he spent so long in jail, and he explained, she replied, " You must be a very stupid old man." With children everywhere—despite or because of his own family problems—he could descend from his towering image to rediscover his own·simpler self. But while he could sound like an innocent abroad, his instinctive ability to relate to all kinds of people made him a master politician.

We can look upon Mandela's life and work in a somewhat broader perspective that takes us out of Africa and moves us to a more global perspective. First, I find that the leadership exhibited by this dedicated servant to South African welfare is aligned with Jim Collins' (2001) recipe for effective leadership. Like Collins' successful leaders in late 20th Century and early 21st Century American organizations, Mandela was both persistent and modest. We are looking at a man who fought against apartheid for many decades, both when out in the world and when in prison. It would be hard to find an example of someone with such willpower and focus (other that perhaps Gandhi). And with all of this, as we have been noting, Mandela refused to take credit as an individual for his achievements. He remained humble and never took himself too seriously. Perhaps we should add Collin's insights to our model of Theory A leadership, much as William Ouchi brought in American models of leadership when formulating his Theory Z.

I would take it a step further by suggesting that Mandela exemplifies what the Jewish theologian, Martin Buber (1958), identifies as the power of "I/Thou" and what Greek's identify as the form of love called "agape." In the case of both "I/Thou" and "agape" there is an overriding concern and commitment that brings two people or an entire nation together. A higher purpose, a greater goal, and sustained vision serves as a "third party" in the two-person relationship, community, organization or nation. The individual recedes into the background on behalf of something bigger than that to be found in the "I". For Nelson Mandela this greater

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good was concerned with equity and inclusion in his home country. He was not in it for just himself.

Commitments to "I/Thou" and agape do not fit well in a modern society—especially one that is highly individualistic (such as the United States). In many ways, these commitments are most closely aligned with old (premodern) religions and cultures (Bergquist, 1993). We might even suggest that Theory A is a "throwback" to another era in Africa (and elsewhere in the world). Mandela's biographer (Sampson, 2000 p. 575) is suggesting that this might be the case with the man he studied:

> Mandela was not so much postmodern as premodern. He belonged to the much older tribal tradition-in which he had been brought up, of a chief representing his people and accessible to them. He still recalled the boy Mandela sitting at the feet of his guardian, the Regent, watching him hearing his tribesmen's outspoken criticisms and settling their disputes with careful courtesy, making them all feel part of the same society. His rural roots remained a crucial ingredient in his makeup: it was noticeable that he wrote best about his home territory. He still genuinely saw himself as the "country boy" who had a sense of his own belonging and ubuntu, and his own rural values: it was no accident that his life would end as it had begun, in his tribal village of Qunu.

Given this appraisal, it is understandable why Mandela exemplified many of the perspectives and practices of his African heritage and why Theory A might be fully aligned with Mandela's work (Sampson, 2000, p. 575-576):

> But Mandela was no ordinary country boy: he remained the son of a chief. His princely style could strike chords with white as well as black South Africans; and in Britain it could even help to reassure the Queen. He could evoke an earlier era when monarchs were identified with their people and there was no distinction between the imagery and the reality of kingship. Mandela's monarchic instincts could have drawbacks in running a complicated industrial state beset with economic · problems and urgently in need of modern management. He could be devastatingly candid about his government's shortcomings, but he seemed in no hurry to rectify them. In his detachment from bureaucracies and diplomatic complexities, from economists or man- agers, Mandela sometimes seemed to belong more to the nineteenth than to the twenty-first century.

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It might be that Nelson Mandela has taught us something about how to meld the premodern world of the 19th Century with the postmodern world of the 21st Century. How do you bring the lessons of a traditional African community with chiefs, ceremonies, rituals, ancestors, many spiritual forms and a rich three-tiered cosmology into the 21st Century world of globalization? What must we do to make Theory A applicable in a world that contains and supports a dangerous combination of interdependence and competition (Friedman, 2005, Smick, 2008; Bergquist, 2021)? This is the real challenge of Theory A—and Nelson Mandela can help us addresses this challenge—as a deceased "ancestor" who still lives in our 21st Century heart and head.

Civic Religion

One place to look for this new blend other than in the life and work of Nelson Mandela is in the vision of a society based on something called "civic religion." It is in the model of communitarianism, in the engagement of ritual to fortify collective commitments, and in the life led by Nelson Mandela that we once again find the Theory A blurring of boundaries between the sacred and the secular.

The term "civic religion" is sometimes used to portray this blurring. I would suggest that Theory A is founded on this notion of civic relation, whether applied to leadership in a community or leadership in an organization. Building on the work of the noted American sociologist, Robert Bellah (2005), Olupuna offers the following definition and description of "civic religion" as it exists in African society:

> By civil religion, I have in mind not only institutional religion and the beliefs and practices as they relate to the sacred and transcendent, but also practices not always defined as religious, including the rites of passage offered by our various youth brigades, and also the values of communalism and national sacrifice. Religion also encompasses the human, cultural dimensions within faith traditions, such as how human agency shapes, influences, and complicates religious control. Thus, I have argued that religion should be examined not only as a sacred phenomenon, but also as a cultural and human reality, all the while remembering the importance of integrating the sociopolitical dimensions of religiosity into any examination of an African state.

As I have noted, it is in the presence of civic religion in African communities that we witness the interweaving of the sacred and secular. Religion is embedded in community and community is embedded in religion. All spheres of the African cosmology are engaged, both past and present. In the midst of this sacred-saturated community we find the "coin of the realm"—and it is not money or any other secular commodity (such as land, building or stock portfolio). In the African community (and organization) there is no market exchange—only social exchange.

I personally witnessed this saturation of the Africa-centric communities when visiting Red Top, North Caroline—a home for the forementioned Gullah people. I had the honor and privilege of attending a church service in Red Top. This was a special service in several regards. First, the members of this church were being celebrated by another congregation that joined members of the Red Top congregation in conducting a "ring shout" (which is not as one might assume a display of vocal exuberance, but is instead a display of exuberant dancing, with rhythmic stomping being prevalent).

The service I attended was special in a second way. Tragically, the home of one of the church congregants burned to the ground the evening before the service was held. The paster of this church announced that "Sister Browne" was without a home and that it is "right and proper" that we donate money to help her rebuild her home. At that moment, a card table was placed out in the aisle and members of the congregation got up and began placing cash on the table. An ample amount of money was donated that morning (at least several thousand dollars). This was impressive especially given that Red Top is one of the poorest communities in the United States.

I was attending this service with an African American colleague. She began to quietly cry when the money was being donated. I asked her what was happening. She told me that this was the type of generosity that her grandmother had described as being prevalent in the Black church she attended in Philadelphia. My colleague and I reflected on the way this community provided protection for all its members. You don't need fire insurance, when you can trust that your neighbors will pitch in their own money and (as we were later told) help to rebuild the home. This is pure social exchange, whereas formal insurance policies are found on the principles of market exchange. There is the blending of religion and social welfare—this is what Robert

Bellah and Olupona identify as civic religion. It resides in African communities and in an Africa-centric community such as Red Top. Theory A is alive and well!

Constructivist Leadership

The powerful charismatic leader in African society typically relies on oral (rather than written) communication. Leaders are influential if they are persuasive speakers, if they can tell a compelling story, if they connect directly and intimately with their audience. In this oral tradition there is greater room for interpretation and the reconstruction of reality. When words are written down, they are much harder to change then when they are spoken. Furthermore, spoken words are very contextual in nature: tone of voice, posture, physical setting, and the relationships that exist among those who are present to hear the oral presentation all determine what the statement means and how one should respond to these spoken words.

The Emperor's Ways

We can turn to the life and practices of one (notorious) leader in African history, Halle Selassie, to see how this oral/constructivist process played out in one specific African country (Ethiopia). We devote a few word specifically to Emperor Selassie who ruled over this country for many years during the early 20th Century. Following are several observations made by Ryszard Kapuściśski (1989, p. 7). He suggests that the Emperor was not only a bit paranoid (justifiably) but also deeply embedded in the royal tradition:

> The Emperor began his day by listening to informers' reports. The night breeds dangerous conspiracies, and Haile Selassie knew that what happens at night is more important than what happens during the day. During the day he kept his eye on everyone; at night that was impossible. For that reason, he attached great importance to the morning reports. And here I would like to make one thing clear: His Venerable Majesty was no reader. For him, neither the written nor the printed word existed; everything had to be relayed by word of mouth. His Majesty had had no schooling. His sole teacher-and that only during his childhood-was a French Jesuit, Monsignor Jerome, later Bishop of Harar and a friend of the poet Arthur Rimbaud. This cleric had no chance to inculcate the habit of reading in the Emperor, a task made all the more difficult, by the

way, because Haile Selassie occupied responsible administrative positions from his boyhood and had no time for regular reading.

Kapuściśski (1989, p.7-8) suggests that there might be another reason for the Emperor's reliance on spoken words:

> But I think there was more to it than a lack of time and habit. The custom of relating things by word of mouth had this advantage: if need be, the Emperor could say that a given dignitary had told him something quite different from what had really been said, and the latter could not defend himself, having no written proof. Thus the Emperor heard from his subordinates not what they told him, but what he thought should be said. His Venerable Highness had his ideas, and he would adjust to them all the signals that came from his surroundings. It was the same with writing, for our monarch not only never used his ability to read, but he also never wrote anything and never signed anything in his own hand. Though he ruled for half a century, not even those closest to him knew what his signature looked like.

I add one additional bit of description regarding the way Selassie operated as a leader, for it illustrates the way in which Theory A might be engaged in a manipulative and destructive manner—an important cautionary note for us to keep in mind. Here is Kapuściśski's (1989, p. 8) account:

> During the Emperor's hours of official functions, the Minister of the Pen always stood at hand and took down all the Emperor's orders and instructions. Let me say that during working audiences His Majesty spoke very softly, barely moving his lips. The Minister of the Pen, standing half a step from the throne, had to bend his ear close to the Imperial lips in order to hear and write down the Imperial decisions. Furthermore, the Emperor's words were usually unclear and ambiguous, especially when he did not want to take a definite stand on a matter that required his opinion. One had to admire the Emperor's dexterity. When asked by a dignitary for the Imperial decision, he would not answer straight out, but would rather speak in a voice so quiet that it reached only the Minister of the Pen, who moved his ear as close as a microphone. The minister transcribed his ruler's scant and foggy mutterings. All the rest was interpretation, and that was a matter for the minister, who passed down the decision in writing.   ·

Postmodern Emperors

While the Emperor's behavior can be ascribed to his traditional African upbringing, we find similar processes operating in many 21st Century organizations and governmental offices. Some leaders rely on the spoken word and resist reading any documents. Truth is recreated based on the whims of the person in power. Words that were spoken only yesterday are being retracted or denied today. As my colleague, Walt Anderson (1990) noted in the title of one of his books: "reality isn't what it used to be." In yet another of his books, Anderson (1995) offers an ironic title: "The Truth About Truth." In both of these books, he speaks to the kind of processes engaged by the Emperor of Ethiopia many years before.

Like Walt Anderson (and myself), many of the so-called "postmodern" theorists of organizational life suggest that organizational culture and continuity are based in the constructed stories being told about and within the organization (Bergquist, 1993). These social constructions may or may not represent what really occurred in the organization; however, they say a great deal about what is valued in the organization, and they tend to be self-fulfilling. Given the power of story and narrative within organizations, the role of narrator becomes critical—as was the case in the courts of Ethiopia during the reign of Halle Selassie. Who is allowed to tell the organizational story and who owns the narrative of the organization? African leaders have always been cognizant of this "postmodern" truth. This is why they insist on being active in the initiation of new adults into their community: African leaders know that the initial stories being told the initiates define the initiate's construction of this communities' reality. Perhaps, the content and mode of presentation, and status of the presenter regarding the initial orientation of new employees in a 21st Century organization is not a trivial matter.

Sacred Leadership

As I noted in beginning this preliminary description of African leadership, there is not the traditional distinction between the sacred and secular. Sacred myth is interwoven with secular history. Sacred ceremonies and rituals inform the daily operations of African communities and the organizations operating in them. While in our Western world we try to deny that historical narratives are social constructions and believe that truth can be discovered through unbiased, scientific analysis, there is a recognition in Africa that the Western assessment might not be realistic. Myth and history are deeply embedded in one another: myth creates history and

history creates myth. When we specifically look at leadership, there is a mythic narrative that is assigned to all leadership roles. The many different leaders in a community have all come to their roles of responsibility through some collective understanding and acceptance of a higher order (a "godly" design).

Born into Community

Just as we are born into an African community without individual identity and only gain this sense of identity (at the point of passage) having served the community well in our youth, so we come to a place of credibility as a leader by accepting and operating with integrity in an assigned role and position in our organization and community. Leadership need not be equated with either money, formal power or politics. This role can be as wide-ranging, for the offering of assistance to children or serving as an artist is viewed as a sacred, leading position in this community. It is as a container of diverse abilities that a community becomes empowering of all its members. Theory A leadership is founded on this commitment to inclusion and diversity. Somé (1999, p. 95) again provides us with insights:

> Community can create a container for natural abilities that can find no place in a world defined by economics and consumerism [market exchange]--abilities such as artistic talent or shamanic gifts, healing skills and clairvoyance. These talents are widely recognized in indigenous communities because indigenous people assume that the artist is a priest or a priestess through whom the Other World finds an entrance into this world. If the priest or die priestess regards with reverence and humility the world where his or her art originates, then the work done become lasting and impressive. If not, the artist does not last very long. The artist as an artisan of the sacred can cooperate in bringing the sacred to birth in this world. Indigenous people believe that without artists, the tribal psyche would wither into death [social exchange].

Somé (1999, p. 96) focuses in particular on the role of artists as leaders, relating this role to the interweaving of the sacred and secular in African life:

> The connection between the artist as a sacred healer and the community is undeniable. To produce beauty consistently requires a healthy community. Therefore the artist is the pulse of the community; his or her creativity says something about the health of the community. This is be- cause another role of the artist consists in acting as the spiritual

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fountain of the community. The beauty artists produce quenches the thirst of the village. Sometimes I have wished that there were a museum of art in my village. But then I remember that collecting art objects in one place, to indigenous people, would be a sign that people want something from the Other World that is not being supplied adequately; they would be experiencing a thirst that is not being quenched.

In sum, Theory A is founded on the premise that we are born into our diverse leadership roles and learn to engage these roles over time. Leadership is not something that can be taught as is the case in modern societies –where management and leadership are often mistakenly confused. Rather, leadership is accepted as an assigned responsibility into which one grows and "matures—much as in the case of slowly maturing and finding individual identity when becoming an adolescent and eventually an adult in the African community.

The Wisdom, Courage and Vision of Leadership

I have elsewhere (Bergquist, 1993) written about the three primary sources of leadership that exist in most premodern societies. These three sources speak to some of the diversity to be acknowledged, honored and engaged in a Theory A model of leadership. One is successful as a leader when providing wisdom, when demonstrating courage, or when offering a compelling vision. I wonder if the mythic histories of leadership in Africa tend to align with these three sources. Are some leaders in an African community –and specifically in an African organization assigned (or live into) the role of being a rich source of knowledge about not just the past heritage of the organization, but also the present-day situation in which the organization finds itself. This wise leader is often someone who has worked in the organization for many years and is knowledgeable about all its operations. The wise leader has learned how to escape the silos to be found in many contemporary organizations (whether in Africa or elsewhere in the world). Certainly, the systemic orientation of Theory A would encourage this "beyond the silo" perspective of leadership.

We find wisdom as a source of leadership in the life and work of Nelson Mandela—especially as we witnessed his careful guidance in the creation of a new governmental structure in South Africa. Mandela's story, however, also leads us to a cautionary note—for a reliance on wisdom in leadership roles is not without its risks. What happens when wise leaders die or retire? How is the knowledge and experience held by this leader passed on and how is credibility

established with a new wise leader? We found this kind of crisis of succession occurring when Mandela was no longer leading the country—and this crisis is to be found right now among the Zulu communities in Africa (Madlala, 2021).

What about the role played by a courageous leader? The capacity to take risks and remain vigilant in a world filled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence and contradiction—what I have labeled VUCA-Plus (Bergquist, 2020) requires considerable courage. The mythic history of struggle against colonial rule in African culture might support and encourage this courage. Furthermore, it becomes a sacred duty as a person assigned to a specific role in the African cosmology (on behalf of the ancestors) to take on this role as warrior, conflict-manager –and even entrepreneur (Bergquist, 2011).

Once again, we can point to the exceptional life of sacrifice led by Nelson Mandela. His years in prison, arising from his courageous resistance to apartheid, speak forcefully to the powerful source of leadership to be found in courage. However, as in the case of wise leadership, there is a risk inherent in turning to and relying on courageous leadership. The final years of Mandela's leadership and years after he served in a leadership role speak to this risk. What happens when there is no longer a human enemy or challenging force of nature (such as a pandemic or global warming)—or will they always be present?

To what extent have African communities been required over the years to find an enemy and sustain battle in order to justify courage? Most importantly, can we ever forgive our enemy? Certainly, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa speaks in a profound manner to the potential for forgiveness—and to the remarkable achievement of at least some forgiveness (or at least understanding) in South Africa. Might such a commission be of value in other countries where the enemy always seems to be found (either in other nations or inside one's own nation). And would it even be of value for something like a "truth and reconciliation" process to be engaged inside a conflict-ridden organization?

The third source of leadership is based on the mythic history of inspiring vision. It is this source that is most closely aligned with the sacred element within organizations. The organization is saturated with energy and purpose. The role of a visionary leader is to identify and become a servant (Greenleaf, 1970) of this energy and purpose. If rocks, trees, and beasts of the field have been assigned some reason for being, then organizations must certainly also have been assigned

a purpose and provided with the accompanying energy. Theory A requires that a visionary quest be undertaken by the leaders (and members) of an organization so that this purpose might be identified—and its accompanying energy fully engaged.

It is in his sustained articulated vision of a new, more equitable and inclusive South Africa that we might find the most important contribution to be made by Nelson Mandela. It is a vision that resonates not only in his home country, but also in nations throughout the world where citizens long for a similar compelling image of their own future. There is, of course, the risk associated with relying on a visionary leader. This risk resides in the possibility that the vision is realized, leaving a community, organization or nation without something to which the members of the community, organization or nation can collectively strive. As Fred Polak (1973) has noted, any community or society must have a compelling vision of the future if it is to be viable. What then happens when the future has been "confiscated" and there is no new vision to populate the future?

Even worse, we might find that the realized vision is not as great as it was supposed to be. To some extent, this seems to be the case in South Africa. While this country has become quite inclusive (for instance, with regard to LGBTQ+ rights), there is still much to be done. Mandela's vision has not been (and probably never will be) fully realized. At an even more universal and existential level, we might note that life in general often seems to continue without much new or much better taking place. It is easy, sometimes, to declare in despair that it is one "damned" day after another without much to inspire us. As Peggy Lee observed in her most jaded ballad: "is that all there is?" An existential moment of collective disappointment has been all too common in world history. Yet, as Fred Polak declares, we must keep hoping and dreaming of a brighter future. Polak is offering us another component that can be added to the foundation of Theory A.

Conclusions

Does any of this Theory A make sense? Is this theory of leadership nothing more than a nostalgic (and perhaps even dangerous) regression to an outmoded, primitive and even superstitious way of seeing the 21st Century world? Is this any way to articulate the role to be played by leadership in this challenging VUCA-Plus environment? Does Halle Selassie represent this theory as it is actually being practiced (and misused) or can we look to Nelson

Mandela as a representative of what Theory A can be in the real world (recognizing all of the risks associated with enactment of this theory)? Might Theory A tap into some of the new ways in which we are viewing our world and leadership in the world? Does the new science of complexity and chaos relate to what I am proposing? Might the emerging wisdom of Quantum physics as applied to our understanding of dynamic systems be aligned with Theory A? Could the introduction of Buddhist thought into 21st Century leadership theory be a valuable complement to Theory A? Does Theory A open the way to a more global perspective on leadership?

At the very least, our established understanding in the Western world of the ways in which social constructions influence our views of reality, and ways in which effective leadership needs to be contextual and adaptive seem to align with the insights offered by African leaders. Terms such as agility, constructive dialogue, collective responsibility, and community capital might be fully understood and appreciated in a traditional African community. Ken Gergen (2011) exploration of the ways an individual's identity as a "relational being" is clarified and energized by a collective commitment would seem to ring true in an African society. Trees that interact with other trees would not come as a surprise to those steeped in African culture. The lessons to be learned from a forest about the need for interdependence would not be lost on elders in an African organization and community. Perhaps, we of the West should be just as open to learning from not only the trees, but also our colleagues in Africa. Hopefully, this preliminary offering of Theory A opens the door a little bit to this learning.

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