

Indigenous African Wisdom and its Orientation to the Common Good – Implications for Leadership

Abstract: This paper explores African indigenous wisdom and its orientation to the common good in the practice and teaching of leadership. Traditionally, a wise leader was grown from the community and steeped in its communitarian traditions which led the leader to apply practical wisdom in seeking the collective good. Based on a qualitative literature review that is complemented with semi-structured interviews with African sages - elders, wisdom insights indigenous to Africa are presented and then discussed in the light of Aristotelian epistemic architecture of phronesis and Catholic Social Teaching. The countries referenced are Ghana (Western Africa), Kenya (Eastern Africa), Nigeria (Western Africa), Somali (North Eastern Africa) and South Africa (South African Africa), giving some geographical spread though far from being exhaustive. The results show that the three traditions have much in common albeit with some nuances due to the disparity in their contexts and cultural settings. The expectation that the wise leader should judge rightly and act ethically in pursuance of the common good is common to them. The communitarian element of African indigenous wisdom stands out as the polis where wise leaders are taught and groomed for their responsibilities to the community. Where the person is disconnected from this reality of community, it could become more difficult for him or her to attain and maintain moral uprightness.

Introduction

This paper explores indigenous wisdom and its orientation to the common good in the practice and teaching of leadership. Traditionally, who is a wise leader? Based on a qualitative literature review that is complemented with interviews with African elders, wisdom insights indigenous to Africa are drawn out. In addition, this concept is assessed within the Aristotelian epistemic architecture of phronesis as well as in relation to the common good perspectives embedded in Catholic Social Teaching (CST). In relation to the first, Aristotle's conceptualizations of wisdom as both intellectual wisdom and practical have a parallel in African indigenous wisdom where there is a general body of wisdom and the injunctions rooted in practical wisdom are found embedded within it. However, the division is not distinct. It is with practical wisdom that the wise leader applies all wisdom. For the latter, it is clear that the concern for the common good is expected, in much of African wisdom, to be an essential quality of the wise leader and, indeed, of all wise persons. Overall, an evaluation of the data indicate that the indigenous wisdom traditions have much in common with both Aristotelian thinking and CST. A few nuances due to the disparity in their contexts and cultural settings are highlighted.

Indigenous Wisdom in Ancient Leadership Traditions

The wisdoms or philosophies indigenous to Africa can be found mostly in oral traditions conveyed through "language, folktales, proverbs, songs, ceremonies, cultural artifacts, performing arts, myths ... customary law" (Ilmi, 2015, at 97); customs and way of life. A good example is found in Ghanaian music which illustrates how "Akan and other Ghanaian cultural communities revere elderly women as custodians of local knowledge... noted for their circumstantial wisdom and judgment, which they often display with an admirable spontaneity" (Dor, 2014, at 19).

These indigenous traditions constitute a wealth of practical wisdom that could be tapped for application in today's world (Harris and Wasilewski, 2004; Dor, 2014) in order to enhance the understanding and practice of leadership in Africa and the rest of the world. Leadership activity, being very complex, requires wisdom to carry it out. Perhaps not unrelated to awareness of such complexity, there is a certain sense, in indigenous wisdom, that humans are stewards in an interconnected world (Spiller, Pio, Erakovic and Henare, 2011). It is with this sense of stewardship permeating their understanding of their role as leaders that they accord proper respect for others' dignity, give others' a voice in decision-making, ensure fair hearing, practice dialogue, engage in consensual decision-making, resolve conflicts, and all other practices that fall within their leadership purview.

Community versus the individual – the revolving of the world around self and self-interest has dominated much of Western philosophical thought since the time of Descartes (Spiller, Pio, Erakovic and Henare, 2011). Instead, ideas of community, relationality and reciprocity dominate many indigenous philosophies (Spiller, Pio, Erakovic and Henare, 2011), as for example is the case with Ubuntu, kaitiakitanga, dhaqan and others like them. These ideas facilitate and promote ways of thinking that considers the common good above personal interests, since the self is perceived as part of a larger community, a larger system.

Pre-western contact value systems, moral codes, and social structures show that many indigenous peoples were systems thinkers - Harris and Wasilewski (2004) pointed this out in their bid to understand the Maori people and other Native Americans. Systems thinking was a useful tool for promoting a profoundly democratic outlook in the villages and communities as they sought to consider the whole picture and all potentially affected parties in making decisions. Thus, traditionally, rulers and leaders were considered the fathers of the people and had the responsibility for them. The community was typically made up of clans which were in turn made up of families. People were seen as their families rather than as individuals – because of this, the name of the family mattered greatly and had to be borne with honor. Systems thinking was also a way to test the orientation of every decision, every plan of action, to the common good.

The direction to the common good was set by two compasses: one internal and the other external. The internal drivers of the common good orientation and to ethical behavior were akin to the virtues (paralleling virtue-ethics), while the external drivers were the family, the community, and informal ‘codes’ (recommendations of wise and ethical behavior contained in wisdom sayings, songs and stories handed down via oral tradition from one generation to the other and injunctions and taboos to ensure good conduct and compliance).

For example, for Yoruba living in different African countries and in some African American and Latin American communities, internal drivers include Iwa: virtue, character, good behavior; Ogbon: wisdom, cleverness or cunning; Imo: knowledge; Oye. The connection can be seen in wisdom sayings such as ‘omo to gbon kii s’iwa hu’ meaning ‘a wise child does not misbehave’. Hence, the wise leader displays iwa, which is virtue and ethical behavior and in so doing, shows imo (knowledge), oye (understanding) and ogbon (wisdom), and attains the status of Omoluwabi when this is done consistently. The term Omoluwabi refers back to the community from which the wise leader springs from and whom the wise leader serves. It also brings honor to the person’s family.

Similarly, for Somali, the concept of family is a notion that revolves around ideas of righteousness and being part of a collective community (Ilmi, 2015). Behavioral standards within a family is connected with honoring one’s family name. The family name’s interaction with society had given rise in many African traditions to epic poems sung in honor of the person’s lineage, known as *oriki* for Yoruba, for example. These poetic compositions were the deepest praise of the person being as they were, lyrical narratives of his or her lineage – it was very important not just to be remembered but to be remembered for good. A good name or a bad name could affect even the marriage prospects of a person. In general, African poetry is musical and tends to be sung, often with “moral or didactic intent” (Dor, 2014, at 20) to inspire the person to upright behavior in and for the community.

The collective or common good of the community is paramount for African societies. Somalians emphasize and value collective responsibility and the imperative to do what is good for the community (Ilmi, 2015). This has been described as communitarianism by Gyekye (2003, at 299), and he describes it as seeing “the human person as an inherently (intrinsically) communal being”. This is echoed by Sarra and Berman describing Ubuntu, the South African humanistic philosophy as “the notion of individuals’ well-being as intertwined with that of others” and as a vision of being human where “personhood is defined in relation to the community” (2017, at 460). Marriage, as the foundation for family, is a community event, involving the elders of the community and garnering communal assistance for setting up a new household (Ilmi, 2015). The community provides for members who set out on a journey and for strangers who pass through on journeys, and settles disputes (Ilmi, 2015). It is within the community that the person finds moral identity

and validation. It is not surprising to find that, the best way to live, for a typical Kenyan, was to dedicate oneself selflessly to the improvement of one's community and to service of one's neighbor (Presbey, 1999).

Table 1: Some faces of indigenous intellectual and reflective wisdom in Africa

Countries	Wisdom concept(s) at the root of ethical behaviour	Common good orientation
Somalia	<i>dhaqan</i> philosophies; communalism	Resources are shared for the collective good. Ilmi, 2015
South Africa	Ubuntu: "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu"- "a person is a person through the humanity of others."	Who one is is connected to others' wellbeing, such that the good of the other(s) is as important as personal good. Moyo, 2016
Nigeria	Iwa; omoluwabi as evidence of practical wisdom and virtue	The virtuous leader exhibits moral excellence and prioritizes the common good, Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011
Ghana	Wisdom and hospitality of the old lady, communitarianism	Welcoming the visitor as a son is wisdom – strangers are simply extended family. Dor, 2014
Kenya	Love for others and generosity are aspects of wisdom	Caring for others as traditional, Presbey, 1999

African behavioral 'codes' are informal and advisory, transmitted as oral tradition (Presbey, 1999; Ilmi, 2015) covering a vast variety of subjects, and expressed as proverbs, admonitions, sayings and quips. These codes shape the way of living as individuals and as a community. Practical wisdom is applied to select the precept applicable in each situation for the individual and also for the common good, often by examining the circumstances.

Aristotelian phronesis and leadership

The Aristotelian leader requires intellectual wisdom to understand and reflect on deep insights and practical wisdom to navigate the realities of life (Moberg, 2007; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011). Both make up phronesis – the virtue of wisdom. The first dimension, a loftier and broader idea of wisdom, ultimately encompasses the second, practical wisdom, in order to characterize a wise leader (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011). Practical wisdom is that dimension of phronesis by which one is able to judge the right thing to do at the right time in the right place and for the right reason (Berti, 2012; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011; Surprenant, 2012). It discerns and assures that the end is right and the means are appropriate (Aristotle, 1934, VI, 12; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011). In summary, phronesis confers on the wise leader the ability to judge morally rightly, grasp the essence of situations and events, communicate effectively, connect others and move them to action, and create other wise leaders (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011). This is clearly a virtue that a leader must have, both for personal development and for the development of the community he or she serves.

According to Surprenant, the possibility of becoming a person that possesses phronesis comes at least in part from the person's education and life within a community; for him, a polis. This person then emerges from the community as a wise leader, the phronimos, who is able to make good laws for the community since he or she understands what is the common good of the community (Faure, 2013; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011). The wise leader must know what is virtue, know how to grow in virtue, and be virtuous (Surprenant, 2012). In this way, the knowledge of the leader can lead to

Common good perspectives in CST

Love for neighbor takes precedence over self-interest, in CST, and is the end of all virtue and wisdom (das Neves and Melé, 2013). Since the purpose of the law is the common good, (Aquinas, 2012, IIa IIae, q. 120), the wise leader is guided by his or her interest in the common good and exhibits practical wisdom by loving his or her neighbor(s) (das Neves and Melé, 2013). Prudence as practical wisdom is additionally reflected in objectivity and fairness and in the judgement to follow the spirit and not the letter of the law when its literary interpretation runs counter to the good intended by the law (Melé, 2005).

Following Aristotle, Aquinas expects the wise man to be virtuous and to work for the common good (das Neves and Melé, 2013). The notion of dignity of the person is connected to and inseparable from considerations of solidarity and the common good (Sison, Ferrero and Guitiá'n, 2016) that cuts across current and future generations to lead to efforts towards ensuring sustainable human development (Rousseau, 2017). The main point of all CST is the emphasis on man as a being that lives in community and must engage with other members of that community in an ethical way (Turner, 2017). In line with this, in order to be truly human, society itself must be organized and developed in a way that tries to achieve the common good (Gruijters, 2016).

Insights into Indigenous Wisdom – Interviewees' Perspectives

The interviewees described the way of life of indigenous societies and the wisdom that guided their leaders. According to Noble (Nigeria, 77 years old), wisdom for native rulership or government is a distinct type of wisdom. The native ruler or leader had to be a custodian of the different types of wisdom – in management of people, discerning in what roles individuals fit, knowing the demands of the people, knowing the directing of the people and what to achieve during the term, knowing how to manage peace within and with the other communities– neighboring villages. Often, the ruler was simply the first settler in a community, who would then apportion land to all newcomers and draw up rules and regulations based on ancient beliefs and traditions – for example, on how to keep the environment clean (especially the waterways), days for communal labor, the importance of being one another's keeper and all protecting the common good, the plan for helping one another in cultivating the farms, days set aside for dispute resolution, and so on (Ajua, 75 years old, Ghana).

Traditionally, life starts from the family to the kindred to the town to what is now called state (Noble). The organizer, leader, or chief was at the head of the community, in most cases chosen by the people based on personal qualities. The leader would decentralize by appointing people to report to him on different aspects. Ability and honesty were prized, as were truthfulness, prudence, and a sense of justice. Ruling well necessarily entailed not converting community goods into personal goods. Hence, it meant leading communal projects to build schools, markets and hospitals. The community always strove to place honest and prudent men who would serve it in charge at every level. Whenever it happened that people who were self-interested got into leadership positions, it would reflect in the kind of people they chose as their representatives, mostly sycophants who would sing their praises regardless of whether or not they acted rightly or for the common good. This type of leaders usually did not achieve much – they diverted goods to their selves and families. Thus, true leadership was properly predicated only of men who prudently ruled for the common good, in contrast to despots who ruled for self-interest.

The typical African example of communal living is described by Kwame, 60 years old, Ghanaian. Life was organized in communities which were in turn made up of extended families – grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, siblings and cousins, etc. and the grandmother as the matriarch prepared and distributed food to all. Housework was also a shared responsibility such that each one played their roles for the common good of everyone. Tasks were rotated so that no one had to do the same thing permanently. Moreover, the education of children was a shared responsibility of all adults in the community. At times, a family would identify responsible and outstanding adults in the extended family, or teachers and pastors, and give them children not theirs biologically (a kind of fostering) for mentoring and coaching. This could happen as early as three years of age, as with Ndiame who is now 52 and grew up with an aunt as one of her children. Neighbors were meant to discipline children for wrong behavior before reporting to the family. Thus, it was the duty of the community, not just the family, to ensure that children grew up to

become responsible adults. Such an atmosphere ensured an orientation to common good, rather than personal good, as a way of life. When a child was old enough to reach beyond the community for further education, apprenticeship, training, or even a job, it was a communal event. The child would go to inform the family and neighbors of the impending departure and they would contribute in cash, kind, advice on ethical behavior, and prayer to the expedition.

Amadi (Nigeria) sees Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart' as a good source for an understanding of traditional wisdom, especially with the character of Okonkwo who was well known for his leadership attributes and ability to get a team to work for the common good. For him, the contrast between the wisdom indigenous to Africa and received Western wisdom is that, traditionally, the leader is in front of the system, pulling the cart, whereas, in the new corporate world, the leader is pushing the cart. One is seen by the world before the other. The leader is assessed and analyzed, in Africa. Conversely, nowadays, the corporation is assessed before asking who is behind it. If people's interests are prioritized above the organization's it causes problems. It could also mean that the organization goes up and down with the individual.

Many traditional Africans are agriculturalists. Yet, being a leader was independent of the size of one's barn (of one's wealth). After all, leaders were required only for war and for community leadership – for the common good. The latter task was typically undertaken by elders who would take collective decisions, to preserve fairness. There was also leadership within the family – people followed the footsteps of their parents. The leadership of a father in his home was important – one's ambition was to be like one's father. Work was with one's father. The family had primacy over personal plans and interests. On the farms, everyone in every family was expected to work hard (Amadi).

The village would come together to share what they had all worked for. Laws were hardly ever challenged – they had been crafted with the common good as their purpose and everyone knew the importance of holding together. These practices were more or less the same all through the South East of Nigeria (Amadi).

Indigenous Wisdom, Aristotelian Thought and CST – Commonalities

Many regard Aristotle's intellectual wisdom as epistemic knowledge that is complemented by phronesis – the right judgement regarding the application of that knowledge to concrete situations (Faure, 2013; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011), while others consider both knowledge and right judgement as dimensions of phronesis. In either case, both are united in the phronimos, the wise leader who is therefore virtuous since the latter is entailed by practical wisdom (das Neves and Melé, 2013). The two concepts are just as distinct and concrete in African indigenous wisdom – the wise man is able to apply practical wisdom to the vast body of knowledge gained from the wisdom of his community that has been passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. The indigenous wisdom practice of fostering children with people already identified as virtuous (wise) leaders also reflects the Aristotelian expectation that phronesis is shown in the ability of the phronimos to pass it on to others.

It also important to note that phronesis entails ethics for all three traditions – Aristotle, CST and African indigenous wisdom. The parallel for Aristotle's epistemic phronesis culminating in virtuous/ethical behavior can be found in the Yoruba terms 'imo' and 'oye' applied with 'ogbon' which give rise to 'iwa' (ethical behavior) and is typical of Omoluwabi, the Phronimos. Perhaps, this is why the orientation to the common good embedded in African indigenous wisdom is shared by Aristotelian thought as well as CST. It is the reason why CST guides humanity towards social justice (Sison, Ferrero and Guitián, 2016), which is also meant to characterise the polis of Aristotle and the community of indigenous African wisdom.

As already discussed, for Aristotle and in CST, the common good has a primary importance. Similarly, concern for the common good is critical in Africa, for example, the concepts of Ubuntu (Kenya), Omoluwabi (Nigeria), and dhakan (Somali) are anti-selfishness and pro-community. Similar other-centric approaches to community building abound in traditional wisdom sayings and

concepts in other African traditions. The notions of inclusion, solidarity, and cooperation in Ubuntu thinking resonate firmly with CST concepts of solidarity, fairness, and common good.

In all three traditions, the law, as formal and or informal codes in indigenous traditions, is enacted for the common good and practical wisdom or phronesis helps the wise leader to discern which precepts apply in a variety of situations. However, while Aristotle did not expect all individuals to have phronesis but rather those involved in governing, both CST and African indigenous wisdom do assume that everyone is capable of it to differing degrees.

Uniqueness of Indigenous Wisdom – Contextual Nuances

The story telling approach helped to foster a type of systems thinking. Virtues are not taught in isolation but embedded in stories that illustrate how the virtue is to be practiced. Thus, intellectual wisdom and practical wisdom are often merged in the telling. Thus, while, for Aristotle, all the knowledge and wisdom in the world cannot assure wise leadership unless the person acquires practical wisdom and becomes phronimos with experience gained over time (...), African indigenous wisdom embeds the acquisition of practical wisdom in itself and can therefore be displayed even by a child who learns from the community's experience rather than rely on personal experience.

Several wisdom stories around the same virtue showing how it is practiced by people in different societal functions emphasize the universality of the virtue while indicating its forms and implications for the person and for the community. The narrative approaches of oral tradition led to whole moral stories being condensed into sayings which then formed the informal codes of ethics and conduct. The person learnt morality from the community and was considered wise to the extent that he or she assimilated the morality taught and was able to apply it with practical wisdom for the common good. A person disconnected from the community would therefore find it more difficult to learn and to apply true wisdom – selfless wisdom even if the person was cunning or clever (Moyo, 2016). Such a person could not become a good leader.

Indigenous wisdom does not foster risk taker behavior, as people feared losing what they had (Amadi). It is not surprising then that much of indigenous practical wisdom urges care and caution. Yet, when they have to act, they do so with courage, again based on practical wisdom applied to the situation at hand, for the common good.

The importance of one's name was paramount (Ilmi, 2015) and sometimes led to a strong desire for male children (Amadi, interviews). The comingling of wisdoms has in some cases led to confusion in identification of which tradition one belongs to, with its consequences – for example a recent trend of people wanting their children to bear their own name reflects a modern tendency, at times subconscious, to cling to the personal over the collective and a growing shift of emphasis to seeking personal achievement over the common good (Amadi, interviews).

While Aristotelian approach emphasizes the role of the leader to ensure virtuous life of self and others in order to achieve individual eudemonia, and the community is instrumental to achieving this, the African indigenous approach is for the leader to aim for collective eudemonia and urge each individual to a virtuous life in order to achieve this collective good. Yet, both traditions agree on the importance of the common good. Eudemonia is not achieved in isolation.

Conclusion

There are opportunities to be explored for deepening common good perspectives in leadership and people management in Africa by going to indigenous wisdom for guidance and inspiration. The concepts are from their origins deeply rooted in love of neighbor and, unfortunately, when people are disconnected from their communities, the hitherto smooth transmission of wisdom through oral tradition is interrupted and, at times, completely broken. Some ethical deficiencies in leadership behavior can be related to such disconnectedness which then tends to accentuate disregard for the common good. Further empirical research to unpack this could yield new and useful insights into how to build good leaders for Africa and beyond Africa.

According to Surprenant (2012, at 236), “when educated and habituated by the laws of a well-ordered polis, an individual’s character is molded in such a way that he associates what is good with what is in the public interest, and not what is in the best interest of a private individual or individuals. Having developed this characteristic, an individual is able to display phronesis when enacting laws for that particular polis, directing the populace towards his understanding of what is best for everyone”. Substituting polis for community, this is an excellent explanation of how African indigenous wisdom is oriented to the common good. That the two traditions can be captured in practically the same words shows their strong likeness in this regard and calls for deeper reflection on African indigenous wisdom to see where its concepts and tenets can help to enrich the understanding of leadership and management in theory and in practice.

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