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Leadership in Colonial Africa: Disruption of Traditional Frameworks and Patterns

Edited by Baba G. Jallow

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There is little doubt that the study of organizational leadership is vastly underdeveloped from non-western, specifically non-American, perspectives. Leadership in Colonial Africa attempts to contribute to this deficiency via an exploration of public leadership throughout various African regions during and as a consequence of the influences of colonialism. Further, Jallow argues that leadership in the African context is urgently in need of careful study because the failure of leadership within Africa explains "Africa's seemingly chronic development crises" (p. viii). This assumption is further developed into a discussion concerning a universal theory of leadership in which it is suggested, "African leadership studies might have a strand or two to contribute to "a leadership DNA" (p. ix). Recognizing these realities and motivations, especially the vast opportunities for African studies to contribute to theories of organizational and public leadership, *Leadership in Colonial Africa* is presented as utilizing the multitude of divergent influences that constitute colonialism over a rather significant timeframe, in some cases several hundred years, as a lens in which to examine characteristics and contours of public leadership in various African contexts.

Generally it is an intriguing work, well written, and should be commended for tackling a much-needed area of study while attempting to incorporate multiple perspectives from a variety of cultural and contextual vantage points. However, it is questionable that this volume contributes directly to the areas identified as significant. Four points warrant discussion.

First, although the book is presented within the framework of organizational leadership scholarship, it might better be conceptualized as an historical exploration. The majority of discussion attends to the deconstruction and explanation of very specific historical events, influences, and realities as it pertains to each author's respective area or person(s) of interest. This may well be the most significant contribution of the work. Such contributions should not be minimalized as historical depictions should influence and inform continuous exploration of organizational leadership in various contexts throughout Africa. Be that as it may, tackling decades or centuries worth of a region's history is a monumental task which warrants significant nuancing concerning what is and is not included within scholarly analysis. As it pertains to the work under review, the quality in which such nuancing and care occurs varies.

Second, the width and breadth of several hundred years of history throughout a geographic area as large and diverse as Africa represents an immense undertaking. Whole volumes are devoted to a specific area of interest within the timeframe of one African people group's experience of colonialism. This edited volume attempts to examine the general contours of African leadership and organizational realities – most notably represented as people groups or movements (Chapter 1), specific contexts as varied as Gambia (Chapter 2), Nigeria (Chapter 3), Guinea-Bissau (Chapter 4), Zimbabwe (Chapter 5), South Africa (Chapters 6 and 7), as well as the intellectual influence of a prominent African throughout various African regions (Chapter 8). Further, this impressive scope spans the beginnings of the nineteenth century to the close of the twentieth century and often includes references and allusions to influences far wider and more complex than the region or context identified. Further still, attention to a variety of local, regional, and international relationships are mentioned or examined with varying degrees of care; not least, specific identification and commentary concerning the effects of British, Portuguese, Belgian, and French colonialization. Even more, the effects, influences, and actions from nations such as Russia, China, America, and others are introduced – with varying degrees of attentiveness – by the authors. All of which identifies the impressive and – arguably – overenthusiastic width and breadth of *Leadership in Colonial Africa*.

Third, several areas of analysis are generally minimally explored or briefly mentioned without sufficient attention to nuance and complexity. Of these, brief mention must be made concerning values and the effects of religion upon the relationships, decision making, and events that transpired throughout Africa before, during, and after colonialism. For example, British colonialism emphasized the three Cs (commerce, civilization, and Christianity), which was intended to “help” Africans evolve. These ideas, the practices that ensued, and the relationships that resulted instigated many – but certainly not all – of the dynamics inherent to the European colonialization of Africa. These influences were substantial, often manifested explicitly and implicitly in the clashes between competing values, religious beliefs, and worldviews and continue to influence and shape various elements of African thought, life, leadership, and socio-cultural realities (Stanley, 1990). Unfortunately, mention of values, cultural or ideological, as well as interactions with religions have largely been neglected.

Finally, the subtitle of the work – Disruption of Traditional Frameworks and Patterns – suggests or, at the very least, implies significant interaction with the ways in which leadership changed as a result of the influences of colonialism. In the midst of the plethora of internal, regional, and international influences and the diversity of events that influenced contexts, peoples, and cultures dissimilarly, a review must question whether the volume attends to its identified focus of demonstrating disruption of organizational leadership as a consequence of colonialization. To be clear, there is little doubt that colonialism did in fact do so – as many scholars have well demonstrated (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991, 1997), but *Leadership in Colonial Africa* does not appear to focus upon nor clearly explicate the ways in which colonialization disrupted leadership in Africa.

Nevertheless, despite these issues, the work itself is a worthwhile and potentially useful contribution to the study of organizational leadership and – more specifically – public leadership for various contexts throughout Africa. Each chapter offers a unique vantage point that fills in and – in many cases – fosters a broader understanding of history as it pertains to a specific region or person by examining a particular area within the study of public leadership, whether that be situational leadership, diplomacy, the importance of cultural knowledge, etc., within the context of colonialism. The book as a whole should prove a useful and insightful resource that will likely serve as a valuable reference for future studies of organizational leadership, African leadership, public leadership, and colonialism. Because of the aforementioned issues, the specificity of the content, and the expense to purchase the book, *Leadership in Colonial Africa* will likely be limited to a narrow academic audience. In summary, while this work fails to address the areas it identifies as significant – namely, that African perspectives of leadership may contribute to the larger study of organizational leadership and the ways in which colonialism disrupted leadership in Africa – it succeeds in providing a useful and potentially important resource for future studies of African leadership via multiple analyses of historic people, events, and their influences within the context of colonialization.

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