



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 5 · THURSDAY 2 JULY 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 5

WHOSE POINT OF VIEW?

Every voice defining leadership came from one part of the academy.
A guest scholar asks what the theory would look like written from here.

SESSION 5 · THURSDAY 2 JULY 2020

Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 5 — the series' first guest episode, and its first sustained disagreement.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Whose Point Of View?

A guest scholar noticed that every voice defining leadership came from one part of the academy, and wrote a paper asking what the theory would look like written from somewhere else. The Professor agrees — and then makes a harder claim of his own.

The first guest episode of the series. A scholar of leadership and critical management studies joins for the full hour to discuss her paper on leadership in Africa and rethinking development. The moderator chairs; she and Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi speak roughly equally, and correct each other twice. **Her founding question is deceptively simple: if leadership theory is not written from her point of view, then whose point of view is it written from? His answer runs in the same direction and then further — that recognition follows power, and that if forced to choose, he would take development over democracy.**

This week's guest is a doctor of leadership and critical management studies, whose paper grew out of a doctoral thesis completed in 2012 and who teaches in the United Kingdom. Her name is rendered at least eight different ways by the automatic transcript and none is reliable, so it has deliberately been left out of this issue rather than guessed at. It must be supplied and checked before circulation — roughly half the substance of the evening is hers.

An archive edition, recorded 2 July 2020 — days after Russia's constitutional vote extending presidential terms, and in the fourth month of the Covid-19 emergency. Events, offices and figures are described as they stood that week.

01 · THE QUESTION THAT PRODUCED A PAPER

The guest explains where the work began. As a young scholar interested in the theories of leadership, she was perplexed that all the voices defining the subject came from one part of the

academy — the Western one. She is, she notes, a product of the business school, and the business school is framed by Western perspectives. As a critical leadership scholar that framing was not something she could leave alone.

Her question is the title of the evening. If the phenomenon is not being seen from her point of view, whose point of view is it being seen from? And the consequence she draws is a warning against premature universality: there are a multiplicity of perspectives, and she does not accept that leadership has been examined from enough of them to justify standardising what its practice should be.

The Professor receives this as vindication and as regret. He was foreign minister of a developing country, caught between blocs that each interpreted the world in their own terms, and he could never get an African perspective across. He was in office when Thatcher was in Downing Street and Reagan in the White House — and adds, in an aside that lands differently now, that Trump did not invent America First. Had her paper existed then, he says, he would gladly have sent it to both capitals; he lacked the intellectual basis for what he was trying to do.

“If we did not see it from my point of view, then whose point of view are we looking at this social phenomenon called leadership from?”

— The evening's guest scholar

02 · RESPECT FOLLOWS CAPABILITY, NOT ARGUMENT

The Professor then supplies the mechanism he thinks explains the whole pattern. He was a postgraduate in the United States when China was still dismissed, and remembers the adjectives used. Then China tested an atomic weapon, and Washington sat up — and so, he is sure, did Downing Street. The same happened with India and Pakistan: third-world countries of little consequence, until they became nuclear powers, at which point their perspectives became worth hearing.

It is the argument he returns to across the series in different forms. Recognition is not conferred by the merit of a case. It follows capability, and it follows power — which is why he treats the question of whose theory prevails as a question about who is strong enough to have a theory.

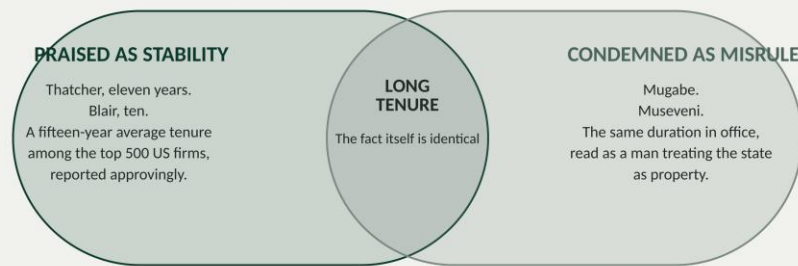
03 · UBUNTU, AND WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE AS AN INSTITUTION

Asked whether there is an African account of leadership fit to export, the guest says scholars have already begun, and takes Ubuntu as the example: I am because we are. She traces it across the sub-continent under different names — an Igbo expression for looking out for a brother or sister; in Shona and Zulu, the right hand washes the left; the southern African word built on the root for people. The English proverbs that carry the same idea are familiar enough — you scratch my back, it takes a village to raise a child.

Her strongest illustration is institutional rather than proverbial. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, she argues, was built on Ubuntu, and it is the reason South Africa did not burn after apartheid — a body driven by reconciliation, reciprocity and sensitivity rather than by prosecution.

The same fact, two verdicts

Long tenure, as the evening's guest put it — praised in one hemisphere, condemned in the other



"It is hypocrisy really for the West to turn around and say the same thing is wrong in their own context."

SESSION 5 • WHOSE POINT OF VIEW?

Figures and names as cited on this broadcast

The argument the guest and the Professor build together: the same fact, read two ways depending on where it occurs.

04 • "ISN'T THAT THE ROOT OF CORRUPTION?"

The moderator puts the obvious objection, and puts it bluntly: if a man's father or mother can intervene and have the rules overlooked for him, is communal obligation not simply nepotism with a philosophy attached?

The guest answers historically. For colonialism to proceed, indigenous systems had to be made to seem inferior, and the connectivity Ubuntu depends on was among the first things to go. The Professor answers structurally, and concedes the moderator's point on the way. No concept lacks a negative side — socialism has one, and capitalism, he argues, imported corruption into the African system. But every value system also carries punishment: there were judicial councils of elders imposing penalties for infractions long before the British arrived. The remedy for the abuse is a punishment system that punishes rather than rewards it.

He then turns the same instrument against itself. Ubuntu can also produce the big man who knows everything and overrides everyone. Tanzania under Nyerere is his counter-example — a one-value rather than one-individual system, whose party structure limited the president's term and rotated the office between the mainland and Zanzibar.

"There is no concept that does not have both a negative and a positive side. No concept."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • GOVERNANCE WAS ALREADY DEVOLVED

Asked whether leadership can exist without centring on one individual, the guest answers that it already did. There was a paramount ruler, and there was a council of elders that took decisions. There were age grades, women, youths who were mostly warriors. Business was done in the village square where the voices of young and old, least and great, were heard. In parts of Cameroon, East and Central Africa a ruler who became a problem faced a ceremony in which the community decided whether to replace him.

This is the structure, she argues, that the colonists found and exploited — dividing where it was strong, installing warrant chiefs where it was weak. Her account of when dictatorship arrived places it after independence, with nationalist saviours who won freedom and quickly became rulers on the logic that they had come to save.

The Professor accepts almost all of it and corrects the timing, which is the evening's sharpest exchange. Dictatorship was not introduced by the independence generation. It was introduced by the colonial administration, which destroyed the devolved system and replaced it with a governor in the capital and district officers who consulted nobody and simply passed down instructions from London or Paris. That went on until the eve of independence — so there was no moment at which emerging African leaders were exposed to the democratic values of the past. On independence day they walked into the governor's office and inherited one-man rule already built.

“Dictatorship is what was inbred into us during the colonial period. That is probably why it was easy for the savior generation to simply walk into the colonial governor's office and assume the powers of one-man rule.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • LONG TENURE, AND WHO GETS CONDEMNED FOR IT

The conversation turns to how long leaders stay. The moderator cites a Harvard Business Review study of the top 500 US companies by market capitalisation finding an average chief-executive tenure of about fifteen years — the longer the better, on that reading, for the company's performance. Does the model transfer?

The guest's reply is the argument the evening is remembered for. If that is the case, why is Mugabe a problem, and why is Museveni? Where are these criticisms coming from? Thatcher was in office eleven years and Blair ten. The leadership a country requires is determined by the issues facing that country, and it is hypocrisy to sanction long tenure in one context and celebrate it in another.

The Professor supplies the strategic reading underneath the hypocrisy. He was peripherally involved at Lancaster House, and recalls that the British government promised funds so that Zimbabwe could buy land back from white farmers rather than seize it — land, he notes, taken originally without compensation. The money did not come. Mugabe waited nearly twenty years before acting, and when he did, the response was, on the Professor's account, a determination to demystify him — because the land question could not be allowed to spread to South Africa. He extends this to a criticism of Mandela that he flags as likely to offend: that Mandela was more concerned to reassure the white establishment than to secure economic returns for black South Africans, and that the instability and xenophobia later presidents have faced grew from that.

“It is hypocrisy really for the West to turn around and say the same thing is wrong in their own context.”

— The evening's guest scholar

07 • DEVELOPMENT OR DEMOCRACY

Pressed on whether development must come at the expense of democracy, the Professor asks to be categorical, and is. Given both, he takes both. Given a choice between democracy and development, he takes development. Given democracy accompanied by retrogression, he would rather have the development and talk about democracy after the country has become a developed society with the respect that follows.

He arrives there partly by observing his own moment. He had thought the case for a strong hand was peculiar to developing countries. The streak of authoritarianism shown by practically every prime minister and president in fighting Covid-19 has modified that view: rights have been removed across Europe and the United States under the banner of the emergency, and what a country needs turns out to depend on what it is facing.

The claim is offered as a choice under constraint rather than as a preference for autocracy, and it is the most contestable thing said all evening. It goes into this issue as he made it.

“If you give me a choice between democracy and development, I will pick development. If it is democracy and retrogression, then you can keep democracy.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 · DECOLONISING THE CURRICULUM, AND THE MIND

Asked how she protected her identity inside a Western education, the guest goes back to a school textbook: she was taught that Mungo Park discovered the mouth of the Niger, and wondered as a girl about the people who had been washing their clothes in it. From there she sets out the sequence as she understands it — that a people must first be made to seem less than equal, then made complicit in that judgement, then declared in need of civilising, which is where the colonial project began and where it connects to slavery and the commodification of the African body.

The Professor's generation had it harder, and he says so plainly. They were punished for speaking their own languages, which were called vernacular. The literature was Chaucer, Keats and Shakespeare; Achebe had not yet written, and when he did his books were not treated as literature — and in any case the teachers were British. The professors who taught them knew that Mungo Park discovered the Niger and never thought to ask who had led him there.

Both are more hopeful about the present than about the past. She is an activist for decolonising the curriculum and reports the pedagogy genuinely changing, with the British or American way no longer presented as the standardised way. He notes that where there was once no African professor at Oxford or the LSE, there are now several — and that students sent abroad at great family sacrifice are not being lost to the Western system but are helping to build a global one they are part of.

Her closing charge is the line the episode ends on, and she offers it as work for a generation rather than a conclusion.

“If you don't know who you are, how can you know where you are going?”

— The evening's guest scholar

THREADS TO PULL

- If leadership theory has not been examined from enough perspectives to justify standardising practice, what would a genuinely provisional management education look like — and would any business school sell it?
- The Professor says dictatorship was inherited from the colonial administration rather than invented after independence. Sixty years on, at what point does that explanation stop doing useful work?
- Ubuntu produced the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and, on his account, can also produce the big man. What institutional design keeps the first without licensing the second?
- Fifteen-year chief executives are praised and long-serving presidents condemned. Is the difference that shareholders can sell and citizens cannot — or is that too generous to the distinction?
- "I would take development over democracy." Which developing states have actually been offered that choice, rather than ending with neither?

Watch Session 5 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

More analysis: tmeinsights.com · profbolajiakinyemi.com

THE GUEST IS UNNAMED IN THIS ISSUE BY DESIGN. The automatic transcript of this 2020 broadcast renders her name at least eight different ways and none is reliable; rather than print a guess about a named academic, the name has been left blank throughout and must be supplied before circulation. Around half the substance of the evening is hers and she is quoted here at length. Quotations have been cleaned for readability — punctuation and obvious mis-transcriptions only, never sense — with the raw forms listed in the transcript header. The characterisation of Nelson Mandela's priorities, the account of the Lancaster House land-reform promise and its breach, and the reading of Western motives towards Mugabe are the Professor's own and are flagged as such. The Harvard Business Review finding is as the moderator cited it and has not been independently verified.

thruMYeyes with Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi · Produced by Syncterface Media