3 *Leadership and identity in precolonial African contexts: A retrospective account*

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Overview

This chapter examines the leadership practices of precolonial African societies. Multidisciplinary scholarly accounts of leadership were examined using the social identity markers of precolonial societal and community organisation, ethnicity, gender, and social stratification. The emerging picture is one of traditional African rulerships that vary across social identity markers mediated through traditional polities or forms of social relations. What became evident was the diversity of complex, context-bounded forms of leadership and leadership practices. In precolonial societies, leaders and their followers had the opportunity to engage each other in leadership actions or processes, depending on whether the communal contexts they operated within enabled or constrained either authoritative leadership or democratic co-participation in the leadership processes. The sociopolitical complexities from which leaders and their followers operated created contexts for leadership outcomes ranging from the ethical to the unethical, and from the socially just to the unjust.

Introduction

The discourse on precolonial Africa has at times assumed a monolithic tone, despite the continent having been home to a socially and culturally diverse populace both before and during the colonial eras. In this context, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008, pp. 375–376) argues that leadership and governance of precolonial Africa were driven by a set of superdiverse contexts comprising 'a complex mixture of communalism, clan and family intimacies, and kinship, co-existing uneasily and tendentiously with domination, militarism, patriarchy and aristocratic tendencies'. It would be unrealistic to try to pin down leadership and leadership practices across the diverse sociohistorical precolonial African experience to a common generalised notion of 'precolonial African leadership'. The confluence of sociohistorical complexities and their different and unequal precolonial African contexts yields an uneasy mix of different leadership types and practices.

While the emergence of precolonial African leadership is entangled in continental sociohistorical complexities, historical evidence provides pointers

to some of its causes. Monroe (2013) postulates that some of the drivers of the formation of precolonial African societal divisions or complexities (for example states, kingdoms, or empires) comprised the following two factors: first, the role of indigenous political entrepreneurs in driving state formation; and second, the diverse modes of power that shaped the political contours of precolonial centralisation. The notion of centralisation, or sociopolitical centralisation, refers to processes through which political systems, or specialised political institutions that were rooted in kin-based power, emerged as adaptive responses to socially complex indigenous socioenvironmental stressors. These resulted in the formation of precolonial centralised bureaucratic states (Monroe, 2013). Montuori and Donnelly (2018) refer to these social changes as emerging from process-orientated transformative moments or moments of reinvention. De Maret (2012, p. 316) suggests that centralisation did not follow single one-way paths or trajectories leading to social complexity conditions, but rather an 'array of political creativity on the many pathways to [sociopolitical] complexity… and return from it!' Such assortment of political activity could be credited for the precolonial sociopolitical complexities produced, and the attendant forms of leadership with their array of complex practices. Further, De Maret (2012, p. 315) posits that some individuals assumed leadership by attaining power and becoming 'the "big men" of their community, and eventually the king' (see also Huffman, 2000). At the core of such leadership were ritual power and networks – in other words, having a large following (De Maret, 2012; Heywood, 1998). Mtaka and Matshiqi (2021) suggest that leaders should have a leadership 'calling' to service, which would be a spiritual or ancestral calling. Such leadership types and practices gravitated towards people-centric leadership styles, as aptly captured by Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2008, p. 375) use of the Ndebele proverb '*inkosi yinkosi ngabantu* (a king is king because of the people)'.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine retrospectively and grapple with issues of leadership and leadership practices in precolonial Africa. It is an attempt to look back through time to ascertain the leadership types and practices, both ethical and unethical, that existed then and lessons that can be derived from them (Slater, 2019). In this context, 'leadership' functions as a noun denoting the man or woman who assumes or assumed a position of influence over their society or community, whereas 'leadership practices' refers to a process or processes through which leadership is actioned or enacted (Weiner, 2003). Precolonial African societies and communities, through their traditional organisations, facilitated the emergence of the leader, leadership, and the construction of leadership practices, even though some leadership scholars have expressed caution on leadership based on the persona (for example, Montuori & Donnelly, 2018; Shields, 2010). However, human beings are fundamentally

endowed with the capacity to be creative (Montuori & Donnelly, 2018) and, by extension, to create or to be a leader. Nye (cited in Montuori & Donnelly, 2018) posits that leadership can be learned, implying that any person can learn to become a leader and to assume either the leadership or followership position, with the act of leading being exercised at either level. This denotes a dialectical, as opposed to a hierarchical, relationship between the leaders and the led, which conjures a democratic notion of leadership – leaders being led and conversely the led being leaders (Weiner, 2003). Further, Mtaka and Matshiqi (2021) posit that as leaders are called into service to lead their communities or societies, their followers too should be 'called' to lead as supporters. In the precolonial African context, whether such leadership or leadership acts had ethical and social justice intentions in mind depended on precolonial sociopolitical complexities and their inherent contradictions.

Surveying the literature

The literature sourced for this chapter comprised journal articles in the main, with a few book chapters. Articles were obtained using the EBSCOhost and JSTOR databases, and Google Scholar. Literature searches were conducted using the following keyword combinations: precolonial African leadership, precolonial Anglophone African leadership, precolonial francophone African leadership, precolonial Lusophone African leadership, and precolonial (Eastern/Western/Southern) Africa/African leadership. The results of the literature searches comprised multidisciplinary (for example anthropology, archaeology, history, sociology, etc.) reference materials. The following three limitations were encountered. First, only the English literature was consulted, with French and Portuguese being excluded; second, the literature consulted was neither extensive nor broad enough to match the immense and diverse sociopolitical nature of precolonial Africa; and third, many of the scholars whose materials were used wrote from outside the African continent, and their viewpoints portrayed a Global North orientation. Nevertheless, it is the author's contention that the literature referred to and how it was engaged with shed some light on precolonial African leadership and leadership practices, and their current relevance for transformative leadership as described by Swartz (Chapter 1, this volume).

The chapter is organised into subsections that offer an overview of the influences the various social markers had on precolonial African leadership and leadership practices across a plethora of polity complexities. The subsections are as follows: leadership and societal and community organisation, leadership and ethnicity, leadership and gender, and leadership and social stratification.

Leadership and societal and community organisation

Many scholars of precolonial African leadership and the associated societal and community organisation have adopted the Global North (or Metropolitan) conception of statehood in analysing the nature and types of leadership and governance forms at play (Connell, 2007). In rationalising this approach, it could be argued that it gives the best prospect for re-imagining precolonial leadership and leadership practices as they were prior to the colonisation experience meted out to Africa by Europeans. However, Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2008) criticism of this statehood thesis – of trying to simplify a diverse and extremely complex precolonial African context – looms large.

The statehood conception of precolonial Africa postulates that African indigenous societies and communities were settled in organisational forms that demonstrated both centralised and decentralised social organisation dominated by ethnic affiliation or society membership (for example, see Bandyopadhyay & Green, 2016; Bradley, 2005; Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015; Monroe, 2013). Leadership and governance in these binary societal or community arrangements were mediated through the agency of ethnic leaders (for example kings, queens, chiefs) or any other forms of local social ethnic collectivism that held sway. According to Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940, cited in Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015) and Bradley (2005), the binary societal organisation ensured that there was a balance between centralised and decentralised power (and leadership practices) to prevent the abuse of authority by any one person. In a central authority, the administrative machinery and judicial institutions characteristically constituted a high level of centralised leadership and governance, where there were correspondences between wealth, privilege, and status on the one hand, and the distribution of power and leadership authority on the other (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015). Examples of centralised leadership and governance systems can be discerned from the precolonial customary rulership of the Zulu, the Ngwato, the Bemba, the Banyankole, and the Kede. Furthermore, in addition to being centralised, such precolonial states were also hierarchical, with concentric levels of leadership and governance (at national, regional, state, and local levels). This is aptly exemplified by Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2008) description of the precolonial Ndebele state in Zimbabwe. Societal control in centralised forms of governance was vested in traditional leadership (for example kings, queens, or chiefs) but this leadership worked with other levels of society in a communitarian system of governance. On the other hand, there was a group of societies or communities that lacked centralised government, which Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940, cited in Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015) referred to as the stateless societies. Such societies exhibited no sharp divisions of rank, status, or wealth, and their decentralisation was characterised by the diffusion of leadership and power. Examples include the Logoli, the Tallensi, and the Nuer

(Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015). Another example is the precolonial Igbo society of Nigeria, which could be considered to represent a stateless populace led by horizontal ethnic-specific community structures (Amadi, 1991).

Potholm (1979, cited in Bradley, 2005) posits that precolonial Africa had two types of centralised democratic political systems – the pyramidal and the associational monarchy systems. The pyramidal monarchy system was characterised by a central leadership authority in control of a central government or monarchy. While the monarch was at the helm, they did not exert absolute control, but worked with a royal council made up of clans or clan families (Bradley, 2005). The power of the king or queen was balanced by the council. So on the one hand, while a monarch could declare war, a royal council determined such things as the selection of the leader's successor from the royal family. In this way, while decisions were taken together at times and separately at other times, there was a balance of power. The associational monarchy, like the pyramidal version, maintained a federalist system in which non-royal clans and other ethnic groups had a degree of autonomy from the central authority (Potholm, 1979, cited in Bradley, 2005). The associational monarchy performed a mediating or liaising function between the villages and the central authorities. For example, they were responsible for collection of taxes and the promotion of good behaviour (Amadi, 1991).

Unlike Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's (1940, cited in Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015) and Bradley's (2005) binary characterisation of precolonial African societies, Murdock (1967, cited in Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015) employs a proxy of political centralisation that describes the number of political jurisdictions above the local (usually village) level for each ethnic group using a continuum perspective. Using as a construct the degree of the distribution of political centralisation of ethnic societies under ethnic leadership and control, he devises a continuum of what might be considered to be precolonial African state and non-state communities. On the one end of the continuum, the dominant ethnic groups of the major precolonial African communities, evincing greater centralisation, could constitute states. The opposite end of the continuum comprises less centralised ethnic community formations which are termed 'stateless' (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015, p. 53). Murdock's (1967, cited in Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015) examples of centralised precolonial African states include the ethnic societies of different continental regions, such as the East African kingdoms of the Ankale, the Banyoro, and the Buganda; the empires of the Zulus and the Swazis in southern Africa; and in western Africa, the Yoruba in Nigeria and the Songhai in Mali. These forms of governments and polities of the centralised states were under traditional rulership. Societies classified as stateless are those identified as acephalous (without leaders or hierarchies) societies, exhibiting low to non-existent political centralisation, as

explicated by Murdock's (1967, cited in Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015) jurisdictional hierarchy thesis. According to Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2015), the Ashanti of Ghana, the Kuba in Congo, the Bemba in Zambia, and the Egba in Nigeria, all had some intermediate level of political centralisation. However, the Amba, the Konkomba, the Tiv, the Dinka, and the Lugbara were considered to have the lowest (to non-existent) level of political centralisation. Societies evincing the intermediate or lowest forms of political centralisation were each under some form of customary rulership.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008, p. 378), though critical of Metropolitan scholars such as Fortes and Evans-Pritchard for offering 'single-despot model[s]' not confirmed by the realities on the African ground, concedes that their work does offer a glimpse into the hierarchically organised leadership and governance system of the precolonial Ndebele kingdom in Zimbabwe. The king provided a link between himself and the ancestors and then God (Huffman, 2000), which is in accordance with Mtaka and Matshiqi's (2021) assertion of (African) leadership as having a spiritual or ancestral calling component. The Ndebele system of leadership and governance, though hierarchical, is said to have provided for democratic participation at various levels, where matters were discussed and debated before decisions were taken. However, what is instructive is Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2008, p. 378) cautionary note on the diverse, varied, and context-bound nature of leadership and leadership processes in precolonial Africa:

> Each precolonial society had a unique set of rules, laws and traditions suitable for particular contexts…there were also diverse systems of governance [and leadership] suitable for different socio-economic and political exigencies and realities.

From Ndlovu-Gatsheni's argument, it follows that the diverse and varied nature of Africa's precolonial past gave rise to varied and diverse forms of social and community organisation and attendant leadership types and practices.

Leadership and ethnicity

Although ethnicity is considered to be one of the social markers in precolonial African societies and communities, its role in shaping leadership types and practices tended to differ from one sociopolitical grouping to another. Green (2010, p. 3) considers ethnicity to be made up of the attributes of 'common descent, a unique name, a common history, a common territory/homeland, a common culture, and a sense of solidarity [and] language'. Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2012; 2015) regard ethnicity as the most pronounced social and identity marker of precolonial African statehood. It defined social group membership across most precolonial African societies and communities. These authors posit that ethnic identification was spurred by, among other factors,

the highly pronounced cultural and linguistic differences of the continental populace, punctuated with income differentials (or inequalities) between the ethnic groups. However, Lentz (2000) argues that ethnicity, as a social descriptor, is an ideological construct of the northern hemisphere imposed on the African context. This assertion is disputed by Green (2010), who argues that the Baganda of Uganda existed as an ethnic entity even before British annexation in the 19th century. This is supported by various researchers who note the phenomenon of ethnic affiliation and its prevalence across different parts of precolonial Africa (Atkinson, 1989; Ball, 2000; Bandyopadhyay & Green, 2016; Green, 2010).

According to Green (2010) and Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2015), people in centralised states belonged to the same ethnic group, and identified with and swore allegiance to their traditional leadership. Traditional leaders in this context played the crucial role of allocating land rights to their subjects under customary law and resolving disputes within their communities through the traditional court system. These ethnic authorities and leaders are said to have been popular with their communities and peers, and 'exercised considerable de jure and de facto authority in many aspects of local economic, political, and social life' (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015, p. 63). The Buganda precolonial kingdom of Uganda studied by Green (2010) exemplified a centralised precolonial polity, whereas the precolonial Igbo community of Nigeria that Amadi (1991) reports on displayed a tendency toward decentralised leadership. However, the heterogenous and complex nature of precolonial African states makes generalisation from one polity to the other impossible, as cautioned by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008). In a similar fashion, how individual or group ethnic affiliation played itself out in leadership and leadership processes varied from one precolonial African society to another. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008, p. 392) observes that the precolonial Ndebele rulership was not ethnically rigid, as its citizenry was allowed to associate freely without social barriers:

> The reality is that people continuously moved across these [ethnic] categories as they negotiated new alliances, usually by marriage, merit and loan of cattle. [For example,]…a respectable Hole was able to move closer to the Ndebele chiefs and could become richer than a relative of a chief who had fallen out of favour.

The Ndebele ethnic identity was relaxed to accommodate persons from other social groups, and these individuals could rise to important community leadership positions, such as becoming chiefs. Also, captured slaves were put on probation before they were assimilated into society. But the same could not be said of the precolonial centralised Buganda kingdom of Uganda, which had heightened ethnicity leanings.

Bandyopadhyay and Green (2016) posit that in precolonial Uganda, ethnic group identities were held together through the kingship system, where centralised

polities existed side by side with non-centralised communities. They further assert the variable nature of precolonial ethnic centralisation within the Ugandan borders, where different kingdoms were found, each banded together by ethnic identity (for example, the kingdoms of the Ankole, Buganda, Bunyoro, Busoga, and Toro in the south and west of the country). These kingdoms existed together with the non-centralised communities of the Acholi, Itesot, Karamojong, and Langi in the north and east. Ethnic affiliation tended to be stronger at the centre, while displaying a waning identity towards the periphery.

Unlike the reported flexible approaches to ethnic identity, belonging, and leadership shown by the precolonial Ndebele (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008), the clan-powered Buganda kingdom, under a *kabaka* or king, demonstrated a strong attachment to their ethnic identities, displayed through a common culture, common territory or homeland, and a sense of solidarity and language. They are said to have defended ethnicity through violent means (Green, 2010). The rigid adherence to the Bagandan ethnic traits meant that people who did not have traceable Bagandan lineages could not be assimilated into the clans. At worst, captured slaves or their descendants could neither own property nor assume chieftainship, and if they died, their mortal remains were subjected to the undignified treatment of being thrown into the forest (Green, 2010).

Attachment to ethnic affiliation in the precolonial African polity appeared to have followed the diverse contexts within which centralised statehood and fractionalised or acephalous stateless polities were formed. Under these varying conditions of precolonial statehood versus statelessness, ethnicity exerted differentiated effects on leadership forms and practices. The precolonial Ndebele kingdom of Zimbabwe and the precolonial Buganda kingdom of Uganda represent two contrasting cases of the effects of ethnicity on polity membership, leadership, and leadership practices. Precolonial Ndebele centralisation tended to lean towards an expanded and tolerant notion of ethnic affiliation and belonging. This paved the way for a leadership that tolerated ethnic differences and was inclined to accommodate 'outsiders' (for example slaves) through a process of assimilation. On the contrary, the precolonial Bagandan polity was conservative and intolerant of ethnic difference. To this polity, true ethnicity ran in the blood and was to be demonstrated through one's lineage. However, the sociopolitical complexities associated with either rulership could have predisposed their societies and communities to mixed ethical and unethical, as well as mixed socially just and unjust, leadership processes and outcomes.

Leadership and gender

A binary construction of male versus female gender division is prevalent in scholarship on gender relations in precolonial African societies, which were

characterised by unequal gender roles, where men dominated women. This pattern of patriarchal domination is extended to issues of leadership, leadership roles, and leadership practices (see, for example, Allman, Geiger, & Musisi, 2002, cited in Day, 2007; Amadi, 1991; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008). However, there exists a scholarly strand that contests the patriarchal domination interpretation of gender relations in precolonial African polities as a conception of issues from the Global North and a misportrayal of African contexts (for example, Amadi, 1991; Day, 2007; Maphalala, 1985, cited in Hanretta, 1998). While the latter scholarship agrees with the binary gender construct, it argues for a portrayal of women as partners to men through the 'separate but complementary male and female spheres of responsibility' (Day, 2007, p. 436). However, Hanretta (1998, p. 390) has construed the spheres of complementary responsibility (SCR) paradigm as a 'benign patriarchy model of pre-colonial gender relations'. Further, the SCR thesis has been used to argue for a gender inclusivity view, among other things, on matters of leadership and leadership practices in precolonial Africa, without disrupting entrenched patriarchal tendencies and the binary conception of gender. The SCR paradigm suggests that male and female genders are equal but different when it comes to the roles and responsibilities expected of them. This paradigm has been used to ideologically rationalise the partitioning of roles and responsibilities for men and women leaders and their followers. Further, it could be construed as one way of blending each gender's uniqueness into collective societal, community, or organisational action (Bennis, 1986). Oluwagbemi-Jacob and Uduma (2015, p. 225) posit that traditional Igbo culture follows the complementary gender rewarding system, which accords esteemed status to both masculine and feminine genders, contrary to the binary and status differentials conception of gender held by Western scholars:

> If a woman gives birth to male children only, she is celebrated for enlarging the population of the community at the village level, but if she gives birth to female children only, she is celebrated for enlarging the community at the family level.

Further, these authors emphasise that the Igbo traditional culture did not discriminate between the sexes in terms of symbols of wealth:

> Male roles were open to certain categories of women through such practices as 'male daughters' and 'female husbands.' These institutions placed women in a more favorable position for the acquisition of wealth and formal political power and authority.
> (Oluwagbemi-Jacob & Uduma, 2015, p. 229)

Given the above, the question then becomes how the SCR thesis accounts for the association of leadership, followership, and their related practices to the femaleness or maleness of members of society or community in some precolonial African contexts. Day (2007), arguing from an SCR paradigm,

describes the leadership of a female ruler (or queen), Nyarroh of the Bandasuma people in the Mende region of what is now known as Sierra Leone. Chief Nyarroh had ascended the throne and assumed the Bandasuma chieftainship following the death of her husband (Day, 2007), and her reign as the principal ruler commenced before and extended to the cusp of British colonial occupation of Sierra Leone. Chief Nyarroh's leadership prowess is evident in reports of her as both a skilful negotiator and an instigator of wars. In fighting wars, she reportedly did not personally carry spears and guns but relied on 'war boys who led raids on her behalf or defended her town against attack, and who could be lent or hired out to fight for her allies' (Day, 2007, p. 427). In addition, Chief Nyarroh's mediation skills were underscored by the fact that 'Bandasuma often served as a centre for negotiations between rival factions in the dispute in the neighbourhood regions' (Day, 2007, p. 429). Her negotiation skills are said to have been best demonstrated in the early years of British colonial occupation, when she acted as a mediator between the colonial occupiers and the local people, even in areas outside of Bandasuma territory. Thus, Chief Nyarroh's display of agency in her leadership practices negates and delegitimises the prescriptive gender role paradigm and simultaneously affirms the SCR thesis. She could be said to have demonstrated exceptional leadership skills and roles similar to, if not better than, those demonstrated by her male peers.

Another account of the industriousness of women in a precolonial African context is that of the Yorubaland women, in what is now Nigeria, described by Denzer (1994). According to Denzer (1994), the Yoruba women were not only highly industrious, but their social activism and leadership stretched to the economic, social, and political affairs of their societies. They were considered to have played crucial roles in the precolonial Yoruba economy. Their business acumen saw them being involved in businesses at different levels in their communities and town markets, for instance as hawkers, selling food; as plantation owners, producing a variety of goods (for example making pottery, dyeing cloth, processing palm and nut oils, making soap); as successful merchants, selling or trading in a variety of goods; and as employers of freeborn and slave labour (male and female). They also engaged in business transactions across the length and breadth of Yorubaland and beyond, trading goods (such as foodstuffs, kola nuts, palm oil, cloth, arms and ammunition) from place to place in long-distance caravans. Yoruba women are said to have translated their economic and social roles into political power and influence. As a result, precolonial Yoruba traditions referred to strong women who founded or ruled kingdoms. Every Yoruba kingdom had a hierarchy of female chiefs, with the most common title for the head of the female chief hierarchy throughout Yorubaland being that of *iyalode*. The *iyalode* was described as the 'mother of the town', or the 'queen of the ladies', or the 'most distinguished lady in the town' (Denzer 1994, p. 10). Unlike Chief Nyarroh of Sierra Leone, the precolonial Yoruba women

displayed leadership prowess that was independent of their position in society, but whose positive outcomes affected various areas of society.

The above discussion demonstrates that in the midst of a binary conception of gender in precolonial African polities, becoming a leader and exercising leadership did not always follow the patriarchal norm. The leadership calling is not gender-specific (Mtaka & Matshiqi, 2021). Thus, the existence of women monarchs, albeit not predominant, could be taken to suggest that leadership was not the preserve of men only. Women exercised leadership roles in their families, communities, or societies, even behind the 'patriarchal curtain'. Further, women as leaders or followers, acting alone or with men, had avenues for exercising their agency and thereby participating in leadership processes and the co-creation of either ethical or unethical leadership outcomes.

Leadership and social stratification

Social stratification of the populace may have occurred throughout most, if not all, precolonial African polities across their different complexities, such as in the Ogoni of Nigeria (Kpone-Tonwe, 2001), the Ndebele of Zimbabwe (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008), and the Baganda of Uganda (Green, 2010), to name a few. Precolonial African polities portrayed non-egalitarian qualities in their social ranking or ordering. Moreover, the social stratification of polities intersected with their societal and community organisational forms (Bandyopadhyay & Green, 2016; Bradley, 2005; Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2012, 2015; Monroe, 2013) and their gender compositions (for example, Kpone-Tonwe, 2001; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008).

Further, social stratification also extended to both the leadership and followership divisions of various polities. According to Preston-Whyte (1978, cited in Huffman, 2000), precolonial Zimbabwean society was stratified into two socioeconomic classes: the nobles and the commoners. The differences between these two social classes lies in the fact that the nobles were

> a high-status group, with well-recognised rights, duties and behaviour.
> Senior families of different lineages across the culture area formed
> a single bureaucratic upper class, restricting wealth, prestige and
> political power to themselves…in contrast, [commoners] lacked the
> same access to wealth, prestige and power.
> (Preston-Whyte, 1978, cited in Huffman, 2000, p. 14)

Consequently, the latter (lower) social class did not have equal leadership status to the former.

Another instance of precolonial African social stratification is the case of the Ovimbundu kingdoms of Angola (Ball, 2000; Heywood, 1998). These kingdoms exemplified unequal political power and differentiated leadership

status, embodied in contrasting rulership styles: 'blacksmith kings' and 'hunter kings' (Heywood, 1998, p. 152). The two rulership types were socially constructed opposites. The blacksmith kings (or spokesman kings) represented the constitutional ruler, and characteristics such as kindness, generosity, and justice were attributed to them, suggesting that they made decisions in consultation with their subjects. This form of rulership tended to define power as a balance between the consultative element and the authoritarian element. However, the hunter kings epitomised the autocratic ruler, representing a rulership which was characteristically the opposite of the blacksmith kingship. It was based on a conception of leadership grounded in the belief of the hunter as a predator (Heywood, 1998, p. 151) – a command-and-control leadership style that encouraged conformity by curtailing freedom and creativity (Montuori & Donnelly, 2018). The two types of ideologically contrasting precolonial Ovimbundu leaders demonstrated practices designed to yield socially differential leadership outcomes: the blacksmith kings by emphasising consultative, consensus-building, and communal forms of participative leadership, leaned towards precipitating ethically desired and socially just outcomes; the hunter kings, who employed authoritarian and non-consultative methods of rulership, could not be linked to ethical and socially just leadership dispensations and outcomes. The latter represented a despotic type of leadership where conditions for both accountability and legitimacy were severely curtailed or non-existent.

Some precolonial African polities had leadership practices geared towards the social stratification of their societies or communities, as instantiated by the *Yaa* tradition of the precolonial Ogoni people of Nigeria (Kpone-Tonwe, 2001). According to Kpone-Tonwe, the *Yaa* tradition was practised within an early Ogoni matrilineal line which evolved into a patrilineal kinship with the passage of time. The purpose of the *Yaa* tradition was to take young Ogoni boys and girls through a systematised training on the ways of Ogoni life. In its heyday, this tradition is said to have provided a steady recruitment and training of young people (male and female) for the defence and preservation of the Ogoni lifestyle. While young people who had undergone the *Yaa* training achieved some social status or recognition in their community, their counterparts who were not similarly trained are said to have suffered social, economic, and political isolation later in adult life. Further, the *Yaa* training took the form of trainees being attached to mentors, who initiated their mentees into the Ogoni tradition. Successful young people were inducted into the elite social group in their society. A mentor who succeeded in mentoring their student(s) in the *Yaa* tradition was also rewarded with the social recognition of being called a *kabaari* (or chief) in the community (Kpone-Tonwe, 2001).

Social stratification is inherently a phenomenon inducing social disequilibrium and inequity. It could be argued that in precolonial African complexities, it could have served the purposes of perpetuating the social status quo and

neither advancing nor regressing it. All would depend on the transformation moments each of the polities were faced with, the leadership action(s) taken, and their outcomes.

Conclusion

The picture emerging from the literature examined is of differentiated and diverse forms of leadership and leadership practices across sociopolitical complexities and varying societal contexts in precolonial Africa. The complex nature of the societies or communities had varying influences on being a leader or follower, the forms of leadership, and the resultant leadership practices (processes and actions). Although both leaders and followers had their leadership practices mediated through traditional structures, their leadership acts were context-bound and varied according to the unique context(s) of each society. Different social markers (societal or community organisation, ethnicity, gender, and social stratification) seemed to have had various impacts on the forms of leadership and their associated practices. What is certain is that there is a rich heritage available to students of precolonial leadership styles, structures, and practices. These multifaceted learnings are able to deepen contemporary leadership theory.

#LeadershipPrecolonialAfrica

Every African country has a unique history of 'coming to being', with attendant leadership challenges. Read about how precolonial communities were organised and governed in Africa, and the part that ethnicity, gender, and social stratification played in these communities.

Questions for discussion

1. What are the main things to be aware of when trying to emulate (or dismiss) past practices of leadership?

2. What leadership practices in precolonial African societies could be described as transformative – in other words, ethical and socially just?

3. What practices from precolonial times need to be disrupted in contemporary Africa, and how might we go about doing this in a way that is respectful of cultural heritage?

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