



Leadership: Cross-Cultural Reflections from Africa

LEE E. SNOOK

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

Can America's mainline churches learn anything constructive about leadership from churches in Africa which endure and often thrive in the turbulence of the so-called dark continent? The rapid growth of Christianity in Africa is widely known, and that fact alone should provoke the curiosity of Christian leaders in the northern hemisphere whose membership, in the mainline churches, declines relative to the population curves. One can readily suppose that African Christian leadership might be one of the factors accounting for the phenomenon of flowering Christianity in many African countries. Yet, to most outside observers, leadership in Africa—whether political or ecclesiastical—has been a series of colossal disasters. An immediate answer to the opening question, then, would be unequivocally negative if the interrogator were seeking techniques in leadership, a typical American quest.

Insiders have a different view of the origins of African leadership crises. Consider the 27-year dictatorship of Joseph Désiré Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire. To the outsider, the brutality of his regime, the scandalous wealth he has accumulated through corruption, the collapse of the entire infrastructure put in place by the Belgian colonials, are without equal. Africans are quick to remind the outsiders, however, that Mobutu's reign was established and supported by outside patrons, namely, the United States, France, and Belgium; that the fabulous mineral wealth of this region has enriched not only Mobutu but foreign investors, without the slightest benefit to the impoverished residents of the nation. The mineral deposits of Zaire have had a long-standing strategic importance to the economies and

military programs of the north: the uranium used by the United States for the first atomic weapons came from Zaire, formerly Belgian Congo.¹

An outsider can only marvel that, in spite of socio-political-economic conditions which cause suffering beyond measure in Africa, Christianity continues to expand throughout many parts of the continent. The increase of Christianity in Africa is often most striking among the so-called independent churches. At the same time, other churches, whose origins can be traced to mainline denominations or foreign mission societies which sent workers to this continent beginning in the early nineteenth century, are also reaping the harvest. These are the churches best known to outsiders who come out to Africa and visit the "stations" built by their denominational mission board back home.

Outsiders are then frequently shocked to learn of corrupt church leaders, of wholesale misappropriation of funds contributed from overseas, and even of life-threats made by one leader against another.² Africans, again, are quick to remind the outsider that cultural differences will

inevitably skew an observer's perceptions. Such things as entitlement to property or the transfer of power and leadership are viewed differently in traditional African culture and within African churches. Also, one is told, the flow of funds from the north to the south has had its own devastating effect on the Africans' personal dignity, causing them to feel many times like immature children and beggars fighting with one another over the meager bones which drop from the table of the over-fed churches in Europe and North America.

I. LEADERSHIP: A SOCIAL CONTRACT?

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fifty-odd newly independent nations of Africa were caught in the middle of the struggle between the two superpowers, and indeed used that global ideological competition to gain material advantages. Recent geo-political changes have had their own effects in Africa. Were it not for the present drought devastating much of the continent, bringing huge shipments of food and other humanitarian aid, Africa would have disappeared from the consciousness of the west, eclipsed by new interest in the market potential and mission opportunities in China, eastern Europe, and the former Soviet states. In the new, post-cold-war world order, the nations of Africa are being forced to stand on their own politically and economically, while, ironically, South Africa, itself a highly "developed" nation, seems to be the only major country interested in strengthening trade and political alliances with its neighbors to the north.

¹Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, professor of African Studies at Howard University, has recently described the situation in Zaire: "Democratic Movement in Zaire," *Southern Africa: Political and Economic Monthly* 5 (1992).

²From his own life experience in Germany, Paul Tillich understood the ambiguities of leadership, and his analysis of those ambiguities is still illuminating. See *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1963) 81-83, 205-208, 263-264.

In both scholarly and popular African media, the debate about the widespread crises of leadership has much to do with how one defines democracy. Which form of democracy would be appropriate to new nations whose colonial occupiers did little or nothing to prepare their inhabitants for self-government?³ How can an economy develop in an area which has been until recently the source of cheap raw material for Europe and North America while those same industries based on African raw materials—and the jobs created by those industries—have been located in Europe and not in Africa? African nations are struggling to participate in the competitive world markets while still dependent on donor nations in the north for generating the infrastructure required for playing in the game at all. Political independence seems hollow in African nations which continue to be dependent on donors. It is that circumstance which creates deep resentment.

Parallels are not hard to find in African mainline churches, principally Methodist, Anglican, Lutheran, Catholic, and Reformed. These churches are no longer controlled by mission boards overseas, but they continue to be financially dependent. Conflicts over leadership are both common and severe in African churches and often have much to do with which contender for leadership can get financial support from Europe or the United States or Canada.

This essay proposes that what to an outsider can be viewed as confusing and troubling clashes among uncivilized Africans—resulting in atrocities and gross violations of "human

rights”—can be better understood if one first pauses to note two fundamentally different ways of understanding cultural differences about leadership. Stated as a question: From whence does a leader derive authority? When outsiders observe the African context with that kind of question in mind, they might “see” something more than battles for political power and privilege.

Robert N. Bellah and colleagues have demonstrated the depth of Americans’ commitment to the myth of governance according to social contract.⁴ Human beings, according to this myth, are defined as adults who have by their labor extracted wealth from nature and then agreed to a contract which establishes governing authorities charged with protecting private property. Government is limited to that which consenting adults (property holders) agree to on the basis of reason. Power is ownership. Governance is a contract, and hence notions of leadership are contractual. Free property-holding individuals agree to the contract for the sake of protecting their own lives, liberty, and property.

The notion of free individuals entering into a contract has come to influence all our relationships. The United States now has the highest ratio of lawyers of any nation in the world largely because individuals feel they are justified in suing their doctors, their neighbors, their pastors, their school teachers and now their parents.

³I. Mandazza and L. Sachikonye, *The One Party State and Democracy, The Zimbabwe Debate* (Harare: Southern Africa Political Trust, 1991).

⁴Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), and *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

“Consumer Christians shop for the best package deal they can get, and when they find a better deal, they have little hesitation about switching.”⁵ Church members in the United States, so deeply imbued with the myth of the contract, find it very difficult to see that the church is at all different from other contractual arrangements into which they enter.⁶ For them it is hard to think of the church as grounded in reality, or that as members of the church they are somehow defined by their church-relationship. American church members are not likely to think themselves diminished if they were cut off from the church. For them the church is not a community of loyalty, covenant, commitment, and discipline, rather it is one of several social contracts into which they freely enter and from which they freely depart. Authority and leadership, in an individualistic culture like the United States, are confused with power or the capacity to be arbitrarily coercive.⁷ This confusion arising out of the myth of a social contract rather than commitment to a covenant, argues Bellah, is a fundamental challenge to church leaders in America.

In Africa the myth of social contract and its attendant individualism have not (yet?) captured the consciousness and imagination of the people. As more and more Africans migrate to the urban centers, however, or attend universities and technical schools, watch “Dallas” and “L. A. Law” on television, and acquire a taste for designer jeans and upscale labels on their running shoes, there is a discernible transformation of consciousness. For more and more Africans, the rights of the individual are in conflict with the authority of tribe, clan, and extended family. Nowhere is this conflict more powerfully described than in the novels of Africa’s best and most widely read authors.⁸

Much of the turbulence regarding leadership in Africa, then, can be traced to alterations and shifts in consciousness as Africans are influenced through education and the media to seek a greater range of personal freedom.⁹ For example, even as I tap these words on the keyboard, university students are being tear-gassed by police one block from our flat. Here in Zimbabwe, as at many African universities, students have little or no memory of the liberation struggles which brought Africans into positions of leadership, and they do not hesitate to defy the authority of

⁵Robert N. Bellah, "Cultural Barriers to the Understanding of the Church and Its Public Role," *Missiology* 10 (1991) 463.

⁶See Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991). According to Bloom the American religion is a religion focused entirely on the self.

⁷See George R. Hunsberger, "The Changing Face of Ministry: Christian Leadership for the Twenty-first Century," *Reformed Review* 44 (1991) 224-245.

⁸Perhaps the best known is *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, or several of the works by Ngugi wa'Thiong'o such as *The River Between* or *I Will Marry When I Want*. Two Zimbabwe writers have explored the troubled psyches of young Africans torn between loyalty to the village ways and their own quest for personal freedom: see especially Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain*, a minor classic in Zimbabwe, and Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions*.

⁹M. F. C. Bourdillon, an Oxford-trained sociologist whose research and teaching are carried out at the University of Zimbabwe, has described this phenomenon in chapter seven of his *Religion and Society: A Text for Africa* (Harare: Mambo Press, 1991).

their elders—contrary to African tradition. African university campuses are almost continually involved in confrontational battles with government forces. Leaders in government and in the churches are usually drawn from the older, traditionally-minded generation for whom liberation meant the overthrow of colonial power at great cost. They are baffled by the younger generation who now seem to defy African traditions from which their elders and leaders have always drawn their authority and from which many drew the courage to overthrow colonial rule.¹⁰

II. TRADITIONAL WORLD VIEWS AND AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Although the rate at which urbanization is taking place throughout Africa is one of the highest in the world, greater than in India or China, its actual levels of urban population are still quite low. As a result, the western or "modernist" world view has not overwhelmed the African consciousness, which is still deeply religious.

The "world" as mentally constructed in Africa has not been imagined as a closed system; it is truly mysterious and restless, it is a living and growing organism. Events, actions, and relationships take priority in the African's awareness over watches and clocks. Miracles and worship are integral to the world of the everyday. Because religion embraces everything, it is not split off from everyday experience, nor is religion dispatched to a separate realm or confined to private, inner feelings.

It has been argued that African cultures will find it easier to move from the pre-modern to the post-modern because the modernist assumptions about scientific certainty, or objectivity without personal involvement, have never really taken root in African societies. In Europe and North America, the failure of modernity in dealing with some of the deeper issues of human life is becoming more and more evident.¹¹ Hence the movement toward post-modernity. Intuition and imagination are more and more appreciated in scientific and scholarly circles of the west,

whereas in Africa they have never been repudiated as irrelevant to human experience. The world as a closed, machine-like entity, in which feeling and intuition have no place, never conquered the African mind so completely as in the north. There is an affinity between the traditional world views in Africa and the post-

¹⁰Bourdillon cites numerous examples of the role of religion in the various struggles for independence. “In the independence war in Zimbabwe in the 1970s, there was often close co-operation between the guerrillas and the traditional spirit mediums. In many cases, the guerrillas discouraged or forbade the practice of Christianity. Traditional religious leaders provided a symbol of opposition to White ways and White domination.” *Ibid.*, 185.

¹¹See David Krieger, *The New Universalism: Foundations for a Global Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), especially chapter three, for an analysis of the ways in which theology in the west has been preoccupied with the modernist assumptions. Also, Mark Kline Taylor, “Religion, Cultural Plurality, and Liberating Praxis: In Conversation with the Work of Langdon Gilkey,” *The Journal of Religion* 71 (1991) 145-166, as well as Colin Gunton, “Knowledge and Culture: Towards an Epistemology of the Concrete,” in *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hugh Montefiore (New York: Paragon House, 1991) 84-102.

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modern sense for unexpected depths, for the inexhaustible questions, for living with uncertainty.¹²

It is not surprising, then, that Christian theologians in Africa are re-considering the significance of African traditional religions as sources for an African theology fit for the post-modern world.¹³ By contrast, it was fairly common for European missionaries to regard the Bantu-speaking peoples in southern Africa as totally non-religious and as having a totally “carnal view of spiritual things.” To the Europeans the African tradition offered neither a common religious concern nor a basis for a conversation about spiritual matters. The Europeans could discern no “unknown God” or religious ideas or legends with which to relate the Christian gospel. “African religion did not conform to Western institutional definition; it did not flow clearly between visible banks. Ritual practice operated on another plane entirely. It saturated the ground of everyday activity.”¹⁴

In spite of rapid social change, African traditional religion still retains the emphasis on all things being intimately related, insisting that religion is not one of the social contracts which one can choose or reject. Religion is grounded in the whole of reality, it permeates all relationships. In other societies, based on a contract theory, individuals take priority over relationships, and so relationships are contingent on individuals’ agreement to a contract.

In traditional African religion...personality presupposes relationships. One of the main reasons for the existence of so many indigenous independent...churches in...Africa is that they are substitutes for the traditional intimate family relationships in a situation where such relationships are eroded...[by]...rapid secularization.¹⁵

Not all forms of Christianity are growing, but the increase is most striking among those Christian movements which are authentically African, or which have not ceased to believe that to be human is to be intimately connected to a broad network of personal interrelationships, a belief which is perhaps much closer to Scripture than the individualism of modernity. The vitality of African Christianity, then, can be best understood if one first appreciates what might be called

classical African culture, still very much alive and effective in the traditional religions of Africa. The so-called independent churches, far more than many of those churches

¹²Gerhardus Cornelis Oosthuizen, "The Place of Traditional Religion in Contemporary South Africa," in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Paragon House, 1991).

¹³See especially the essays by African theologians in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), particularly those entitled "Christology in the Village" and "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother." Aylward Shorter sets forth the discussion in Catholic thought as it pertains especially to African cultures in *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988).

¹⁴Jean Comaroff, "Missionaries and Mechanical Clocks: An Essay on Religion and History in South Africa," *The Journal of Religion* 71 (1991) 11.

¹⁵Oosthuizen, "The Place of Traditional Religion," 41. This point has been exhaustively documented by M. L. Daneel. Two of his many books are *Old and New in Southeran Shona Independent Churches*, vol. 3, *Leadership* (Harare: Mambo Press, 1988) and *Quest for Belonging: Introduction to a Study of African Independent Churches* (Harare: Mambo Press, 1987).

founded by missionaries from the north who often repudiated traditional religion, have incorporated and transformed the African culture, and for that reason, it can be argued, they have many times been far more successful in attracting Africans to the gospel than churches which are still dependent on the north.¹⁶

III. COMMUNITY BASED LEADERSHIP

The previous section argues that there are significant cultural factors which account for the surge of Christianity across Africa. An obvious theological implication is that wherever the Christian message has been incarnated in African cultures, transforming them rather than repudiating them, the Christian movement has spread.¹⁷ What implications for church leadership are there in the African culture?

Sociologist Robert Bellah writes, "If religion is a purely private matter, and essentially a matter of subjective feeling, then one person's feelings are as valid as another and there is nothing objective against which to test them. Thus there can be no such thing as authority in religion."¹⁸ As already observed, neither traditional religion nor Christian faith, in Africa, is—or has yet become—a purely private matter. Therefore African church leaders can generally count on their constituency to be a community of loyal believers who draw their identity from belonging. It would not occur to an African Christian to declare with the American Thomas Paine, "My mind is my church."

Faith and worship are intensely communal, and church leaders derive their authority in large part from the people who look to them for guidance in understanding the Bible and in participating in the rites of the church. A bishop's authority as leader does not flow from arbitrary use of coercive power. That would more likely occur in a social contract culture of celebrity preachers catering to consumer Christians. Rather African leaders rely on a complex hierarchical structure which facilitates relationships and communication rather than domination and coercion.¹⁹ Indeed one African church which I know fairly well has just survived a devastating crisis of leadership brought on precisely because the bishop

¹⁶See C. C. Okorochoa, *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa* (Hong Kong and Brookfield, VT: Avebury Press, 1987). This analysis focuses on the Igbo of Nigeria. "We see Igbo conversion to Christianity as a

genuine religious experience which has its roots in the people's Primal religious concepts about salvation" (242).

¹⁷Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

¹⁸Bellah, "Cultural Barriers," 463.

¹⁹The extensive research of Daneel describes in painstaking detail how elaborate these structures are. Leadership conflicts have often led to schisms in the independent churches, a phenomenon which Daneel thinks has some positive features in the African context because "kraal-splitting" was a common practice among the Shona. It was a way of alleviating conflict and allowing for the expansion of the tribe. Much of the growth in African Christianity can be attributed to "kraal-splitting," a healthy multiplication process of church expansion. This marvel of growth might be thought similar to the explosion of the computer industry in the United States. "Kraal-splitting" within IBM has allowed people of diverse talents to find niches for their leadership gifts.

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had for too long used his office to isolate himself, to dominate and control clergy and evangelists from a distance, all the while refusing to meet with his critics and appealing for justification of his behavior to the juridical power invested in him by the founding European church. He was deposed only after the government authorities, concerned for civil peace in the area, put pressure on some prominent lay leaders to wrest power from the bishop, write a new constitution, and elect a new bishop from one of the minority tribes.

Referring again to the independent churches, Professor Daneel, whose research among them is by far the most extensive and reliable, writes that this statement could apply to most of these groups:

The mystique of the ministry is not attached to authority to celebrate the sacraments or to theological education, but is present in the anointed man of God who can perform the rituals of the church and lead its worship, help his people in their everyday troubles through his gifts of healing or revelation or interpretation, and discipline them in their attempts to follow the pattern of Christian life laid down by the church.²⁰

Daneel has emphasized how important for these churches are the New Testament offices of prophesy, healing, exorcism, and teaching.²¹ An American scholar of early Christianity has investigated one of these churches and agreed that African Christianity among the independent churches is surely similar to the early generations of churches before the Constantinian age: fervent, evangelical, spirit-filled, but not very orderly by the standards of *pax Romana*.

IV. SUMMARY

We have been asking: What are the leadership characteristics which accompany the expansion of Christian faith in Africa? The answer being proposed is that those African churches which demonstrate the most vitality and growing power bring together two distinctive features. On the one hand, they have hierarchical structures which do not suppress but empower all the members to exercise leadership according to their gifts, even prescribing uniforms peculiar to each form of office. On the other, they are Christianized versions of traditional African culture, emphasizing a deep sense of being together in community and in interpersonal relationship. These churches are both places of healing and of social welfare, carried out by various levels of leaders. In these churches leaders have close links to other aspects of African culture and at the

same time they exercise careful oversight to assure that the various offices—prophecy, healing, exorcism, etc.—are carried out according to biblical criteria. Daneel has shown that even the most elevated position of leadership among them is never regarded as a competitor or equal with Christ. In fact many of them receive no remuneration from their churches. They are genuine leaders among the poorest of the poor, and they themselves are often as materially poor as those whom they lead.

²⁰Daneel, *Quest for Belonging*, 143.

²¹Daneel, *Old and New*, especially part I, “Characteristic Features of Independent Church Leadership.”

In addressing American bishops, Robert Bellah gave this advice: one who would lead the church in the American culture, so dominated by the individualistic myth of social contract,

must help the whole church...to show forth to itself and the whole world what a covenant community based on faith and love is like. For people caught up in the ideology of self-interest and minimal commitment to anyone else, the very presence of a community based on radically different premises can be salvific.²²

To live and work and worship in Africa for only a few years or months can lead to a deeper experience of such a presence and to having one’s own enslavements and idolatries judged for what they are: barriers which prevent the “yeast of the gospel” from acting effectively on our overfull yet often empty western lives. Perhaps, for churches in the north, as Professor Daneel writes, salvation “may lie in the dancing bare feet of Africa.”²³

²²Bellah, “Cultural Barriers,” 473.

²³Daneel, *Old and New*, 396.