The place of African native culture in the business world

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Colonization by the British with the aid of globalization set in with its dominant culture and devoured the native culture leaving a bastardised culture in some African countries, where lack of respect and promotion of individualism at the expense of collectiveness has become the norm of everyday life. This article highlights some African traditions that can help inform and/or impact some essential teachings that will enhance harmony and increased productivity in the modern day business operations. The assumption is that our native culture is full of wealthy teachings, wherefore a culture of respect, hardworking and of working together is exhibited through aspects like ubuntu, storytelling, use of proverbs, going early and working together to the as teams in fields among other aspects.

Key Words
Native culture, Proverbs, Storytelling, Seniority, Ubuntu, Motivation, Nuclear family, Extended family.

Many businesses in their operations have westernised at the expense of local indigenous culture that could easily assist in the current challenges and operations in Africa. While business concepts that land themselves to best practice are awash in Western literature, these are minimal in the local situations. Even local writers themselves are westernised and will in most cases look at the local challenges in the western mind. There are various local cultural norms that if incorporated into the business world, could alleviate many challenges. These shall be discussed and their link to business made. Brown (1998) on his article on culture and copyrights does concur that organisations can gain from the cultural knowledge of indigenous people. Brown however focuses on the exploitation of indigenous knowledge through the acquisition of varieties, indigenous designs, collection of human DNA, etc. without prior permission. The focus on this article however shall be on the realisation of efficiency and effectiveness through recognition of the importance of indigenous culture.

Different but complementary definitions of culture have been given by many. Myers (1987) defines culture as a “total way of life of a people” while Peterson (1979) looks at culture as consisting of values, beliefs, expressive symbols, and norms. Guiso et al (2006) also define culture simply as “those customary beliefs and values that ethnic, religious, and social groups transmit fairly unchanged from generation to generation.” Africans as a people have certain norms and values/ways of doing things, that if recognised by the business community could go a long in motivating the workforce thereby making organisations more efficient and competitive in the global village. It is upon the business community to identify positive elements that can propel their businesses not only to local competitive advantages but also to international levels. One can note the case of products being manufactured in China. A huge percentage of electronic products in the world are manufactured in China, and who knows, if our (African) culture had been respected and taken positive advantage of some of these products could have been manufactured locally and the lives of people in Africa could have been different.

For instance, Africans transmitted their morals and values through storytelling, and proverbs but this was interrupted through colonisation when the missionaries came in with their own ideologies (Chilisa & Preece. 2005). Storytelling can still play a significant role in solving some challenges that businesses in some African countries are experiencing. Whilst this could be a solution to some economic challenges especially productivity, in order to compete with foreign products, the challenge though is that most of the managers who are themselves Africans, have been schooled in the western culture and used western literature and knowledge particularly designed for the Americans and the British. As a result, they no longer even begin to consider solutions in locally designed methods that
would recognise culturally related challenges, but always look at experimenting with more and more European and American methods some of which have been tried and tested, of course, in those countries and have worked. But then, these business behaviourally related solutions may have worked in those countries as a result of the culture of the people in those countries and are not compatible with the local cultures.

Storytelling as an example, is an exciting native cultural process that many African children go through. But as they grow up this is abandoned as these children become westernised. These stories were always looked upon by the young men and women as they were growing up. However positive elements of storytelling could be used in business. Managers/supervisors could win the support of those that they lead if they adopted storytelling, as long as they used related stories to their business endeavours that are commonly told to children as they grow up. These stories could invoke the cultural recognition in the minds of the employees as a people with their own distinct culture that is also useful in business settings. Once the hearts of these employees are won, the managers or leaders could then enjoy the commitment and allegiance that the employees could have. It is however acknowledged that there are obviously other business variables that would have to go along with this cultural recognition of these employees to achieve this commitment.

There is the concept of Ubuntu which encompasses respect for adults, working together, and collectivism (Chilisa & Preece. 2005) which can be taken advantage of by the corporate world operating in Africa. While it is appreciated that at work the procedures and processes followed are mostly guided by the organisation’s policies, at times organisations hire young graduates from universities and ignore the older employees that would have served the organisation for years. The challenge noted by many, in following this route, is that these young graduates would have done their internship, placement or industrial attachment in these organisations and trained by these old people, whom the organisations then find unsuitable for hierarchical positions. That put aside, the challenge that is faced by hiring these young men and women to supervise these older workers is that they would have been schooled in the Western way and as such would want to practice their bookish experiences and ignore the spirit of Ubuntu. In their supervision they lose the fact that elders must be respected irrespective of the positions of these managers.

Again, African businesses have tended to look upon paper qualifications as the best criterion for identifying capabilities of individuals for employment and promotion. This criterion leaves out a lot of experienced employees and would be managers who would not have attained the educational levels required as a criterion for qualifying for the positions. As such, this affects production, if the employees feel that they are not being respected by their supervisors. Once their motivation is affected they then only put enough effort to keep them in the job and avoid being summoned to the supervisor’s office, thereby raising the cost of production and increasing the labour force unnecessarily. However, if businesses took cognisance of the importance of the respect for elders even in the training and orientation of younger supervisors and managers, this culture of respect would be emphasized and challenges minimised.

The indigenous societies, as Onwuachi (1966) writes, instilled the values and norms of the society through deliberate means where the outcomes were to respect elders and parents and to learn how to communicate appropriately. This was however to be replaced by formal schooling in which most of the content was Western or scientific and excluded traditional lessons that were to build these children to adulthood. Onwuachi further argues that there is nothing wrong with the Western way of education but that the indigenous norms and values should be taken into consideration. It is on this basis that this article sought to link and show the importance of the indigenous systems to business operations especially in the current economic challenges currently facing African countries such as Zimbabwe.
In general, labour relations acts recognise a nuclear family when it comes to benefits which is contrary to the cultural norms of most Africans. It has been argued by some authors that the roles of kinship in the Western families are different from the African societies. This is supported by Cobbah (1987) who posits that Africans do not operate with the auspices of a nuclear family but instead operate in a concept of extended family. As an example cousins in the African family are part of what the Western culture would call nuclear family. Very few families especially where there is a gainfully employed person would be restricted to a “nuclear family” concept. This could be as a result of economic challenges facing many African households. And because of the culture of Ubuntu or collectivism once one is gainfully employed they would endeavour to assist as many of their relatives as they possibly can. A household in an African nuclear family usually includes what the western culture calls cousins. As such, when an employee is denied leave to attend to what in the Western culture would be an extended family but an immediate family to the employee, this would easily result in poor employment relations and absenteeism. If organisations operating in African countries could appreciate the concept of family in an African perspective then their policies could be favourable to their employees thereby improving the lives of the ordinary citizens. Many benefits offered to employees are largely governed by the western culture. Medical aid and other benefits are only extended to the nuclear family as an example. Considering the average salaries earned by many and the cost of services, it is not surprising that many employees remain in poverty as they work solely to meet where possible their basic needs, at the lowest level of Maslow’s hierarchy of Needs. Their family members not covered by the medical aid societies have to be catered for on a cash basis. It is some of these reasons that then would affect the employees’ motivation to excel and propel the organisations they work for to greater heights. Some organisations provide funeral benefits and again these are limited to the nuclear family. It is time then, that when organisations are looking at ways and means of getting the full potential of their employees through motivation that they looked at the family in the context of the African society and not the western culture.

There are many African employees that believe in traditional healers though a majority of them will first seek medical attention from the westernized medical doctors and facilities. When the progress is not obvious most of these employees easily fall back to the traditional healers. This includes even the members of the so called elite class of African employees at management levels. However it is through the deliberate western minds that traditional healers have been side-lined. When employees seek medical attention, organisations only recognize the formal healing places like clinics, hospitals and surgeries manned by western medical personnel. Unfortunately the traditional healers that include faith healers are generally not recognised. This on its own also has a bearing on the moral of the employees as they then have to lie about their whereabouts when they have absented themselves to seek medical attention or spiritual healing from traditional healers. If they were to be honest about their search for health they risk being punished or ridiculed by some members of the organisation since traditional healing is not recognised in most cases.

Many service organisations struggle to instil etiquette rules that if they were cognisant of the general African culture they would just make reference to and get their employees to respect their own culture and apply it to work organisations. Such rules include greeting of strangers as you meet them. In work situations employees are asked in many circumstances to greet customers who in real sense are strangers to them. It is uncommon to meet employees working in big organisations to just cross each other without greetings, let alone meeting strangers who may be customers. With an emphasis on the importance of indigenous culture to business operations on both organisations and its employees, the African culture can also be seen to contribute positively in the growth of the economies and alleviation of poverty by improving the so much deserved productivity. There is therefore a special emphasis to young Africans whose culture has been diluted partly because of the education system that they have gone through to begin to appreciate that it is not all that is good about foreign cultures and bad about their indigenous native culture. They just have to be selective and take advantage of their own native culture as it can rip similar results to the western culture.
Cobbah (1987) further writes in his work that, in the African culture, as one grows up in the society they also acquire automatically, seniority rights irrespective of their attributes. This too has an effect in the business setting since in many cases promotion decisions may not necessarily consider the seniority of those already holding the posts. When young man and women are promoted into positions of authority, who in some cases would have gone through apprenticeship in the hands of these senior employees, the employment relations are seriously affected as seniority rights would have been compromised. In some cases, these compromised relations can lead to sabotage by some employees. It is not surprising that at times young engineers are known to fail to fix certain machines which these senior employees who would not have been recognised for their experience actually watch from afar not wanting to be involved in the repairs. They watch from afar because they would be wanting to prove a point that they can repair these machines even if they are not engineers. The issue of seniority rights is so important in the African culture as it grows with the people right from the time they go to school. Even among children, the older ones want to be recognised for their seniority. These seniority rights are even shared by the young as they herd cattle when it is known that there are seniors play supervisory roles as other younger boys run around making sure that all cattle are in place. This therefore calls for organisations to seriously consider seniority to contribute to good employment relations.

Communalism is also a characteristic of the African culture. For instance, land was communally owned as opposed to individual ownership in the Western Culture (Cobbah 1987). It is important therefore to identify the communal characteristics that can be taken advantage of in a business operating in African settings. For instance, in the agricultural season there is a lot of assistance that each family gets from other families until everyone has tilled, planted and weeded the family pieces of land. There is very little competition on this area as the communities would be trying to make sure that each family does get enough that can last them until the next season. This on its own could as a result work well as organisations build teams. And as they do so, what is best other than to refer to the native cultural norms of team building giving examples of tilling land in the agricultural seasons. In a team there is no competition as everyone is working towards a common goal. Besides, there are organisations that could work together even if they were competitors when there is need to do so. However this should not be used in isolation from other normal business procedures and processes. It would not be proper to insist on communalism because the organisation wants to build teams, and when it is time to allow the employee time to attend to family issues, the employer then refers to the Labour Relations Act that is clearly against such communalism of the African in some instances.

Communalism expressed in the African culture could also be used to solve some challenges currently facing the viability of organisations. Guiso (2006: pp 24) asserts that “cultural values do have a large economic payoff.” During the agricultural seasons, communal communities will not wait to start work at 8 am as the standard procedure in many work organisations, but will start tilling the land as early as 4 am in periods of the full moon. By 8 am or when the sun has risen and it is getting warm, they would be getting ready to knock off from the fields and look at other less deserving duties of the day. This tradition could be adopted by the business fraternity, where instead of religiously sticking to the conventional times of 8-5pm, in cases of need and with proper arrangements, some of these employees could start work early and then finish the day early. This could allow employees to then have time to pursue their entrepreneurial activities to sustain themselves now that the wages and salaries they receive are largely below the poverty datum line. But then this is not the case as most organisations have adopted the common 8-5pm working day even where there is no need for that rigidity. There are exceptions though for an insignificant number of organisations that operate outside normal working hours.

There are universities for instance that are challenged in terms of teaching space, but because they are used to the 8 to 5 pm working day, their conventional day classes are tight scheduled to run in those times. However if the classes could be scheduled to extend outside these times, more space could be
created such as beginning lectures at 7 am and finishing the normal day at 6 pm. These universities would then not need to hire more teaching space, hence becoming more efficient. This would result in the universities offering their degrees and diplomas at a lower cost that would be affordable to a larger population of the communities.

Just as Onwuachi wrote in 1966, the recommendation is not for a totally African Business principle but principles that are blended with concern for the African culture in order to take advantage of the already existing norms and values to solve current challenges. With this recognition of the local African cultures which are largely similar in most African countries particular in the SADC region, motivation of employees could be reasonably attained to the benefit of the organisations, the region and the individuals themselves. This would however require that these organisations revise a number of policies that would recognise the African traditions that matter in business settings. It would also require the Africans themselves to recognise the value of their indigenous culture and apply it positively to business practices.

References