

Contextualising the Regeneration of Africa's Indigenous Governance and Management Systems and Practices

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this article is to remind contemporary public administration analysts and policy-makers of the need to position indigenous governance management systems and practices within mainstream intellectual discourse. The African continent has suffered a tormented history. This is partly due to the different historical periods and deliberate efforts to Westernise all explanations concerning African governance, knowledge management systems and practices. Centuries-old indigenous African knowledge regarding the management of societal affairs has been overshadowed by colonialism, neocolonialism, global capitalism and the promotion of Western organisational management/leadership practices. Furthermore, Western cultures showed intellectual arrogance by painting anything African in a negative light. Yet, indigenous African countries had their own governance systems and knowledge management practices that are worthy of any academic and intellectual theorisation and discourse. While the article does not argue that these indigenous systems and practices are flawless, the societies under study exhibited important features that can provide a lens for understanding contemporary challenges surrounding public administration and theorisation.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Defending centuries-old knowledge systems and practices to a contemporary analyst can raise questions of relevance, especially where the importance of history is understated. Indigenous peoples' cultures and their respective knowledge systems are largely misunderstood or even dismissed by development planning experts and those who believe in modern science (Green 2016; Lalonde 1991:3). Indigenous knowledge touches on what local people knew and did for generations in their attempt to manage public affairs (Appiah-Opoku 2005; Green 2016; Basheka 2015; Lalonde 1991; Njoh 2006; Nkondo 2012). Authors such as Gbadamosi (2003), Kiggundu (1991), Zeleza (2006), Mazrui (1978) and Kaya and Sereti (2013) highlighted how various Western colonial powers destroyed or devalued local institutions and management practices and substituted them with what were believed to be culturally and technologically superior colonial administrative systems. However, the new academic leadership of the African continent should redirect their energy towards rebuilding African management models and theories. While some African societies' governance systems demeaned the human race, many societies had good management practices that are worthy of scholarly attention.

Eurocentric authors want us to believe that Africans lived a 'miserable' life in one form or another before colonialism. However, this view is strongly contested by certain authors who believe that it is wrong to posit that pre-colonial Africa was devoid of administration or social organisation systems (Basheka 2015; Odhiambo 1990). Zeleza (2006:197) confirms the dominance of the Western hegemony in Africa and the neglect of indigenous systems. Furthermore, the author reports how Western ideologies appeared to have been "...everywhere, dominating the disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses and departments, paradigms and publications, academic politics and practices". Indigenous governance systems have been subjected to neglect and they hardly receive any scholarly attention in most public administration discourses, as well as within policy analysis debates concerning the solution to African peoples' problems (Basheka 2015; Njoh 2006; Odhiambo 1990).

Since the colonisation of Africa, all systems of knowledge production, dissemination and consumption tended to reflect Western hegemony (Zeleza 2006:196). Such an approach has worked to deflate what Africans knew and could do to manage their societies. To date, the Western perception of African practices remains limited, as it lacks appreciation of the African social context. The use of indigenous institutions and knowledge systems has come to be encouraged and acknowledged in both developed and developing countries (Appiah-Opoku 2005; Basheka 2015). Basheka (2015) argues that, where Western scholars view

African systems as irrelevant and not worthy of scholarship, African scholars should document indigenous knowledge practices. With public administration, there is a need to develop a theory based on indigenous knowledge and practices to better serve the continent.

Indigenous knowledge is built up by societies through generations of living in close contact with nature. Such knowledge includes norms, taboos, a system of classification for natural resources, a set of empirical observations about the local environment and a system of self-management that governs resource usage (Appiah-Opoku 2005). Mazrui (1978), who devoted most of his academic research to advocating for indigenous knowledge systems, criticised the limited Western conceptualisation of scholarship and education. Rather, Mazrui (1978) supported the need for scholarly attention to indigenous knowledge and management systems. Moreover, Nkondo (2012) states that the Western perception of African indigenous knowledge as a mere repetition of practices without any theory to explain them is a reflection of Western cultural and intellectual arrogance.

Before the advent of colonialism, African societies were founded on certain knowledge systems, structures and practices in all aspects of societal life and existence. African societies had known religious beliefs, norms and practices that connected their existence to God. These societies had strong systems of medicine as they used their knowledge of local medicinal plants to heal the sick. The indigenous societies had mechanisms of commerce and trade which reflected knowledge of the principles of economics and market systems. Bartering was the main medium of commerce and trust played a fundamental role in trade. Indigenous or pre-colonial societies' governance systems had democracy-based doctrines like checks and balances as well as systems that demanded accountability from those in leadership positions. While corruption was present in some of these structures, Africans had systems in place to run their governments.

According to authors like Lander (2000) and Chavunduka (1995), the introduction of the Western world view of 'knowledge' to Africa and other non-Western societies has lacked an understanding of the holistic nature and approach of non-Western ways of knowledge and knowledge production. One area that has been unfairly treated is the governance architecture of indigenous societies. Based on historical accounts, indigenous governance structures included all functions of modern government and governance. Societies of the time had structures and bodies that were responsible for making and implementing executive decisions. Some institutions (formal and informal) performed legislative functions, while other structures discharged judicial functions. The governments of the time practised foreign affairs and diplomatic functions through the use of agents and emissaries to foreign lands. Moreover, communication and public relations played a key role in running the governments of the time. The governance and political

systems featured high regard for participatory decision-making and the need for consensus-building in making decisions.

In the pre-colonial African context, a traditional healer who was able to cure a particular disease using specific herbs had the knowledge and theory of the plant species and its characteristics. However, such knowledge is often disregarded by Western medicine as lacking scientifically proven results. A traditional king in the pre-colonial African context who had the ability to unify his people around common projects that supported the development of the kingdom demonstrated traits of public servant leadership and good governance. However, such practices are discounted by Western leadership style theory. These concerns have been highlighted by scholars who have devoted some effort to indigenous systems. Lalonde (1991:3) raised concerns about how indigenous knowledge is treated. The author states that, in the past, indigenous peoples' cultures and their respective knowledge systems had been largely misunderstood or even dismissed by development planning experts. Where indigenous communities were known to have centuries-old knowledge of their environment, this reality was ignored or neglected to the detriment of the continent.

Before colonialism, African people practised "...the development and use of appropriate technology for primary resource utilisation and a holistic world-view that parallels the scientific discipline of ecology" (Appiah-Opoku 2005:103). Indigenous healers had intimate knowledge of the environment including of plants and their healing properties. Indigenous farmers were thoroughly acquainted with vegetation, soil and climatic conditions. In turn, indigenous hunters had extensive knowledge of the habitat, including the "location and timing of a host of biological events unknown to scientists. They knew the life-cycle of certain animals including the kinds of foods they ate, their methods of searching for food, their pregnancy and gestation period, natural habitat and average life-span" (Knudston and Suzuki 1992).

Although much has been said about the indignity of African practices, there has been limited effort among African scholars to provide a clear understanding of the concept of 'knowledge' based on Africa's history of ideas and intellectual development (Kaya and Sereti 2013:31). This has undermined the development of a strong African indigenous theoretical framework and methodological rigour to guide the scientific incorporation of African knowledge and knowledge-production into the post-colonial education system. As such, there is a need to revisit historical facts and regenerate Africa's indigenous knowledge systems. In this regard, Green (2016:76) points out that history inspires a deep respect for the personal sacrifices of our predecessors. Furthermore, history can provide the 'intellectual ammunition' to challenge the narrow contemporary orthodox thinking. In systems terms, history reveals how different institutions emerged and evolved to reach the structure, culture and practices we see today. This, in turn, offers useful insights

on how to influence the current *status quo*. History inspires a healthy acceptance of pluralism since institutions have taken many different paths. One can also argue that history provides a temporal positive deviance – by studying the historical outliers on any given issue, we gain new insights and ideas.

Research problem

The broad research problem addressed in this article aims to determine whether indigenous societies had any governance systems and knowledge management practices in place that are worth being regenerated by African scholars. Western knowledge and science have tended to depict pre-colonial Africa as primitive societies that lacked any form of order, social organisation and knowledge management systems and practices worthy of intellectual discourse and theorisation. A review of literature and African folklore strongly suggests that indigenous societies had indigenous knowledge and practices on a range of subject matter. In fact, some were comparable to modern scientific methods and practices. Unfortunately, indigenous practices and knowledge have remained undocumented and related models and theories have not been supported or encouraged. While elders in various African societies still possess such knowledge, there has been limited empirical research in this field. Due to this intellectual injustice, there is a serious ‘dearth of knowledge’ about the governance practices and knowledge management systems of indigenous people. One way to address this gap is to call for a regeneration of this debate.

From an educational perspective, Ayittey (2006:17), states that it is undesirable to apply Western management theories and practices in Africa. The author has made a call to African scholars to transform “imported” theories and concepts into acceptable cultural norms that could be applied to management practices in Africa. This intellectual expectation is possible to achieve through the development of indigenous African management principles and practices that accommodate cultural, social, political and environmental factors that are unique to Africa. Ayittey (2006:17), argues that, while economic governance did exist in pre-colonial African societies, these systems have always been portrayed as nothing more than simple hunter-gatherer activities. European anthropologists and historians who study Africa often focus on racially motivated stereotypes. Ayittey (2006:17), argues that indigenous African economies revolved around efforts to eke out a “pitiful living from primitive subsistence agriculture” and that “trade and exchanges were unknown since self-sufficiency and subsistence farming were the operative commands”. Undeniably, this is not a true reflection of the commerce and trade practices within indigenous societies.

To shed new light on contemporary discourses, the discipline of Public Administration and Governance needs to develop models and theories based

on indigenous practices, systems and structures. A theory, in the context of this debate, should encompass a systematic collection of related principles and management practices to categorise pertinent management knowledge relating to African norms and practices (Basheka 2015). In line with this, African Public Administration theory should involve a collection of indigenous African principles, practices and knowledge that depict how indigenous societies managed their public affairs. One of the underlying causes of the West's negative view of African indigenous management practice stems from African scholars' limited efforts to document indigenous systems.

There is a need to regenerate African indigenous knowledge practices and systems. African scholars should build a coherent analogy of the elements of African systems that would see the African paradigm of administration being covered in public administration training. In this regard, indigenous knowledge should serve as a starting point to the construction of alternative administrative theories. This knowledge should be adequately disseminated and shared among interested public administration scholars and policymakers (Basheka 2015).

The following sections of the article will address the secondary questions:

- What general indigenous knowledge management practices and systems existed in Africa before colonialism and how did colonialism influence these systems and practices?
- What characterised the indigenous governance structures and political organisation of Africans before colonialism?
- How did indigenous societies ensure accountable leadership and governance to prevent abuse of power by those who had authority over managing societal affairs?
- Is it possible to develop a framework or model for indigenous governance, management and decision-making practices to address contemporary public administration challenges?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The term 'indigenous' has various applications and may be subject to varying interpretations, by different people, depending on their intellectual and theoretical orientation. Some scholars apply the term to knowledge, governance, systems, culture, beliefs, practices, institutions and structures. 'Indigenous knowledge' and 'indigenous governance' present broader terms and as used in this article, capture a number of other aspects. Semali (1997), for example, describes indigenous knowledge as encompassing what local people know and do, and what they have known and done for generations. This could relate to what local people know about medicine, conflict resolution, governance, education, societal structures,

checks and balances, commerce and trade, project management and resource management. In turn, Dei (2000:72) considers 'indigenous knowledge' as a consciousness that arises locally and in association with the long-term occupancy of a place.

The term 'indigenous', when used in relation to governance, has different interpretations as governance itself has various connotations. One can argue that pre-colonial Africa had governance mechanisms based on the following two elements: First, governance involved the evolving processes, relationships, institutions and structures by which a group of people, a community or society organised themselves collectively to achieve things that are believed to be of importance (Hunt, Smith, Garling and Sanders 2008). Second, governance had both formal and informal structures and processes (Martin 2003). Such governance within communities involved strengthened decision-making and control over their organisational systems. Furthermore, it was based on people's skills, personal and collective contributions, and shared commitment to an organisation's chosen governance processes, goals and identity. Njoh (2006) has attempted to provide a comprehensive description of the governance apparatus that existed in pre-colonial Africa. However, Odhiambo (1990) argues that the education system in Africa has consistently ignored the knowledge, skills and survival strategies of local farmers, who have successfully managed their farmlands and remained productive for centuries, with little or no external input.

The term 'governance' can be used to imply a regulatory framework or government. If the concept of 'government' refers to the regulatory functions of the rule of law, social institutions and processes, then it is clear that pre-colonial East African communities had governments. In most indigenous African political systems, "the lineage was the most powerful and effective force for unity and stability" (Abrefa 1951:6). Indigenous knowledge varies from community to community and is likely to change and become diluted once one community's knowledge is mixed with that of another community (Green 2016).

KEY FEATURES OF INDIGENOUS SYSTEMS AND MANAGEMENT

Pre-colonial Africa, or indigenous societies, had diverse governance and management systems due to the societal set-up. However, there existed certain common features to maintain societal cohesion. This section of the article highlights the systems and management practices of these societies according to the following five broader areas:

- Political management
- Judicial functioning

- Health management
- Education systems
- Systems of trade and commerce.

This is to avoid a situation that Gbadamosi (2003) describes as the dominance of Western academic and management thinking in Africa. Indigenous administrative systems had a wealth of knowledge scattered across many disciplines. It has become a challenge for African Public Administration scholars to document what can be described as a common administrative theory (Basheka 2015). The continent has enjoyed many accomplishments in the areas of political and social organisation, architecture, city planning, arts and crafts, commerce and trade, tax administration, education, health management, grievance-handling and discipline.

Indigenous governance and political systems

Did pre-colonial Africa have governance systems in place that are worth researching by Public Administration scholars? Kaya and Sereti (2013:31) have reported that much has been said about the indigenous African practices. The authors add that African scholars' limited endeavours to provide a clear understanding of 'knowledge' based on Africa's history of ideas and intellectual development has been a disadvantage. The research efforts have produced three broad indigenous governance systems in pre-colonial Africa, namely centralised kingdoms and empires; centralised medium-size kingdoms; and widely dispersed empires and chiefdoms (Vassin 2005). Sesay (2014) observes that several pre-colonial societies were organised into medium-sized city-states, with centralised and pyramidal structures of authority. The most important distinction between medium and large pre-colonial kingdoms in Africa was their territorial size. Medium-sized kingdoms were urbanised and their kings wielded immense power, which they shared only with trusted allies. Law-making, and the implementation and adjudication of powers were concentrated in the king-in-council. The royal elite monopolised access to vital economic resources, such as land and revenue from taxes, and controlled the military and security agencies.

In an attempt to defend the narrative that indigenous societies had a governance architecture, Ayithey (1991:257) summarised key features of such an African indigenous political system. These features go hand in hand with what Williams (1987) refers to as the "African constitution". The scholars argue that African societies were characterised by the following democracy-leaning features:

- The people were the building blocks of government
- Decisions were made by public opinion
- Checks and balances were implemented to curb despotism
- Decentralisation of the political system existed;

- Freedom of expression was emphasised
- Decision-making was by consensus
- Participatory democracy existed.

The above features resemble the contemporary elements of democracy. As such, pre-colonial Africa adopted governance systems that had a democratic underpinning. These governance and political systems, however, had their own weaknesses which cannot be overlooked. While the above features demonstrate the idea of good governance and constitutionalism, in such societies, rulers exercised much authority on behalf of the citizens. Some leaders were authoritarian and benefited their families and friends at the expense of the general citizenry. Some strong checks and balances were instituted at various levels. Like now, pre-colonial societies had decentralised governance systems, and decision-making was by consensus. Citizens had a right to exercise their fundamental rights and freedoms through their involvement in decision-making.

According to Walsh and Stewart (1992 in Peters 2003:8–9), a pre-colonial governance structure had the following elements of a traditional governance model:

- **An assumption of self-sufficiency:** Government was a self-sufficient actor that could act autonomously regarding the economy and society.
- **An assumption of direct control:** Government was internally structured by authority and hierarchy, and the individuals at the top of organisational pyramids were assumed capable of exercising control within their own organisations.
- **An assumption of upward accountability:** Accountability was to flow upward, with career officials answering to their political “masters” and those ministers answering to legislatures. This mode of accountability formed the principal connection between the administration, the political system and the surrounding social system.
- **An assumption of uniformity:** Government had to treat all citizens equally and to provide the same benefits and deprivations to all similarly situated people. This was seen as a fundamental reflection of fairness.
- **An assumption of a civil service system:** Standardised established procedures to govern public sector personnel through a formalised civil service for recruitment, pay, grading and other aspects of internal management.

Chieftaincy was one of the key indigenous governance institutions. Traditional African systems were aware of the misgivings of poor government, an unravelling state (often as a result of local and regional conflicts) or upheavals associated with political transition (Chabal and Daloz 1999). Pre-colonial societies generally had elaborate systems of checks and balances for holding the leaders accountable because the then-political systems knew the dangers of allowing a traditional leader to attain uncontrolled power (Ayittey 1999:89).

Three institutional mechanisms of checks and balances existed. First, some checks were handled within religious structures. Second, some checks and balances were institutionalised within the existing political institutions. Third, certain checks and balances were simply spontaneous. As a result, it was not unusual for leaders who failed to meet societal expectations to be removed from power. In a number of cases, chiefs were surrounded by numerous institutions, which served as checks regarding their powers (Ayittey 1999:126). In terms of religious checks and balances, the chief/king was the guardian of the people and served as a bridge between the ancestors and the people. The duty of ensuring the safety and well-being of their people to please the ancestors was explicitly stated when the chiefs were sworn into power (Opuni-Frimpong 2012:57). The institutionalised checks and balances took the form of private and public reprimands from the Queen Mother, the inner or Privy Council of Advisers and the Council of Elders (Ayittey 1991:128). Where religious and institutional checks and balances failed, a third form of checks and balances through spontaneous action took place (Ayittey 1991:140).

In other societies, respective institutions established for managing societal affairs played this role. If a chief/king did not listen to these entities, he could face being removed from his position of power. For example, the Asante people removed three kings from power: Osei Kwame in 1799 for absenting himself from Kumasi and failing to perform his religious duties during the Adaye festivals; Karikari in 1874 for extravagance; and Mensa Bonsu in 1883 for excessively taxing the Asante people (Ayittey 1991:139). The protection of human rights and the interests of the community played a key role. In traditional Africa, the rights of the individual never came before the rights of the community.

The African indigenous judicial system

Political governance and judicial systems are key cornerstones of human civilisation. The judiciary, or any institution mandated to handle disputes in society, is a central feature of a functioning state/society. Indigenous societies had extensive judicial systems for handling grievances at different levels. Like modern-day law, there existed institutions for dealing with private law (resolving disputes between individuals) and public law (resolving disputes between individuals and the state). Some were written rules, while others were based on societal customs. The institutions of conflict prevention and resolution, resource management, and social integration were valued as a constitution and a cornerstone of society (Legesse 1973:73).

The customs guided the administration of justice and were a key component of indigenous judicial systems in several societies. The indigenous judicial system also had comprehensive consultation processes that were used to maintain order and harmony in communities. Grievance hearings before community

members were fundamental to the indigenous justice system. During these hearings, all community members were welcome to attend. In addition, the principle of collective indemnity and communal solidarity underlined the judicial system of indigenous societies, with a key guiding rule that decisions needed to be made by consensus.

Heath (2001) states that Africa has been viewed as a stronghold for many variants of free, fair, thorough, and advanced legal systems. Indigenous African systems had diverse court systems for resolving disputes. Some of the indigenous court systems still exist in the traditional authorities on the continent. This is testimony to their enduring nature and the need for a home-grown and time-tested legal system in Africa.

According to Heath (2001), the Somali indigenous democratic system of governance, *Gadaa*, for example, was based on elections, democratic procedures, new leadership every eight years and a smooth transition of power. *Gadaa* was a complex system in which the Oromo were divided into age groups, with specific rights, duties and responsibilities. Known as *miseensa* or parties, duties and responsibilities in military, political, legal and cultural affairs were given to individuals of each *Gadaa* group from childhood to adulthood. Each *miseensa* had specific roles and functions to perform in five stages of eight years (Baissa Lemu 1971:48). While Legesse (2000) highlights that the *Gadaa* institutions assumed military, economic, political and ritual responsibilities in the leadership of the Oromo society, Hinnant (1978) states that these institutions were less politically relevant and played more of a ritualistic role. The system was, however, crafted in such a way that it included all the functions of modern government, such as executive, judicial and legislative functions. The Oromo were able to participate in self-rule, elect new leaders every eight years, recall those who failed to discharge responsibilities, make laws through their representatives, and settle disputes according to the law (Baissa Lemu 1971:50).

In another example of indigenous judicial systems, the *gacaca* court hearings were synonymous with the Tutsi of Rwanda. In these courts the hearings were held in open places where all the concerned parties to the disputes were invited. The grievances of the offended were followed by the accused defending their acts, as is the case with contemporary judicial systems. Testimonies were heard from eyewitnesses and supporters of both the accused and the complainant and these constituted the key elements of what is now referred to as natural justice. The judges of the time were tasked with sifting through submissions by all parties to separate lies, inconsistencies in arguments and other discrepancies before declaring judgement. There was always room for a retrial or appeal to a court of higher authority.

Existing literature suggests that traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in Africa were generally closely bound with socio-political and economic realities of communities (Rabar and Karimi 2004). In Tanzania, traditional conflict resolution

mechanisms have played a major role in bringing about harmony and peace among members of the society. These mechanisms were created within the socio-political structure of every community (Emanuel and Ndimbwa 2013). As the mechanisms of resolving conflict tended to be rooted in the culture and history of the particular society, the customary courts relied on the goodwill of society to adhere to the ruling in any conflict. The judicial and conflict resolution systems were anchored on the social set-up of the societies and disputes were handled by different structures, depending on the gravity of the offence. Olaniyan (1985:28) states that the nuclear family, for example, had jurisdiction to settle minor disputes among members of the family, while more severe offences were handled by the extended family or kindred. In these societies, the lineage heads settled “cases of assault, petty theft, family disputes, adultery and even divorce”. In most African societies, for example, the Igbo of Nigeria, the village court handled inter-lineage cases where the lineages involved could not reach agreement (Olaniyan 1985). While handling conflict in indigenous societies, it was emphasised that both the plaintiff and defendant pay settlement fees, although the plaintiff only paid the summons fees. The innocent party had a part of their settlement fees refunded. These procedures resembled the contemporary court procedures for handling disputes.

The *Boran* political and judicial system from modern Ethiopia is another example of an indigenous system that has never received any formal recognition. Yet, this system has been, and remains, an important institution for regulating interpersonal relations in the rural context. The overall state-imposed allocation of land and resources to newcomers has partly affected the relevance of this indigenous system. However, for the current debate, it remains worthy of attention. Newcomers who claim a substantial share of existing water rights and often neglect the local rules and agreements ignite the importance of home-grown community-based structures for managing such scarce resources. The relationship between the formal political administration units of government and traditional institutions has also received attention.

Indigenous knowledge systems of education

While Africa’s pre-colonial education systems have been neglected, they present scholarly attention within our contemporary public administration discourses. Odhiambo (1990) observes that the education system in Africa has tended to unfairly ignore the knowledge, skills and survival strategies of local farmers who successfully managed their farmlands and remained productive for centuries, with little or no external input. In pre-colonial Africa, traditional skills and knowledge were acquired in four different ways, depending on the type of knowledge in question. Knowledge was transmitted through a process of apprenticeship; the

practice of oral tradition; direct observation and instruction; and through dreams, natural talents or divine gifts.

Ssekamwa (2001) reports that imparting specialised knowledge and skills through oral tradition was a key characteristic of indigenous educational systems. From an early age, children were exposed to the different types of life-skill activities in the village. In terms of pre-colonial African informal systems, fathers and mothers played a critical role of educating boys and girls, respectively. While this indigenous system had no known curriculum and was offered in indigenous languages, it emphasised a communal sense of education, promoted indigenous culture and prepared learners to be future societal leaders (Kasibante 2001). According to Semali (1997), a curriculum which divides “indigenous” knowledge from “modern” knowledge fails to teach students about the unique cultural patterns by which people developed and advanced their social worlds, and ignores the ways in which “modern” cultural beliefs and practices drew from folklore and indigenous ways of life.

Indigenous knowledge on economics and trade

Indigenous African societies have been involved in trade and commerce for centuries. Ayittey (2006:345) highlights that indigenous societies had a unique system of trading which was based on the institution of trust, and with this trust, it was possible for “middlemen or agents to secure credit”. Skinner (1961) has long reported how Africans were involved in diverse economic activities that revolved around “agriculture, pastoralism, hunting, fishing, and woodworking”. The indigenous societies also had small thriving industries such as pottery, brass works, iron, copper, silver, gold and tin smelting and smithing which constituted key ingredients of the economy of the time. The key characteristics of the indigenous economic system were its subsistence nature, limited goods and services and small-scale production. In these societies, labour was sourced locally – usually among family members. Distribution of land, labour and produce was, to a large extent, determined by social relationships. The tools that were used were simple and were made from locally available resources. People borrowed money by pledging their farms or formed partnerships with a person with capital. In the African marketplace, trade and economics were founded on the idea of production for consumption and exchange. In the West, it is founded on “the worker selling his labor for wages, or by the manufacturer producing goods for profit and then using the profit to obtain other desired items” (Schneider 1986:181).

Western scholars have always attempted to characterise African indigenous economic systems as nothing more than hunter-gatherer activities, and the myth of subsistence-based indigenous African economies has long been upheld by anthropologists and most European historians studying African culture. Schneider

(1986:181) disproves claims of a focus on hunting and primitivity, by stating that the economic system that existed in pre-colonial Africa was legitimate and in line with what is acceptable as the fundamentals of market process. Understandably, the way Africans conducted their economic affairs differed from that of Europe and America “but their behavior could still be considered economic and commensurate with market process” (Schneider 1986:181).

Indigenous knowledge in medicine

In the history of medicine, societies have changed their approach to illness and disease from ancient times to the present. Medical institutions, referred to as Houses of Life, are known to have been established in ancient Egypt as early as 2200^{BC}. Early medical traditions included those of Babylon, China, Egypt and India. Indigenous African societies had their own systems of healing the sick and practising medicine, which usually relied on the use of locally available plants. Indigenous medicinal knowledge is thus as old as the first inhabitants of the continent. For centuries, this knowledge was applied to ensure longevity and quality of life within societies, and although practised in various interpretations, there is general consensus regarding its underlying philosophy. Flint (2001:202), for example, records that “when Europeans first arrived, Africans in the Zulu kingdom had, for the most part, minimised health risks by settling outside low-lying malarial areas and requiring multiple dwelling structures for large families”. Herbalists also prescribed an array of remedies based on the medicinal component of a specific plant, root or herb.

The sophisticated nature of indigenous healing that Baronov (2008:137) associates with African indigenous herbal remedies has led Western pharmaceutical companies to patent several of the age-old remedies as their own intellectual property. Baronov asserts that, “This robbery is based on an ongoing relation of exploitation between Africa and the West as well as biomedicine’s proclivity to treat medical care as comprised of discrete elements that exists outside a holistic framework”.

In pre-colonial Africa, supernatural healing characterised a number of African societies. Regarding the relevance and usefulness of supernatural healing, there are two schools of thought on its role in African indigenous medical practice. One school of thought argues that the role of such forces is archaic and inconsequential in the study of the herbal knowledge of the medical practitioners. The supernatural aspect of African indigenous medicine, the school of thought contends, “contravene the laws of nature and are therefore, surely nothing more than the fanciful ranting of a preliterate, uneducated and primitive mind, however respectfully discussed” (Baronov 2008:138). The second school of thought, however, argues that supernatural healing exists, and the fact that Western science, which upholds only the physical, does not take it into consideration, is not proof of its non-existence. This school of thought submits that “such forces pertain to a reality not captured by

investigations of the natural world (for example, ancestral spirits) and are, therefore, simply beyond the self-imposed ontological limits of the Western natural sciences” (Baronov 2008:138). Notably, practitioners and patrons of indigenous African medicine and several African scholars subscribe to the latter view.

Closely related to the supernatural realm of analysis in explaining indigenous medicine practices is the social network explanation as the cause of disease in human beings (Baronov 2008 142). Indigenous African medical philosophy contends that a breakdown in interpersonal relationships would occur when two people engage in some sort of quarrel. This could lead to a physical breakdown, especially when one party engages the supernatural to harm the other. For the indigenous medical practitioner, it is pointless to administer herbs to treat the symptoms of ill health if the underlying causes are not adequately addressed.

THE RELEVANCE OF INDIGENOUS SYSTEMS IN MODERN GOVERNANCE

The preceding section has examined a variety of indigenous systems of politics, commerce, education, medicine and governance. For the purposes of understanding and relevance, it is important to investigate whether such systems and practices can help shed light on understanding of contemporary public administration problems. Undoubtedly, one can learn many lessons from history. Indigenous systems were not perfect as there were many incidences of human rights violations. Green (2016:79) reminds us how new factors, like technology, women’s rights and mass literacy, have emerged to shake the kaleidoscope of power and unleash the possible, as do new threats like climate change. Even in all these new developments, history remains an engine of the imagination.

Odhiambo (1990:3) argues that, “Indigenous knowledge can reveal missing ecological keys, which may help scientists develop alternative agricultural technologies less dependent on nonrenewable resources and environmentally damaging inputs (e.g., chemical pesticides), than conventional technologies”. Through this connection, it is argued that a repository of indigenous knowledge, practices, systems, cultures and customs offers a perfect platform for understanding contemporary governance problems and provide us with useful knowledge on how some societal problems have been addressed in the past. This gives contemporary analysts a template or a set of best practices for addressing similar modern-day problems.

While African traditional knowledge systems may not necessarily be better suited to making long-term predictions of change, indigenous knowledge (as observed in traditional survival strategies) may have some advantages in recognising the onset of change and finding ingenious ways to accommodate and mitigate them at an early stage and within community-based decision-making structures (Lalonde

1991:4). The wisdom and skills maintained by the “keepers of indigenous knowledge” (as applied in the traditional practices of farmers, hunters, gatherers, master fishermen, artisans, etc.), are based on a dynamic and sophisticated understanding of their local surroundings. Change in the use of this knowledge is not random, but rather predicated upon conscious efforts by people to define their problems and seek solutions through local experiments and innovation, including evaluating and learning from appropriate technologies elsewhere (Lalonde 1991:4).

Public Administration is taught at various levels at universities in Africa. Such intellectual debates require knowledge from different contexts and perspectives. Indigenous systems of governance offer contemporary analysis on the perspective of the importance and longevity of certain democratic values. Wiredu (1997:307) explains how the idea of consensual democracy was an African feature and more specifically of the Ashanti kingdom. Ayithey (1999:91) argues that the indigenous system of government was unique and inclusive thanks to an open system of decision-making along with representation through kinship. Based on the African philosophical thought of interconnectedness and sacredness of the land and its people, decisions at village meetings were made by consensus (Ayithey 1999:88). If unanimity was not reached, the chief would request a village assembly where deliberations took place in order to reach consensus. The premise of making decisions through consensus was to ensure that minority positions were heard and considered. While consensus-building brought about unity, the downside was the length of time it took to make decisions. It often took days and sometimes weeks to come to a decision due to the need to build consensus.

Lalonde (1991:5) argues that an understanding of indigenous knowledge and customs can help development planners with establishing more flexible project alternatives or innovative mitigative measures, in order to avoid inadvertent damage to the ecosystem or culture. Agriculture has been the backbone of African society since time immemorial. In recognising the need for pre-existing indigenous knowledge and its usefulness in agriculture, several development agencies have called for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the research and development of agricultural projects in developing countries. The Farming Systems Research and Extension Projects, for example, “recognise that local farmers know a great deal more about their own situations and needs than does anyone else, and these exigencies can and should form the basis of local development projects in the sector” (Warren 1991:10).

TOWARDS A MODEL OF INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

A model is a framework for understanding what held indigenous societies together and can be used as an intellectual guide for analysing the indigenous society's

contemporary system. Gennaioli and Rainer (2007) suggest that, as pre-colonial political centralisation has had an impact on the contemporary levels of development in Africa, it is prudent to have a framework upon which such impact can be analysed effectively. Moreover, Nkondo (2012) highlights that the perception of African indigenous knowledge as a mere repetition of practices without any theory has perpetuated the Western cultural and intellectual arrogance on African matters. This approach is unwelcome and has been criticised for distancing higher education on the continent from community concerns and producing graduates who tend to be inadequately sensitive to the developmental challenges of their local communities and country (Muya 2007).

A model for indigenous governance and management systems needs to be based on the centrality of people as the key element to any governance arrangement. While people are central, representative democracy demands that certain structures be put in place to manage societal affairs. The people have a collective view of what they need (rights) and what they demand from those in leadership positions (services and protection of their rights). People broadly establish systems and structures for managing their affairs through elected representatives. History tells us how people have always had systems of checks and balances in place. The other fundamental feature of the governance model is therefore a need to examine structures and systems that were established for managing societal affairs, as well as the checks and balances for demanding accountability.

The systems of governance or government align with the contemporary branches of government in terms of the separation of powers. Some structures are vested within the judicial branch, with systems of appeal mechanisms. Others are vested within legislative functions, which were traditionally performed by the assembly and decision-making was participatory and consensus-based. The executive functions were performed by those assigned the power and a system of decentralisation was recognised. Notably, the advent of technology and the emergence of the need to show accountability creates another element of the governance framework that is based on monitoring and evaluation as well as an additional element that is based on the use of technology.

CONCLUSIONS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Indigenous societies were diverse and had various governance and management systems. These societies had useful systems and practices that need to be espoused and used in modern public administration discourses. Having examined the various key features of the traditional governance and management systems in indigenous societies, a number of building blocks emerge. First, people and government are fundamental building blocks in a functioning society. The building blocks of any

government are the people and all government activities must be directed at improving its service to the people. Second, decision-making processes and practices give various stakeholders insight into government's intentions. Consensus and stakeholder involvement, as emphasised among traditional African cultures, are critical elements of contemporary public administration discourse.

Third, checks and balances are an important feature for any level of governance. To address the centralisation of authority, indigenous systems teach us how checks and balances were implemented to curb despotism among leaders. In this arrangement, decentralisation of the political system played a fundamental role. Fourth, freedom of expression, the protection of human rights, decision-making by consensus and a heavy reliance on systems for promoting participatory democracy are critical. As such, African scholars should show a renewed interest in theories and models for advancing indigenous governance and management systems and practices.

NOTE

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ISSN 1015-4833