

African Leadership Deficit in the Global Context: A Review

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of leadership in Africa within the context of global governance and socio-political challenges. It examines the concept of leadership deficit, highlighting issues of legitimacy, accountability, and effectiveness faced by many African nations. Leadership is categorised into three phases: making, unmaking and remaking, each representing distinct historical and contemporary contexts. The Making phase reflects how pre-colonial and colonial histories shaped foundational leadership structures, where indigenous leaders navigated colonial complexities, often becoming co-opted into colonial governance, creating a dual legacy of agency and subjugation. The Unmaking phase illustrates the post-colonial struggle for identity and autonomy, where leaders emerged with promises of liberation but often resorted to authoritarianism, corruption, and civil strife. This period has resulted in significant disillusionment among citizens as leaders fail to address pressing issues such as poverty and inequality. The Remaking phase envisions a new paradigm emphasising transformative and inclusive governance, exploring innovative leadership models from grassroots movements to digital activism. It advocates for redefining leadership to prioritise transparency, sustainability, and community engagement. Employing a historical and multidisciplinary approach, the study identifies significant challenges facing transformative leadership in Africa, including political instability, corruption, weak institutions, economic constraints, and social fragmentation. Addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering an environment conducive to transformative leadership and sustainable development. This paper, being a conceptual one, aims to contribute to political development in Africa.

Keywords: Leadership; Post-colonial state; Accountability; Leadership Deficit.

1. Introduction

Leadership is a necessary phenomenon in the political field. It is the ability of an individual or group to inspire confidence and earn respect, allowing a person or group to guide and influence followers effectively. Every political activity does need a leader, without which it may not be effective or workable, although, of course, leadership is also determined by situations and circumstances. A leader at one time may not be a leader at another time. Without a leader, every group is a “crowd, each one of the members going his own way, while a leader is one who shows the way and carries them all together behind him” (Chaturvedi, 2006:170). Leadership may be defined as an instrument exercised by a leader or a group of leaders by which

all other elements of national power – geography, economy, population, technology, ideology, and morale – can be mobilised and used purposefully and effectively for the achievement of a nation's goals in a given context. Leadership is so essential for the strength or progress of a nation that often the strength or progress of a nation itself is sought to be judged in terms of its leadership. Leadership can be of different types: military, political, diplomatic, social, economic, and so on (Chaturvedi, 2006). Perhaps the most accepted definition of organisational leadership functions comes from Bernard (1938) in his study of the functions of the executive. According to Shafritz et al. (2011:374), he defines three essential functions of leaders or executives, viz:

- (1) To provide a system of communication,
- (2) To promote the securing of essential efforts, and
- (3) To formulate and define the purposes and goals of an organisation (also cited in Eneanya, 2025:345).

However, quality and progressive developmental leadership is a mirage in contemporary Africa. There is no doubt that in Africa and other developing countries, national development continues to be elusive because of a leadership deficit and discontinuities. The political space is monopolised by people who have no vision of what they want to do beyond holding political power. It is imperative to emphasise that the history of nation-states and civilisations has shown the importance of focused leadership in the socio-economic development and transformation of their countries. This has not only uplifted the living conditions of their people but also changed the status and destiny of their countries in the international system. There is little doubt that the seminal work *Why Nations Fail* tied the development and underdevelopment of nations largely to the quality of their leadership (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In the words of Dauda (2022:195) – from Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, Mao Tse Tsung in China, the Meiji monarchy in Japan, Stalin in the former Soviet Union, Mahatma Gandhi of India, Winston Churchill of Britain, Charles De Gaulle of France, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln of the United States of America – we see illustrations of the role of leadership in nation-building (Dauda, 2022).

There is no denying that in the contemporary world, the problem of leadership deficit is a global challenge and not peculiar to any region or part of the world (Okunade, 2008:3). The challenge, however, lies in the fact that the severity of the problem is considerably greater in Africa, where the leadership deficit is more pronounced across virtually all sectors of society. And that is Africa's big challenge. More so, leadership plays a fundamental role in shaping world affairs, which is the main thrust of this paper.

This paper is divided into sections. Following on from the introduction above, Part 2 discusses the proper conceptualisation of leadership in its various dimensions to eliminate the ambiguities and misunderstandings often associated with concepts in the social sciences. We, however, focused attention on its typology. Part 3 flashbacks to leadership recruitment in pre-colonial Africa, when electoral/representative democracy was completely alien to the continent. Part 4 highlights reasons for, and various dimensions of leadership deficit in Africa. Part 5 is a consideration of how best to remake leadership in post-colonial African states. The paper, however, infers that political leadership in Africa should develop the required political will if the continent is not to continually lag behind in the 21st century.

2. On Conceptualisation of Leadership

Undoubtedly, leadership, like several other concepts in social sciences, lacks a universal definition, and it is interpreted in various ways. Leadership is a concept with wide applications. It applies to all categories of human collectivities. Munroe (cited in Abdulkarim, 2024:11) defines leadership as the ability to influence and inspire others to achieve a common goal while maintaining commitment and confidence. Collier and Williams (2004) highlight influence as a key aspect of leadership, meaning the ability to direct others towards important goals. Ordinarily, leadership can be seen as the action of leading a group of people or an organisation, or even a nation, or the ability to do this (Nebo, 2019:10). However, leadership is much deeper and broader than this simplistic definition when it comes to leading a nation. Pierce and Newstrom (2011) wrote that “Leaders are individuals who are capable of taking ambiguous situations, interpreting these situations, and framing for the followers an understanding of the situation and what needs to be done to move forward” (cited in Abdulkarim, 2024).

Furthermore, Borgadus in 1928 defined leadership as “the creating and setting forth of exceptional behavioural patterns in such a way that other persons respond” (cited in Oluleye, 1985:1). A research work in the same book revealed the following: focus of group process, personality, art of inducing compliance, exercise of influence, act of behaviour, form of persuasion, instrument of good achievement, effect of interaction, role differentiation and initiation structure (ibid.).

Nevertheless, there are several ways through which a leadership position can be assumed, viz:

- (a) Leadership through self-imposition is a common method, which is devoid of constitutional issues.
- (b) It can be through the collective imposition of a person on others. This method has an element of constitutionality.
- (c) It could be through usurpation.
- (d) It may be through collusion.
- (e) It may be through physical performance in a struggle, as can be evidenced in some struggles for independence by nationalists whose countries were under imperial tutelage (Oluleye, 1985).

In a perceptive lecture, Abdulkarim (2024) identified several attributes of a good leader, namely:

- (i) A leader must be a man/woman of good knowledge.
- (ii) Principle is another attribute of a good leader.
- (iii) Closely related to knowledge is intellectual humility.
- (iv) Perhaps the strongest attribute is vision.
- (v) Leaders should be able to connect effectively with the led.
- (vi) Embracing a servant’s mindset.

In contrast, Barbara (2004, cited in Abdulkarim, 2024) listed some traits of a bad leader, which include: incompetence, rigidity, intemperance, callousness, corruption, insularity, and evil.

It is important to briefly dwell on the typology of leadership. In his book, *Petty Tyranny in Organisations*, Blake Ashforth discussed the potentially destructive sides of situations and identified what he referred to as petty tyrants, that is, leaders who exercise a tyrannical style of management, resulting in a climate of

fear. Fear in leadership situations can be counterproductive and affect productivity negatively when taken to the extreme. Fear is a hallmark of toxic leadership (Nebo, 2019:33). Toxic leadership simply refers to any leadership that leaves a place worse than it met it. In other words, if you assume a leadership position, even under difficult circumstances, and cannot improve the situation, then at the very least, ensure that you do not leave it worse than you found it. Toxic leaders create a “hyena mentality” in their subordinates – a permanent sense of fear at all times.

Conversely, a charismatic leader is the direct opposite of a toxic one. Ten basic attributes are usually depicted in a positive leader:

- (1) Ability to take action.
- (2) Courage.
- (3) Willpower.
- (4) Magnetism.
- (5) Man management.
- (6) Knowledge.
- (7) Moderate living.
- (8) Fitness.
- (9) Tact and diplomacy.
- (10) Honesty (ibid.).

The challenge in Africa, as shall be demonstrated later in this paper, is the dearth of credible leaders who can satisfy the basic minimum conditions for impactful leadership.

3. Modes of Leadership Recruitment in Pre-Colonial Africa

Undoubtedly, in virtually every human collectivity, irrespective of its level of development, there are various modes of leadership recruitment. Thus, before representative democracy was brought by European penetration to Africa, pre-colonial societies and various communities had ways by which leaders emerged. In essence, no matter how primitive the societies were, there was no vacuum vis-à-vis leadership. In their highly insightful and influential study, social anthropologists M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1950) observed that in certain regions of Africa, it is relatively straightforward to identify and define what may be termed a “political society.” In an incisive preface to the book, Professor Radcliffe-Brown (1950:xix) asserted that “what one may call wars of conquest have been important in Africa, as they have been in Europe. When such a war is successful, it establishes one people as conquerors over another, who is thus incorporated into a larger political society, sometimes in an inferior position as a subject people.” Thus, conquest is known to be one of the ways by which leadership position is assumed in pre-colonial Africa.

Be that as it is, gerontocracy – rule by elders – is a form of political organisation that is found in parts of Africa. In some tribes of East Africa, it is systematised by means of a definite structure of age-sets and age-grades. Hence, the older you are, the nearer you are to a position of leadership in society. Similarly, where a society is under a chief or king, one may find an element of gerontocracy combined with the monarchical principle. A king or a chief is known to be well recognised leaders in African societies (ibid. xxii).

We cannot exclude religion when referring to leadership positions and roles in Africa. Practitioners of Traditional African Religions (TAR) do honour their oracles and regard them as important sources of spiritual guidance. Oracles of “Ifa”, “Sango”, “Oya”, or “Obatala” deities, among others, are well respected as leaders by the Yoruba race in Nigeria. This has nothing to do with age, but a deep involvement in spiritual matters. The oracles settle conflicts and inflict punishments on offenders. We cannot conclude this section without adding the fact that in pre-colonial African societies, there were built-in mechanisms to punish offenders for different categories of crimes.

4. Leadership Deficit in Post-Colonial African States

Africa’s post-colonial state is grossly enmeshed in the fundamental problem of leadership deficit. Reflecting on Nigeria’s development challenges, Chinua Achebe – a literary giant – identified this leadership deficit in *The Trouble with Nigeria* when he inferred that:

“The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land, climate, water, or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to a challenge of personal example, which is the hallmark of true leadership” (cited in Ojo, 2009:693).

This sentiment can be perfectly extended to the entire continent, where favourable climatic conditions, good vegetation, and many other positive things exist, but alongside weak leadership. Undoubtedly, nothing threatens a nation’s people like mediocre leadership. Unfortunately, Nigeria, and indeed the African continent, has not had the redeeming grace of consistent, sound leadership to facilitate development. This is the worst crisis Africa has been contending with. According to Nixon, the formula for successful leadership has three elements: a great man, a great country, and a great issue. The small man leading a great nation in a great crisis clearly fails the test of greatness but never wins the recognition (Adeleye, 1997:68-78; also cited in Ojo, 2009).

This problem manifests itself in the inability of political leaders to better the lot of the masses. Weak leadership is revealed when there is a conspicuous absence of sound social programmes geared towards the production and provision of food, health care, employment, shelter, and education for all. No doubt, one of the concomitant effects of leadership deficit in Africa is that the citizenry is living in a system where nothing works. Successive governments, known for mere Fabian rhetoric, were incapable of improving the lot of the people. Whether military or civilian, any government is ultimately judged by its ability to provide the good governance that citizens desire (Ojo, 2009). Despite its abundant resources, Africa continues to struggle with development, largely due to leadership-related challenges and other structural constraints. Several factors can be identified to explain this situation.

Firstly, the processes of leadership recruitment in post-colonial African states have been faulty, more so with the imported model of representative democracy, which Africa has not been able to emulate correctly. The system has been throwing up toxic leaders who lack passion for development. Aside from very few, such as Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Nelson Mandela of South Africa (all of revered memory), among others, the continent has been suffering from a dearth of quality leadership for a long time.

Secondly, African leaders have not demonstrated sufficient hard work that leadership demands. Their perception of public office is far from the sacrifice that it entails, but rather the comfort of the office. This attitude has promoted corruption on the continent. Many African countries are usually poorly rated annually by the International Corruption Perception index each year. It is tragic that they plunder their countries and syphon the money to Europe and America. For instance, the Thabo Mbeki report of 2018 put Africa's losses at between \$50 and \$60 billion per year, with Nigeria accounting for 30 per cent of the amount. Illicit financial flows from Africa, as reported by the HEDA Resource Centre, continue to hinder the continent's development by facilitating the loss of valuable financial resources (HEDA, 2021, cited in *Vanguard*, April 25, 2021, Lagos, p. 6). Unfortunately, their mindset is probably that a leadership position is an avenue to get rich quickly and to avenge the evils done to them or their tribes.

On the other hand, as the popular saying goes, *it takes two to tango*, implying that responsibility for the situation does not rest with one party alone. The followers, too, are extremely weak in Africa, as can be seen in situations where leaders are super-corrupt and directionless, and their followers are unable to hold them accountable. In essence, both the leaders and the led are irresponsible in Africa, with the boomerang effect of under-development. In addition, the colonial masters were high-handed. The Western education they brought was an empty curriculum that trained Africans how to only read and write, simply because missionaries required interpreters to help them evangelise. It took a very long time for Africans to attempt deep thinking and acquire knowledge of Science and Technology. Courses that were newly introduced here were taught centuries earlier in Europe and America. The problem of leadership deficit in Africa is further compounded by the influence of foreign compradors. These kinds of patriotic instincts are known to have compromised African leaders. Public funds syphoned in Africa are taken to Europe to be kept and invested. When such slush monies are discovered, it takes an extremely long time to get them repatriated and, worse still, without interest.

Interestingly, some African leaders who sought to foster development through effective leadership faced external interference from European and American leaders, with the aid of the Criminal Intelligence Agency (CIA) and other undercover agencies, which hindered their efforts. A case in point is that of Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, which is enough to buttress this point. The Libyan strongman was in a bid to develop his country and to unify Africa. This was infuriating to the Western powers, most especially the United States of America (USA), which necessitated sponsoring uprisings that upturned his government and eventually destabilised Libya. The USA later regretted the action, but the harm had been done. In the same vein, we can recall nine other prominent African leaders who were brutally assassinated by foreign powers before the Gaddafi experience. They are (1). Patrice Lumumba of the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1961; (2). Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso in 1987; (3) Sylvanus Olympio of Togo in 1963; (4) Amilcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau in 1973; (5) Mariam Nguabe of Congo in 1977; (6) Anwar Sadat of Egypt in 1982; (7) Samora Machel of Mozambique in 1966; (8) Marien Nguoabe of Burundi in 1993; and (9) Laurent-Désiré Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In essence, the developed world is largely responsible for the underdevelopment in Africa. These leaders were all brutally assassinated with the aid of local compradors because of their interest in developing their respective countries and stopping the exploitation of their God-given natural resources. Thus, the issues addressed in this section are far from being exhaustive of all factors that are responsible for the leadership deficit in Africa.

5. Remaking Africa's Leadership

Presently, there is an urgent need to reinvent leadership in Africa. Without that, the consequential effect will be telling, not only on the continent but also on the whole world. The developed world may have to share more of the horror associated with the leadership deficit in Africa. Currently, the present rate of illegal immigrants to Europe and America is alarming. This has resulted in the “Japa syndrome” (the mass emigration of Nigerians seeking better opportunities abroad) ravaging virtually all countries on the continent. This is simply because both economic and political milieus in Africa are inhospitable for the younger generation to thrive and maximise their potential.

To reverse the trend, African leaders in all facets require a complete reorientation for servant leadership to evolve (Okunade, 2008:34). Meanwhile, based on Greenleaf's original writings, Spears (1995) identifies a set of ten characteristics of the servant leaders that are of critical importance and are central to the development of servant leaders. These are: Listening, Empathy, Healing, Awareness, Persuasion, Conceptualisation, Foresight, Stewardship, Commitment to the growth of their people, and Building Community. In essence, servant leadership begins with the inherent feeling that one wants to serve and “the conscious choice... to aspire to lead” (Okunade, 2008:35). Thus, servant leadership is primarily a principle of leadership that believes that the leader is first and foremost a servant of their people or followers. Servant leadership sees leadership as a trust that should never be betrayed. It sees leadership from the perspective of influence and not that of coercion, intimidation, bullying, threats, or dictatorship (Nebo, 2019:36). As a servant is always accountable to their master, a servant leader is always accountable to their people. They do not consider accountability. After all, power belongs to the people, and authority belongs to those the people have called to lead them.

6. Concluding Remarks

The theme of this paper is indeed apt – Making, Unmaking and Remaking Africa – as the continent indeed needs purposeful leadership. The current set of leaders needs a general overhaul, or they should give way to the emergence of a new set. The current circulating governing elite have no doubt been a cog in the wheel of progress. Consciously or otherwise, the system is undergoing a gradual rebirth. There are important lessons to be drawn from the recent divisions within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). A number of member states, particularly Francophone countries, have withdrawn from the regional bloc and have since pursued alternative political and developmental trajectories. While some of these countries are currently under military rule, their leaders have sought to project a reform-oriented agenda aimed at addressing governance challenges and responding to popular demands for improved socio-economic conditions.

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