Advancing Africa through management knowledge and practice: the way forward

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to review and summarizes the articles that were accepted for the special issue focusing on "Advancing Africa through management knowledge and practice". The paper also provides suggestions for future research focus for researchers on management issues in and about Africa. **Design/methodology/approach:** The paper presents a conceptual review the distinctiveness of the five articles in the special issue which focus a personal reflection about management research and education in Africa, effective leadership development in Africa and the African diaspora, performance management implementation in the public sector; internationalization process of African businesses with special reference to banks; and strategic factors that could be emphasized by African firms to improve their performance. These papers are synthesized to present a coherent management research framework for Africa. **Findings:** African management research requires a strategic choice approach, which asks interesting questions focusing on issues relevant to the growth of African businesses and the development of African national economies. African management research needs an identity that is uniquely African such as the intersection of private and public (including governments) interests; and the blurred nature of the formal and informal sectors. **Originality/value:** The paper presents some opportunities and value of conducting management research in and about Africa in the areas of leadership and also followership.

Keywords: Africa | management research | leadership | African management research | strategic choice | followership | public sector | internationalization process | strategy research

Article:

Overview

This special issue is about the importance of management knowledge and practice in advancing the growth of businesses in Africa. The role of management knowledge in the growth of African businesses and consequently the African continent cannot be overemphasized. Management knowledge is critical in developing and sustaining long-term capabilities of firms which could be used to enhance productivity and performance. Several researchers have argued that knowledge

is crucial in fostering innovative activity in organizations and economies, which in turn stimulates economic growth and development (Howell, 2002; Romer, 1998). However, in Africa, the role of management knowledge and practice goes beyond innovativeness and capabilities development and exploitation at the organization level. Management knowledge and practice is also critical at the national level because most African countries have a large public sector, the government is the most important economic actor, and the government plays a very important role in the strategic organization of business activities (Acquaah, 2008).

The African continent is endowed with vast national resources (both natural and human), and how to manage these national resources in order to foster economic growth and development, thereby alleviating poverty is noteworthy (Shrestha *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, the inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Africa has grown significantly over the years. For instance, from 2005 to 2011, FDI inflows to Africa increased from US$30.5 billion to 42.7 billion (UNCTAD, 2012). These FDI inflows to Africa to finance and support development projects need to be effectively managed in order for them to yield their intended objectives. Thus, Nkomo (2011) has argued that management knowledge is vital to the development and transformation process in Africa. Consequently, encouraging the production, dissemination and practice of management knowledge about Africa and the rest of the world in Africa is indispensable to the growth and development of organizations and economies.

Recent reviews of the production of knowledge about management in Africa through research publications show that not only is a small number published in the top 50 journals in management (Zoogah *et al.*, 2009), but only 216 articles were published between 1950 and 2011 in management journals (Zoogah and Nkomo, 2013). Other researchers have also commented on the dearth of articles on management in Africa by researchers who are based in Africa (Brough *et al.*, 2008). To help fill the gap and encourage the production and dissemination of management knowledge about Africa in Africa, The Africa Academy of Management (AFAM) was formed on November 24, 2010. One of the objectives of AFAM is to provide an identity to African management. As Zoogah and Nkomo (2013, p. 23) argue, "the likelihood of Africa's research identity being supplanted by foreigners is greater" if African scholars do not help develop that identity. A similar view was expressed about 30 years ago (Kiggundu, 1989). In order to develop an African management identity, Zoogah and Nkomo (2013) propose four options – symbolic (research that neither contributes to unique African identity nor global identity), sentimental (research that contributes to defining foreign rather than African identity), territorial (research that contributes to defining a very unique African identity), and instrumental (research that contributes to defining both African and global management identity). The choice of a particular option should be strategic (i.e. involve a calculus of enhancing African management in the global space). It can be done as suggested by strategic choice theory.

Strategic choice theory which first originated from the seminal research by Chandler (1962) on the relationship between firm strategy and structure, has been popularized by the work of Child (1972, 1997). Child (1997) argues that strategic choice does not only focus on the relationship between the organizational design and structure, and strategy, but also the environment in which the organization is operating. Strategic choice is defined as "the process whereby power-holders within organizations decide upon courses of strategic action" (Child, 1997, p. 45). According to Child (1997, p. 1) "strategic choice drew attention to the active role of leading groups who had

power to influence the structures of their organizations through an essentially *politically* process" (italic in original). Thus, opportunities in any environment that could potentially be exploited by any actor are critically dependent on the power that is exercised by the major decision-makers because of their influence in providing and allocating resources. In Africa, most resources are controlled by the government so any management research program should include the government as a stakeholder of the output from that program. Moreover, decisions about strategic choice can only occur when groups within organizations have discretion over their decisions, and constraints in the environment do not severely restrict the groups' choice of alternatives (Kochan *et al.*, 1984). Although most work in the area of strategic choice uses the firm as the frame of reference, we agree with Child (1972) that the "work organization" should be the appropriate frame of reference. The work organization includes both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations in addition to government institutions and departments (Child, 1972).

Strategic choice theory is conceptualized to explain the dynamics of the environment, agency, action, and design in facilitating achievement of goals (i.e. effectiveness; Child, 1997). Advancement of management knowledge cannot occur without research and education by Africa-centered scholars focusing on identifying solutions to issues that are uniquely African. The questions they ask (Walsh, 2011) not only help resolve the unique problems of Africa but also the link with the common problems of the world. Those questions emerge from the African environment. Unfortunately, there is a sense that nothing good can come from Africa. This is evidenced in the low representation of Africa in top-tier or high scholarship journals, organizations, and societies (Zoogah *et al.*, 2009; Zoogah and Nkomo, 2013). As Zoogah *et al.* (2009) observed it is because the academic telescope has not been directed towards Africa.

AFAM hopes to change that perception of Africa. AFAM expects that through agency relationships, a critical element in strategic choice theory (Child, 1997), Africa-centered researchers can ask interesting questions (Davis, 1971). These questions would not only address African-specific problems but also address problems in other environmental contexts, and heighten the curiosity and zest of world-class organizations and institutions for management knowledge from journals focusing on management in Africa such as the *African Journal of Economic and Management Studies* (*AJEMS*), and top-tier management and organizations journals for African management issues. Implicit in this expectation is the robust effect of agency relationships: Africa-centered researchers can transform perception and identity of Africa management. We just have to work on it, work at it, work in it, and work for it. That is enactment which, according to strategic choice theory, will bring Africa management into relevance (Child, 1997). Of course there are several ways African enactment can manifest but one major way for us scholars is through research and publication of interesting questions that challenge conventional and stereotypical thinking about Africa. Are we testing theories developed in the West (i.e. using Africa as the proving ground) or developing theories based on Africa's unique experiences? Western theories are conceptualized in socio-cultural, political, and economic environments that differ from Africa (Zoogah, 2008). Effective enactment thus involves theoretical knowledge that emerges from the African environment and context.

Theorizing is one enactment mechanism; designing or selecting areas of research is another. Western areas of study encompass the macro (e.g. strategy and business policy, international business, and entrepreneurship) and micro (e.g. organizational behavior and human resources

management (HRM)) delineations. These classifications are based on and oriented toward formal organizations mostly in the private sector and established or developed systems and institutions. The lines between formal and informal sectors are so clear (Godfrey, 2011), and so is that between the private and public sectors that they facilitate the delineations adopted in the West. Unfortunately, the formal and informal sectors are blurred in Africa (Godfrey, 2011), as well as the private and public sectors. So, can and should Africa management and organization studies be designed based on the same classification? As we discuss below one of the scholars in this special issue forum thinks we should not. The significant point in his article is that he raises a contemplative issue, one that centers on enactment. This special issue is an initial attempt.

Summary of articles in the special issue

The articles in this special issue emerged from AFAM's inaugural conference in San Antonio, Texas, in August 2011 which had the theme "Advancing Africa through management knowledge and research". The call for papers to this special issue of the *AJEMS* was developed as a result of the quality and breadth of the papers presented at the conference. Even though the call for papers initially focused on papers that were presented at the conference, it was extended to researchers working on management issues broadly defined in and about Africa who were not able to attend and present their papers at the conference.

In response to the call for papers, we received 19 papers. After a double-blind review process five were accepted for inclusion in this special issue. The topics of the papers cover a reflection of African management research and practice; effective leadership development in Africa and the African diaspora; performance management implementation in the public sector; internationalization process of African businesses with special reference to banks; and strategic factors that could be emphasized by African firms to improve their performance. The papers further focus on several African countries and international contexts such as Barbados, Canada, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, and Uganda. The following is a brief review of each of the five papers.

The first paper, "Personal reflections on African management: looking in, looking out and looking ahead", is an invited piece by Professor Moses N. Kiggundu who was the keynote speaker at the AFAM Inaugural Conference in August 2011. The author eloquently navigates the reader through the growing pains of management scholarship in Africa while prescribing practical solutions for those ready to carry on the mantle. Kiggundu reflects on his journey as a scholar interested in management in Africa and the travails he encountered especially during the era when Africa was not anywhere near the horizons of mainstream Western management literature. He asserts that until recently most of the research concerning Africa has been extractive research which he defines as:

> […] a process usually involving foreign researchers using locally untested or validated foreign conceptual models or diagnostic tools, gaining entry into a local organization, extracting data and information from the focal organization and its members, returning home, and using the data to advance own academic or professional interests with little or no regard for the needs and interests of the people or organization(s) from whom the data were extracted (Kiggundu, 1989, p. 22).

Kiggundu asserts that economic development of a region awakens research interest about that region such as has been witnessed in the East (Japan, Asian Tigers, and now China). As the economies of these countries have catapulted them to global status, the interest in their local management practices and academic research focusing on these countries has followed suit. Now that Africa is on the global focus for its economic promise, we anticipate that management research concentrating on the continent will follow suit. We have already witnessed the beginnings of this with the recently held Academy of Management (AOM) Africa Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, the first of its kind for the AOM outside North America. Kiggundu implores researchers interested in management knowledge and practice in Africa to take on the role of partners with Africa by translating theory to useful practices that would solve Africa's problems and launch sustainable programs that transform lives. Moreover, Africa management research and the search for effective implementation of solutions to Africa's problems should not adopt a "one size fits all", but has to be driven from:

> […] a multitude of models, approaches and methods, characterized by multidisciplinary, multitrait, and multi-method approaches drawing not only from the social sciences but increasingly also from the physical, life, and digital sciences, arts and humanities (Kiggundu, in the issue).

In the rest of his paper, Kiggundu offers suggestions for moving Africa management research, education, and practice forward, while taking into consideration the Africa's unique environmental context.

The second paper "Leadership in Uganda, Barbados, Canada and the USA: exploratory perspectives", is authored by Lituchy, Ford and Punnett. This study is part of a larger project by the authors to use an emic approach to examine and measure the concept of leadership in Africa and the African diaspora (i.e. individuals of Africa-origin who reside outside the African continent). The authors call the research program "Leadership Effectiveness in Africa and the Diaspora". The paper in this special issue analyzes the concept of leadership in four countries in Africa and the diaspora – Uganda, Barbados, Canada and the USA by asking the following two questions:

> *Q1*. What are the similarities and differences in the descriptions of culture among the four countries?

> *Q2*. What the similarities and differences in leadership among the four countries?

It is important to note that this study is also one of the few that also investigates the perceptions of the African diaspora about management and leadership development. The authors use an emic approach to avoid imposing Western-based views of leadership on the participants. This method develops the definitions and descriptions of the concepts from the responses from the participants in the research. Methodologically, the authors do not use standardized definitions based on Western-originated literature.

The authors should be commended for looking at the concept of leadership from the perspective of Africans and the African diaspora because the African concept of leadership has basically remained invisible in the mainstream leadership and management literature (Nkomo, 2011). Even though there is evidence that some literature have attempted to address this scarcity, most of the research still perpetuates a Western hegemony touting Western derived leadership concepts as the solution to Africa's demise. The findings from the study shows that even among Africans and the African diaspora, differences exist on the attributes that makes a leader effective. While Ugandans emphasized honesty and trustworthiness, Barbadians focus on being a visionary. On the other hand, the African diaspora in Canadian and US emphasized being charismatic and inspirational. Clearly, all these attributes are recognized in the implicit leadership theories and the GLOBE project studies (Epitopaki and Martin, 2004; House *et al.*, 2004), however, the findings demonstrate that there are cultural differences among Africans and the African diaspora and those differences influence their perceptions of an effective leader. The authors extend the current understanding of African leadership past the popular mainstream Western conceptualization of African leadership by incorporating culture which provides for a more practical way of developing leaders for African organizations and nations.

The third paper, "Challenges impacting performance management implementation in public universities: a case of Uganda" is authored by Karuhanga and Werner. The study explores the challenges public universities in Uganda face in their attempt to implement performance management. The issue of performance management implementation is germane to other regions of Africa as well and could be seen as a broader challenge of effectively managing human resources in the public sector to perform their tasks and help the public sector achieve its objectives. One does not need to dig deep to encounter ample literature in any discipline or in the popular press when searching for performance management in Africa before encountering numerous examples of failed and flawed management systems. Karuhanga and Werner used a mixed methods approach to uncover the challenges affecting the effective implementation of performance management from 330 respondents who were senior administrators and faculty in four public universities in Uganda. The findings indicated that the major factors inhibiting the effective implementation of performance management in the public universities were the lack of a formal performance management environment, limited employee engagement/communication problems, challenges in the institutional governance mechanisms, and constraints in the institutional systems and structures. The paper concludes by providing suggestions for improving the use of performance management systems in the universities. This paper's approach is consistent with Kiggundu's (in this issue) contention that management research should not be conducted to only identify problems, but should also be used in providing viable and sustainable solutions that are fundamental to the development and growth of African businesses and economies. This is especially relevant in public educational institutions of higher learning where resources are scarce and yet the need is overwhelming. Thus, if African businesses and economies are to be contenders in the global economy in the twenty-first century, they need to focus on building world class educational institutions of higher learning that could produce graduates with the knowledge and capability that could be used to manage businesses that compete globally.

The fourth paper, "Internationalisation process of African banks: an exploratory study" by Boojihawon and Acholonu provides us with a glimpse of how African banks have been

expanding and internalizing beyond their home-base on the continent as well as expanding outside the continent. While several studies in the international management literature document the FDI activities of multinational corporations (MNC) from both the advanced industrialized countries and the larger emerging economies (e.g. China, Brazil, India) on the African continent (Acquaah, 2009), this paper focuses of the FDI activities of African banks within the African continent and in some instances to Europe. This study uses case studies of four African banks – First Bank Nigeria, Plc (Nigeria); Intercontinental Bank, Plc (Nigeria); Zenith Bank Nigeria, Plc (Nigeria); and Investments & Mortgages Limited (Kenya/Mauritius) – to explain how their leverage their capabilities to internationalize. The study argues that internationalization offers a wealth of internal and external linkages and opportunities, the effective exploitation of which depends on the entrepreneurial initiatives and capabilities of the firms' key decision-makers and their organizational characteristics.

The findings from the study indicate that the internationalization pathways of African banks are shaped by the exploitation and leveraging of local and regional market strengths and global networks. The author, therefore, provides a framework for capturing the process of internationalization whereby the banks moved from export-type transactions like money transfers to start building networks of branches and subsidiaries across the African region and eventually into Western markets. Establishing networks is deemed to be a needed post-internationalization activity where networks are sought after most of the case banks have already moved into the international market to exploit resources, acquire knowledge, legitimacy and market opportunities. Among the key strategies that these banks use especially to expand into Western markets is tapping into the large population of the African diaspora. As was recognized by Lituchy *et al.* (in this issue), The World Bank estimates that there are about 140 million Africans in the diaspora. For a long time this enormous market segment has not been tapped into and finally African banks are leveraging cultural ties to secure this market. Studies have noted that Africans in the diaspora wield a significant economic potential and they do contribute substantially to their home countries GDP (Mohan and Zack-Williams, 2002). It is only prudent that African banks have taken advantage of this opportunity.

The final paper in this special issue is "Strategic factors and firm performance in an emerging economy" by Damoah. This study investigates how some firm-specific, industry and locational factors affect firm performance in Ghana. The study fills a void on firm level management research using longitudinal archival data from African firms. The use of credible datasets for firm-level research in sub-Saharan Africa is vital in assisting firms to formulate and implement strategies that will lead to competitive advantage. It is also instrumental in the development of sustainable public policy initiatives that leads to social and economic development. The findings indicate that firm performance is influenced by size of the firm, workforce productivity, joint venture between local business and domestic firms, the firm location and the firm's type of industry. Most of the findings are expected as the strategy and international management literatures in advanced industrialized countries have linked these factors to firm performance. However, the author's examination of the role of these strategic factors in influencing firm performance in the sub-Saharan African environment strengthens the theories underlying the findings in developed and industrialized economies. In that regard, it enhances our understanding of the role of various firm-specific, industry and locational factors on firm performance in different social and economic environments. Moreover, the findings provide insight for

entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan African economies: strategies that incorporate firm-specific factors are vital for success and survival.

Opportunities and value in Africa management research

Since management was defined broadly, the five papers that were accepted for this special issue focus on diverse topics and issues that define the role of management in advancing Africa. The foci of the papers – leadership development, HRM in the public sector, internationalization of African businesses, and strategic factors – provides a direction for Africa management research and practice in the future. They represent strategic areas of Africa management. There are significant changes taking place in the business and economic environments of Africa such as the important role of the government in supporting private sector business development; increasing establishment of entrepreneurial ventures; the reduction in the role of the government as the major source of employment; reliance on in-flows of FDI from both developed and larger emerging economies such as Brazil, China, and India; explosion in the establishments of business schools to meet the leadership and management needs of the growing private sector; and an increase reliance on natural resource exploitation to finance economic development. These changes clearly points to the need for public-private partnership in Africa development and growth.

One critical factor that undermines the development of Africa is ineffective leadership (Kiggundu, in this issue). Our current understanding of leadership is based on Western notions and cultural underpinnings. However, African countries have different cultures. As a result, some scholars have argued that leadership situations, behaviors, and styles in Africa are different and therefore should be studied *in situ* (Kiggundu, 1989; Ugwuegbu, 2001). Such studies are vital for two reasons. First, our knowledge of it is etic; emic studies are needed. How indigenous leadership functions in the dynamic environment of Africa seems interesting (Davis, 1971). Second, leadership is applicable to several facets of African countries including politics, economics, and industry. Studies of indigenous leadership can help inform these areas. In other words, studies of leadership development can enhance our understanding of leadership in Africa. The leadership interface involves the leader and follower. Unfortunately, there has been a greater focus on the leader but not the follower. African culture is heavily leader-centric but recognizes the indispensable role of followers in effectuating leadership. Yet, we lack models of effective followership. Can we develop followership models based on the colonial and historical experiences of African countries? Africa is a meddling vase where external agencies (European, American, and Asia countries) constantly intrude. How can leadership be developed when Africa is buffeted constantly by external meddling? How does leadership develop when the context is in perpetual flux? How does leadership with an individualist origin fit into the collectivistic cultural background of Africa? Studies that examine both leadership and followership can identify Africa-based and Africa-centered models and in so doing help provide a unique identity to Africa management.

Another area for future research is the public sector. Unlike the West where there is a great divide between the private and public sectors, that divide is not so clear in Africa. One reason is the role of government usually as largest employer. The state-owned enterprises in African countries were established to provide employment to citizens. That is why governments allocated

resources to them even though they were inefficient. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, that view seems to be changing due to the privatization of state-owned enterprises and implementation of structural adjustment programs (Ikiara, 1999). Not only are there initiatives to adopt management systems in the public sector (Bavon, 1999) but also there are calls for studies on private-public partnerships (Dansereau, 2005). The unique expertise of management scholars can be brought to bear on private-public partnerships and support of the public sector in general. The strategies, entrepreneurial tendencies, human resources, and behaviors of those public sector organizations *vis-à-vis* the deprivation of African countries can be examined. At the moment we still do not have answers to the question, "Are public enterprises inefficient because of deprivation or the deprivation abounds because of the inefficiency of public enterprises?"[1] Studies that build on the articles in this special issue will help define the identity of Africa management.

The third area of research is internationalization of businesses. The rise of Africa and the influx of foreign multinational companies have resulted in a number of dynamics that require investigation. First, if the multinationals are performing well even though most economies are relatively stagnant, it may be argued that the multinationals are exploiting Africa (Udofia, 1984; Corkin, 2007). But are the MNC not helping in the rise of Africa? If the answer is affirmative, then what is the effect of the MNC on Africa's development? More specifically, what is the spillover effect of their operations on local businesses or the informal sector? The informal sector is argued to be larger than the formal sector in Africa. To the extent that foreign multinationals in Africa are transforming the informal sector, one might assert that they are contributing. The base of the pyramid theory suggests that areas of poverty may be cash cows for corporations (Prahalad, 2005). What we do not know are the mechanisms that transform deprivation to wealth for one set of agencies (e.g. MNC) but not for others (e.g. local companies, governments, etc.). Studies that can unlock those mechanisms are certainly going to help African businesses not only to grow but also to compete internationally. The article by Boojihawon and Acholonu (in this issue) attempted to show how African banks are competing globally but banks are a different breed; they function within universal standard systems which suggest that they can easily be established in other contexts. For other businesses, that ease of establishment is lacking. We therefore need studies to help local businesses extract the gems of value-creation in Africa.

The fourth area in need of studies is strategy. It is common knowledge that strategy is critical to the effectiveness (defined in broad terms) of organizations. Competitive advantage (Porter, 1980) as well as cooperative advantage (Zoogah, 2012) emerge from organizational strategy. Indeed, strategy was integrated in the structure-conduct-performance paradigm that dominated the Economics and Business Policy literatures in the 1980s and 1990s. Strategy functions effectively in a relative stable and predictable environment. However, the African environment is very turbulent and unpredictable. For MNC and other foreign companies that are used to predictable environments, the role of strategy may therefore have to be broadened beyond the organization-industry nexus to include the nation state. For local companies, strategy may even not be understandable. Why? The concept of strategy, which evolved from modern Western military institutions, is dependent on organizational characteristics and capabilities. Organizational systems and structures have to be developed to ensure that strategy leads to the

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[1] Mathematically, the first part of the question is expressed as: inefficiency=f(deprivation) while the second part is expressed as: deprivation=f(inefficiency).

desired outcome. Managerial competence also ensures that good strategies are developed. Unfortunately, both are lacking in Africa. Most organizations, particularly in the informal sector, tend to have amorphous structures (Nzelibe, 1986). Further, managers lack training or expertise in strategy development, implementation, and evaluation (Ugwuegbu, 2001; Zoogah, 2008). Researchers should therefore examine:

- potential extension of the concept of strategy to cover the public sector;
- how strategy training interventions can improve the situation; and
- how organizational structures and systems can be established to enable strategy effectiveness.

Hopefully, the findings from such studies can be used to help African organizations compete with their Western counterparts. The article Damoah in this special issue is an initial attempt.

In addition to the above areas, we recommend that Africa-centered scholars dedicate the intellectual energies to examining the African context. One of the authors in this special issue noted, "Africa is not a unitary concept or homogenous society. Rather, it is characterized by contrasts, contradictions and often conflicts" (Kiggundu, this issue). We need to understand the dynamics and dialectics using either inductive or deductive techniques. The persistence of ethnic diversity, external meddling, dependence, and latent (and in some cases manifest) faultiness suggests that Africa will for a long time be characterized by perturbations. To the extent that organizations can be effective in such environments, African scholars can contribute significant insight to the management community. We therefore need to understand, explain, and predict our context. Without that it will be difficult for us to make meaningful contribution to Africa's development. From the perspective of strategic choice theory (Child, 1972) we have to engage in enactment so as to shape and define Africa management.

Along those lines, strategic choice theory (Child, 1997) could be used to design the structure of the future direction of African management research and practice. The intermingling of agency, environment, and strategy suggests that we as Africa-centered scholars have to consider carefully what type and how they conduct research. Mere replications or testing of theories developed in the West do not define what Africa really is. Besides the direct relevance of strategic choice theory to researchers, it also has direct impact on such sectors as agriculture and agro-business; transportation, mining/extractive industries, social services, energy, and infrastructure. They all have strategic import and therefore require choices that are strategic. For example, should foreign companies be allowed to exploit the natural resources of Africa willy-nilly? Beyond questions, it is important to demonstrate empirically a particular method or mechanism that will prevent the wanton extraction of resources or enhance the retention of the resources. In other words, an evidence-based approach complements the enactment suggested by strategic choice theory.

In conclusion, we hope that this special issue helps advance Africa management. In particular, we hope it inspires Africa-centered scholars to strive to provide a unique identity for Africa management.

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