Reflections of a Doctoral Research on Knowledge Management (KM) through an Afrocentric lens in a Nigerian Oil Corporation

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the reflections of a doctoral research that evaluated the challenges of the adoption and implementation of a knowledge management (KM) initiative through the experiences of the knowledge champions. The African/Nigerian socio-cultural view was used to explore the narrative accounts of the knowledge champions. A case study research was carried out using qualitative approaches. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used in data analysis. The findings demonstrated the ability to ground KM adoption within a socio-cultural specific context helped in making sense of the organizational KM experience. The paper serves as an academic expression to the current generation of KM researchers and practitioners of African/Nigerian descent and takes time to reflect on African/Nigerian socio-cultural realities in KM adoption. The use of African psychology steps outside of the limits of Western KM theory to evaluate the KM experiences in this organization. As such, it holds the promise of bridging a research gap that validates African/Nigerian indigenous KM practices in organizations.

KEYWORDS

Reflection, knowledge management, African psychology, doctoral research, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the way knowledge management (KM) was conducted in Nigeria's biggest corporation. The narratives that prevail in the mind of the average Nigerian is the critical importance of oil to the economic growth of the nation. However, the connection between this and the case study organization underscore the way of thinking about understanding this organization more. Prevailing issues about the case study organization as Albin-Lackey (2007) noted is dominated by corruption in governance,

inefficient management generating information about the frailties of this organization that is of grave concern to the average Nigerian.

This doctoral research was used to give an account of the KM experiences of the organization and it has contextualized the social expectations of this research. The research is not based on whether the African/Nigerian centered view has the potential of making the case study organization efficient at KM, but it is about the understanding the participation of the knowledge champions through a socio-cultural lens that is not exclusively within universal best practices with regards to KM adoption and implementation in organizations. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the experiences of carrying out a doctoral research in Nigeria's National Oil corporation that explored the challenges of the adoption and implementation of a KM initiative through the experiences of the knowledge champions who took part in the initiative. In view of this, the following research questions were raised:

1. how did the African/Nigerian socio-cultural view of the world shape the knowledge champions understanding of KM?
2. how does the African/Nigerian socio-cultural view translate in their individual experiences and involvement in KM?
3. how do they respond to the African/Nigerian socio-cultural influences that confront KM in the organization?

This research represents an awakening in the understanding of the dominant post-modernist universalistic paradigms that have shaped research in the field of KM. It offers a new perspective for researchers and practitioners to look beyond this view and consider the 'situation-specific' requirements, adaptations and 'fine-tuning' to ensure success. As such, it makes a case for research that would confront the complexities and ambiguities that organizations in developing countries face in integrating the universalistic concepts. Due consideration should be given to the context of the application as demonstrated in the case of this study; KM, hence ensuring an interface of what counts as a hybrid of 'best practice' and 'best fit'.

In order to provide an account of the KM experiences of this organization, the stories of the knowledge champions were contextualized based on the narratives of their experiences. The study integrated some perspectives of power (Foucault,1980) in a way that ensures the understanding of the phenomena that was explored in the course of this research. The post-structural application of Foucault (1980) is based on the assumption that the context in which KM was implemented in an organization did not take into consideration the indigenous nature of the environment that needed knowledge management to bridge the knowledge gap needs of an organization. Foucault's (1980) power/knowledge, however, was used to clarify in the natural philosophy of power that emanates from a home-grown view with Nigeria in focus. It provides a link to understand the philosophical makeup of an organization. The interplay of power and knowledge in an organization gleans from a socio-cultural view that is embedded in the collaborative ways of doing things in the organization.

Nigeria and the case study organization

It is important to say that the focus of the study was to provide an account of KM adoption and implementation within the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation-Research and Development Division. Nigeria was a former British colony and gained its independence from Britain in 1960. Uzoigwe and Nwadialor (2013) point out that in its current state, it is a 'conglomeration of multi-ethnic groups and

religious affiliations engendered by European imperial powers' (p. 69). Nigeria is located in West Africa, and it shares borders with the Republic of Benin to the West, the Republic of Niger and Chad to the North, the Republic of Cameroon to the East and has a coastline with the Gulf of Guinea which is part of the Atlantic Ocean.

It should be stated here that for some decades now, the Nigerian economy has largely been dependent on its oil sector which supplies most of its foreign exchange earnings. It is a well-known fact that the Oil and Gas Industry in Nigeria plays a crucial role to the sustenance of the nation and fuels her economic and development activities (NNPC, 2017). The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) headquarters are located in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria. The NNPC remains a monolithic corporate entity with Executive Board and the Research and Development Division where the KM champions were based. The case study organization has a mission to carry out research and develop technology while providing services to Nigeria's Oil and Gas industry. The case study organization is ISO 9001:2000 certified with an upgrade to ISO 9001:2008 in progress. The division is also in the process of obtaining certification for ISO 14000 Environment and ISO 17025 Laboratory accreditations (NNPC 2017). The case study organization has a team of highly qualified and experienced staff, and it is currently structured into departments that are headed by the Group general manager.

Language and thought processes

As an African and a Nigerian, I have always received my education in English. Going back to my earlier years in education in Nigeria, the English language has always been the language of teaching. I have silently pondered the future of my mother tongue (Igbo), that I can only use privately, but I often process my thoughts indigenously first. This language and thought processes highlights the dilemma that the average African/Nigerian experiences have openly marginalized their thought processes. It limits the use of indigenous knowledge and ways of thinking in academic inquiry. It is within this paradigm that I used an African/Nigerian yardstick to give an account of KM in the case organization. That is to say that this phenomenon is not understood solely on the backdrop of the universal application, but it is necessary to take into context my African/Nigerian thought process which defines my way of doing things. In this case, what would count as the socio-cultural/'Nigerian way' of adopting universalistic approaches in organizations?

Significance of this research

The importance of this study is subject to different opinions. This study cuts across disciplines and appeals to those with a keen interest to understand the Afrocentric/African-centered/Nigerian worldview as opposed to Eurocentric/universalistic worldview. It is significant to the field of KM as it is reasonable to believe that the findings would lead to further studies to understand and even test the socio-cultural influences that confront KM identified in this study. The primary focus of this study is on KM in the case study organization.

The African/Nigerian context of the application is imperative. What happened after it was applied in the organization constitute elements of the stories that emerge from the knowledge champions. This project addresses a gap in the KM field where the literature is sparse on African/Nigerian centered KM research. This doctoral thesis is part of an on-going project to incorporate African/Nigerian socio-cultural worldviews to help inform KM initiative adoption and implementation in African/Nigerian based organizations. In looking at this study, opinions are likely to be framed that are incorrect due to a misunderstanding of the context. It can be argued that without an appreciation for the complexities of the

African/Nigerian society played out in this research, the misconceptions might equally be considered deviations from norms and conventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

African-centered paradigm

A range of articles has informed knowledge and understanding of the prevailing theories within the field of KM. The literature in this field had been written solely without consideration given to its adoption and implementation in African/Nigerian societies. As such the literature in the fields of African psychology and African philosophy were useful in this regard. The roots of taking into consideration these literature that was close to my thought process has been linked to historians and social theorists that have seen themselves as having a responsibility to promote what is seen as African thought.

These historians and social theorists includes authors such as Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972), Harold Cruse (1916-2005) and Molefe Asante. This way of thinking sought ways to deal with the questions of African identity by viewing African people as people who should re-assert a sense of agency to achieve sanity (Asante 2009). Put in a different way; one can say that this new way of thinking drives the need to put into consideration the socio-cultural perspective as well as the social dynamics as the best approach to understanding African situated problems. Thus, all understanding will be with their socio-cultural lens. However, there is a limited scholarship of what counts as African/Nigerian thought process.

Mkabela (2005) acknowledges (Asante 1995) who offered his view of what counts as the African thought process uses Afro-centricity which he defines in the following way;

> *'To say that we are decentered means essentially that we have lost our own cultural footing and become other than our cultural and political origins, dislocated and disoriented. We are essentially insane, that is, living an absurdity from which we will never be able to free our minds until we return to the source. Afro-centricity as a theory of change intends to relocate the African person as subject. As a pan-African idea, Afro-centricity becomes the key to the proper education of children and the essence of an African cultural revival and, indeed, survival'. (p. 1).*

In exploring the broad origins of this paradigm, the enduring background is a question of the agency for the African. That is to say, what is the contribution of the African/Nigerian to his/her way of doing things in organizations where the grounding of what dominates knowledge has been overshadowed by modernity? In situating the African/Nigerian context, this doctoral research is a unique context that helps understand KM in the African/Nigerian society. To enrich this study, taking this paradigmatic view would explore the relationships that have occurred in the case study organization, the attitude of the knowledge champions to the environment, kinship patterns and even historical references that have played out in the organization.

The perceptions of KM that is held by the knowledge champions and the particularity of the circumstances in the case study organization informs this study. Zheng et al., (2010) note that the sense-making mechanisms in KM are experiences that stem from culture. Having literature such as this added the drive to give this research legitimacy by undertaking a detailed literature search that will ensure that

this research will be centered on the African/Nigerian reality. The researcher made efforts to collate other scholarly views to ensure that it would add significantly to the KM field.

The literature review search

The literature review continued with a systematic search of academic journals, practitioner-oriented professional publications, professional association publications, textbooks and academic work associated with KM theory, reviews, and empirical social science based on the work of Rashman et al., (2009). It was carried out to understand KM relevant to the context of the research having explored its implications for the research. This literature search found that previous studies done by Webster and Watson (2002) used classical literature reviews. Others such as (Dwivedi et al., 2011; Heisig, 2014) have used meta-analysis, bibliometric metric analysis, author co-citation analysis, historical analysis, and domain analysis. These earlier studies demonstrate that research on KM is an ongoing work in progress.

Studies in the field of KM suggest that it has a social element to it. Karkoulian et al., (2013) reminds us that KM techniques have been practiced since the birth of business organizations. They noted that globalization, coupled with rapid changes in the business environment, has shed light on the vital significance of KM. This is not surprising as existing literature affirms it. Geiger and Schreyögg (2012) argued that with the increasing amount of knowledge work and knowledge-intensive firms, the management and sharing of knowledge has been receiving consequently lots of attention.

The systematic literature search found that studies from public sector organizations in the oil industry were sparse, so it was extended to include research from all public sector organizations, studies that deal with knowledge management adoption in organizations and socio-cultural challenges. The search covered the period 2001 – 2016 with exceptions for important texts that pre-date 2001. This timeline was chosen to bring the research up to date with current developments in the field of KM. The search covered peer-reviewed articles written in English. While noting that few studies have been carried out on KM in developing countries such as Nigeria compared to intensive studies in western companies in the Oil and Gas Industry. There was no current or archived research done on KM in the case study organization.

This literature review was vital as there was an absence of any significant KM studies in Nigeria's oil and gas industry; it makes this study important to the growing base of literature in knowledge management. This gap further reinforces the work of Ferlie et al., (2003), which found out that researchers give little attention to public sector organizations. This study justifies the need to increase the amount of KM research carried out in public sector organizations in Nigeria, whose national oil company serves over 160 million people. This study in the broader field of KM is a pilot study that will be filling the gap between the practical and theoretical side of KM adoption in organizations.

Need for this research

Within the field of KM, there is a need to take into consideration the context of KM initiative adoption and implementation in organizations situated within African states. This is apparently limited in KM literature, and there is a need to inform African/Nigerian researchers and practitioners who adopt KM to explore embedding the socio-cultural realities that are central to the recognition of the challenges that confront KM adoption and implementation in African/Nigerian organizations. This research is not an appraisal of the African/Nigerian worldview, but it recognises that KM adoption and the context of the application is to be taken into consideration.

The research acknowledges that there is limited evidence of organizations adopting and implementing KM in African/Nigerian settings. In fact, this research was partly about understanding how knowledge management fared in the case study organization. It is also about ensuring adequate understanding about what goes on in Nigeria. The need to contribute to the successful KM initiative adoption and implementation in African/Nigerian organizations justifies the need for this research.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study recognized the limitations of the Afro-centric philosophy (Mkabela 2005) in interrogating epistemology and ontology. Therefore, the work of Stanfield (1993) provided the research with a starting point to reflect on the epistemological considerations that demonstrate the significance of the Afro-centric philosophy, which has informed the African/Nigerian view of the world that shaped the KM experiences of the knowledge champions. The African/Nigerian orientation to evaluate the KM experience of the organization uses an indigenous logic of analysis to access the reality of the experience of this organization.

Stanfield (1993) advanced some "epistemological considerations" for researchers who have their work based on Afro-centric reasoning. He argued that it is important as provides a tool for such scholars to counter Euro-centric realities and as such this study makes a significant inroad in the KM discipline. It is not within the scope of this research to provide an in-depth and detailed account of how Afro-centric qualitative research is (or has been) carried out in KM research. Applying the Afro-centric epistemological considerations presented this research with what counts as African knowledge, which recognizes an African/Nigerian voice. In doing this, it conflates with the general view and brings out the story that re-affirms the centrality that is necessary to situate this research as a dynamic one that places the cultural experience at the forefront of knowledge production.

The snowball approach Atkinson and Flint (2001) was used with a small number of those familiar with the phenomena of interest, and the KM champions were asked for referrals which were followed up to establish a sample frame of knowledge champions within the case study organization. A total of nine interviews were conducted lasting between 50 minutes to over an hour; two electronic interviews were also conducted. The interviews were carried out in KM champions 'offices. There were nine knowledge champions involved in KM within the case study organization. Getting the managers to talk was a success by the collaborative research office in the division.

This data was analyzed using Smith et al., (2009) interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The use of IPA has been the result of the need to explore how the knowledge champions in the case study organization have been able to make sense of their personal and social world. This has helped to understand the meaning of their experiences and the events that occurred in the course of being focal persons.

In reflecting on the use of IPA it can be argued that it is a suitable choice for the nine knowledge champions whose accounts of their KM experiences were explored in-depth to make sense of how this was shaped by society, culture, and history. The inductive analysis used in IPA underlines the 'double hermeneutic' (Gill 2014:126) which in this research enabled the sense-making of the experiences of the

knowledge champions. Thus, based on this, the interpretative phenomenological analysis was deemed most suitable method of analysis for this research.

FINDINGS

If the research had envisaged the challenges of gaining access to the organization, the research would have been probably given a second thought. The hope given the researcher the during the initial contact with the organization dried up, as their initial interest in the research declined. Persuasion was used to keep the case study organization enthusiastic and engaged through the course of the study. However, it took three more visits to succeed to start the research. For the researcher, it goes beyond that, just like in real life, when you meet people, get to know them, and why they do what they do. The researcher as an outsider gained a snapshot into an organization that Gillies (2010) found out has been labelled as 'the world's most secretive oil company' Transparency International and Revenue Watch (2010). This was made possible by the creative use of the researcher's skills to gain access and continuous adaptations to get significant data while keeping the focus on understanding the experiences of this organization in adopting KM.

Notwithstanding the persistent limitations of access and entry into the organization, it is worth mentioning this research tested the perseverance and tenacity to reinvent the research methodology to make the best of the somewhat unexpected hindrances. Yin (2014) advocates this vital skill for researchers carrying out small-scale qualitative case study research. The researchers untiring pursuit to overcome research challenges is encouraged and should be taken into consideration. It is relevant for future researchers carrying out similar studies in similar contexts.

The researcher's immersion in the organization also helped in the openness of the knowledge champions during the interviews which helped generated a rich data on the organization KM experiences. The use of narrative interviews supported with observations has given the KM community the imagery of KM practices that has evolved from experiences of the actors and is close to the context of action (Schreyögg and Geiger 2012).

The findings also infer a sense of disillusionment on the part some knowledge champions that pointed out the loss autonomy over the KM initiative, resulting in frustration. At the management level, there was no significant support towards KM, and there were issues around the rational hierarchical authority in the organization which was supported by the socio-cultural attitudes of the knowledge champions. The research drew attention to the challenges faced with the successful implementation of KM within the case study organization as well as the contradictions that have emerged. It found out that the need to make KM resident in the organization through the human resource department is a way forward. The role of top management and the lack of a clear strategy for KM implementation were evident.

These findings showed that there is no accepted definition of KM within the organization. The evidence suggested that KM was not clearly understood at the beginning of the initiative in the case study organization. This lack of understanding led to a reluctance to accommodate the researcher as such the organization insisted on a presentation to understand the benefits of the research. As the understanding grew within the organization, the knowledge champions believed that the research could contribute to the development of the KM initiative, and the organizational members became more receptive to the research.

CONCLUSION

This research is not concerned with conclusions from the findings. This study had a goal to expand understanding of how KM was experienced in this organization. It provided a platform to understand KM based on a flexible research design. As such, one can contend with (Yin 2014) that this doctoral research was about spelling out the phenomena. The research contributed to a better understanding of how cultural context influences KM practice (Dwivedi et al., 2011). Previous research such as Ajmal and Koskinen (2008) that have revealed that these factors and a culture have a key role to play in the success of KM in organizations. This doctoral research provided a platform for theoretical scholarship in the advancing KM research from an African/Nigerian centered view while taking into consideration the impacts at both the individual and organization levels.

However, there have been limited studies carried out to link context specific dimensions and how it influences KM such as (Bamgboje-Ayodele and Ellis 2015). This doctoral study has been able to do that especially in the light of the oil industry in a developing country in sub-Saharan Africa. This makes this study unique in nature. The findings generated from this case would help develop constructs that would add to the literature on the context-specific nature of KM. Addressing them in the light of the cultural context will enable and create facilitating conditions for successful KM adoption through indigenizing the universal view to ensure successful implementation and ownership by all and sundry within the organization.

We found out that what counts as power is a product of the modalities that are grounded in the socio-cultural environment. This relationship makes knowledge and power to become inseparable. That is not to say there is an epistemic misapprehension; this way of thinking has as this research has shown implications for the application of KM in this organization. This study has gained a snapshot into the workings of one of the world's most secretive national oil corporations in trying to understand the experiences of the knowledge champions in the case study organization in adopting and implementing the KM initiative. Additionally, the research has tried to provide a clearer picture of the socio-cultural influences that challenge KM though previously covered by previous researchers, None has attempted to understand how it has influenced KM adoption in the context of this study. This study will hopefully generate interest in further research on KM research using the Afrocentric lens in the region.

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