

# The management discourse: collective or strategic performance drive?

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to engage with the discourse on the assumed existence of a distinct “African management” model. It critically deconstructs the concepts and submits an alternative strategy to address the need to understand what is happening in management of business in Africa.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Qualitative critical text analysis is used to understand the discourse on the nature of “African management” from the extant literature. The identity theory informs the understanding of the references to “African” as fundamental to identify a distinct management model. This analysis is supplemented by empirical case study research into successful African business.

**Findings** – Scholars failed to conceptualise what is “African”, and subsequently also what constitutes “African management”. This conceptual void undermines the critical reconstruction of a single African management model. Empirical research into actual management practices emerge as fundamental to systematic progress in this discourse. This research points to diverse management traditions converging into pragmatic practices.

**Research limitations/implications** – Only a limited number of case studies were conducted into management history in Africa. This paper argues for an extended research programme, but this is future work.

**Practical implications** – It suggests a research strategy for scholars in African business studies, business history and management history to collaborate towards making a solid contribution to the economic development of our continent.

**Social implications** – This research has the potential of forging collaboration in business among all of the people in Africa.

**Originality/value** – A critical text analysis is used to expose the conceptual lacunae that undermines progress in the discourse. This paper contributes to the literature on “African management” by systematically deconstructing the concept of “African identity” as a prerequisite to the management discourse. By signalling ethnic nostalgia, the critical reconceptualisation of Africanness offers an intellectually creative strategy out of the stalled discourse.

**Keywords** Family, Ethnic, Collective, African management, Ubuntu, Africanness

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Multi-racial and multi-ethnic societies, of which every African society has in abundance, deal with the dilemma of identity. In 2011, the Kwame Nkrumah International Conference reiterated with urgency the Nkrumian “African personality, African identity and African Unity” (Dei, 2011, p. 42). More than half a century after Nkrumah’s death, pleas for “the liberation and unity of the African race” (Quist-Adade and Chiang, 2011, p. 10), for “an Afrocentric reality for Africans” (Kah, 2012, p. 26), for “the radical reclaiming of an authentic African identity” (Dei, 2011, pp. 41, 44) and for the implementation of “socialism [as] the sure



road to Africa's development" (Dodoo, 2011, p. 71) still frame a paradigm for Africa's future (Quist-Adade and Chiang, 2011). Dei (2011), for example, argues that "[...] we must seek African-centred praxis as a site of epistemological location on its own terms [...]". This discourse links the economic development of Africa to its identity, specifically its Afro-centric identity as a mobilising agent. While Africa's economy has performed impressively since the beginning of the 21st century, it still requires sustainable economic growth. Such demands place renewed emphasis on Africa's human resources to direct and realise a sustained growth trajectory. In turn, this development demands renewed attention on the managerial capabilities of African leadership (Kiggundu, 2002; Nkomo, 2011; Nkomo *et al.*, 2015; Acquah and Kiggundu, 2017). Inextricably linked to the development debate is, thus, the identity of the managers as agents of growth, development and prosperity in Africa.

Despite the centrality of identity, an African business enterprise displays similar diversity as business operations worldwide. Business enterprises in Africa are diverse in organisation, management structure and strategy. A sound comprehension of the complexity of business development in Africa recognises the complex and dynamic manner in which entrepreneurs in Africa have borrowed from and integrated their operations into indigenous and non-indigenous global business practices (Marsden, 1992; Forrest, 1994; Verhoef, 2017; Akinyoade *et al.*, 2017). Since the early 1990s, such integrative practices have expanded beyond the confines of national states, as African governments gradually embraced aspects of the liberal market economy. In a challenging competitive market environment, African entrepreneurs took advantage of market opportunities. This mandated adaptation and innovation of entrepreneurial activities to advance enterprise and society. To sustain this growth trajectory, business in Africa needs capable management. Management by whom? What is the identity of those mandated to lead Africa's development? Is there something distinctly identifiable as "Africanness" in management in Africa? What is African? Who are Africans? How does the continent account for its diverse people, cultures and languages? Can a systematic inquiry into the practices of business management in Africa deliver a principally distinct form of management, called "African management"? The question remains: what is "African management"? Does it constitute a distinct conceptual entity? Business in post-1990 Africa manifests the openness of the market. Entrepreneurs engage with a diversity of indigenous management practices, acquired professional management strategies, western-style corporations, informal business and small and medium-sized enterprises. Do these realistically reflect a distinct African form of management?

In seeking to understand the discourse on "African management", this paper follows the conceptual discourse on "Africanness". Why is it important to deconstruct "identity" when we are seeking to understand the nature of management in Africa? It is because, as indicated above and later in the manuscript, that "African identity" is the phenomenon protagonists of the so-called "African management" model submit as distinguishing management in Africa from management in other parts of the world. The manuscript then addresses the African Association of Management's (AFAM) recurring call for the promotion and study of "African management", and finally, it considers the epistemological usefulness of the concept "ubuntu" towards a resolution of the discourse on management in Africa. In doing so, it speaks to debates about not only management *in* Africa but to debates about the assumed uniqueness of African-inspired managerial practices *outside* Africa. In a recent Special Edition, this Journal reflected on "Black Business and Management History". The guest editors were exceptionally optimistic about the range of possibilities illustrated by the contributions to the special issue, about "black historical actors and communities" (Guest Editorial, *Journal of Management History*, 26(3), p. 294). This is indeed exemplary. In

business history, the central focus is the process encapsulating the entrepreneurial agent, irrespective of ethnicity, race, language, creed or social construction (an individual or collection of individuals, such as a community) responding to entrepreneurial opportunity (Popp and Holt, 2013). There seems to be a concern about the limited focus on “black” agents in various aspects of business, especially in societies where people of colour constitute a minority, as aptly illustrated in the contributions by Stott and Fava (2019); Hasan *et al.* (2020) in that special issue. Writing minorities into the full narrative of the history of business is part of historical reconstruction, but the concern of my paper is not simply to write about “black” or other persons of colour, but to establish the existence of a distinct model of “African management”. In Africa, its people are neither minorities, nor marginalised, but in the “impregnated [...] .logic of the African renaissance, the ‘African management’ is aiming at the understanding of organizational practices through the African system of thought” (Kan *et al.*, 2015, p. 272). It is argued that such scholarly enterprise requires as a prerequisite, clarity about “What is Africa?, Who are Africans?”.

### Methodology and theory

At the heart of the AFAM search for conceptual support of what it referred to as “African management” is the discourse on identity, Africanness. The theory of identity constitutes the methodological framework of the analytical epistemological discourse. The theoretical framework used by Charles Ngwenya positions this discourse. Identity is treated as dynamic and liberating. An African identity is understood as heterogeneous by applying critical hermeneutics to reject a reductive sameness as “rationalising, normative, a gaze constructed upon a *prior* discursive centre that excludes, invalidates or incorporates in order to align” (Ngwenya, 2018, p. 2) Ngwenya uses the concept “identity” in an exploratory epistemology. The concept is not used in a *theocratic* way, assuming that the phenomenon studied exists in or can be positioned in a pre-assumed framework or template. The observation of the phenomenon occurs as an exercise of “finding”. There is no proclivity towards seeing phenomena “[...] as if they were the same and in ways that erase their differences and particularity” (Ngwenya, 2018, p. 4). Exploring identity, *nativism* is considered a *theocratic* vision reducing the phenomenon to an abstract universality. Critical phenomenology disciplines the scholar to set aside all factual knowledge and reasoned assumptions about a phenomenon to explore the intuitive essence of its existence. That methodology will not efface individual agency nor reduce human things to ideological automatons (Ardley, 2011; Velmans, 2007). Identity as a social phenomenon is, therefore, understood as a dynamic, evolving, changing social phenomenon. The visual appearance of physical matter cannot resonate the nature of the phenomenon in an ever-changing world. This aligns to Stuart Hall’s notion of identity as incomplete and temporal and “in process”. Identity is being and becoming, always in the making. The dynamic process is a subjective interaction between desire and uncertainty – the desire to reflect certain characteristics and the uncertainty of which elements to incorporate from other identities. Identity is multiple, conjectural identifications that are always becoming (Hall, 2000; Hall, 2005). Identity is a dynamic human condition or phenomenon that has no phenotype or a pre-constituted self, or as Ngwenya calls it “a closed identity” (Ngwenya, 2018, p. 7).

How then can “African identity” be understood? How do the calls for “African management” resonate with the question of who might be “Africans”? This paper uses qualitative critical text analysis to understand the discourse on the nature of “African management” from the extant literature.

### Distinctly African

A productive way of thinking about African identity is to accept the open productive mediation for thinking about *Africanness*. The identity of “being African” has taken on dimensions of relativity and essentialising in seeking to respond to the question of “who/ what is African”. Dei, for example, refers to “an authentic African collective identity[ies] as informed by the indigenous African cultural knowledges, and the histories of the politics of resistance that have shaped and continue to shape our existence as African beings” (Dei, 2011) as being one of the Negroid race or being black. “Blackness/Africanness” is presented as synonyms, because he denies the existential possibility of any other racial category as African. The conceptualisation of Africanness has also acquired a location within the experience of colonialism, resistance and praxis. We, thus, read that: “The critical reflection of our collective existence is about developing a consciousness of our interconnected realities and social well-being as resisters who are continually contesting agendas in order to design our futures” (Dei, 2011, p.44), of having an identity understood as the “other” of the European “self” (Soyinka, 1976; Lushaba and Lategan, 2019; Marschall, 2001; Azeb, 2019; Swartz *et al.*, 2019). This conceptualisation of identity is nativist. It defines people through the template of resistance to European colonialism. Hall, in contrast, disputed the very possibility of recovering pre-colonial African identity – pre-colonial identity has since adapted to a new context, society and human interaction to those of the pre-colonial era (Hall, 2005). The call for a revisiting of indigenous African knowledge, thus, may create tension with dynamic operations in the post-colonial open market. This is a market that is “irreversibly plural” (Idegu, 2007), characterised by individual entrepreneurial risk-taking and reward, in some instances, enhanced by cultures of collectivism.

Two broad categories of “nativist” African identity contributed to the conceptualisation of a distinct “African” identity. These strands of thought define identity as a generic construct, a nativist Africanness, assigning content to identity as “a saturated and oppositional natural essence” (Ngwenya, 2018, p. 5). On the one hand, Europeans – during the period of European imperialism and colonialism – developed a conception of the people of Africa from their own Caucasian racial perspective, one based on a particular and established western European civilisation and culture. This identification afforded African people a single and simple genealogy, which has been described as “ahistorical” and “loaded with stigma” (Soyinka, 1991; Mbembe, 2001; Mbembe and Rendall, 2002; Mazrui, 2005). This identification describes Africans as people of the Negroid race, located in a sub-Saharan geography where they supposedly acted as practitioners of an indigenous culture inferior to that associated with European culture. According to this perspective, indigenous languages are undeveloped and unsuited for advanced learning. By contrast, Africanists consider this European identification of the African people as reductionist, a tool of control in a hierarchical relationship affording Europeans a superior position. As Ngwenya summarises: “This system has bequeathed an enduring legacy of hegemonic racial thinking which dichotomously categorised humanity as a predominantly white half at the apex of a racial pyramid, and the nadir are varieties of in-betweens – races not as superior as white but not as low as black” (Ngwenya, 2018, p. 7). In developing their own race-based counter to this European understanding, Africanists have produced a resistance or Black/African emancipatory discourse by asserting an ontology of blackness. Since the 1920s, the Pan-Africanist movement has given its own political credence to anti-colonialism resistance. Largely, the product of those most exposed to modernity, this movement mobilised solidarity to achieve social and economic modernisation, cultural regeneration and political determination. In origin, this Pan-Africanism owed a particular debt to the (descendants of) enslaved Africans in the western hemisphere from whence an African diaspora began to see

“Africa” as a distinct entity. Esedebe (1977), Geiss (1974), Kazemzadeh (1972), Walraven (1999). As such, it moulded an existential response to acculturation and social alienation in ways that re-established an African identity as a transcendental and radical alternative. As Africa exited the 20th century the re-awakening of a radical African identity, affirming equality and human dignity, positioned this discourse as one diametrically opposite the European concept of African identity.

After Pan-Africanism, a number of other identity-constructing concepts such as “Africanity”, “Afrocentrism” and “Negritude” emphasised new reiterations of an African identity discourse in ways that initially lacked conceptual clarity (Diagne *et al.*, 2001; Swartz *et al.*, 2019). More recently, however, a new generation of African intellectuals have transformed the identity discourse from one characterised by conceptual reductionism into a dynamic hermeneutics of Africanness. The dynamic fluidity of human movement, association and identification gave rise to an intellectual openness that replaces the former discursively produced identity that stood for “racial and cultural signposting of evolutionary backwardness” (Ngwenya, 2018, p. 77). In decoding this postulation of African identity, the discourse intersected with Hall’s concept of identity as becoming (Hall, 2000).

The earlier reconstructions of an assumed single African identity is a discourse that imposes a reductive sameness, delivering a “rationalising, normative gaze constructed upon a *prior* discursive centre that excludes, invalidates or incorporates in order to align” (Young, 1990, pp. 125–126). This, I argue, is limiting and non-liberating. By contrast, Hall offers a liberating epistemology, which allows for adaptation under conditions of fluidity and newness. It facilitates newness and the managing of dissonance and recognising emerging consensus with other identities of people in a dynamically changing world. As Hall noted, plurality is the condition of human action (Hall, 1990; Hall, 2005). Critical theorisation about the shaping of identity, benefitted also from Servaes’ notion of inward identification with specific cultures and outward identification with other cultures, explaining cultural assimilation with other cultural entities with which the individual came in contact (Servaes, 1997, p. 81). This notion was adopted by Souleymane Bachir Diagne, reflecting on Africanity as an open question (Diagne *et al.*, 2001, p. 23). In the post-colonial context, Francis B Nyamnjoh refers to “Africa’s hybrid identity”, or an identity dynamically engaging in “an ongoing process of sorting out, selection, choice, and finally *voluntary* adoption of some ideas, values, outlooks and institutions” that have resulted from the constant interaction with different forms of identity (Gyekye, 1997, pp. 25–26).

The acknowledgement that Africans deal with identity as a voluntary adapting discourse resonates with Mbembe’s challenge that Africa should develop a discourse and a theory about *Africa for itself* (Mbembe, 2001). Ngwenya’s “decoding of African identity” delivers an open logic of identity, a radical liberating notion of “You are African if you say you are. Africanness is belonging” (p. 150), because the “power of race” was weakened in the high noon of colonisation. “Race” makes African identity “essentialist and monochromatic” (p. 145). Indebted to the deconstructive archive of cultural theorists, Ngwenya states, “[. . .] it is better to concede that there is no single racial or cultural signifier for Africa [. . .] Africa and Africanness are open to multiple mapping” (p. 148). His understanding of the people of Africa embraces heterogeneity by keeping “[. . .] the door open for social reflexivity and ever-transforming Africanness” (Ngwenya, 2018). When Idegu responds to Soyinka’s Yoruba cosmology to ethno-absolutism, he calls for “[. . .] a harmonious African panoramic view of cosmologies by sharing what is convergent and in mutual respect for what is divergent [. . .]” (Idegu, 2007). Neither Idegu’s recognition of diversity nor Ngwenya’s hermeneutics of Africanness deny authenticity, but reimagines that identity by moving

away from a “[...] thick and dominant notion of African identity as archaeology [...]” to accommodate uncertainty and a plural universe (Ngwenya, 2018, p. 275).

Considering the size of the African continent, the diversity of its people and the openness of its borders to centuries of migration (Verhoef, 2017, pp. 7–9), the only authentic “African” identity can be an inclusive, adaptive, self-reflective and heterogeneous conceptualisation of diversity. The decoding hermeneutics of the African identity discourse briefly outlined above has not penetrated the discourse on “African management”.

### Search for “African management”

How does this epistemology of identity, specifically African identity, inform the discourse on management in Africa? In the 1990s, Kiggundu (1991) called for management development in Africa to facilitate the development needs of the continent. In the subsequent disciplinary discourse of management, it remained unclear, however, as to what constituted “African management” (George, 2015; Jackson, 2004, 2013; Kan *et al.*, 2015). To fill the “knowledge gap” on what constitutes the epistemology of management research (Hatchuel, 2005), Jackson called for the reconstruction of indigenous management systems (Jackson, 2013), while Kiggundu’s (2013) reflection on “African management” delivered an overview of how Africans managed Africa, rather than a conceptualisation of what “African management” entailed. He propagated “action research” as a tool to teach Africans to manage, rather than to discover the unique elements of indigenous management. Kiggundu states, “I believe African management will require active and dedicated practical theorists” (Kiggundu, 2013, p. 181). But, he fails to reveal the distinctive essence of “African management”. While advocates of “African management” acknowledge that “Africa is not a unitary concept”, and that “Africa is not a monocultural society” (Kiggundu, 1991, pp. 33–41; Idegü, 2007; Amankwa-Amoah, 2018; Zoogah and Peng, 2019), they simultaneously insist on a supposedly unique African identity, specifically in the management education programmes at various management training institutions in Africa. In 1989, delegates representing directors and principals of ten institutions of the Association of Management Training Institutions of Eastern and Southern Africa identified the two key objectives of their training as “inculcating national values and ideology as per party manifesto” and “contribution to the liberation struggle and dismantling of apartheid” (Kiggundu, 1991, p. 38; Kiggundu, 2013). These *foci* were very different from earlier “western” management education in Africa seeking to enhance efficient business or organisational performance. It also departs from other scholarly calls for a reassessment of indigenous management practices, such as Osiri’s exposition of the Igbo management tradition (Osiri, 2020), Wariboko’s discussion of the West African house boat management system (Wariboko, 2002), Ekesiobi and Dimnwobi’s assessment of the Igbo apprenticeship entrepreneurial support system (Ekesiobi and Dimnwobi, 2020) or Amankwa-Amoah’s call for the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into management research in Africa (Amankwa-Amoah, 2018). In actual fact, Kan *et al.* found that “African management” emerged as an act of resistance to dominant literature in management (Kan *et al.*, 2015, p. 260) and as a strategy to re-appropriate African authenticity (Bangura, 2005; Darley and Luethge, 2019). A potential misalignment seems to occur here: the AFAM agenda seems to engage with “African management”, while other scholars engage with indigenous practices and knowledge emerging in different contexts of society and business. These are indeed authentic to different African cultural ethnic entities, but do not constitute a blanket an African management model”. The fundamental question the AFAM has not yet addressed is the question of who are “Africans”? The identity of the focus of the “African” in the management model remains unaccounted for. The closest to a response may be the

comment by Zoogah and Peng. They define “African scholars and/or academics interested in management and organizational issues in Africa (defined broadly to include all of Africa and individuals of African descent in the Diaspora – i.1 the Caribbean, South America, Europe, Asia, Oceania, the Middle east, and North America)” (Zoogah and Peng, 2019, p. 12).

Despite repeated calls for the promotion of “African management” (Kiggundu, 2002; Zoogah and Nkomo, 2012; Kiggundu, 2013; Nkomo *et al.*, 2015; Acquaah and Kiggundu, 2017), none has suggested a definition of what “African management” actually means or how it can be distinguished from non-African management. In 2013, Kiggundu called for AFAM to accept the “responsibility of advancing an African management system” (Kiggundu, 2013, p. 183), which implies the persistence of a knowledge gap. In 2017, the President of AFAM Stella Nkomo called for the production of “management theory and knowledge for Africa”. At the same time, she lamented the limited breadth and depth of research on management and organisation in Africa, and the scarcity of authors from the continent. Other delegates emphasised how management theory and practice needed to be “kept African”. The undisputed agenda of defending a distinctive identity in “African management” is crippled by its sustained poor conceptualisation (Kamdem, 2000).

Scholars of management in Africa seem to sustain an ideological attachment to the idea of “African management” without dedicated research to conceptualise the phenomenon they so passionately wish to promote. The majority of the protagonists of “African management” as a distinct phenomenon are in diaspora, teaching at tertiary institutions outside Africa. “African management” is portrayed as being “marginalised” through the hegemony of western perspectives in management research (Zoogah and Nkomo, 2012; Darley and Luethge, 2019), but they hold the vision that “there is life beyond Northern academia, both in terms of management theoretical concepts and in terms of organizational practices” (Alcadipani *et al.*, 2012). This view positions the so-called “African management” on one side of the binary divide, with western management on the other side. A growing voice amongst scholars calls for the convergence of indigenous management practices with other modern or western management practices. Barnard *et al.* (2017), Amankwa-Amoah (2018), Baba (2018), Kan *et al.* (2015, p. 265) call for a convergence of culturally rooted values with management practices from other cultural contexts. Osiri (2019), in recognising the disintegration of the Igbo values and institutions (pp. 309–311), similarly calls for a revisiting of the values and cultural practices of the Igbo people, as potentially capable of contributing to a systematic rebuilding of the African economy. In a similar fashion, a reflection on cultural values and social networks by minorities in diaspora reveal lessons of how African people managed existential challenges in diaspora (Stott and Fava, 2019; Hasan *et al.*, 2020; Sales *et al.*, 2019). These studies do not suggest a framework for a distinctive “African management” model, but insert cultural and ethnic specific values of diverse social entities into mainstream management research. The notion of seeking common values around which to construct an “African management” model has been suggested, especially around the concept of “ubuntu” (Mutabazi, 2007; Mangaliso, 2001). The discourse on management in Africa, thus, turns away from searching for an “African management model” to a more nuanced investigation into dimensions of management in Africa.

### Concept and ideology in “African management”

The extant literature calling for the recognition of an “African management” model failed to offer a framework to construct such a model. There are general discussions around shared values or indigenous knowledge systems, such as *igwebuike*, explained by Kanu as the Igbo-African philosophy of complementarity – the particular identity of the individual finds meaning in the community (Kanu, 2017). Protagonists of “African management” submit the

concept of “ubuntu” as a general African management concept. A question arises about the appropriateness of “ubuntu” towards conceptualising management in Africa. Is “ubuntu” representative of all the peoples of Africa? The discourse returns again to the question of who is “African”? The literature identifies only a limited number of African countries in which the concept is known or generally ascribed to – Nigeria, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa (Kan *et al.*, 2015, p. 271; Osiri, 2020, p. 295). These countries, however, represent only 9.6% of all the states in Africa. If the concept is known in such a limited number of African states, can it be a coherent conceptual phenomenon capable of actually encompassing management practices in Africa? The surge in the interest of what “African management” is (Nzelibe, 1986; Goldman, 2013; Jackson *et al.*, 2004; Jackson, 2008; Nkomo, 2011; Van Rinsum and Boessenkool, 2013; Mapunda, 2013; Corbishley *et al.*, 2016; Jackson, 2013; Kan *et al.*, 2015; George, 2015; Achtenhagen and Brundin, 2016) associated in part with the “unprecedented economic growth” in Africa since the early 2000s (Kan *et al.*, 2015; McKinsey Global Institute, 2016). There are two reasons for this. First, Africa needs sustained economic growth and therefore international best practice management of society and the economy (Marsden, 1990; Perry, 1997; Kuada, 2006; Kiggundu, 2013). This mandates a focus on the business enterprise to secure the sustained growth required to deliver on the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) aim of alleviating poverty. Second, the multi-cultural and the diverse ethnic and linguistic nature of its population (Luiz, 2015) mandate managerial strategies capable of harnessing the power of cross-cultural diversity in management. Instead of a binary “Northern hemisphere – Southern hemisphere” discourse, Hamann *et al.* argue a dialogical approach to management in Africa can create alternative spaces of collaborative inquiry functional to an epistemology of dynamic diversity (Hamann *et al.*, 2020).

The dilemma remains that there is still no clarity of what “African” means. The protagonists of “African management” as a distinct model want African managers able to embrace unique “African” experiences. Towards this goal, there seems to be a conviction that “ubuntu”, a concept that emphasises “humanity” or human interdependence, driven by norms of reciprocity, suppression of self-interest and the virtue of symbiosis, can secure efficient African management and offer enterprises in Africa competitive advantage (Mangaliso, 2001; Bangura, 2005). “Ubuntu” is presented as a “uniquely African” concept, but is it a distinctly African concept? Does it provide a basis for a distinctive set of African managerial practices capable of securing a competitive advantage over a “non-ubuntu-organised” enterprise? Despite the increasing importance of corporate African business – South Africa in particular being a base for well-known global firms such as Anglo-American, De Beers, BHP Billiton and Woolworths – small- and medium-sized enterprises and the informal sector still dominate the African business landscape (World Bank, 2000). However, the discourse as to – What is African management? What is the African philosophy of management? What is indigenous management? – tends to be one-sided, focusing on a single or one group to the exclusion of others, namely, black Africans (people of African descent; Zoogah and Peng, 2019). That perspective side-lines the presence of business people from other cultures, races, ethnicities and languages from the discourse. There is no literature on what Indian, Asian, Muslim, Afrikaner or Jewish management models – all integral to Africa for generations – might be. All these entities conduct successful business in Africa, but are not considered to be “African” business. All the literature on African management refers to “African indigenous management systems”. What about the long tradition of Lebanese businesspeople operating in Ghana; the Indian businesses in several East African states such as Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania; the Chinese businesspeople in South Africa? Despite their absence from the literature and the discourse,



these constituent people of Africa all contribute to the rich diversity of management cultures of Africa, as vividly described by [Gomes et al. \(2011\)](#), [Nkomo \(2011\)](#). This omission is more surprising considering the persistent emphasis on Africa's cultural diversity and complexity ([Nyambergera, 2002](#); [Nkomo, 2011](#); [Kiggundu, 1991](#); [Kiggundu, 2013](#); [Kan et al., 2015](#); [Luiz, 2015](#)). Instead, the "African" discourse tends to reflect an "exclusion and expulsion" of anything that is "not-African". The concept "African" is used instead as a metaphor, which, in the philosophy of Paul Ricoer, acquires the power of "re-describing". In the post-colonial drive to re-establish African authenticity, "African" has also served as a metaphor for "liberation". This "liberation" is from hegemonic Eurocentric science and technology, from hegemonic rationalist and instrumentalist organisation theory, liberation from neo-liberal market theory and commercial interests of global business – in any case, liberation from "Empire" and its global reach. In short, we witness an essentialist act to "create" an identity, an "authentic moment" that, easily, becomes an "invention of tradition" ([Van Rinsum and Boessenkool, 2013](#); [Kan et al., 2015](#); [Ngwenya, 2018](#)). The dilemma does not escape us: "ubuntu" is not proven to be universally "African", and we still do not know where to position the multitude of entrepreneurs or businessmen in Africa who are not "African", according to the Zoogah and Peng definition.

How do the protagonists of the so-called "African management" model explain the other entrepreneurs in Africa? In East Africa, the Indian Muslim business communities have been instrumental in developing trade and commerce in the different independent states. In North Africa, Muslim entrepreneurs dominate commerce. In Southern Africa, Indian businessmen, Jewish entrepreneurs and Afrikaners – and a wide variety of different European cultural communities – contribute to the economy of the region. A one-dimensional conceptualisation of the people of Africa as indigenous black Africans, thus, adds to the poverty of the discourse on management in Africa. This is a fundamental flaw in management research. Rather than focusing on the supposedly uniqueness of one form of African practice, the key question should be: what are the diversities of *management cultures* in Africa, and what are the dynamics of their interaction? How does the dynamic plurality of African identity manifest in the multi-cultural diversity of African business cultures to explain the development of Africa's economy? The focus should shift to the study of business culture in enterprises. The concept of "business culture" reflects the wider cultural background (which is dynamic and diverse in Africa) of entrepreneurs and society and account for its economic success ([Godley and Westall, 1996](#)). Such a focus would lead scholars away from the "thick and dominant notion of African identity as archaeology" to an empirical analysis of entrepreneurs and business.

A key factor sparking interest in the specific nature of indigenous black African entrepreneurs and management is the lack of systematic research into the nature and application of management approaches by indigenous black African entrepreneurs ([Jackson, 2004, 2013](#); [Goldman, 2013](#); [George, 2015](#); [Kan et al., 2015](#); [Barnard et al., 2017](#); [Amankwa-Amoah, 2018](#)). International development agencies and multinational corporations increasingly engaged with business partners in Africa act in an intellectual vacuum. It was understood that Africa needed institution building, leadership empowerment and business development, but there is a lack of systematic knowledge about business in Africa and about the business culture, organisation and management amongst the diversity of indigenous black African businesses. An understanding of the so-called "indigenous management factors", or "indigenous knowledge and values", is thus assumed to be a prerequisite for successful business integration and international exchange ([Dia, 1990, 1996](#); [Wohlgemuth et al., 1998](#); [Darley and Luethge, 2019](#)). What "indigenous

management factors” are remains unclear. Even if some distinct “African” management framework might be identified, it remains limited to certain pockets of business in Africa.

When indigenous black Africans reposition themselves in the global post-colonial environment, black intellectuals such as Edward Blyden and William du Bois propagated Pan-Africanism. Similarly, as the rejection of western intellectual domination mounted after the Second World War, African leaders popularised the concept of *Negritude*, a conscious movement to re-evaluate African cultural values. When *Negritude* failed to solicit all-African support for being too closely articulated in a western conceptual framework, new ideologies developed around *Uhuru* (liberation and nation-building), *ujamaa* (African socialism) and *ubuntu* (African humanism) and the *African Renaissance*, all of which were popularised during the 1990s.

In this politically mobilised context of the 1990s, *Ubuntu* was revived by Bishop Desmond Tutu to give new theological content to the concept. Since the 1990s, the resurgence of African mobilisation concepts during the so-called “African renaissance” coincided with the structural adjustment of weak African economies and the rise of private enterprise. This, therefore, was the context of the indigenous black African reappraisal of African identity, one associated with mobilising dynamism towards economic reconstruction. As African political leaders embraced economic growth through engagement with a market economy, as articulated in the NEPAD Charter, the redemption of the concept of a distinct “African management” identity – underpinned by a distinct “African thought” and inherent African values embedded in “ubuntu” – proved to be a strategic tool to revive entrepreneurial agency so profoundly marginalised under colonial and post-independence heavy statism. The move to open markets was a fundamental paradigm shift in policy and required organisational change. This trend often met with opposition, as it was perceived as a threat to the influence and power of the new ruling class (Blunt and Jones, 1992). Increasingly, effecting organisational change within African organisations (state and private) was premised on defining what “African” is – African thought, organisations, culture, etc. Kan *et al.* describe “African management” as “an object of ideological posture of which ideal types of management styles can be distinguished [...] [and which] is purposely mobilised in the literature on ‘African management’ as an essential tool for emancipation and resistance” (Kan *et al.*, 2015, p. 268). The systematic literature on “African management” as a distinct model of management has well-articulated agendas of positioning “African management” beyond the previously legitimised universal management knowledge (Nkomo, 2015), or as Bangura puts it, to address “[...] the debilitating effects of the Western educational system that have been forced upon Africans” (Bangura, 2005). This literature does not seek to position management research in Africa in the new context of open markets and dynamic competitive business in Africa. Rather, it is directed towards the development of an “African management theory” of African organisations, an Afrocentric knowledge of African organisations (Bamberger, 2008; Lutz, 2009; Holtbrügge, 2013). Despite this objective, however, no sufficiently coherent scholarly research on what “African management” is has yet been produced (Nkomo, 2015).

The re-invention of “African management” resulted in extensive literature into what the nature, underlying values and complex diversity of the phenomenon might be. Central to “African management” were the concepts such as ethnocentrism, traditionalism, communalism and cooperative teamwork. The discourse positioned these elements as opposites to “Western management”, which was purported to promote eurocentrism, individualism and modernity (Nzelibe, 1986). Embeddedness in African customs, beliefs and practices are assumed to regulate every individual’s conduct. Management practices are presented as recognising the family as the “basic unit of socialisation” (Bangura, 2005). An

integrated existence between members of the family and nature exists, which brings a connection to ancestry. In turn, the integrated nature of family is held to underpin human communication in African organisations. For management in Africa, this means unity between the spiritual and material, of which the unified phenomenon moves in grand unity. Such understandings lead to the notion of “communalism” or communal sociability, which is the communality between the family as fundamental socialising unit, and the tribe/clan, as the basic socialising unit. Communal sociability is understood as the harmonisation between different institutional levels in African society. This notion brought to African management thought the idea of the communality of a persons’ culture outside the organisation being integral to their position inside the organisation (Kan *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, the notion of consultation is deemed to evolve from the tribal chief’s decision-making process, it being held that “decisions were not made but they seemed to emerge. Elders did not take unilateral decision without informally consulting with other members in the society” (Mbaku, 2002; Mangaliso, 2001). A strong emphasis is also placed on the nexus between societal values and the operation of the organisation, which suggests adherence to collective and communal conduct. These traits are also identified in informal mutual self-help social entities. The reference to “insider knowledge” as one dimension of the meaning of “indigenous” (Marsden, 1990), and the analysis of “African management” as a distinct concept, integrates the specific cultural elements outlined above (Nzelibe, 1986; Kiggundu, 1988; Barratt Brown, 1995; Wild, 1997; Bangura, 2005; Safavi and Tweddell, 2007; Jackson *et al.*, 2008).

This emerging literature on African thought and social organisation has been extended into the organisational context as an essential part of the African renaissance paradigm. Indeed, Kan *et al.* (2015) interpret the main body of literature on “African management” as essentially “an act of resistance to the dominant literature in management. The African system of thought is mobilised as a means of (re) appropriation of African authenticity” (p. 260). This (interpretation dovetails with Tony O Elumelu’s (the Nigerian banker) idea of an African capitalism, called “Africapitalism”. *Africapitalism* is advocated as a means of promoting African economic development through investment that generate prosperity and social wealth (Amaeshi, 2013a, 2013b; Elumelo, 2015; Akinyoade *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, explanation as to the limited success of African business organisations in the past is tied with supposed alienation from rationalist and functionalist conceptions of business in Africa (Bangura, 2005). Instead, it is argued that the western conceptions of African business organisations fail to understand the indigeneness of such organisation. Jackson (2013) unpacked “indigeneness” and “endogenous” as concepts explaining the knowledge from within the specific society, “a function of place and context, of collective values” (p. 22) – in this case, the African society. The alternative conception – considered to be better suited to the nature of African society and business – is the humanist and cultural conception, which considers a distinctive African culture or identity underpinning African organisations (Jackson, 2013; Mapunda, 2013; Walsh, 2015; Zoogah *et al.*, 2015).

The discourse on “African management” is, thus, essentially one about the nature of African culture, society and organisations from within the “indigenous” knowledge base (Darley and Luethge, 2019), which Kan *et al.* describe as “part of a general reasoning having a dual objective: emancipation and resistance to domination of the Western world through Western management precepts” (Kan *et al.*, 2015, p. 264). The fundamental issue here is the assumed universal “African” phenomenon, while the concept has limited traction in Africa and fails to account for the diversity of Africa’s people. Promoting an understanding of African culture in ways that resemble theories built around the antithesis between “South” and “North”, African renaissance management also wants to elevate the human dimension of the organisation, the “stakeholders”, in ways that reconnect with “African” culture (again

assuming “African” universality). Culture emanates from outside the organisation, as the people working in the organisation bring that culture into the organisation. In Africa, therefore, the management model is expected to reflect that distinctly African “culture”. However, the cognitive dilemma is that Africa is ethnically diverse, harbouring multiple cultures and more than 1,000 languages (Kiggundu, 1991; Luiz, 2015; Verhoef, 2017; Ngwenya, 2018).

### Can “ubuntu” be the holy grail of “African management”?

The recent conceptualising of “African management” has led to a re-appraisal of concepts considered to be at the core of “African” culture. The rejuvenated concept that is central to the revived discourse about African renaissance is “Ubuntu”. The extensive engagement with conceptualising “ubuntu” as an Afrocentric concept has been key to the post-colonial search for African identity (Bernstein, 2002; Lutz, 2009; West, 2014; Kan *et al.*, 2015). *Ubuntu* is presented as a specific form of African humanism, which emphasises the individual as a moral being, an African worldview or a collective consciousness of the people of Africa. *Ubuntu* is presented as embodying unique and authentic African values of humanness, respect, caring, sharing, social justice, righteousness, empathy for others and compassion. Most scholars explain *Ubuntu* as a communitarian ethic, articulated as *umunthu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Nguni indigenous language) – which can be translated as “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am”. This communitarian ethic is inclusive and expressed in solidarity, compassion and sacrifice. These “values” are also presented as ones constituting the essence of the African community, expressed in reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in building and maintaining community (Mbiti, 1989; Mbigi, 1997; Prinsloo, 2000; Mbigi and Maree, 2005; Schutte, 2001; Mangaliso, 2001; Broodryk, 2005, 2006; Nussbaum, 2009; Lutz, 2009; West, 2014).

These notions are presented as characteristic of sub-Saharan societies as distinct from those underlying western values and business philosophy. The constituent *ubuntu* concepts are claimed to offer a unique African concept of behaviour, applied to different spheres of human conduct, such as the legal sphere, education, nursing, government and business management. However, the notion of communalism holds a potential contradiction with individualism and self-preservation, which has implications for entrepreneurial self-driven ambition and vision. By contrast, Nnadozie (2002), Bangura (2005), Kanu (2016), Kanu (2017), Kanu (2019), Osiri (2019) and Ekésiobi and Dimnwobi (2020) all subscribe to the co-existence of individual achievement and communitarian collectivism (not communism) amongst the Igbo people of Nigeria. They reject exclusive collectivist organisation among African peoples, testifying to the simultaneous “highly individualistic” and competitive nature of the Igbo people, albeit in a communal sphere (Osiri, 2020, pp. 297–299). On the other hand, there is still the Nkrumaian call for the adoption of socialism as a vehicle for breaking down colonialism and promoting development (Dodoo, 2011). Nevertheless, Mbigi (1997) considers *ubuntu* a dynamic spiritual/religious experience or spirituality, which does not rule out “an individual existence of the self and the simultaneous existence for others” (Schutte, 2001; Mangaliso, 2001). Thus the hallmark of *ubuntu* is submitted to “be a good community member. It is also about living and enjoying life rather than the acquisition of the material creature comfort of life” (Mbigi and Maree, 2005).

Despite the presentation of *ubuntu* as a distinctly African concept, it lacks systematic scientifically reconstructed content, based on systematic empirical research (Bernstein, 2002; Metz, 2007; Metz, 2009; Lutz, 2009; West, 2014; Kan *et al.*, 2015). No systematic scientific research confirms actual universality of *ubuntu* as an African practice or consensus on analytical content. Nor is there proof of a universal African preference for collectivism as

opposed to individualism. Rather, an interaction between individuals and society (be that family, kin, community), is observed. In fact, Hofstede found in his systematic international cross-cultural survey of employees of the computer company, IBM – carried out in 53 countries – a distinct lack of preference for collective conduct in Africa. Hofstede revealed an affinity among the African respondents for a loosely knit social framework and a higher degree of interdependence. Despite wide criticism of Hofstede's research paradigm (Jones, 2007; Fougère and Agneta, 2004; McSweeney, 2002; Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1997; Baskerville, 2003), his research results suggests a degree of alignment by African people to communalism (Hofstede, 2001; West, 2014). Thomas and Bendixen repeated the Hofstede investigation by surveying 586 South African middle-managers a decade after the nation's holding of its first democratic elections in 1994. The result was a score of 81 by South African middle managers on the individualism–collectivism scale used by the Thomas and Bendixen study; a result that confirmed a stronger alignment to individualism in South Africa by both white and African people. White Afrikaans-speaking managers scored 77, Sotho managers 79, Xhosa managers 78, Zulu managers 83 [the last three categories are African managers] and English-speaking managers 88. These results revealed the notion of African people being less individualistic – and white people more individualistic – as an unfounded simplistic generalisation (Thomas and Bendixen, 2000). This conclusion was substantiated by the Trompenaars and Hampden-Taylor (1997) survey of company managers.

On a wider geographical scale, Noorderhaven and Tidjani (2001) confirmed the complexity of cultural notions of communalism, social responsibility, human goodness and sharing among African peoples in 12 sub-Saharan countries when compared to the UK and the USA. On these four dimensions of culture, aligned to elements of *ubuntu*, African countries (Ghana, Cameroon, Senegal, Tanzania and Zimbabwe) scored less than 50 on the scale of “human goodness”, while South Africa, the UK and the USA scored higher than 76. On the notion of “sharing”, the USA and Zimbabwe scored 45, as opposed to a higher score of 62 and above by managers in Ghana, Cameroon, Senegal and Tanzania. On collectivism, the highest scores were achieved by managers in Cameroon, Ghana, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and the UK, while Senegal and the USA had the lowest scores. Finally, on the notion of societal responsibility, the lowest score was achieved by managers from Tanzania and Zimbabwe, while the highest scores were posted by managers from Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, the UK and the USA (Noorderhaven and Tidjani, 2001). These studies confirm the complexity and diversity of alignment with notions of collectivism, social responsibility and other notions supposedly aligned to key elements of *ubuntu*. These studies also refute the notion of an exclusive African concern for the collective or a lack of individualism amongst African managers. Indeed, the fluidity of managerial traits seems to align more to the nature of the business context in which they operate than to ethnic cultural distinctions.

The most extensive body of literature on the concept *ubuntu* emerged from South Africa as a supposed tool towards demographic transformation in the economy, specifically in business management. Van Binsbergen (2001) describes *ubuntu* as a utopian and prophetic philosophy, an “exhortative instrument” and a “tool for transformation in the context of globalisation” (Van Binsbergen, 2001, p. 73). He argues: “Ubuntu offers the appearance of an ancestral model to [those who fought to attain majority rule] that is credible and with which they can identify, regardless of whether these urban, globalised people still observe ancestral codes of conduct - off course in most respects they do not, regardless of whether the ancestral codes are rendered correctly (often they are not)”. Bernstein (2002) also argues that “the rediscovery of African values and culture is largely an elite reinterpretation of

residues of what used to be [...] the fashionable celebration of Ubuntu is intended more for white consumption or to display a badge of (Africanist?) honour than as sincere moral reconstruction” (Bernstein, 2002:210). This scepticism is echoed by Chen (2014) and Kragh (2012) who question the idealism with which the concept is presented as only the positive aspects of African social norms.

The dilemma for management research is that the literature on *ubuntu* remains anecdotal. In the absence of any systematic empirical research, the utility as a distinctive concept in African management is seriously constrained. Scholars have refuted the attempt to present *ubuntu* as a uniquely African idea of “humanness”, a sense of social connectedness of individuals to society and fellow humans, exclusive to African societies. The notion of interpersonal relationships embedded in a moral philosophy, Metz (2007, 2009) argued, has its foundations in traditional European normative theories. It was Aristotle who developed the idea of self-realisation and of interpersonal relationships as supplementary and non-contradictory. Applying the ancient and medieval moral philosophy of “the common good is my good” allows a wider understanding of human universalism, which confirms shared rather than contradictory normative values in global societies (Lutz, 2009; Kan *et al.*, 2015; West, 2014). The limited number of studies on *ubuntu* originating from outside South Africa suggest that the concept was not widely held, thus undermining the claim to its general depiction of a typical African value and therefore fundamental element of a distinct “African management” model (Mbigi, 1997; Mbigi and Maree, 2005).

### **Management of organisation and business in Africa: mobility and global convergence**

Across Africa, western management thought systematically penetrated business education as scholars joined business schools in the UK and the USA (Kamoche, 2011; Perry, 1997; Kuada, 2006). These scholars were not the businessmen operating in emerging markets. As Kiggundu (1991) explained, management training also often served state goals as African entrepreneurs assumed an increasingly important economic role, albeit in markets still typically dominated by state regulation and state-owned enterprises (SOEs). For, although the privatisation programmes since the mid-1980s were slow and often incomplete, they ultimately offered the “dormant” African entrepreneur access to business opportunities. Many were remarkably well prepared. In East Africa, well-capitalised and well-managed family businesses, often with generations of entrepreneurial experience, acquired loss-making SOEs. These failed SOEs were invariably restructured with diversified operations soon extended into neighbouring markets (White and Bhatia, 1998; Sutton and Kellow, 2010; Sutton and Kapenty, 2012; Sutton and Olomi, 2012; Sutton and Langmead, 2013; Sutton, 2014; Verhoef, 2017). In their structure and organisation, these enterprises typically resembled the western firm or corporation. This, not *ubuntu*, is the new face of the emerging African enterprise.

The new African enterprise has two distinctive characteristics: firm bureaucratic control from the centre by the patriarch or head of the family (the new entrepreneur) and individual/private ownership. As African economies increased opportunities for local entrepreneurs, the bulk of business organisations perpetuated firm structures built around patterns of pre-colonial kinship or family connections. Although the family structure epitomises the *ubuntu* principle of collective benefit, the sustainability of enterprises mandated adherence to market forces and factors such as capital efficiency, productivity, operational efficiency and profitability. Significantly, however, not one of the diversified conglomerates in Africa (excluding South Africa) is a public-listed company (Verhoef, 2017, pp. 189–201). In each conglomerate, moreover, the first and/or second generation family managers benefit from

the next generation's western education in the USA or the UK. Such education experiences infused western management principles and expertise into the firm. A number of these conglomerates now dominate their chosen markets not only within their own country but across entire African regions. Excellent examples are The Trade Kings and the Unity Group. The Trade Kings are a Zambian conglomerate owned by the Patel family, which merged its cotton ginnery operations in the 1990s with those of the Kenyan-based cotton businesses of Munir Zaveri, whose grandfather had settled in Kenya during the 19th century. The Unity Group of companies, owned by Manu Shah, also developed from humble trading operations. The business was started by the current owner's Gujarat-born grandfather, an entrepreneur who arrived in Kenya in the late 1890s. Originally confined to Kenya, the Shah family business interests extended into Tanzania. In each family enterprise, the second or third generation acquired business education outside Africa to benefit the local enterprise.

Similar examples of firms that have witnessed a restructuring of long-established family businesses along modern management and business principles are found in the Mohan Kothari Group of companies in Ethiopia; the Azam Group of companies owned by the Bakhresa family in Tanzania; the MeTL Group owned by the Dewji family (operating in Tanzania as well most other SADC countries); the Madhvani Group in Uganda; the Sawiris family of the Egyptian Orascom Group (some of the companies in the Orascom Group are listed on the Egyptian Stock Exchange); the Comcraft Group in Kenya, owned by the Chadaria family; and the Dangote Group in Nigeria (Verhoef, 2017). New African global conglomerates (operating outside Africa) include the Craft Silicon Group and the Mara Group.

The successful operation of conglomerates such as those mentioned above, as well as the small- and medium-sized enterprises that still dominate business operations across the continent, operate as private enterprises within the paradigm of modern management thought. The *ubuntu* discourse, by contrast, is an ideologically motivated "rewriting of Africa" discourse, which holds the risk of constructing an "identity" conflated with "recovering tradition and custom" (Ngwenya, 2018). For management in Africa, it denies the logic of engaging with modern management. While the *ubuntu* concept may contribute to management theory through the existing organisational development (OD) thinking, there is little evidence that it has shaped the recent revival of African private sector business. Instead, business in Africa benefits from more market-friendly business policies and from engagement with management practice infused through professional management education abroad. These enterprises' management model is not something distinctly African. Rather, it is aligned to international management theory.

Despite the concept of *ubuntu* gaining academic credibility, there is, thus, little evidence that it is informing current business practice. As Kamoche noted, "Any scholarly quest for a distinctive "African" management style is almost always going to be futile". The cultural, linguistic and leadership styles are simply too diverse across the continent (Kamoche, 2011). In highlighting aspects of African culture, the *ubuntu* discourse also fails to offer a single comprehensive view of "African culture", because it does not exist. The only contribution to the OD theory is, therefore, to sensitise management to contextual complexity and change.

The literature on *ubuntu* is essentially propagating a frame of thought. It cannot present a concrete and distinct system of "African management". Nkomo (2015) admits to the inability of the proponents of "African management" to construct a coherent body of knowledge on the subject. Elumelu's "Africapitalism" and Eze's call for the revitalisation or reinterpretation of "*Ubuntu* as a moral ideal for a new age" (Eze, 2010), as well as Mangaliso's constructive proposal for the integration of elements of *ubuntu* in

organisational relations to motivate fellow workers and nurture loyalty and trust among employees (Mangaliso, 2001), are similar expressions of a desire for some future dispensation. Zoogah *et al.* (2015) propose a framework to explain the effectiveness of African organisations. But, there is no case of an *ubuntu*-managed enterprise in Africa that can be tested against the performance of non-*ubuntu*-managed enterprises. Nkomo also appeals for an assessment of the impact of “indigenous African knowledge transfer” on operations of multinational corporations in Africa. Her call lacks operationalisation. She nevertheless admits that there is an illusion to cultural uniqueness in the rhetoric on “African management” (Nkomo, 2011). Scholars are, thus, left with the question of what this “indigenous knowledge” is and how it is transferred into successful business.

How then can the nature of management in Africa come to be identified and studied systematically? “African management” remains a tentative ideologically motivated construct. It fails to engage with diversity in Africa and excludes persons who are not black Africans. This agenda inhibits systematic scrutiny, assessment and comparison of actual management practice in Africa. At the same time, this literature seeks to achieve a form of “Africanisation” of management to enhance organisational efficiency. In a multi-cultural context, this appeal is directed at achieving four outcomes: greater equity amongst employees, higher productivity, strong loyalty to the organisation and improved organisational citizenship (Kan *et al.*, 2015). These outcomes (proposed in the study of McFarlin *et al.*, 1999), however, are all encompassed in the Hawthorn effect in management, enabling people to achieve their full potential as fulfilled employees, by considering the human side of the enterprise of equal strategic importance. The human relations management theory of the 1930s has moved beyond the bureaucratic management theory by focussing on psychological and social factors in employees’ working environment. These contextual dimensions of business and organisations culminated in Peter Senge’s “learning organisations”, displaying sensitivity to organisation and learning about cultures of employees (Senge, 1990; Bateman and Snell, 2009; Hellriegel and Slocum, 1985; Hamel, 2007; Jones and George, 2011). There is nothing unique to Africa about the *ubuntu* humanistic objectives.

The dilemma of the “African management” narrative lies in the one-sided ideological nature of the discourse. Kan *et al.* (2015) offer a concise position. They argue that the research on “African management” can be separated into three different intellectual postures: “convergence, divergence and crossvergence”. On the one hand, the proponents resist convergence of cultural values that may be affected through managerial action. The insistence on a distinct “African management” model, based on the “unique” concept of *ubuntu*, represents a point between divergence and crossvergence. This is clearly a “re-writing” exercise, pursuing an “ideal type of the African renaissance management” – albeit it being “not sufficiently abundant to form a coherent body of knowledge” (Kan *et al.*, 2015, p. 272; Kamoche, 2011). In seeking to “re-write” or revitalise “African management” in practice, this work is at best tentative. Management research elsewhere made progress on the “hybridisation” of management systems (Bangura, 2005; Mangaliso, 2001, actually refer to the fusion of cultures and management influences) and the development of concepts of crossvergence, but this has not yet permeated the African discourse on “African management” (Jackson, 2014: 30; Kuada, 2006). A similar call to replace the systematic-biased “Northern hemisphere/Southern hemisphere” divide in management theory, fed through assumptions uncritically pulled into the debate, by a constructive dialogue exploring actual context (Hamann *et al.*, 2020), is a rational voice. The discourse requires liberation from ontological assumptions linked to essentialised context. Ultimately, the “African management”/*ubuntu* discourse fails to contribute to the identification of an



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authentic African management model. Rather, it has become an aspect of OD's focus on cross-cultural perspectives on management (Bendixen and Burger, 1998).

The reality of the African experience is that when indigenous black African persons rose to positions of leadership and management – either through indigenisation programmes (such as statutory enforced Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) in South Africa – Verhoef (2017), Taylor (2002), Verhoef (2020) or through entrepreneurial ingenuity as displayed in the rise of African-owned conglomerates – they managed modern firms. Invariably, the “new owners” claim to manage their corporations to achieve optimal efficiency and profitability as socially responsible enterprises, having to report on the triple bottom line: financial sustainability, environmental sustainability and social sustainability/responsibility (Witzel, 2012). Undoubtedly, black African entrepreneurs and managers benefited from indigenisation policies all over Africa after independence. However, such policies must not be confused with the discourse on “African management”. Instead, these policies transferred ownership of private business assets from so-called “expatriates” to the indigenous population, irrespective of the business acumen or management capability of the recipient. In South Africa, the state intervened with the stated object of correcting “historical” legacies of discrimination. Unfortunately, the practical effect of this programme is associated with unprecedented corruption and personal elite enrichment of governing party loyalists or *cadres*. Despite such all-too-obvious failings, the visible profile of black persons in management, ownership and control of business across the board in South Africa – as well as in the composition of the employee profile – have a significant managerial impact. However, this was found primarily in human resource management thinking as firms adapted to a demographic change in employee composition, *not* enterprise management theory.

### Conclusion

OD is deeply grounded in the dynamics of cross-culturalism. The challenge to management in Africa lies in embracing the reality of Africa's multi-culturalism, articulated in Ngwenya's *Africanness* as identity of becoming and being. This position mandates a conscious journey to depart from a fixation on an assumed single “African” past, or as Hamann *et al.* (2020) put it, “ontological assumptions of an essentialised past”, by not perpetuating the earlier “colonial/indigenous” binary divide by insisting on a distinct “African management” model. Bendixen and Burger (1998) found the market-oriented management model to be the only management model positively correlated to organisational effectiveness (Bendixen and Burger, 1998). That model allows a dynamic interaction between a multitude of cultures or ethno-linguistic societies in Africa. African business has indeed aligned more closely to a diverse set of management practices akin to global business.

The endeavour to pursue an “African management” model seems fragile. The resurrected concept of *ubuntu* is neither unique nor general/authentic African. The identity of the people of the African continent is neither exclusively black nor singularly identifiable. This article used the identity theory as operationalised by Ngwenya to argue for a discourse redirection. I call for a scientific research strategy to direct this discourse out of the impasse in which it has arrived. The first principle of the redemptive strategy is that identity is dynamic and adapts to changing contexts. What is “African” therefore constitutes the cornerstone of seeking to understand and explain management **in** Africa. The second principle is that no race, creed, culture, language or ethnic group in Africa can claim exclusive ownership of the name ‘African’. Therefore, an inclusive developing identity constitutes the subject matter of the research seeking to understand and explain the

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manifestation of management **in** Africa. The result of this analytical point of departure is that Africa is not able to claim a single “African management” model. The sheer complexity of the continental diversity mandates an exploration into management practices **in** Africa. It is anticipated that extensive systematic empirical research into the actual practices of management **in** Africa will ultimately reveal an understanding of the nature of management **in** Africa.

To gain an understanding of how different entrepreneurs organise their businesses in Africa, and how they relate to different cultural and/or indigenous traditions, scholars of management in Africa need to embark on a systematic research agenda. The goal is to understand business **in** Africa by engaging systematically in case studies of actual business operations. The first step is to open the dialogue by departing from ideological positions of the past, seeking to explore beyond “categories”. The approach should rather be a “[...] participatory, dialogical interplay of action and reflection in the pursuit of transformation” (Hamann *et al.*, 2020, p. 15). With analytical openness and in pursuit of an understanding of actual business management **in** Africa, a dialogical strategy will, instead of chasing the phoenix of “African management”, encourage scholars of business and entrepreneurship to engage in empirical work towards understanding how African businesses integrate the diversity of its business cultures into modern current-day successful enterprises. As Osiri (2019) alluded to distinct Igbo management practices, the question scholars of management in Africa need to ask is how do such distinct ethnic/cultural traits permeate modern Nigerian enterprise? How has the successes of the Igbo apprenticeship system impacted on business in Africa and influenced other cultural entities in Nigeria and neighbouring countries? The Igbo model is one specific management tradition that has immense potential in supporting small, medium and informal enterprises in growing their businesses and sustaining economic benefit to the entire region or continent. Osiri does not offer an “African management model” but emphasises the contribution that the rich diversity in management practices of one ethnic community can make to the study of management in Africa. Mangaliso’s (2001) exposition of the cultural traits of *ubuntu* underlines the usefulness of certain aspects (not all) of traditions in African societies to support change in management/employee relations. Senge (1990) found that learning in organisations was difficult, but necessary to facilitate smooth adaptation to change. This can also be rephrased as, adaptation to cultural diversity, or management strategies “when two African cultures clash” (Gomes *et al.*, 2011). This is the dynamics of hybridisation within African enterprise that characterise business in Africa (Claeyé and Jackson, 2012; Anakwe, 2002; Jackson *et al.*, 2008; Newham-Kahindi, 2009).

Current research into the “African management” model has reached a *cul de sac*. Amankwa-Amoah (2018) aptly outlined the necessity for an open research agenda. This paper subscribes to his call for caution in respect of static labels and supports the critical investigation into the applicability/relevance of diverse indigenous and ethno-cultural practices into management practices in Africa. As Verhoef (2017) indicated, many business conglomerates in Africa have moulded management strategies with western management principles through the education and training of kin and staff at business schools in the west. The majority of scholars calling for an “African management” model are teaching at tertiary institutions outside Africa. They could potentially make a significant contribution towards critical scientific investigation into the nature and direction of management practices **in** Africa. Valuable empirical research by Prieto and Phipps (2019) underscores the usefulness to minorities of ethno-

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cultural practices in managing enterprises in the USA. This study is a prime example of the integration of cultural traditions into business activities in host societies. This research follows on the work on immigrant communities in business, such as Andrew Godley's work on Jewish immigrants in London and the USA (Godley, 1992; Godley, 1996), or Light and Bonacich's work on Korean entrepreneurs in Los Angeles (Park, 1990). This research offers an insight into the integration of cultural traditions into host societies. The rich case studies in Prieto and Phipps demonstrate the value of grassroots empirical investigation towards theory building.

This case study methodology is required to arrive at the bottom of how ethno-cultural practices and traditional values from the diverse African landscape, manifested in business, or were adopted into underexplored contexts such as suggested by Barnard *et al.* (2017). In-depth case studies into actual management practices in Africa will display the organisational and managerial diversity in business in the context of African cultural dynamism. Barnard *et al.* (2017) reiterate, "firms in Africa have received little attention in the mainstream management literature. There are very few articles analyzing business and management in Africa [...]" (Barnard *et al.*, 2017, p. 467). These authors call for theory-building from the bottom up, i.e. from empirical studies focussing on the context of business in Africa using the perspective of an developing home country. They suggest investigation into theories such as extreme conditions, new phenomena or alternative paradigms of social relationships, with the view to establish possible theory innovation or extension. Another research agenda comes from Amankwa-Amoah, who called for the development of "a multidimensional framework of African management research" in which indigenous concepts are integrated into novel research to assess the applicability of western and eastern theories and concepts for the experience of business management in Africa. He is concerned about a lack of well-developed research methods (p. 516) in African management research, because that limits the advancement of such research. African management research needs to progress beyond the concepts such as "indaba" and "ubuntu". For that to happen, research methodology challenges need to be overcome. He warns that in seeking to advance "indigenous research", a danger lurks of disconnecting from mainstream research. He argues, "There is a danger that highly indigenous research may represent a disengagement from the mainstream literature [...]" [leading to] the tendency among scholars to "introduce and hang on to distinct labels to demark the uniqueness of research areas, [which] hinders building cumulative knowledge on market-based activity" (Amankwa-Amoah, 2018).

Systematic, extensive case study research will, in the long run, deliver insights into the dynamic nature of management **in** Africa. The fundamental dissimilarities in value priorities of the ethnic, cultural and religious groups constituting modern society are not limited to Africa. Rather, difference and dissimilarity is the universal phenomenon. The resource-based perspective on management, which is fundamental to organisation theory, mandates dealing with diversity, irrespective of the source of the diversity – race, creed, culture or language. Redirecting scholarship towards empirical exploratory studies of management in Africa rather than imposing a single ideologically constructed "African management" model will assist us in understanding the nature of management in Africa through its diversity. The current discourse on management in Africa should be about management "**in**" Africa, not "African". In future, the scholarship may identify a distinct model of management **in** Africa, reflecting on a multitude of different ethno-cultural traditions that have moulded management different from that in other regions of the world.

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