Ritualism, symbolism and magic in consultancy practice: an exploratory investigation[1]

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an exploratory attempt to examine the practice of management consultancy and the cultural components of rituals, symbolism and magic in Botswana. Management consultants as catalytic agents of change remain relevant in organisational life and this study investigates how they are perceived and how they perform their tasks in the African context.

In-depth unstructured interviews were conducted with seven top management consultancy firms in Botswana, who agreed to participate in the study, focusing on six key research questions.

Findings revealed that the role of cultural values, while relevant does not affect actual consultancy practice. It also establishes that consultation process is limited to mainly big organisations and government departments. The activities of consultants may be ritualistic to the extent of repetitiveness; there are also symbolic practices, there is however no evidence of superstitious or magical acts.

Qualitative data generally struggles with the accusation of researchers bias, while a sample size of 7 consultants, certainly limits the generalizability of our findings, how much can we possibly learn from such a small size?

The need to reposition the consultation process for long-term survival in the non-Western context by inculcating indigenous values and mores was discussed as well as other policy implications.

The paper demonstrates the need for a reconceptualisation of what should constitute an effective management consultancy practice in non-Western settings. Since managers are not divorced from their socio-cultural environment their mental images reflect axioms that are deeply located in the uniqueness of their cultural settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural Backgrounds: Africa and the West

Changes in the cultural environment brings with it attendant loses in the effectiveness, transferability and appeal of organisational policies; this has been shown in several studies (Hofstede, 1980a, 1980b; Kiggundu, *et al.* 1983). The import of this is that management is culture-dependent. Consequently, theories developed in a given culture reflect the main patterns of that culture and are not easily transferable to other cultures (Beugre and Offodile, 2001). The people of Africa are influenced by several factors including values and belief systems, language, occupation, religion, urbanisation, levels of education, westernisation and historical experiences. Some of the salient cultural patterns in Africa have been extensively covered in the literature and they include but are not limited to respect for elders, collectivism, importance of extended family system, reverence to power and authority (Beugre and Offodile, 2001; Blunt and Jones, 1992).

Indigenous beliefs and values are deep-rooted in the African society. Indeed, they are the very essence of the "Africanness" in the average African. Yet they are sometimes taunted as signs of "backwardness". For example, "... the South African law still forbids anybody from practising "witchcraft", yet the country's 200,000 or so traditional healers, in effect, do just that" (Economist, 1995). Statements like this fails to recognise that there could be any difference between the indigenous traditional healing practises and "witchcraft" as all practitioners of indigenous healing are lumped together as practising "witchcraft". Nor has the statement taken into account that prior to the advent of colonisation and the imposition of Western cultural imperialism, the people of Africa had lived for centuries taking care of their own welfare in all spheres of life. A large number of Africans still rely on their indigenous practitioners to take care of their medical, spiritual and other needs. According to the Medical Association of South Africa, four-fifth of blacks regularly consult a traditional healer (Economist, 1995). Among other things, this paper attempts to verify if consultants are seen in the category of "healers" solving organisational problems at their client's request.

Alexander Luria conducted some of the pioneering studies on the role of culture in the development of cognitive processes (Luria, 1931, 1971, 1976). The findings showed among others that the logical reasoning of the 'traditional' people differed substantially from that of the Western oriented individuals. In his explanation of these results, Luria attributed the emergence of formal logical type of thinking primarily to school education. Findings of other studies have since amended Luria's position, one of which was that the 'traditional' style of thinking is not fundamentally different from the 'Western' style in terms of the cognitive structures involved. Rather, traditional thinkers tend to apply these cognitive structures to different realities and in different contexts than people in Western societies (Cole, 1996; Cole, *et al.*, 1971). Viewed from a general perspective, these amendments imply that, despite fundamental differences between the roles that scientific and logical reasoning play in 'traditional' and Western cultures, the mental processes of individuals living in these cultures are not fundamentally different (Subbotsky and Quinteros, 2002). According to Mbigi (1996) (cited in van der Colff, 2003), the main stem that underpins all the most important values of African history can be traced through *Ubuntu. Ubuntu* can be seen as the key to all African values and involves collective "personhood" and collective

morality – values around harmony are deeply embedded in African communities (van der Colff, 2003).

In more traditional societies, particularly where values, norms, mores, etc. are shielded jealously, natural objects and elements are endorsed with spiritual powers and this includes the ancient European societies. In contrast, modern Western cultures are based on a strong belief in scientific rationality where all natural events are universal, based on physical laws and governed by physical causality. These are widely held general beliefs. There are, however, fundamental changes in cultural beliefs about the structure of the world, and as Subbotsky and Quinteros (2002) opine, it can be the case that an average Western individual, at a certain level, remains relatively unaffected by these changes or at best the individual can only be superficially affected by these changes in culture. In fact, these authors proclaim that on the level of some intuitive beliefs, many contemporary Western individuals may not be crucially different from individuals of the earlier historic epochs in their tendency to accept beliefs in magic and the supernatural (Subbotsky and Quinteros, 2002).

Rituals, Symbolism, Magic and the Consultation Process

Little attention has been devoted to magic, symbolism and rituals in the consultancy literature (see for example, Kaarst-Brown, 1999; Schuyt and Schuijt, 1998). Schuyt and Schuijt (1998) have shown that with organisational changes, cultural aspects – symbolism, magic, and rituals – play a central role. The consultant surrounds the organisational change with rituals.

Cultural anthropology is interested, among other things, in explaining how magicians seek to make anxiety and uncertainty controllable through rituals and symbols. The cultural anthropologists emphasise the symbolic value of rituals in times of important change. This line of thought is pursued in Africa because of the strong hold and the pride the people have about customs and value systems.

> *In other, mainly non-western cultures, the witch doctor, magician and medicine man are important figures, helping people to fulfil their wishes (rain, good harvest) or to avert adversity (sickness). Magicians are also instrumental in smoothing the various transitions in the life cycle: birth, puberty, (sexual maturity), marriage and death. In both cases ritual plays a pivotal role. Here the magicians are the wise men, the experts who structure the rituals to ensure they are properly conducted. This is where a comparison can be drawn with the "western" profession of consultant: aren't consultant also in a sense, magicians who guide and structure important transitions through the use of rituals and symbols? (Schuyt and Schuijt, 1998, p. 399)*

Consultants when called in can indeed be viewed as magicians and expected to perform miracles thanks to their personal skills and not so much to their technical expertise. Owning to the fact that many consider consultants as 'gurus', they seem to exert a spiritual impact on firms. Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997), discussing attempts to bring management theory closer to the generalist view and perhaps challenge the specialist view argued that this view may or may not be correct. On the positive side these authors noted, "…That general lessens can be extracted

from what companies do and can be used to help other companies to operate better. Successful management ideas are not just bits of local knowledge, fixed by culture and circumstances. They can travel and, suitably modified, can be used to reproduce that success elsewhere, in other countries, industries or even vocations p. 367". Similarly, it was also established that management theory is not entirely devoid of intellectual content and that results coming back from it are broadly positive. Conversely and limiting the relative success of the management theory is the fact that it is still a relatively young discipline, its audience demand instant solutions, and it is a crowd-puller for charlatans who are probably welcome (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1997).

This paper is an exploratory investigation, specifically examining the assertion by Schuyt and Schuijt (1998) as it concerns Africa and specifically Botswana. Is it true that consultation is in any way ritualistic? To what extent are consultants viewed as "magicians" and are expected to perform near magical acts in the light of the strong Africans belief in traditional values and culture? The traditional medical practitioner (who even though may not be scientific in his/her procedure) is a very important feature in the lives of most Africans and in their communities, which is often characterised by close interpersonal interaction, and the belief in the supernatural powers that such men and sometimes women possess. With poverty still pervasive and education still generally low, such *"native"* doctors are cheaper for many Africans. UNICEF report for the year 2003, indicated the per capita income of Botswana was US$3430, life expectancy at birth 39 years, total adult literacy 77 percent, while the percentage of population living below $1 a day (1992-2002) was put at 24 percent.

The specific objectives of this paper thus include the following:
1. To provide a description of the management consultation process in a non-mainstream economy and highlight the different myths and realities of consultation process as they evolve in relation to the practice of management consultancy in non-Western settings generally, and specifically in Africa.
2. To possibly evoke new and non-traditional analysis of management consultancy.

The above objectives are accomplished through the conduct of interviews with practitioners and a documentary analysis of the consultation process. The need to engage in this arise from the paradoxes that are emerging as conventional management paradigms seem to be applied to contexts for which they are ill designed. The paper also provides a schema useful for describing socio-cultural processes which underpin the practice of management consulting in traditional societies.

Cultural Components as Instruments in the Consultation Process

Cultural components in organisation include: symbols, language, narratives, rituals, totems and practices. **Symbols** are the most basic and smallest unit of culture. **Language** is a shared system for communicating and has several cultural components. *Jargon, slang, gestures, songs, humour, jokes, rumours*, and *slogans* are examples of some linguistics cultural components. **Narratives** are a more complex type of cultural components, consisting of both symbols and language. Narratives include *stories, legends, myths*, and *sagas*. *Sagas* are true accounts of organisational events; while *myths, legends*, and *stories* are based on true events and may have been distorted or modified to emphasize a certain value or aspect of the event. **Practices** are the most complex of

the cultural components; they include behaviours, rituals, rites, and ceremonies that may be undertaken for instrumental reasons but also carry important cultural messages to organisational members. ***Rituals*** are procedures regularly followed in exactly the same way every time and may vary from the mundane ritual of staff meetings to the more elaborate rituals associated with periodical meetings or celebrations. In many organisations today, most people commence their day with the relatively new ritual of checking their e-mail. The idea of coping with insecurity and anxiety is vital in enabling us to fathom the motives for actions which might otherwise appear mysterious. It seems that people usually resort to ***magic*** in situations of actual or potential danger (Kamoche, 1995).

Kamoche (2000b) examined the symbolic nature of human resource management (HRM) activities drawing from socio-anthropological thoughts. He noted that the emergent research in this tradition has adopted a broad range of approaches with some of them relating culture to organisational symbolism. The study of culture especially its symbolic manifestations, is one attempt to characterise social phenomena from the point of view of social actors. People who engage in ritualistic behaviour are involved in the creation and communication of meaning (Kamoche, 1995). Organisational actors use language and rituals to create/distort, and to communicate meaning to relevant audiences. On the basis of the foregoing argument, Kamoche (2000a) argues that HRM must be seen within this paradigm – as a manifestation of ritualistic and symbolic behaviour, which essentially seeks to "communicate meaning". Man, he noted, as a social being is engaged in an on-going exercise to create and redefine "meaning" within his social reality and to communicate and share meaning with others.

Drawing from the arguments of Beattie (1964) on ritualistic and symbolic behaviour, Kamoche (2000a and 2000b) noted that to the extent that belief and faith are involved, ritual behaviour can be regarded as *magico-religious.* Ritual has two main characteristics: the *expressive* and the *instrumental* (Beattie, 1964; Cleverly, 1971; Trice and Beyer, 1985). According to Kamoche (2000b), the "expressive" aspect means that rites can be regarded as a kind of language; by enacting a rite, social actors are trying to communicate something. The "instrumental" aspect, on the other hand, suggests that when people carry out certain rites they are trying to bring about some favourable or desired state of affairs, or to prevent some unfavourable or undesired ones.

Management consultancy in this respect embodies the second element in the nature of a ritual – instrumentalism. The organisational actors, in this case, the consultant and the organisational members believe that the consultation process will bring about the desired state of affairs. Could rituals have been misapplied given the contextual differences? Perhaps the organisation might also be more interested in the symbolism of the act or process, while at the same time anticipating favourable outcomes and this would amount to magical symbolism (Kamoche, 2000b). The question this raises is that since many organisations have been using consultants, perhaps it is apt to do so too? Perhaps it might also be a sign of success and/or that the organisation has joined the elite club of organisations rather than a dire need or a commitment to some required change effort.

Management Consultancy Practices

The last two decades have generally seen many of the largest organisations around the world undertake some massive organisational transformations (Kaarst-Brown (1999). In an effort to readjust to new realities and a dynamic world, we have witnessed these changes not only in large organisations but also in medium and small ones and this has been an ongoing process. Consulting organisations currently play more significant roles in promoting business changes than ever before. Aside from providing recommendations for client companies, consultants now assist in making strategic business decisions, help implement these strategies and at the same time train employees for skill development. Changes in the economy are believed to have contributed to the growth of the consulting industry.

Pascarella (1998) advocated that organisations should re-examine the changes in the fit between their "day-to-day" operations and the external forces even when they are doing well, and not wait until things get too difficult before calling in external expertise. Consultants and clients agree that today's relationships are markedly different from those of years past. Ten years ago, a consultant was seen as someone who probably did not know more than anyone else, but had the ability to get management's attention, when nobody else could (Adamson, 2000). Today, it is probably someone who found himself or herself prematurely "downsized" or "reengineered" out of a permanent job and forced back into the job market to earn a living as a consultant (Farrell, 1997).

It is believed that only certain unique individuals possess mystical powers that enable them to practice magic successfully – *sorcerers*. Cleverly (1971) suggests that management consultants, who possess systematically acquired knowledge or special skills, have become the organisational *sorcerers*. Harari (1986) has also shown how the old consultant reports never really gets old as they are turned around and could be used several years later. In today's comfy arrangement, the clients are willing to pay consultants for quick fixes and easy answers, and with this knowledge consultants will grow rapidly in number. The clients expect so much from a consultant, not just because he/she claims expertise but again because the consultation process is not by any means cheap. However, there exists a belief, not least among consultants, that it is the consultant's personal skills and experiences, rather than the methods *per se*, that provides value in the consulting process (Werr, *et al*. 1997). For instance, to what extent are the views of the consultant reflective of what can be considered a corporate view?

The question concerning the extent to which Western educated individuals can still possess magical causal beliefs is far from being purely academic. For instance, Luhrman (1989) in her intriguing account of witchcraft and magical practices in England, estimates the number of people who practice magic in England at several thousand and noted that these people are usually well-educated middle-class individuals. A systematic survey conducted in England also showed that one person in six believes in ghosts; one in three has been to a fortune-teller at least once, one in ten feels that they have lucky days or numbers, or possess lucky mascots, and one in five believes seriously in the influence of the stars (Jahoda, 1969). Another survey of a representative sample of USA counties estimated the number of practising witches to be about 25 000 (Hyman and Vogt, 1967), while Adler (1986) estimated magic believers in the USA to be in the range of 80 000. On the basis of these data Subbotsky & Quinteros (2002) suggest that an individual has a substantial degree of autonomy from the dominant cultural tenets, at least as far as the individual's causal beliefs are concerned.

Beliefs in magic, witchcraft, astrology, palm reading, and all sorts of 'mysterious occurrence' are still widespread among people living in cultural environments packed with computers and advanced technologies (Bem and Honorton, 1994; Lehman & Mayers, 1985). Superstition remains a part of the ordinary life of the Western individual and has become a subject for sociological and psychological analysis (Jahoda, 1969; Vyse, 1997). The thirteenth floor is still a 'jinx' in many parts of the Western world. The implication of this is that, it can be assumed that, at some level, Western and non-Western people may not be fundamentally different from each other in the extent to which they believe in magical causality (Subbotsky and Quinteros, 2002). Subbotsky and Quinteros (2002) findings suggest that, at a relatively high cost of not believing in magic, Western and non-Western adult are likely to engage in magical practices to an approximately equal extent; whereas when the cost is low, Western adults proved to be significantly more rationalistic and scientifically oriented than non-Western (Mexican) adults.

Kamoche (1995) argues strongly that the assumption that the magico-religious behaviour of earlier times in Africa is endemic in organisations today is simplistic. He contends that this is because the fortunes and hazards in the business world today are largely analogous to those that existed in earlier times. Traditional communities throughout history attempted to reduce anxieties bred by the hostile and the unknown through magico-religious behaviour. The use of rites, symbols, totems, taboos, and the various forms of magic were all attempts both to understand the world and to "tame" it (Kamoche, 1995). These are manifested today in the psychological processes underpinning man's efforts to overcome business risks, and in the management of organisational rites and symbols (Cleverly, 1971).

Botswana as a country is generally applauded as an "African success story" in economic management and political governance. However, recently, there has been a growing and serious concern over declining levels of productivity in the public sector demonstrated by public pronouncements of government ministers and other senior officials. The consultant cannot be left out in the search for creating an enduring business success in any country and the view that consultants operate more in viable economies and during times of economic transitions – in boom and in downturn – may or may not be valid. The evidence from the literature of the preponderance of superstitious beliefs in the Western world notwithstanding, there is still a heavy tilt of general beliefs that Africans are significantly more traditional and mystical. This view is what we attempt to explore in the context of management consultancy practices in Botswana.

THE STUDY

We attempt in this paper to do a general evaluation of the practise of management consulting as well as highlight the activities of consultants in Botswana using seven of the top fifteen consulting firms. The seven are all international firms of management consultants with offices in Botswana. This study is not a hypothesis testing one but rather seeks to provide answers to the following specific research questions:
   1. Find out the relevance of rituals and symbolic practices in consultancy

2. Identify the extent to which clients see consultancy as *magic* or *witchcraft* and the extent of clients' expectations of "magical" solutions to their problems in the consultation process
3. Determine who controls the initiation process in consultation
4. Find out to what extent consultants attempt to dazzle their clients
5. Examine the extent of clients' support and cooperation in the action stage of consulting
6. Assess the involvement of clients in the implementation of solution

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the activities of management consultants in Botswana, interviews were conducted covering these seven firms after invitations were extended to eight firms using the six research questions stated above as guide. The firms were identified based on the author's knowledge and experience of consultancy practice in the country; these firms ranked the top eight by number of clients and reputation. The eight firms were approached for the study through a letter to the Managing Partner of each firm. One firm declined participation on the ground of presently winding up its consultancy operations and repositioning in line with the new global trend of separating audit practice from consultancy practice completely, a wave which started in the U.S.A. and which is gaining acceptance around the world. More significantly, the firm believes that consultancy practice is not yet viable in Botswana. A sample of seven consultants – five men and two women – participated in the study. They occupied senior positions in their organisations – Three Partners, two Directors, one Senior Manager and one Consulting Executive. All the respondents had a basic university degree with six out of the seven possessing higher degree qualification. Five of the seven firms were among the top 10 internationally known consulting firms; one was a local firm with international affiliation and the last was an expatriate-owned highly reputable consulting firm of expatriate partners. The consulting experience of the respondents ranged from 3 to 15 years, with a mean of 11.29 years. The length of time they had been employed by the current firm ranged from 1 to 9 years with a mean of 4.36 years. Only two of the seven consultants in our sample were *Batswana* (as citizens of Botswana are known), the others were expatriates.

All the firms have their offices in Gaborone (the capital of Botswana) and only two of the firms have one branch office located outside of the capital city in Francistown. The firms collaborate within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region and they all go into strategic alliances with other firms for jobs as circumstance demands. Only two of the firms make use of external consultants in the discharge of jobs, and such external people are usually lawyers, estate consultants and allied professionals depending on the job involved. It is important to note that all the seven firms used in this study – except the expatriate-owned firm – even though engaged in management consultancy practices but they were better known in the country for their Audit/Accounting and Tax Practice. This is not unusual as this situation is similar in many other countries in the world since the bulk of their clients require audit, accounting and tax advisory services.

Using Cohen (2001) typology of size, location and types of clients they serve to classify our sample: all the 7 firms will like to be classified as regional and local firms; 6 as a major accounting firm with consulting divisions; 4 as national general management firms; 3 firms would like to be called think-tanks; public sector firm and industry-specific firm; while 2 would like to be classified as a functionally specialized firm. Our sample of consulting firms are

involved in a wide range of activities (see Fuchs, J. H. cited in Cohen 2001, p.4) including general management (encompassing organizational planning, strategy, and other general management tasks); finance and accounting (including cost accounting, valuation, tax advice, financial consulting and business advisory as well as investment programmes) (6 firms); administration (5 firms); Manufacturing (including production control and facilities management); human resources/personnel (having to do with development and training, recruitment, executive selection, management of employee benefits programmes, and similar activities) (4 firms); marketing; procurement and purchasing; and international operations (which has to do with import-export, licensing, tariffs and joint ventures) (2 firms). Other activities which they generally engage in include: e-commerce, outsourcing, IT packaged solutions, organisational transformation and restructuring, change management, organisational review and reform, socio-economic study, feasibility studies and market surveys, strategic consulting and organisational design. While the wide range of activities these consulting firms engage in may be mind boggling, the undeveloped state of consulting practice in the country as in most of Africa may be responsible for the seeming 'jack of all trade' syndrome, since the few firms in practice attempts to capture the market by providing a wide range of consulting service.

FINDINGS

When asked to what extent the consultants generally take the word of clients when approached for jobs? The responses indicate that consultants generally take the word of clients when approached as revealed by six of the respondents; only one of the seven consultants interviewed never takes the clients' word. Results also indicated that all the consultants involved clients in projects depicting the interactive nature of the consultation process. Significantly, all the consultants also revealed that their approach in the consultation process is client-specific.

Relevance of rituals and symbolic practices in the consultation process

On whether, the consultants consider rituals as relevant in consultancy, four of the seven consultants opine that it is absolutely not relevant, three say it is relevant to some extent and one considers it very relevant. In the words of one of the consultants *"we are sensitive to value system"*. One consultant noted that *"consultation is a process, hence process and empathy are relevant, sensitivity to the client is important, but rituals does not come in for me"*. While three of the consultants hold that consultancy activities are not in any way symbolic or ritualistic, the other four – in different ways – believe that there are symbolic practices in consultancy. *"Yes, there are symbolic participation and symbolic approaches"*. Another holds that it is relevant only to the extent of adapting your style to the client's.

The extent to which symbols are appropriate depends on the organisation given the repertoire of values in the organisation. A developing country, like Botswana, presents a special situation given the variety of value systems that people hold as opposed to a relatively more monolithic situation in the West. One of the consultants noted, *" There is a lot to do with symbols and what it would represent to the organisation"*. He further, noted that as a firm they have toyed with symbolic practices but never worked thoroughly on it, for example, in organisational turnaround, organisational members could be requested to bring something negative from the past – maybe in writing – and a big symbolic fire is made where such papers are thrown by every organisational

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member as an indication of separation from the past and a commitment to a new productive future. Alternatively, it could be tying several such vices to a balloon and letting it all go into air in a symbolic gathering of organisational members.

Consultancy as magic or witchcraft and the extent of clients' expectations of "magical" solutions to their problems

The responses to questions along this line vary almost as much as the number of respondents, but in three broad categories. First, are three respondents who do not see any link between magical act and consultancy; second, is one respondent who actually claim the opposite of such expectation is the case, as nearly nothing is expected from the consultant. Finally, are the three respondents who hold that there is actually a link between consultation and near magical expectations from clients.

A respondent noted that magic, witchcraft and the like have no place in consulting and that this question does not arise at all. *"We operate with very civil clients and so this does not arise"* was the response from a consultant. In a similar reasoning another consultant holds that consulting is practical and that since clients spend a lot of money on it they want results, which is why there is always, a tender for government consulting jobs. The third consultant in this category claims never to have come across a client who holds such expectation of consultation as being near "magical". The emphasis of the firm, according to this consultant, is that clients must learn to solve problems on their own and the role of the consultant in the consultation process is to facilitate it.

On the other end of the continuum is the consultant who noted that clients often do not expect a solution to their problems. *"They believe it (consultancy) is a waste of money, they just want us to help them"*. This opinion is isolated, yet important because four of all the eight firms invited for participation in this study holds the view that management consultancy practices is still very difficult in Botswana and that it might still take some time before this change. The frustrations expressed vary from not enough clients, to lack of belief in the consultant's ability, and ignorance on what the consultant could really do for them.

However, three of the consultants hold the view that one cannot ignore the belief in "magical acts" in the consultation environment of Botswana. A consultant noted that clients often expect "magical act" to some extent even though the way this manifests differs with clients. *"It is more prevalent – though not unique – to public service sector of the economy"*. According to this consultant when you approach clients with a statement like *"this is what we are going to do and this is what you are going to do"*, you get a surprise response from some clients. The belief being that as a consultant you have the answers or should have the answers and they perhaps wonder why they are paying you if they still have to do a number of things and you others. It is like asking out aloud, if we pay you, who will pay us for our part! Where a client refuses to participate this consultant claims the firm can walk away from the job, even though this rarely happens.

Another consultant holds that it is a regular occurrence for their clients to expect a near "magical act" from them and in line with the last respondent, it happens more in the public sector. He

noted that you get assertions like, *" I have called you as a client and you will pick up a cheque, when I get here next Monday my organisation should be fixed"*. In response, according to the consultant "we tend to educate such clients that we have the experience, the knowledge and the methodology among others, not the drugs, therapy or cure, etc. to solve your problem". Consequently, *"you must be part of the process, since consultation is a process, you must be part of the change. In this way, we prepare the client and this is an up front battle before the commencement of the project"*.

One of the consultants noted that some clients actually expect miracles in their operations and common among such clients, he noted, are often persons (clients) whose backgrounds are technical and unrelated to management. People who have limited exposure to management/finance and the like often see management consulting as magical since solutions obtained at the end could never have been thought of by many of them. What they considered so difficult because of "human" involvement now seems so easy!

In order to be able to establish and illustrate a definitive link between consulting and magic perhaps further investigation with a more thorough probing and an enlarged sample of consultants may be required. The nomenclature and title "*Witch Doctors*" which Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997) gave their book (coming from the West) is another signal of how widespread and universal the underlying link between consultation and magic may be.

The initiation process: who controls it?

The initial contact between the client and the consultant is critical in the eventual success of the consultation process. The consultant must display his power and expertise from the outset, for the manager is placing his fate in the hands of the consultant and will not be prepared to do so unless the consultant inspires his confidence, makes a self-assured impression and, if need be, is able to speak as an equal (Schuyt and Schuijt, 1998). The consultant is therefore responsible for the initiation rituals.   The confidential nature of the client/consultant interaction poses some problems of research design, particularly when a researcher wishes to study the significance of the first meeting between the two. The first meeting is important, since it is the first step in the negotiating process between a client who needs the consultant's expertise and knowledge, and a consultant who is there to sell his or her knowledge, and securing a satisfactory contract (Adamson, 2000). When Adamson (2000) requested 40 consultants to be observed during the initiation stage of consulting, only 4 agreed, with one being observed four times and the remaining three only once!

Six of our seven respondents clearly expressed that they try as much as possible to control the initiation process for different reasons. The need for taking charge of this process has been well treated in the literature (e.g. Schuyt and Schuijt, 1998). Only one consultant claimed that their control as consultants is very low as the client does a lot in preventing such controls much as they try. The key to success is to be sure that the expectations between both parties are right. It is important to seek to build understanding to manage each other's expectations because it is in the interest of the consultants to do so as service providers so as to avoid litigations at the end of project. A consultant claims *"…we take control, we have a very elaborate risk management procedures to guide against litigations and to cover ourselves as an organisation"*. Indeed, the

control process for the consultant does not wait until the project commences rather it does even before the job.

Attempt at dazzling clients

In different ways the consultants tend to dazzle their clients. Four of the seven respondents hold that they never do this, that indeed they do the opposite. One of them noted that they prefer to work for the benefit of the client and that it is never necessary to attempt to dazzle in the consultation process because such an attempt may actually be counterproductive. Another opined, *"We try as much as possible to offer solutions that exceed client's expectations which we believe builds respect, and future relationship"*. Yet another respondent claims, *"… we make sure that we don't give high expectations, so that it does not backfire. The last thing we do is creating a false impression. If you do and you are not able to deliver, then you leave a gap"*.

One consultant had this to say, *"Our experience has taught us that if there is any dazzling to be done it could be in the delivery of recommendations. For instance, a 20-minutes PowerPoint presentation of the three most critical solutions recommended and the possible implementation outcomes. We tend to be more practical and realistic rather than dazzling"*. In a similar manner of when to dazzle, another consultant noted, *"This is not the prime way we get respect. But in the bidding process, we try to put up a show"*. Only one consultant clearly agreed that dazzling clients is useful when he noted, *"We try to do this because it works"*.

Clients' support and cooperation in the action stage of consulting

A significant majority of the consultants (five) imply that support and cooperation of clients does not come easy even though they all agree that it is vital to the success of the consultation process. Indeed one respondent noted, *"…for me support and cooperation is a major prerequisite for the success of the consultation and we keep trying to get it, otherwise there is no success"*. A unified view of two of the consultants is that they get not nearly enough support and cooperation and that they will definitely like a lot more. According to this view, this attitude of no support is due to the notion that the consultant is the expert and the clients does not have to get involved in any way. Another possible reason for this lack of support is that *"Change pose threat, and this could manifest in almost overt opposition",* noted a respondent.

While one consultant holds that powerful individuals at the top of the organisation often constitute the stumbling block to support and cooperation, another asserts, *"While we get the support of the top management, we often have problems with the foot-soldiers who may show disinterest"*. Again, most of the consultants hold that public sector jobs give more problems than private sector ones. In some cases the lack of support could be so bad as aptly expressed by a consultant, *"It could be terrible, you come in and nearly no one is willing to help. You notice a general feeling with the people that you can do it on your own without assistance!"* Bennett (1990) suggested that the problem with the use or lack of use of consultants might have to do with the fact that people really do not know what management consultants do, do not trust them, and find them expensive.

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However, two of the consultants affirmed that they tend to get a lot of support and cooperation. According to one of them, *"This is because of the very practical nature of our approach. There are however, exceptions. These are the just do it people – I just want a report – and often it comes from the highest sponsors and usually in the public sector"*. Another consultant claims the support they get comes from the fact that they do involve the clients and they (the clients) get to learn by so doing. In large companies, the top management consider external consultants either as cost-effective because of their pace of work, and for staying out of the company politics, or sometimes as expensive disrupters of the established order (Handy, 1987).

Involvement of clients in implementation of solution

All the consultants stated that their clients generally seek their involvement in the implementation of changes stage. Five of them further observed that with most clients the implementation is another consulting job altogether, which with government/public sector they again have to bid and may not usually get because of the concern of not wanting to give it all to one consultant or of giving too many jobs to one consultant; even though the continuity advantage suggests they should do so. It is however, not a problem with smaller (private sector) clients who will usually give both jobs to one consultant. Indeed two of the consultants indicated that they are fully involved in implementation with all their private sector jobs but not the public sector ones. One of the respondents noted, *"We are careful here so as not to create dependency on us, since we facilitate change and our neutrality is important in implementation depending on the project"*.

DISCUSSION

Qualitative data is inundated with criticisms not the least of which is the researchers bias. The present study sets out to assess the practice of management consultancy in Botswana and if indeed the practice is ritualistic, symbolic and magical. Qualitative research is known to be time-consuming and difficult to carry out, and it could leave the researcher vulnerable to the accusation that the interpretations are simply what the researcher expected to find (Arnold, *et al*., 1995; Oppenheim, 1981) and also that the interviewer could have influenced the respondents in many ways (Cooper and Schindler, 2001). There is a clear limitation in this study of our sample size of seven respondents representing seven firms, how much can we possibly learn from such a small size? This certainly limits the generalizability of our findings. Moreover, we cannot draw on the work of other researchers to see if they arrived at similar conclusions because we were unable to identify similar prior studies in the African context. In its exploratory form we, however, believe that the analysis and findings have useful implications for consultancy practices in non-Western settings generally, and specifically in Africa.

Management consultants are unmistakably important individuals in connecting knowledge gap in organisations. Adamson (2000) noted that as research subjects they are difficult to assess. The present study has shown that the views of the consultant do not necessarily represent the corporate view. We cannot even say for sure that their experiences and reflections were typical of other consultants who worked in their company. Indeed, some of our respondents have expressed positions on some of this research issues that may have been coloured by their individual value system and beliefs rather than the organisational views. This perhaps explains

somewhat fundamentally opposed views on some basic consultancy issues and practises among some of the top firms reputed for professional handling of the consultative process. Related to this is the critical issue of five of our seven respondents being Western expatriates, we cannot therefore claim to have obtained indigenous responses as such, albeit all the respondents have significant local experience.

Consultancy is highly valuable for uncertainty reduction. This is especially relevant in the African context given the level of uncertainty in the environment. Much as Botswana is arguably one of the most stable countries in Africa, a recent government decision to reposition the country as a financial centre in the sub-region has made the need and use of consultants more crucial now if existing financial and related service organisations must meet the emerging new and dynamic environment. Current challenges of the country include sustaining its impressive record of economic growth and human development, while coping with the problems of unemployment, poverty and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Consultancy, minimally involves two human systems where one (the client) believes help is needed and the other (the consultant) assists by providing it (Lundberg, 1997). Help is when a human system perceives that anxiety has been reduced based on real or imagined uncertainty that is sometimes expressed as a request for help (Lundberg, 1997).

Managers of organisations must not only be able to manage but also to initiate and anticipate change. The consultant is symbolic of the change to come; symbolises changing norms and values as well as symbolises power redistribution in the organisation (Kaarst-Brown, 1999). The need for a more effective and proactive use of management consultants is obviously desirable. Presently, the government and public sector parastatals seem to be making the most use of consultants. However, much as they do, there has obviously not been the positive rapport and cordiality that should characterise the client-consultant relationship in the present scheme of things. This blows a negative whistle in getting the private sector to make more effective use of consultants in their activities for enhanced and optimal performance. The government is the major spender in Botswana and a more positive use of consultants could kick-start a commitment to the use of management consultants in all sectors of the economy.

Much as family traditions and the strength of the family unit are maintained and cultural and spiritual values respected among Batswana, consultancy as practiced in contemporary society does not make superstitious values/beliefs to affect managerial practice or attitudes. The traditional healer [*Ngaka* or *Dingaka*] in the *Tswana* village – in common with healers in other parts of southern Africa – is not only a medicine man. He is also a religious consultant, a legal and political adviser, a police detective, a marriage counsellor and a social worker (WHO, 1978). Given the important role that they play (or could play) in the lives of the ordinary people there is no doubt that they assume a stabilising role in the society.

It is important to be aware that embedding institutional factors within which management functions take place in each environment defines that environment's management orientation. Whilst it may be plausible to make generalisations across certain environments, especially when scholars have used scientific approaches to discover, document and empirically validate a number of regularities pertaining to employee/organisational/management behaviours, the proclivity towards law-like generalisations and universal applicability of certain management

phenomena over all circumstances hoists serious concerns. The need for a reconceptualisation of what constitutes or should constitute an effective management consultancy practice in non-Western settings, specifically in Africa is pertinent and apt. Managers are not divorced from their socio-cultural environment; therefore mental images they carry even into organisational contexts reflect axioms that are deeply located in the uniqueness of their cultural settings. Those that are offering consultancy services are indeed, selling "a culture". It is possible that there is a 'structural/cognitive disconnect' between what is being offered (i.e. Western-oriented nuances of management) and taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning relationships and organisational processes among local Africans.

In a study of history, ritual and myth in HRM, Ulrich (1984) argues that HRM executives would be able to understand the challenges of HRM better if they were more sensitive to traditions, myths and rituals that constitute organisational reality. She goes on to describe these "manifestations of culture" as keys that can be used to open the "cultural lock" and facilitate desired changes. This position is most germane in the ongoing discussion. Perhaps management consultancy will remain relevant and utilised by only big businesses, multinationals, and government departments for a long time in Africa and many non-Western parts of the world. Consultancy practices are likely to remain largely unsuccessful in terms of real client benefit until concerted efforts are made to relate with and inculcate the indigenous values and beliefs into the practise. Many small scale and medium sized indigenously owned businesses are likely to remain aloof with the consultation process both in terms of use and connections, even though they may be the most important pool of potential users of consultancy. There is a need to reverse this trend.

The practice of management consultancy is still at low ebb in Botswana with consultants being significantly utilised by government and the large public sector organisations. Consultants envisage an increasing use of their services by clients from the private sector (the real movers of sustained development) in the near future particularly as they reposition their organisations in the face of emerging competition and an ever-dynamic business environment. Management consultants play an important role in organisational change, they are expected to bring with them specific knowledge, a broad range of experiences, assume a transient position, and take on many roles beyond those agreed with the clients as professionals.

More research is obviously required in the future in relation to this subject. A comparative study across the continent would prove invaluable in this respect. For example, what kind of results would a replication with enlarged sample size comparing management consultancy practices in Southern, East and West African reveal? What macro-view of practices are dominant in the various regions of Africa? Also within many African countries there are numerous tribal groups and diverse cultural and indigenous practices, for example, in places like South African and Nigeria among others and such places may serve as useful ground for future within-country enlarged studies.

CONCLUSIONS

A number of conclusions could be drawn from the foregoing investigation in Botswana. There are symbolic practices in consultation. The activities of consultants may be ritualistic to the

extent of repetitiveness; there is however no evidence of superstitious or magical acts. The use of consultants is still generally very low and significantly so in the private sector than in the public sector. Hence, consultancy is still bad business for most firms, many having tried and failed pulling out of it completely. A number of reasons might account for this ranging from ignorance, high cost and lack of faith in consultant's competencies among others (Gbadamosi, 1999). However, those who lack knowledge of consultative process seem to appreciate the consultants and his/her contributions more. Consultants generally control the initiation process in consultation. Consultants do not get enough cooperation and support from clients much as they hold that it is vital to the success of the consultation process. There seem also to be a generally poor client participation in the consultative process. The involvement of consultants in the implementation of recommended solution is high, even though at additional cost to clients.

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