

The Veracity of Servant Leadership as Narrated in Mark 10: 42-45

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Abstract

Servant leadership can be found in many religious texts, though the philosophy itself transcends several religious traditions. In the Christian tradition, the passage from the gospel of Mark (10: 42-45) is often quoted in discussions relating to servant leadership. In this passage, Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be servant of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Islam and other world religions have long embraced the philosophy of servant leadership. In Islam, leadership is a trust (amanah). It represents a psychological contract between a leader and his followers that he will try his best to guide them, to protect them and to treat them fairly and with justice. Hence, the focus of leadership in Islam is on doing good and enhancing justice to all. In Africa, the concept of servant leadership is often challenged by political leadership deficiencies. In this regard, Ake and Onoge, (1995) point out that;...political leadership is parochial rather than national; and corruptly converts national resources into its project of primitive accumulation of wealth. This scenario has led many in the continent to suffer untold injustices in various spheres of life. This paper explores the values of servant leadership and its relevance within the African context. It uses relevant available literature on the subject and is also influenced by Greenleaf’s (1997) theory of servant leadership. In this theory, Greenleaf touches on various aspects related to power, manipulation, hope, responsibility, strength among others. Eventually these aspects are coalesced into a theory of servant leadership consisting of other attributes, namely: listening, empathy healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building a responsive community. It is hoped that the insights generated by this paper will help enhance servant leadership in Africa.

Key words: Religious teachings, Servant leadership, Africa.

Introduction – Background information

Leadership around the world has continued to generate interest and discussions on its nature, effect and ability to transform lives and communities and thus spur sustainable development. Leadership is closely linked to the question of governance which generally constitutes the establishment and direction of institutions to spearhead social, political and economic development initiatives. The wave of violence, insecurity, increasing crime wave, economic recession, coupled with the break in law and order witnessed in modern societies are linked to the problem of leadership and governance in Africa (Muchiri, 2011). Therefore, the quest for good leadership is an important avenue for governance and sustainable development. It is instructive to note that in this regard, no nation has achieved meaningful development socially, politically or economically without the input from effective leadership.

Thus, in contemporary discourse, the concept of leadership and governance has attracted a wider spread of interest as leadership serves as the pivot on which social, political and economic structures rest and are believed to thrive. The numerous economic problems which bedevil African states vis -à-vis ethnic and communal clashes, increasing crime wave, drug trafficking, advanced fraud etc have often been blamed on ineffective leadership. While it is true that there have been apparent leadership and governance crises in

Africa, the last two decades has witnessed a struggle to engender effective leadership and governance in Africa.

The concept of servant leadership is a ready answer to numerous problems facing African states as presented by social, economic and political diversities within the continent. Servant leadership can be found in many religious texts, though the philosophy itself transcends many religious traditions. In the Christian tradition, the passage from the Gospel of Mark (10: 42-45) is often quoted in discussions of servant leadership: Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be servant of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Islam and other world religions have long embraced the philosophy of servant leadership. In Islam for example, leadership is a trust (amanah). It represents a psychological contract between a leader and his followers. The leader will try his best to guide them, to protect them and to treat them fairly and with justice. Hence, the focus of leadership in Islam is on ensuring justice to humanity. In Africa, the concept of servant leadership is often challenged by political leadership deficiencies. This paper therefore seeks to explore the values of servant leadership in the context of leadership challenges prevalent in our midst in Africa today.

Theoretical Considerations

The discussions in this paper are broadly influenced by Greenleaf’s theory of servant leadership,(Greenleaf, 1977). In this theory, Greenleaf touches on various aspects related to power, manipulation, hope, responsibility, strength. Regarding servant leadership, Greenleaf explores the role of a servant as leader, the institution as a servant, trustees as servants, servant leadership in business, education, foundations, and churches. For Greenleaf, a servant-leader’s desire first and foremost is to serve others. The servant is “...always searching, listening, and expecting a better future...to serve, to strive and not to yield.” It is in the serving, the searching, the desire to grow oneself and others. The ability to be vulnerable, to listen deeply, to try and fail and think of those failures as great learning opportunities. To enter uncharted waters, to confront fear and conflict, that we become better than we know we are. The path of the servant-leader and those who follow often find it rough going. There are no certainties. There is a vision, an “overarching purpose” towards which people are moving towards self-realization, this move requires openness to uncertainty, to ambiguity as well as to change. It requires a deep ability to listen and practice silence in the face of adversity, (Greenleaf, 1977).

For Greenleaf, it is important to sometimes ask, the key question that determines whether what someone is doing qualifies as servant-leadership is to ask: “...do those served grow as persons; do they while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (Greenleaf, 1977). This theoretical consideration mirrors the Christian tradition in the passage from the Gospel of Mark (10: 42-45) on servant leadership. In this passage there is a deliberate call to leaders who want to become great, to become servants, and those who want to be first must be servants of all. On the other hand it, is important to note that even with Greenleaf’s perspectives, researchers have presented multiple models of servant leadership which various behaviours and virtues of the leader are proposed. These models are based on competing definitions, emphasizing different aspects of the phenomenon (van Dierendonck, 2011). Wong and Davey (2007), give servant leadership as a spiritual humanistic approach. An approach that puts employees at the center and seeks to create supportive workplace environments. Sendjaya (2008) extends servant leadership conceptualizations by considering the importance of spirituality and morality.

The religious implications of servant leadership

Kruger and Seng (2005), compared the world-views of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism in relation to factors such as the nature and exemplars of leadership. They concluded that leadership in the five religions corresponds more closely to charismatic leadership theories. Each tradition provides a series of individuals as role models who exemplify leadership behaviour as well as acceptable life patterns. Not to mention their inclusion of heroes and heroines who arise in times of crises to provide guidance and inspiration.

Kruger and Seng (2005) also provided a list of values drawn from the study of spirituality in the workplace. These included forgiveness, compassion/empathy, integrity, kindness, honesty/truthfulness, patience, humility, loving kindness, service to others, peacefulness, thankfulness, guidance, joy, equanimity, and stillness/inner peace. They stated that these values were also found within each of the five religions. In religious traditions such as Christianity, servant leadership embodies eight components which consist of human dignity, personal responsibility, character, and community, the use of power, compassion, stewardship, and justice. These components have been reduced to broad topics from an examination of the Old and New Testament teachings in Christianity. The components are related to how individuals are to be treated and the essential values associated with what the scriptures teach that a healthy society should embody. How leaders use power is a key area of interest in the Scriptures.

The recurring theme is one of sharing power; not amassing power, misleading or manipulating people, or using them as pawns in some grand vision or scheme of the leader. A leader should encourage each person to have the opportunity to participate in shaping their individual destiny. The scriptures are concerned that use of power by leaders must affirm and strengthen human dignity. Power usage must involve the average person having the means to act upon their dreams and desires (Christian, 1994).

Of particular note is the attention given to those who are marginalized, disenfranchised, and downtrodden in society in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. This concern is a dual concern. On the one hand, it reveals the value God places on an individual regardless of whether that individual is rich or poor, a member of the community or not, useful or not. It emphasizes that communities have a responsibility to care for these marginalized people. On the other hand, it reveals that a community's concept of justice exposes the strength or weakness of that community and whether or not its world view is sufficient for its long-term sustainability (Perkins, 1995). The concept of justice found within Scriptural passage under consideration includes; (a) procedural justice, which specifies fair legal process for rich and poor alike; (b) commutative justice, which defines the fair exchange of goods and the conducting of business (e.g., fair weights and measures); (c) distributive justice, which specifies fair allocation of a society's wealth; (d) retributive justice, which defines fair punishment for crimes; and (e) restorative justice, all of which demand servant leadership. God declares that the earth and all that is in it is His: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Pslm 24:1). Humans are given the responsibility to care for God's creation. People have the opportunity to use resources placed in their care as stewards, one who manages resources according to the wishes of another (Block, 1993). Finally, stewardship includes leadership in the development of personal skills and abilities. Stewardship of community, management of personal social resources, and management of social systems. Stewardship, therefore, involves a redefinition of the management of capital to include physical, social, financial, reputational, and human capital.

Servant Leadership Within the African Reality

In the African context, leadership has been viewed as individuals' predisposition to seek benefits only to their families, their peers, and sometimes their communities. Traditionally, ethnic African leaders played

three roles in leadership: political leaders, social leaders, and religious leaders. In their role as political leaders, leaders were entrusted with public administration of public assets. In their role of social leader, they settled social conflicts among members of society. Religious leaders acted at the service of the the gods. Although three leadership roles resided in the caring and protective hands of leaders, there seemed to be no conflict of roles in traditional African society. The crisis of leadership in Africa results in continued poverty for millions of men, women and children, underdevelopment and continued dependency on the west. The causes of this crisis have been identified. But high among them is the fact that many African countries lack a broadly shared vision of the future that effectively meets the demands of globalization with local values.

Unfortunately, the colonial era reshaped the traditional African leadership. Leaders saw their powers taken away to some extent. They were compelled to share power with the colonial authority. The sharing of powers –political, social and religious– between ethical leaders and the colonial authority favored the latter. With the emergence of democracies in post-colonial Africa, Africans hoped to regain, through new African leaders, ethnical power lost during the colonization. Unfortunately, the world witnessed the birth of two groups of leadership in Africa. The first group included among others elected leaders such as Patrice Lumumba and Kwame Nkrumah. They were nationalist and charismatic leaders. (Nkrumah, 2013). To this crop of early African leaders, leadership meant more than power; it meant loyal service to their nations and their continent. They had the trust of their countrymen. They mirrored servant leaders. The second group of leaders comprised Africans brought to leadership positions by colonial powers. They had no choice but to remain loyal to their masters. They were the extension of colonial hands. They had the trust of those who vested them with leadership. Through them, former colonial powers have been exercising control over young African nations. The coexistence of these two groups of leadership has had effects on the fate of African people leading to massive underdevelopment.

The African continent was unfortunately divided in two ideological clusters. Thus, invisible ideological boundaries emerged in Africa with ramifications that have had a negative bearing on the social, economic, and political development of African nations. The African continent has been therefore been known for suffering from leadership vacuum. Excellent leadership is obviously rare in Africa. Whenever there is an emergence of a progressive leader in Africa, the enemies of the African progress always find ways to hinder their quest for progress. Poor leadership is thought to be the source of most problems plaguing African societies, (Salawu, 2012), Citizens of countries in which leadership is not clearly defined, practically demonstrated, or effectively applied do not enjoy the desired level of well-being. Effective leaders are those who feel that they have clear obligations as human beings to care for their countrymen. Thus, there is a pressing need for practical, good leadership in the region. In other words, countries located in the sub-Saharan Africa need leadership that directly impacts on the local populace.

The problem which troubles Africans most is the failure of political leadership. The Nigerian, DR-Congo as well as the Kenyan contexts provide an overview of challenges in leadership in the continent. It is important to note too that indeed there are of course failures in other domains, but these are traceable in the consciousness to political leadership deficiencies. Seteolu (2004) summarizes the challenge from Nigerian perspective thus; the political elite are not a productive class, but rely on the control of state structures to access economic rewards. The over politicization of the Nigerian state is also understood in the context of the unmediated struggle for power, influence and patronage. The nature of political contest ensured the emergence of a local governing class without ideological commitment. Rather than pursue political contests within ideological frameworks, politics became a contested terrain for shallow, self-centred political gains. By far, the political challenges are more perennial and indeed central to the causation or escalation of the other challenges. These are political instability, as well as Machiavellian manipulation of power, corruption, manipulations of electoral processes, political assassinations and militarization of democratic institutions are a common phenomenon in Nigeria. The DR-Congo the situation is not any different. The country is awash with natural mineral deposits, however despite this fact poverty levels in the country remain very high while

the country's physical infrastructure is in a deplorable state. The Kenyan constitution 2010 proposed to revolutionize the way in which the country's political leadership interacts and functions by devolving power to county governments. This was aimed at promoting a more participatory, interactive and inclusive system of governance. Political leadership was to play a vital role in sustaining this new system, as outlined in the chapter on leadership and integrity, (The Constitution of Kenya, 2010). However, what Kenyans continue to witness contradicts this vision of a better-governed country. Some political leaders have rather focused on ensuring impunity in their corrupt activities, in many instances by hiding behind their political parties and ethnicity. The post-2010 political leadership has been unable to adapt to the devolved system of governance, which calls for transparency and accountability. Instead, leaders continue to engage in a way that is combative and confrontational, punctuated by negative political posturing not reflective of servant leadership. This has created an 'us-versus-them' situation between different parties and leaders, with those seen to be close to members of the other political side labelled as traitors, (Sebastian, 2015). Political parties and coalitions threaten members with party disciplinary action and expulsion for their working relationships with those perceived to be 'enemies' – including the government, in the case of the opposition. This continued form of abrasive political engagement shows that the country's leadership has neither been dynamic nor innovative enough to measure up to the new political systems. This servant leadership crisis should be viewed against the backdrop of the hotly contested 2013 general election, as well as alignments ahead of the 2017 elections, (Maureen, 2016).

The discussed nature political leadership has a negative impact on governance, as every national concern is politicized and approached in a partisan manner. Consequently, the leadership has been unable to unite the nation even when it comes to important national policies and strategies. This has resulted in crucial national initiatives being contested and lacking in legitimacy due to their partisan origin. Thus, the governance style of the current political leadership has severely restricted accountability and entrenched impunity within the public sector. The inability or unwillingness of the political leadership to become dynamic and innovative, and adapt to new institutional mechanisms, threatens to erode the principles of good governance in Kenya. This has inevitably resulted in a confidence crisis: the public has only become more mistrustful and disillusioned as the leadership appears to be dedicated towards self-preservation instead of public service. There is scarcity of servant leadership.

There is therefore a need for developing leaders –whose goal is the pursuit of broader moral principles in the public interest– at all levels of the society regardless of gender or age. This is critical because effective leadership is not supposed to be a “one-man” show or gendered (Duerst-Lahti, 2010). An inclusive approach to leadership is critical to the development of Africa, and the thus the orientation towards servant leadership values. These values are embodied in Robert Greenleaf's (1997), understanding that “only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first.” A servant leader is people focused.

Broadly, however, a servant leader and one that the African continent seeks, is the one who pays attention to people, develops people, and looks ahead far into the future with the hope of improving the people's status quo.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that servant leadership is a moral or virtuous leadership style. The values or attributes of servant leadership are found to be strongly supported within various religious traditions. The traditions affirm human dignity, increases the bond of community by fostering compassion and attention to people's needs. It empowers people helps them develop character, and provides an environment that promotes justice.

Servant leadership therefore does not exist as merely a tool to use; rather, it is more of an archetype or ego ideal that governs daily interactions. It has more to do with *being* than merely *doing*. What servant

leadership presents is being a servant. In this regard, Africa needs to produce leaders who are honest, competent and committed. The continent needs to embark on educational processes which will nature servant leaders.

This process will guarantee that the interest of African people is met and their myriad challenges addressed. According to Greenleaf (1997), a servant-leader's desire first and foremost is to serve others. A servant leader is the one who desires to grow oneself and others. Has the ability to be vulnerable, to listen deeply, to try and fail. Think of those failures as great learning opportunities, to enter uncharted waters, to confront fear and conflict a servant leader is needed in Africa – Kenya today. This is the lesson of the Gospel of Mark 10:42-45, “*You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be servant of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*”

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