

A Review of the Materiality of Classical and Modern Approaches to Public Administration in Africa

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Abstract

Public Administration's long history as a concept is as old as the very notion of government itself. Its foundations as a discipline can be traced back to the 20th century writings of Max Weber, Woodrow Wilson and Frederick Taylor. Their ideas found overt expression in the administrations of European and American societies which had organised forms of governments. Most pre-colonial African societies were organised according to traditional structures governed by chiefs, councils of elders and kings. However, with the political decolonisation of most African states, post World-War II, the United Nations advised that there should be public administration and public service which should, in every real sense, belong to the society they serve. Public bureaucracies came to be viewed as the vehicles through which the struggle toward development and nation building could be achieved. This paper seeks to give an overview of how the classical approaches have been applied in post-colonial African states. It will also review how the new public management approaches were (un)successfully implemented in these very states. Using qualitative research and descriptive and exploratory methods, this paper will explore the nexus between African bureaucracy and public administration approaches.

Keywords: *Public Administration; Classical Theories; Modern Theories; African Public Administration.*

Introduction

Statement of the problem

Governance is perceived as a critical factor in accelerated and sustainable economic growth and development. Most African countries, since the 1990s, were deemed to be operating under critical circumstances including doubtful political legitimacy and flawed economic management. Many African countries continued to rely on centralized and highly personalized forms of government and some had also fallen into an unacceptable pattern of corruption, ethnically based decision-making and human rights abuses. (Olaniyan: 2008). It is clear that there is need for more progress in the majority of countries to provide an environment in which individuals were protected, civil society was able to flourish, and Governments executed their responsibilities efficiently and transparently, through adequate institutional mechanisms that would ascertain accountability. (Olaniyan: 2008). It is from this background that there is need to review the approaches that are often imposed on African

states disguised as good governance packages and evaluate how relevant they are to the African context.

Existing solutions

According to Basheka (2015), if one was to pause and question whether African societies had administrative systems worthy of the name, before the colonial epoch, attracts two opposing views. First, is the negative view that construes Africa to have been a mere dark continent without any sense of organization. The second confirms how African societies, at the time, had systems to manage public affairs that constituted an administrative system.

From these two views, arose scholars, on one hand, who advocate for a public administration approach that is purely African in origin, a system that takes only from the traditional African administrative systems that existed before colonialism. On the other hand, there are those whose take is that Africa needed a complete transformation in which they were supposed to adopt the Western Classical and Modern

approaches to governance in order for them to run efficient governmental systems.

Which solution is the best?

The debate between these Afro-optimists who are usually Euro-critics – who advocate for a pure indigenous administrative approach- and the Afro-pessimists who in most cases are Eurocentric scholars -as they advocate for the Western approaches, is as old as the theories of public administration. It is significant from the outset to note that this paper will principally focus on the theories of public administration as championed by eminent scholars in this field, from the likes of Weber, Wilson and Taylor, who founded the traditional approaches to public administration, to the later writers such as Homburg, Pollitt, Bouckert and Guys, and others, who were exponents of new managerialism as a form of modern governance. It is therefore my take that a middle of the road approach to these approaches, in which aspects of each approach is taken and infused with the other. That way an approach that is contextual can be found.

Limitations

This article is based on secondary data sources as it seeks to evaluate the African context of public administration against the conventional approaches that are modern. The first hurdle that one meets is that, there is very limited literature that exists on any systematic approach to administration in Africa. Authoritative literature on Africa exists largely on the colonial and post-colonial era and to a larger extent portrays a negative picture of the African Administrative systems. This point is corroborated by Basheka (2015) when he posited that,

“The tendency of the architects of the colonial enterprise is to believe Africa had no administration needs to be countered with compelling facts and examples to solidly illustrate the robustness of the pre-colonial governance apparatus, especially given the time perspective”

The revisionist scholars who have tried to retrieve the positive aspects of the African administrative systems have also often had to confront the lack of reliable sources of that information.

Methods

This article employed qualitative research design and descriptive methods to get an understanding of the landscape and relationship of African bureaucracy and public administration. exploratory techniques were used in the effort to explore the connection between African bureaucracy and public administration. Then, pertinent sources of this research were equally and examined and verified against the obtainable literature for the research purpose. Critical reading and writing down of ideas were done academic sources were reviewed during a desktop study.

Results

Modern approaches to public administration in their existing form are clearly inapplicable to the African context and this is due to Africa's troubled past of colonialism, the nature of African leadership which has largely been pre-occupied by the need to keep power for its sake, the lack of constitutionalism and many other ills. It is from this background that there is a need to navigate African past governance systems and infuse them with modern approaches to administration in order to cure the public administration conundrum in Africa.

Discussion

Due to the colonial linkages, most post-colonial states adopted these western models in the organisation of their governments. Then doing this does not suggest that Africa's indigenous administrative systems were troubled, chaotic and biased (Basheka: 2015) as portrayed in some literature, especially where western ideas are portrayed as superior to indigenous systems.

Public administration theory has gone through various stages as a framework for running states. The traditional approach to public administration was introduced in the 20th century – The Bureaucratic Approach. This was meant to run a state in a stable and predictable way in a relatively static environment, and therefore, public administration was not prepared to meet new challenges and was resistant to change. (Katsamunski: 2012). The traditional model of public administration has been regarded as the most successful theory of public sector

management, although it does not have a single, coherent intellectual foundation. (Katsamunskaja: 2012).

This approach was added to by Woodrow Wilson who introduced the politics-administration dichotomy. Whereas the former espoused personal relationships, based on the loyalty to a particular individual such as a king, a leader, a minister or a party, (instead of being impersonal, based on legality and the loyalty to the organization and the state) (Katsamunskaja: 2012), the Wilsonian doctrine emphasised the "detailed and systematic execution of public law" and he believed there should be a strict separation of politics from administration because administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics, and administrative questions are not political questions. (Katsamunskaja: 2012). This thinking was then further consolidated by Fr. Frederick Taylor through his publication in 1911 of the 'Principles and Methods of Scientific Management'.

These classical thoughts were challenged in the 1960's and 70's by a new movement, 'The New Public Administration' which fundamentally criticized the "old" public administration for its lack of an explicit ideological framework. The basic principles of the New Public Administration were participation, decentralization and representative bureaucracy.

A new managerial approach in the public sector emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s and it was named New Public Management. This new approach gave prominence to the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of government organizations, instruments and programs, and higher quality service delivery. This new model of public sector management emerged in the most advanced countries, as well as in many developing ones, and is regarded by many authors as "not a reform of the traditional public administration, but a transformation of the public sector and its relationship with government and society". (Hoos et al: 2003).

Background to Public Administration in Africa

As far back as African history extends, human beings have always grouped themselves together into communities; each having a person or a collective to govern it (Kay & Thomas: 1965). In Swaziland, the ruler is the King and in

Matabeleland and Mashonaland, enclaves of pre-colonial Zimbabwe, there were Chiefs or a King's Councils at first, whose authority extended only over a couple of villages and over large communities. This was essential to aid the community to protect itself and guarantee that customary law and order were sustained and disputes settled without fighting. All across Africa, this forms the basics of traditional administrative systems that existed before the emergence of public administration in Africa.

The impact of theory and practice of public administration in Africa is very difficult to characterise. Olaopa (2009) aptly puts it when he points out that, the history of modern public administration in Nigeria and by extension other African countries is relatively short and is full of events, shaped by different actors, and characterized by multifarious problems.

African Context and the Classical Approaches to Public Administration

The study of public administration and public management is a field of scholarship that requires to be firmly embedded in the society it serves. (Itika et al: 2011). The classical theories of public administration such as those put across by Weber, Taylor and Wilson are, on the other hand, foreign, so to speak. They are an imposition either by default or design on the indigenous governance systems that existed in these societies prior to the influence of imperialist forces. Public administration in developing countries is, therefore, administration in transformation. In many countries in Africa, managing the public sector implies a continuing quest for good governance: for organisations, institutions and policies that best fit the needs of modernizing societies. (Itika et al: 2011).

Scholars and practitioners of public administration in Africa borrow ideas, concepts and institutional designs from all over the world, but mostly from the highly developed countries in Western Europe and America. This background is informed by Africa's past which has largely been interfered with by these very nations. According to Basheka (2015), the African Continent has suffered a rather tormented history, following different historical epochs with shadows of colonialism, conquest, neo-colonialism, and global capitalism foisting upon them the western organizational management/leadership practices. This reality

impresses upon the public administration scholars the significant question of whether the classical theories are useful in this context or otherwise.

In order to understand the changes and reforms in the system of public administration, particularly in the African context, we need to understand the traditional model of governance, because any attempt at reform is viewed and evaluated against it. (Katsamuniska: 2012). Basheka (2015) makes a very important observation that some Public Administration scholars may not even imagine the existence of an indigenous governance apparatus worth historicizing during the teaching of public administration. In such circumstances, the warning of Sharma et al (2009) against ignoring indigenous knowledge, suffices. Dia (1996) suggested that many of Africa's problems, of modern times, stem from a structural and functional separation between informal, indigenous institutions as rooted in Africa's history and culture and formal institutions that are mostly transplanted from outside.

The Classical model of public administration was thought to be the best way for organizing the public sector work and undoubtedly worked well for a long time in the developed countries. However there hasn't been a deliberate study of how it worked in the developing countries of Africa. The traditional model of public administration has been regarded as the most successful theory of public sector management. (Katsamuniska: 2012). Its theoretical basis is derived from W. Wilson and Fr. Taylor in the United States, the Northcote -Trevelyan Report in the United Kingdom and M. Weber in Germany. In general, it is characterized as:

"an administration under the formal control of the political leadership, based on a strictly hierarchical model of bureaucracy, staffed by permanent, neutral and anonymous officials, motivated only by the public interest, serving and governing party equally, and not contributing to policy but merely administering those policies decided by the politicians". (Hughes: 2003).

According to Hoos (2003), the key feature of this model is that in the modern governmental systems professional bureaucrats execute the tasks of public administration while separated from the political mechanisms as well as from the private sphere. Katsamuniska (2012) posits that the European and the American public

administration have passed through different historical development, but the Weberian approach became common for them and both stressed the necessity of impersonal, formally regulated and hierarchical mechanisms.

Weber's critics argue that his principal focus was not administration, but that his main distinctive contribution to the field of public administration was related to the analysis of the social and historical context of administration, and more particularly, bureaucracy - and that he identified it as the dominant form in a legal-rational society and specified the features of the most rational form of bureaucracy. (Katsamuniska: 2012). According to Fry (1989), Max Weber not only gave the characteristics and criteria for modern bureaucracy, but also outlined the terms of its employment in the bureaucratic organization. They are as follows:

1. Officials are personally free and are appointed on the basis of a contract.
2. Officials are appointed, not elected. Weber argues that election modifies the strictness of hierarchical subordination.
3. Officials are appointed on the basis of professional qualifications.
4. Officials have a fixed money salary and pension rights.
5. The official's post is his sole or major occupation.
6. A career structure exists with promotion based on merit (though pressure to recognize seniority may also exist.)
7. The official is subject to a unified control and disciplinary system in which the means of compulsion and its exercise are clearly defined.

In light of the above hypothesis of the bureaucratic system, it is clear that most African jurisdictions have adopted a fusion of this system with elements of the traditional indigenous governance systems in which hierarchy was important. The appointment of officials to public office has always been and remains attached to loyalty to the king, president or the party in power. There are many reasons for this disposition. Firstly, the need to consolidate power by the incumbents meant that they had to appoint those officials who, despite their qualifications, or lack thereof, would pledge allegiance to the incumbent. Tied to this is the second reason that being in power continues to be a license to the state purse and therefore there was a need to keep

a hierarchical structure that would allow those at the top to plunder national resources without any dissent from appointed officials. Thirdly, the nature of family ties in most African states meant that officials were appointment based on a patronage system in which those who were related to the rulers had unfettered access to power.

Woodrow Wilson introduced a new dimension to this classical approach in which he proposed the politico-administration dichotomy. In Wilson's words, public administration is 'the detailed and systematic execution of public law' and he believed there should be a strict separation of politics from administration because administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics and administrative questions are not political questions. (Katsamunski: 2012). This view of public administration fails to account for the existing conditions that exist in many African countries; that of political party-government conflation. This has always been a sure source of weak public institutions. In Africa, the winner-takes-all mentality which is embedded in their constitutions means that the political party that wins political power has the power to control government and its institutions with no accountability. Therefore, Wilson's ideas that the that the dichotomy between politics and administration could eliminate the arbitrariness and corruption in the administration could never be a reality in the African context as in reality there has not been complete and clear separation between politics and administration.

Furthermore, Africa has the experience of having good constitutions but without constitutionalism and therefore to imagine that Wilson's ideas of a detailed and systematic execution of public law would work in Africa would be a fantasy. Africa is awash with examples of "rule-by-law" in most countries such as in Zimbabwe as opposed to the rule of law. Constitutions are not respected as the fundamental document upon which the nation is founded and therefore supposed to shape the way public administrators conduct themselves. On the contrary, constitutions are amended arbitrarily to suit the current interests of the individuals in power. In that regard, the politico-administration dichotomy is clouded and the doctrine of the separation of powers in the African context is an uphill task.

The 1911 Frederick W. Taylor published his fundamental work "Principles and Methods of Scientific Management" which was thought to be the best way to introduce efficiency into administration. According to Katsamunski (2012) At that time there was a search for general administrative techniques in the private sector that could possibly be used to enhance the efficiency in the operation of the American government, and the scientific management attracted the support of governmental officials who believed that its techniques directly concerned with the question of efficiency, could be applied to the public sector. However, for the African government the challenges to rationality in administration has always existed as a pipe dream. According to Mutenheri (2009), as its name implies, this theory applies rational decision-making to planning. The four typical elements of RCP are: goal setting, the identification of policy alternatives, evaluation of means against ends, and implementation of decisions with feedback loops and repetition of steps. Using this method requires meticulous information gathering and analysis. It stresses objectivity, the public interest, information, and analysis, which allow planners to identify the best possible course of action.

Mutenheri (2009) contends that, "the rational comprehensive position, abstracting from the messy "real world", assumes that decisionmakers have a well-defined problem, a full array of alternatives to consider, full baseline information, complete information about the consequences of each alternative, full information about the values and preferences of citizens, and adequate time, skill, and resources." Mutenheri's argument concerning Zimbabwe here summarises what has prevailed in most African states: that the Scientific Management approach could never have worked considering what has prevailed in Zimbabwean policy planning: where political expediency supplants common good. The method strives to be objective, technical, and exclude subjective and emotional discussion sparked by divergent perception of problems. It attempts to separate planning from politics by ignoring the political considerations of public interest.

Essentially, the classical approaches or what has basically been called the orthodoxy cannot be applicable in the African context because they are foreign theories imposed on governance systems that were based on indigenous systems of

governance. (This is not to say the existing governance systems in Africa were not viable or historically irrelevant). That is a thesis for another research. The crux of the matter is that these theories remain approaches whose fundamental bases do not relate to a common past which most African countries have been subjected to: that of colonial conquest, plunder of resources by Europeans, neo-colonialism, globalisation and its negative effects on these nascent states.

Modern Managerial Approaches to Public Administration and the African Setting

During the 1980's and 1990's there was a large-scale rethinking of governance, which was followed by attempts to move administration far away from its roots. Only a few governments have remained untouched by the wave of reforms. (Katsamunskaja: 2012). Before the term "new public management" was coined, the new model of public sector management had several names. Different names such as *managerialism*, *new public management*, *market-based public administration*, *post-bureaucratic paradigm* and *entrepreneurial government* were used to describe the same phenomenon. Katsamunskaja: 2012). Katsamunskaja further notes that the new approach to public management is oriented to results, focusing on clients, outputs and outcomes. It focuses on management by objectives and performance management, the use of market and market-type mechanisms in the place of centralized command and control style of regulation, competition and choice, and devolution with a better matching of authority, responsibility and accountability.

Africa has been plagued over the past half century with the tag of bad governance, corruption and underdevelopment. Over this period, Africa has been the largest recipient of aid to avert mostly man-made disasters – famine, civil wars, disease outbreak (Malaria, HIV/AIDS and others) and coup d'états – this notwithstanding that Africa has the resources, skill and climate to eradicate these problems. All these could have been avoided had the governance infrastructure of the African continent been attended to. It is therefore clear that there is a poverty of leadership in Africa – a leadership which is ready to take the lead in shaping individual countries and the continent in the direction of good governance.

There has always been a debate in Africa as to which comes first- democracy or development. This debate was meant by Afro-optimists/ Euro-critics to scuttle any argument which sought to believe that African states should democratise first or should be expected to run their economies transparently, following good governance measures as espoused by the New Public Management approaches. They argued that all the developed nations of the world which now had the luxury to impose this managerial ethos to administration had themselves undergone a period of strife, of slaughtering each other even, before they could democratise. These critics of modern approaches to administration question why America and the civilised world have not been questioned on their role in the slave trade, a four centuries-long barbaric practice which deprived Africa of an opportunity to grow as its most able bodied and economically active human resources were shipped across the oceans to work for slave masters. The other major argument that the Afro-optimists/Euro-critics put forward is that in the last quarter of the 19th Century European imperialists had partitioned Africa and dispossessed Africans of their livelihoods by taking their land. It is therefore the case that in most African states the clamour for land repossession without compensation has found traction. The euro critics argue that there has to be restitution of past injustices before we can talk of good governance, of new public management, of civil rights and of all other aspects of managerialism as a form of public administration. Further they argue that under colonialism Europeans had plundered mineral resources from Africa for the benefit of Europe.

The managerialism reform was mainly aimed at a massive privatization of public enterprises and cutting other parts of the public sector, while the civil service moved from an administered to a managed bureaucracy. These policies in Africa were implemented in the form of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPS) in the 80's and 90's with devastating effects on the poor people of the African countries. To date, privatisation is loathed in Africa because it seeks to move the state from being welfarist and affirmative in its action to the poor. It implies that where the government is supposed to give services to the poor for free or in a subsidised manner, the poor people are left with the burden to do it themselves. Privatised organisations often leave

the market to determine prices of services and this has always been known to be calamitous to the poor.

The modern approaches including, New Public Administration, New Public Governance and other forms of the reform era emphasised the need to focus on efficiency in providing services and needs to citizens. They expect the government of the day to be driven by servitude to the citizenry as opposed to bureaucratic hierarchical systems which benefit the politician more than the citizens. In Africa this has been difficult to achieve. Most African states find themselves still saddled in yesteryear politics in which the government of the day accuses the colonialists of the economic, social and political problems that they find themselves in. The liberation struggles that they fought to liberate their nations are often used as a boon for entitlement and impunity. The liberation generation of statesman in Africa, at least the majority, seem to think that they have a birth right to rule their countries and they do this with no accountability to the citizenry. Instead of being administrators, they are patriarchs for their people. The examples that come to mind are Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Idi Amin of Uganda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi.

What is the future of Public Administration in Africa?

The question remains – does Africa need its own theories of Public Administration? If so, how will that be possible in this age of globalisation? Would Amilcar Cabral and Franz Fanon's anti-colonialist ideas and De-linking work for Africa? Does Africa need a home-grown approach to administration and if so, how possible is it? According to Basheka (2015):

To pause and question whether African societies had administrative systems worthy of the name, before the colonial epoch, attracts two opposing views. First, is the negative view that construes Africa to have been a mere dark continent without any sense of organization. The second confirms how African societies, at the time, had systems to manage public affairs that constituted an administrative system. (Basheka: 2015).

This view makes it clear that there is a need for theory that draws from the African past and is infused with the modern approaches to

government. This is not to portray Africa as one homogenous landscape which had a similar experience in governance and even in colonial experience. There is therefore a need for scholars to be contextual and pursue an interdisciplinary approach that should establish approaches or a theory that should provide African solutions to African Public Administration problems. Basheka's argument about indigenous administrative systems is strong that, they have a wealth of knowledge scattered across many disciplines, and it is a challenge to African Public Administration scholars to document a common administrative theory.

Conclusion

Modern approaches to public administration in their existing form are clearly inapplicable to the African context and as mentioned above, this is due to Africa's troubled past of colonialism, the nature of African leadership which has largely been pre-occupied by the need to keep power for its sake, the lack of constitutionalism and many other ills. The classical approaches, in particular the bureaucratic approach seem to have found much acceptance; though as they were reformed in the global North, it was never applicable to the African context. Once again it is because these approaches were knitted in neo-liberal and western political culture which is totally antithetical to the African context. It is from this background that there is a need to navigate African past governance systems and infuse them with modern approaches to administration in order to cure the public administration conundrum in Africa.

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