Leading A Postmodern African Organisation: Towards A Model of Prospective Commitment

by

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Abstract

Africa's adoption of Western management and leadership practices has impacted adversely on her capacity to develop in the global marketplace. As this paper shall argue, an African oriented management and leadership paradigms couched in postmodernism will facilitate her efforts towards continental bliss. Postmodernism is a reaction against modernity that universalises Western (organisational) models by asserting one-dimensional approach to apprehending reality. Leading a postmodernist African organisation entails a deconstruction of Western schema through opening up multiplicities. The envisioned new African organisational model is one of these multiplicities. Also, Africa's (organisational) leadership in post-modern era is a correlate of prospective commitment. Prospective commitment translates into envisioning future progress of African business as well as re-imagining Africancentred organisational models for competitive edge. This is crucial for Africa to rediscover its cultural identity. This is also critical for transcending the trammels of Western oriented management methods by evolving Africa's indigenous management practices that are couched in *Ubuntu*, a collectivist leadership model premised on shared vision and experience. This is important for Africa's renaissance as well as a useful management tool for circumventing imperialist hangover and impositions, which are standing in the way of her organisational growth and development.

Keywords: African management; Organisational leadership; Postmodernism; Prospective commitment.

Decoupling Imperial Burden: African Organisation, Colonial Heritage and the Quest for Change

Africa has suffered a tormented history that follows a shadow of colonialism, conquest, neo-colonialism, global capitalism and foisting upon her Western organisational management/leadership practices. Thus, in the context of cultural relativism, it is neither appropriate nor useful for African organisations to copy Western oriented organisational models (Adeleye, 2011; Ngugi, 2009). Africa's disempowerment in the global community and her lack of organisational advancement on the heels of the above reverses impinge on the continent's capacity to think from within. Echoing similar perspective, in his foreword to Richard Dowden's recent book on Africa tiled *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles* (2008), Chinua Achebe says:

Africa, as most people are aware, has endured a tortured history, and continues to persevere under the burden of political instability... Many chroniclers of the African condition often find Africa overwhelming (Dowden, 2008: xv).

The above offers a fresh vista to Achebe's observation about Africa's burden, which he argues in his chapbook on Africa, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983), rests mainly on the scaffold of failed leadership precipitated by "a tortured history", a metonymy for the negative effects of the twin devils: colonialism and slavery.

Part of the failure of (organisational) leadership in this instance is located in the area of adopting Western organisational management/leadership constructs as a consequence of Africa following in the footsteps of Western or Eurocentric organisational paradigms. In adding credence to this,

Western management concepts and writings have dominated the thinking of academics and managers in Africa for a long time. Such writings have not shown how culture might be taken into account in managerial practice (Gbadamosi, 2003, p. 274).

This is a major obstacle to Africa's organisational development. Thus, for Africa to lead in the post-modern era, an age characterised by questioning 'old self-description as being a purposeful hierarchy' (Baecker, 1999) as well as an epoch underwritten by multiplicity of platforms to apprehending reality, an African-centred organisational leadership paradigm is of essence.

As this paper shall argue, this would be realised through *Ubuntu* approached from the prism of postmodernism, which recognises cultural peculiarities. Thus,

one of the most commonly cited attributes of *ubuntu* is the way that it helps individuals value their own identity through their relationship with the community. *Ubuntu* is about developing your "fullness of being" through your relatedness and relationship with others. It identifies human beings as "beings with others" and prescribes what "being with others" should be all about ... (Hailey, 2008: 7).

This is essentially what Shutte (1993) calls a web of reciprocal exchanges in which subject and object become identical, and in which the Western philosophy "I think, therefore I am" is replaced with "I participate, therefore I am". In tearing the epistemological edifice of Cartesian principle, *Ubuntu*, advances the rhetoric of African humanism and peculiarity by favouring solidarity instead of solitary intervention (Louw, 1998).

It is worth noting the philosophical constructs of diverse global paradigms to show fundamental management practices, leadership patterns and cultures that exist. Arguably, this will place this study into a broader context that mediates local and international spheres. It will also help in establishing that African management practice is in the shadow of Western influence. The significance of understanding these organisational practices and variations in terms of African and Western management systems places premium on the urgency of theorising African organisational management practice via *Ubuntu*, an idea that is being animated by Africa's reaction to the rhetoric of universalising Western management thought as well as postmodernist pressure for prospective commitment, which is needed for her organisational re-invention (Mbigi, 2005; Theimann, April & Blass, 2006). Thus, the application of Western management methods often proves less effective when transplanted elsewhere, hence, every nation, culture and setting is rooted in its contextual value system and culture (Ahiauzu, 1999; Adeleye, 2011; Zoogah, 2009).

One of the underlying root causes of the West's inferiorisation of African indigenous management practice stems from the Gramscian theory of hegemony and control as well as domination for advantage. This is why the imperialists reason that there are no indigenous African leadership paradigms (Ugwuegbu, 2001; Edoho, 2000) as well as management system. This has stimulated debate towards "an emergence of new leadership" (Kiggundu, 1988: 226), which this study envisages would be achieved via postmodernist reconstruction of African management models. This form of leadership is communalistic in scope as it incorporates everyone into leadership process through a process of socialisation; it also rejects Eurocentric model of management methods that are individualistic.

Critical to dismantling the foundations of Western organisational management practice that finds provenance in the Cartesian schema, "Cogito, ergo sum" – "I think, therefore I exist" for a re-invented Africa, Hofstede's (1985) work is ideologically immersed in repudiating Mintzberg's (1973) thesis that universalised Western management paradigm. In the view of Al-Yahya, Lubatkin & Vengroff (2009),

the work of Mintzberg (1973) is indeed central to what is known today in the comparative management as "the universality hypothesis". This hypothesis suggests that Western management theories, particularly organisation theories, are applicable worldwide regardless of culture or historic experience of a society (2).

The replication of Western management and leadership models in non-Western environments has been a contested issue in management science for a long time (Ahiauzu, 1999; Hickson, 1974; Montgomery, 1985). However, studies have demonstrated that Western culture is different from Africa's way of life. Culture is an integral component of organisational management, and should therefore be considered for Africa's organisational evolution. This is in accordance with Nkomo's (2006) assertion:

Whereas Western management thought is said to advocate Eurocentrism, individualism and modernity, 'Africa' management thought is said to emphasise traditionalism, communalism, co-operative teamwork, and mythology (23).

Theoretical Framework

Firstly, this study is built upon the edifice of *Ubuntu* – "I am because we are; I can only be a person through others" (April & Ephraim, 2010; Nussbaum, 2003). Secondly, the study also takes a postmodernist re-articulation of African management practice, which is part of the debate about "incredulity towards meta-narrative" (Bhat, 2010: 5). Since the publication of Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), a book that trenchantly questions the unilateral, one-sided way of interpreting reality through the conduit of universalising Western approach to meanings as well as discountenancing multiplicities of meanings, efforts have been made towards rethinking unbounded relativism inherent in thinking outside the box. This is what Christopher Norris in his *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (1988) referred to as "open-ended free play of style and speculative thought, untrammelled by 'rules' of any kind' (91).

Outside the box here translates into Africa looking inwards in terms of organisational management paradigms to be adopted for her reinvention; it also entails rising above the epistemological basis of modernity's meta-narrative or grand narratives, a received way of locating meanings without questioning grounds for rationality. Thus, *ubuntu* will facilitate the process of making Africa's organisational practice truly African. This is one of the hallmarks of questioning received understanding of reality.

Postmodernist African Organisation and *Ubuntu*

Hofstede's (1985) study crystallises in culture-specific theory of management development. It was drawn from a multinational perspective. It is arguably regarded as setting the foundation for a critique of Mintzberg's (1973) work as well as one of the most influential studies on cultural differences. In his analysis, Hoftstede (1985) articulated that national cultures could be clustered along the axes of their parallels across a range of factors. These variable included individualism or collectivity, the degree of centralization or autocratic leadership and layers of hierarchy (this is also referred to as power distance), and the degree to which uncertainty is accepted or avoided. According to Hofstede's (1985) theory, collectivism refers to a preference for a "tightly-knit social framework in which individuals can expect their relatives, clan, or other in-group to look after them, in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (347-8). This is compared with the Western notion of individualism, which is defined as a predilection for a loosely formed social structure in a society in which individuals are supposed to take care of themselves and their immediate families only.

A close reading of the above presents the essentials of *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* goes beyond mere pandering to ingrained sense of belonging and purpose that comes through community spirit, which is largely characteristic of African worldview and philosophy. *Ubuntu* rather inheres in shared leadership, which is one of the offerings of postmodernism, an era of paradigm shift in viewing reality and truth. This period calls for a re-writing of organisational framework from the African worldview and culture. Mbigi (2005: 20) outlined some of the vital components of African leadership as follows:

- Respect for the dignity of others
- Group solidarity an injury to one is an injury to all
- Teamwork none of us is greater than all of us
- Service to others in the spirit of harmony
- Interdependence each one of us needs all of us

The foregoing is set against the backdrop of individualistic society and management practice that elevates self-interest. The African cultural construct foregrounds essentially group implication of decision-making and leadership, thereby asserting that individual needs will be met or achieved when things are viewed collectively. Consequently, team rewards would take precedence over individual interests, rewards and benefits. The effect of rewarding individuals in a collectivist society could result in social chastisement and sabotage of performance (Theimann, April & Blass, 2003; Mbigi, 2005).

As a consequence, a postmodernist reframing of Africa's organisational practice will usher in a new era of organisational leadership that resonates with *Ubuntu*, a schematisation of collectivist, shared leadership model that takes the cultural identity of African organisations into consideration. It also places premium on African-oriented organisational practice and management methods. Shared, collegial leadership in this context has to do with what Pearce & Conger (2003) called "relational leadership" (25). This is in tandem with what Fletcher (1999) dubbed post-modern framing of organisational leadership that is associational. As has been argued, "compromise, persuasion, discussion, accommodation, listening and freedom of speech are the key elements of the African leadership paradigm" (Mbigi, 2005: 21). This is crucial for collectivist leadership that galvanises transformational leadership, which is needed for change. The issue of shared leadership is critical for reinventing African organisations in the postmodernist era. In this light,

the starting point of any reflection on social innovation and post-modern organisation ought to be what characterises post-modernism as such: the individual experience of contingency. This is the experience that everything that is, could be otherwise. Not only the grand systems explaining the world, religion and science, fail to grant orientation and meaning. It is the very, leading discourses of modern society, politics, and economy, which cannot provide stability any longer (Kiehne & Klein, 2006: 3).

The above largely informs the rationality of *Ubuntu*, a conceptualisation that is grounded on the anvil of postmodernism – an African organisational as well as intellectual thought process informed by breaking from totalising, constraining Western schema of apprehending truth and reality.

From Retrospective Memory to Prospective Commitment

Retrospective memory deals with digging deep into historical experiences that sometimes equip us to plan and execute as well as get ready for future events, plans and strategies. In his article "Politics and Cultural Memory in Wole Soyinka's *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*", Sanyo Osha (2005) acknowledges assessing as well as critiquing the nexus between retrospective memory and prospective commitment for Africa's renaissance.

Thus, a reinvented African management practice that resonates with rising from the rubbles of colonial experience by refashioning Africa's organisational model is of essence. The process is a bridge between this grisly experience and a vision of what African business leaders want it to be.

In consonance with this position, Soyinka (1999) takes this debate further as he articulated the internecine relationship between retrospective memory and prospective commitment (action) for a wholesome prognosis of the future:

... underlying the vivid accuracies of the events ... as patterns of inhuman conducts that continue to scare and traumatise individuals and nations in an ever-escalating magnitude of horrors, it serves (dare one hopes?) as an unintentional reminder to surviving emulators of the chastening reckoning with mortality that awaits both the sinned and the sinned against (Soyinka, 1999: viii).

Although addressing a national problem, Soyinka's opinion above reverberates with the wider context of locating truculent colonial experience within the ambits of consequences of failing to remap Africa's future as well as the necessity for African organisational leaders to rearticulate her organisational model.

Prospective commitment technically "consists of hopeful preparations, anticipations of future power rather than meditative reflections on past moments of insight and harmony" (Royle 2003: 103). Thus it should be a programme of reinvention and remodelling from the angle of postmodernism that is completely oriented towards the future as well as a dismantling of the present organisational order. This is thus an attempt "to rediscover the African past through the undermining of colonial stereotypes" (Carroll 1980: 29). The postmodernist task that stares organisational managers and leaders in the face on the continent is

that of providers of constructive alternatives susceptible not only of cleansing the continent's image but even more importantly of moving the society forward in the right direction. Retrospection in the service of prospection ought to be the new creative order (Nyamndi, 2006: 566).

From an organisational point of view, commitment translates into whatever that makes a person to be committed to a task or course of action when difficulties or positive alternatives influence the person to abandon the endeavour (Manion, 2005).

Be it personal organisational commitment, it takes belief, trust and dedication to a goal that has to be achieved. This brings about the saliency of motivation to be committed to an ideal or goal. Thus,

commitments are not free-floating but instead are attached to a person or a thing. Commitment also implies a strong evaluative element: people must believe in the truth and inherent value of that to which they commit. Commitment indicates a belief that an organisation ... is worth supporting, and important in some way (Manion, 2005: 62).

It is interesting to note that adversity animates the tendency to commit to task, objectives and goal (Lydon and Zanna, 1990). The form of commitment in this instance could be efforts made to change an organisation's mode of practice, plans made to redesign an organisation's modus operandi and leadership vision to usher in better management practice organisationally or nationally. Apart from the directional element of commitment (Trigg, 1973), which transcending adverse organisational practice is one of, commitment has five major stages according to Manion (2005). They are as thus:

- Stage one exploratory commitment
- Stage two testing commitment
- Stage three passionate commitment
- Stage four quiet commitment
- Stage four integral commitment.

The main reason for the five stages of commitment as enunciated by Manion (2005) above is to give clarity that commitment is a process. Thus, commitments are fluid and dynamic, not static. They are witnessed as individuals, organisations and nations react to certain practices that could be negative, positive, empowering and disempowering.

A postmodernist reappraisal of Africa's organisational practices would trigger group cohesiveness grounded on the anvils of cultural identity and singularity rather than being buried under the rubbles of universalised Western organisational paradigms. The reason for relegating African organisational practice to the background and adopting Western-style paradigm could be traced to colonialism's evangelical mantra of superior civilisation, which saw the gradual disappearance of Africa's cultural practices as well as management methods (Inyang, 2007; Nkomo, 2006). Thus Africa's

development of the principles of management was marred ... by contact with the western world, contact marked by decades of economic exploitation, social oppression and the importation of scientific management, all of which have left acute problems for management today (Nzelibe, 1986, 153).

A priori, African continent's ability to go beyond the adversity caused by adopting Western management methods could be accomplished through the instrumentality of group cohesiveness as a *sine qua non* for cultural identity. In the view of Kanter (1972: 67), group cohesiveness is basically the "ability of people to 'stick together', to develop the mutual attraction and collective strength to withstand threats to the group's existence".

In adding credence to this, Udo Udo-Aka in his preface to P. N. O. Ejiofor's book, *Management in Nigeria: Theories and issues* (1987), asserted that

Nigerian (African) management experts have the great and necessary challenge of evolving management principles and styles which are tailored to meet the needs of our environment. Gone are the days when our schools curricular were dominated by only foreign principles, concepts and background. Our urgent need now is to use that experience to develop the type of curricular that would take cognizance of the peculiarities of our environment (Ejiofor, 1987: v).

Manion (2005) identified three types of commitments that could be exerted for organizational renewal; they are as thus:

1. Continuance commitment

This is about people recognising the benefits as well as gains accruable from aligning their commitment to an organisation's ideals. The sacrifices and losses inherent in such commitment are part of continuance commitment (Manion, 2005).

2. Normative commitment

This has to do with people being committed to organisation's goals and aspirations when such fit into their belief system and values. This is also called moral commitment; hence, people see the organisation's value system as being in sync with theirs. It brings about less deviance and resistance to authority and leadership (Makin, Cooper & Cox, 1996).

3. Affective commitment

This happens when events and occurrences evoke emotional correlation with people beliefs and interests leading to enhanced group cohesiveness. When groups are strong as a result of emotional bonding, this is a vital source of affective commitment. Another means of advancing affective commitment is strong, cohesive group relationship (Kanter, 1972).

This study also introduces another variant of organizational commitment called organisational *prospective commitment*, which could be arrived at through a postmodernist re-articulation of African organisational practice that has been in the shadow of Western management schema. Such a remapping would foreground the saliency of *ubuntu*, which is collectivist, shared and collegial, as well as a far cry from Western methods that are individualistic. This is the challenge of evolving African-oriented management practice as well as a stumbling block to leading a postmodern African organisation. It is to this end that

leaders who understand the various forms of organizational commitment as well as the stages of commitment formation and key factors that result in commitment can consciously choose behaviours to support this process (Manion, 2005: 59).

The patterns of "behavious" to underpin this process for Africa as has been stated earlier find expression in postmodernism, which looks at reality from diverse perspectives by repudiating Western based configuration of meaning. In this instance, particularities and singularities are substituted for universals.

Transcending "Learned Helplessness": Strategies for Empowering a New Face of African Organisation

Seligman & Hiroto's (1975) theory of "learned helplessness" deals with a person's failure or lack of capability to take harm-violent responses or to reverse harm-inflicting condition, even when such could lead to reduced exposure to (anticipated) harm or risk of harm. Thus, the expectations that events are uncontrollable and inexorable make reaction almost impossible because there seems to be non-contingency envisaged (Abrahamson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978). It is to this end that it has been stated that

learned helplessness occurs because the organism learns that its reinforcements are independent of its responses (i.e, that it lacks control over its responses), and this learning undermines the motivation to initiate further instrumental responses (Cohen, Rothbart & Phillips, 1976: 1049).

Central to Seligman and Hiroto's (1975) thesis is that humans sometimes carry over experiences of defeat, conquest, domination and repression to new environments. When this experience of negativity is taken to new externalities, it reduces one's motivation to positively respond to similar situations, which could reverse the trend or order.

Arguably, this is the case with African organisations. The early managers, who shall be described as precursors of new fangled African organisational paradigms, consisted of people that have colonial education and professionalism. Thus, colonial hangover percolates their organisational management ethos because these trained and elevated brains consisted of pioneer groups of Western management apologists who make up contemporary African management (Eze, 1995). A major negativity of this pattern is that a workforce was formed that was made of best brains in Africa but trained in Western style of management practice and principles aimed at supplying resources and energies to the West. This is what Eze (1995) characterised as "colonised African management" practice. This is the dilemma of African management practice – the quagmire of moving from the real to the ideal paradigms (Osuntokun, 2001; Ahiauzu, 1999). This present situation brings into bold relief the transfer of Seligman & Hiroto's "learned helplessness". What this means is that African managers and organisational leaders see circumventing Western imposed organisational practices as almost impossible. The reason for this is that these organisational leaders are still under the jackboot of colonialism. Here lies the saliency of learned helplessness.

Circumventing this organisational framework for African organisations to be truly African in scope and content, a postmodernist approach is crucial. This will detonate with what has been identified as "poly-centric organisational self-observation and self-description" (Kiehne & Klein, 2006), prerequisite for Africa's capacity to rearticulate appropriate organisational paradigms for her reinvention in the global marketplace. Hence, the "unmodified transplantation of those practices which are being utilised in the industrialised countries" (Deihl, 1984: 247) has not by miles helped in the development and progress of developing indigenous African management theories, cultures and practices. Accordingly, in the view of Fashovin (2005), organisational management practice and culture in Africa is essentially rooted in her cultural belief system, norms and traditions that are uniquely African. This mode of practice is what colonialism had come to supplant by imposing Western management system on Africa. Still within the limits of transcending learned helplessness, the most important task for African business and organisational leaders is to act in order to stem the tide without thinking that their efforts to make Africa's management practice come to fruition is not feasible since the continent is still under the jackboot of colonialism that finds resonance in neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism. This is what Ngugi (1972) has identified as learned helplessness couched in kaleidoscopic cultural imperialism.

The strategies to rise above the trammels of learned helplessness are articulated below:

The Imperatives of Convergence and Divergence

According to Ralston, Gustafson, Terpstra & Cheung (1993), the agglutination of convergence and divergence give rise to "cross-vergence", the development of the cross-vergence theory of values evolution, which states the dynamic interaction of the socio-cultural influences with the business ideology influences that provides the driving force to precipitate the development of new and unique values systems in societies.

The Need for African Oriented Methodology for Leadership

This is about developing African centred organisational *modus operandi*. This will lead to usable scientific as well as pragmatic, research-based models for Africa's organisational renewal (Vil-Nkomo, 2002; 297). This approach should be grounded in knowledge development through research and scholarly efforts. In the age of knowledge economy (Drucker, 1999), this is imperative for Africa's competitive edge. Thus,

today knowledge and skills now stand alone as the only source of comparative advantage. They have become the key ingredients in the late twentieth century's location of economic activity. In the era ahead, counties have to make the investments in knowledge and skills that will create a set of man-made brainpower (Thurow, 1996: 68).

Continental or Regional Leadership

This is not merely a function of geography or reaction to Western adopted methods, rather, it effervesces with the capacity to translate Africa's endowment and human capital into her advantage by designing approaches to make her uniqueness a success in the wider context of world business. This largely has to do with instituting visionary, transformational leadership that will midwife this prognosis of future organisational practice on the African continent (Adeyemi-Suenu & Inokoba (2010; Gomswalk, 1986) offer same perspective. For Adeyemi-Suenu & Inokoba, Africa's

... commitment must inexorably be consistent with its capacities to achieve its foreign objectives on one hand and on the other hand be articulated towards a set of desired gains achievable across a country's international boundaries either for national goals or towards a desired role in international politics (2010: 179).

Recognition of the Urgency of Postmodernism

This is important for Africa's understanding of organisational health. In order to increase continental competitive age, Africa should embrace the force of postmodernism, which makes room for apprehending peculiarities. The Asian Tigers identified this truth in time, and metamorphosed into giant leap for their global greatness. Thus, the identification and appreciation of one's cultural difference is significant in offering unique, specific solutions to realities. African organisations should be made to evolve outside the management practices dictated by the West.

The Reworking Africa's Cculture

Culture is crucially important in organisational advancement. Culture encapsulates the general worldview and way of life of a people. It also inheres in a people's value system, which are necessary ingredients for total repacking of a continent's way of understanding reality.

Management by Integrating Ethnic Group Differences and Patriotism

The question of multifarious ethnic affiliations and differences in Africa should be appreciated and made to confront the challenges of organisational development. This again would de-emphasis disunity, which is a major stumbling block to Africa's development.

Management by Research and Development (R&D)

In this age of knowledge economy, developing science and technology will impact positively on African organisations. Thus, African oriented research and development programmes should be designed to aid her organisational transformation. This will also make Africa competitive in the global marketplace; hence, the West got the point they are at the moment through investing in research and development.

Management by Performance Appraisal and Overhauled HRM

The emerging African organisation should overhaul their HRM system to adopt African based organisational paradigms. These organisations should also device means of gauging employee's performance and engagement. From an HRM point of view, this is important for compensating hard work and service.

Elimination of Corrupt Practices

It has been argued that corruption in Africa is a norm. Things are not usually done the right way; people cut corners to achieve their aims. This is a deterrent to organisational growth and evolution. There should be appropriate mechanisms to check corrupt organisational practices that do not recognise commitment and service. For virile African organisations to emerge in the postmodernist era, elimination of corrupt practices is essential.

Managing Through Incentivisation

For reinvented African organisations, people or employees need to be adequately remunerated and encouraged to their work. Although Africa has collectivist, shared way of life, people who offer services should be compensated in accordance with the quality of service and commitment they bring to organisations. This will in the final analysis bring about deep sense of commitment.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been stated that for Africa to lead in the postmodernist era that promises unbounded relativism, she has to organisationally re-engineer its *modus operandi* to conform to the demands of the time. The spirit of the time inheres in dismantling the constraining logic of unilateral apprehension of reality via modernity by opening up African oriented management practices capable of addressing her cultural peculiarities and uniqueness for development. As has been argued, this would be achieved through prospective organisational commitment that transcends colonial management practice hangover by envisioning African based organisational leadership/management models. This is also important for the continent to rise above developmental impediments occasioned by learned helplessness. Thus, leading a postmodern African organisation is a function of prospective commitment to African centred ideals that repudiates Western imposed management paradigms. This is crucially important in order to organisationally remap the continent for growth and cultural identity.

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