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Lead...For Father's Sake: An Autoethnography on Leadership Growth in Western and Indigenous Contexts

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Abstract

This autoethnography examines the juxtaposition of Western and Indigenous ideas of leadership through my lens and experiences as a refugee, student-athlete, a patriarch in a sub-Saharan African culture, and Soldier. I utilized existing literature on leadership perspectives from multiple regions (McManus & Perruci, 2015) to contextualize the study, revealing insights into differences in leader-follower relationship, decision-making, and responsibilities. Although the Western context, specifically the United States, is predominantly individualistic, I highlight the versatility and plurality of its leadership—sports and the military provide the most potent examples. Leaders in the Western context are judged on their leadership role, whereas Indigenous leaders are judged on their actions and every aspect of their life beyond their role. Indigenous Dinka (South Sudan) leadership context reveals unique insights into the role of leaders, followers, context, and culture. Leadership educators and scholars can use the insights to inform leadership development programs, research agendas for immigrant youth in the United States, and youth models of leadership ideas in practice.

Keywords

western and Indigenous leadership, leadership development, autoethnography

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I want to acknowledge the world's Indigenous communities, especially in Africa, for their humanity, persistence, and contributions to mankind despite the subjugation and oppression by European colonizers. I want to thank Dr. Robyn Cooper, Drake University, for her mentorship, leadership, and support. I want to acknowledge and extend my appreciation for everyone that has influenced and shaped the person I am today.

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This autoethnography examines the juxtaposition of Western and Indigenous ideas of leadership through my lens and experiences as a refugee, student-athlete, a patriarch in a sub-Saharan African culture, and Soldier. I utilized existing literature on leadership perspectives from multiple regions (McManus & Perruci, 2015) to contextualize the study, revealing insights into differences in leader-follower relationship, decision-making, and responsibilities. Although the Western context, specifically the United States, is predominantly individualistic, I highlight the versatility and plurality of its leadership—sports and the military provide the most potent examples. Leaders in the Western context are judged on their leadership role, whereas Indigenous leaders are judged on their actions and every aspect of their life beyond their role. Indigenous Dinka (South Sudan) leadership context reveals unique insights into the role of leaders, followers, context, and culture. Leadership educators and scholars can use the insights to inform leadership development programs, research agendas for immigrant youth in the United States, and youth models of leadership ideas in practice.

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Introduction

Besides the recounted stories and anecdotes about Sudan, I received my first introduction to African history as a freshman in college. My limited knowledge was exposed during a debate with a Nigerian classmate about aid in Africa. I heard calmly expressed facts for every statement I made, what seemed like facts anyway. I could barely engage in an analytical discussion because my knowledge was simplistic overgeneralizations. The debate was a humbling reality check; it defined my academic journey. The next day, I visited my academic advisor and informed her of my intention to major in philosophy, despite being petrified of the work. Having learned English for only six years, I was a poor reader and writer. My curiosity and work ethic gave me the audacity to think I could overcome these challenges. After all, my life was an embodiment of dichotomies—loss and hope, war and possibilities, successes, and failures.

The debate forced me to reflect on my journey, Africa, and the wars that shaped me. I was angry, saddened, and conflicted by the articles I read and videos I watched about my motherland, Sudan. I was mad that I had become complacent, perhaps to the point of assuming being African meant I understood Africa. Moreover, I realized my actions and goals were not aligned; coming to the United States was intended to be a journey to a better life. I committed to learning about Sudan and Africa because I was intrigued by African history, the people, the land, and the circumstances that allowed such proud and powerful nations to capitulate to Arab and European rule.

I was mesmerized by stories of brave men killing lions using only spears as a child. The Dinka commemorated warriors as immortal all-knowing beings: although the Dinka are known as warriors, it was their cultural codes of conduct that captivated me most. In the early days, the military shaped my initial ideas of leadership because the most celebrated leaders were warriors, especially Soldiers in the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), of which my father was an officer. Southern Sudanese revered Army officers for their courage, yet the stories always emphasized leadership as an ideal reserved for Chiefs or warriors.

My admiration for warriors notwithstanding, I became more transfixed by the purity of human behaviors that influenced people to achieve impossible odds. The romanticized narratives of warrior leaders were admirable, but I was more enthralled by Jieng cultures. Jieng men and women were terrified of breaching the social codes predicated on respect. My experiences growing up in a Jieng household, as a student-athlete, officer in the United States Army, and academic career have exposed me to nuances of leadership in Western and Indigenous African contexts. According to Ellis et al. (2011), researchers can use narrative ethnographies—such as presenting texts in stories that incorporate the researcher's experiences—to conduct research. Researchers use thick descriptions of personal experiences to connect the individual to the cultural context (Belbase et al., 2008). In this autoethnography, I juxtaposed Western and Indigenous African leadership.

The 1884-1885 Berlin Conference split Africa into colonies—dividing 600 years of interaction and enabling European countries to claim the people, resources, and land (Eyong, 2017). Today, Africa is home to 55 nations, thousands of ethnic groups, and over a billion people with a history of Indigenous, Western, and Islamic influences (McManus & Perruci, 2015). This layered legacy has shaped life and leadership in Africa. Considering this triple heritage and poor leadership that I experienced as a survivor of Sudan's Second Civil War, I sought to highlight leadership literature to contextualize this autoethnography.

The Study of Leadership

The scientific study of leadership intensified at the turn of the 20th Century (Antonakis & Day, 2018). Leadership has been studied extensively, yet there is no consensus on a singular definition. The study of leadership assumes that leadership is an indispensable difference maker (Kouzes & Posner, 2010) with followers because it is about relationships—the foundation of the human condition (Epitropaki et al., 2018). In this study, I deployed leadership definitions advanced by Perruci (2019) and Antonakis and Day (2018). Perruci (2019) defined leadership as “the process by which leaders and followers develop a relationship and work together toward(s) a goal (or goals) within an environmental context shaped by cultural values and norms” (p. 22). Leadership includes five components: leaders, followers, goals, context, and cultural norms, and these terms serve as the basis of understanding leadership. Each piece is critical to experience leadership in theory and practice. According to Antonakis and Day (2018), “leadership is a formal or informal contextually rooted and goal-influencing process that occurs between a leader and a follower, groups of followers or institutions” (p. 5). Hence, leadership is a process grounded in the context between a leader and others. I wrestled with profound cognitive dissonance—formal leadership is meritorious and celebrated, yet my intersectional experiences revealed and affirmed informal leadership as requisite for transformative relationships, influence, and effectiveness. However, I found myself code-switching to be effective based on the circumstances. In both Western and Indigenous, leadership remained relational.

Western Concepts of Leadership

Leadership literature in the Western context has evolved since the late 19th century, and the earliest theories of leadership can be categorized by period. Perruci (2019) summarizes leadership theories posited over time in Table 1. The table shows the focus of the ideas in the various periods and the issues raised or addressed. Chemers (2000) noted that in the beginning, Western scholars mainly looked to the characteristics of leaders, an expression of individualism in the Western cultural context. One of the earliest leadership theories, the Great Man Theory, proposed by Carlyle in the early 20th Century, viewed leaders as heroes with certain traits that set them apart (Chemers, 2000).

The 20th century saw waves of leadership theories, such as individual traits and personality, behavioral, contingency, transactional, transformational, servant, charismatic, authentic, and autocratic leadership theories, to name but a few (Chemers, 2000; Perruci, 2019). Theories of leadership since the 1990s have considered the impact of culture, context, and globalization on leadership.

Table 1
The Traditional Leadership Literature

Time period	Focus	Issues
1880s-1920	Leader	Traits (Great Man Theory)
1930s-1950s	Leader-goal	Behavioral theories; how to motivate followers in pursuit of a goal
1960s	Context of leader-follower	Situational leadership, contingency theory
1970s-1980s	Leader-follower relationship	Leadership styles related to the quality of the relationship (power-wielding, transactional, transformational); followership
1990s-present	Culture norms/value	Globalization; comparative leadership studies; global competencies

Note. Perruci (2019, p. 5) presents a concise summary of the various theories of leadership in the literature covering the 1880s to the present.

There are leadership concepts that are predominantly prevalent in the Western context. Leadership is a merit-based process predicated on rules, social contracts, and results in the Western context (McManus & Perruci, 2015). Meritocracy underscores the focus on the leader, and leadership is a skill, choice, and responsibility that individuals undertake (Kouzes & Posner, 2010) to motivate followers. According to Perruci (2019) and Chemers (2000), leadership focused on the individual until the introduction of followers in the 1960s.

Followers are a precondition for leadership because followers legitimize leaders (Antonakis & Day, 2018; Drucker, 1997; Hunter, 1998). Leaders emerge and are effective through followers—people willing to follow them to achieve goals. According to Chemers (2000), leader effectiveness is measured by their impact on follower satisfaction, motivation, and overall results; the leader's role is to enable followers to contribute to the group's goals while satisfying their needs and goals. Epitropaki et al. (2018) reported that following is a natural disposition for human beings. The leader-centric aspect of Western leadership has always intrigued me because leaders are celebrated when, in fact, the conditions, followers, and context often decide a leader's effectiveness. As an officer in the United States Army, I am a part of a team; I lead by providing purpose, direction, and leadership, but my soldiers execute the mission. Therefore, all success should be attributed to the soldiers, not just the leader.

Leadership enables human beings to function and survive. Leadership is a function of resource distribution, conflict management, teaching essential skills and knowledge, and coordinating among society members (Epitropaki et al., 2018). These functions meet human needs and separate leaders—individuals who emerge and effectively perform their responsibilities. Leadership is measured by results (Drucker, 1997) and outcomes (Antonakis & Day, 2018). These consequentialist measurements of leadership are specific and often individualistic.

African Concepts of Leadership

African leadership is situated in the varied history of Indigenous, Western, and Islamic influences. Africans viewed leadership as a participatory process grounded in the local context, and the community was the source of a leader's role, power, and legitimacy (Eyong, 2017). Indigenous Africans preferred collective leadership informed and amplified by the Indigenous culture of the communities (Gumede, 2017). Traditional African leadership centered on five fundamentals: family, ageism, kinship, religion, and tribalism (McManus & Perruci, 2015). Elders were viewed as better leaders based on the belief that wisdom accompanies age.

Africans view leadership as a privilege, influence, and responsibility (Gumede, 2017). Leadership is a responsibility and community service in which leaders serve as standard-bearers of tribal values and morality. A person's identity is connected to the group and individuals identify through tribes. Collaboration, participation, relationships, authenticity, and shared cultural beliefs are critical themes in African leadership (McManus & Perruci, 2015). Mentorship is a pronounced leadership developmental tool in Indigenous African communities—adults' taught youth relevant life skills, history, legends, and about the environment (Assie-Lumumba, 2012).

The most insightful research on Jieng comes from Dr. Francis Mading Deng, a Jieng writer, diplomat, and scholar. His works have provided the most pertinent details about Jieng. Jieng derive their unique socioeconomic identity, cultural values, and structures from their cattle, among the wealthiest on the African continent (Deng, 1998). Cattle are the primary means of Jieng economy but hold value in every aspect of life—social relations, religious values, and politics (Deng, 2010). Cattle serve as a reference point for the Jieng.

Deng (1998) reported that "Jieng moral and social values are highly institutionalized and expressed in a concept known as *cieng*, which is fundamental to Jieng moral and civil order" (p. 108). The concept of *cieng* is used as a verb to mean "to look after" or "to order" and as a noun to connote "the custom" or "the rule" (Deng, 1998, p. 108). This concept governs individual behavior and social interactions, often through an implied code of conduct. According to Deng (2010), "the traditional Jieng social safety nets are well rooted in their social relations (*cieng*), their notions of human dignity (*dheeng*), and their communal ownership of wealth" (p. 234). Jieng display dignity—an individual's humanity—through their relationships.

The Jieng culture distinctively affords all people means to dignity, honor, and pride. Leadership to the Jieng serves moral and social ends by ensuring everyone is guaranteed access to a minimum standard of living. The Chief or *beny* is the conduit to provide to those in need while enforcing kinship obligations of relatives to the poor (Deng, 1998, p. 114). According to Lienhardt (1982), Chiefs exercised an influential process that sought to enforce the right behavior, develop youth, and care for the people under their care. Beswick (1994) reported that Jieng leaders had minimal authority and control. Laws in Jieng society were fluid without written structures. Abdi (2007) found that there are over 3,000 spoken languages in Africa, but only 80 are written. Although the Jieng laws are not written, they are regulated through the concepts of *cieng* and *dheeng*. Jieng leadership is reflective of its egalitarian approach in social, economic, and law systems.

Divergence of Western and African Concepts of Leadership

Eyong (2017) reported that leadership in African and Western contexts differ in power dynamics, sources of leadership, and external influence. African leaders were addressed without reservation—a demonstration of African belief in servant leadership. Contrary to the Western belief that leadership is a hierarchical leader-centric process focused on the individual, Africans did not believe leaders were superior; instead, they were ordinary citizens informed and counseled by the community (Eyong, 2017; Gumede, 2017). McManus and Perruci (2015) articulated the worldviews of various religions, regions, and philosophies. Table 2 summarizes the differences between Western and African worldviews.

Table 2
Western and African Worldviews of Leadership

Leadership Concepts	Western Worldview	African Worldview
Leadership viewed as a...	Prize (meritocracy)	Earned honor (relational)
Leader-follower relationship	Transactional (rules-based; social contract)	Authentic
How decisions are made	Through rationality, logic, pragmatism	Collectively
Responsibilities of the leader	Motivate followers, results orientation	Empower, relate to community, respect tradition
Responsibilities of the follower	Dependable, committed, motivated	Active participation
The moral dimension of leadership	Secular “code of ethics” (derived from Judeo-Christian values)	Humanistic value of the community

Note. McManus and Perruci (2015) provide detailed insight into the perspectives of various geographical and religious worldviews.

Purpose and Significance of this Study

In this autoethnography, I explored how my reflection and growth as a student leader reveal contrasts between Western and Indigenous African ideas of leadership. I shared lived experiences as a refugee, student-athlete, patriarch, and soldier to underscore the individualistic and communal nature of Western and Indigenous African leadership, respectively. Although I am not proclaiming my findings in this study as scientific truth or generalizable, the results highlighted the manifestation of Western and Indigenous ideas in practice, providing insight into struggles of converging cultural contexts and the impact of leadership in an individual’s development. I hope the results offer youth models of leadership ideas in practice. I hoped to answer two wonderings: what are the similarities and differences between Western and Indigenous ideas of leadership? And how have these ideas manifested in my life?

Methods

I used an interpretive theoretical perspective to interpret my experiences, contextualized by literature. An interpretivist theoretical perspective enabled me to engage in knowledge creation as an interpreter and participant (Goodsell & Zvonkovic, 2015; Howe, 1998). Autoethnography is a research methodology in which the researcher is the subject, and the researcher’s experience is the data (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Hence, I sought to understand my experiences through a thorough account and analysis (Ellis et al., 2011; McIlveen, 2008). As a research methodology, autoethnography allowed me to be vulnerable, empathic, subjective, and therapeutically benefit in carrying out this study (Custer, 2014). The researcher

extensively observes, interrogates thoughts, and challenges assumptions, adding depth and historical perspective. An autoethnography is a fundamentally subjective approach that celebrates the researcher's ability to affect the world, hence, celebrating individuality (Custer, 2014; Ellis, 2000; Ellis et al., 2011).

According to Custer (2014) and McIlveen (2008), I can use an autoethnography to communicate multiple worldviews without compromising the need to be scientific. Moreover, I can disrupt the binary of art and science; this approach can be rigorous, theoretical, inclusive, analytical, and therapeutic (Ellis et al., 2011). The transformative nature of autoethnography is appropriate for research of Indigenous communities. Moreover, it allows me to utilize fictional stylistic elements such as imagery, hypothetical situations, interior monologue, self-talk reflection, present tense, past tense, and flashbacks to captivate the reader (Richardson, 2000).

I have nuanced identities that include the triple heritage of Sudan—European, Arab, and endogenous—and the complex American identity. My life is an act of resistance and transcendence of trauma and single stories. The complexities of deeply personal stories required a methodology I could use to elevate experiences often underrepresented, interrogates the meaning of experiences, and uncovers qualitative experiences in a particular context. In other words, I used autoethnography to deeply examine stories that have shaped and impacted me methodically; I analyzed my actions and behaviors through the lens of leadership. I had to actively contribute to constructing meaning, hence the reader is invited to co-create meaning in this study.

Expectations and Ethical Considerations

I extend an invitation to you, the reader, to join me on a multicultural journey that details my leadership development as a student of leadership. As a reader, I ask that you consider the contexts of cyclical wars in Sudan and immigration debates in the United States that shaped my identity. I used literature to contextualize my story—interweaving personal reflections and questions—to resemble a two-way dialogue (Ellis, 2000). I resisted the temptation to oversimplify, generalize, or over-theorize the leadership in Western and Indigenous African contexts. I do not claim to speak on behalf of Indigenous Africans, Americans, or for the various groups in the roles, I have lived. Although the stories are my experiences, I took multiple steps to protect the privacy and identity of folk who an integral part of my journey have been. I applied for and received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and permission from Drake University prior to conducting the study. The names and places in this study are pseudonyms. This autoethnography was partial, localized, and historically contextualized, representing my interpretations of navigating multiple worlds simultaneously.

Finding Purpose and Inspiration in Loss

The pre-teen years of my life were ipso facto the worst. I began to grasp and feel the void of orphanhood in a patriarchal society. Although I excelled at the local Catholic school, the satisfaction of outperforming peers only exacerbated my situation. I was literate in my mother tongue, Jieng (Dinka), and connected with peers through soccer, but I felt the emptiness and void of being fatherless. I was alone despite being surrounded by family and friends. I often thought about the day I saw my father walk off the garden to tend to family obligations.

Life changed when my great aunt walked past my father in the garden one morning; he stopped her, and she shared that her son had been missing for days. It was three days after the rebels had defeated Sudanese government troops in a strategic stronghold. My relatives had joined groups of men hunting government soldiers who ran, fearing they were a threat to the civilian population. My father promised his aunt that he would find her son. He did, but it cost

him his life. My father was a proven leader, son of Paramount Chief, and Captain (Promotable) in the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the military wing of the Second Sudanese War rebels. He was the Bahr el Ghazel Division Headquarters and Headquarters Company Commander responsible for the logistical support of the most prominent division in the war. Now, I was of age to comprehend the meaning of death.

Each day, the neighborhood boys dispersed from the school soccer (football) field as the sun broke for the African night; young women carried jugs of water on their heads, singing Jieng melodies echoed by birds in the distance. The evening walk home was dreadful because I resented being home. Our small hut sat in the middle of my extended family's homestead, with multiple households led by men. Being home was a sentence to mental and emotional scuffles. I watched my uncles interact with their children—embracing them with smiles. I reminisced about the times my father held me as he sipped his morning tea. Now, my heart yearned for my father—his companionship and guidance.

I was lonely. Worst, I was disappointed that the men in my life reported absent. I assumed that the plethora of uncles revered by their forefathers' feats and leadership would play a prominent role dictated by Jieng customs. My uncles vanished into the chaos of grief following my father's death; they failed to provide guidance, support, or direction in my darkest hours. In the Jieng culture, the relatives and community guide an orphan (*abaar*; Deng, 1972). Despite the confusion, shame, and self-doubt, I found refuge in the church, specifically the Bible studies in Jieng. I memorized the Catholic prayers and mass structure; faith became my lantern.

Faith fostered a mindset that would shape my life; I could always depend on God and memories of my father as a reference point to shape my understanding of *Piir*, life. The faint memories of my father corroborated by family and friends cemented my faith in Jieng values, especially *Cieng*, the ideal human relations (Deng, 1972). I decided that my father was the perfect leadership model, but I struggled to make sense of the world and my role in it. The uncles were rightfully preoccupied with their children, but I failed to reconcile their reluctance to deliver the necessary presence assured by Jieng customs. I was naïve to expect from men I believed did not compare to my father. My father's relatives, friends, and colleagues confess he was an exceptional leader whose leadership changed lives through *Cieng* and statesmanship.

People who knew my father emphasized two qualities that elevated him ahead of his peers and elders: humility and leadership. They testify that his humility enabled him to selflessly serve his communities amidst one of Africa's longest and bloodiest civil wars—Sudan's Second Civil War (1983-2005). Humility amplified his leadership during a war in which the rebels fought a better equipped larger government Army without salaries, nominal logistical support, and tribal conflicts. During those pre-teen years, I only felt my father's absence, yearning for his affection and guidance, which led to seclusion, hopelessness, and admittedly, depression.

One evening while walking home from the soccer fields at Komboni, I resolved that I only needed God—it was God and me against the cruel world. My father epitomized manhood and leadership, and I set out to prove being an orphan was not a handicap. It was fuel. I followed these resolutions for years. I searched for evidence of my father's superiority, and at present, it was his commitment to the Jieng principle of *cieng* and personal values. Deng (2010) reported that *cieng* is the standard by which an individual's deeds, relationships, and character are measured.

My father earned the admiration and respect of family, constituents, and strangers by leading a life of Jieng values. Simple gestures like sharing his crops with those impacted by famine or how he treated guests, throwing feasts, and offering tangible gifts earned him mythical status. He never came late to someone in need or facing an injustice. He once flogged his brothers for instigating conflict between lineages of the same tribe. During my first trip to

South Sudan in 2012, I asked one of my uncles about the incident; he smiled and admitted that the flogging was justified and revealing. He explained:

Your father ordered our flogging, a painful experience...later, in the evening, he brought medicine to my house. He explained that it was his responsibility to uphold the law, and he would do it again, if he had to. That deterred people from conflict because they asked, “if he does that to his brothers, what would he do to us?” Ahh, your father was different. I think if he were alive, our people would not be in the current poverty and constant conflict.

The pre-teen experiences and stories of my father shaped my understanding of leadership.

The more I learned with age, the clearer I experienced the juxtaposition between the various spaces I occupied. Being the patriarch of my father’s Jieng family meant my decisions and choices were informed by Jieng’s obligations and the principles of *cieng*. As a Western-raised Ivy League graduate and Army officer, I wrestled with a commitment to self-accountability, individualism, and the pursuit of excellence. The profound contradiction of seemingly incompatible cultures and identities meant amalgamating values, wisdom, and nuanced meaning of leadership.

Follow Me: The Burden of Leadership

The United States Army is a complex organization with a storied history and tradition of teaching leadership. The fabled field training exercises (FTXs) are tools the Army uses to sharpen tactical proficiency, teamwork, warrior tasks, and combat readiness. Soldiers deploy to training areas to simulate combat conditions in various terrains and weather. While in Missouri for a five-month course, FTXs were employed as developmental tools.

The cadre, senior Non-Commissioned Officers, and officers evaluated the 60 young lieutenants in my class in garrison (a term used to refer to a location where troops are stationed), and field environment in a rotational module—each student served in a leadership role. I served as a Squad Leader (A squad is typically 9 to 11 Soldiers) of an eight-soldier squad during a field exercise. The 60-person cohort conducted consecutive operations for 96 straight hours, while the cadre evaluated each lieutenant’s leadership and potential. My squad trekked 33 miles in the first 24 hours of the exercise, individually carrying 60-pound rucksacks and weapons.

I was concerned about the welfare of my squad, especially the impact of the heat and blisters. I shuffled up and down the formation during the foot marches to check on my squad mates. We marched up the Missouri hills as the summer heat danced for the privilege of someday leading engineers, the tip of our country’s spear. On one of the five-kilometer marches, I noticed one of my teammates struggling; he was a tall West Point (United States Military Academy) graduate with whom I had previously quarreled. He was arrogant and self-righteous despite his physical limitations. I walked to him as he fell back in the staggered formation, visibly exhausted. He was bearing the heavier M249 squad automatic weapon (SAW) instead of his assigned M16 rifle.

Me: Are you all right, Echo (pseudonym)?

Echo: Yes. [his facial expression betrayed his answer]

Me: Need anything?

Echo: No, I will be fine.

Me: [adjusting my voice to avoid triggering him] Whose weapon are you carrying?

Echo: Kilo. [Kilo was his buddy from another platoon] He would fall out, so I switched with him.

I was annoyed. Echo did the right thing helping his friend, but my squad was paying for it. I focused only on my squad, but I understood the principle guiding our servant leadership service.

Me: Here. [handing Echo my assigned rifle]

Echo: No, I got this.

Me: [annoyed and firm] Here. Give me your weapon.

Echo reluctantly handed me the M249 SAW, and I will never forget the guilt on his face. I asked my Alpha Team Leader to lead the squad from the front. Changing weapons with Echo was extreme in the Western context in my role as a squad leader. Friendship, not army leadership, was the driving force behind Echo's decision to assist his friend. The military (Army) leadership is a "be, know, do" model that emphasizes attributes and competencies desired in leaders. Leadership encompasses what you do, know, and most importantly, what you are as an individual. Army leaders are expected to set the example of character, presence, and intellect that encompasses mental agility, judgment, and expertise (U.S. Department of the Army, 2019).

Army leaders are judged on their competencies: ability to lead, develop others, and achieve results, accomplishing the mission. After all, the military is a results-oriented organization with life-or-death consequences. My decision to switch weapons with Echo was adherence to Jieng's Indigenous leadership principle. Jieng leaders are expected to serve their people in deeds rather than words. To be a leader is to embrace the role as a matter of lifestyle. Although the Army doctrine reflects a similar disposition as Indigenous leadership, I have observed the latter as stricter.

Leadership Analysis

Military leadership's clarity and structure facilitate individual growth, but it often manifests itself as a condition of roles. Army leaders lead based on their position or function, and I worked with many officers who did their job by playing a role. Some lacked moral and ethical consistency as individuals but excelled at playing their roles. A pervasive natural aspect of Western culture is the separation of work-life roles. Individuals can separate their work from their family and life outside of work. Indigenous Jieng customs deem leadership as an identity; what an individual is all the time—all aspects of an individual's life are inseparable.

A leader epitomizes the attributes, values, and behaviors of leadership and cultural competence in all aspects of life. On that hot Missouri summer, my decision to carry the heavier weapon for my teammate was an act of humanity. The choice to endure the pain for someone else is how I am in all aspects of my life. Echo was a teammate under my leadership, and I would rather bear the consequences for his well-being. Although the military is full of courageous men and women who have and continue to sacrifice their lives for their comrades,

it is often isolated to the military rather than a Western ideology. Moreover, leadership is individual-centric in the context of the West while communal in the Indigenous Jieng system.

The incident with Echo might have been motivated by an Indigenous disposition, which I justified as right, but the adherence to my own beliefs deprived Echo of choice. I perceived my actions as authentic and informed by consideration for others, but a genuinely African worldview would have valued Echo in the decision-making in a relational manner (McManus & Perruci, 2015). An African worldview would have considered Echo's humanity—I ignored Echo's dignity, an assault on Indigenous Jieng's idea of *cieng*. My actions were self-righteous and imposed an individual's beliefs on other people. Moreover, my actions reflected Western worldviews, pragmatist decision-making, and a transactional approach to our relationship (McManus & Perruci, 2015). Leadership in either context is nuanced and situated in specific contexts that often transcend socialized norming.

Role of Sports in Leadership Growth—a Western Gift

In the United States, sports are an ingrained billion-dollar industry with normative and descriptive roles in society. Amateur and professional sports are organized, lucrative, and transformative with accepted cultural values that transcend race, religion, gender, socio-economic class, and natural abilities. I played sports in Africa for recreational purposes, but that changed when my family emigrated to the United States on December 9, 2003. In the US, sports were the catalyst for my integration and development as a refugee in a new land. Basketball, a beautiful game I had never played until I arrived in the state of Mayorville, provided the necessary impetus to negotiate the transition and adjustment to a new culture, language, environment, and life. Besides the discipline, work ethic, teamwork, and confidence acquired through sports, basketball augmented my natural affinity for leadership.

I had what Dr. Martin Luther Jr. described as a “dream major instinct,” a natural disposition to be first, to be recognized in his 1968 sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Although the journey to the United States was tumultuous, basketball provided an escape and complemented my desire to exhaust all opportunities. My family emigrated to the United States for a better life, hope for a life defined by peace, a life realized through education, a life worthy of the sacrifices of 2.5 million lives, including my father's.

I discerned my life's purpose through sports, and this profound recognition enlightened all aspects of my journey. I interpreted events, tasks, choices, steps with heightened awareness and curiosity—the key to transforming the drum major instinct into productive energy. Sports ignited internal motivation in providing me with structured platforms that turned inclinations into a disciplined pursuit of unattainable perfection of skills and commitment to purpose.

Role of Team Mindset

I was a freshman basketball player at the University of Smithville when we played at East Rutherford, NJ, then home of the Nets of the National Basketball Association. The noon Saturday game against the United States Army Academy (West Point) was a welcomed break from the aches of long bus rides and evening games. We won a hard-fought November game, but our smiles quickly turned into frowns. Our team was exuberant, as the head coach offered words of encouragement, and as he concluded his speech, a phone buzzed from a locker cubicle to my left. A ringtone proceeded the buzz.

Our coach had strict rules, particularly concerning telephones and tardiness. Telephones were turned off during film sessions and games, and every player was expected to arrive on time for meetings, treatments, practices, classes, and games. The phone ring stunned the group—teammates dropped their heads while others rolled their eyes, for we understood the

consequences. The coach's disposition changed from pride to irritation; he covered his mouth with his right hand and gazed on the floor for 15 seconds. He looked up with a straight face and uttered, "I will see y'all at six on the track."

We were scheduled to have a light practice Sunday morning following our win, and now, the practice was a faint memory. Players started arriving at half past five at the football stadium. As the players gathered on the grass, our bodies absorbing the morning's frigid temperatures, we speculated about the possibilities. The punishment was coming, this we knew to be accurate, but it was a matter of severity. We were perplexed when the coaches did not show, but our team captain received a call from the head coach instructing us to report to the gym 15 minutes past 6.

Players quickly changed into their basketball shoes as the air thickened in the arena. We lined up on the sidelines as the coach vented about discipline, the lack thereof. We ran suicides: starting on the baseline, each player would run to the free-throw line and back, half-court and back, the opposite free-throw line and back, and baseline and back. Coach demanded that every player finished in 28 or 29 seconds, or it would not count. We ran 27 suicides that morning, but the expected consequences of group punishment held the most significance. College basketball was a physically demanding task, a crash course on leadership development.

Coaches employed ruthless physical punishment to enforce critical leadership traits and behaviors. In my case, our coach emphasized teamwork, accountability, leadership, service, and relationships with each other and stakeholders on campus. Our coach believed these principles were foundational to student-athlete success on-and-off the court; he prioritized our development into men of character, leaders on campus, and productive citizens able and willing to use our gifts to serve others. Our players were recruited from across the country, each of them one of the most talented players on their teams, conferences, and states. The coaches' primary goal with these talented student-athletes was to replace bad habits by fostering a team culture on teamwork, discipline, work ethic, and commitment to the team's vision.

The leadership challenge and opportunity were threefold: cultivate the necessary individual behaviors and traits, improve accountability, and excel as a student-athlete. Physical punishment guided by verbal torments served as a disciplinary action for selfish or detrimental to the team. At Smithville, I learned the art of modeling from my teammate, Gideon.

Gideon was two grades ahead of me, and he served as a pivotal reference point throughout my Smithville journey. He mentored me as a naïve freshman, teaching me the fine arts of work ethic, social etiquette, surviving the long seasons of college basketball, leading other men who are often more gifted than you, and most importantly, the strength of relationships. I witnessed Gideon lead by example during our 6 a.m. daily workouts with Alpha One, a local coach defined by his immeasurable love for basketball, team workouts at 8 a.m., and the afternoon pick-up runs. Gideon was a 6-foot tall point guard who embodied the toughness New Jersey is famous for in basketball. His devotion to his craft was amplified by the respect he earned off the court.

A model student, Gideon seemingly knew everyone on Smithville's campus. He introduced me to every student and staff we met and took the time to explain the importance of their contributions to the community. Gideon taught me the importance of celebrating other people, a foundational leadership trait in any context. His approach to people is best characterized by Kant's categorical imperative (Paton, 1948), the principle that we should treat people not to an end but as an end in themselves. This approach served me well in all aspects of my life: in non-profit while working with volunteers, obtaining, and sustaining morale in the military, leading through influence in familial relations, or simply leading a moral life.

Leadership Analysis

In Africa, soccer was our lantern in an otherwise hopeless, death-ridden life that thrived on anger, war, and trauma. In the United States, sports accelerated my socialization process, given the dimensional challenges of culture change. Sports offered the clearest example of Kouzes and Posner's (2010) argument that leadership is a skill and choice, but they also provide young people opportunities to experience leadership in multiple dimensions.

My sports experiences provided perspective on the impact of the five components of Perruci's (2019) leadership model. I gained an appreciation of followers' criticality to team success, the relevance of shared goals leveraged to shape group behavior, differences of context and culture based on the leader. The coaches or leaders of my teams influenced the context and culture of my leadership experiences; sports offered insight into leadership that transcended worldviews. Basketball, a team sport, had elements of Indigenous and Western leadership concepts, and it facilitated the refinement of my cultural competencies.

Sports are an integral aspect of Western society with an infinite role in youth development, leadership, and identity. Although the western context is pluralistic, sports are perhaps the greatest developmental tool in my experience. The inherent structures, competition, and inherent intangibles offer youth opportunities to grow individually and as team members. Indigenous Jieng context lacks the vital role of formalized sports in its developmental process. The Western context provides youth the space and time to be young, whereas the Jieng culture requires youth to mature younger, sometimes depriving them of their youth. The Western context offers youth exploratory opportunities in their growth, but the Indigenous context prepares young people for a specified role, often the responsibility for the family.

Family and Responsibility: The Role of Leaders and Followers

Family dynamics offered me insight into the nuances of Indigenous Jieng leadership, complex yet familiar in its common aspirations. Leaders serve as facilitators rather than the hierarchical directive leader-centric style I often observed in the Western context. I have learned most in my role as the patriarch of my father's family, a position thrust on me upon his death. I did not grasp the gravity of the duties of being a patriarch until I graduated from college. My father's death meant I was the *de facto* leader of his family as the eldest child; I was now responsible for his children's decisions, issues, and lives, known and unknown.

The ultimate measure of leadership for Jieng is responsibility. It is instilled as a foundational value in almost all interactions, from how children relate to more critical tasks such as goat or cattle herding. I had to accomplish the seemingly individual task of attaining an education in my instance. Through it, I eventually took on the responsibility of my half-siblings based on a deep sense of obligation as a patriarch. Albeit an easy decision, I imagined my father would have empowered his children by educating them. I assumed responsibility as his eldest son, and someone privileged to live in the United States.

I was born into privilege as a descendent of families in tribal leadership because I was exposed and had access to Indigenous Jieng leadership. My grandfather was the Paramount Chief of my Jieng tribe. His leadership covered many flaws in the family, but as I have grown to appreciate in my observations, the most critical component of Indigenous Jieng leadership is the leader-follower relationship. Contrary to the Western context in which leaders set the goals and followers help the group achieve the results, Indigenous followers legitimize and exercise power over leaders. Followers shape and impact leaders' decisions, and in so doing, their voices exert enormous authority.

Indigenous followers are the guardians of the heritage and communities their leaders serve. They are expected to articulate needs, concerns, diverse perspectives, and consequences

of decisions on behalf of the community. Leaders who rely on their followers for guidance and perspective retain prestige and legitimacy for themselves and the communities they represent. Followers provide the necessary resources and support that empower the leader to be effective. However significant the power held by followers; leaders retain the right to make the final decision.

I encountered my first test of Indigenous leadership during my sister's marriage in 2020. I was considered the patriarch of my father's family. Still, in this instance, my uncle managed most of the decision-making regarding bride prize and distribution of the dowry. Irrespective of my life-long responsibility for my siblings, I had to defer to him regarding the matter. I consulted with my brothers before communicating our stance to my uncle, but in the end, he neglected to abide by our wishes. His final decisions were informed by self-interest rather than our collective desire to establish a base as orphans. His decision regarding dowry distribution caused great tension within the family. Still, it gave me a poignant example of what happens when leaders fall short of their obligation to execute follower-informed decisions.

My uncle had not only made an inconsiderate decision, but he also breached a governing principle of Jieng Indigenous leadership; *cieng*, measured by words and actions. The leader adheres to *cieng* in all aspects of life, including decision-making informed by followers. My uncle's words meant nothing because he reneged. His choice to ignore follower-input supplanted doubt, rift, and deepened existing wounds.

Leadership Analysis

I have always felt obligated to uphold my father's legacy; it often meant adherence to assumed principles based on his past actions. I presumed my father would have continued to lead a life of service that forfeited his personal goals for the collective good. Consistent with McManus and Perruci's (2015) perspective, the Indigenous African worldview sees leadership as an earned honor predicated on relationships rather than a meritocracy. In my case, the honor was inherited as the eldest son, but I had to perform my responsibilities to emerge as a leader within the family ranks. The unproven measures were my capacity to empower my siblings, to engage in the community, to adhere to cultural values, and to make decisions.

One of the most profound privileges of being a patriarch is access to the decision-making process of significant consequences. I have only experienced this as an Aide-de-Camp (equivalence to assistant) to a Brigadier General, a Commanding General in charge of over 5,000 soldiers, in an observer role. In the Indigenous context, ordinary people have access to leaders and decision-making, which is often an exception in the West. My experiences align with Gumede's (2017) findings that Indigenous African leadership is predicated on and realized through community culture.

A similarity between the two contexts is how leaders earn credibility. Regardless of the worldview, meritocracy and relationships are realized through the leader's actions and deeds. In my role as a patriarch and military officer, credibility is earned by acting per the culture's values. Consistent with Drucker (1997) and Antonakis and Day (2018), leadership is measured by results and outcomes, but I would submit that this is also true of the Indigenous context. However, the Western context specifies the expectations, and there is more accountability. Leadership in the Indigenous context is subordinate to Indigenous value systems; in my case, the Jieng values are institutionally expressed through *cieng* (Deng, 1998). Jieng leaders are protected by *cieng*; their decisions are often final and challenging them is perceived as disrespectful.

Although both the Western and Indigenous contexts value responsibility, leader responsibilities are often more explicitly articulated in job descriptions in the West. The Indigenous context lacks the delineation of roles and responsibilities, which meant adherence

to normative and assumed value systems with minimal guidance. My experiences underscored the idea that African leadership is a responsibility and community service because I have sacrificed my individuality for family harmony.

Indigenous Features in Western Leadership—Family

It was my first semester at Smithville, and the imposter syndrome had neutralized my confidence and self-esteem. The only space I found safe was the historic basketball arena. It was unbeknownst to me that Makuu, the Smithville Black Center (Makuu means “home” in Kiswahili), would become my refuge, a natural home reflective of the village that raised me.

Dr. Taylor, a beloved transcendent then Makuu leader, changed my life in a moment of vulnerability with hope. Hope that community, in the purest sense, existed in America, hope in humanity, that someone like me might survive the Ivy League. Dr. Taylor’s adept intellect, emotional intelligence, and deep love of people sparked the deepest precincts of my life. While interviewing for a work-study job with her, she corrected me when I shared, I was privileged to be at Smithville. With a broad smile, hands folded, she said, “No, listen to me . . . just as you are fortunate to be here, Smithville is also fortunate to have you.”

Dr. Taylor’s wisdom shaped my Smithville experience because at that moment, I interpreted her words as a license to believe I was worthy of the opportunity. Makuu and its leaders like Dr. Taylor and Dr. Mambu taught me invaluable lessons: leaders change lives by caring and humanizing education. America’s pluralism means there are aspects of otherworld cultures in the United States. The best response to imposter syndrome, low self-esteem, and transitional challenges is to be unapologetically yourself. I had permission to be my authentic self.

Makuu was a necessary space to grow, a place where truth and service were valued more than the façade of individual accolades. Like the Jieng culture, the Makuu community challenged the individual to be better, humbled by candor, unconditional support, and service. Makuubians, an endearing term for the Ivy League Black Cultural Center residents, rallied to celebrate each other, stood in solidarity, and loved beyond my imagination. I am a beneficiary of the humanity and leadership of Makuu. At Makuu, I dared to dream, be myself, and serve.

Leadership Analysis

I genuinely appreciated life, opportunities, and people. I realized that my gift was not intellect, it was the character. In hindsight, I was arrogant to believe that I was unique in my character. After all, Smithville students represented over 60 countries, and the diversity was an asset that created challenges for students. Makuu nurtured me into a student-athlete whose actions were informed by service, gratitude, and building communities. In many ways, Dr. Taylor’s leadership taught me the essence of the community by providing timely advice, mentorship, and fostering an inclusive space—necessary space to wrestle with the imperfections of humanity.

Young people in Western and Indigenous contexts need healthy environments, mentors, and accountability to facilitate their leadership development. Both contexts have structures that support leadership development. Discussions of Western or Indigenous contexts often view the two as contradictory, but each context influences the other. The context of the West requires a thorough examination, for it consists of elements from world societies. The United States’ pluralism allows for Indigenous philosophies and cultures to exist within the larger US context, albeit Western worldviews remain the predominant influence. Makuu was a microcosm of the Indigenous perspective of leadership, community. An individual’s leadership development is

a collective effort, and each person actively partakes in the leadership process. The fundamental belief is that every individual has something to contribute.

Final Thoughts on Western and Indigenous Contexts

Throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies, I completed more than four different personality assessments, often in the context of discussing leadership. The obsession with personality as a foundation for leadership in the West confronts my interpretation of the nuances of leadership and the value of context. Perruci (2019) provided my preferred descriptive and normative definition of leadership as “the process by which leaders and followers develop a relationship and work together toward a goal (or goals) within an environmental context shaped by cultural values and norms” (p. 22). There is an expansion towards considerations of the value of followers and context in leadership in the Western context, and this progress has encouraged conversations about cultural relativism. Precluding the impact of environment, culture, norms, and followers on the emergence and effectiveness of leaders limits our understanding of the nuances of leadership. There are differences in knowledge and practice of leadership based on contexts.

My interpretation of Western and Indigenous leadership as experienced in both contexts underscores the robustness of pluralism. The Western context, specifically the United States, is a heterogenous society that encompasses subtle elements of other cultural values, ideas, and leadership. I have experienced Indigenous Jieng leadership concepts and deals in the Western context; however, the most revealing differences involve accountability, decision-making, and responsibilities. The individualistic value system informs Western leadership, and leader decisions, accountability, and role are focused on the individual. Indigenous Jieng leadership relies on communal participation in decision-making and accountability.

Discussion

In this study, I explored the contrasts of Western and Indigenous African leadership ideas using reflections as a patriarch, student-athlete, and soldier. Researchers use narrative ethnographies to conduct research using the researcher's experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). I highlighted and shared my stories that illustrated leadership in action and provided analyses that juxtaposed Western and Indigenous leadership ideas. The Western context often defines the leader's role and responsibilities, and this clarity often means separation of work-life roles, while leadership in the Indigenous context is a whole-person perspective. Leaders in the Western context are judged on their actions at work or in the leadership role, but leaders in the Indigenous context are assessed by their efforts and every aspect of their life beyond the role. Furthermore, my actions and decisions were informed by assumed obligations relegated to me as the patriarch. The lack of clearly articulated expectations in the Indigenous context means more discussions need to occur to educate people, especially young people, about cultures, values, norms, and realistic expectations given the infinite nature of adhering to ideal standards of a culture.

The worldviews expressed by McManus and Perruci (2015) do not manifest in isolation because the context, cultural values and norms of the society and organization, and goals shape the leadership experience (Perruci, 2019). There are elements of Indigenous leadership in the Western context because the United States, in my experience, is pluralistic, adding to the complexity of leadership. Sports and military are pronounced elements of the Western context that facilitate nuanced leadership development, enhancing principles critical to Western and Indigenous leadership ideas. The inherent structures and intangibles of sports or military offer opportunities for individual growth in team cultures reflect Indigenous communal values.

I would submit that my leadership journey transcended Western and Indigenous contexts, and leadership, effective leadership, is informed by and works for the context in which it serves. The followers, environment, or organizational values ought to inform leaders' decision-making process. Leadership needs to be understood through the lens of the five components posited by Perruci (2019): leaders, followers, goals, context, and cultural norms. The intersectionality of these critical components transcends worldviews. Autoethnography supports and empowers the sharing of stories that can transform our nuanced understanding of intersectional experiences.

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