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**Coming of age, seeking legitimacy: The  
historical trajectory of African  
management research**

Amankwah-Amoah, Joseph

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**Joseph Amankwah-Amoah**  
Bristol University  
School of Economics, Finance & Management  
Social Sciences Complex  
8 Woodland Road, Clifton, Bristol, BS8 1TN  
E-mail: [Joseph.amankwah-amoah@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Joseph.amankwah-amoah@bristol.ac.uk)  
Tel: 0044 (0) 117 3317936

## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine the historical trajectory of African management research and managerial thinking.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper draws from a review and synthesis of the literature from 1960–2012.

**Findings** – The analysis led to the identification of three distinct phases which reflect the difficult and uncertain beginning to a promising future. Our historical pathway model also allows us to account for the evolution of management philosophies and thoughts, and current state of knowledge.

**Originality/value** – Although there is a burgeoning stream of African management research, lack of comprehensive review and synthesis have obscured the enormous strides made. We advance a “novel” approach towards theory application and theory creation building on the “convergence hypothesis” and “divergence hypothesis”. Our analysis yielded a number of promising avenues for future research.

## **Introduction**

Over the past six decades, African management research has not only broadened in scope, but also in size (Kamoche et al., 2012; Walumbwa et al., 2011). This surge in scholarly works has been spurred partly by the increasing recognition among scholars that indigenous and traditional concepts have the potential to further enrich mainstream management literature (Jackson et al., 2008). Although some scholars of African management have suggested the need to chart a new course (Kamoche et al., 2012; Newenham-Kahindi, 2009), our understanding of the journey travelled so far remains unclear.

As insightful and illuminating as the existing scholarly works are, we know relatively little about the historical trajectory in African management research and managerial thinking. Although there has been some review of African management literature which has stimulated our understanding enormously, it has focused on very narrow areas such as leadership and ethics (e.g. Muchiri, 2011), thereby ignoring much of the mainstream literature. Consequently, there is a serious deficiency in our understanding and future directions remain unclear. More importantly, the progress made so far has been obscured by the lack of a comprehensive overview and synthesis of the literature.

Our purpose in this paper is to examine the historical trajectory of African management research and managerial thinking. Specifically, we review and synthesise the management literature from 1960–2012.

Our study builds on and extends the literature on African management by developing a phase model of the evolution of the literature and managerial thinking. In developing our arguments, we advance steps towards theory “application” and theory “creation” to enrich our understanding of the subject. The study further responds to calls to bring “history” back into the international business discourse (Jones and Khanna, 2006).

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. In the next section, we set out the scope of the review and then utilise existing classifications to develop a phase model of the historical trajectory of management literature and managerial thinking. We then examine the key features in each phase. Finally, we outline a number of fruitful avenues and approaches towards theory creation and theory application.

### **Scope of the review**

In order to ensure a wider coverage of the past accomplishments of research into African management research and managerial thinking across multiple social science disciplines, we adopted the best practice advocated by past studies (e.g. Short, 2009; Webster and Watson, 2002) and utilised by other review studies (Short et al., 2010; Menz, 2012).

In line with the suggestions by Short (2009) and Webster and Watson (2002), our study began with conducting searches on electronic databases (Atypon link, EBSCO Business Source Complete, Emerald journals, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar and JSTOR) using keywords such as “Africa”, “Afro-management”, “management research in Africa”, “African management research”, “African managerial thinking”, “comparative management”, “cross-cultural management”, “people management”, “indigenous management”, “sub-Sahara Africa” and names of individual countries. This approach helped in identifying and tracing research articles.

The numerous keywords employed meant that the initial search yielded a very high number of articles which were reduced by employing additional keywords in combinations (e.g. such as “African management” and “managerial thinking”). This process helped to reduce the number of studies and eliminated studies which did not fit the scope of the review. Based on the review, we deduced a phase model based on synthesis of the literature.

### **African management research and managerial thinking**

By African management research, we are referring to research on business and management practices in Africa. These include human resources and leadership. Managerial thinking refers to the processes through which managers make sense of the environment in which they operate (Jones, 1988; Porac and Thomas, 1989). It is influenced by the past history,

education, attitudes, beliefs and values that shape managers' actions and inactions, and what is considered acceptable (Jones, 1988).

Similarly, managerial thinking can be seen as the processes through which managers allocate resources, define the scope of their operations, “assign priorities, and make decisions about both important and unimportant matters” (Porac and Thomas, 1989, p. 323). Its key dimensions include leadership, motivation and skills formation (Haire et al., 1966; Porac and Thomas, 1989). Figure 1 classifies the shift in African management research into three distinctive phases. As demonstrated, studies have surged significantly since the 1990s.

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**Insert Figure 1 about here**  
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African management research and practice has been heavily influenced by its colonial history. Table 1 summarises the key arguments and features of the three phases.

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### **Phase 1 (1960–1989): Legacies of the past**

A number of factors influenced the evolution of African management research and managerial thinking during this period. One major source of influence in managerial thinking was the deep-rooted nature of the colonial legacy. During the 1960s and 1970s, educational programmes and management principles were largely designed and then delivered to the local population with little attention to the local setting. Indeed, most top executives, managers and administrators prior to and immediately after independence were expatriates.

Accordingly, public sector management and delivery were planned and delivered with little attention to context. Therefore, there was little incentive to explore African management thought with a view of “meshing it with Western management thought” and principles on the continent (Nzelibe, 1986, p. 10). The argument can be illustrated by the examples of the French colonial policy of assimilation and the British Indirect Rule.

### **The French colonial policy of assimilation**

Prior to most countries gaining independence in the 1960s and 1970s, the policy of “assimilation” was geared towards developing the notion of “Black Frenchmen”, who shared values and cognitive styles (Clignet, 1970). As such, in French West African countries such as Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Niger, Mauritania and Senegal, and French Equatorial African nations such as Chad and Gabon, greater emphasis was put on the notion of universality and “equality” in management. As such, education and managerial thoughts were grounded in these principles. Such was the inherent force of assimilation, it required countries and communities to discard traditional methods of interaction and analysis to make way for new models in understanding issues and managing within the local context (Clignet, 1970).

These notions of universality led to the introduction of a French management style towards work, human behaviour, negotiation and responsibility with little or no regard for the indigenous approach to managing and organising. The ideology tended towards creating some kind of universal approaches to management and the application of management principles anywhere within the nations (Gopinath, 1998). Similarly, the British approach of indirect rule also, to a lesser extent, emphasised the abandonment of local concepts or thoughts towards a universal notion of management and managerial thinking.

Unlike British Indirect Rule, “the French system of administration deliberately sapped the traditional powers of the chiefs in the interest of uniformity of administrative systems, not only within individual territories but throughout the two great federations of West and Equatorial Africa” (Crowder, 1964, p. 201). However, both policies entailed the duplication of “principles and regulations initially developed at home” (Clignet, 1970, p. 426). Consequently, Western management principles, for that matter British and French management principles and philosophy, thrived in this environment.

In addition, there was a view that organisations in Africa and the West somehow operated in a similar cultural environment and therefore principles that have helped British and French firms achieve success at home could be replicated in foreign markets. By the time Ghana, alongside sizeable francophone countries, became a republic in the 1960s, the success of British, French and Portuguese corporations also deluded local politicians and governments into believing that there was no need for indigenous management alternatives.

At independence, countries were entangled in this web and style of management and knew little about the development of alternatives. Also stemming from colonialism was the practice of delegitimising indigenous concepts and philosophy as something which cannot be fully employed to understand business behaviours or how businesses compete.

There were few avenues for those champions of indigenous concepts and models to channel their views so it was unsurprising that the notion of indigenous management failed to take off to any significant degree. The dismantling of the colonialism process highlighted that the arguments in favour of the universal applicability of management concepts were difficult to sustain.

The spread of Western management concepts can be partly attributed to the setting up of business schools and collaborative networks that many African countries established with the European universities. Indeed, the numerous programmes and curricula were largely grounded in European management principles and philosophy which were “transmitted around the world giving it the additional semblance of universality” (Gopinath, 1998, p. 259). Even decades after independence, universities in francophone countries such as Cameroon and Ivory Coast were still governed by the French colonial imprints. Such was the force of assimilation, its emphasis on knowing what applies in even a “new and unknown context” provides the ammunition for the advancement of Western management principles (Clignet, 1970, p. 443).

Notwithstanding the inherent limitations, there were some notable benefits of the systems adopted. For instance, the British Indirect Rule model in countries such as the Gold Coast (Contemporary Ghana) and Nigeria sought to “conserve what was good in indigenous institutions” and helped countries to develop their own systems (Crowder, 1964, p. 198). The indirect rule also relied on local chiefs as “executives” to help not only preserve the institution of chieftaincy, but also to encourage local government to command support of the people (Clignet, 1970; Crowder, 1964). Taken together, the systems undermine the traditional approaches and sources of power, leadership and authority.

### **Two competing views: “Convergence” and “divergence”**

Our analysis indicates that from 1960 to the late 1980s two competing views shaped the discourse on African management research and managerial thinking: the “convergence” and “divergence” schools of thought. According to the “convergence” school of thought, “management is a science governed by universal principles” and, therefore, can be replicated in any local setting (Negandhi and Estafen, 1965, p. 309).

Scholars argued that the strategic “imperatives of industrialization” created conditions that fostered managerial values and behaviour that pushed countries towards uniformity (Jones, 1988). Harbison and Myers (1960) even suggested that the processes of industrialisation helped countries to shift from an autocratic to democratic style of leadership. This notion of western management style applying anywhere was advocated and took on new momentum within the academic literature (Kerr et al., 1960; Harbison and Myers, 1960). The notion of universality led to the relegation of national and local differences which matters in international management. Koontz (1969, p. 425) puts it so eloquently:

*“For the role of science is to organize basic knowledge. A real science should explain phenomena regardless of national or cultural environments. Thus, the science of mechanics knows no boundaries providing it applies to the reality being considered. Principles of the building sciences are no different if applied to a small house or a large building and whether these structures are built in the tropics or the arctic.”*

On the other hand, the “divergence” school of thought contended that countries differ in their institutional environment which entails norms, culture, rules and unwritten rules which shape human behaviour and organisational culture (Ejiofor, 1980; Jones, 1988). This school of thought further contends that African managerial thinking and research must pay attention to these factors to advance knowledge (Nzelibe, 1986). The underlying assumption is that organisations needed to pay attention to national and regional difference. The distinctive features of African societies such as the role of family, concept of “communalism” and “traditionalism” entail adherence to customs and beliefs. The argument in the words of one scholar, is that:

*“The rationality of human behavior and the presumption that it can be standardized that underlies classical economic thinking and forms the base for most management theories can be challenged by introducing culture related variables that influence human behaviour.”*  
(Gopinath, 1998, p. 259)

Although some scholars voiced their concerns of the need for local theories which reflect the local culture and conditions in the 1960s (e.g. Vuerings and Hanika, 1964), much of the literature in the subsequent years was predominated by the rise of Western management concepts. For instance, Western management “places great emphasis on personal freedom, the rights of private property, the sanctity of contract and the stewardship or service responsibility of those in positions of leadership” (Gonzalez and McMillan, 1961, p. 40). This was in sharp contrast to African societies at the time where protection for property was weak, people relied on social contract rather than written agreement and leadership was often obtained through inheritance. For instance, in Akan society in Ghana, many farmers and traders developed an edge over rivals through a strong network of ties and relationships within their communities which fostered trust. The Western management style and principles shaped the intellectual discourse and nature of research.

Following the incremental decline of colonial rule, there were conflicts of thoughts as these assumptions of Western management thought and African management thought came into contact in practice. For instance, arguably Western management thought emphasises “individualism and modernity, whilst African management thought advocates traditionalism, communalism and cooperative teamwork” (Nzelibe, 1986, p. 11). This was important because the transition from colonial rule to modern democracies entailed the adoption of management culture with inherent tension between local culture and inherited cultures, and a power structure left in government departments and agencies by the former colonial powers.

### **The nature of management research**

During the second half of the 20th century, the changing governance regime from colonial to self-rule ushered in multiple streams of research which explored the capacity and capabilities of the newly independent countries’ ability to manage their own affairs. A large

stream of this research focused almost exclusively on public-sector management, public administration and the role of governments in public organisations (e.g. Fleming, 1966; Luckham, 1971; Magid, 1967; Muwanga-Barlow, 1978; Smith, 1971). The urgent need of countries to ensure efficient allocation of legacy resources (those stemming from the end of colonial rule) enticed a number of scholars to explore the administrative issues.

A number of studies uncovered that African countries generally lack the highly skilled personnel needed to run their economies and meet the demands of self-rule (see Nzelibe, 1986; Magid, 1967; Fleming, 1966). This contributed to the economic decline of some countries immediately after colonialism (Lwiza and Nwankwo, 2002).

In addition, a handful of studies began to examine the role of influential leaders and political elites in shaping their country's policies in areas such as education, economic development and health (e.g. Clignet and Foster, 1964; Prasad, 1967).

However, most studies merely replicated studies that have been conducted in the West to see whether issues such as firms' performance and market position were largely shaped by the same external factors. For instance, theories were largely applied without attention to the underdeveloped nature of Africa's post-colonial setting such as the weak legal system which adversely affected firm performance. The major question at the heart of research was whether countries emerging from decades of colonial rule could design a governance system that would allow them to progress and cut themselves free from their former colonial masters.

An exemplary case commonly used in the literature to illustrate this period was the dramatic move by Ghana to "cut off the umbilical cord" of ties with former colonial power, Great Britain, immediately after independence. This was eventually found to be ill-judged because

it deprived the country of key human capital required to run government ministries and industries. Indeed, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (through principles of Ujamaa's vision of socialism stemming from the Arusha Declaration in 1967) also pursued large-scale nationalisation in sharp contrast to the principles of "free market" at the time. These policies drove away private investors which were largely nationals of former colonial powers (Harris, 1968). The policies also led to major economic decline in the 1970s.

The two nations, alongside others, concluded that mass nationalisation of industries and sectors was necessary in overcoming the legacies of colonial rule. Some scholars have since uncovered that the growing confidence after independence and national pride in state nationalism rather than economic reality were the main driving forces behind this shift (e.g. Lwiza and Nwankwo, 2002).

### **Phase 2 (1980–1999): Embryonic phase**

At the start of this period, a common feature of research was the over-reliance on Western-developed theories with little or no attention to context. These were largely insightful but overlooked the unique features within countries in Africa and largely assumed that national and regional differences matter less.

A number of studies came to the conclusion that there was a need to address the inherent limitations of the universal notion (e.g. Ahiauzu, 1986a). Another unique feature was the growing recognition and even interest among scholars to explore whether general management concepts about organising and dealing with workers were indeed applicable in the African setting. In 1983, the review study by Kiggundu et al. (1983) examined the

applicability of management theories to developing countries and concluded that these theories apply in very limited cases such as where the firm operates in a closed system.

Other scholars also observed that there were inherent values in incorporating indigenous concepts into African management thoughts (Nzelibe, 1986). In an insightful piece, Kanungo and Jaeger (1990) concurred with the need for developing countries, in general, and Africa, in particular, to develop an indigenous management which reflects their domestic conditions and realities on the ground.

Stella Nkomo so eloquently captured the mood at the time by noting: “research has tended to study organization populations as homogeneous entities in which distinctions of race and ethnicity are either unstated or considered irrelevant” (Nkomo, 1992, p. 488). There were real differences even within countries. For instance, Adigun (1995) demonstrated the various differences in on-job attitudes within tribal groupings such as Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in Nigeria. There was increasing recognition that management knowledge is “intricately interwoven with culture” and this needs to be taken into consideration in our theorisation (Nurmi and Udo-Aka, 1980, p. 90).

By the late 1980s, the challenges emerging from the post-colonial bureaucracies were still posing problems for countries as to whether they should adopt the universal principles or local concepts (Ahiazu, 1986b). The legacy of colonial rule and advances of Western management principles and philosophy guided more studies. As more research emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, it became increasingly difficult to sustain those arguments in the face of rising evidence to the contrary. Therefore indigenous concepts and their advancement began with greater intensity.

By the end of this period, there was a major shift towards recognising the complexities inherent in the institutional environment in shaping firms' behaviour and strategies. Institutions can be defined as "the rules of the game in a society" (North, 1990, p. 3). These included the role of formal institutions such as regulations and laws as well as informal institutions such as norms, attitudes and behaviours within Africa. There was a major shift from the competing perspectives of management research and practices towards the divergence view.

At this point, the assertion by management "process school" theorists (see Negandhi and Estafen, 1965) that there is universality to management principles in the previous phase became increasingly difficult to sustain. Indeed, many African organisations that adopted Western management principles and strategies began to realise that Africa was different and needed policies and practices tailored to its history and culture (Kiggundu, 1996; Kamoche et al., 2004). Organisations that prescribed to Western management style in areas such as decision-making and negotiations began to experience performance decline rather than success which had often been predicted.

### **Policy prescription and its effects**

During the 1980s, the solution prescribed by the World Bank, advanced countries and the International Monetary Fund to declining economies' performances was for nations to remove or minimise the role of government from sectors of the economy such as energy, mining and water, to make way for the private sector to take-off. Under the so-called Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), governments deregulated their industries and markets. By the end of the 1990s, the SAP designed by advanced economies based on their development model and institutional environment, projected to deliver successful private sector and booming economies, was widely described as a total disaster for Africa (Jaeger

and Kanungo, 1990; Kamoche et al., 2004). Consequently, the forces behind the SAP began to subside and in so doing brought to the fore the importance of institutions.

As this point, the notion that institution matters in African management was gathering steam in the literature (Nzelibe, 1986). Even as far back as the 1960s, some leading scholars recognised and challenged the prevailing notion that Western management philosophy can be applied everywhere (see Gonzalez and McMillan, 1961). A critical challenge faced by scholars was whether the prevalence and advancement of management was adequate in explaining events and actions occurring in local organisations. The limitations of Western-developed concepts became clear as more scholarly quests became evident. Nevertheless, African management pursued this course until late 1990, with very few notable exceptions (e.g. Nzelibe, 1986). It is striking that the increasing recognition of management as a science deceives many practitioners into believing that national differences somehow do not matter.

Many scholars have often focused on applying Western management principles and concepts to Africa, with limited attention to the inherent limitations. The emergence and advances of international management began to seriously question these assumptions of “universality of management theories” and emphasised the point that cultural differences shape firms’, employees’ and employers’ behaviour (Koontz, 1969; Schollhammer, 1969). Until the late 1980s and 1990s, much of the management research was filled with these assumptions, which were hardly challenged and empirically refuted.

### **Human capital development**

Among the widely observed characteristics of this period was a large stream of research that focused on skill formation and the need for skilled workers to help countries transform their economy from the doldrums of the post-colonial environment towards a sustainable future.

The earliest works during this period focused on management education and the nature of management in Africa (e.g. Safavi, 1981).

Although studies recognised human capital development as being essential in unlocking countries' potential (e.g. Nurmi and Udo-Aka, 1980), much of the literature with notable exceptions failed to pinpoint the organisational practices and government policies that would deliver such outcomes. Some suggested that research and development units within education and government agencies were essential (Safavi, 1981). Other studies emphasised the importance of strategic management in the public sector (e.g. Ayittey, 1991; Kiggundu, 1996).

Another line of scholarly works began to explore the role of the state in influencing industry competition through market liberalisation and deregulation. The effects began to reflect in studies in the 1980s and emphasised management education for equipping future African managers (e.g. Safavi, 1981). The review uncovered this phase as the watershed moment with increasing confidence of scholars about the values inherent in indigenous theories and concepts, and their potential to inform mainstream management thinking. The groundbreaking work of North (1980) and colleagues not only shaped discourse but also contributed to the growing body of work on the role of institutions in influencing and shaping firms' behaviour.

In the late 1980s, Nzelibe (1986, p. 6) observed that "African management thought, in terms of conceptual and research activity of management scholars, has advanced only slightly in its theoretical and practical orientations". By the end of this phase, African management research began to discover some degree of "maturity" emerging from the doldrums into mainstream literature (see Sawyerr, 1993).

### **Phase 3 (2000–2012): The “coming of age”**

By the turn of the 21st century, much of sub-Saharan Africa had turned the page on the failed SAPs coupled with the increasing democratic regime. This phase was a major turning point in the Afro-management research with growing confidence among scholars as many turned to indigenous concepts for better understanding of local phenomena (e.g. Newenham-Kahindi, 2009).

In the first half of the 2000s, more and more scholars began to draw attention to the inherent limitation of the widely used Western theories of management. Traditionally, scholars have assumed that all developing economies share certain features such as unstable institutional environment, lack of effective market supporting mechanisms such as mutual funds, and weak legal enforcement regimes, but the degree to which these factors vary has been overlooked.

Research on indigenous concepts such as Ubuntu (Mangaliso, 2001) and Indaba (traditional mechanism for resolving disputes) (Newenham-Kahindi, 2009) which have underpinned African societies gathered steam. This was accompanied by a surge in the literature that emphasised issues such as the role of local cultures, human capital development, workplace learning, attitude towards conflict resolution, source of trust, institutional development and authentic leadership.

As Gonzalez and McMillan (1961, p. 41) observed several decades earlier, the “aspect of management which lacks universality has to do with interpersonal relationships, including those between management and workers, management and suppliers, management and the customer, the community, competition and government.” As it came to be conceptualised as an informal institution, these played a major role in shaping firms’ behaviour and

organisations' ability to operate successfully in emerging economies (North, 1990; Peng, 2003).

More recently, the “institutional difference hypothesis” (IDH) in the African context has emerged to reinforce these arguments (Julian and Ofori-Dankwa, 2013; Ofori-Dankwa and Julian, 2013). The concept broadly argues that the formal and informal institutions such as regulations, culture and norms would influence how firms behave and what strategies they pursue as they expand to each jurisdiction. It has been suggested that the underdeveloped market supporting institutions, such as weak regulatory enforcement agencies, can create an environment which is fundamentally different from advanced economies (Julian and Ofori-Dankwa, 2013; Ofori-Dankwa and Julian, 2013). It is in this spirit that scholars examining why firms' succeed or fail in international markets have suggested the need to not only employ the resource-based view alongside industry-based views, but also the institution-based view to give consideration to the institutional context within which the firm operates (Peng, 2012; Peng et al., 2009; Amankwah-Amoah and Debrah, 2010, 2014).

In the last few years, it became abundantly clear that those looking at issues such as competitive advantage and industry competition in the emerging markets could not rely solely on the resource-based view and industry-based view, but must rather incorporate the important role played by institutions to complement our understanding of the role of management (see Yamakawa et al., 2008). The so-called third leg in the international business strategy tripod is essential in illuminating our understanding (Peng, 2003). This period was also characterised by an increasing number of studies using experiments and empirical testing which helped enormously in enriching our understanding and shedding light on the applicability of some of the Western theories such as the resource-based view and institution-based view (e.g. Acquah, 2007, 2012).

### **Some emergent trends**

African management literature has emerged to bring more indigenous concepts about leaders, finance and social capital to the forefront of key debates. As Nzelibe (1986, p. 6) pointed out, “constructing theory for African management thought will not be advanced by assuming that what prevails in the Western world is applicable also in the African environment.” However, it remains to be seen whether this surging stream of research would help lead to theories applicable to other settings. There remains a genuine need for more scholarly works that are indigenous in nature which can inform practice and management thinking (Amankwah-Amoah, 2013). Figure 2 summarises the key features of the three phases.

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### **Discussion and implications**

The main purpose of this article was to examine the historical trajectory of African management research and managerial thinking from 1960–2012. Our study revealed that the past decades have amassed a great deal of scholarly works. The study identified meaningful patterns as research has emerged from a challenging beginning to a promising future with an environment which allows indigenous ideals and concepts to flourish. The study uncovered three unique phases in the evolution of Afro-management research and managerial thinking.

Phase 1 demonstrated the imprinting effects of Africa’s past history in the practice and nature of research. During this phase, African management research appeared to lack self-confidence with little attempt to bring indigenous concepts to the fore. Phase 2 demonstrated a shift from the traditional emphasis on the Western-based model and approaches towards

the emergence of indigenous concepts. Nevertheless, there appeared to be some kind of “Northern bias” in much of the literature during this stage.

Phase 3 provided indications of the adolescence of African management research, where indigenous concepts began to take root and gain prominence in mainstream management research. There was a minor turn towards indigenous concepts to provide an explanation of complex local phenomena. During this stage, there appeared to be clear directions and avenues for future research. Throughout the three phases, a constant theme has been the applicability of Western-developed concepts and models to the African setting.

The progress made in the past half a century has ushered in new foundations towards enriching our understanding of management theories. In spite of a growing body of literature on indigenous concepts, there has been limited progress in bringing such concepts to the mainstream management discourse.

By charting the historical trajectory and shedding light on the shift from largely Western-based models towards indigenous concepts, we contribute to the long-standing debate about the inherent value of indigenous and “universalistic” theories (Barney and Zhang, 2009). In so doing, this interdisciplinary effort responds to the recent calls by scholars to chart a new phase in this field towards uncovering limitations and practical utility of theories developed in the West (Kamoche et al., 2012). Below, we outline steps towards enhancing the rigour and relevance of the research.

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### **Directions for African management research**

Our analysis suggests there is a need to leap forward with the concurrent pursuit of both theory development and theory application (see Figure 3). In this direction, we borrow the concepts of theory application and theory creation identified by Tsui (2006) to shape our discussion and contextualise. By contextualisation, we are referring to the process of “incorporating the context in describing, understanding, and theorizing about phenomena within it” (Tsui, 2006, p. 2).

Theory application advocates the use of existing theories largely developed in the West to the African setting. In advancing African management research, there is a need to pay attention to the principle of replicability, which has been identified as an essential element in genuine scientific knowledge (Tsang and Kwan, 1999). This process of replication and repeated testing helps in discovering limitations and generalisability of existing theories (Corley and Gioia, 2011; Popper, 1959).

To position Afro-management research within the mainstream, replication of new theories is essential. Indeed, without critical testing of theories emerging from unfamiliar settings, it may be very difficult to disentangle the “truth from wild conjectures” and we may be “swamped by a plethora of creative yet unsubstantiated theories” (Tsang and Kwan, 1999, p. 775). Our contention here is that to build indigenous theories and concepts with greater legitimacy, they must lend themselves to replication.

In seeking to encourage theory development stemming from the local context, there is an inherent danger that we may create conditions for a plethora of premature and fancy theories not either grounded in evidence or which could not be subjected to meticulous empirical tests (see Ofori-Dankwa and Julian, 2001). Such theory proliferation is more likely to lead to

duplication of work and “conceptual confusion, which arises when a number of theories (strong, weak or even false) provide incompatible or even contradictory explanations of the same phenomenon” (Tsang, 2009, p. 135). Replication would help to bring order to the so-called “management theory jungle” by eliminating redundant theories which are not grounded in evidence (Koontz, 1961, 1980).

Our findings suggest a need to avoid creating some kind of “African management jungle” where it becomes a breeding ground for irrelevant and unjustified theories. There is also a need to speak to a wider audience rather than becoming silos of scholarly works which does little to foster interdisciplinary and cross-cultural knowledge diffusion (see DiMaggio, 1995).

On the other hand, theory development is grounded in the notion that there are rich historical and cultural factors which are essential in explaining firms’ behaviour and organisational performance. Future research should seek to bring more indigenous theories to the fore and test their limitations not only within countries, but also across countries. Interestingly, a rich stream of research has already laid the foundations in this area (e.g. Jackson et al., 2008) but more work is needed. This would help to bridge the gulf between the scientific research and practice in the local setting.

Another promising avenue would be to examine historical imprints of colonial legacy on firm behaviour and research practice. Such historical analysis would be of great interest to business historians and general management scholars.

According to DiMaggio’s (1995) concept of “theory as narrative”, good theories are grounded in story telling which brings together a series of events, actions and inactions to help explain a phenomenon. Some African traditions are rooted in storytelling, rituals and

norms that govern people's behaviour and relationships. This provides a mechanism for scholars to explore this issue. Multiple and single case studies are some of the methods which provide us with a good starting point. Such empirical works are pertinent in theory development as well as in uncovering the inherent limitations and weaknesses of existing theories. The development of new theories can then be subjected to empirical testing, but we should not allow replication to kill off originality and creativity which are essential in advancing promising concepts. In many ways, the question of whether we should strike for a universal theory or local concepts has been characterised by inherent dangers. Extremely localised concepts are unlikely to find an audience within the mainstream management literature but might have a high practical utility, whereas universal theories are less likely to have practical utility within the local context.

We should make room for both theory development and replications to flourish. A potential limitation of the study is that the state of African management research and managerial thinking might be more complex than has been presented here. We hope this work helps in furthering the debate about the generalisability of management concepts and theories.

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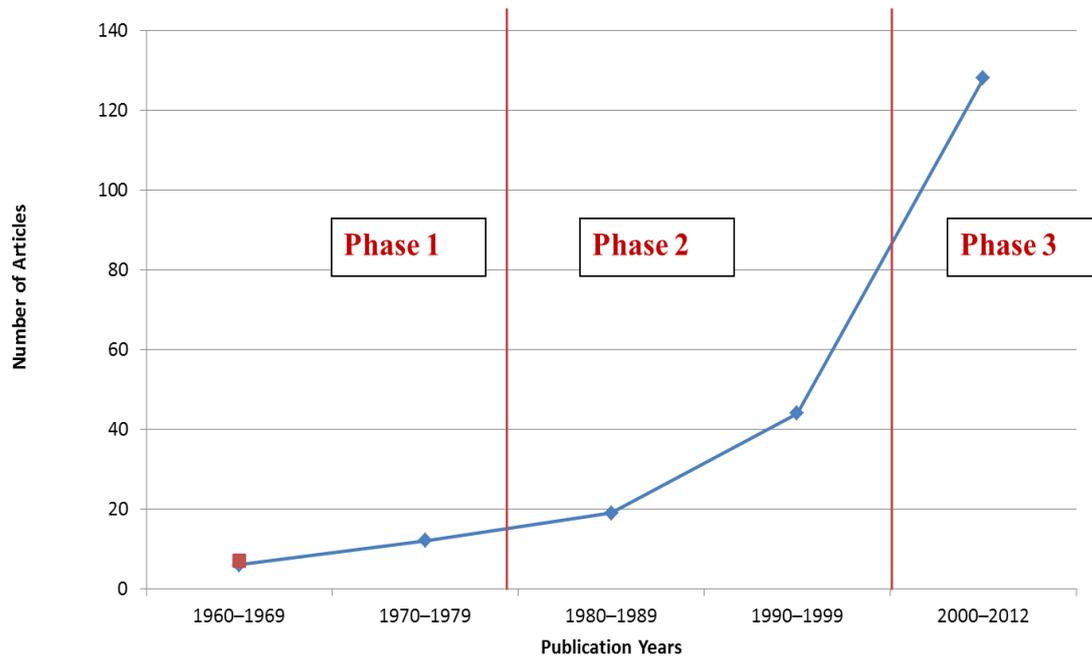
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**Figure 1: Evolution of Africa management research**



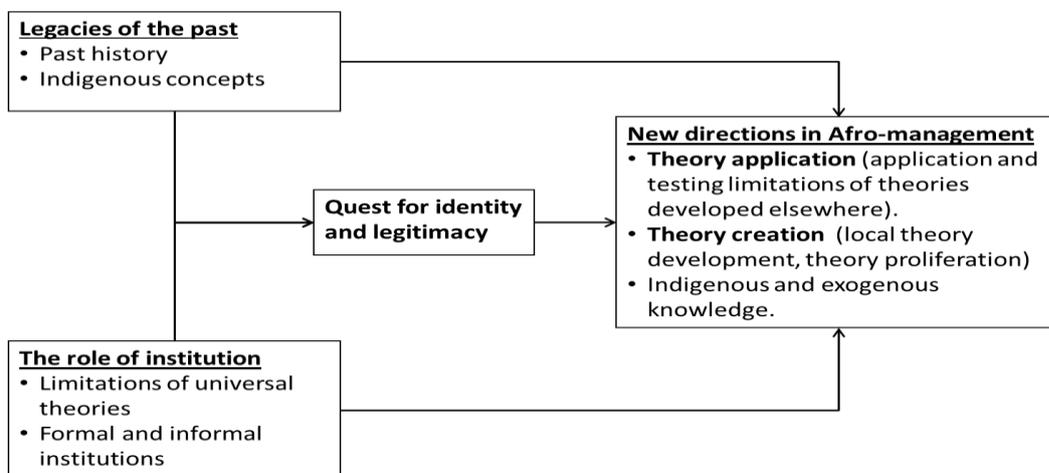
Based on Amankwah-Amoah's (2013) comprehensive review of African management literature from 1960-2012.

**Figure 2: The trajectory of African management research, 1960–2012**

|                 | Phase 1 (1960–1979)  | Phase 2 (1980–1999)   | Phase 3 (2000–2012)   |
|-----------------|--|---|---|
| <b>Features</b> | <p><b>Areas of focus</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Convergence hypothesis” vs. “divergence hypothesis”.</li> <li>• Lack of indigenous concepts.</li> <li>• Colonial legacy.</li> <li>• Blind replications.</li> <li>• Public administrations.</li> </ul> | <p><b>Areas of focus</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal and informal institutions matter and application of Western concept.</li> <li>• Increasing recognition of limitations of universal theories.</li> <li>• Emergence and development of indigenous concepts.</li> </ul> | <p><b>Areas of focus</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional difference hypothesis.</li> <li>• Emergence of indigenous research.</li> <li>• Applications and examination of Western models/concepts.</li> <li>• Development of local theories.</li> <li>• Emergence and development of indigenous concepts.</li> </ul> |

**Stages/Years**

**Figure 3. A proposed agenda for enriching African management research**



**Table 1: Summary of the key features of the three phases**

| Phase                | African management research and representative studies  | Managerial thinking   |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Phase 1              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studies focused mainly on public organisation, administration and colonial elites (e.g. Harris, 1968; Fleming, 1966; Luckham, 1971; Magid, 1967; Muwanga-Barlow, 1978; Smith, 1971; Clignet and Foster, 1964; Prasad, 1967).</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dominance of the notion that “Management is management everywhere” (Gonzalez and McMillan, 1961) and governed by “universal principles’ (Negandhi and Estafen, 1965, p. 309).</li> <li>• Nationalisation as a means to improve the competitiveness of state-owned firms and their “corporate social responsibility”.</li> </ul>    |
| Phase 2              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was an increasing realisation that institutions matter (e.g. Ahiauzu, 1986a; Nurmi and Udo-Aka, 1980; Mbigi, 1997; Mbigi and Maree, 1995).</li> <li>• A surge of studies on human capital development (e.g. Nurmi and Udo-Aka, 1980; Safavi, 1981).</li> </ul>                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privatisation of inefficient state-owned firms to improve their competitiveness.</li> <li>• Management is culturally bound norms, rules and unwritten rules which shape human behaviour and organisational culture.</li> <li>• Local culture and conditions recognised as influential forces in strategic formulations.</li> </ul> |
| Phase 3              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The emergence and rise of indigenous concepts such as Ubuntu (Mangaliso, 2001; Jackson, Amaeshi and Yavuz, 2008) and Indaba (Newenham-Kahindi, 2009).</li> <li>• Studies on the “institutional difference hypothesis” (Julian and Ofori-Dankwa, 2013; Ofori-Dankwa and Julian, 2013).</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local culture and traditions have the potential to inform and improve organisational performance.</li> </ul>   |
| Some emergent trends | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theory development and theory application.</li> <li>• Indigenous concepts development.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The rise of the “new” African management thoughts and leadership.</li> </ul>   |