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Family Leadership in Africa

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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Kasongo, Muteho
Publisher	Globethics.net / WCC Publications
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-06-12 14:52:09
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173427

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FAMILY LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

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Introduction

The main issue to be dealt with in this paper is the dynamic of leadership in the family and its relationship with leadership in society. The attempt in this study is to reflect on the way the family leadership model can influence leadership in society. Focusing on the model of family leadership, the objective of this study is to call upon a responsible family leadership in the process of the establishment of democratic and more responsive leadership in all societies. Analysing the model of family leadership, our intention is to challenge the model of leadership in Africa, and to awake people's consciousness to the need of reviewing the established leadership models towards more participatory leadership. In what follows, the topic will be developed from an African point of view.

The guiding assumption in this essay is that it appears clearly that the family represents the basic nucleus or the foundation of society. Since all members of society come from families, this implies that the leaders of societies are formed – at least partly and among other influences – in and by families. Given this, the family has a strong influence on society in various ways. Its power is the power of the whole society. Its weakness impacts on the whole society as well. In talking about leadership, it is important to note that all types of leadership start in the family. Therefore, if a family enjoys good leadership, it is more likely that children raised in such a family have acquired a culture of good leadership and that they might become themselves good leaders. This is also expressed in one of the Chinese sayings that the state's harmony and prosperity depend on the stability of the families.¹ Generally, if a leader in society emanates from a family where the father is tyrant, dictator, or battering his wife, he more likely becomes a tyrant, dictator and oppressive leader. The opposite may also be possible if the leader comes from more cooperative, respectful, loving, compassionate and humble parents. Children, in short, tend to imitate their parents' way of doing things, including their modes of acting as leaders. This sounds logical and inevitable, indeed, since psychologically speaking, the child learns from adults.

Therefore, the main questions are the following: 'What type of leadership is commonly carried out in families? What type of family

leadership is suitable as a model for society leadership?' I will try to respond to these questions below.

1. Participatory Family Leadership

First of all, it should be noted that the African family is composed of father, mother, children as well as all members of the large family on both the father's and the mother's sides. It is an extended family, in which uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces are all included.

Secondly, the concept of 'leadership' shall be understood in this paper as the skill or the capacity of taking responsibility for matters that encompass all areas of life in society, i.e. the economic, the social, the political and the religious. All these aspects are reflected in family life. Daniel Arap Moi defined leadership as 'the dynamic and catalytic ability of an individual or a group to liberate, engage and direct the constructive endeavours of a people for betterment of individual and/or whole communities, for their material prosperity and for their social-cultural uplift, spiritual peace and mental productivity.'²

Practically, as a social group, a family needs leadership for its own development and for all its members'. No family can stand without a leader. In this dynamic, husband and wife within their parenthood capacity are the main leaders of the family. They have a primary capacity and a responsibility to sustain the life of their family members. Their main task is to ensure the welfare of all members of the family.

Good family leadership takes responsibly and engages its power for the welfare of all family members. This welfare include many elements such as good education for the children and the provision of housing and food supply to the family, but also that needs such as health care, economic, political and social development be responded to. Through their leadership, the parents play the role of a good shepherd whose commitment is the protection of the members of the family, just as the shepherd does secure his flock.

This requires love, caring, self-respect and the respect for others, loyalty, wisdom, etc. Without love, parents cannot sacrifice themselves and cannot carry out their responsibility. Likewise, the parents' self-respect and their respect for the members of the family would help them establish a more respectful family leadership. This respect is supposed to be more inclusive, without any discrimination based on gender and age. Boys and girls would be taken as equal and given the same opportunity to develop their respective capacities and exploit them equally for the development of the family. They should be given the same opportunity to speak, to be heard, to be educated and to use their abilities in the interest of the whole family group.

It should be noted that parents are assisted in their responsibility by their children in the sense that the education they provide is not passive. It is a participative education in which the children learn how to do things in a practical way. It is thus through a process of 'learning by doing' that the children are taught how to become responsible persons capable of managing their own life and their surrounding environment.

Besides this, each family member has a responsibility to contribute to the common good within the family. The development of the family is the result of the participation of all its members. In this sense, family leadership cannot be the monopoly of one person, but needs to be a participative leadership where the wife, the father, the children as well as all other members join hands, each one on his level, to sustain the life and the development of the family. For instance, parents have power over all family members. They give them orders, direct, advise, and instruct them, and look after them in all ways. In the African context, children, too, have on their own level some responsibility in the management of the family. The elder son or daughter watches over the younger brothers or sisters, they help their parents to achieve some works in the house, in farming, in fetching water, in grinding the grains; they even participate in the upbringing of their younger brothers or sisters in ruling over them, giving orders, in imitation of their own parents. None can deny the fact that the elder children somehow influence the behaviour of the younger ones. This is somehow a participative leadership in which the children are being prepared for leadership. When they become mature, they have already acquired the necessary preparation to take on some responsibilities.

2. Patriarchal and Exclusive Family Leadership

Since most African societies are patriarchal, however, and despite the fact that both parents are the main leaders of the family, the father is always the head of the family. His power is predominantly submitting the power of women. This appears clearly in most families in which one can observe a tendency of men keeping the leadership as their monopoly to the point that women have been excluded from their 'natural' guiding roles in the family. For instance, in most families, men take decisions without consulting their wives. This is due to a culture where women are considered inferior and as secondary citizens, incapable of making any mature decision. This leads, in the long run to an oppressive family leadership in which women have simply to implement the decisions taken by men. This has affected women, who developed an inferiority complex and a tendency to be passive *vis-à-vis* all leadership.³ Very often, women are even excluded

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from decisions affecting their own life and that of the family. The following examples are necessary to illustrate the type of exclusion of women from family power. For instance, in most traditional tribal families in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the woman could not own any property, even if she was the one who worked hard to avail it. If she is still single, her property will be on her father's or brother's account. If she is married all her properties will be subscribed on her husband's account. She could not open a bank account, neither buy or sell any valuables such as land or goats without her husband's permission, whereas men can do that without informing their wives. Women can also not own some important properties such as lands. Women are also requested to present a written marital authorisation for job application while this is not required from men. Despite her education, a man can decide whether his wife could work outside of her household in office or not; yet the opposite is not always obvious. This translates the fact that a woman cannot decide for her own job. However educated they may be, women in some traditional African societies are not given the power to take some important decisions. This prevents many women from going for some important position in society, especially since some men are reluctant to allow their wives to do so. As we can read in this statement of the World Council of Churches: 'Patriarchy makes us think in hierarchy that puts the male at the top, privileged or superior position.'⁴ This has been strongly highlighted by Nkiru Nzegwu who pointed out the fact that 'Women's limited participation in politics has been sought in family structures.'⁵ In order to bring any possible change in such way of excluding women from decision-making in the family as well as in society, the new constitution of the Democratic Republic of Congo has been amended so that women could be given the rights to be treated like any human being with all the corresponding rights.

Not only women are excluded from family leadership; children are also affected by patriarchal family leadership. Boys especially would like to rule over girls by simply following the example of their fathers. They also consider girls as inferior. This attitude is strengthened by proverbs teaching that a boy has more power and is stronger than a girl. In African cultures, boys are considered as more responsible than girls in the family. They are more involved in decision-making than their sisters. They are treated as the successors of their fathers, and can therefore inherit their fathers' properties. Their power and strength is translated in various attitudes, as shows in the following example: if a boy falls and if he wants to cry, the parents just simply tell him that he should not cry like a girl. If a girl achieves a wonderful work, they often congratulate her saying that she has acted like a man. With this type of education, African girls and women have been weakened in terms of leadership and men have been reserved the monopoly of

power. This is apparent in the Congo government where the women are under-represented.⁶ Thus, for some women in Africa, the family power has been generally patriarchal, oppressive and exclusive.

This type of dictatorship present in the family influences the position of women in the government leadership. Not only are most African governments dictatorships, but they only feature – as a commonplace – an under-representation of women. Talking about the consequences of the exclusion of women from power, Amoako declared in a statement to the United Nations General Assembly that: ‘As we come to understand the links between responsive and effective governance and development more fully, we learn that the governance that does not represent both sexes, is neither participatory nor inclusive and this cannot move a society forward.’⁷ This has been the source of conflicts and wars in some African societies. The example which stands for this is the genocide in Rwanda: when one ethnic group is excluded from leadership, it ends up to genocide. In Congo also, the many civil and political conflicts and wars are also due to long periods of dictatorship. This excluded the potential power of various social groups. The same thing is happening in African societies where development is imbalanced due to the fact that the talents and skills of women could not benefit to societies because of their exclusion. Many conflicts ended up in wars where males have decided alone – without women – to use their strength and weapons to settle conflicts.

3. Family Leadership and the Scriptural Model of Leadership

It is in the family that people can learn how to become honest and responsible. This requires the good role model that can be played by the parents. The latter should serve as good examples for their children and the other members of the family. Usually, as already mentioned, the children follow the model of their leaders. In their life, they try to reflect the pattern of people who shaped their lives. It is in this sense that the Scriptures declare that none should make the little one stumble. If he does, he should be tied a heavy stone on his neck and be thrown away in the sea (Matt 18:6).

According to the Scriptures, the parents’ leadership originates from the creation. It is God’s will that parents become co-creators with him by procreating and participating in the management of the whole creation in giving direction and a sense to the life of all creatures as well as of the whole creation (Gen 1:26-28).

Within this responsibility, parents’ leadership is identified with God’s leadership. In several scriptural books like the Proverbs, the children are summoned to obey the parents’ teaching and leadership

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for their good life as they obey God (Prov 3:1-3, 5-7, 12; 4:1-4, but see also Eph 6:1-4). To faithfully carry out this responsibility, parents should therefore play the role of servants as God, through the incarnation, became the perfect servant of the whole creation in Jesus Christ. Jesus confirmed this when he said that 'The son of man did not come to be served, he came to redeem many people' (Matt 20:28). In his life, he made this declaration a reality by being on the service of those who sought help such as the sick people, the paralysed, the marginalised or those rejected because of their sins, in order to help them recover their full life. In this ministry, Jesus did not seek his own protection and glory. He humbled himself to humiliation so that he may provide for the welfare of humanity. He offered his life to a shameful death because of his leadership. His leadership appeared as a servanthood instead of being served like actual leaders who prefer to be served and who enrich themselves at the expense of the populations they lead. He himself identified leadership with the service to others by declaring that if someone wants to be the greatest he should be the servant of all (Mark 9:35). Jesus did it and at the end of his mission, he was revealed to the humanity as the king of kings who has the power over everything in heaven as well as on the earth. This happens after the resurrection (Matt 28:18).

To successfully fulfil his missionary leadership, Jesus complied with some important criteria which we cannot overlook in this model of leadership. These are criteria such as obedience to God, humility, love of the humanity, compassion, faithfulness to his mission, patience, perseverance, purposive self-giving, sacrifice, life giving, justice, equal consideration of all people without discrimination, etc. Besides, Jesus liked to share his life with many others for their welfare.

Jesus associated the disciples to his ministerial leadership. He gave them the power of healing the sick and of casting the demons as he himself did. He even included women in his ministry – as it becomes apparent, Jesus' leadership was truly participatory. Following this model of leadership, parents should respect these criteria if they are to be successful in carrying their responsibility as family leaders. The confidence they place in God, and the faithfulness to his command, will enable them to carry out this mission of family leadership according to God's will.

4. Family Leadership and Decision-Making

Within the family important decisions are taken in all aspects of life. Parents are those responsible for taking decisions in the family. However, it is also their responsibility to train their children on decision-making. In the line of what Jesus did, this can be done by involv-

ing them in some deliberations. Instead of excluding them, parents can consult the members of their family and enquire about their opinion regarding matters to settle jointly, thus enabling them to participate freely without any restriction. Everyone should be given the opportunity to be heard. Good family leaders should not be tempted to impose their decisions on others without considering whether it is helpful for them or whether it brings upon a dislocation of the group. The members of the family can also make suggestions that can enlighten the decisions of the parents. Good family leaders should not neglect the point of view of children pretending that they are all childish. This has been the tendency in many traditional African families, in spite of good proverbs that illustrate how a child can also give good advice to his/her parents. One of those proverbs says that the chick can also give advice its mother hen.⁸

In their leadership, men should learn how to value the gift of women and should involve them in decision-making. They should realise that the unity of working together with women is the strength of the family and the whole society.

5. Family Leadership and Conflict Management

As in every group interaction, good leadership is affirmed by its capacity of creating harmony in the case of conflicting interests among the various group members. As the family is composed of many members with different ways of perceiving things, there also exist conflicting interests, which correspond to the diversity of needs. The lack of good management of these conflicting needs can create conflicts and disharmony among the family members. This implies that one of the tasks of the family leaders is to know how to find the ground on which all these various needs can be met in a peaceful way so that the harmony in the family can be safeguarded.

On the other hand, good family leadership must think of preparing the children to peaceful conflict management. This is important in as much as by peaceful conflict management, the children learn how to settle the matters that bring divisions in the community and open new ways for each to give a chance to others and give space to a harmonious community life. This is important in training the children for future leadership. Women should be allowed to use their feminine experience of conflict management to the benefit of the family groups as well as of the whole society.

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Conclusion

From this reflection, let us note that family leadership is a God-given responsibility to the parents. Through this role, parents fulfil God's work as intended in humanity to create order and to ensure empowerment of people for the human and environmental development. Family leadership, understood in this biblical sense, could serve as a model for government leadership. That is the reason why parents should be watchful in their responsibility in order to serve as good models in the preparation of children for future leadership. Likewise, the leaders in power today have a responsibility to initiate a more participatory leadership.

NOTES

- ¹ See Zhu, Rachel Xiaohong, 'Family Leadership Shift in China. Preliminary Perspectives for a Confucian and Christian Dialogue', in: Stückelberger, Christoph/Mugambi, J.N.K. (eds), *Responsible Leadership. Global Perspectives*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005, pp. 34-45. See also Chapter 3 in this volume.
- ² *Ibidem*.
- ³ AACC & CETA: 'La violence domestique', in: *Lève-toi et marche. Matériel ressource sur la violence faite à la Femme*, p. 4.
- ⁴ World Council of Churches (WCC), 'Changing the World: An Interfaith Consultation on Gender Justice, June 2004', in: WCC (ed.), *Streams of Grace*, 2005, pp. 25-27, also on www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/streams_of_grace_the_book.pdf (last accessed 13 July 2006).
- ⁵ Nzegwu Nkiru, 'African Women and Fire Dance', in: *West Africa Review* 2 (1), 2000, also on www.africaresource.com/war/vol2.1/nzegwu2.html.
- ⁶ Study made by Butembo Coteder under the guise of the 'Parlement écoles des femmes' in Nord-Kivu.
- ⁷ Declaration of Amoako, K.Y., Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, in the Report to the UN General Assembly Hall, July 28, 1997, New York.
- ⁸ This is a Nande proverb. The Nande are a tribe living in the North Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo.