Diversity Issues Facing the Public Service in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Yesterday’s heresy is today’s orthodoxy. This is precisely the dilemma facing analysts as they grapple with the nature and consequences of diversity in public organizations. In years gone by, no scholar or practitioner who valued his/her reputation would accord diversity greater importance than is deemed necessary to sustain an organization’s “unity of purpose”. Adherents of the “formal organization” school took care of diversity by subordinating it to the organization’s underlying purpose and the prevailing “rules” regime. The “informal organization” perspective echoed the demand for unity of direction, while insisting that meeting this demand required that organization rules be applied in such a way as to accommodate individual and group needs. And McLaren suspects that the subject of tension in multicultural organizations has been blown out of proportion (McLaren, 1997:60-61).

Yet, scholars and practitioners alike are today celebrating a new-found freedom – the “organization man’s” freedom to be different and to bring personal identities to the work place. This paper argues that despite the attention that it is currently receiving, the concept of diversity is not new. What is new is the increasing tendency towards polarization within organizations and the lack of a powerful analytic tool that could be applied in reconciling the classical understanding of organization as a unifier with the unfolding and conflicting identities in the world of work. Confronting this dilemma requires incorporating trust-engendering elements in organization theory and design – which in essence means, bringing back the rules that modern innovative management practices deem to be of secondary importance.

I. The nature, politics and theory of intra-organizational diversity

Diversity has always been part of organization and management calculus. However, how it was perceived in the past is substantially different from the way it is currently viewed. In classical, scientific management thinking, diversity means nothing more than the conflict between management and the work force. It (diversity) posed little problem, as management had perfect knowledge of what the workers were to do and workers simply did as instructed. Through devices like “time study”, the former would transfer this knowledge, the knowledge of the “one-best-way”, to work-men (Taylor, 1947). Gant dispensed with pretences toward “democratic participation”. He once noted (Rathe, 1960):

“To say … as some contend, that the amount of work a man should do should be decided as the result of an argument between the task-setter and the work-man is absurd; the amount of work a man can do is discoverable only by the methods of scientific investigation.”

The effort at forcefully integrating the individual with the organization reached a peak with the construction of formal organization models. Weber’s “ideal construct” of bureaucracy left little room for personal idiosyncrasies and conditions. His legal-rational order represented a deliberate attempt to move away from authority based on tradition and individual charisma, to one based on formal logic and the rule of law. It is an order that, at least, in theory, outlasts personalities, structures individual behaviour, reduces the scope for capricious and whimsical choices, remains indifferent to personal traits, and recognises no identity beyond that of the bureaucracy and its
“officially” accredited agents. This “clock-work” view of the formal organization runs through the writings of the first generation of business and public administration scholars (e.g., Fayol, 1949; Mooney and Reilley, 1931; and White, 1955).

To both the scientific management and the formal organization scholars, the organization was a means to an end. It was “an engine of (geopolitical and industrial) warfare” (Lewis, 1896), capitalism’s profit-making tool (Weber, 1971), or an institutional framework for accomplishing policy objectives. Given this “instrumental” view of organization, it was difficult to countenance situations whereby individual workers would be free to influence substantive objectives, or bicker over their status in the organization’s pecking order.

The contributors to the succeeding “informal organization” and decision-making literature (Fayol, ; Argyris, 1960; McGregor, 1960; and Simon, 1960, among others) sought to temper the dictatorial language employed by the classical scholars. Unlike the latter, they recognised that the individual is endowed with “energies”, and that the source of these energies is “needs” – biological, social, and psychological needs. However, while differing with the formula proposed by the scientific and the formal organization scholars in managing diversity, the “informal organization” scholars did not challenge the underlying assumption that organizations are purposive entities, and that the organization’s master-plan serves as the final arbiter in conflict resolution. Yes, human needs must be taken into account in formulating substantive strategies and in enacting the rules to regulate individual behaviour. However, as Robert Presthus rightly observed, the organization controls most of the devices needed to induce worker conformity, and enhance his/her “propensity to obey”.

The changing face of diversity

Things worked more or less as planned when diversity was a simple matter, i.e., when it was about how far to proceed in involving individuals and groups in the planning and implementation of organization objectives, and not about which organization objectives to reformulate in light of new, largely non-organizational considerations. However, where the challenge facing the Taylorist or, for that matter, the Weberian manager was confined to the integration of the worker with the organization, the managerial equation is no longer that simple. Diversity has taken a new, and increasingly complicated form. It compels the manager to balance the claims of efficiency and “profit-making” with the demand for social inclusiveness and equal opportunity.

By social inclusiveness is meant creating and sustaining conditions making it possible for the various strata of society (ethnic minorities, women, the physically handicapped, rural dwellers, competing religious and sectarian orders, the weakest and poorest sections of society, as well as victims of erstwhile social exclusion practices) to be represented in a formal organization. This contrasts with an arrangement in which “merit” holds sway. It also highlights the dilemma facing the modern public sector manager. Merit, howsoever defined, has to do with the quest for excellence, while social inclusiveness – particularly, when interpreted as “quota representation” – leans towards compromise, inter group bargaining, and, possibly, mediocrity. To be guided by merit is to be able to anticipate, or at least, respond to, market forces. To bend towards social inclusiveness is to seek to promote the cause of social justice even if this means going against the grain of efficiency and “rational” resource allocation.
Respect for diversity is not simply about the tolerance of conflicting primary loyalties. It extends to the conflict ensuing from differences in thought patterns, life styles, mannerisms, and mind-sets. It is contended that in a genuinely representative bureaucracy, recruitment and career development decisions should take into account one’s social origin or personality characteristics, as well as qualifications and other job-related criteria.

This view of inclusiveness, it must be remembered, emerged as a core element of public sector management in the 1990s as the world rediscovered the virtues of good governance through democratic participation. With the United Nations playing a leading role, gender mainstreaming became a central focus of public policy in different parts of the globe. To pre-empt the growing and insistent demand from ethnic and religious minorities for autonomous “homelands”, governments compromised merit principles as they took the ethnic or racial origins of candidates into account in recruitment decisions. In one country after another, human rights clauses were inserted in constitutions to protect the socially excluded from different forms of discrimination – particular, discrimination on grounds of age, gender, religious belief, ethnic origin, physical condition, and socio-economic status. “Facial” discrimination is still alive and well in the modern world, but racial discrimination is unlawful, and “ethnic cleansing” is a war crime.

What is the justification for the increasing interest in inclusiveness, and how does this shift in thinking affect the performance of organizations in the public domain? If, as argued by the World Bank (2000:2), dysfunctional and ineffective public institutions and weak governance are at the heart of the economic development challenge, it is legitimate to ask whether a policy of inclusiveness would halt or hasten the slide to productivity losses. To put it another way, will the diversity (which comes with inclusiveness) enhance the public bureaucracy’s role as an “engine” of growth, or push the bureaucracy further in the path of disintegration and decay?

If the argument is pitched at the political level of analysis, diversity may be perceived as a minimum condition for the safeguard of the rights and autonomy of groups constituting a nation-state. Where a nation-state is made up of heterogeneous groups, the equality of the partners can only be guaranteed if that heterogeneity is reflected (or to use a familiar terminology, “mainstreamed”) in government structures, policies, and programmes. To “manufacture” a consensus under such circumstances it to strike at the heart of equality, and in the process, invite stiff, sometimes, armed, resistance from the victims of what is perceived as the hegemonic (nay, internal colonialist) practice (Walzer, 1983). In a simple language, diversity is natural, and it is futile to “outlaw” it (Ekeh, 1975; and Horowitz, 1985).

A contrary view is that identity politics is ‘transactional’ rather than being natural or spontaneous. It is inextricably linked to conflict over resources and symbols (Mohapatra, 1999; Collier and Biswinger, 1999). Identity is a powerful mobilization tool for a group that is intent on consolidating its power or wresting it from historically dominant “stranger elements”. Ahmed (1999:63) sees identity as a relative, and therefore, dialogue-inhibiting, factor. Starting from the premise that no two persons are identical, he cites empirical studies indicating that the Hutu refugees in Tanzania identified themselves differently depending on whether they lived in ‘refugee camps’ or in affluent neighbourhoods outside. This finding is confirmed by a survey of residence patterns in a number of African urban communities (Balogun, 2000:159-160). The risk
in employing ascriptive criteria to demarcate human boundaries – that is, on the basis of presumed ethnic homogeneity – lies in this “fabricated diversity” constituting a block to inter-
personal and inter-group communication.

There is no question that diversity breeds conflict, and the latter is most frequently associated with tension. This is by itself not too much of a disaster. As argued by Lewin (1935), human beings do not live in a tensionless world. As a matter of fact, a minimum degree of conflict and tension is essential to the survival and development of the human race. Development, after all, hinges on creative solutions to problems, and these (creative solutions) are conceivable only when the problem-solvers make conscious efforts to move out of conventional ethnic, racial, religious, gender, cultural, mental and physical boxes to share knowledge and perceptions with “outsiders”. Getting individuals and groups to make that momentous move – i.e., to venture out of their “safe and familiar” surroundings in search of new experiences – is the crux of the diversity management problem. Where the problem is properly handled, conflict will be perceived as an edifying factor in team building and productivity improvement. Conflict becomes a destructive agent only when diversity is so mismanaged that inter-personal and inter-group tension consistently rises beyond the acceptable (let us term it, “the Lewin”) threshold.

In any case, regardless of the danger which it poses to inter-group relations, the analyst cannot but confront diversity (and its consequences for “esprit de corps”) head on. When diversity is discussed within the context of public sector organizations, the analyst is compelled to trace the link to the phobias and insecurities that are now so characteristic of intra-organizational relations as to be deemed mutually inter-changeable. For example, the novel recruitment practices adopted in the wake of the enactment of inclusive policies tend to fan real or imagined fears – among them, of undue favouritism, of unwarranted exclusion, of reverse discrimination, of cultural or group “contamination” and of alienation.

As presented in this paper, diversity is a three-way pattern of interactions. The “parties” to this triangular relationship are the political system, together with the conflicts associated with its creation and maintenance (represented by the letter “A” in the accompanying drawings), the individual personalities (“B”), and the cultural sub-systems, totems and signals (“C”). Diversity remains manageable so long as each party is ready to give as much as it takes – i.e. no party overloads the other with demands greater than the latter is capable of fulfilling. For example, the novel recruitment practices adopted in the wake of the enactment of inclusive policies tend to fan real or imagined fears – among them, of undue favouritism, of unwarranted exclusion, of reverse discrimination, of cultural or group “contamination” and of alienation.

To date, we know very little about the impact of diversity in public sector organizations. Our limited knowledge of the conditions prevailing in public sector bodies – based on anecdotal evidence and fragmented pieces of information obtained from visits to a number of organizations in Sub Saharan African countries - suggests that these organizations are a beehive of activity, largely, conflict-related and unproductive activity. While experiences vary, one gets an impression of organizations in which individuals and groups battle for supremacy. In-depth investigations are likely to reveal that the battles are more over who wins than what gets accomplished, that is, over whose group controls the key offices rather than how to serve the
citizen better. In such circumstances, enemies are manufactured, alliances are formed, while substantive programmes are left by the way side. In the absence of concrete empirical evidence, we shall never have precise knowledge of the impact. All the same, it is not unlikely that this kind of diversity management explains the non-performance of public sector entities such as the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA), the Nigerian Postal Service (NIPOST), both in Nigeria, and the Sudan Airways (Olanrewaju, 1994; Hammour, 1994:80-87).

Fig. A. Normal Diversity Triangle

A = Conflict/conflict situations  
B = Personality types  
C = Cultural attributes/signals
II. Managing diversity in the Sub-Saharan African public service: approaches and contemporary issues

That the performance of the public service in Sub-Saharan Africa is generally poor is beyond doubt. What needs clarification is the factor accounting for the productivity declines. With the exception of a few shining examples of public enterprise management (the Ethiopian Airlines comes readily to mind), many of the public service agencies are notorious for delivering shoddy services at high cost and with little regard for “customer-oriented” time and quality standards. The frequent explanation for the performance shortfall is the “natural inclination” of public sector entities towards patrimonial, rent-seeking behaviour (World Bank, 2000:3; Deme, 1997: 80).

Fig. B: Conflict-inclined Diversity Triangle

A = Conflict/conflict situations
B = Personality types
C = Cultural attributes/signals
The position taken in this paper is slightly different. It is the paper’s contention that at the root of the public sector’s abysmal performance is the lack of consensus on the building blocks of a collective political culture as well as on the essential ingredients of a goal-focused, co-operative and functional system of administration. The challenge facing the public sector, therefore, is primarily that of diversity management. Undoubtedly, some countries have been more successful than others in confronting this challenge. However, rather than attempt to score the countries against what, might to all intents and purposes, turn out to be an arbitrary set of criteria, this paper merely highlights the diversity issues emerging from a survey of experiences across Sub-Saharan African countries.

**Linkage between primordial and national loyalties**

It is the view of some observers that the impact of cultures on organization behaviour has been grossly exaggerated. Citing the United Nations, as an example, McLaren (1997:60-61) states:

“If the literature expects an IGO to be rife with conflict and multicultural divisions, the actual employees of the IGO do not in general confirm this…. (Cultures) are unimportant to the conflicts and arguments that do arise; what is important to understanding the source of conflicts are the personalities and positions of people, not their cultural backgrounds.”

Whether or not cultural differences translate into conflict within organizations depend largely on what we mean by culture and conflict. As it is generally defined, culture is how a community of individuals relate their past to the present, thus providing a clue as to their likely responses to future challenges. McLaren’s earlier observation can be challenged on this ground – i.e., that it is based on the artificial separation of culture from personality.

Secondly, conflict does not always manifest as shouting matches, physical confrontations, or open declarations of war. In the context of bureaucratic organizations, conflict will not take the form that it does in the political or military domain. It will tend to be “latent” rather than manifest. In deference to their codes of conduct, civil servants will never be sighted in the corridors of power noisily organizing ethnic solidarity meetings or openly promoting religious and other divisive causes. They are apt to leave such “unprofessional” roles to proxies – traditional rulers, opinion and civic leaders, and full-time politicians. Yet, when pulled aside and assured of confidentiality, they are not unlikely to reveal their stand on burning national issues. The cultural prejudice that they have tried – sometimes, unsuccessfully – to suppress in the work place, will sooner or later come out as a topic of beer hall and informal discussions. In a relaxed atmosphere, the civil servant sometimes finds no inconsistency between, on the one hand, his oath of neutrality, and, on the other, his perceived political “marginalization” of his people and the constant belittling of his god and faith.

Certainly, a culture that allows an individual to “sell himself” at selection interviews is at variance with another enjoining reticence, and humility bordering on self-deprecation. Products of a culture that invests phenomena with a mystic purpose, uses teleological arguments to explain natural cause and effect, and equates motive with intention, will perceive authority differently from individuals who have been brought up under the rational, Hellenic, scientific
tradition (de Graft-Johnson, 1986:225-6). Some cultures encourage officials to “network” after office hours to advance their careers, while other modes of upbringing will term such an act reprehensible. That such nuances are not openly debated does not remove the fact that they are capable of generating conflict – conflict that manifests at staff meetings, in informal group discussions, as silent resistance to authority, and, possibly, as sub-optimal performance.

With specific reference to Sub-Saharan Africa, it has been noted that the interpretation given to daily occurrences provides a clue to the people’s definition of the nature of man. De Graft-Johnson for instance, regards ‘fictive thinking’, or the tendency to provide ready-made answers to puzzling or unpleasant happenings, as an African cultural attribute: “The boss falls seriously ill, and his deputy is immediately under suspicion” (de Graft-Johnson, 1997:226).

This observation is confirmed in a separate survey of African traditional values and institutions:

“It is assumed either rightly or wrongly that one person’s misfortune is brought on by the evil machinations of another. In most cases, the notorious villains are the evil spirits working hand-in-glove with the Devil.” (Balogun, 1986:202)

The argument is not that Sub-Saharan Africa is under the influence of one monolithic culture. Indeed, it is diversity rather than cultural homogeneity that emerges as the defining attribute of politics and public administration in this part of the world. While practically every Sub-Saharan African country inherited or copied a “modern” administrative system from western industrialised societies, the system has to “co-exist” with local traditional values and mores. The conflict between modernity and tradition is by itself a source of tension. This is admirably captured in de Graft-Johnson’s observation. According to him (de Graft-Johnson, 1986:320), the bureaucracy, with its stress on uniformity, collective-orientation, and affective-neutrality, is perceived, “as the ‘white man’s’ way of doing things, and therefore alien and unsympathetic to African ways and sentiments.”

If the conflict between modernity and tradition creates tension, so does the conflict among the traditional value systems. The Nigerian case study presented in the next section illustrates the tension not only between the legal-rational thrusts of the civil service bureaucracy and the African traditional mystic impulses, but also the struggle among indigenous cultures for national supremacy. Diamond identifies the latter type of tension as one major obstacle to the emergence of Nigeria as a nation-state. Instead of a people pulling in the same direction and uniting behind a common national “civic culture”, Diamond (1995) sees, “a culture of self-interest, fragmentation, exploitation, cynicism, dishonesty, and distrust – a striking absence of enduring shared commitments to the formal community.”

It is possible that Nigeria’s situation is unique. It is different in many respects from many other Sub-Saharan African countries, particularly, in terms of population size, ethnic and cultural diversity, the prevailing socio-economic circumstances, and history. All the same, the tension that comes with diversity is not confined to Nigeria; it is also discernible in varying degrees in other African countries. This is confirmed by the experience of Uganda before the National Resistance Movement took over power in 1986, and of Ethiopia after the 1991 overthrow of the former socialist regime. In South Africa, and to a lesser extent, in Namibia, the challenge goes
beyond reconciling the interests of groups making up the black population. It includes redressing the historical and racial imbalances in the composition of government departments.

Ethnic diversity is an issue, if not a factor, in the instability experienced at one time or the other by Angola, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Liberia. In many cases, diversity is viewed by each ethnic group not as an opportunity to harness and channel aggregate energies towards national development, but to claim citizenship rights while imposing all the obligations on “strangers” (Adejumobi, 2001:163-169).

In any case, before examining how some countries responded to the challenge of ethnic, racial, or regional diversity, it is essential to look at diversity from a slightly different angle – the gender angle.

**The gender focus**

Ethnic diversity and the tension accompanying it have received a lot of attention in the literature. Yet, there is another type of diversity that impacts directly on the work of public administration in Sub-Saharan Africa as it does elsewhere. This is the gender aspect of diversity. What probably accounts for the little coverage it has received is its late entry into the civil service diversity discourse, and the relatively little passion it has generated. In contrast to ethnicity or race that features prominently in political discussions, gender tends to be restricted to the implementation of agreed international conventions on the subject.

Still, and in a quiet way, women role in development is becoming a major item public policy agenda in Africa. All countries forbid discrimination based on gender. In addition, gender ministries and focal points have been established to ensure equal opportunities for women and men. Today, there are women legislators, ministers, university presidents, permanent secretaries, and managing directors of key state enterprises (See Tables 1 to 4).

Women parliamentarians constituted “only 10.4 per cent” of the total parliamentarians across Africa by January 1997 (Africa Leadership Forum, 1998). This is an improvement over the 1994 when women occupied only 8 per cent of parliamentary seats across African countries, and a mere 6 per cent of ministerial-level posts (Bekele, 2000: 255-7).

Nonetheless, and regardless of the fact that the traditional barriers to women competition in socio-economic fields are rapidly coming down, it will take some time before an equitable parity could be worked out between men and women. A number of factors account for this. For one thing, and except in a few countries, women may be twice, or even thrice, as likely to be illiterate relative to men. Admittedly, school enrolment pattern varies from one African country to another. All the same, a few countries need to institute measures aimed at closing the education gap between men and women. With 1997 as a base year, the net enrolment ratio of female/male in secondary schools for Lesotho was 122, for Namibia 108, Botswana and Mauritius, 106. This is in contrast to 31:100 for Guinea, 37 for Chad, 53 for Niger, 48 for Benin, 37 for Chad, and 31 for Guinea (UNIFEM, 2000: 68).
Table 1: Women’s Share of Seats in National Parliament, January 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
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<td>South Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
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<td>Rwanda</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eritrea</td>
<td>14.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
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<td>Zimbabwe</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Mali</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congo</td>
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<td>Lesotho</td>
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<td>Guinea-Bissau</td>
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<td>Mauritius</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Burundi</td>
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<td>Benin</td>
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Source: UNIFEM, *Progress of the World’s Women, 2000*, Table 3.3.
Table 2: Women in Parliaments, Cabinets, and Other Government Structures in SADC Region, circa 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage of women in parliament</th>
<th>Percentage of women in cabinet</th>
<th>Percentage of women in other government structures</th>
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<td>8.6</td>
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N.B. (a) 1997 figures obtained from the ECA publication cited below

Table 3: Percentage of administrative/managerial posts occupied by women in Selected African countries, 1988 - 1992

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<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N.B The decline in the proportion of female administrators between 1988 and 1992 is attributable to the countries’ preoccupation with issues such as liberalization, privatization and retrenchment – which affected women more adversely than men.


Table 4: Female Share of Paid Employment in Industry and Services in Sub-Saharan Africa (latest data available)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Female Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritius</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swaziland</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cote d’Ivoire</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNIFEM, Progress of the World’s Women, 2000, Table 3.2.
Up to now, the recruitment of women into the public service has not generated any negative reactions from their male counterparts. This is probably because the influx of women has not reached a level deemed threatening to men. If there are cases of sexual harassment, they are either few or under-reported. And with the possible exception of a few places, men have come to terms with the idea of answering to women bosses and the reality of working with female colleagues.

This is not to say that women have been fully integrated into the work place. While rules have been revised or enacted to address women concerns, the work environment is still by and large “gender blind.”

**Social change as a diversity factor and issue**

Besides primary loyalties and gender, socio-economic change provides another explanation for the complexity in managing diversity in the civil service of Sub-Saharan Africa. Increasing rates of population growth, urbanization, and literacy serve as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they expose individuals to new experiences, and by so doing, break the stranglehold of traditional values and loyalties. On the other hand, an increasing tempo of change may prove so threatening to some cherished traditional values that the adherents of such values feel the need to retreat into ancestral soil and mount a rear-guard action against “foreign” influences. Granted that the bureaucracy is not a place where individuals are free to choose whom they associate with, it is unlikely that a stubborn attachment to traditions will be an option. Yet, a diversity management formula which leaves no room for the Muslim mid-day and late afternoon modes of worship in parts of northern Nigeria, or for other socially sanctioned obligations elsewhere, will sooner or latter run into trouble.

**III. Country Case Studies**

The previous section focuses in a general way on the critical diversity issues facing Sub Saharan Africa. It thus provides a setting for the appreciation of the measures that have been adopted at one time or the other to manage diversity and its perceived consequences in the various countries. The present section briefly examines the experiences of Ethiopia, Namibia, Nigeria, and South Africa, focusing on the different lessons suggested by the countries’ approaches to diversity.

**Ethiopia**

Ethiopia is one of the countries in which the Government confronted the issue of ethnicity head on. Unlike Uganda where ethnicity and religion were perceived as threats to the survival of the nation-state, Ethiopia sees nothing wrong in acknowledging, and in fact, celebrating, differences in language, culture, and gender. In deference to the perceived will of the constituent regions and nationalities, Chapter 3, article 39, paragraphs 1 to 3 of the 1994 Constitution underscores the unconditional right of every nation, nationality, and people in the country:

“to self-determination, including the right to secession…to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express and to promote its culture and to preserve its history…to a
full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of
government in the territory that it inhabits, and equitable representation in regional and
national governments.”

The 1994 Constitution goes beyond “mainstreaming” cultural diversity in central government
structures and policies. It provides for the establishment of regional and local government
institutions staffed with persons indigenous to the local communities, and accountable to citizens
of these communities. Citizen preferences are, as a matter of policy, reflected in the formulation
and execution of local infrastructure projects, the staffing and discipline of regional police
forces, and the composition of local legislative and executive organs. The “recall” procedure
enshrined in the 1994 constitution has also gone a long way in ensuring the accountability of
officeholders to local electors (Balogun, 2000:165).

The new accent on diversity has certainly raised the profile of nationalities that might have felt
left behind in the previous dispensation. Besides providing channels for the transmission of
different cultural and linguistic signals, the new policy places emphasis on the application of an
inclusive recruitment formula – one ensuring the equitable representation of the different
nationalities and regions on central government organs, including the appointive offices. As to be
expected, attempts at reconstituting government agencies into socially representative bodies have
brought about friction between long-serving officials and the new entrants. However, efforts
have been, and are being, made to ensure that the situation does not spin out of control. Cases of
breaches of discipline are rare in the Ethiopian civil service, and government services continue to
be delivered within the limit of resources and in spite of the momentous changes taking place
within the bureaucracy and without.

Namibia

For historical reasons, the focus of diversity management in the Namibian civil service is not on
ethnic balancing – important as this may be in some other African countries. The primary
concern in Namibia is how to improve the conditions of the disadvantaged black population, and
enhance the status of women, while at the same time, assuaging the fears of the non-black
population. As in the Nigerian case reported below, discrimination of any kind is forbidden.
Article 10(2) of the Namibian constitution states that “No persons may be discriminated against
on grounds of sex, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed, or social or economic status.”

The Public Service Commission of Namibia was also established to promote the cause of
professionalism in the public service. It is empowered under Article 112 of the Constitution of
the Republic of Namibia, the Public Service Act of 1995, and the Public Service Commission
Act of 1990 to perform the following duties:

(a) To advise the President and the government on the appointment of suitable persons to
specified categories of posts in the public service, with special regard to the “balanced
structuring thereof”;

(b) To exercise adequate disciplinary control over such persons in order to ensure “the fair
administration of personnel policy”;
(c) To retire any such persons; and

(d) To advise the President about the identity and availability of suitable persons who may be appointed to such positions as the President is entitled under the Constitution or any other law to fill;

(e) To advise the President and the Cabinet on all matters which by law pertain to the public service.

Against the background of the system of inequality inherited on the country’s independence, the Government had to give high priority to the recruitment of black personnel. A lot of progress has been achieved since independence. As part of the rationalization process initiated by the Prime Minister of Namibia in 1992, 97 per cent of public service posts have been filled with members of the formerly disadvantaged groups (Republic of Namibia, 2000:38). In order to defuse the crisis triggered by rapid demobilization, the Government further launched the Peace Project under which over 9000 ex-combatants were placed in various offices, ministries and agencies (Republic of Namibia, 2000:38).

There is no doubt that the infusion of new blood into the Namibian civil service would generate tension. At the initial stage, the civil service was faced with the challenge of translating texts from Afrikaans (the language of the departing colonial administration) into English. There was also the problem of getting officials from different backgrounds to subscribe to a common administrative ethos. The country’s colonial history was not of much help, particularly, insofar as it fuelled inter-racial distrust and tension. As noted by an insider, (Cupido, 1996: 39),

“Many of the apartheid-era civil servants (white and black) did not possess high academic qualifications….The new incumbents, in contrast, felt superior because of their impressive qualifications. They (the new entrants) also distrusted some of their apartheid-era colleagues because of their (the latter’s) close identification with the previous regime. (The lack) of know-how and insecurity as to what the future holds left most people in the civil service unsure about the framework within which they should operate. This reinforced the …mutual distrust already evident in the early years of independence.”

The Wage and Salary Commission (of which the author was a member) visited different parts of the country to take stock of achievements and problems. The Commission’s overall impression was of a civil service struggling with problems. Cases of in-discipline, misuse of government property, indifferent attitude to work, and failure of supervision were among those brought to the Commission’s attention. The Commission thus felt obliged to report in part as follows (WASCOM, 1995: 47-49):

“During the period of our work, we have read with concern the analyses of the woes of the country in general which have appeared in the press. Our experience suggests that they are not far from the mark. In particular, there is a widespread misinterpretation that freedom means licence to do whatever one likes without any responsibility for those actions or the consequences…. We have come across cases of abuse of power by individuals, either to
advance the interests of their ethnic group or to satisfy (what they perceive as) their moral convictions. We condemn such actions unreservedly.”

It is gratifying to note that the Government acted promptly to halt the drift to an abyss. While a few problems remain to be tackled, the civil service of Namibia of today is not what WASCOM saw in 1994-95. The critical issues in diversity have been boldly addressed. Much of the credit for the “turn-around” must inevitably go to the sensitivity and maturity of the political leadership, as well as the spirit of reconciliation that pervaded the entire institution reconstruction process.

Nigeria

As observed earlier, each public service might exhibit the “universal” attributes of bureaucracy, but these attributes are subject to the prevailing local cultural conditions. The Nigerian public service provides an example of the clash of modern with traditional values. As provided for in section 15 (2) of the 1999 constitution, the corner-stone of state policy is national integration. Accordingly, “discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited.”

Section 153 of the same constitution lists the Federal Civil Service Commission as one of the “Federal Executive Bodies”. It is empowered to make appointments and exercise disciplinary control over the federal civil service. To guarantee the integrity of the appointment process, section 158 (1) of the constitution stipulates that, in exercising its powers, the Commission shall “not be subject to the direction or control of any other authority or person”.

Despite these elaborate provisions on the autonomy and professionalism of the civil service, recruitment into the service is not made without regard to the diversity of the country. The “federal character” policy, for instance, was introduced in response to the educational imbalance between the south and the north. It was felt that the merit system, by stressing the possession of formal qualifications, would be “identity blind”, and, in that state, would tend to exclude candidates from the “educationally disadvantaged” parts of the country. As it was politically unacceptable for a powerful institution such as the civil service to be “dominated” by a specific ethnic or geographical group, framers of the constitution began from 1979 to-date to entrench the following clause in the nation’s fundamental law:

“The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies.”

The scope and intent of this “federal character” provision have generated heated debate. Its critics regard it as a smoke screen for ethnic favouritism. Its advocates see it differently – as the only safeguard against nepotism (Balogun, 1982). In any case, as reported earlier, Section 39 (1) of the 1999 constitution specifically forbids discrimination on grounds of ethnic origin, gender, religion, or political affiliation. The only instance whereby the chief executive (the federal
The president or the state governor) could apply preferential treatment in appointments is in relation to “posts of confidence” – essentially, political, or quasi-political positions like those of minister, permanent secretary, inspector-general of police, and advisers.

The Civil Service (Reorganization) Decree 43 of 1988 sought to fine-tune the constitutional provisions on “federal character.” While reaffirming commitment to the principle of representative bureaucracy, the Decree limited the application of “federal character” to entry-level, junior management positions (then ranging from GL07 to GL 10). Thereafter, recruitment into higher-level vacancies would be strictly on merit – defined as, “experience, performance on the job, length of service, good conduct, relevant qualifications, training, interview performance, and relevant examination, where appropriate” (Civil Service Reorganization Decree, No 43, 1988). The 1988 Decree has since been amended leaving the “federal character” clause intact. It should also be noted that one of the Federal Executive Bodies listed under the 1999 constitution is the “Federal Character Commission” whose role consists essentially in ensuring that the principle of representative bureaucracy is maintained in public service appointments.

Whether Nigeria has succeeded in promoting national integration through the enforcement of the “federal character” clause of the constitution is open to debate. A senior police official, Hamman Misau, was quoted as attributing police inefficiency in part to the application of the federal character principle in staff recruitment (The Guardian Online – http://ngrguardiannews.com, Monday, April 30, 2001, p.7).

One thing is clear: the magnitude of the diversity challenge facing the country dictates responses going beyond the sharing of the fast dwindling “national cake.” At the very least, there is a need for a national ethos combining the representative features and the national integration thrusts of the “federal character” formula with the productivity and ethical focus of a modern civil service.

There is no denying the fact that the federal and the state civil services are confronted by a formidable challenge on the diversity management front. To start with, the conflict in the various groups’ world-views tends to promote relativist responses to critical ethical and professional management questions. If the anti-corruption programme of the Government has not proceeded as smoothly as originally intended, this should be blamed on the lack of consensus on the consequences of institutional decay as well as on the measures deemed adequate and appropriate to stem the rot. The new Administration appears determined to vanquish the forces of corruption, but it has a long way to go. After all, it was not far in the past when it was possible to amass “ill-gotten gain” in one part of the federation and be hailed with traditional chieftaincy titles and honours in another. And as soon as the police invites the new “chief” for explanations, his “people” will not only be quick to rise to his defence, but also to accuse “enemies” (meaning, members of rival ethnic groups) of plotting the downfall of the hard-working, upright, and generous “son of the soil.”

The mutual distrust reported by Diamond plays out in the work place. An official that is perceived as a beneficiary of the “federal character” dispensation is labelled – rightly or wrongly – incompetent, or unqualified. His mode of dress may feed the perception of “restricted accessibility” – i.e., the perception that only members of his ethnic or language group, or of his
religious order, can get anywhere near him. It is only when an “outsider” summons the courage to approach him for solutions to problems that this biased assessment of the official begins to disintegrate. This underscores the point made earlier about the need for individuals to step out of their boxes once in a while so they could see the world in a new light. It also highlights the need for those in key policy and management positions to create an environment that is conducive to dialogue and communication – in other words, open environments in which a steady flow of information disperses rumours before they being to germinate.

**South Africa**

South Africa was, like Namibia, under apartheid rule. This has implications for the post-independence affirmative action policies. It should be recalled that a Commonwealth Expert Group on Human Resource Development for a Post-apartheid South Africa had noted that close to 96 per cent of senior-level positions in the public service were held by whites. The Group further observed that the precipitate decline in the black communities’ educational standards since 1976 had contributed largely to a feeling of alienation – a feeling that drove the township resistance to apartheid. The Group then argued in favour of a “new civil service culture” - one that could “only be created if specific targets are set for black advancement in these top management positions during the transition period (Hubbard, 1992:209-212).

In theory, recruitment into the civil service of South Africa is based on merit. Thus Chapter 10, Section 195 (1) of the South African Constitution insists, among other things, that:

(a) A high standard of professional ethics must be promoted and maintained;

(b) Services must be provided impartially, fairly, equitably and without bias;

(c) An independent and impartial public service commission must be established to ensure the enforcement of high professional and ethical standards.

In practice, the South African civil service could not close its eyes to the historical imbalances referred to earlier, and the need to rectify them. Starting from 1994, the highest career post in the service – that of director-general became a post of confidence subject to be filled at the discretion of the political executive (Lungu, 1998:8-9). Unlike in other African countries where the selection of candidates to such posts was made on the advice of the civil service commission, “the South African director-general at both departmental and provincial levels is personally hand-picked by a minister and premier respectively, with partisan, if not personal, considerations weighing heavily” (Lungu, 1998:8).

However, professionalism is fast gaining ground as a factor in the recruitment, placement and promotion of civil servants. It is virtually impossible to dismiss tenured officials unless they are guilty of gross misconduct or prove totally incapable of performing their statutory duties. Only those civil servants unable or unwilling to adjust to the post-apartheid realities are likely to have a difficult tenure. By contrast, officials who provide quality service to the various segments of the population – that is, who serve the different communities without prejudice to their racial or
ethnic origins – will most likely find the Government’s policy on national reconciliation highly credible.

IV. Conflict and collaboration in public institutions: a summation and a proposal

Conflict is a fact of organizational life. The success of an organization hinges on how far this conflict can be transformed into productive energies before the force of gravity pulls the organization in unwanted and undesirable directions. If the experience of Sub Saharan Africa offers any lesson, it is that closing the gap between knowledge and perceptions is a major component of a successful diversity management strategy. This underscores the need for a new analytic framework, the broad outline of which is presented below.

A framework for diversity management

The foregoing analysis reveals that diversity management relates not only to the measures adopted to construct or reconstruct government structures, policies, and programmes in the society’s image, but also to the actions taken by policy makers and senior career officials in managing the attendant conflict. Contemporary organization theory does not provide a framework that adequately captures the transactions taking place within this dynamic situation. Besides the works highlighting ‘multiple loyalties’ and cultures as an issue in the management of international organizations (Guetzkow, 1955; Jordan, 1971; Martin, 1992; and McLaren, 1997), there are few empirical studies tracing the relationship between diversity and organizational impact in Sub-Saharan Africa. At the very least, there is a need for an analytic framework incorporating the following diversity parameters and variables:

(a) **Scope and pattern of diversity** (population characteristics, diversity patterns and dis-aggregation, inter-group feelings and relations, conflict threshold and tolerance level; conflict resolution mechanisms).

(b) **Perception of diversity** (whether diversity is perceived by key actors as a “threat” or a “strength”; policies indicating whether diversity is “fully accepted and/or celebrated”, “viewed as a *fait accompli*”, “simply tolerated”, “banned/frowned upon” or handled with “benign neglect”; types of diversity accepted, barely tolerated and outlawed).

(c) **Policy and institutional measures in support of, or at variance with, diversity** (legal instruments relating to equal opportunities, quotas, set-asides, open, competitive bidding, as well as mutual reinforcement or internal inconsistency of the documents).

(d) **The impact of (a) – (c) on inter-personal and group relations** (survey of individual and group perceptions of policies, the fairness and transparency of rules application processes, and management styles, otherwise termed “moodwatch” or “diversity barometer”).
the consequences of (a) – (d) for the prevailing “management culture” and for productivity growth and overall development (this tracks the impact of diversity management processes on the “management culture” and on productivity gains/losses); and

remedial measures (diversity training and counselling, legislative actions and/or amendments, establishment of open and transparent decision mechanisms, inauguration of “cultural exchange” forum, etc.)

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