

# Towards advancing African management scholarship

African  
management  
scholarship

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to address the main arguments put forward in Grietjie Verhoef’s article and contribute to a wider debate among management scholars on the role of indigenous theories. It challenges the view of African management as illusory and points to the rising support for indigenous theories as indicative of the weakening of the unquestioned dominance of universal theories.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper takes a conceptual and critically reflective approach, underpinned by a 360-degree evaluation of pertinent literature and theoretical arguments.

**Findings** – This paper reveals an underlying symmetry and interconnectedness, anchored on a shared communal ethos, among Afrocentric management concepts, specifically Ubuntu, Ekpe and Igbo apprenticeship systems. This symmetry points to an underlying indigenous management theory that begs to be further conceptualised, evidenced and advanced.

**Research limitations/implications** – This paper affirms Verhoef’s demand for Ubuntu, Ekpe, Igbo apprenticeship system to be more rigorously developed and theoretically coherent and urges scholars to intensify effort towards advancing the conceptual and empirical foundations of African management. Echoing Mahatma Gandhi’s timeless counsel, this paper calls on critics of African management to join the effort to bring about the change they wish to see in African management theorising.

**Social implications** – This paper disavows the alleged effort to impose a single “African management” model or perpetuate the “colonial/indigenous” binary divide but equally cautions against an effort to veto scholarly striving for a common identity, to learn from history or not embrace collective amnesia. As examples from the USA and Europe show, diversity, even heterogeneity, needs not to preclude the forging of a commonly shared identity complemented with appropriate sub-identities.

**Originality/value** – This paper links the African management-centred themes addressed by Verhoef to the wider debate among management scholars about lessening the dominance of universal theories and allowing space for context-resonant indigenous theories. It calls on African management scholars to invest the premium and intensified effort towards building a more robust and coherent body of indigenous theory that will have the capacity and efficacy to inform, explain and advance organisational practice and outcomes across Africa.

**Keywords** African management, Indigenous theories, Context, Ubuntu, Ekpe, Igbo, Africapitalism

Paper type Research paper

## Introduction

The challenge of advancing African management thought in a world resonant with globalising impulses has, in recent years, generated a great deal of scholarly discussion in management and organisation studies (Amaeshi and Idemudia, 2017; Eyong, 2019; Jackson *et al.*, 2008; Barnard, 2020; Hamann *et al.*, 2020; Zoogah *et al.*, 2015; Prieto and Phipps, 2020).

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Although some scholars champion the development and application of indigenous African practices, others encourage better integration into universal theories and practices. Grietjie Verhoef's article entitled "*The management discourse: collective or strategic performance drive?*" – a hard-hitting deconstruction of what the author pejoratively referred to as the *holy grail or phoenix of African Management* – draws us into this debate. The paper makes four substantial claims. Firstly, it contends that some African scholars are unwisely fixated on *chasing the phoenix of African management* instead of leveraging the global pool of knowledge to drive up organisational outcomes across Africa. Next, it suggests that scholars are bent on *imposing a single ideologically constructed "African management" model* (p. 22) rather than acknowledging the "diverse and dynamic nature of management in modern African firms" (p. 21). Third, that the philosophy of Ubuntu is not *sufficiently evidenced to form a coherent body of knowledge* (p. 20), and finally, that seeking a unique African management model is tantamount to *a fixation on the past and perpetuating "colonial/indigenous" binary divide of the colonial era* (p. 21).

The arguments advanced in the aforementioned paper are robust, extensively researched and persuasive in places. However, the tone sometimes borders on caustic. In our view, the repeated use of the "so-called African renaissance" is unnecessary. Admittedly, sections of the advocacy for African management identity reek of emotion and nostalgia for Africa's pre-colonial heritage, but critical questioning of such bygone era, even if romanticised, ought not to have morphed into disdain. The commentary on privatisation exercise also hints at a reluctance to acknowledge historical injustice and a contrasting willingness to label African actors, not entirely unjustifiably, as corrupt (pp.19–20). Surely, most readers know that the link between privatisation exercises and corruption is far from being a unique African phenomenon. [Barnard \(2020\)](#) makes a great point about the need for emotion to be deployed as fuel to drive rather than fumes to obfuscate. These words strike us as relevant in this context.

To paraphrase the famous African writer, Chinua Achebe, African management is yet on the morning of its creation day. It, therefore, needs to advance its empirical and evidence base and demonstrate its efficacy and impact on the indices that really matter. It must go beyond erudite advocacy to produce real value by, for example, influencing the emergence of exemplar economies and organisations, creating sustainable jobs and promoting well-being across Africa. That said, scholars deserve the space to propagate and advance African management thought.

The rest of this paper is organised into five parts. The first four identify and respond to each of the weighty claims outlined above. The final section concludes with reflections on advancing African management theorising.

### Is African management an illusory quest?

Verhoef thinks so, even likening African management, albeit implicitly, to the apocryphal *Loch Ness Monster* of the Scottish folklore. The contention that seeking to rediscover indigenous African management theories would be less beneficial to African scholarship and organisational and entrepreneurial outcomes than embracing universal management theories is shared by other critics of African management ([Bolden and Kirk, 2009](#)). Not surprisingly, this position is rejected by African management advocates ([Kuada, 2010](#); [Nkomo, 2017](#); [Ayittey, 1991](#); [Ahluwalia, 2001](#); [Jackson et al., 2008](#); [Barnard, 2020](#); [George et al., 2016](#); [Hamminga, 2005](#); [Nkomo, 2017](#); [Zoogah et al., 2015](#)), including scholars exploring Africa-inspired approaches to leadership and enterprise ([Adeola, 2020](#); [Darley and Luethge, 2019](#); [Eyong, 2017, 2019](#); [Hamann et al., 2020](#); [Koenane, 2018](#); [Osiri, 2020](#); [Zoogah, 2020](#)).

This schism reflects a wider ongoing debate in the management field. Although scholars have long assumed that universal Western theories apply to a wide range of contexts (Mills, 1959) – a viewpoint sustained by leading journals through their hostility to explanations other than universal theories – critics have pointed to these theories' limited relevance to many different world settings and their nonreflection of the realities managers and people face in their daily decision-making. These critics are increasingly urging scholars to develop indigenous theories that better capture the distinctiveness of local contexts (Bruton *et al.*, 2021).

There is no doubting the intuitive appeal and merit of adopting or adapting universal management theories and applying established principles and practice. However, as Verhoef surely knows, contextual dissonance advises against wholesale adoption of universal theories. The assumption that the more an African entrepreneur exhibits prototypical Anglo-Saxon individualism, materiality and teleological thinking (Burrell and Morgan 1979), the more successful they will become (Kuada, 2010), reflects a blasé view of the differences between sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and the Western contexts from which these theories originated. As Bruton *et al.* (2021) and Filatotchev *et al.* (2021) recently argued, the assumption that universal theories developed based on Western realities are widely applicable is likely to be “inaccurate in some (or many different) settings since such theories in fact emerged and are locked into their own specific cultural and ideological context” (Bruton *et al.*, 2021, p. 3). These authors further posited indigenous theories as better placed than universal ones to offer unique and often nuanced understandings of different contextualised settings and questions that management scholarship has not adequately addressed, such as the causes of persistent poverty and underdevelopment.

African management advocates point to the relatively weak state of African economies and organisations despite the dominance of Western-inspired management knowledge (Inyang, 2008; Koenane, 2018; Nkomo, 2011) and disregard for indigenous African knowledge or Global South insight (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1993), as a strong indication that doing more of the same is unlikely to advance the continent. If these scholars' response to the perceived failure of the universal management orthodoxy is to promote African-centred notions of management, develop context-resonant knowledge (Mji *et al.*, 2020; Nkomo, 2017) or theorise around indigenous African management notions like Ubuntu and Ekpe (Fenton, 2012) or adapted Western versions such as *Africapitalism* (Amaeshi and Idemudia, 2017), they ought to be afforded a respectful hearing rather than be dismissed. Their efforts must neither be negated Ahluwalia (2001), Ayittey (1991) nor deprecated.

Indeed, given the legacy of deprecation associated with the Euro-African encounter, as exemplified by Lugard's condescending denigration of the African manager for adapting to survive colonial subjugation [1], contemporary scholars ought to resist the temptation to replicate Lugard's posture. African management scholars' opposition to the hegemony of universal theories in Africa could be understood from this perspective. As they see it, ideological independence has become imperative not only because of the historic deprecation of African managers for abnegating their authentic self during colonial subjugation but also the continuing disrespect African actors attract for inclusively adopting the “other” and the “self” in hybridity and mimicry (Bhabha, 1994).

We are not fans of the *West versus Africa* narrative that sometimes appears in African management scholarship, but we robustly defend the right of scholars to advance their arguments and to be heard rather than dismissed. The challenge is facing champions of African management, though not an insubstantial one, is that of evidencing the efficacy and impact of approaches being put forward on actual organisations and entities across Africa. The high-octane advocacy on African management must go beyond providing an emotional lift. It must empirically show how these new or rediscovered indigenous management

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concepts can lead to value creation or addition, or influence the emergence of exemplar African economies and corporations, create sustainable jobs or promote organisational or individual well-being. Producing enhanced insights into how indigenous and naturalised Africans behave as managers and why they behave the way they do could be helpful, but an additional understanding of how such behaviour might impact organizational, individual and national outcomes would be even more fruitful.

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#### African identity and the homogeneity–heterogeneity question

If, as Verhoef argues, a single African management identity built around the indigenous majority is being imposed on a racially, culturally and linguistically diverse continent, this would attract our unequivocal opposition. We agree that the questions, “*What is African? Who are Africans?*” should best be answered in an inclusive and adaptive sense *and* in a manner that literally puts an arm around all Africans irrespective of backgrounds or backstories.

However, this perspective does not need to nullify the quest for an African identity or African management. Europe has forged and continues to sustain a common European identity despite the significant presence of other racial and linguistic groups, including Africans, Turks, Asians and Latinos and significant sociopolitical differences. European management thought has continued to be widely researched, propagated and disseminated. Furthermore, the USA, despite being the classic land of immigrants, inhabited by a melange of races, tongues and tendencies, has always strived for defining American identity. Representations such as Italian Americans, African Americans, Jewish Americans, Asian Americans and Cuban Americans are a nod to the differences, but these sub-identities are subsumed under a proudly shared American identity. The latter reflects a passion to prioritise and focus on the common bonds and experiences in a shared geographic space. Therefore, the prevalence of racial or linguistic differences or tendencies across Africa ought not to obviate the pursuit of a shared African identity. To insist otherwise would amount to emasculating the majority or vetoing their ability to even have a say.

That said, African management identity must develop organically rather than be imposed. Whilst the discourse must understandably focus on the indigenous population, insight from other racial constituents in Africa’s current geographic space, notably European and Indian communities, ought to be actively sought and incorporated. African management must not be viewed solely from the lens of indigenous African cultures and traditions as that would amount to ignoring the reality of cultural hybridisation [Bhabha \(1994\)](#) dating back, at least, to the colonial era. European Africans, Indian Africans and other racial groupings across Africa must have the space and support to sustain their dual heritage or multiple identities. Verhoef’s arguments about the polarising and exclusionary nature of the advocacy for African management require due consideration, but it must be noted that the claim that African management scholarship “does not address the diverse and dynamic nature of management in modern African firms” appears to be refuted by the range of perspectives reflected in articles published in the *Africa Journal of Management* (AJOM).

We next turn to the issue of Africa’s claimed heterogeneity. Reflecting Western-inspired social anthropology and geography literature, the picture is painted of a heterogeneous and fragmented Africa without a discernible identity, and which is rife with *multi-racial and multi-ethnic* societies (p.1), including European and Indian African communities. A cursory examination of available evidence appears to challenge this characterisation. As previous research posits, apart from European and Indian Africans, the entire SSA population spread across 46 countries can be reduced to two groups, Bantu and semi-Bantus ([Ningaye, 2011](#); [Inyang, 2008](#)).

Furthermore, a recent extensive paleontological and genetic study of 44 populations across SSA reports that “almost all African languages can be classified into four foundation languages: Afro-asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo and Khoesan” (Fan *et al.*, 2019, p. 10). This reinforces much earlier finding that several communities in present-day SSA exhibit similar cultures and traditions and broadly speak similar languages. The Swahili language, for instance, is spoken entirely or in sections of ten African countries (Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Malawi, Somalia, Zambia, Mozambique and Democratic Republic of Congo). The Hausa language is also spoken in Northern Nigeria as well as Chad, Niger and Cameroon. The foregoing suggests far less heterogeneity, that is, often suggested, debunking the notion of *impossible unity*.

It is important to note that perfectly homogeneous groups or entities are a myth. Even families are rarely homogeneous. The challenge, therefore, is to constantly focus on and emphasise common grounds and shared characteristics rather than the inevitable fissures. We, indeed, wonder at the apparent contradiction between calling for convergence towards universal management theory and contrastingly advocating for divergence away from a common African management identity.

### The trail of Ubuntu

Verhoef’s critique of Ubuntu as lacking empirical backing and sufficient coherence to constitute a credible theory of African management identity is eminently persuasive. However, it appears to ignore the reality that no management theory is perfect and that no knowledge system qualifies as completely representative of all the peoples, regions, traditions and customs it purports to epitomise. The representativeness charge has been addressed in the preceding section, so it will not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that the notion of Ubuntu as an African philosophy does not imply that all its dimensions or practices are shared by all Africans or that it *represents all nooks and crannies of, or voices and persuasions across, Africa*. That has never been the standard for judging representativeness or the balance of public opinion. Indeed, in most mature democracies, national elections or referenda are not infrequently won with less than 30% voters’ support. Belittling Ubuntu on the basis that it is practised in a handful of African countries is mistaken. What is more, the countries identified actually constitute over a third of the African population rather than the suggested 9%.

Turning then to the arguments on Ubuntu’s empirical rigour and theoretical coherence, we reiterate our agreement with Verhoef’s view that African management concepts, the most famous of which is Ubuntu need more robust research to evidence their efficacy. The litmus test for Ubuntu has to be whether its adoption leads to improved outcomes and whether robust empirical evidence or case studies (Eyong (2019) can be adduced to demonstrate its favourable influence on sustainable performance at organisational, individual or national levels. Such efficacy tests must also apply to recently reported indigenous traditions and customs on trade, relationships and governance prevalent in communities across western and central Africa (Adeola, 2020; Eyong, 2017; Osiri, 2020). These markers are needed to enhance Ubuntu’s prospect of joining the pantheon of emerging indigenous theories (Bruton *et al.*, 2021), the most notable of which are Confucianism and Taoism focused theories (Chung *et al.*, 2015; Jiang, 2018; McElhatton and Jackson, 2012; Prince, 2005; Sun, 2016).

Having clarified as above, our focal article’s response to Ubuntu’s observed imperfections must be called out as unhelpful. Rather than join other scholars *labouring in the vineyard* to develop and offer African management notions to the world or redress rightly identified empirical gap (Eyong, 2017; Nkomo, 2017; Karsten and Illa, 2005;

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Fenton, 2012), the paper chose to brutally debunk Ubuntu and canvass continuing adherence to universal management theories, which serve to perpetuate African scholars' role as intellectual consumers (George *et al.*, 2016).

What would be more productive, in our view, is to focus on identifying aspects of management thought and practice from Africa, indigenous and otherwise, that have the potential to advance positive organisational and societal outcomes. Surely, who would object to elevating newly emerging concepts with a demonstrable track record of making things better irrespective of their origins? From the Japanese *Kanban* to Chinese *Guanxi* to mention a few, management scholarship has shown itself to be receptive to new concepts with demonstrable effectiveness. Ubuntu could, with some work, join that emerging band of indigenous theories (Bruton *et al.*, 2021), as is the Igbo apprenticeship system (Osiri, 2019, 2020), the focus of a recently released report by Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Nigeria. Management scholars focusing on Africa should be looking to conceptualise and advance Africa's contribution to management thought, theories and discourse. Colleagues such as Barnard appear to be fruitfully engaged in such germane pursuit, showing in a recent paper, for example, how religion is being used across Africa as a substitute institutional framework (Barnard and Mamabolo, 2021).

This endeavour should not be about romanticising Africa's image on emotional or patriotic grounds. We also discourage such effort, just as we strongly reject any insinuation that no important management insight can be gleaned from indigenous African cultures and traditions (Adeola, 2020; Eyong, 2017; Osiri, 2020). Indigenous Africa, to be sure, produced historic empires such as Mali and Songhai empires and created wonders of the earth such as the great mosque of Timbuktu. It seems unfair; therefore, to imply that there is nothing to be learned from Africa about organisation and management.

The argument that Ubuntu's ideals of humanism and communalism are not exclusive to Africa is uncontested in this piece. As Metz (2015) and Parker (2003) have argued, other worlds always have semblances of cultural and traditional features claimed by humans elsewhere. The present authors are in no doubt that Africa or Ubuntu's proponents would willingly share any plaudits accruing from the recent heightened global focus on inclusiveness and community, including the recently elected Japanese PM's pledge of a new, more distributive capitalism (BBC, 2021), with humanists from the other parts of the world.

Societies or cultures tend not to be entirely one thing or the other but variations along a spectrum (Metz, 2015; Parker, 2003; Zoogah, 2020). The issues under discussion are far from binary. Africa is neither entirely humanistic and communalistic, nor is the West entirely efficiency-driven, output maximising or soulless (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Verhoef is right to note that individualistic pursuit of profit is not alien to Africa and that the spread of African multinational enterprises across the continent reflects their market-oriented drive for productivity, efficiency, growth and profitability to a larger extent than Ubuntu. Nevertheless, if, as is increasingly the case, some African scholars choose to challenge the Darwinian management world (Ford *et al.*, 2008) and offer Ubuntu's humanistic approach (Khoza, 2012) as a partial or full alternative, they ought to be heard and fairly critiqued.

Make the colonial-indigenous binary history?

The observation that pursuing an Afrocentric vision of management romanticises pre-colonial Africa and *perpetuates the earlier "colonial/indigenous" binary divide of the colonial era* (p. 21) is an interesting one. The risk of looking at the past with a tinted lens is definitely real and must be guarded against, but one wonders whether scholars are being urged to ingest a collective amnesia pill and not learn from Africa's history. What then is the essence of the great discipline of history if it is not about drawing upon the past and the present to

inform the future? As Frantz Fanon memorably cautioned us all, forgetting the past condemns one to not knowing the present and the future. Thus, understood, management scholars should neither abandon their heritage nor be held hostage by it but must seek effective ways of learning from the past and present to achieve better future outcomes.

The quest for an African management identity should be viewed and understood in that light. Not as a post-colonial repudiation or act of resistance to the prevalent Western orthodoxy (Gore, 2018), but as a positive effort at self-discovery and heritage treasure-hunting by a more confident and unfettered scholarly community aiming to contribute to and make a mark on the global tapestry of knowledge. Such historical learning must, however, not be grievance-driven and overly focused on the many wrongs of Africa's colonial experience. There is arguably a limited role for the latter kind of *remembering* in a *Never Again* sense, but this must not be a substitute for a positive enunciation of what African management is about. The focal article's seeming dubiety of the "historical' legacies of discrimination" (p. 20) is unhelpful but would attract no further attention in this paper.

### Conclusions on advancing African management theorising

Reflecting the largely uncontested view that knowledge is power, its presentation and positioning are understandably often burdened by political undercurrents and perceptions thereof. The perceived North–South epistemological imperialism and marginalisation in knowledge production, or what Bhabha (1994) refers to as "none-sensing [of] other cultures and traditions", is illustrative. It is also not surprising that the worldwide dominance of universal theories Johns (2006) and their influence of an academic process in which researchers, irrespective of context, are nudged into "seeing the world in one colour" (Guba and Lincoln, 2005: 212), is increasingly being challenged.

It is encouraging, however, that some of the leading management journals have recognised *the error of their ways* and are beginning to redress this longstanding shut-out of indigenous theories, including Afrocentric ones (Hamann *et al.*, 2020). There is, thus, an opportunity for scholars committed to advancing indigenous theories, including African management scholars, to step up with robust "indigenous research"[2] Van de Van *et al.* (2018) to shape or at least influence the future of knowledge production.

Returning to the context of this paper, the recent unearthing by African management scholars of historical relics, narratives, mythology and monographs of pre-colonial African explorers Hutchinson (1855), Lander and Lander (1830), Livingstone (1875), Park (1799) and Stanley (1886) and the ongoing sense-making to better understand indigenous African management and social governance systems appear promising. For example, the egalitarian, communal and shared leadership approach revealed by the Lander brothers' diary entry[3] reinforces the ontological and epistemological worldview of SSA communities prior to Western contact. This management approach may have hibernated after the arrival of Europeans Davenport and Saunders (2000) or Indians in South Africa and elsewhere (Moodley, 2020; Thiara, 2001), but has not disappeared, as suggested by the Ubuntu philosophy Karsten and Illa (2005) and *Ekpe* concept (Fenton, 2012; Tangban, 2003), a leadership approach characterised by multiple leaders rather than one at the top of an organisation or institution (Eyong, 2017). The symmetry and interconnectedness between these management concepts and the socioecological reality of the African context point to an underlying theory demanding further development.

The communal ethos of the *Igbo* apprenticeship system (Iwara *et al.*, 2019; Chinweuba and Ezeugwu, 2017; Ejo-Orusa and Mpi, 2019; Ekesiobi *et al.*, 2018; Kanu, 2019; Osiri, 2020) further suggest a common underlying theory. Also referred to as the *Igbo Traditional*

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*Business School* (Adeola, 2020) or *Entrepreneurial Webbing*, this concept entails a process whereby an established trader, *oga* or *madam*, takes other family members or nonrelatives under their wing for business training over a number of years. During the service period, the apprentice or *nwa boyi*, (apprentice) learns the business trade and is accommodated and catered for by the *oga* or *madam*. At the end of the agreed service period, the trainee is rewarded with some capital to start a business of their own, transiting, thus, to a new venture founder-owner (Adeola, 2020; Iwara et al., 2019).

The communal management ethos reflected in the aforementioned historical artefacts, the Ubuntu and Ekpe concepts and the Igbo apprenticeship system all point to an underlying indigenous management theory that begs to be further strengthened and advanced. Such an indigenous theory, given its context specificity, relevance and realism (Bruton et al., 2021), may do a better job of addressing questions about the persistence of poverty and underdevelopment in Africa and beyond (Inyang, 2008). The African management scholarly community, notably The African Academy of Management and AJOM, have rightly been at the forefront of advancing African management thought and articulating the implications of Africa's contextual realities on management practice and theory development. This is laudable, but, as noted a few times already, much more research effort is needed to push African management scholarship to reach its full potential.

The aforementioned community must lead the charge towards building more robust indigenous African management theories that exhibit a significant capacity to inform business and organisational practice. This calls for intensified research effort to conceptually crystallise extant African management concepts and to advance these into a coherent body of impactful knowledge. It also demands thorough, 360-degree interrogation of African management ideas, even celebrated indigenous practices such as the Igbo apprenticeship system and Africapitalism (Adegbite et al., 2020; Ouma, 2020). African management scholars should not shy away from unflattering discoveries as these may also help to advance African management theories and scholarship. Despite our critique of aspects of Verhoef's paper, we actually welcome the intervention and agree on the need for more theoretical coherence. Paraphrasing Mahatma Gandhi, we respectfully urge critics of African management to join the effort to bring about the change they wish to see in African management theorising.

#### Notes

1. For instance, Lugard, a British colonial administrator and later Governor-General of Nigeria (1912–19), famously described the African manager as follows: "Lacks the power of organization and is conspicuously deficient in the management and control alike of men or business. He loves the display of power but fails to realise its responsibility [...] he will work hard with a less incentive than most races" (Lugard, 1929;70).
2. Van de Van et al. (2018) define "indigenous research" as scientific studies of local phenomena using local language, local subjects and locally meaningful constructs, with the aim to build or test theories that can explain and predict the phenomena in their local social and cultural contexts'.
3. The Lander brothers, Africa's most impactful explorer, wrote; thus: "*There is hardly any knowing who is monarch here or even what form of government prevails. Besides the king of kings himself, four fellows assume the title of royalty [...] Very little ceremony is observed by the people towards their sovereign, they converse with him with as little reserve as if he were no better than themselves*" (Lander and Lander, 1830:45 and 47).



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