This case-study attempts to describe and analyze perceptions on moral leadership education in a small international university, located close to Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa. Based on the collected data, it attempts to make recommendations for the development of moral leadership in our future African leaders while taking into account their African worldview.
African Perceptions on Moral Leadership: A Case-Study in a West-African University

Introduction

Moral leadership seems to have come closer to the center stage of reflections on the quality of leadership for which students are being trained in universities. However, Deborah L. Rhode (2006), in the introduction to her book Moral Leadership: The Theory and Practice of Power, Judgment and Policy, claims that although much has been written on moral leadership, only very limited research has focused on developing field research on this theme beyond the anecdotal level.

This paper attempts to describe and analyze perceptions on moral leadership education in a small international university, the International University of Grand-Bassam (www.iugb.org), located close to Abidjan in Côte d’Ivoire, West Africa. Based on the collected data, it will attempt to make recommendations for the development of moral leadership in our future African leaders.

Côte d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast) is a country that has been war ridden from 1999 until 2011, for political reasons. The International University of Grand-Bassam (IUGB) was founded in 2005 as a sister university of the Georgia State University. To date, over 350 students have enrolled in two schools, the school of Arts, Science and Technology (ASTEC) and the School of Business, International Relations and Economic Policy (BIREP). The majority of students attending the university are Ivorian, but a growing number of foreign students have enrolled from all over Africa and other non-African countries. One of the significant characteristics of the Ivorian students is that most of them spent their teenage years in a climate of political and ethnic conflict. One wonders how these students can become a new generation of leaders.
A qualitative methodological approach has been adopted for this research in order to elucidate responses from students on the theme of moral leadership. Students from three core classes (Sociology, Psychology and Critical Thinking) offered at the freshmen and sophomore levels have been asked to respond ‘for free’, i.e. not for a grade, to seven questions\(^1\) that were e-mailed to them on this theme. Out of fifty-six students who were sent the questionnaire, thirty-six responded, i.e. 66% of that group of students. They represent 16 females (44%) and 20 males (66%), mostly freshmen and sophomores. The high response rate demonstrates that the subject of moral leadership is a primary concern.

**Defining Moral Leaders**

In order to assess students’ preliminary understanding of moral leadership, students were asked to define a moral leader. Three main points of convergence seem to come out of students’ responses.

The first and strongest is that the moral leader is values driven, making choices at the expense of his personal benefit. Such a leader will have thought through ethical guidelines for his/her role and will live by his/her beliefs. Among these, the concept of fairness and justice was mentioned several times as being the underlying value that will need special commitment from the leader. As a consequence, the moral leader is someone “who makes decisions based on fairness and morality”\(^2\). Although these students have not yet taken a philosophy class (except for their high school studies) it is interesting to note that they seem to be intuitively aware of at least two of the barriers that David Messick (2010) referred to in his chapter *Ethical Judgment and Moral Leadership*,\(^3\) i.e. the need to maintain “one’s conviction of moral rectitude and objectivity.”\(^4\) This does imply that morality has been reflected upon, that the moral leader will have put thought and effort into defining his/her guiding moral principles, especially that of fairness.

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\(^1\) See Appendix: *Moral Leadership Questionnaire*

\(^2\) Quote from students’ responses to the *Moral Leadership Questionnaire*


\(^4\) Ibid. p. 110.
Secondly, students mentioned the need for the moral leader to be a role-model, an example to those who are led. They pointed out that while being this role-model, it is important for the moral leader to focus on those who are led and act responsibly towards them. Such a leader will take on the responsibility to speak up on behalf of those whom he leads. In the above mentioned chapter, Messick also points out that the moral leader needs to display moral courage to move against the tide, risk unpopularity, and thus become a leader who points out a new direction. By walking off the beaten path, he will serve as an example and encouragement to those who do not feel they have a voice. As a role-model and example, such a leader becomes inspirational for his followers, which brings us to the next reflection.

A moral leader, according to these student responses, inspires others, brings his followers together, nurtures them, and increases their capacity for learning. A couple of students also mentioned the need for a moral leader to serve those who are led, thus demonstrating self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Such a leader will take on the responsibility to speak up on behalf of those whom he leads. It was very interesting to note that, intuitively, these students were referring to some of the very specific characteristics of a transformational leader who, according to Bass and Riggio (2006), displays the following four characteristics: Having a positive charisma or idealized influence based on strong and solid morality, being a source of inspirational motivation, challenging assumptions and encouraging intellectual stimulation, and paying individual attention to his/her followers' needs. Thus, the question arises: is the moral leader a transformational leader – or even, are the two concepts of moral leadership and transformational leadership interchangeable? Kirk O. Hanson (2008) seems to agree when he writes: "Moral leadership usually involves transformation, for example, by introducing a people to a new moral value or calling out behavior from the group consistent with a moral value that is not currently practiced."
The Five Top Qualities of a Moral Leader

In the second question, students were asked to identify the five top qualities of a moral leader. The intent of this question was to focus more specifically on the very specific values that students would look for in a moral leader and that they could emulate. As students reflect on the values that they were hoping for in a moral leader, they could also reflect on whether and how they would be displaying those values.

As students are coming from a geographical area that is ranked high for corruption by Transparency International\(^5\), it is not surprising that the quality that had the highest rating was that of honesty or integrity. Students mostly used these two words, or some related concepts, like having a high sense of justice or equity. This top quality received twice as many references as the second one with thirty-two references. This ratio does confirm that this is a high-ranking preoccupation for students. Thus, the challenge remains for us as educational leaders to reflect on how to best equip students with role-models, tools, and strategies to develop integrity and become the moral leaders they envision.

The second quality referred to was that of respect with fifteen references, followed closely by the third one, that of being responsible (fourteen references). Humility, service, care to other people was then referred to (thirteen references). All these qualities refer to the leader’s relationship with those led. As we review these qualities mentioned over and over again by our students, we realize that their perception of moral leadership is not at all related with the transactional, i.e. the top-down, authoritarian leadership models they grew up with. On the contrary, one can witness their deep yearning for much more meaningful and deep relationships with the groups that they will lead. One can note that we are in an African context, where relationships are so much more important than productivity. These students’ longing for positive, adult-to-adult relationships with their colleagues no doubt results from

\(^5\) Ivory Coast is ranked 130\(^{th}\) out of 176 in the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (http://www.transparency.org/country#CIV) in 2012.
their experiences during the Ivorian war years, or even from their position as silent spectators of other African conflicts. Valuing humans with dignity, respect, and honor goes far beyond achieving personal material, financial, or even political goals for these students.

Finally, the aptitude for critical thinking – interestingly enough, in my educator’s eyes – or having wisdom showed up in at least ten references in their list of the top five qualities of a moral leader. This emphasis on the need to demonstrate higher-level intellectual capacities supports their reference to the intellectual nurturing that appeared in the definitions of a moral leader. Judy Chartrand and Mark Rose (2008) point out six core critical thinking skills that make great leaders that can be connected to the different levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy: explanation, self-regulation, interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference – the latter which leads to the development of creativity. In the many decisions that a leader must make, critical thinking skills will be a non-negotiable component of the decision making process.

The Importance of Developing Moral Leaders for Africa

In the third question, students were asked to assess the importance of developing moral leaders for Africa. It is very interesting to note that twenty-six responses focused on the desire and the dream for the development of the African continent. There seems to be a very strong yearning among our students for a developed African society where African resources would benefit the African population, where economies would be sustainable, where the countries of this continent would represent a voice that would be as credible as from the Northern continents. Students have been made aware of the barriers to the development of their countries. They have watched how conflicts and wars keep their country from developing. They have this hope and desire to make sure that their contributions to African leadership will have a positive impact on the economies of their nations so that their descendants will have a better place to live and to study. As these students experience a much higher exposure to American and international educational perspectives, cultures, and economies, one can hope that they will acquire the needed
strategies to become global moral leaders who will bring back to their country of origin skills and knowledge. As Zeleza (2005) points out, the African Diaspora needs to work at moving from *brain drain* to *brain gain* (p. 223) and thus contribute to the development of their country of origin. As future moral leaders, our students need to be made more acutely aware of that moral imperative.

The second highest response was to avoid violence, conflicts, and wars and to develop peace and harmony (nine responses). One does not need to take much time to understand that this is a high-level motivator for young people who have grown up during wars and times of violence. Bush (2007) explains the importance of this value by referring to two typically African leadership models: the first described by Mbgi (1997) called *Ubuntu* that places emphasis on African “collective personhood and collective morality” and the second, *Legkodla* (p. 403), where mutual trust is a key component of decision making processes.

The third strongest response was the avoidance of corruption. This concern has already been identified earlier in the paper when discussing students’ definition of a moral leader. It is encouraging to note that this generation of students, despite having gone through wars for a decade in their lives, seems to be moving strongly forward with an unshakable vision for the development of their continent.

**The Likelihood of Becoming a Moral Leader**

The fourth question required students to assess the likelihood that they will become a moral leader. Thirteen students thought that there was an 80% to 100% chance that they would become a moral leader, while ten were in the average bracket of 40% to 70%. Fourteen students either responded too vaguely to the question or not at all. A couple of students expressed discouragement. For example: “When I see how things go down such as war everywhere, famine,… I’m just discouraged and want to change things.” Generally
speaking, students do seem to feel somewhat overwhelmed by the huge tasks in front of them as they anticipate their lives as moral leaders of Africa.

The fourth question brought the most ‘blank’ answers in the whole questionnaire. Perhaps it is because students have not been exposed to many moral leaders in the political or economic arenas. Or, it might have frightened students to either face their lack of capacity to become a moral leader, or they may not be convinced that they want to work at becoming a moral leader. They have witnessed that becoming a moral leader is synonymous with unpopularity and rejection. A sizable number of students were in the average bracket (ten). Maybe this was the reality check question. They may not feel that they are ready or strong enough to respond to the challenge in a positive way. Altogether, one clearly feels that the whole group is not ‘on board’ to aspire to become a moral leader.

Jim Sterba (n.d.) points out the difficulties in opposing moral injustices in the world and in finding followers who also would take such risks. However, he does not examine the sources of strength of moral leaders. This is where the issue of the inspiration of the moral leader needs to be discussed. Where does a moral leader derive his/her strength, dynamism, energy, and vision?

Perhaps, the most appropriate place to look is the soul of the leader. How does a moral leader nourish his/her soul to find the resources to remain a moral leader? Not much has been written to answer this question beyond superficial statements. Joanne B. Ciulla, Terry L. Price, and Susan E. Murphy in the first part of their text have sought to offer some answers to the question as to what are the heart, emotions and religious beliefs of the leaders. By trying to understand how the Greeks understood reverence as an antidote to the abuse of power, how emotional integrity is to prized above all other aspects of leadership, or how religious faith can be a source of ethical leadership, one may draw closer to some of valuable answers as to what informs the Leadership Diamond Model proposed by Koestenbaum (2002) to elucidate the inner strength and drive of a leader and how to nurture it.
The Greatest Challenges of Future Moral Leaders in Africa

The fifth question asked students to reflect on the greatest challenges that they anticipate as future moral leaders in Africa. The greatest concern for these students is the capacity to be able to “change people’s minds or mentality”. Nine students responded this way. The second highest concern was regarding corruption (seven students) and the need to develop honesty. Finally, a list of individual concerns emerged, which revealed that students would like some areas of political leadership to be developed, e.g. justice, education, expertise, peace, freedom, wisdom, the absence of nepotism, and democracy.

The answers to this question actually triangulate some of the previous responses and constitute additional support for claiming that a moral leader is transformational. Change is part of the make-up of a moral leader which is necessary in order to make sure that he brings a transformational dimension to the community that he/she is leading and serving.

Moral Leaders’ Profiles.

The sixth question, which to me seemed one of the most important ones, asked students to profile in a paragraph the moral leader whom they admire and strive to emulate. Only thirty students responded. Thus this question has the highest rate of missing responses. One student responded that he had not yet found a moral leader to emulate. This confirms that perhaps students have not yet been exposed to enough moral leaders to emulate – a sad conclusion!

Nelson Mandela

It was interesting to discover that Nelson Mandela represents the highest role-model for moral leadership with ten students. One of Mandela’s main characteristics according to these students is that he was able to define a clear vision and to convey it to all the South African people. Furthermore, they realized that he didn’t seek anything for himself, but that he has always sought to serve the interests of his people instead. He was a great
communicator and negotiator who was able to fight for justice and peace, and who also was able to forgive and develop strong and fair leadership. His life seems to be coherent with his values, and he always sought to respect people’s rights. He is characterized by humility, courage, and also love for his country. He was able to change people’s mentality about segregation around the world. He undoubtedly is these students’ hero!

Other Well-Known Moral Leaders Recognized

Three other “famous” leaders have also each been mentioned twice by students. Barack Obama has been recognized as fighting for people’s rights, improving respect for diversity, and succeeding in solving complicated situations with good decisions that are in line with the laws and the constitution. He is also seen as working to improve relationships throughout the world. The second moral leader whom two students referred is Martin Luther King. Students recognize how he rejected violence and fought non-violently for the equality of rights in the U.S. and for the freedom of African-Americans. The first president of Ivory Coast, Félix Houphouët Boigny, has also been acknowledged by two students who recognized his incredible sense of honor and devotion to his country, his superior intelligence, his ability to communicate meaningfully with all Ivorians, as well as his thorough understanding of cultural issues and how they can be viewed as enriching for the country.

Students also referred to a number of other well-known leaders, once each. Oprah Winfrey was recognized for promoting respect and freedom for women, and for inspiring them. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf from Liberia is seen as having tried hard to find a common ground between politics and morality. Gurdip Hari is a moral leader for his behavior and his Bible-based inspiration. Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi from Burma also represents a non-violent and moral leader who has defended poor people and denounced abuse. Finally, Ernesto Che Guevara from Latin America is referred to by a student as his idol because of his selfless behavior and his fighting for the poor.
Family Members or Friends

The remaining students have referred to members of their family or to friends. A father and an uncle have been extremely influential because their conduct matched the education that they were trying to give. A business leader who was also an internship supervisor had encouraged and protected his staff. A mother has taught her child to be honest and ready to die for one’s convictions. The student wrote: “She teaches me integrity and how to be impartial, even if it’s painful.” A teacher has been a trusted model, not because of his teaching, but because of the way he was managing his family life, gaining trust with people, and giving good advice.

How Can IUGB Help Promote Moral Leadership?

The seventh and last question asked for students to suggest ways that their university could train them to become moral leaders. Suggestions were fairly low-key. One of their main requests is for conferences and discussions on this subject, and in particular interaction with moral leaders. They also emphasize the importance of sociology and psychology classes, and especially the business ethics class (referred to by several students). Finally, a few students asked to do more community service for the poor in order to practice selflessness.

Conclusion

It seems that there is a huge area of leadership development reflections open to us, here in West Africa. Moral leadership, while sought after, constitutes a real challenge to our student group which seems a fair representation of our future African leaders. The energy and the dynamism of moral leadership seem to be lacking, especially in the African Francophone world. Furthermore, one can note with Chiku Malunga (2006) that most leadership development models have been imported from the Northern nations and do not necessarily take into account the African cultural heritage. This might constitute one of the
major causes of the apparent failures in leadership development throughout the continent. In this brief, but thoughtful article, Malunga challenges the reader to go back and study Mbigi’s concept of *Ubuntu* and its applications in African leadership contexts.

On a similar note, Greenleaf’s (1977) servant-leadership model is perhaps one of the only western models rooted in a non-western worldview and close to the African one: the worldview of the biblical times and of Christ’s leadership who is the source of inspiration of Greenleaf’s model. Although this model clashed with Roman and Jewish cultures of biblical times and brought death with its triumph, Trompenaars and Voerman (2010) point out that this leadership is paradoxical while quoting Mandela: “My imprisonment symbolizes our cause and serves my people” (p. 168). They conclude in the same paragraph: “Losing one’s life and saving it is a single process, as descending only to rise again. This is integrity of the highest order.”
References


Greetings! In order to support research on moral leadership, please answer the following questions by October 18, 2013. Anonymity will be respected. THANKS A LOT IN ADVANCE!

DEMOGRAPHICS (please circle the appropriate adjective):

Male / Female Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

Please answer the following questions.

1. Please write your best description of a moral leader.
2. According to you, what are a moral leader’s top five characteristics?
3. Do you think that it is important for Africa to develop moral leaders? Explain why.
4. As a future leader of Africa, how would you rate the likelihood that you will become a moral leader who will display the five characteristics you mentioned in question 2?
5. As a future leader of Africa, what do you anticipate as being your greatest challenges towards becoming a moral leader in Africa?
6. Please profile (i.e. describe) with at least 100 words the moral leader(s) who you consider your role model(s) towards becoming a moral leader.
7. Do you have suggestions as to how a university like IUGB could help you to become a moral leader?