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RETURN TO AFRICA TO *MINE* AN AFRICAN UNDERSTANDING OF EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION *IN* AFRICA: *SANKOFA*

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Over the last 80 years commendable advances have been made in the field of employee motivation by scholars who have carried out research, developed theory and put forward tools for application. This paper argues that given the importance of work motivation to economic growth, the wide range of African realities (economic, social, historical, political and philosophical) and the sheer diversity of the continent, scholars must look to start an employee motivation discourse for Africa which derives from the African context. To this end, a four-pointed argument is used to propose a re-framing of the scholarly motivation discourse in Africa. In addition, grounded theory generation – rather than theory testing – is suggested as key to unearthing applicable understandings of the phenomenon within the varied African context.

Keywords: employee motivation; Africa; context

INTRODUCTION

This paper has three interrelated messages. These are, first, to make the case that scholarly efforts in the field of work motivation in Africa *need to look back to Africa* for the necessary contextual requisites through which indigenous Afrocentric concepts of work motivation may be developed. Second, that this Africa-centred contextual understanding is important not only to advancing research on motivation in Africa, but also to expand the boundaries of current knowledge. Third, that phenomenological research approaches are perhaps more appropriate for addressing the gaps in the African work motivation literature and my better facilitate Afrocentric understandings of work motivation.

Employee motivation is a much-researched area that has intrigued scholars and vexed practitioners. Its central concerns are to explore what initiates, energizes and sustains work behaviour and its debates often centre on developing theory that enables practitioners to influence worker behaviour towards performance and productivity. The international attention to work motivation has been considerable (Steers, Mowday & Shapiro, 2004). Special issues of the journals *Applied Psychology – An International Review* (Wood, 2000) and *Academy of Management Review* (Steers et al., 2004) highlight the wealth of research and conceptual development in the field. However, describing the state of research on motivation in Africa, Munro (1986), writes:

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Regrettably much of the work on work motivation ... in Africa continues to be done by white psychologists and to be directed to parochial issues ... So indigenous theories have not emerged and research methods that embody African values remain un-invented. (p. 292)

It is rather worrying that almost three decades later, Puplampu's (2013) assessment of the African situation with regards to motivation research shows that scholarly efforts on the continent have neither caught up with international trends nor formulated uniquely relevant African understandings of the subject. What could be the problem? This paper asserts that the difficulty lies in the failure of motivation theory to tackle the matter of culture and context and therefore suggests that the solution lies in encouraging those scholars who are interested in the African situation, to turn – *sankofa* – to Africa's varied contexts, to mine a relevant, indigenous and perhaps autochthonous understanding of work motivation.

Sankofa

As *sankofa* is used to frame the central idea posed in this paper, a brief exposition is required. *Sankofa* is an Akan nuance that is effectively saying '... return, go pick up what you left behind ...'. In the Akan languages and Ghanaian culture, *sankofa* has the dual prospect of referring to the '*adinkra*' symbol of a hen with neck arched back picking an egg which is gingerly placed on its back. (*Adinkra* in the Akan languages means 'message' or a 'message given at a point of departure'). *Sankofa* also refers to the phrase in the Akan languages which effectively means: 'go back and collect' or 'reach back for ... something'; 'take from the past that which is good to inform the present and future'; 'go back to the roots'; or 'reach back for something left behind'. In using *sankofa* to frame the title of this paper, we are drawing on its nuanced richness to suggest the need to reach back and consider the diverse range of African cultural forms, understandings, philosophies, experiences and socioeconomic realities which scholars interested in motivation on the continent have not sufficiently considered in framing their current conversations. *Sankofa* is thus used here as a call to rethink a chosen path.

EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION RESEARCH IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

Various defined, work motivation refers to the purposive or goal-directed behaviour of persons and the psycho-social dynamics that energize and sustain such behaviour (Steers et al., 2004). Employee motivation is important for a number of reasons. It is at the nexus of organizational behaviour, industrial relations and human resource management (Puplampu, 2013) – with direct applications to people management issues in organizations. Its appeal to the very essence of work and its link with many aspects of management (Steers et al., 2004) has led to motivation receiving the attention of scholars for the better part of the last century. Organizations spend a great deal on motivating their employees – not only in terms of compensation arrangements but also through other non-monetary rewards, incentives, recognitions and inducements. However, inappropriately directed motivation could lead to poor performance. It is noted that whole economies are propelled or stagnated because of difficulties with understanding and crafting appropriate mechanisms for motivation in various sectors (Punnett, 2013). Employee motivation is therefore concerned with

the factors which cause employees to engage in behaviours that cumulatively promote (or constrain) the profitability and productive good of the organizations in which they work. It is concerned with the dispositions, predilections and values of people in the work place as well as with the environmental circumstances which shape the predilections and the behavioural consequences on organizations.

When we talk about motivation theory, three distinct but interrelated frames are at issue. First, we are referring to the agreed view (Steers et al., 2004) that underlying human work motivation are three psychological dynamics: initiation, direction and maintenance of work-related behaviour – howsoever these are caused. Secondly, we are referring to the dual notion that motivation may be externally occasioned or internally derived (Latham, 2007). This is the intrinsic/extrinsic divide. Finally, we are referring to the array of theories which attempt to explain work motivation. These tend to divide along the needs/drive/content (for example Maslow's hierarchy of needs) or process/rational schools of thought (for example Adams' equity theory or Vroom's expectancy theory). In this paper, these three elements (namely: initiation, direction and maintenance of behaviour; intrinsic/extrinsic sources of motivation and the content and/or process explanations of motivation), collectively stand as *motivation theory*.

While a review of the literature may be desirable, such a review would be superfluous to the focus of this paper. Very credible reviews have been carried out along with special issues of various scholarly journals. The interested reader is urged to access resources such as: Ambrose and Kulik (1999); Wood (2000); Steers and Sanchez-Runde (2001); Steers et al. (2004); Latham (2007) and concerning the African situation, Puplambu (2013). It would be unprofitable to go over ground that the scholars noted above have covered. Instead, we draw on these reviews and the motivation conversation in Africa to make our case.

Puplambu's (2013) review of the literature on employee motivation in Africa concludes that the African literatures are disjointed and lack theoretical foundations. There is also not much by way of theory development. Studies lack methodological sophistication and not enough effort has been given to 'cumulative and additive' work (p. 282). In addition, there does not seem to be a concerted effort for cross-Africa research that draws in a community of scholars from different countries.

In addition to the above, more recent concepts such as job resources, employee engagement and organizational citizenship behaviour are hardly featured in the research within African countries. It appears that motivation researchers in various African countries are caught in something of a period capsule – focused on theories that western researchers are moving away from.

Finally, and most importantly, researchers do not appear to use the cultural and organizational landscape of Africa to sufficiently inform their research. The literatures show that the rich and commendable heritage in employee motivation theory and research is in large measure a western heritage (Adler, 1991). Researchers have tended to test these theories in other countries without moderation of the initial theory/model. A consequence of these points is that African researchers are almost always playing catch up, without sufficient pause to construct an African dialogue. Motivation researchers in Africa have not taken on board the suggestions of Steers and Sanchez-Runde (2001), Steers et al. (2004), Latham (2007) and Puplambu (2013) to look a little more closely at culture as a critical variable.

Most theories of motivation are focused on individual motive dynamics and individual outcomes. This highly individualized treatment of work motivation is evident

from writings on expectancy theory (Chen et al., 2006; Lunenburg, 2011), equity theory (Fadil et al., 2005; Shore, 2004), hierarchy of needs (Kroth, 2007) and so on. This individualized emphasis leaves out a whole range of potential influencing variables which may be of relevance in contexts such as those we find in Africa. As Kanungo and Mendonca (1994) demonstrate, in developing countries, employee motivation is a hydra-headed prospect drawing in worker productivity, national economic challenges, obsolete technology, poor infrastructures as well as insufficiently articulated localized frameworks of understanding.

AFRICAN CONTEXTUAL REALITIES

Africa is an extremely diverse continent (Nkomo, 2011). Often, references to 'Africa' assume it is an undifferentiated mass (Puplampu, 2007). We note Nkomo's cautions and tensions about the use of the term 'African' as a unitary concept in the management literatures. In this paper, 'Africa', 'African context', 'African' are terms used without negating the diverse cultural, social, political, religious and other differences, nuances and realities.

With one billion people, slow advances in economic performance, and major organizational and social policy challenges in wealth creation, poverty alleviation and productivity, Africa is a prime candidate for grounded theory generation that rigorously examines how context impacts employee motivation and how motivation theory may help to address economic fortunes. As Munro (1986) asserts: 'The most obvious starting point for the study of work and economic behaviour is with a theory of motivation' (p. 286). This is relevant for Africa, as the matter of the motivated employee in the African context must be related to the need for African nations to grow their economies (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Examination of the concept of motivation in an African context also has potential to inform and broaden existing theory. Grounded research helps to refute, support or problematize different aspects of existing formulations (Li et al., 2012) because dominant world views remain dominant until challenged. In the rest of this section, we explore the issue of context a little more closely.

Johns (2006) defines context as '... situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behaviour as well as functional relationships between variables' (p. 386). He identifies seven 'faces' (p. 387) of context, such as situational salience and strength, as well as the ubiquitous character of the milieu and suggests that: 'Researchers in organizational behaviour should study and report context ...' (p. 388).

Indicating context as a 'tension system' or 'force field' of 'opportunities' and 'constraints' (p. 387), Johns argues convincingly, that far too much of prevailing organizational research and theorizing, treats context as if it were *not there*, (or at best as a variable that has to be *carefully controlled* so as to limit its 'interference' with the questions being investigated). This in effect produces scholarly conversations that are stripped of this rather important factor which humanly and socially speaking cannot be sieved out because it *is* forcefully present. It is the force field within which the researched persons or institutions exist. It impacts the issue being researched. It informs the researcher, as well as the conceptual lens through which the outcomes of research are discussed and evaluated.

The African context, is made up of its history, varied cultures, regional differences, political and development conundrums which seem intractable. Much has been written

about the state of Africa in the development, political economy (Agulanna, 2006; Aryeetey and Kanbur, 2008) and socio-historical literatures (Arnold, 2005; Reader, 1998). Management scholars have also increasingly taken up the African issue (Kigundu, 1991; 2013; Luiz, 2006; Nkomo, 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2011); while scholars in the humanities and critical discourses (Lauer and Anyidoho, 2012) have for decades decried the deliberate negation of Africa's potential contribution to its own development. These realities form the contexts that are unique to Africa and which are an ever present and forceful influence and constraint on individual and organizational behaviour, and which must be factored into the work motivation discourse in Africa.

The economic and institutional dimensions of context for example, have a near direct bearing on the matter of motivation at work. The issue is how? As yet, scholars investigating motivational dynamics in Africa have not designed grounded research that demonstrates the nature and impact of these issues.

The state of the African discourse on work motivation does not draw on Africa's history, culture, reality and philosophies. This is compounded by piecemeal theory testing research which due to poor design, hardly tests the totality of any one theory of motivation (Ambrose and Kulik, 1990). Employee motivation researchers in Africa do not appear to deliberately design into their studies context variables which must be identified, categorized, measured or described and their impacts appropriately discussed. Research which merely uses a sample from an African country or region to test or examine extant theory (without significant adaptations), cannot pass for indigenous work (Li et al.). Much as replications and tests are welcome, such efforts often stunt the drive towards grounded theory development and emergence of locally produced and locally derived meanings. Johns' work shows that research that is context-sensitive, requires careful design with focus on matters such as events, processes, cross-level analysis and use of phenomenological realities.

The foregoing represent the base for our position that scholars interested in moving the African motivation debate forward, need to look back (*sankofa*) to Africa and its contexts to mine an effective African understanding of work motivation.

RECONSTRUCTING EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION THROUGH AFRICAN LENSES – A FOUR POINTED ARGUMENT

Steers & Sanchez-Runde (2001) show that increasingly, the new directions emerging in the field of work motivation consolidate much of received wisdom without touching on critical areas such as the impact of culture, national, regional and geopolitical realities on motivational dynamics. There is also a manifest absence of employee motivation theory development in other parts of the world, such as Africa. The connection between motivation and economic performance of a nation – a matter that is important for African countries – is ignored (or at best taken for granted) by the old as well as emerging streams of work. The call for greater attention to context (Johns, 2006), including the macro context, has not featured much. Johns makes the point:

... not that context is never studied. Rather *its influence is often unrecognized or underappreciated* (p. 389; emphasis by Johns).

Africa's intellectual marginalization (Mudimbe, 1988) in the field of business and management is fuelled by the limited efforts of its scholars to deliberately disrupt the

status quo and myths about Africa (Zoogah et al., 2009) and argue from an existential perspective that Africa deserves particular scholarly treatment of its business and management realities. Africa's contribution may be formulated on the back of its own existence and episteme. As Johnson & Cassell (2001) show, work psychology throughout its history has been significantly influenced by Greek philosophers and enlightenment thinkers. Its formulations are therefore decidedly crafted in the spirit of these influences. Beneficial though these influences have been, work psychologists now recognize that it is time for a radical rethink of both theory and how theory is arrived at. Herriot and Anderson's (1997) observation is a case in point:

No other sub-discipline in the organizational sciences has exhibited such a paucity of theoretical perspectives, such a lack of debate over guiding paradigmatic assumptions and such unquestioned conformity to naïve, managerialist positivism ... if the discipline fails to stimulate a diversity of theoretical perspectives and epistemological approaches ... it runs the risk of becoming an overheated engine house of remote, blind, empiricism. (p. 13)

In similar vein, we believe it is time to deliberately pause and redirect the current trajectory of the African conversation on employee motivation. To facilitate this redirection and repositioning, we suggest four main lines of argument. These are: philosophical underpinnings of our theories of motivation; culture; context and the matter of application of theory. We summarize these in [Table 1](#) below and then tackle each in turn.

From [Table 1](#) and the points raised before, we find that there are a number of key realities which neither motivation researchers in Africa nor extant theories take into urgent consideration but which are directly important for African environments. These include: religion and spirituality, concerns about national development as well as viability or otherwise of the process/content and intrinsic/extrinsic divide. Many African countries continue to experience traditional community and social order systems juxtaposed with modernity; fluid and uncertain labour and economic structures, gift giving and apparent lack of control over environmental factors and forces. We may also refer to the pervasive influence of national political arrangements on planning orientations, organizational life and work attitudes. In addition, many nations are in a constant state of flux.

Philosophical underpinnings

It does not take much to recognize that Maslow's need theory for example, derives from a highly individualized interpretation of the human condition and of man's interconnection with the world. Maslow (1970) stresses that the integrated individual, his/her needs, gratifications and intentions, constitute the raw material for looking at motivation. Maslow's position is symptomatic of the philosophy that undergirds much of the content/drive approach to work motivation. Based on Dunnette and Kirchner (1965), Steers and Porter (1991) reflect a model of motivation that starts as a consequence of an internal state of dis/equilibrium of the individual. The emphasis is on the person and the calculative mechanisms of the individual. Referring to the need theories, Steers and Porter (1991) write:

'The need theories ... are primarily individual theories of motivation. Strong emphasis is placed on the ... individual and ... the role played by personal need strengths in the determination of work behaviour'. (p. 577)

Table 1. African context and possible implications for employee motivation.

Factor	Some characteristics	Possible implications
Philosophical underpinnings		
Philosophies and beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religious and spiritual beliefs • Power of an interventionist cosmos • Wisdom of the sages and power of chieftains • Wealth venerated and confers status • Humans interconnect with others and with nature: ubuntu; asabiyyah 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaviour initiation must factor in religious beliefs • Conspicuous consumption patterns which reinforce motive direction and maintenance • Importance of leaders (community, public, corporate, traditional, family) in the motive calculations of people due to expectation of support from leaders
Context		
National & regional cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kinship, tradition and forms • Strong extended family ties but under threat from nuclear family trends • Clash between western, eastern and indigenous cultures • Recognition and respect are valued • What is considered as work? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicted behaviour initiation which draws on the one part on personal needs and wants and on the other, on family ties and requirement to look after others • Intrinsic/extrinsic motivations operating in tandem • Strong voice of one's community in personal motivations in the work place
Socio-political history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religious conquests: Islamic North; Christian South; Traditionalist • Colonization • Chequered post-independence political experimentation, conflict and war • Centralised political power conferring 'rights' and privileges on elitist few • Institutional weaknesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different interpretations of events and within organizational life circumstances which may impact initiation, direction and maintenance of behaviour • Economic prospects tied to political power • Work motivations intertwined with notions of national development but possibly conflicted due to personal behaviours which may detract from national development efforts

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Factor	Some characteristics	Possible implications
Economic and labour situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dominant public/government sector • Large informal economy • Abundant natural resources • Economic uncertainties • Large lower/underclass • Significant economic resources still held by non-African interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivational direction and maintenance often predicated on patronage • Self-directed initiation of behaviour due to informal economy • Conflicted preference for overt and material rewards • Generally difficult economic circumstances
Culture		
Community & organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on: social relations; hierarchy; ethnic and clan loyalties; consensual approaches to conflict resolution • Humans interconnect with others and with nature: ubuntu; asabiyyah 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiation, maintenance and direction of behaviour in the work place informed by social relations and loyalties domiciled outside the work place
Spirituality & religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciation of: the cosmos; spiritual and outer-frame of reference; religious form and order; elaborate ritual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willingness to explain/attribute behaviour and events to interventionist cosmic realities; recourse to God as a motivator
Rites; land use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veneration of: rites of passage; birth, death and funeral celebrations • Land held in trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work choices informed by traditional adherence to rites • People expect organizations to accept that they have to go to a funeral on a Friday or a Tuesday
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance attached to: oral traditions; words of the elderly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivating strength of oral reports
Application		
Individual performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges with motivation due to many potential 'motivators' • Organizational supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preponderance of religious interpretations of events • Perceived lack of control
Organizational change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building high performance organizations • Pervasive political influence on organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for context relevant models for reinventing motivation systems • Limits to managerial prerogative
National level productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak public sector work ethics • Disconnect between reward and performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiated compensation arrangements • Wage spirals

The diversification of this tenet with the advent of the human relations and process/rational schools did little to move the dominant logic away from the individual:

‘... the cognitive-based models ... attach considerable importance to individual thought processes ...’ (p. 579)

By way of example, Latham (2007) indicates that Bandura and Locke (2003) attacked the philosophy underlying control theory as applied to goal setting. While Bandura and Locke took issue with Control theory in that its tenets (as applied to motivation) had not been sufficiently articulated, we raise issue with the humanistic-individualized philosophical underpinnings of a whole class of motivation theories as insufficiently indicative of diverse contexts such as those found in Africa.

Other considerations which have informed motivation theory include assumptions about human nature, the biological foundations of human behaviour, the behaviourist recourse to conditioning as a consequence of environmental stimuli and the notions of economic and rational man. Writers like Latham (2007) and Schein (1990) suggest that these formulations had profound impacts on motivation thinking. Drawing on Wrightsman’s (1974) notion of ‘philosophies of human nature’, Schein arrives at three main assumptions: social, rationality and personal actualization assumptions. The impacts of these are perhaps best seen from the theories that emerged seeking to explain human motivation: McGregor’s Theory X and Y; Vroom’s Expectancy; Adam’s Equity; Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs; Alferfer’s ERG; Herzberg’s Motivator-Hygiene Theory; and McClelland’s Learned Needs. These were all in large measure focused, on the individual’s interpretations of his/her work circumstances. The motive processes are intrapersonal or intra-psychic and the outcome considerations are largely personal ones, not societal.

The point here is that the ontological traditions of people, will most certainly inform the epistemological efforts of their scholars (O’Doherty, 2007), as they seek to describe, explain, predict and perhaps offer prescriptions for interventions in human existence. Our question is: do we have a sufficiently explored interconnect between African ontology and the organizational sciences to produce applicable motivation and related theories? One would think not (at least not at the present time). To buttress the point, we offer below some thoughts based on Gyekye (2003). Gyekye’s work helps us to bring to the fore, the prospect that perhaps for many parts of Africa, the individual motive may not constitute the overriding philosophical reason for being.

Gyekye identifies a number of philosophies which underlie African life. These include the importance of religion, the spiritual world and God. An Akan maxim goes: *‘I am doing the good thing so that my way to the world of the spirits might not be blocked’* and a Yoruba maxim goes: *‘those we cannot catch, we leave in the hands of God’*. This spiritual relatedness spills over into a philosophical consideration of the oneness of humanity which then underscores hospitality, capacity to accommodate others and communality. Communality is the spring from which ‘Ubuntu’ and related values and expressions arise Littrell et al., (2013). It is also the basis for the permeating influence of the extended family system in modern life in Africa (which has often been misunderstood by non-Africans). This philosophy is captured in the Akan saying: *‘a man must depend for his well-being on his fellow man’*; in other words, *‘life’*, as the Akan say, is *‘mutual aid’*.

African philosophy also has clear positions on wealth, work, and political authority, place of the ancestors and ownership of land. A Swahili maxim which Gyekye (p. 102) suggests was much used by Julius Nyerere (the independence leader of Tanzania) goes like this: *'treat your guest as a guest for two days; on the third day give him a hoe'*. Also, Yoruba tales told to children, extol the virtues of hard work. A Swahili maxim suggests *'he who gets blisters from the hoe handle will not die of hunger'*. Similar sentiments are expressed in an Ewe maxim: *'the person who draws water does not drink mud'*. These sayings give insight into the African philosophy of work.

In other considerations, the communal responsibility of political authority towards catering for the community has been expressed in an Akan maxim: *'when the chief has plenty of milk, it is the people who drink it'*. Little wonder that today, holders of political office in many parts of Africa, feel duty bound to spread their largesse – whether the resources so spread belong to them personally or to the State – even when they happen to have access to such resources only as a consequence of their office.

From the above considerations, one gathers that the philosophical basis of the life, work and ontology of many different African people – modernity notwithstanding – include a number of major forces such as community, spirituality and a fusion of the past, present and future. We neither romanticize nor essentialize these forces. Instead we argue that existentially, Africans still place value on many traditional philosophies and beliefs which still have currency in modern society. Scholars would do well to understand and draw on these thoughts which continue to energize the African spirit. We suggest therefore that a concept as central to life and the productive economy as work motivation cannot be understood without recourse to these philosophies and their implications.

Thus, we raise the concern that while various motivation theories focus on need satisfaction, intrinsic motivations, personal self-efficacy and rational assessments, the philosophical traditions that many African people hold or live by, include beliefs in an interventionist cosmos, spiritual explanations of life events, wisdom of the elders and so on. The potential for conflicted understandings leading to equally conflicted applications in various organizations cannot be missed. One finds that hardly any theories or research on motivation tackle these matters.

The case may be further extended by considering the underpinnings of goal-setting theory. Goal setting is at once a cognitive as well as a behavioural theory of motivation. It requires and assumes that the individual possesses and processes information about goals and has sufficient self-efficacy to act on said goals (Latham, 2007). How do we examine the case of an individual who having a promotion goal or a set of sales targets acknowledges these to be his/her responsibility, but in the same breadth suggests that the promotion is *'in the hands of God?'* – and therefore actively resorts to praying about it? Anecdotally, this scenario would not be an unfamiliar story to a Ghanaian, Nigerian or Ugandan. Would praying constitute the individual's capacity to act on the goal?

Culture

The argument that culture and context must inform motivation and management thinking particularly with regards to non-western and developing societies is at this point unassailable (Blunt and Jones, 1992; Kamoche et al., 2004; Kamoche 2011; Steers & Sanchez-Runde, 2001; Trompenaars, 1993). Steers and Sanchez-Runde

(2001) note that: ‘... what remains elusive ... is a solid understanding of how and why culture influences fundamental motivational processes’ (p. 2).

Arguing that people, nations and regions differ along a whole range of dimensions, they propose a culture-based model of motivation. Sadly, this has yet to gain traction with scholars. Importantly, Steers and Sanchez-Runde stress that the labels and descriptive vehicles used by researchers when investigating motivation in non-western societies are often tools which mitigate grounded understanding. Some salient aspects of Africa’s diverse cultural expressions which may have relevance for motivation are set out in [Table 1](#) above and further elaborated below.

In many parts of Africa, land continues to be imbued with cultural significations tying past, present and future generations. Land ownership is thus constructed in terms which may well be described as ‘*holding in trust for others*’. Right of abode or presence is constructed more in terms of ancestral presence, longevity and spiritual connection through burial of forebears rather than contracted purchase.

The increasing evidence emerging from *Ubuntu, indaba* (Littrel et al., 2013), and so on, point to the salience of more communal cultural scripts as well as kinship ties which inform individual, social and economic relations. What has come to be referred to in the development and governance discourses as ‘corruption’, ‘nepotism’, ‘cronyism’, ‘who-you-know syndrome’ are in part results of efforts to take care of relatives and kinsmen – many of whom would have been particularly crucial in one’s upward mobility. The challenge with these nuances as they emerge on the management landscape, however, is that researchers as yet do not discuss the possibility that Ubuntu for example, may not necessarily be a pan-African cultural reality.

There have been various direct and indirect influences on Africa and its culture spanning some 500 years (Ekeh, 2012). Apart from traditional cultural forms and beliefs, religious influences from Islam, Christianity and Judaism are evident. Colonisers, traders and adventurers also brought to the continent European and Arabic influences. The assumed superiority of these external cultural and intellectual traditions has often mitigated efforts towards alternative conversations in the face of dominant science’s efforts to delegitimize other forms of explanation (Lauer, 2012). In various parts of modern and traditional Africa, religious form, expressions and spiritual interpretations of life are normal (Anderson, 2013; p. xv). Thus, the widespread world view of an interventionist cosmos (Asamoah-Gyedu, 2013) and the pervasive character of religious and spiritual considerations in African life would more than likely, have direct or indirect expressions in matters of work motivation through avenues such as work values (Dose, 1997). Drawing on this reality would allow some recourse to spiritual explanations for motive factors or use of the spiritual as a spur for motive action. Munro (1986) alluded to the importance of spiritual matters, yet not much has happened on that front in the African work motivation space. In addition, Harris and Moran (1996) offered 10 characteristics of culture which if applied to motivation studies, may show how defined aspects of culture inform work motivation within any one country or region. These are: sense of self and space, communication and language, dress and appearance, food and eating habits, time and sense of time, relationships, values and norms, beliefs and attitudes, mental processes and learning, work habits and practices. In addition, they suggest adoption of a systems approach by consideration of matters such as kinship, education, economic, political, religious and recreational systems.

While Wood (2000) asserts that there ‘is a true international community of work motivation researchers ...’ (p. 317) the evidence from Wood’s and Steers et al.’s collection of papers lead to the conclusion that this community does not include research in or about employee motivation in Africa and other developing areas.

Context

There are a number of relevant considerations here including socio-political history. Africa’s socio-political history has been characterized as 500 years of difficult experiences including colonization, commoditization of resources (including human), political experimentation and so on (Arnold, 2005; Reader, 1998). The impact of historical events on current realities is perhaps poignantly demonstrated by the following quote from Knight (2011), referring to the pain of the Zulu nation in South Africa:

The invasion was, moreover, part of a broader process of colonial penetration of Zululand which began in 1824, lasted ... a century, spanned a cycle of brutal wars ... left the Zulu people dispossessed, without a voice in their governance, impoverished and economically exploited ... Many of the elements which have remained problematic in the otherwise ... miraculous transformation of South Africa – political divisions, economic disparities, the stripping of the rural areas of human resources and consequent social dislocation and rootlessness – are the direct result of the complex conflicts of the nineteenth century ... that still profoundly affect life there today. (p. 5)

The point here is that the business, economic, employment and organizational circumstances and experiences of the worker in today’s Africa, are a consequence of many interlocking factors, some of which are hundreds of years old. We cannot hold the interplay of these factors constant and theorize as if they are non-existent. As Kiggundu (1991) indicates, ‘present day Africa is still deeply rooted in its past’ (p. 32).

After 150 years of being ‘forced’ to work in colonial administrations, plantations, mines and conscripted military service is it any wonder that the preference for government sector work still holds sway in many countries in Africa a short 50 years after independence? In many African countries ordinary life is mired in the consequences of political intrigue, including political incursions into business operations, award of contracts and so on. The State sector (State-owned enterprises, public/civil services, public agencies and bodies etc.) dominates formal employment and general economic activity in many countries (Aryeetey & Kanbur, 2008; World Bank, 2006). Agriculture, subsistence and other forms of micro and informal enterprises are also dominant. Kamoche (2011) notes that, Africa commands less than 2% of foreign direct investment flows. Despite being resource rich with growing recognition of the continent’s potential, governments continue to struggle with trade deficits and imbalances, economies are dominated by primary produce exports and there are severe challenges with availability of basic utilities and social amenities. These are the context realities.

Evans and Olumide-Aluko (2010) indicated that the realities of many workers in the formal sector in a country like Nigeria invalidate the applicability of much of Herzberg’s two-factor theory. They showed that the Nigerian school teacher operating in a context of significant hardship, general national economic difficulties, public sector corruptions, job insecurity etc., actually found basic salary to be a significant motivator: it energizes behaviour, facilitates commitment and contributes to people carrying on their daily tasks. Interestingly Basset-Jones (2005), however, found mixed results in

a UK study and Udechukwu (2009) found confirming results in a US study. All this underscores the point that context matters. In a similar vein, goal-setting theory one of the most forceful theories of motivation, appears susceptible to context. Locke and Latham (2006) suggested that:

Goal setting can be used effectively on any domain in which an individual or group has some control over outcomes ... Because goal setting is an open theory, there is no limit to the number of discoveries that can be made ... (pp. 267–268)

Despite this very optimistic position of its proponents, Barsky (2008), showed that depending on context, goal setting appears to foster unethical behaviours which have been implicated in corporate collapses and disruptive behaviours as individuals seek to maximize their direct personal returns. Touching on the matter of control over processes and outcomes Puplampu (2009), argued that in many countries in Africa, organizational resources are limited and external provisions (such as electrical power) which many in the West take for granted, cannot be guaranteed. Indeed, many African countries experience power rationing, brown-outs, and unannounced power cuts. Internet up-times, regularity of telephone connections, dependability of postal, transport and other such services are never certain. In such environments, goal-setting theory which requires combinations of internal and external control over task processes and outcomes cannot be directly applied without moderation. Fried and Slowik (2004), introduced another important dimension: time, noting for example, that the Western notion of clock-time is not universally applicable. Alternative conceptualizations of the flow and use of time therefore become important considerations in how goal setting for example may usefully continue to function as a motivation theory in other contexts.

These context realities which live in the minds and experiences of many Nigerians, Ghanaians, South Africans and others constitute a cauldron of ingredients hardly applicable to the societies and ontologies which gave rise to extant motivation theory. The corporate, institutional and employment conditions in Africa as discussed above and as noted by scholars such as Munene, (1991; 1995), Luiz (2006) and Nkomo and Kriek (2011) are different. For example, what would count as motivation when working as sole proprietor-owner of retail kiosks (which abound in many African countries); when working on a subsistence farm; teaching under trees in some places and in classrooms in others and working in rural hospitals without equipment? How relevant and applicable are the current conceptual tools for dealing with motivation issues in these contexts? Can motivation theory consider how those in the informal sector initiate, sustain and direct their work related behaviours?

Let us consider the class of motivation theories which may be labelled behavioural or environment centred. These would include goal-setting theory, reinforcement theory, job characteristics and increasingly, the job resources models. These models are highly context specific. The theories draw heavily on internal locus of control, moderated by environmentally enabled aspirations and available supports, as well as environmental control and predictability. Latham (2007) anticipated the position taken in this paper by considering matters such as control over activities in the work place as well as the impact and nature of communication in context-rich environments. How do we respond to situations in many African countries where political incursions into organizational life weaken the managerial prerogative? What is the

impact on the manager's goal-setting motivation? How do we tackle the matter of supervisory innuendos in providing feedback in contexts and cultures where 'saying it as it is' (without symbolisms and innuendo) is frowned upon? How do we respond to the prospect of job resources that are systematically not available? It is therefore rather significant that, Klonoski (2011) concludes that cultural forms and economic circumstances in a country influence levels of motivation.

It is important to stress that the points we raise here are more about the absence of sufficient contextual understanding where motivation in the diverse African setting is concerned and less about the adequacy of existing theories in tackling motivation issues in the western countries and contexts where those theories were formulated.

The matter of application

Porter (1998) notes that '... real learning in social science involves not only theory but immersion in the effort to translate theory into practice' (p. *xiv*). Applying these sentiments to motivation, one cannot but refer to several anecdotal issues that have received media attention in different African countries in the last few years. In South Africa, striking mine workers lost their lives in pursuit of improved conditions. In Kenya, MPs who voted huge pay rises for themselves attracted the scorn of the citizens. In Ghana, striking doctors stayed out of hospital wards and medical consulting rooms for more than eight weeks, leading to serious consequences for the health delivery system. Anecdotal evidence has it that the Arab spring was reputedly set off by a 26-year-old fruit seller in Tunisia, discontented at the disconnect between public corruption, his employment status and the challenges of making ends meet, as well as the behaviour of public/police officers at work. In Ghana, a pay policy for public sector workers known as the 'Single Spine Salary Structure' got off to a poor start in 2009 with agitations about its inability to address basic motivations while its implementation seems to have caused significant budgetary complications for the public purse. Common to all these anecdotes is the issue of work motivation, its psychological as well as economic dynamics. How do or how should African management scholars respond to these matters? What applicable theoretical solutions sensitive to the nuanced environment are available? Another point common to the above examples is that although the motivation issues are often localized at start, their consequences quickly assume national and international proportions – a reality that may not be directly recognized in contexts outside Africa. Is the content-process divide in motivation theory appropriate to Africa? Can the current range of motivation theories account for the implications of the finding by Puplampu (2007), that the internal environment of organizations in Africa are often weighted by influences from national political actors? From challenges with public sector teacher motivation, productivity of civil servants, talent sourcing for small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to dealing with the implications of pay differentials between expatriate and local employees of multinational companies, managers and policymakers face real choices and motivation conundrums that have implications for the economic progress of many African nations. It seems proper to advocate that motivation research and theorizing ought to offer pointers towards mechanisms for intervention.

Organizational justice theory (Colquitt et al, 2001) may perhaps assist to surface the difficulties of application which we seek to address. Distributive, procedural, relational and informational justice considerations are anchored on the principle of a rule-

based society, neutrality and even treatment of organizational members by various actors. It is further expected that justice and neutrality would be driven by documented processes and sufficient institutional capacity (both internal and external) to facilitate adherence to procedure. Justice theories however do not offer mechanisms for application in contexts where embedded unequal arrangements are normative. Justice theories do not offer mechanisms for application in circumstances where organizations and the societies in which they operate are in a near constant state of developmental rather than disruptive flux. Many multinational firms operating in parts of Africa have 'criminalized' gift giving and receiving by their employees – on the understanding that it promotes corrupt practices. But these are societies and contexts where gift giving in recognition for service rendered, or at social functions such as weddings, outdooring of new born babies, funerals and so on are seen as necessary relationship building tools. Such gift giving is characteristically unequal in nature. What would motive dynamics look like in situations where procedural inequalities are deemed acceptable? Indeed, Colquitt et al (2001) note:

Under the purview of ethics, an act can be defined as just through comparison with a prevailing philosophical system. Unfortunately, often there is no agreement on what that philosophical system should be. (p. 425)

This quote takes us back to the matter of philosophical underpinnings of theory considered earlier.

In a similar vein, process theories such as equity and VIE and behavioural theories thrive on information and knowledge. However, caution may be needed when such frameworks are applied or researched in environments that are characterized by difficulty of access to information, information asymmetry and a developmental state of skill acquisition and deployment.

REPOSITIONING THE EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION CONVERSATION

The philosophical traditions that have given seed and impetus to work motivation theory and research, the cultural and contextual realities of Africa, the need to bend scholarship to an engaged mode that offers relevant conceptual applications for resolving real problems – all of these call for a repositioning of the scholarly efforts on work motivation in Africa. We suggest that this repositioning involves a deliberate and strategic scholarly return to Africa to mine localized imperatives critical to understanding work motivation on the continent. This is what we mean by '*sankofa*': a return to the relevant range of African values, experiences, philosophical systems, cultural, socioeconomic and political realities which still hold currency for human and work behaviour on the continent.

What should the repositioned conversation look like?

We believe a repositioned scholarly conversation should have four main characteristics. First, employee motivation work on the continent must explore the principal psychological dynamics of motivation (initiation, maintenance and direction of behaviour) and show what factors inform these dynamics and how. Second, a repositioned conversation must adopt a far-sighted visionary outlook that draws on a community of scholars in a consistent, iterative and long-term approach to research (Puplampu,

2013; Walumbwa et al., 2011). Third, such a conversation must adopt Whetten's (1989) position on good theoretical contributions (answer the 'what', 'why' and 'how' questions) and, in order not to commit the error of considering Africa as an undifferentiated mass, the 'who', 'where' and 'when' questions must also be answered. Fourth, and perhaps most important, a repositioned conversation should, by implication, be culture and context sensitive, and must speak to the African organizational, institutional and policy challenges where work motivation is concerned.

In an African management research space where there are insufficient baseline data on various organizational behaviour and business matters, it stands to reason that scholarly work which offers descriptive accounts of such issues must be given adequate 'airtime' on their merits despite the 'descriptive and atheoretical' label that may be placed on such work by established journals. One is here referring to mundane matters such as size and dynamics of the public sector and the range of human resource practices and staffing practices of both large local firms and SMEs. In addition, we know very little about the functions and capacity of regulatory agencies and how such agencies may be powerful facilitators of professional motivations; or how they become tools of the State through which political influences are exerted in organizations. Researchers must seek to offer rigorous, sound and grounded scholarly outputs on matters such as the work values which energize people.

A repositioned work motivation conversation which has returned (*sankofa*) and drawn on country specific realities in Africa could offer opportunities for tackling employee relations issues and facilitate productivity through performance environments that understand what makes people perform. It may contribute insights that can minimize compensation-based turnover by exploring a fuller and more diverse base for employee motivation. It may offer motivation regimes that address what people value and what organizations need, and perhaps capture the psychological imperatives that interconnect with the needs of the economy and the concerns of African societies.

How is the repositioned conversation to be operationalized?

In the last few years, a shift towards scholarly attention to management and organizational issues in Africa has stabilized. This has led to quite a number of suggestions, models and opinions about advancing management scholarship. Although many of these relate to management broadly, they offer valuable start pointers for motivation researchers. For example, Walumbwa et al. (2011) offer a rich nine-point framework; Lituchy et al. (2013) suggest eight pointers regarding management research in Africa; Zoogah and Nkomo (2013) offer two useful diagrammatic frameworks for addressing the choices researchers must make and Puplampu (2013) offers a model as well as some 14 research foci geared specifically to motivation in Africa. It is time to take these many suggestions forward through actual research and theory building. We argue that central to these efforts must be a return to reflexive, phenomenological and alternative research approaches as evidenced by work such as that of Munene (1995), Puplampu (2005) and Nkomo and Kriek (2011). Methodological appropriateness as Munro (1986) shows is important.

Alternative and reflexive methodologies. From the six or seven editions of Rick Steers and Lyman Porter's (and later Gregory Bigley's) edited volumes on work motivation,

and the major reviews referred to earlier, it seems clear that the vast majority of studies on work motivation is carried out using cross-sectional survey based theory testing approaches. In the case of equity theory, for example, lab-based experimental manipulations have been reported (Mowday, 1991). These are valuable. However, we argue that the cross-sectional survey, paper and pencil questionnaire mode is context stripping (Johns, 2006). Successive editors of one of the leading journals in the industrial/work psychology area (*Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology – JOOP*) have called for greater attention to meaning, lived experience, philosophical underpinnings of peoples' work life and so on (Arnold, 2004; Sparrow, 1999; West et al., 1992). These calls demand greater methodological responsiveness and suggest avoidance of apparent knee-jerk recourse to quantitative and positivist approaches. Delving into the reality of people's lives in ways that offer rich, grounded descriptions, and reflective and reflexive understanding lead to applicable theoretical propositions calls for emic rather than etic strategies (Kottak, 2006). Our position is that this is the time for researchers interested in building a relevant understanding of motivation in Africa to commit to 'escaping from the ivory tower of epistemic privilege' and produce 'more reflexive research that can address the ongoing challenges in the world of work' (Johnson & Cassell, 2001, p. 140) using relevant, reflexive and embedded tools of enquiry. Sparrow (1999) shows that for the journal he edited, at a point in time, only 3% of papers tackled 'real world problems' and only 13% 'were theory driven' (p. 262). In Africa, we cannot afford such a situation (Puplampu, 2009).

Phenomenological approaches. We argue that to truly capture an African view point on work motivation and produce an Afrocentric understanding, researchers need to seek grounded, rich, descriptive accounts of work, work experiences, challenges and interests which enable complex but rounded explanations of lived experience (Finlay, 2009). This is particularly important because as set out earlier, the African scene has, as yet, not factored in the range of philosophical, cultural and contextual issues which most certainly provide the milieu within which motivation occurs. From a purely reflexive researcher's position, one may argue that without such commitment to grounded reality, the instruments and approaches that researchers adopt would most certainly continue to draw on extant theory and lose the tremendous potential inherent in having African workers speak for themselves and instruct researchers on what is important or what matters to them. Methodologically therefore, Munro (1986) calls for interviews about actual life events, content analyses of archival materials, use of everyday conversations and writes: '... we still need to encourage the more ready acceptance of qualitative data ... to ensure that a much wider range of behavioural phenomena can be accounted for' (p. 292). While motivation is largely a matter of inference from behaviour, we contend that there is everything to be gained by having working people in Africa articulate their motivational dynamics themselves. We are thus calling for grounded theory (Hutchinson, 1988); epistemological reflexivity (Johnson & Cassell, 2001); focus on cultural arrangements and how those arrangements are experienced by individuals (Greene, 1988). We are suggesting rigorous qualitative research with depth; hermeneutic iterations leading to data stabilization (Dowling, 2004; Forster, 1994) and triangulation of phenomenological methods (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). We are suggesting that rich descriptions of lived experience; narrative explanations and grounded interpretations that draw out the relationships between persons, situations, actions and consequences (Finlay, 2009) are useful

and necessary, and may be more rewarding at this point in time. We are asking for discourse analyses, case studies, action research, focus groups and so on (Li et al., 2012). In addition, Puplampu (2011) arguing for innovative approaches to management research in Africa, suggests the use of graphic scales – visual methods – which offer opportunities to respond to visual images rather than text. This may help address the matter of accessing responses from those who may not be literate in English, French or Portuguese (the colonial heritage of dominant formal languages in much of Africa).

In addition to the above, we suggest that longitudinal studies that track cohorts or events over time may also offer revealing insights given that many African countries are going through very rapid socioeconomic, organizational and political changes. We suggest that there is the need for studies to draw on multiple nodes or multiple research locations. This means that communities of scholars working in an interrelated fashion can collect national (for example Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa), regional (West Africa, Central Africa, etc.) and continent-wide evidences. We are of the view that case-based information drawn from practices in organizations from different parts of the continent may offer invaluable insights. We argue that methods such as observations, interviews, document analyses and life stories should be used as the basis for larger surveys where items are derived from the findings of grounded studies. Finally, in recent times, much has been made about the researcher-practitioner divide and the need to bridge this. The points raised by Anderson et al. (2001), arguing as they do, that work psychology scholars need to engage in ‘political activity’ (p. 407) in furtherance of ‘pragmatic science’ (p. 394) is most relevant for motivation scholars in Africa. We argue that scholars need to use applied interventions to gather research data as well as to demonstrate how grounded work motivation concepts can be applied to motivation challenges. This should help policymakers to see the value of theory and assist students to better appreciate the interconnection between science and practice.

These calls are consistent with Drenth and Heller (2004) who note that a broader approach to research would enhance the potential for generating knowledge that is rounded, relevant and more representative of the mosaic of life. These calls are also consistent with the drive for indigenous research with all its challenges and, as yet, unresolved dilemmas. Li et al. write:

We share the view that there is no inherent reason why Western theories, derived from context-specific indigenous research, have an inherent monopoly over the knowledge of management... It is our view that indigenous research in diverse cultural contexts should be encouraged ... (p. 19)

This is an opportune moment to define the nature of work motivation in Africa, define how we carry out such research and define the value of this work to solving real problems in African organizations and institutions.

Relevant questions and issues

In pursuance of the above we suggest below, relevant questions or pointers which could guide motivation research across the African continent:

1. How do the cultures and philosophies by which people live inform their work motivations? This question needs to be answered both descriptively and analytically; the matter of values and work values (Dose, 1997; Munro, 1986) holds significant promise here.
2. What informs initiation, maintenance and direction of work behaviour and do these dynamics change over time? African scholars need to develop grounded models or theories around these dynamics. The result of such work could lead to theories of motivation which may be compared with extant models, thus allowing for areas of similarity and divergence to be explored.
3. What proximate, distal, organizational and context factors inform how motivation actually results in productivity, performance or otherwise?
4. Do questions around the meanings people ascribe to work and general socio-economic circumstances integrate with motivation? If so, in what ways?
5. Does the need/drive-rational/process divide in motivation theory hold in African countries?

CONCLUSION

Contextualized research and embedded theory achieve two major benefits. First, scholars free themselves from the twin burdens of resource myopia (Drenth & Heller, 2004) and the imposition of dominant world views (Lauer, 2012) on non-dominant others who often have alternative but insufficiently articulated world views. Second, contextualized research and embedded theory support astute organizational analyses, relevant application and more accurate intervention. It is perhaps in this spirit that Steers et al. (2004) lament the lack of embracing motivation theories that address emerging global realities and changes. We hold that the emergence of new theories which would address emerging global realities depend on the extent to which such theories derive scholarly and intellectual weight from the locale. When researchers take up the call to do location specific research and couple this with the drive for indigenous and autochthonous knowledge, alternative explanations may surface. The assumptions and milieus within which motivation research has hitherto taken place have informed the nature and types of theories which have emerged. In this regard therefore, ontological and epistemological perspectives which accept the diversity and reality of Africa's *otherness* may well enable scholars to arrive at a sufficiently broadened and inclusive understanding of what motivates and how motivation as a psychological process takes place in different places across the continent. This is the point of Li et al. that:

... indigenous research is essential for a full understanding of local phenomenon [...] generate the most effective solutions to local problems because of the high compatibility between theory and phenomenon ... (p. 7)

It is perhaps a telling indictment on the scholarly efforts so far that more than two decades after Munro (1986), his sentiments are partially repeatable. This is a call to action, akin to the sentiments expressed by Yankah (2012), who calls for:

... indigenous knowledge systems that address local needs and also for scholars who would be committed enough to facilitate the synchronization of indigenous knowledge with dominant knowledge. (p. 63)

We do not reject the value of extant work motivation theory and the rich progress made in the field. We reject the continued ‘imposition’ of theory. This ‘imposition’ may be inadvertent – African scholars have to reclaim their own ground. While we fully accept that theory testing is fundamental to the growth of any discipline, we reject the notion that extant theories ought to have been ‘fully’ tested for applicability before localized, context sensitive theory development should take place. While we agree with the value of positivist paradigms in fostering research rigour, we contend that at the present time in the African work motivation discourse, equally rigorous phenomenological approaches are to be preferred. This should ensure that sufficient space is created for the emergence of meanings and understandings that are near to the lived reality of the African-at-work and which are based on the expressed interpretations and outlooks of Africa’s peoples.

It is hoped that the arguments raised here will stimulate an African effort to generate locally derived theory as well as a wider debate on the lack of diversity in the theoretical formulations in work motivation, for motivation, is indeed culture-bound (Adler, 1991). Understanding, managing and bending the motivations of employees towards performance and productivity is difficult under the best of circumstances. This difficulty is exacerbated when organizations, businesses, policymakers and managers do not have location-sensitive tools and frameworks with which to engage presenting motivation challenges. The answer lies in returning to Africa to ask Africa and Africans: ‘When it comes to your work impetuses, imperatives and behavioural drivers, what really matters for you and why?’ *Sankofa*.

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