
Book Review

Astrid Podsiadlowski

E-mail: Astrid.podsiadlowski@wu.ac.at

1 Cultural mythology and global leadership
by Eric H. Kessler and Diana J. Wong-Mingji (Editors)
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In a unique endeavour of international cooperation Eric Kessler and Diana Wong-Mingji have brought together management thinkers and practitioners from around the globe to discuss cultural mythology and global leadership from an insider's perspective. When looking at today's global challenges their book on 'Cultural mythology and global leadership' bears timely relevance as interactions between employees and managers of different cultures are continuously increasing and managing multiple cultures is a core leadership task around the world. In each book chapter, different authors present central cultural mythologies of their country of expertise. They discuss and explain how those cultural mythologies provide relevant models for prevalent, but also desirable leadership behaviour in a global context. This edited volume comprises a very interesting collection of writings on cultural mythology and global leadership from 20 countries representing four different geographical regions, starting with the USA, followed by Europe, Africa and the Middle East and finally Asia and the Pacific Rim.

It is an intriguing idea to explore the integration of cultural mythology of a specific country in current leadership styles and to consider its specific global challenges. The individual book chapters provide a lot of valuable insights into a range of cultural values, beliefs and practices from countries the reader may be sometimes more and sometimes less familiar with. The reader further learns how helpful it is to have insights into a country's cultural heritage when working with people of diverse cultural background. After having read the book, the reader will have a better understanding of how cultural myths are reflected in daily leadership practices so that misperceptions become less and culturally sensitive interactions more likely.

As a starting point the editors Eric Kessler and Diana Wong-Mingji identify a nexus of three interrelated key ideas: globalisation, leadership and culture with cultural mythology at its core. "Our central premise is that leadership is inexorably intertwined with culture, and that mythology provides one of the most important keys for understanding the nature, manifestation, and dynamics of global leadership both within and across cultures" (p.2). In view of a complex world where leadership is critical, the editors aim at a contextually informed understanding of cultural values and norms from a historical perspective. This understanding provides insights into the formative influences of current leadership styles, their global challenges and practical applications within and

outside the respective countries. The authors could have answered the question of how cultural values and norms affect current, expected and desired leadership behaviour by (solely) referring to the many studies that have explored underlying relationships of cross-cultural interactions in international business. However, the editors chose an emic approach as one important way of studying cultures (see also Berry et al., 2002): to understand cultures from within by referring to one core aspect of transmitting cultural symbols, values and beliefs – cultural mythology. This is in line with Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952, p.151) early definition of culture as patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols. Following Schein's (1985, p.14) model on organisational culture those observable symbols and artefacts stand for underlying values and beliefs that are partly conscious and partly subconscious but can be made explicit. It is the purpose of this book to make values more explicit via important cultural myths and to help to understand what is behind more or less observable leadership practices. By such an emic approach, the individual contributions avoid the de-contextualising of myths by trying to understand them from within the culture and not from our own cultural perspective.

Each chapter has a similar structure and gives insights into central myths of one specific country or cultural subgroup within a country (e.g., the Zulus in South Africa). Different ethnicities within a country like in Kenya and mutual relationships with developments in other countries (e.g., the English speaking Caribbean islands) are also acknowledged. In each chapter, different authors describe the underlying societal values and visions and show how those have been relevant for shaping a country's view on leadership. Then they trace their significant impact on leadership with all its global challenges and practical applications, always providing concrete examples of global leaders via commentary boxes. Though each author presents his or her analysis from within, most of them also refer to findings from across, often referring to the GLOBE project on global leadership styles around the world by House et al. (2004) and Hofstede's (2001) work on international dimensions of cultural variability. Some authors further discuss their conclusions in the light of other empirical work in the country of interest. Nina Cole and Rhona Berengut, e.g., link Canadian myths of the land, the settlers, the natives, winter and sport and the resulting mosaic with other empirical work on contingent, transformational and participative leadership style. The influence of socialised power is described as a consequence of the historical cooperation between the three founding minorities, the English, the French and First Nations peoples. In another example, Sonja Sackman refers to stereotypes of German business conduct and recent empirical studies on current leadership to demonstrate how Prussian virtues and values may still have an influence on leadership but are now grounded in a democratic understanding and participatory environment to avoid pre World War II developments.

In their individual contributions, most authors go back in history looking at a very different time frame. In some countries, the cultural myths presented start with ancient mythologies like the cast of deities in Egypt or China, whereas a much shorter time orientation applies when Eric Kessler refers to superheroes in US mythology. Reasons for a historical perspective also differ: Christopher Ziemnowicz and John Spillan stress the unique importance of knowing Polish history to understand dominant cultural values and beliefs, while authors from the Caribbean and Kenya explicitly address historical developments to fill an assumed gap of country specific knowledge. As in the case of Poland, a country's mythology should not only be understood by its history but also by its dominant religion, Catholicism. It would be Hinduism in India and Judaism in Israel,

where Shay Tzafrir, Aviv Barhom-Kidron and Yehuda Baruch name the Old Testament as the most profound ‘mythology’ that underpins Israeli culture. Emic contributions with a less historical approach refer to a unique geographical location as in Canada or Australia, to political developments as in Russia, to the economic situation of scarce resources as in Israel or to the stage of development as in Kenya.

The cultural myths presented may refer to deities, leaders of the past or figures from stories that are either transmitted orally (the Nibelungenlied, a Germanic saga, or Russian fairy tales) or in written form (the Chinese classical novel of the monkey king or Iranian verse). Patricia Friedrich, Andrés Hatum and Luiz Mesquita, e.g., name Evita Perron, Che Guevara and the iconic gaucho as important Argentinean mythological figures that are influencing modern public and business leaders. Myths may resurface again and build a bridge as in China. Tomoatsu Shibata and Mitsuru Kodama describe how in Japan myths are indirectly or directly translated to employees through stories, traditions and unique corporate myths thus showing that modern day leadership has mythological foundations and traditional values. In Egypt, ancient myths and times of pharaohs are kept very much alive in daily activities and physical surroundings (like street names). Diana Wong-Mingji as well as Stansilav Shekshnia, Sheila Puffer and Daniel McCarthy stress the dynamics of referring to ancient myths to create new myths for Chinese and Russian leaders, also acknowledging the function of state sponsored myths. When Theodore Peridis recounts stories of the king of the gods, Zeus, of mighty Hercules and of brave Achilles in Greek mythology a close connection to US superheroes becomes apparent. All authors agree that cultural myths influence individuals and organisations (sometimes more, sometimes less directly) and are relevant for different types of leaders in different countries. Or as Mohamed Mostafa and Diana Wong-Mingji state, the goal of their Egyptian contribution is “to inform and bridge cross-cultural understandings with outsiders in a shrinking global society” (p.268).

The various approaches to the book’s objective are not only expressed through the way the cultural myths are presented but also how the authors apply them to a country’s leadership context. Some authors, e.g., distinguish between corporate versus political types of leadership as in Russia or specifically address the role of women which ranges from a very male dominated leadership perception in Russia to the importance of female mythological figures in China or Egypt. David Lamond sees the low representation of female global leaders as a blind spot in Australian business and a respective need for change. In a world that is becoming smaller and increasingly more inter-connected the contributions from India, Kenya and the Caribbean specifically ask for a change in local leadership styles towards more transparency and participation. A wide range of distinguishable but also overlapping leadership practices are identified with striking features ranging from charismatic in England, participatory in Germany, compassionate with a deep sense of community (Ubuntu) in South Africa, value-based, dialectical in Japan to benevolent paternalistic in India with all its paradoxes, ambivalences and transformations. This becomes particularly apparent in the Argentinean paradox of charismatic but team oriented, high power distance but egalitarian and self-acclaiming but socially devoted leadership characteristics.

The authors’ approach to the specific global challenges and practical applications make it clear that countries are affected differently by globalisation. Whereas Nina Cole and Rhona Berengut assume familiarity with Canadian and British global leaders and view their role within a global economy – outside their countries of origin, other authors

focus on interactions within the respective countries and may not even explicitly refer to global implications, like Adriana Garibaldi de Hilal for Brazil or Betty Jane Punnett and Dion Greenidge for the Caribbean. For some authors, e.g., from the USA, Canada and Australia, the particular global challenge is to ask where to go from here: they address necessary changes towards more pluralistic societies and more collaboration within and across and outline blind spots in (global) leadership positions such as the lack of women, indigenous people and other minority groups. Other authors particularly aim at helping to understand and explain potential misperceptions of leadership, e.g., in connection with the Western evaluation of the current Islamic government in Iran. The authors from South Africa, Iran and India draw specific attention to problematic misperceptions of Western scholars. David Abdulai explains how the misinterpretation of ancestral veneration as ancestral worship in African societies leads to negative stereotypes and neo-colonialism. He calls for a cultural immersion of Westerners who are truly interested in understanding African culture and appreciate cultural norms which is particularly relevant when considering the cultural dimension of development projects.

Practical applications specifically look at employees' expectations of good leaders as in the Egyptian contribution. Examples of informed understanding can be found when Afsaneh Nahavandi contrasts key Iranian leadership characteristics (integrity and honesty, humility, loyalty, fairness, kindness, moderation, courage, forgiveness, seeking wisdom and patriotism) to a Western focus on tasks and results. Similarly, Shanthi Gopalakrishnan and Rajender Kaur explain how Indian emphasis on spirituality and duty is in conflict with materialism, economic rationality and rights in the West and address a need for assimilation of values that are different but of global relevance. All authors agree that cultural differences can lead to misleading interpretations and have implications for leadership practices in a global business environment resulting in potential clashes with international partners. Recommendations are given, e.g., how important it is to devote time to social interaction and establish trust in an Argentinean business context, to understand the concrete meaning of a long-term and high-context orientation in Chinese culture or to encourage informal talks, listening and looking for consensus in Sweden which Lena and Udo Zander describe as 'walking, talking and silence'.

Whereas each chapter is worth reading one specific example will be chosen to present a more concrete picture of the type of information the reader can reflect on. After Fred Walumba and George Ndege have introduced the economic and social situation in most African societies and in Kenyan specifically they give a brief history of Kenya as a colonial construct. In their overview of Kenyan mythology, they refer to a population of 30 million which are made up of 43 ethnic groups each of which having different languages, culture and myths on their own. These reflect origin, religious beliefs, and interactions with neighbours characterised by a distrust of colonial chiefs and the appointed authority, the British Crown.

When looking at contemporary Kenyan leadership styles the difficulty of defining culture becomes striking and a focus on subculture or 'microcultures' is often necessary. A diverse range of subsequent leadership styles emerge: "Given the diversity, the style of leadership best suited for a particular leader in Kenya, depends upon a particular group [...] taking into account the uniqueness of Kenyan cultures" as a business consultant from Nairobi states in the commentary box (pp.236–237). While managers should strive for good relationships with their employees there is also the importance of distance between leaders and subordinates where authority is rooted in moral integrity. There is a

complex and multifaceted nature of paternalistic leadership in African societies where people tend to be egalitarian within but hierarchical between age groups.

According to the authors multiple and sometimes conflicting forces shape Kenyan management systems: the bureaucracy rooted in the legacy of British colonial rule, Kenyan traditional values rooted in subcultures, communism or the extended family, and a hybrid conventional Western business values promoted by Western multinationals and Kenyan managers educated in the West. The authors consider it desirable to discuss the applicability of authentic and transformational leadership in Kenya as they regard this as quite compatible with aspects of idealised leadership in Kenya. They call for increased leadership responsibilities to engage and transform Kenya's multi-ethnic work force and to enable employee empowerment and develop more effective leadership at all levels of organisations.

The balanced representation of different countries around the world is a great asset of the book and the emic perspective a very culturally sensitive approach. Still – in a globalised, mutually influenced world – it would have been valuable to look across and to link the country specific analyses of cultural mythologies, leadership styles, global challenges and practical applications. Only the contributions from Poland, Kenya, the Caribbean and India refer to other countries and acknowledge regional developments across countries. Questions arise: How does the importance of myths differ across the world? What about global myths, what about travelling myths? For example, Swedish gods like Odon and Thor have influenced German mythology. The US mythology clearly has European roots, e.g., in the Germanic tales by the Brothers Grimm. Those fairy tales travel worldwide through animated films, comic books and cartoons and influence a development of global myths with regard to good leaders. Such a look across countries and book chapters could have been dealt with in a final closing chapter that presents some concluding thoughts on how to learn from the different approaches and how to manage globally, even more so as the distinction between global implications and practical applications does not always become clear in the individual book chapters.

The book convincingly argues that core insights of leadership are grounded in the mythology of its cultural context. Both universal and unique characteristics are presented with important intercultural implications and potentially problematic interactions. International management calls for a complex interplay of historical, political factors and intergroup relations within and between countries. The authors succeed in supplying us with culture-specific information of what is expected of a good leader in a specific country and cultural context, of how to understand reasons for misunderstandings and how to overcome them in order to implement change in a global context.

The book is highly recommendable for people interested in the complex interplay of culture and leadership in a global world. In the end the reader will surely be able to answer the text on the cover where he or she has to match the cultural mythology and their sovereign origin. Or do you already know about the story of Ilya Muromet as a Russian mythical hero or the mythical story of Anancy, the trickster spider that took root in the Caribbean? And beyond that, you will gain a lot of insight of how such knowledge becomes relevant in a global leadership context.

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