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COUNTERPOINT

International business and Africa: Theoretical and applied challenges, and future directions

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Abstract

In response to Nachum et al.'s (J Int Bus Stud, 2023) call for further research in Africa by international business (IB) scholars, we argue that while IB scholars may have been slow to engage with Africa, the same cannot be said of related and IB-relevant business and management scholarship. There is already a substantial body of work on Africa in other domains of business and management scholarship – and relevant theorizing – that represents an important resource for IB scholarship. In contextualizing the 'interesting', we identify several contemporary theoretical strands that have so far characterized 'Africa research', interrogate ongoing challenges that mitigate these efforts, and suggest ways in which further research that speaks to theoretical, practical, and policy issues might inform IB researchers' engagement with Africa. Specifically, we set out the broader scope of the African business/management debate that might inform IB research, re-examine African diversity through the prism of 'theoretical tensions and puzzles', and consider the role of emergent indigenous theorizing such as ubuntu and Africapitalism that make Africa both 'interesting' and worthy of IB inquiry.

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INTRODUCTION

Nachum, Stevens, Newenham-Kahindi, Lundan, Rose, and Wantchekon (2023) suggest that the neglect of Africa by international business (IB) scholars may be attributed to the impression that 'there is no demand for information about Africa'. We respond to this argument by identifying what it is about Africa that raises 'interesting' researchable questions, identifying what other management scholars have achieved thus far, and by suggesting what IB scholars can learn from Africa and contemporary African business/management research. We argue further that studying Africa is vital because of its increasing prominence in the global economy. Furthermore, Africa offers important research and business

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opportunities as it undergoes rapid transformation, navigating turbulence and a large informal sector, and formulating innovative products/services, while engaging increasingly with the east as an alternative to the traditional (post-colonial) relations with the west.

Researchers often begin with the debatable generalization: 'we know very little about Africa', a claim which does not stand up to scrutiny from even a broad reading of the literature. Yet, extant research spans a wide spectrum, including technology and knowledge transfer (e.g., Osabutey, Williams, & Debrah, 2014; Kamoche & Newenham-Kahindi, 2012), and business ethics (e.g., Adeleye, Luiz, Muthuri, & Amaeshi, 2020), leadership (e.g., Nkomo, 2011), the HR dimensions of internationalization (e.g., *International Journal of Human Resource Management* special issue edited by Cooke, Wang, Yao, Li, Zhang, & Li, 2015; Cooke, Wood, & Horwitz, 2015; Ibeh, Wilson, & Chizema, 2012; *Thunderbird International Business Review* special issue edited by Boso, Adeleye, Ibeh, & Chizema, 2019); international human resource development and management (e.g., Debra & Ofori, 2006; *Journal of World Business* special issue edited by Kamoche, 2011; Mamman, Rees, Bakuwa, Branine, & Kamoche, 2019). The bigger challenge is that IB scholars might not have engaged with Africa as a research domain as much as scholars in related management disciplines and cognate fields. This means that there is a substantial body of theoretical and applied work that can be readily infused into IB studies, in the same way, for example, as the substantial body of HR work on China has done. Indeed, much HR work has dealt directly with IB issues, both with regard to MNEs and in the comparison of managerial practices between settings. In this sense, it can be said that there is a body of broadly defined IB work out there, but it is somewhat underrepresented in the main IB journals. However, not taking account of the work on the fringes of IB or IB work published in journals covering cognate disciplines risks neglecting opportunities to take the field forward.

If we cannot say that there is a lack of empirical research in Africa, there is still a case to be made that it is relatively neglected in proportionate (but not absolute) terms. For example, Zoogah, Peng and Woldu (2015) noted the rather modest proportion of Africa-related topics in business and management journals, and argued that while management research is no longer the 'parochial dinosaur' as described by Boyacigiller and Adler (1991), Africa-focused research has remained a missing link. They found a total of 568 articles on Africa across a range of three disciplines over a 52-year period (1960–2011): management, marketing, and economics, and despite an increase from 2000 onward, the proportion remains relatively small. Noting a similar trend, a later search by Kolk and Rivera-Santos (2018) noted a 'general decline' in the proportion of articles on Africa in top business and management journals. We argue that these findings must be treated with caution due to methodological concerns. Above all, it is important to look in the right place. For example, Zoogah et al.'s (2015) search does not include some key journals which have published Africa research, for example, *Human Relations, Organization, International Business Review*, and *Thunderbird International Business Review*. Unlike Zoogah et al. (2015) who cover a 52-year time-frame, Kolk and Rivera-Santos' (2018) 5-year review represents too short a period to conclude that there has been a 'general decline'. They also omit important journals that have published Africa research, such as *International Journal of Human Resource Management, Organization, Group and Organization Management, British Journal of Management, Human Relations*, and *Thunderbird International Business Review*.

Clearly, we need more extensive and comprehensive reviews of the real scope and extent of Africa research in the leading journals in order to gain a better understanding of the contribution of this research to the IB corpus of knowledge, and to shed more light on what is really 'interesting'. There is also a need to assess the extent to which distinctive Africa-based themes have emerged, the actual gaps in knowledge and possible research avenues. It has been argued that distinct sets of theories that capture and explain management practice in a diverse African context are yet to emerge, although this would, for example, discount important areas of theorizing, from historical institutionalism through to theories of ubuntu. Meanwhile, poor performance at firm level has been ascribed to embedded socio-cultural features, colonial legacies, or simply poor leadership (Zoogah et al., 2015). Zoogah et al. (2015) argue that such approaches fail to take account of dynamic features, and the interaction of institutions with firm level resources and capabilities to make for organizational effectiveness or lack thereof (ibid.). These challenges have been observed previously, which in part points to challenges in linking the macro and micro levels. For example, Kamoche (2011) observed that Africa remained proportionately less represented in the fields of management, organization studies, HR and IB, with significantly more attention focused on economics and foreign trade, and work at one level infrequently speaking to work at the other, other than in the most general terms. Indeed, Zoogah et al. (2015) found that 60% of the articles in their survey were in economics. Yet, there is room for inter-domain dialogue. For example, headline growth has often gone hand in hand with the decline of medium and large African firms in manufacturing and services. More specifically, seemingly good macro-economic performance has often been the result of a relapse to a reliance on primary commodities, leaving other areas of business and their workers worse off (Aiginger & Rodrik, 2020), and economies vulnerable to the vagaries of commodity markets. This has meant a decline in the scale and scope of decent work, with modern mining being increasingly automated, and artisanal mining associated with poor and dangerous conditions of service. Bokpin (2017) finds a link between FDI and environmental degradation in Africa, which reflects the extent to which much of the FDI attracted in recent years has been geared towards the exploitation of minerals and other natural resources. Micro level work can provide a powerful critique for macro level policy prescriptions and help highlight the need for more nuanced understandings of national growth and prosperity than one or two headline indicators.

Kolk and Rivera-Santos (2018) conclude that three dominant sets of theory have been deployed in Africa related research: (orthodox) economic theory; institutional theory (of one sort or another); and stakeholder theory, the latter concentrated in the *Journal of Business Ethics* (which carries a comparatively larger number of articles per se). Other work identifies historical tipping points (e.g., colonialism and the colonial legacy) and/or resilient indigenous cultural features (e.g., ubuntu) (Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2018); however, it can be argued that the former is often broadly aligned to the institutional literature (see Herbst, 2014). Below we identify what we consider to be some critical tensions and puzzles which influence and characterize theorizing on Africa, yet have been relatively neglected in Nachum et al.'s (2023) paper.

THEORETICAL TENSIONS AND PUZZLES

There are several different tensions and puzzles posed by the application of existing theories to Africa, in turn, impacting IB research across the continent. The first in terms of comparative institutionalism, which represents an influential stream of present day IB-scholarship (Jackson & Deeg, 2019). Whilst it is possible to trace linkages between institutional archetypes and growth for carefully selected periods of time, there is no overall pattern across the continent. Hence, if institutions do not provide the basis for stability and growth are they coherent institutional orders at all (Wood, Dibben, Stride, & Webster, 2011)? On the one hand, it has been argued that seemingly dysfunctional institutional orders can work quite well for insiders (ibid.). On the other hand, the lack of a strong and coherent set of national institutional features may make it harder to compare countries (Nolke & Claar, 2013). This would be apart from a rough distinction between South-Eastern, West Africa, and North Africa, given there are important differences in historical experience, geography/climatic challenges on these broad lines (Herbst, 2014). And, even if the latter is used as a basis to derive rough taxonomies, there are important distinctions to general rules. For example, it could be argued that Mozambique has more in common with the Lusophone countries of West Africa than with its neighbors. Others argue that at some Lusophone African states have at least as much in common with culturally similar countries elsewhere in the world (e.g., Angola and Brazil), as with their African counterparts (Ferreira, 2012). Similarly, with its relative prosperity, excellent education and training system, Ghana might appear to be an exception to the prevailing realities in the region. In turn, there does not seem to be a direct link between identifiable institutional recipes, and dominant patterns of firm level practices and performance outcomes; there seems to be as much internal diversity as between different sets of nations, which reflects complex and coexisting ecosystems on firms (Wood et al., 2011), characteristic of Africa's diversity (Kamoche, Siebers, Mamman, & Newenham-Kahindi, 2015).

Nachum et al. (2023) contend that few African firms have emerged as global players, which we argue reflects the institutional and geographical diversity across 54 countries, with none having anywhere near the economic clout or domestic markets of Asian emerging economies such as India or China, and without the strong regulatory commonalities and depth of ties of, say the European Union. While some such as South African Breweries have ventured beyond the continent (and in doing so, ended up being subsumed into an even larger brewery group), large African firms such as MTN, Shoprite, and the Dangote Group have tended to expand regionally or across the continent. Smaller and informal African firms do operate on the transnational scale, a function both of arbitrary colonial boundaries, and because they can exploit small differences in price and availability between countries in the same region (Peberdy, 2000).

However, an even greater paradox is that alluded to above, between macro level theorizing that claims firm relevance (if nothing else in terms of understanding why organizations may be more or less competitive, or why MNEs prefer some countries to others), and actual organizational facts on the ground. Although there is considerable work on how firms may mitigate the effects of poor institutions (Marquis & Raynard, 2015), there is rather less on managerial choice and why managers make the wrong or the right decisions under similar circumstances, or indeed, how the firm as an active agent might alternatively support and undermine institution-building. While there is a wide body of issue-orientated HR research in Africa that highlights the creative solutions managers and/or their employees come up with when confronted with contextual adversity (Gomes, Angwin, Peter, & Mellahi, 2012), it could benefit from interrogating and critiquing macro understandings as to the nature and causes of such adversity.

In some instances, the real story may be of highly competent management acting in creative and innovative ways to offset the negative effects of contextual features, such as the resource curse on firms outside of the primary commodity bubble. This paves the way for research on pragmatism and organizational improvisation, especially in the face of endemic commodity price volatility. Moreover, the need for the former has been greatly heightened by the turbulence resulting from events such as climate change, and, indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic. The sheer speed of change required to cope with the latter meant that, as everywhere else in the world, governments, organizations, institutions, and individuals resorted to improvisation to various degrees. Media reports have identified improvisational actions taken to deal with the pandemic, including the manufacturing of lost-cost ventilators by start-up firms and engineering students (e.g., Blandy, 2020) as governments negotiated uncertain supplies in turbulent times. These unexpected forms of creativity have presented new research avenues for the study of organizational improvisation in emerging economies more generally, but equally in Africa (Cunha, Gomes, Kamoche, Mair, Miner, & Tarba, 2022). Improvisation appears particularly pertinent in African organizational contexts that are prone to institutional turbulence and uncertainty owing to historical legacies and primary commodity dependence, that pose significant challenges to strategic planning (e.g., Kamoche, 1997; Kiggundu, 1989; Munene, 1991). Kamoche (1997: 553) argued that 'improvisation and the management of ambiguity are essential capabilities' in African organizational contexts characterized by uncertainty which potentially renders rational strategic planning futile. Yet, pragmatic improvisation has not been critically examined, in spite of its pertinence to organizational resilience and contextual indigenous knowledge. Prior literature has defined organizational improvisation as the conception/realization of action as it unfolds, or a convergence of planning and action (e.g., Cunha, Cunha, & Kamoche, 1999; Hadida, Tarvainen, & Rose, 2015; Moorman & Miner, 1998).

Where managers navigate poor infrastructure, political interference and corruption, and various social-cultural challenges, improvisational skills and resilience become critical managerial capabilities embedded within the institutional context. In this regard, Cunha, Fortes, Gomes, Rego and Rodrigues (2019) propose a research strand on 'ambidextrous leadership' as a way to deal with paradox, conflicting tensions particularly in countries like Angola that are transitioning from a centralized to a market economy, developing 'short-term flexibility' and learning to reconcile deep-seated interests. Other work points to evidence of entrepreneurial actions by leaders of African firms, driving cross-continental expansion through building a common developmental vision (e.g., Gentile-Lüdecke, Halaszovich, & Lundan, 2019).

This last point leads to a further puzzle. On the one hand, if institutions and/or policies are ineffective or bad, then it might seem that the best firms can do is avoid having to deal with them. This might be through not investing in a country, exiting, or evading regulatory scrutiny (Barnard & Luiz, 2018). Yet, even in the advanced economies, national institutions are never perfectly coupled, and, in response, local actors may base their competitiveness on complementarities flowing from measures implemented to compensate for systemic weaknesses (Crouch, Streeck, Boyer, Amable, Hall, & Jackson, 2005). In short, firms may either evade or actively compensate, and that latter may actually lead to solutions much better than might otherwise have emerged (ibid.). Of course, the evasion or complementary seeking paths are not necessarily mutually exclusive; firms may seek to infuse elements of both, or oscillate between the two. A common feature of emerging markets is extended informal networks of support based on notions of reciprocity (Wood et al., 2011). As Verbeke and Kano (2013) note, firms may trade favors as a mechanism for reducing transaction costs; one rationale may indeed be institutional failure, but there are many other reasons for engaging in such activities, including in settings where social ties are strong, where there are opportunities for reciprocity, and/or where high bounded rationality coexists with low bounded reliability. These complexities and institutional ambiguities require appropriate strategic capabilities and responses. For example, managing and sustaining rather than overcoming ambiguity has been identified as an important strategic capability for firms that juggle formal and informal contexts, such as Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry (Uzo & Mair, 2014). New coping mechanisms and emergent capabilities are social-historically constructed and not easily replicable by expatriate managers, whether from the west, or, increasingly today, from China.

The expansion of the Africa–China engagement has seen trade flows grow from under US$10 billion in 2000 to over US$200 billion in two decades, according to various reports from the China-Africa Research Initiative (CARI) at the John's Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. This engagement first attracted academic attention in the areas of political science, international trade and economics (e.g., Brautigam, 2009), and has demonstrated for example the Chinese investors' preference for natural resources over markets (e.g., Gunessee & Hu, 2020).

While Chinese firms are often associated with poor working conditions which partly reflects home country practices (e.g., Akorsu & Cooke, 2011), Zambia in particular offers important lessons and a rich research vein illustrative of an extreme case of power imbalance and failure to rein in the excesses of foreign investors in general; many Western MNCs have, in their own right, very controversial reputations across the continent in terms of poor labor standards, political interference, and in terms of pollution and hazardous waste (see Stephens, 2017).

Angola and Mozambique both have a complex history of post-colonial conflict; this has been followed by periods of reconstruction characterized by strong engagement with China, based very much on resources revenues, including that accruing from fossil fuels, to fund infrastructural development, that at times, has led to the marginalization of other areas of economic activity (for example, the traditionally strong cashew nut processing industry in Mozambique). Much of the emerging research evidence highlights both the internal diversity of the continent (cf. Nachum et al., 2023) and how issues play out in specific contextual circumstances. For example, in the case of Cameroon, Chinese firms diverted from contemporary normative isomorphic pressures, and instead challenged and altered long-standing and deeply embedded business and employment practices of their French and US counterparts. This was attained at the diplomatic level, and engagement with the Cameroonian state (Geary & Nyiawung, 2021). Cameroon may be a particularly salient example to understanding the relationship between parent country diplomacy and its impact on overseas subsidiaries, given both the insights afforded by existing scholarship on that country (Jonker & Robinson, 2018), and its internal diversity; for example, tensions and disarticulations between the Anglophone and Francophone areas of the country may not only provide challenges, but also opportunities that foreign and domestic firms might exploit (cf. Ezemenaka & Ekumaoko, 2021). Such approaches challenge views of Africa as both a unique and coherent unit of analysis, and the extent to which local and foreign players may forge solutions both from established playbooks and what may be improvised under specific contextual constraints.

As one of the biggest destinations of Chinese FDI, Zambia's engagement with China has been one of the most controversial on the continent, beyond the often-reported view of Chinese firms as a threat to local entrepreneurship in many African countries (e.g., Gadzala, 2010), to undue influence in the Zambian political landscape (Matambo, 2019) and oppressive work practices including reports of workers being shot, with no discernible consequences for Chinese bosses (Carmody, Hampwaye, & Sakala, 2012). This is not to depict African governments and businesses as passive subjects. While it has often being suggested that China has a specific 'Africa strategy' while Africa has no 'China strategy', Carmody et al. (2012) argue that African elites do in fact have a 'China strategy' designed to counter Western conditionalities and entrench their own position.

There is a significant body of literature pointing to shortfalls in local managerial capabilities (Edoho, 2001). In theoretical terms, this may be conceived of in terms of institutional shortfalls, at the formal regulatory and associated national training systems, informal cognitive (relative materialism) and informal (norms and weak social capital) levels (Stephan, Uhlaner, & Stride, 2015); the relative weighting ascribed to each would fit each sub-school in institutional analysis. Yet, other more recent accounts explore how firms in Africa build internal capabilities (e.g., better managerial capacity or employee skills) or engage in enabling activities (e.g., new market entry strategies) to cope with challenging circumstances, in a manner that may indeed leave them much better off than before (George, Corbishley, Khayesi, Haas, & Tihanyi, 2016; Zoogah et al., 2015). While shortfalls in education and training remain common across the continent, a number (for example, Ghana and Botswana) have quite effective broad-based systems that extend through to the tertiary level (cf. Takyi, Amponsah, Asibey, & Ayambire, 2019).

Again, it cannot be assumed that Africa has a monopoly on poor management, nor that Western expatriates always have superior (or relevant) skills or capabilities. Indeed, evidence points to numerous instances of poorly prepared Western expatriate managers undermining the achievements of their local counterparts (Hanckock, 2012). Others point to the need for expatriates to build trust with locals (Gertsen, 1990), although this often steers away from material issues such as job security, wages and equity that might undermine such relations (Dibben & Williams, 2012). In short, although managerial capacity is often depicted as an African problem, there is considerable evidence to suggest that expatriates often have capability problems of their own (Hancock, 1992). More recently, management scholars have examined business and comparative employment practices, and the cross-cultural challenges faced by expatriates, both drawing on and critiquing institutional theory and postcolonial theory (e.g., Cooke, 2014; Cooke, Wang, Yao, Li, Zhang, & Li, 2015; Cooke, Wang & Wang, 2017; Jackson & Horwitz, 2018; Kamoche & Siebers, 2015). For example, Cooke (2014) highlights the importance of the government and other institutional actors in both causing and potentially mitigating the antagonistic employment relations arising in particular from Chinese firms' reliance on ethnocentric staffing and low pay at the micro-level (cf. Kamoche & Siebers, 2015; Lee, 2009). Yousfi (2014) examined hybridization processes where managers adopt foreign management practices reinterpreted through local cultural frameworks, and identified the need to formulate knowledge systems that are cognizant of the complexity and ambiguity in postcolonial African contexts.

Important questions remain about the viability of cross-cultural engagements, the role of foreign firms in Africa, transfer of knowledge and technology, and how these shape managerial thinking and practice and reflect diverse national social-political realities. Yet, the claimed resonances between Chinese guanxi (networking) and African ubuntu (e.g., Chi, 2019) would suggest potential areas of convergence and promising avenues of further research that challenges conventional wisdom and goes beyond the rhetoric (Kamoche, Gunessee & Kufour, 2021). Thus, going beyond the accommodation of expatriate and MNC managers is the broader question of situated, contextual knowledge, indigenous practices, and the place of African worldviews in the firm and wider society.

INDIGENOUS THEORIZING: UBUNTU AS THEORY AND EXTENSIONS

Indigenous concepts may be over-simplified when presented to a Western audience. Any evaluation of theory and the firm in Africa, would indeed be incomplete without a look at ubuntu, and indeed, it is mentioned several times in the Nachum et al. (2023) article. However, we would start by looking more closely at what ubuntu is and what it is not. Claiming that it lies at the basis of informal sector activity given the need to support family, as Nachum et al. (2023) suggest, is something of a simplification. In much of the developing world, informal sector activity is used as a survival strategy; African informal sector operatives are little different in this regard, as indeed, is their common reliance on family, ethnic, and/or or community based informal networks of support. Mangaliso (2001: 24) defines ubuntu as 'humaneness – a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony, respect and responsiveness – that individuals and groups display for one another.' Hence, it is much more than simply a sense of financial obligation to family or clan. While Nachum et al. (2023) see ethnic affiliation as a source of in-group solidarity, we urge caution as neither such a narrowly defined focus on ethnicity – nor ubuntu – assure socio-cultural harmony at the broader national let alone pan-African level, as evidenced in the widely acknowledged scourge of 'tribalism'. In short, ubuntu is more than informal networks, but at the same time, its communitarian focus does not alone, make it a panacea for all challenges.

While ethno-social affiliation and ubuntu are central to the African thought and value system, they have in the past often been at odds with the emergence of capitalist structures that privilege self-interest over the much more nuanced social values that inform workplace kinship ties, community solidarity and social hierarchy. Yet, traditional social norms and values remain dominant, even while economic activity is increasingly monetized on sophisticated online platforms that are readily accessible to the poor including advanced mobile telephonic payment systems such as Mpesa in Kenya. In short, different and seemingly incompatible ways of seeing and doing things may coexist. One discernible risk with a narrow interpretation is the misappropriation of the term in everyday parlance with a focus on the rhetoric of solidarity and collectivist African values and little critical reflection on what this means in actual business practice. For example, McDonald (2010) offers a trenchant critique of the damaging marketisation of ubuntu particularly in post-apartheid South Africa where political and business circles invoke it in everyday discourse as a way to lend credibility to their business practices, even when, in reality, they may be infused with many other characteristics, which may even include legacies of apartheid (Ndlovu, 2020). Given the relative dearth of debate on how ubuntu values and tenets actually bring about meaningful change in business practice beyond the rhetoric of a humanistic ideology, we believe ubuntu is ripe for more rigorous analysis as to its boundary conditions, and what it really contributes to firms and societies. A key debate within ubuntu philosophy highlights tensions between the promotion of dignity and equity, and through the implicit perpetuation of patriarchal values and authority, which may include the workplace (Chisale, 2018). It is argued that a focus on the communal aspects in confronting shared challenges may be one mechanism for imparting a greater awareness of gender and diversity within the ubuntu literature (Chisale, 2018).

Woermann and Engelbrecht (2019) propose to theorize ubuntu as a new lens through which the firm might be viewed not merely in terms of stakes but harmonious relations. They argue that 'an Ubuntu ethic assumes that a moral responsibility is generated a priori due to the mere fact of a relationship' (Woermann & Engelbrecht, 2019: 30). The relational is an inherent part of what it means to function and to belong within a community, embracing notions such as generosity, reciprocity, compassion, whereby 'to be a human be-ing is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them' (Ramose, 2003). In turn, this relational ethic is seen as being in sharp contrast to the tenets of 'Western individualism' and the autonomous individual (Praeg, 2014). The suggestion that the firm might be treated as a nexus of relationships, rather than a nexus of contracts (Woermann & Engelbrecht, 2019) offers an interesting perspective for theorizing the nature and role of the firm in business management as well as IB, that goes beyond current understandings of stakeholder theory. It suggests a new basis for rethinking business ethics and moral agency, and raises important questions about reciprocal obligations between the firm and its members. This entails a shift from merely meeting contractual obligations with stakeholders, to locating harmonious relations at the heart of value-creation across the spectrum of actions, from executive decision-making and leadership to HRM and industrial relations, and community engagement.

These tenets are particularly pertinent for MNCs that often struggle with cultural adaptability and legitimacy. A light social footprint, acting as an island removed from surrounding communities, other than as a source of cheap labor, with skilled jobs dominated by expatriates, has served many oil-and-gas MNCs quite well in many African countries as far as the bottom line is concerned, an extreme example being Equatorial Guinea (Frynas, 2004). At the same time, this may come at a heavy reputational cost, with, in some notable instances, backlashes by excluded local communities endangering their present and future operations, as spectacularly illustrated by the present armed conflict in northern Mozambique (Dos Santos, 2020). This raises broader questions around the relative embeddedness of firms in societies, whether and how they seek compatibility in their activities with the needs of local communities, and the role of indigenous theory in better understanding the same (Amaeshi et al., 2018).

A focus on indigenous theorizing also opens up new research pathways on topics that have been developed extensively elsewhere. Thus, scholarship on leadership might be revitalized by a focus on the ethical dimension that takes account of institutional fragility and weak governance (Story, Guimarães-Costa, Kamoche, & Rego, 2022), the ways communities and firms may compensate for this and the role of leaders in mediating such processes. Again, the application of ambidexterity to include indigenous capabilities and knowledge may help promote a better understanding of how leaders and firms work to address the paradoxes and complexities in the African institutional context (Cunha et al., 2019).

In formulating new theoretical pathways informed by ubuntu, researchers might also pay attention to other emergent ideas informed by indigenous knowledge and the African socio-economic context, and that speak to distinctly African social realities, on which Nachum et al. (2023) are silent. In this regard, Behuria (2022) calls for inductive research that historicizes the African political economy. The latter has traditionally been characterized as centering on the emergence of the African political class, particularly through policy-inducements and state-business relationships that are often opaque and transactional. A possible contender is the notion of Africapitalism. First mooted by Nigerian entrepreneur, Tony Elumelu, Africapitalism represents an innovative approach to mobilize private sector investments to generate economic prosperity and social wealth (Elumelu, 2014). Africapitalism has also emerged as a promising avenue for further research which goes beyond economic theorizing, to raise new questions about how entrepreneurship can promote sustainable value creation, job-creation, poverty-alleviation and intra-African trade and investments while taking into account the social impact of business (Amaeshi, Okupe, & Idemudia, 2018). In practice, it represents a recalibration of economic activity with a clear agenda for private business to play a productive and transformational role in the communities within which they operate, and a shift from a reliance on State-led initiatives, donor-country and NGO interventions. It rejects the notion of seeing Africa simply in terms of a market that happens to be emerging, a non-place where there is no room for real political choices. It is held that this is poorly aligned to the reality of societies with genuine human needs and where connectivity is at the core (Amaeshi et al., 2018). Hence, Africapitalism introduces an alternative basis for a political economy that places the needs of the community at its very heart, in addition to shareholder interests, and equally importantly, serves to rectify inequalities engendered by the more alienative and exploitative forms of capitalism. At the same time, the literature on Africapitalism highlights some important constraints, most notably the country-of-origin effects on MNCs operating in Africa; this, in turn, continues to shape the contours of capitalism across the continent (Idimudia et al., 2018). Again, it is much easier to highlight challenges with the status quo than to develop viable alternatives based on distinction regional and local realities, and indeed, to call for investment in skills without the capabilities to make this happen (Amaeshi et al., 2018). Critics have charged that the value proposition of Africapitalism may be enhanced through a clearer understanding of the moral general principles at stake (rather than vaguer and more private definitions), and the development of a system of corporate governance that is more in alignment with African realities and values (Adegbite, Daodu, & Wood, 2020).

These two examples, ubuntu and Africapitalism demonstrate the diversity of African management thought with respect to emergent theoretical lenses. While the former has emerged largely within the South African context, the latter draws from Nigeria, yet the basic ethos resonates across other parts of Africa, and both perspectives are promising avenues for further research. The foregoing might suggest the need for more nuanced accounts as to the balance of capabilities between locals and foreigners, more accurate assessments of the local knowledge base, and the increasing complexity of social-economic activity. This does not imply that there may be pockets of equally incompetent locals and expatriates (or the opposite); however, the relative balance of knowledge between locals and expatriates, and how their interactions may lead to superior or inferior outcomes is only incompletely understood (Okpara & Kabongo, 2017). While Zoogah et al.'s (2015) call for a 'dynamic integrative model of organizational effectiveness' and an 'African theory of management' may be somewhat over-ambitious, we believe there needs to be a more rigorous analysis of the broad and complex African business context than has been the case thus far, in order to capture both the indigenous institutional and political-economic context and how this informs mainstream management practice, as well as the ramifications of the interface between this context and existing forms of economic production.

CONCLUSION

Above all, this paper makes the case for a more evidence-based approach to studying Africa, not only in terms of setting research agendas, but also in acknowledging the diverse body of existing research and indigenous knowledge. Thus, we would argue that the knowledge base is more extensive than is suggested in the Nachum et al. (2023) article, and that this may be an opportunity to challenge and develop how Africa is studied in IB. This would include challenging the assumption that emerging markets and their firms are intrinsically and irrevocably different from (or for that matter always inferior to) mature ones; rather there is a need to take account of diversity within each category, and the uneven and sidereal nature of systemic evolution in each. Each context may impart challenges and opportunities, even if the relative mix may vary. For example, in contrast to the traditional Weberian view that a limited range of (Western) cultural features are conducive to modern business activity, a close scrutiny of cultures around the world, including African ones, would indicate that 'other' cultures may impart real advantages of firms. In analytical terms, the privileging of a limited range of metrics may detract from a nuanced understanding of outcomes for firms and society. For example, high levels of growth may make little difference to communities and most firms, if only a sector – or a handful of families – benefits, which makes new developments like Africapitalism a potentially fruitful prospect for further research. Similarly, a focus on FDI rates may detract from a nuanced understanding of the quality of FDI, and the impact of FDI on local firms and across an economy. But, above all, this study would make the case for more firm-centered analysis; how competent and innovative managers may devise, experiment and operationalize practices and techniques to compensate for systemic challenges in a manner that goes beyond coping to developing lasting strengths. It is incorrect to claim a lack of research: rather this literature is fragmented, and much of it may be found in cognate fields across the social sciences (e.g., African studies, development studies, political economy).

At a theoretical level, there are several opportunities and challenges. Whilst it is commonly held that either institutions are much less closely coupled in emerging markets and/or that voids exist, each of these aspects could be further theorized. In the case of the former, some institutions might be closely coupled, and others much less so. For example, within Egypt, the sphere of large firms and associated regulations is closely articulated to priorities set by the military and military- owned firms, even if many other institutions are weakly coupled or suffer from some other shortfall. There are many more functional examples of close institutional coupling, for example, the targeted interventions to mutually shore up education and healthcare in Ghana, would provide a more conducive environment for firms and their employees (Abukari et al., 2015). This might suggest the need for a much closer understanding of the makings of institutional coupling, the uneven relationship between systemic evolution and policy, and what types of institutional coupling are likely to produce a more optimal environment for firms and their people. It also might suggest that some contexts may be particularly conducive to studying specific phenomena, again challenging approaches to Africa that see it as a coherent whole.

Nor in working to promote more nuanced applications and developments of Western theorizing, should we neglect indigenous theorizing. We welcome Nachum et al.'s (2023) emphasis on ubuntu, but would suggest that this is more than a grassroots philosophy: it is also a theory for summarizing, explaining and predicting why firms and their managers may exhibit a preference for certain choices in specific contexts. It also is the case that there are internal tensions surrounding thinking around ubuntu that are neglected in Nactum et al. We would both suggest that the concept of ubuntu has much wider explanatory power than suggested in their paper, and that at the same time, it also represents a contested terrain. Hence, we would caution against a very static notion of ubuntu: the existing literature highlights how it plays out in different settings across East and Southern Africa: it is not simply a summary of a set of embedded norms and values, but a dynamic way of contriving solutions in rapidly changing and dynamic contexts. However, the raison d'etre of such theorizing is to help provide contextually relevant understandings and insights, rather than develop trans-IB transformative theory; we believe that there is room for many types of theory in the IB universe. At the same time, the former may help spur other types of contextually relevant IB theorizing around the world. This is not to suggest that everything that goes on in Africa is unique, nor that what is not unique is not worthy of enquiry; indeed, some specific African countries have very close ties and similarities to emerging markets elsewhere, a frequently cited example being Angola and Brazil. Rather, we would argue for a more finely grained understanding of what is really unique and what we can learn both from what is and what is not.

On a final note, while we agree with Nachum et al.'s (2023) general thesis, we argue that it is not enough to note that Africa presents interesting and researchable opportunities. It is all too easy to conclude that there is a lack of IB relevant work on Africa. Whilst, in proportionate terms, Africa may be relatively under-represented, there is more than a critical mass of excellent work, particularly concentrated in political economy, area studies, and HRM journals. A scrutiny of such work highlights the vibrant nature of theorizing on Africa, for example, in terms of Ubuntu, Africapitalism, and more nuanced understandings of institutions than simply stories of voids or failure. At an applied level, this literature provides detailed insights into the experiences of firms, their challenges of managing diverse workforces, reconciling expatriate and indigenous staffing needs, and their interactions with other stakeholders. However, it would be correct to say that this literature is rather fragmented, with limited dialogue between different scholarly communities; it is hoped that this paper may contribute to a more integrated understanding of this undeniably heterogenous literature, as a step towards enhancing IB research on Africa. At the same time, IB researchers will need to adopt creative strategies for tackling the practical challenges of actually doing research in Africa, which deter scholars from engaging with Africa, such as securing access and navigating the institutional bureaucracy, and should embrace the opportunity to build on local knowledge by collaborating with researchers in Africa.

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