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Theorizing collective leadership: Lessons from *Ekpe*, an indigenous African institution

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ABSTRACT

Significant academic effort has been expended in researching leadership. The essence has been to emphasize individualism, linearity, heroism, hierarchy, teleological thinking, and economic calculus – even when theorizing collective leadership. Yet, little is known about leadership in subaltern cultures in the global south. This study discursively explores collective leadership as practiced within a masculine indigenous African council-type governance institution known as *Mgbe* or *Ekpe*, in communities within the coastal regions of Cameroon and Nigeria. Data were generated from 20 in-depth interviews with elders of *Ekpe* institution, onsite observation in 42 communities, and visual interpretation of recorded imagery. Findings unveil a multi-leader construct and practice of leadership founded on communitarianism, egalitarianism, humility, and pursuit of social equilibrium. Data also reveal a process of collectiveness enacted through the *becoming*, *being* and *embodying* processes of member embeddedness. Collectiveness emerged as a multi-leader process of fluid role substitution and power-sharing. The study proposes a multi-leader framework to actualize collective leadership. This approach challenges the seeming inevitability of a dominant or focal leader as theorized in extant collective leadership scholarship. It further introduces recognition theory in leadership studies and identifies directions for future research.

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Introduction

“Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say, “We have done this ourselves” – Lao Tzu.

Significant academic effort has been expended researching leadership in western economies. Underpinned by heroism, individualism, and performance maximization, and assuming every context to benefit from institutional stability, resource availability, linear structures, and individual and heroic systems of thought, western perspectives dominate leadership and management conceptualization academically and in practice (Cornelius et al., 2019;

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Filatotchev et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2023; Gamble, 2021). Consequent to western systems, both mainstream and critical theories on leadership emerging out of western class societies, individualistic culture and tradition are fundamentally leader-centered (Adair, 1989). There is little thought of leadership as a substitutional role or as possible without a single or focal leader. Yet, history tells us that multi-leader systems of leadership pre-date modern civilization – as evident in the ancient Roman Empire (Sally, 2002) and historical non-western indigenous societies (Sveiby, 2011). Leadership theorizing in the global south remains underdeveloped. Research from Africa sparsely features in academic discourses (Boussebaa, 2024; Eyong, 2017; Spiller et al., 2020). Consequently, concepts and practices studied in academic institutions and practiced in organizations within the global south dominantly reflect the western¹ experience, civilization, enterprise, and culture. Applied in the global south, such concepts become partly flawed, given the fundamental cultural, social, and institutional differences existing between nations in the northern hemisphere and the global south. Recognizing indelible differences, Afrocentric scholars (Hamann et al., 2020; Kiggundu, 1991; Nkomo, 2011) have called for the expansion of the boundaries of management research, to unravel “lessons for present and future management development programmes” (Kiggundu, 1991, pp. 32–47).

In response, a small but developing body of work based on historical, experiential, and increasingly empirical data on leadership practices in global south societies has emerged in Management and Organization Studies (MOS). Such work suggests that global south cultures tend to apply more “ecosystemic” approaches (Spiller et al., 2020), “communal” practices (Eyong, 2017), orient towards “companionate” intuition (Zoogah, 2020), and are founded on “collectivist” and “humane” considerations (House et al., 2004). This work also presents the global south context as characterized by institutional voids (Amaeshi et al., 2016), plagued by resource limitations (Liedong et al., 2020), facing political instability (CIA, 2024) and posting comparatively low on the human development index (World Bank, 2024). Yet, concepts developed outside of the global south have been applied in organizations in non-western contexts, oblivious of obvious cultural, social, and institutional disparities. Similarly, study contents utilized in universities and knowledge development institutions in sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries have dominantly adopted western concepts (Iwowo, 2015; Nkomo, 2011). This study addresses the north–south cultural, social, and institutional chasm as it relates to leadership practice by expanding theorizing into the less-known indigenous institution of *Ekpe* in the understudied communities of the Cross River Basin in West Africa which stretches into the Southwest region of Cameroon and Eastern Nigeria.

The research that informs this study addresses the knowledge deficit in the development of alternative leadership theorizing by exploring an indigenous male-only council-type institution known as *Ekpe*. *Ekpe* principles of governance is indigenous to these regions and have been practiced for generations, with the same principles continuing to date (Ruel, 1969). As elucidated in more detail below, the primary role of *Ekpe* institution is to preserve indigenous community customs and traditions and to maintain law, order, justice, and human rights in communities. Considering the unique practices in *Ekpe* leadership, which predates western intervention in west and central Africa, the institution serves as an ideal context to explore alternative leadership practices. The study was guided by three inter-related questions, (i) *How is collective leadership practiced in Ekpe institution?* (ii) *What principles define this practice and* (iii) *How is collective practice*

developed and sustained? To address these questions, the study adopted the complementary lenses of recognition and postcolonial theory and applied discursive and interpretive methodologies (Boje, 2001).

Axel Honneth's theory of recognition presents humankind as constantly seeking recognition (Honneth, 1996). He argues that recognition is necessary for all humans to maintain mutual relationships, develop belongingness, and feel a sense of collective identity (Deranty, 2007). Similarly, postcolonial theory seeks to eradicate prejudice and subjugation of one knowledge system or civilization over another (Ahluwalia, 2001). Together, both lenses offer a relevant periscope to make sense of leadership in the often-neglected indigenous domain (Eyong, 2017). The postcolonial perspective further offers a decolonized script of leadership in context. Thus, while recognition theory empowers an understanding and interpretation of leadership from a mindset of inclusiveness irrespective of origin (Newlands, 2022), the postcolonial lens ensures an undiluted expression of such knowledge devoid of colonialist negation (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978). By coupling these two lenses, the eventual knowledge developed becomes authentic and recognized as advancing relevant knowledge.

The rationale for the paper is threefold. First, it offers an empirically supported knowledge of collective leadership in a new context and in more practical ways. By so doing, it moves extant collective leadership research from rhetoric and ambiguity (Edwards & Bolden, 2023), and elusiveness in practice (Ospina et al., 2020), towards surfacing a practical collective leadership framework that could be relevant for practice in many contexts. Second, the paper deepens scholarly understanding of the implication of culture and context in defining perceptions and practices of leadership. It then draws on differences in the perception, conceptualization, and practice of leadership within *Ekpe* institution, to interrogate extant mainstream and critical leadership concepts of western origin that frequently claim to present universal knowledge (Bass, 1997). Third, the paper proposes a multi-leader framework or road map to actualize collective leadership practice in organizations. The penultimate theoretical contribution is to offer an alternative conceptualization of leadership that liberates theorizing from entanglement and confinement within individualistic, linear, and leader-centered mindset into creating a new thinking around multi-leader possibilities – even at the top of organizations.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section presents recognition and postcolonial theory and explains how these lenses combine to empower a mindset of freedom, value recognition and plurality in the conceptualization and theorizing of leadership. Following is a review of three streams of literature, starting with broad mainstream accounts to critical and collective notions of leadership. The review further explores current research on indigenous leadership. The paper progresses to methodology, explaining the research processes, sources of data, and the analytical process. In the penultimate section, the empirical findings of the inquiry are presented. The paper concludes with discussion of the main contributions, implications for practice and theory, and locates directions for future research.

Postcolonial Perspectives and Recognition Theory

An important consequence of the colonial experience for erstwhile colonized nations of the global south is the systematic marginalization of indigenous knowledge from non-

western worlds in global academic communities (e.g., Abdelnour & Abu Moghli, 2021; Alcadipani & Caldas, 2012; Hamann et al., 2020). This seeming exclusion has triggered the emergence of local knowledge under the banner of postcolonialism. Postcolonial studies explain how colonial domination and subjugation are operationalized in relations between the west and the global south (Khan & Koshul, 2011). Research under this banner seeks to unveil “untruths”, about subaltern knowledge systems and therefore take issue with the characterization of western civilization and knowledge systems as superior and subaltern way of life and knowing as primitive and worthless (Bhabha, 1994; Nkomo, 2011; Said, 1978). Said (1978) for instance, characterized western privileging of knowledge as a “synchronic panoptical vision of western domination” and “othering” designed to subjugate rather than understand the realities of colonized communities (p. 240). In his seminal work, Bhabha proposed that the dominance of western ideas has compelled subaltern communities into “mimicry” and “hybridity” (1994, p. 126). Meanwhile, Eyong (2017) argued that modernization posed the risk of indigenous African communities losing or eroding vital local knowledge systems and practices.

The need to value alternative leadership traditions has been picked up by various management scholars. Many have highlighted inaccuracies with the “global paradigm” currently dominating management theorizing (Case et al., 2012, p. 3). To mitigate this consequence, the postcolonial perspective problematizes west-centric dominance in management scholarship (Boussebaa, 2024) and interrogates claims of such concepts being universally applicable in every social, cultural and institutional context (Nkomo, 2011).

While postcolonial theory transforms the demeaning characterization of subaltern culture, science and way of life from inferior and removes negativity, recognition theory on its part encourages a rethink of erstwhile western knowledge systems and privileges (Young, 2001). In workspaces, such privileges have been questioned as inappropriate in an increasingly multi-cultural world constituting cross-cultural working teams (Newlands, 2022).

Recognition theory therefore invigorates egalitarian principles against the conviction that all traditions and cultures could potentially contribute to knowledge in unique ways and therefore must be recognized and valued (Ikäheimo & Laitinen, 2010; Marcelo, 2013). Honnethian scholars (e.g., Laitinen, 2002) trace the source of social tension and discord in society to the tendency to despise, misrecognize, undervalue and negate persons or practices originating from certain non-western cultures and social clusters (Newlands, 2022). Emerging from critical organization studies and sociology work (e.g., Laitinen, 2002; Newlands, 2022), and increasingly featuring in leadership studies (e.g., Boussebaa, 2024), recognition theory encourages open-mindedness and intellectual inclusion in ways that enable indigenous knowledge and practices to be valued, recognized, and considered as relevant for application in global enterprise.

Recognition theory complements postcolonial perspectives by way of both concepts seeking to debunk the negative connotations of the non-western about subaltern cultures (Ahluwalia, 2001), while also affirming a positive appreciation of alternative practices. Applied in the context of the present study, both lenses empowered the indigenous *Ekpe* perspective under study to regain and enliven its value and to re-position as a relevant concept worthy of publication and further intellectual reflection. Furthermore, by coupling the egalitarian principles encapsulated in recognition theory to the

esteeming effect of postcolonial theory, the researcher overcame existing systemic colonial negation of *Ekpe* in colonial manuscripts (e.g., Mansfield, 1908; Partridge, 1905) to confidentially elevate *Ekpe* leadership principles to the status of extant theories of leadership.

Theoretical Foundation

Despite a huge volume of text on leadership published annually, a closer examination of this literature suggests that this scholarship has evolved along four main époques. Early great man theories associated leadership capability with family of orientation, against the thought that descendants of historical great leaders; Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great, King Henry the eighth and so on, inherited unique leadership skills that made them leaders at birth. As such, leaders were *de facto* descendants of the great men of history (Spector, 2016; Wilson, 2019). When such men or women could not replicate the *great exploits* of their forebearers, attention shifted to the search for individuals possessing the esteemed physical, vocal, and intellectual attributes and characteristics ascribed to leaders in what was referred to as trait theory of leadership (Stogdill, 1948). The impossibility of finding leaders matching an increasingly expanding catalogue of leader attributes rendered trait theory unreliable, inoperable, and fruitless (Fulop et al., 2004; Grint, 2000).

The second wave shifted attention away from human physical attributes to leader behavior. Under behavioral perspectives, effective leaders were persons who achieved the best out of followers either by paying more attention to task accomplishment or able to build closer relationships with followers in ways that empowered them to work more or to be loyal followers (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). The behavior inquest also examined how leaders gained power (French & Raven, 1959), and how they deployed this at work. Scholars categorized leaders as ranging from those preferring autocratic, democratic to more *laissez faire* approaches (Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1958). However, the difficulty of de-coupling leadership behavior from work context made behavioral theories inexplicable as it soon became clear that leaders behaved differently at work and out of work. Behavioral theories were also bedeviled by the fact that human behavior was never a constant measure.

In the third wave, attention switched towards contingency and situational leadership theories (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). The focus here was about how leaders dealt with subordinates at different levels of competence or maturity and the ability for leaders to change and adapt to different contingencies (Fulop et al., 2004). Criticisms levied on the contingency approach, including what has been referred to as the *Blackbox*, of leadership undermined the validity of the contingency argument as scholars could not explain why some leaders could adapt to different contingencies or work situations, while others were only effective in specific contexts. The absence of any consistent or scientifically proven understanding of the links between leaders and their adaptability to context diminished the relevance of situational leadership theory (Ford et al., 2023).

A fourth wave in the theorizing of leadership – often referred to as the “new paradigm” saw the emergence of transformational, charismatic, and visionary theories in the late 1970s. The underpinning argument of these concepts was that individuals embodying and exhibiting certain knowledge, charisma, and power to influence, could inspire followers to perform beyond expectation (Bass, 1985). Originally introduced by MacGregor Burns

(1978), the promise of finding a “superman” or “superwoman”, – panacea for all organizational challenges and beholder of transformative change provoked enormous interest globally (Delaney & Spoelstra, 2019; Wilson, 2019). The hunt for a “guru” or “superhero” leader able to manufacture solutions to every organizational pathology has continued unabated.

The reality though is that the phenomenon of leadership has increasingly emerged as more complex than often presented or defined (Grint et al., 2022). Ford et al. (2023) for instance estimated that the academic effort of seeking to objectively understand and theorize leadership as a phenomenon which can be wholly defined and universally theorized has so far been futile. Even so, how leadership is practiced continues to be dominated by a “romanticized” notion of leadership whereby heads of companies including: Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), General Managers (GMs), Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) and Directors of companies are celebrated and elevated to the status of demi-gods (Morris et al., 2005). Such unassuming heroism continues even as such individualized and heroic characterization of leaders has been associated with increasing unethical practices.

To address limitations observed in the conceptualization of mainstream accounts of leadership, scholars are beginning to look elsewhere for new knowledge. For example, scholars within the critical leadership studies (CLS) platform (Collinson, 2005, 2011; Dar et al., 2021; Dorasamy, 2018; Foldy & Ospina, 2022; Ford et al., 2022) consider leadership as a complex phenomenon enacted and understood differently between cultures and contexts. Thus, contrary to universalizing perceptions and practices of leadership, critical scholarship (which can be referred to as the fifth wave) factors cultural and contextual differences (Collinson et al., 2011), and therefore constantly suspicious of the romance accorded to leaders. They also question the essentialist philosophy at the heart of mainstream concepts (Ford et al., 2008), which they consider to be “dubious” (Spoelstra, 2021), and potentially “misleading” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Consequent to these criticisms, a stream of research theorizing leadership as a collective process has more recently emerged in leadership studies.

Collective Leadership Scholarship

Collective leadership (CL) theorizing (a sixth wave) is nascent but rapidly advancing (Edwards & Bolden, 2023). Although there is no consensus on the definition of collective leadership, a common definition presents it as; a “collective process where a group of people work towards shared goals” (Denis et al., 2012, p. 212), while sharing decision making and working collaboratively (Fairhurst et al., 2020). Framed under multiple captions including: “collective”, “shared”, “distributed”, “network”, “complexity”, “co-leadership”, and so on (Ospina et al., 2020; Yammarino et al., 2012), the CL field comprises two axes or dimensions. The first axis explores the location or locus of leadership with scholars looking for manifestations of leadership and exploring whether leadership resides in the individual, group, or system. The second examines how collectiveness is conceptualized and captures the challenge of escaping from the very foundations of individualism upon which CLS arguments anchor (Ospina et al., 2020).

Recent reviews suggest that defining, measuring, and documenting collective leadership has proven quite challenging with theory outpacing empirics (Edwards & Bolden,

2023) and the field lacking “clarity” (Ospina et al., 2020, pp. 442–443). What is more, scholars have stumbled against the challenge of dislodging from linear, hierarchical, and individualistic framing, thus, limiting leadership to revolve around a “focal leader” who must be at the helm or at the top of an organization (Yammarino et al., 2012), working in collaboration or in partnership with others. The possibility of multiple individuals or leaders benefitting from equal power, responsibility and collective accountability has proven to be unthinkable so far (Fairhurst et al., 2020; Gibeau et al., 2020; Ospina et al., 2020). In particular, the thought of leaders and followers inter-changing power position and substituting roles as leader and follower and vice versa, remains an untraversed terrain in current collective leadership theorizing (Edwards & Bolden, 2023; Fairhurst et al., 2020; Ospina et al., 2020). Collectiveness has so far been limited to the dual relational dynamic between leaders and followers (Ospina et al., 2020, p. 450), and leaders and groups (Fairhurst et al., 2020). Furthermore, theorizing has struggled to disentangle from the “power-laced foundations”, and individualistic constructs of mainstream concepts (Fairhurst et al., 2020, p. 604).

Entrenchment in the conceptualization of leadership as inevitably individualistic is not limited to research in management studies. Psychology-grounded concepts developed outside management studies and founded on social identity theory (e.g., Haslam & Reicher, 2016; Reicher et al., 2020) or Identity Leadership Inventory (ILI) (Van Dick et al., 2018) have not buck the trend of individualistic modeling. In their study on leadership and identity, (Van Dick et al., 2018) identified “trust in the leader”, as critical to job satisfaction, innovative work behavior, and organizational citizenship behavior. Similarly, peering from social identity theory, Haslam and Reicher (2016) argued that “shared identity” depended on the leader. By anchoring on the role of leaders in shaping group behavior, employee identity and group dynamic, psychological notions of leadership have equally adopted a leader-centered understanding (Reicher et al., 2020; Van Dick et al., 2018).

Other extant concepts servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019), paternalistic leadership (Pellegriani & Scandura, 2008) and toxic leadership (Tavanti, 2011) are equally leader-centered, in so far as they focus on the actions of a central figure identified as leader, based on the legitimate high positions they hold in organizations. Thus, Ospina et al. (2020) concluded that a major challenge constituting a key gap in CL research has been the difficulty of surfacing models that are not grounded in individualism, heroism, and leader-centeredness. Yet, anthropological work proffers community-based lifestyle in some societies with practices of leadership tending towards more inclusive and multi-leader frames of thought (Eyong, 2019; Sally, 2002; Sveiby, 2011). Yet, due to limited access and muted interest, we know little about indigenous concepts of leadership from an organizational perspective, warranting a further exploration of early writings on this developing thread of literature.

Indigenous Constructions of Collective Leadership

A growing body of literature has emerged in sociology work, social anthropology and to lesser extent in management studies illuminating indigenous perceptions and practices of leadership. Research exploring leadership practices among Canadian and Alaskan native populations (Kenny & Fraser, 2012), Māori clans in New Zealand, Australian

Aboriginal populations (Spiller et al., 2020), and indigenous communities in West Africa (Eyong, 2017) has sparsely emerged in MOS outlets.

Adopting an ecosystems approach and exploring leadership from the perspective of Māori traditions, Spiller et al. (2020) concluded that in this context, leadership was a living system that draws on “affective ties” to serve the wellbeing of “people” and the “planet” in interdependent ways.

Within indigenous communities in west Africa, Eyong (2017) concluded leadership was substitutional, non-human on instances and essentially participatory. In this context, leaders and followers momentarily substitute roles on different aspects of community leadership. Here, he found furthermore that leadership practice drew on knowledge derived from the natural ecosystem, myths and legends, and belief that the ancestors of the land were involved in the unfolding process of leadership. In the Americas, Warner and Grint (2006, p. 225) found amongst indigenous native American Indian society that “persuasive techniques” were dominant approaches applied in decision making and that practice constituted of several “inter-changing activities” undertaken by different personalities depending on the “circumstance”. They also established that a “community” rather than individualistic approach to leadership prevailed.

Clearly, these concepts relay a preference of communal leadership based on egalitarian principles, people-orientation, humanity, and ethical conducts, which are qualities and dimensions of leadership desired in contemporary organizations (Newlands, 2022). What these studies equally reveal are differences between the conceptualization of leadership in contemporary organizations and constructions of leadership within indigenous communities and their institutions. This difference can be situated around the locus of leadership or where leadership resides (Ospina et al., 2020), and how it should be discharged (Edwards & Bolden, 2024). Yet, empirical research is limited in this context. Knowledge about how collectiveness is built, nurtured, and sustained in practice and the implication of such knowledge for the theorizing and practice of collective approaches to leadership in the modern organization remain less explored (Eyong, 2017).

The Research Field and Context

The specific focus of the study was to undertake an immersive exploration of collective leadership as understood and enacted within *Ekpe* institution. Very little is known about the *Ekpe* institution in leadership and management studies. Yet, the institution and its unique practices is well documented in anthropological studies and early African explorers’ accounts on indigenous African governance and leadership from the sixteenth century (see e.g., Lander & Lander, 1830; Mansfield, 1908; Partridge, 1905; Ruel, 1969). In a study of indigenous legal systems and governance in the Cross River region in Nigeria, Leib and Romano (1984, p. 48) concluded that *Ekpe* institution was one of few institutions to have maintained historical African organizational practices which remains “central to the social lives” of the local people. Similarly, Kah (2017, p. 15) noted that the principles of *Ekpe* institution inform the “socio-political and economic life of the people”. Meanwhile, Malcolm Ruel identified the *Ekpe* institution as a “philosophical paradigm” of governance based on a councilor approach to leadership (Ruel, 1969, p. 23). Jordan Fenton, exploring indigenous African art in Cross River groups in

Cameroon and Nigeria described the *Ekpe* institution as “the governing” organization applying “authentic” African approaches (Fenton, 2012, p. 15).

In the Southwest region of Cameroon and in Cross River regions in Eastern Nigeria, *Ekpe* institution, a male only organization is acknowledged as a council-type institution benefitting from strong adherence by the local people in communities that continue to apply its principles (Kah, 2017). Like local councils, the main function of *Ekpe* is to maintain social equality, collective justice, human rights and law and order for all persons within communities (Ruel, 1969). Although *Ekpe* membership is restricted to men only, its fundamental principles and interest is to guarantee equality, justice, and human rights for all (Bassey & Ekpo, 2019; Miller & Ojong, 2012). While women cannot be members, this is by no means a culture of inequality. Rather, it is more of a culture of separation of roles between men and women, where the men enforce community law and order through the *Ekpe* institution, while women lead in matters of justice and social order pertaining to the women folk.

The regions of focus were communities located along the African Atlantic coast in the two countries. The regions together harbor a population of over 35 million inhabitants. In population and land size, this would be larger than the Benelux countries Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg combined. It is in this context that empirical fieldwork was conducted.

Methods

The aim of the study was to explore how collective leadership is understood, developed, and practiced within *Ekpe* institution in Cameroon and Nigeria. The study adopted a trans-disciplinary approach that integrates historical and social anthropological approaches and discursive management research practices (Klein, 2008), to access deeper meaning. The unorthodox nature of *Ekpe* institution also necessitated a transdisciplinary approach incorporating management and anthropological perspectives to interpret and make sense of both sentient and non-sentient aspects of leadership interstitially (Wickson et al., 2006). Accordingly, a co-creative and interactive process where the researcher and subjects exchange views to make sense (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012), combined with reflexive practice of continuously re-imagining and learning from real life experience was applied. These processes ensured sustained listening, interacting, and learning, as opposed to a monologue restricted to posing questions and receiving response from participants (Cunliffe, 2009).

Using qualitative research methods, unstructured interviews were conducted with 20 elderly *Ekpe* members or Chiefs of *Ekpe* benefitting from a minimum of ten years membership and aged from forty years and above – the duration and age assumed to be enough to gain a sound understanding of *Ekpe* practices. Participants were anonymized using simple number codes for identification and reference (notably: P1 – P20). The average age of participants drawn from 42 village communities across the coastal regions of Southwest Cameroon and Eastern Nigeria was 55 years, with an average membership period of 12 years in the institution. A table presenting the demographic and particulars of the participants is illustrated in Table 1.

Purposive and snowballing techniques were simultaneously deployed for participant sampling. Data collection undertaken by the researcher began in July 2011 with piloting

Table 1 . Participant demographics.

Code	Country	Role	Age	Rank
P1	Cameroon	Community leader	61	Chief
P2	"	Family head	54	Chief
P3	"	Community leader	65	Chief
P4	"	Clan head	54	Chief
P5	"	Regional leader	57	Chief
P6	"	Community leader	43	Chief
P7	"	Clan head	57	Chief
P8	"	Clan head	48	Chief
P9	"	Family head	67	Chief
P10	"	Village chief	47	Chief
P11	Nigeria	Elder role	62	Chief
P12	"	Family head	46	Chief
P14	"	Quarter head	45	Chief
P15	"	Quarter head	55	Chief
P16	"	Village head	42	Chief
P17	"	Clan head	61	Chief
P18	"	Chief of village	57	Chief
P19	"	Family head	45	Chief
P20	"	Regional leader	47	Chief

and continued in successive field visits up to 2016 as doctoral research, and continued to June 2022 as further research, with breaks taken during Covid-19 restrictions. To gain a deeper understanding, the researcher went through initiation into *Ekpe* institution in 2012, growing in rank to the high position of *Sessekou* (Chief) – also head of a family lodge. No differences were observed in participant narratives on *Ekpe* leadership before, during or after Covid-19.

Unstructured interviewing, serving mainly as *aide memoire* Bryman (2016), was adopted to guide the interview process. Interviews were in-depth and themes explored expansive, necessitating a reduced number of 20 participants and a manageable set of data (Ford et al., 2017). A combination of languages including the local *Kenyang* and *Ejagham* dialects, *pidgin* English and English language were used for communication. These were translated by the researcher into English in the transcription process. Discursive interaction was complemented with video recording. The recorded video images, symbols and interpretation of visual artefacts were triangulated with observations and informal conversations with a wider scope of participants and fieldnotes.

Interviews were continuous and unfolded in various ways: planned, unplanned, formal and informal. Interviews lasted between thirty to ninety minutes. Discussions, centered around processes and cultural meanings expressed variously in songs, dance, and veiled communication signs used to convey meaning and instructions. The second data collection approach involved the interpretation of meanings from ceremonies, rituals, and repertoire recorded in video clips. Various other aspects of leadership and organizing including references to animal behavior and ecology were further interpreted. Thirdly, interpretation of symbols, artefacts, and other sources of information including mythologies formed part of the data. Combined, these immersive processes – cascading between organizational and social anthropological research traditions (O'Donovan et al., 2022), offered a deeper understanding of multi-leader practices.

Interviews were analyzed thematically, using template technique to organize key information sources (King, 2012). The analysis revealed process themes that set the premise for leadership knowing and practice. In the subsequent second phase, the analysis

specifically sought to unpack meaning from the discursive narratives of participants. During this stage, multi-leader leadership sensitivity and the various cultural mechanisms supporting collectiveness emerged in recurrent expressions. In both stages, the analysis started by thoroughly reading the transcripts and using NVivo 12 (Windows) version to identify and unify the dominant descriptive quotes of the main themes. The emerging quotes were further cross-checked with raw data and field experience for internal consistency in the coding structure and to avoid overlaps (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The discursive approach adopted enabled an in-depth understanding of each participant's account. These became references to trace and identify similarity and differences between participant accounts. Emerging codes were refined by cycling between data outcomes, debates in the literature and visual, oral, physical, and co-constructed meanings established in the field as recorded in fieldnotes (O'Donovan et al., 2022).

Manual data engagement was also applied. In this process, key signifiers of meaning were manually open-coded and power quotes from visual data and symbol interpretation identified and highlighted (Pratt, 2009). These were reinforced with recurrent representations and common knowledge and repertoire as observed and co-constructed in live *Ekpe* proceedings (Cunliffe, 2003; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Repertory grid technique (Fransella et al., 2004) was used to assemble data from interpretation of pictures, symbols, and video clips from ceremonies. Repertory grid techniques are commonly used in qualitative psychology research and organization studies (e.g., Ford et al., 2017). The grid presents opportunities for participants to put into words aspects of phenomena difficult and abstract to articulate including assumed cultural secrets, myths, taboos (Burr et al., 2022). Visual interpretations scholars argue that imagery in video and photograph elicit aesthetic response to visual stimuli (Pink, 2007) and project sensory experiences (Warren, 2008) that may not be explainable in words (Rose, 2007). The grid was adjusted to fit with the core issues around leadership in context with reference to *a priori* highlighted debates elucidated in the review of extant literature.

Data analysis evolved in three main stages guided by process framework (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010; Maupin et al., 2020; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Process tracing enabled a diligent interpretation and discernment of the multiple configurations of multi-leader practices. The process yielded an "overall workings and effects" of what leadership means and how it is enacted in context (Fairhurst et al., 2020, p. 609).

Summaries of meanings were further organized sequentially, relative to unfolding thematic, events, and interpretations linked to the research questions. Overall, the emergent themes encapsulate information gathered from watershed moments and significant events experienced in the field highlighting *when, what, why, and how* particular actions in leadership were engaged by participants. Outlines of "hot spots" and "glows" noted informally and reflections about how multi-leadership practice unfolded in interactions with participants embodied by the researcher in the field was a central part of the analytical process.

The analysis then metamorphosed into a quasi-grounded theory approach, involving back-and-forth repeated iterations of checking, adjusting, fine-tuning meanings with key participants for confirmation and authentication (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). After several rounds of coding, reconstruction, summarizing and redrafting, three distinct multi-leader processes emerged as aggregate themes. Further refinement led to delineating sub-themes, with corresponding descriptive and narrative codes (Pratt, 2009). The

researcher's immersive experience as initiate and member of *Ekpe* institution, offered additional embodied auto-ethnographic analysis beyond annotated text (Morand, 2005).

Findings and Theorizing

The findings of the study reveal a multi-leader practice of leadership unfolding as a process (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), in accordance with historical culture, traditions, and principles maintained within the institution of *Ekpe* across generations. The data revealed that the multi-leader mindset is developed through three distinct indigenous induction doctrinal stages referred to within this study as the *becoming*, *being* and *embodying* processes. The data further unearthed the foundations of the multi-leader preference as rooted in the application of four main recognition theory pillars notably: communitarianism, egalitarianism, humility, and social equilibrium (Newlands, 2022). In this section, the main features combined as they relate to the dimensions of multi-leader practice, are presented as aggregate themes, sub-themes, and descriptive codes depicting the multi-leader mindset are presented. The process framework is further illustrated in Figure 1, featuring the becoming, being and embodying process of multi-leader leadership practice.

Becoming the Multi-Leader Actor

The process of appropriating multi-leader instincts emerged as an indigenous indoctrinating set of learning activities. Vetting and acceptance into the institution was only approved after members had demonstrated a sense of humility, selflessness, openness, and willingness, grounded in a sense of belongingness and team spirit. Persons retaining or exhibiting individualism, heroism, and self-pride and guardianship of indigenous wisdom, tradition were simply rejected and denied membership. A participant noted:

In *Ekpe*, we are like one body in many persons. Before you join us you already know our laws and principles. In fact, everybody knows, so, if we trust you, we teach, communicate, and engage with you for a long time. We also observe you. When we are satisfied that you know that we are one person, we accept (P20).

Extensive communication and learning ensued. Upon initiation at the becoming stage, full membership was conditionate on members learning to work along others on various task including mundane takes such as fetching water for the team or the role referred in the local Kenyang language as *Beh Tohk Manyiehp*. By serving others consistently and being served, in return, the initiate becomes sensitive towards moulding a collective identity, and thus suppresses the urge to pursue own self-interest or act individually. These values were encapsulated in songs, dance, emblem, and artwork (Leib & Romano, 1984), and enforced through community compliance systems, reinforced by sanctions and temporary suspension of membership privileges, a policy expressed in the local dialect as *Beh kpang Essangha Mgbe*. The lyrics of a popular song chanted in chorus and danced to the rhythm of drums encapsulates the warning of the heavy penalty levied on members for non-compliance to the collective principles of *Ekpe*. "Only a person without senses dares the spirits; such a person is insane, and bear the wrath insanity, insanity, insanity" (chorus repeated timeless).

Another song highlighting the might of the collective enforcement of ideals of collectiveness against individualism and ensuring members exude openness to substitutional

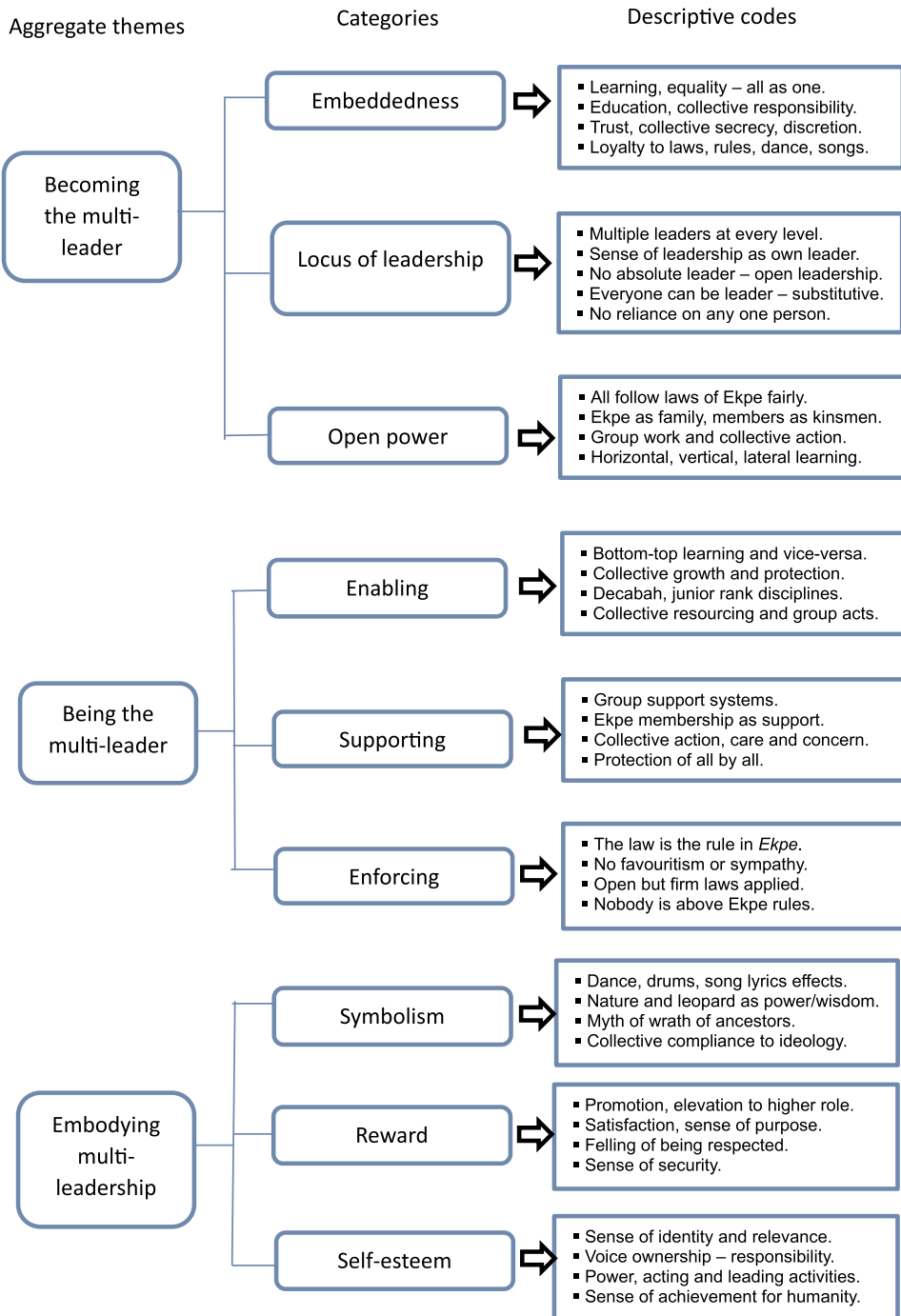


Figure 1. Overview of final coding structure.

leadership roles were captured in the field across all villages with the lyrics translated from video recorded in a live event to mean:

“A small stream of water has slept an elephant, let us go out to see, let us go and see”
(Repeated three times, as refrain to a chorus).

Along with other social repertoire unique to *Ekpe*, accompanied with dance, music and acting, songs like these were central in encouraging behaviors that were more favorable the notion of leadership as identity (Ford et al., 2008), or leadership community (Edwards, 2015). Together, these activities and learning signaling embeddedness, open power systems and locus of leadership as collectively centered reinforce the multi-leader mantra of the institution.

While songs and artwork reflected the centrality of the collectiveness in leadership, interviews and observations revealed that there were no absolute or focal leaders in *Ekpe* leadership practices in a permanent manner. Rather, initiates and the becoming stage were taught to engage in the role of leadership irrespective of their rank. A ranking participant this requirement saying:

We don't have one leader. I am chief, but anyone in my rank is Chief too, so we are the same, with equal rights on food, drinks and greetings. No one controls the other. Often, we follow the order in which we became a Chief in our *Ekpe* lodge – but this is not a law and changes all the time on different activities and roles. Normally, we discuss, agree on those to take up various roles and this also can change even after we have decided (P18).

The above participant's re-interpretation of *Ekpe* decision making on who leads the group as penultimate leader from recorded video highlights the high value of egalitarian principles to the point that it makes the role of absolute position or focal leader rather fluid and in-existent in permanence. A common practice observed across the villages, was that lower ranked members sometimes took up disciplinary roles and in the process were able to pronounce penalty for unacceptable behavior on members in a higher rank. Thus, although, ranks could be differentiated based on sitting order, on quantity of food and drinks and salutation between lower and higher ranked members, leadership was more of a multi-level and multi-person process involving role substitution relative to member expertise, knowledge or suitability to a specific function rather than simply based on hierarchy.

Being the Multi-Leader

Theme two captured what it means to be involved in *Ekpe* and how members see themselves as multiple leaders working together in the institution. Narratives under this theme reflect some key tenets of *recognition* and multi-leader behavior and action. Notably, they emphasize the values of *enabling*, *supporting*, and collective *enforcement* principles beyond learning as explained in the first phase of becoming. This was variously expressed by participants as follows:

The language of *Ekpe* is one of love, affection and seeing that each member is valuable for the survival of the institution. If we don't make space for everyone, we risk losing the values of our tradition as passed down to us from previous generations. In our language we promote respect, care, and willingness to work for others (P13).

The enactment of such social and collective group dynamic was made possible by the institution exhibiting its fundamental principles and admitting a critical mass of people to become part of a its multi-leader system. By achieving an active majority of persons, taking responsibility for leadership, enforcing principles, and using language to frame identity and ensuring collective and individual wellbeing (Fincham, 2008; Potter, 2020), the institution externalizes its principles to extend beyond its premises. Honneth's new critical social theory of recognition associates collective social behavior with intersubjectivity or collective exchange, to highlight the centrality of *voice* in enabling collective sense of belonging. In this sense the recognition of member voice, irrespective of rank or social status emerged as vital in shaping multi-leader mindset at the being stage. Many participants expressed this saying:

In Ekpe, everyone has the right to speak, you stand up, clap your hands (chap, chap, chap), say what you want (P17). Another participant followed: "If your point of view is good and accepted, it will be accepted" (P3). Similarly (P6) stated: "Any person makes his point and then we take what is good from each person's contribution."

As these participants emphasize, open exchange systems or intersubjective (Cunliffe, 2008), or interactive practice was discernible in the enactment of leadership by way of space creation. By creating an open space for all, *Ekpe* members would have confirmed Lefebvre's argument that space produced through the bringing together of physical, mental, and social, ingredients produces both mental and material outcomes, even when community members may not be "free" to make their own choices (Elden, 2004, pp. 189–190). In this respect, the right to speak, be heard and to be allowed to lead reinforced members willingness to engage actively. It also encourages preparedness to reproduce ideals specific to the *Ekpe* environment and space (Harrison, 2000). The link between place and space and the outcome in multi-leader interaction concurs to a socio-material theory of space and place (Harvey, 1990). In the case of *Ekpe* institution, the *melange* of objects, laws, symbols, gathering, exchange in dance and music gives rise to collective emotional readiness for intra-member engagements, resulting to multi-leader action in supporting, enabling, and nurturing collectively.

Embodying the Multi-Leadership Mindset

This theme examined aspects that enable the long-term commitment of members towards upholding multi-leader practices within the *Ekpe* institution. Three key frames of reference or pillars of thought emerged in the analysis, notably: *symbolism*, *reward*, and *recognition*. Each of these pillars are further examined.

Several symbols emerged depicting the key *unwritten* – but heavily *symbolized* leadership convention. The most visible sign, and which was often hoisted as the flag of *Ekpe* institution before ceremonies, dance, and gatherings was the symbol of a leopard. The links between image, symbol and leadership meaning came across in visual interpretation and was captured as expressed by the following participant's contribution:

We consider the leopard as our logo and emblem. There are many stories about the leopard that our past generations have left with us, we believe and respect some of them including being fast, thinking quicker, having many skills, being wise, caring and so on (V14).

The association of the image of the leopard with *Ekpe* institution and its membership created a common focal imagery bonding members to the principles and traditions of leadership in *Ekpe* institution. By collectively connecting and associating themselves and thoughts to the image of the leopard, members were made to replicate and mimic positive myths as well as observed natural behavior of leopard such as outlined by the above participant and interpreted from video recordings. The skills, behavior and myths associated with the leopard were used for mind formation and to establish within member psyche, relevant sentient and non-sentient multi-leader readiness posture (Hekman, 2010). Other multi-leader sources of reference were plants, trees, rivers, the sea (Spiller et al., 2020). The stories and myths relating to various non-human artefacts from nature imbibed positive, transformative, or progressive development from induction, into practicing and eventually firmly implanting a communitarian perception of leadership. The practice of deriving meaning from nature or symbols signifies the metaphysical mindset underpinning leadership thinking established in indigenous leadership studies (Julien et al., 2010; Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Spiller et al., 2020; Warner & Grint, 2006).

The second pillar of *Ekpe* institution leadership consolidation reflects the reward of maintaining multi-leader system for members and the communities. Through communal-fraternity, compliance, and collective adherence and guardianship of its principles, members are rewarded individually and collectively as an institution. To sustain enthusiasm, outstanding advocates, and loyal members are elevated to a higher rank. This system of meritorious growth created a spirit where members constantly evidence and showcase their responsiveness by exuding behaviors exhibiting multi-leadership.

Every member is willing to grow in *Ekpe* either in knowledge or in rank. It is your behaviour that decides whether you go up or down or whether you are suspended. The members are watching all the time – we say it like this “*the community has eyes*”. (P1). If you are humble and open, you learn and grow. If you are strong-headed, you pay fines and don’t progress.

Across the field, members expressed the desire to grow in the organization. To achieve this goal, they behaved in ways that are acceptable to the organization including taking leadership, being willing, agile, and responsive to calls to serve. In more cases, more volunteers opted to take up tasks. The result was that there were always many people involved in every task, reinforcing a collectively driven approach to problem-solving.

A third pillar at the embodying stage was that of a feeling of recognition. The general impression one got about *Ekpe* institution in all the communities was that it benefits from high level of approval, respect, and admiration from the public in both countries locally and beyond. Over the years, the institution has remained true to its principles and has not only talked about the values of communitarianism, collective action, or multi-leader practices, but it has by large applied this to greater satisfaction amongst members and the wider community.

In *Ekpe*, we do not change our ways. Leadership remains the same anywhere. You go Calabar, Oroko areas, Manyu and everywhere, it is the same leadership practice. We maintain the same standard tradition, teaching, judgement, and objective. This is why people respect us as an institution and as individual members.

the institution to function effectively. These processes are further elaborated as narrated, interpreted and co-constructed with participants in the field.

Principles of Multi-Leader Behavior

In trying to make sense of the foundations of multi-leader practice, the data revealed communitarianism, egalitarianism, humility, and social equilibrium as key fulcrums around which leadership thinking and practice within *Ekpe* institution revolve. The analysis indicates the importance of person-fit and community as a dimension of leadership expectations. Participants indicated the importance they attached to multi-leader signals associated with “fitting” with the fundamental principles of *Ekpe*. Key to this was of the readiness of members to form close inter-institutional relationships across the institution.

An interviewee from one of the villages repeated a common theme saying:

“We are a community, so personality, culture and behavior are driven by member commitment to the idea that we are one society whether in here in Cameroon or in Nigeria” (P13). On equality, another participant stated: “In *Ekpe* we are all called to lead because we don’t have any single boss like in other organizations. If you don’t serve, who do you expect to serve you among your own rank and in the entire group?” (P9). Another explained stating: “It is important that everyone sees themselves as equal, so we try to be open, transparent, and honest and it’s bad and seen not to undermine or reduce any member, whether young or old, new, more established or of any rank or position of responsibility” (P20).

Encapsulating the value of humility and social equilibrium, several participants remarked that they did not see the institution of *Ekpe* as their prerogative but as more of a commonwealth which needed protection and contribution more than their individual businesses. This necessitates everyone to take a leading role in safeguarding and protecting the image and survival of the institution. The data also, suggested that the institution of *Ekpe* represented a social environment where members felt valued and recognized and a milieu where they experience social balance and meaningfulness in life. This sense of unity and fundamental entrenchment into a philosophy of collectiveness was well expressed by a participant when interpreting the emblem and greetings of *Ekpe* institution saying:

The greetings; *Bario – Wah; Bario – Wah* emphasize the principles of *Ekpe* as welcoming, socialization, fairness, no discrimination, and happiness for all, which makes every member of *Ekpe* jubilant and enjoying a different kind of social life where people are seen under one identity and principle applied equal to all (P7).

Other symbol interpretation by participants also signaled that the values of communitarian, humility, egalitarianism were highly treasured and promoted and applied to achieve community social equilibrium. These principles were reflected in the social activities embedded in the songs and music and that animate *Ekpe* events as earlier elucidated. In this respect, dance and music emerged as a key uniting factor and motivation for the acceptance of multiple leaders functioning sequentially. Quite remarkable, was the observation that activities were systematically organized in a way that requires all persons sitting on the high table or *emboh* (*Kenyang dialect*) to be part of the leadership at the same time by way of adding their thoughts and voices to what was being decided.

In this respect, although the eldest person to have assumed the rank of Chief or *Sessekou* would sit centrally and coordinate proceedings, he did not benefit from any extra right or power more than any other Chief in the general assembly. Rather, decisions were collectively made by all Chiefs present and others from lower ranks. A participant emphasized this unique aspect of power and rights between leaders in *Ekpe* saying:

In *Ekpe* every *Sessekou* is a leader. You need many people to lead the different activities, social, spiritual, dance, judicial matters, discipline, entertainment and so on. So, people come together and lead simultaneously. It is like I lead in this area, and you lead in that other area and then we come together, and everything works. For *Sessekous* (Chiefs), they are all leaders every time (P12).

The above explanation sums up the rationale for multi-leader practice and supports the reason why individualism, heroism and linear frameworks or practices of leadership would not be suitable in an *Ekpe* institution.

Signaling Multi-Leader Practice

In addition to revealing the embodiment of multi-leader sensitivity and promoting the foundational principles underpinning multi-leader awareness, the data also unveiled five broad action clusters signifying multi-leader practice including: *substitutional leadership*; *living and acting collective*; *embracing commonality*; *forthrightness*; and *humility* as the key signifiers of multi-leader practice in *Ekpe* institution. A key signaling action for living and acting collectiveness came across in the structure of the institution. Data revealed that there was no absolute, focal, or supreme leader within the structure of the institution. One interviewee expressed this in these terms:

“We do not have any supreme leader [...] We have someone who oversees proceedings and others who coordinate activities in each function as a group” (P12).

Although a flat structure of four main ranks or spans of control constitutes the main hierarchical structure of *Ekpe* institution, the role of an absolute leader at any level is only temporal. In the place of a focal leader, the institution operates a councilor or coordinating practice of leadership where the role of leaders is substitutive rather than permanently bestowed or assigned to specific individuals. In that sense, a substitutional leadership practice applies rather than a system of legitimate power of control of one person over others, as is often the case in conventional leadership practice (Northouse, 2020), in continuous terms. When asked whether such a system would not lead to chaos, a participant explained stating:

It is like, there is always someone who coordinates, but he is never alone and he cannot stop another person from contributing in decision making – for instance. You can be the main leader that everyone follows behind if you are the bearer of the *Monyoh* (staff of authority), that is normally in the general, but in your own event even the eldest person who became Chief before you cannot take your place. In that event, you are the leader for that event only (P1).

As reiterated by the participant, the process of leader and power substitution makes the process of appointing or recognizing who leads a rather fluid, elastic, and emergent process often decided instantaneously by the collective. Another participant clarified this fluid rule stating:

Generally, the first person to have become a Chief or *Sessekou* leads the group in gatherings and when receiving members at the common village hall of *Ekpe*. But even in one's village community and when there are members from other communities the host leader is always accompanied by other persons with equal rights to the rank.

Humility and forthrightness came across as key aspects of multi-leader practice. Observation on site and interpretation of video streams indicated a general willingness by members to allow others to take charge. Explaining a participant said:

You can be chosen to lead today and then tomorrow at another event, another person might take the lead, and then you just follow or assist happily. This is the case for leaders who have other aspects that they know better such as *Ekpe* bush and having *Nkandah* or *Nsibiri* which are sub-attributes offering certain privileges on those areas (P4).

Discursively, the notion of commonality, collective purpose and interest animated a practice of leadership where the sense of individual urge of controlling others gave way to the penultimate pursuit of collective support, education and nurturing of all founded on a cherished historical legacy and secrecy deployed to maintain law and order in the communities. Across the field, there was a clear sense in which the desire to achieve the collective good of all through interdependency was important in maintaining a multi-leader mindset. Several participants expressed this view as follows:

We lead by helping and supporting each other. We say it like ... society has eyes. every person is helping and is being helped also (P15) Another participant said: No one does anything by alone [...] on all activities, there are always many leaders involved from new member to the highest or eldest member, we are leaders (P11).

To summarize, the more dominant narratives suggest a multi-leader practice void of any permanent legitimate leader applies in the context under study. This approach is fundamentally different from a western higher echelon theory-based system where selected individuals in legitimate positions benefit from disproportionate power and control. To create such a multi-leader practice, the virtues of humility, communitarianism and leader-follower substitution – as opposed to heroism prevails.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has argued that it is possible for organizations to operate with more than one leader at the top. Collective leadership scholarship has struggled to disentangle from the notion of a focal leader in the conceptualization of leadership. This study has presented a case where leadership is practiced with no absolute leader. In doing so, it advanced the argument that we can conceptualize leadership without focalizing on one person or selected individuals in legitimate positions of power in organizations. The findings explicate how a multi-leader practice can be achieved and presents the underpinning principles necessary for the materialization of multi-leader practice.

The findings of the study encapsulate the opening quote of the paper which affirms that when more heads are involved in collective leadership, deeper satisfaction is aroused out of a sense of participation both at individual and collective levels. By contrast, psychology work and management research around organizational wellbeing associate burnout, stress, and other negative behavior at work to dictatorial, autocratic, and individualistic forms of leadership (Haslam et al. 2016). Within the more recent orientation

towards collective approaches to leadership, and social discourses in leadership, examples of collectiveness in practice have been hard to come by (Fairhurst et al., 2020). Theories advanced have not only been confusing and entangled (Ospina et al., 2020) but as recently remarked “empirics” seems to have advanced “practice” (Edwards & Bolden, 2024). This study addresses this contested arena of collective leadership, making three main contributions.

First, it proposes a process framework to actualize collective leadership in organizations from a case study of a homogenous indigenous community institution of *Ekpe*, in the under-studied context of West Africa. Second, the paper theorizes three stages in the creation of a culture and practice of collectiveness in leadership presented as: the *becoming, being, and embodying* processes which are central to the realization of multi-leader practice. Third, the study presents the social foundations and principles upon which collective leadership is manifested. This offers a way out of the current entrenchment in leader-centered forms of collectiveness (Ospina et al., 2020). Overall, the study presents a model of collective leadership inspired by an indigenous institution in SSA – a context seldom considered in leadership research. By so doing, the author offers voice to the often-silenced science and way of life of medieval societies (Sally, 2002; Spiller et al., 2020). By offering a framework, process map, and principles that inform collective action in leading, the paper moves theorizing from rhetoric towards an accessible and actionable tool and process map for practice.

Previous indigenous leadership work in management has explained the foundations of leadership meaning and highlighted differences with western thinking (Eyong, 2017; Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Warner & Grint, 2006). In their review of leadership practices from diverse indigenous communities in Canada, the United States, and New Zealand, Kenny and Fraser (2012) found that leadership in these indigenous contexts was known, interpreted and practiced in relation to past stories, links to ancestors, and elders and nature. Similarly, a corpus of social anthropology-inspired work published in management studies under the theme of indigenous leadership (e.g., Edwards, 2015; Julien et al., 2010; Spiller et al., 2020) corroborate Kenny and Fraser in relating leadership meaning to symbols, times, myths and interpretation of the natural. On practice, suggestions about how leadership is practiced within indigenous communities have emerged from extant studies as ranging from a more “communal” (Spiller et al., 2020), “companionate” (Zoogah, 2020), to individualistic “patriarchal” systems (Muchiri, 2011).

While extant studies are commendable as building blocks for onward knowledge development, what they have failed to convey are the lessons to be learnt from indigenous notions and practices of leadership and how such localized practices could inform academic theorizing and organizational practice. This is an important contribution which the present study makes. Specifically, it shifts indigenous leadership research beyond current social anthropological explanation and North–South comparison (Alcadi-pani & Caldas, 2012; Boussebaa, 2024; Spiller et al., 2020), towards an empirically supported alternative theorizing of collective leadership that may be relevant in the practice of leadership in contemporary organizations. The study further consolidates sociological perspectives on recognition in sociology (Hornedo, 2000; Newlands, 2022; Pilapil, 2015; Twemlow et al., 2023), and links this to the development of an approach to leadership that enables greater inclusiveness, voice and animated participation and consideration in academic communities.

The findings also reveal both theoretical and practical overlaps, specificities and commonalities with extant concepts on leadership. One specificity in context is the varying power dynamic and relational dispositions and micro-processes that animate how indigenous communities work together. To maintain such a polarized power dynamic and still guarantee equality and inclusion, the data shows that collective surveillance and reprimand were central. This would be different in more individualistic communities, where laws, rules and human rights tend to emerge out of organizational and institutional systems. Such rigid systems offer limited room for alternative foundations of power and role substitution to emerge.

Also distinct in *Ekpe* leadership is underlying philosophy and embodied principles underpinned by historical culture and tradition that emphasize humanity and the ethic of equality and equity in the process of leadership. Such cultural codes encourage many persons to take up leadership simultaneously in a substituting manner.

Data reveal that the emergence of multi-leader practice is facilitated by homogenous nature of *Ekpe* institution, bound by common social, cultural and historical identities and esteemed value systems. Thus, although presented as a theory, this perspective of multi-leader practice might not apply in hierarchical and competitive settings where there maybe the need for individualized influence, personal leader responsibility and accountability as dominant in individualistic western cultures (House et al., 2004). Such individualized mind-framing would naturally be a hinderance to multi-leader thinking (Keast & Mandell, 2013).

Despite obvious preference of multi-leader practice, it was equally observed that on certain occasions one individual needed to take responsibility for leadership – albeit temporarily. This momentary individual action – even within a culture of collectiveness explains the current problematic of entanglement in individualistic framing by scholars of collective raised in more recent literature (e.g., Edwards & Bolden, 2023; Fairhurst et al., 2020; Ospina et al., 2020). A slight difference however in this context is that there was always someone else ready to interject instantaneously. Commonalities between western expressions of leadership and leadership in context were equally evident in the acts of leadership which inevitably involves influence of one person or a group over another and in the existence of unequal power systems as evident in the hierarchical structure of the *Ekpe* institution with members in the higher ranks benefitting from privileges than those in lower ranks.

However, collective adjudication tempered the emergence of individualistic aspirations. Could it be that the absence of financial motivation as a function of high performance and other forms of individual member benefit in organizations explains why members did not seek greater individualism? That is a question for future research.

Implication, Limitation and Future Research

In an increasingly globalizing labor market where the supply of professionals expands beyond western borders in such areas as professional service leadership (Boussebaa, 2024), it has become imperative to execute culturally and ideologically inclusive leadership to reflect the different cultures and nationalities of the modern-day workforce. A direct implication of this shift is for academic communities to be open to and to recognize multi-leader practices such as distilled within this study. The outcome of this work offers a

viable alternative to the established western structures that continue to dominate management thought (Ford et al., 2022; Nkomo, 2011). One benefit of applying multi-leader approaches could be to curb the prevailing toxic and narcissistic leadership practices observed in contemporary high-profile failures in both political and organizational leadership (Dorasamy, 2018). While acknowledging that a multi-leader approach might not be suitable in some contexts, the broad general theory presented within this work offers opportunities to materialize collective action in leadership in adaptable ways.

The notion of multi-leadership is supported by existing research on cooperation and collaboration in management sciences and psychology. Management science studies (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015) present collaboration as the best approach for generating more fruitful outcomes than can be achieved independently. Identified benefits range from innovative and “creative solutions” to wicked problems and enhancing “democratic engagement and equity” to “minimizing risk”, achieving more effective outcomes, and “doing more with” less through resource sharing and collaboration (Stout & Keast, 2021, p. 17). By applying the steps, meanings and practices typical of leadership within the *Ekpe* institution, scholars and practitioners may begin to reflect on more useful ways of collective and egalitarian working teams.

The study also has implication for leadership and organizing in the SSA context where communities are more collective and bonded through tribal, ethnic and clan clusters (Eyong, 2017).

The findings necessitate a deeper reflection towards reconsidering approaches indigenous to the SSA context that resonate more squarely with the communal lifestyle underpinning indigenous traditions and ecosystems. It may well be that the western-imposed individualistic and linear organizational structures and single person leader-centered practices might not be suitable in the SSA context. The findings call for a rethink about rules, practices, and processes by which corporate bodies are directed and managed, which are adaptations from western frameworks, but which have not served SSA organizations well (Eyong, 2019; Wanasika et al., 2011). It may be time for African organizations to consider practices of leadership where multiple leaders concomitantly oversee the leadership of countries and organizations to tame the excesses and negative outcomes of single leader dominance in private and public leadership on the sub-continent. As the findings indicate, most African professionals – even when living and working in urban communities – embody a communal and collective mindset, matching the expectations of home and ethnic communities within countries. Under systems of collective governance, communitarian surveillance applied in *Ekpe* leadership could be one way through which formal organizations ensure checks and balances and can hold persons accountable for their actions in accordance with the fundamental collective ethical values underpinning indigenous community systems (Eyong, 2017; Spiller et al., 2020; Sveiby, 2011). For instance, the application of multi-leader leadership practices in formal organizations in SSA institutions could curb corruption, tribalism, and ethnically inspired favoritism which are common challenges faced by private and public organizations in SSA countries (Liedong et al., 2023).

Finally, the paper has implication for human resource practice. Through recruitment processes, induction, and onboarding systems, organizations can enhance egalitarianism and implement sensitivity towards multi-leader working in ways that address issues around the excessive power asymmetry, control, and other forms of inequality in work

relationships in western and global south organizations (Ford et al., 2021). Such leveling could create happiness at work and augment a general sense of belonging and participation of employees in organizations in ways beneficial for retention and personal well-being at work (Urrila, 2022).

It is worth noting some limitations. First, the application of *Ekpe* leadership practices is limited to the institution and although some aspects are applied in formal organizations, it is often the result of instantaneous practice from the embodied culture of those who employ it rather than as formal organizational policy or practice. Second, while *Ekpe* institution is prevalent in the regions demarcated, its principles do not apply in all communities in both countries. Third, although several communities and participants were involved in the overall research, the focus was on a limited sample of 20 participants. However, by limiting sample size, the study benefitted by gaining a deeper understanding of leadership in context than would have been the case with a larger sample size. A further limitation is that, while *Ekpe* institution competes with other government institutions for relevance and influence in the governance of communities, in the context of fierce open market competition, organizations might require clear processes, located responsibility, and individual accountability which would require adaptation to the proposed multi-leader practice.

Finally, it is worth noting that *Ekpe* institution is a male only organization. Although women abide by its decisions, they only get involved ceremonially and socially, rather than in decision-making. Yet, the institution guarantees the rights of women and ensures overall equality and protection of all persons in the communities. However, the findings may be different in other indigenous institutions involving both men and women. Hence, the author does not claim the finding to be generalizable. Rather, the outcome should be considered as early stepping blocks for further dialogue and academic conversation.

Future research could develop operational definitions capturing key qualitative constructs and process maps depicting multi-leader perspectives and practices, in ways that allow the development of measures and the design of assessment tools for further exploration. Such studies could locate instances and organizational types where multi-leader practices may be relevant and how these can be adapted to various contextual contingencies.

Note

1. Although differences are recognized in the fine margins, Western as used in this paper refers to central and western European nations, the Anglo-Saxon world, North American nations, Canada and the USA and Scandinavian nations. This is because Eastern European Nations, Baltic states and Russia tend to produce different practices and knowledge systems (see e.g., Varnum et al., 2008).

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Notes on the Contributor

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