

May 2019

Does African Culture Impede Development?

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Recommended Citation

Hyun, Chang-Dae David (2019) "Does African Culture Impede Development?," *Undergraduate Journal of Global Citizenship*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/jogc/vol3/iss1/6>

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Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Many scholars hastily claim that African culture impedes development; however, this is an invalidate claim. First of all, culture is continuously evolving according to circumstantial factors internal and external to the country, and it is unclear how much culture affects development. For example, external influences such as geography, colonialization, and the global system contribute to underdevelopment far more than culture. In this paper, I will begin by defining culture and development. Then, I will explain how third (circumstantial) factors could impede development and culture. The following sections will show two of the common mistakes made by scholars who attempt to argue that African culture harms development, and I will address flaws in those arguments. First, many scholars argue that Africans' communalism hinders an individual capacity to innovate and therefore restrains developmental capacity. However, similar cultural traits are found in many advanced countries around the world. Second, many scholars try to prove that the economic difference between Asian and African countries emerged from their cultural differences. However, these scholars who romanticize Confucian values fail to notice that Asian Confucianism was once considered backward in the 19th century and the Asian Miracle of the 20th century was possible mostly because of the Cold War interest that fueled the Asia's economic growth.

Theoretical Background

In order to understand the relationship between culture and development, we must begin with their definitions. Although the definition of culture varies among many scholars, I believe renowned anthropologist George Murdock correctly captures the fundamental idea of culture. Murdock argues that "the cultures of the world are systems of collective habits. The differences observable among them are the cumulative product of mass learning under diverse geographic

and social conditions.”¹ As Murdock argues, culture is the collective habits that are formulated based on people’s surroundings such as geography and society. Since the surroundings can change, it is important to understand that culture is constantly evolving to adapt to a new environment. Such fluidity of culture makes it difficult to analyze its implications on development.

Similar to culture, development can be described in various ways. However, I believe Gunnar Myrdal, who is a Nobel Laureate in economics, gives an accurate definition. Myrdal argues that development is the “movement upward of the entire social system. This social system encloses, besides the economic factors, all noneconomic factors.”² He considers that education, health care, distribution of power, institutions, and attitudes are all part of development that societies need to improve on.³ His interpretation is unique in the way that he emphasizes improving society as a whole. He is different from many modernization theorists who often prioritize economic growth over other factors of development.⁴ It would be a mistake to solely look at development from economic factors; rather, we have to consider it from a holistic perspective. In summary, it is difficult for us to establish a causal relationship between culture and development because the former is fluid and the latter takes multi-dimensional forms. Therefore, it would be inconclusive to argue that African culture impedes development.

¹ Augusto Lopez-Claros and Valeria Perotti, “Does Culture Matter for Development?” *World Bank Group: Policy Research Working Paper* 7092 (2014): 6.

² Gunnar Myrdal, “What is Development?” *Journal of Economic Issues* 8, no. 4 (1974): 729.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Yushi Ito, “Kawakami Hajime and Inoue Tetsujiro’s conflicting views of the religion and the state,” in *Japan and the High Treason Incident* 2013, ed. Masako Gavin and Ben Middleton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 172.

Does African Culture impede development?

In this section and the section following, I will provide two common arguments made by scholars who associate African culture as the impediment for development, and explain their flaws. First, many scholars focus on proving that certain aspects of African culture impede development, even though these values are also prevalent in other advanced countries. Daniel Etounga-Manguelle, who is a Cameroonian economist, writes a list of things that undermine Africa's developmental capacity in his article *Does Africa Need a Cultural Adjustment Program?* He argues that Africa's hierarchical and vertical society naturally makes subordinates conform with authority without validating orders.⁵ Also, he argues that "the African...is so convinced that the past can only repeat itself that he worries only superficially about the future."⁶ Therefore, he contends that Africans do not plan their future.⁷ Furthermore, he writes that since the community dominates the individual, there is less room for individual innovation.⁸ Moreover, he argues that since Africans believe in sorcery and witchcraft, they have difficulty in rationalizing.⁹ The problems with his analysis are that he generalizes his claim to all Africans and some of these observations are also found in many developed countries.

Daniel Etounga-Manguelle makes a very generalized claim about all of the cultural attributes of Africans. Even if some African cultures practice sorcery, and sorcery is used to manage conflict and preserve the status quo,¹⁰ it is most likely that not every society in Africa practices sorcery according to the author's description. Furthermore, although communalism

⁵ Daniel Etounga-Manguelle, "Does Africa Need a Cultural Adjustment Program?" in *Culture Matters*, ed. Samuel P. Huntington (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 68.

⁶ Ibid, 69.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 71.

⁹ Ibid, 73.

¹⁰ Ibid.

could be prevalent, there are many successful individual entrepreneurs including the Yoruba women.¹¹ Moreover, the author's generalization also applies to social hierarchy, and social relationship between community and individual, and perception about the future.

Even if we assume that these generalizations are true for all Africans, this does not explain why these qualities impede development, because we see these cultural attributes in advanced countries as well. I consider that religion is not much different from sorcery because both are *imaginaries* created by social groups. Renowned Israeli professor Yuval Hirari argues that religions “exist only in people's collective imaginations.”¹² As Hirari argues, religion is an imagination created by people who try to explain supernatural powers in a way that is similar to sorcery. Often times, both beliefs do not require proofs in their logic. Furthermore, similar to sorcery, religion is often misused by a small group of elites to preserve their status quo while exploiting its followers. But scholars rarely argue that religion impedes development in Western countries. Also, rigid social hierarchy and prioritization of community over individual is not just limited to Africa, but is also prevalent in Asian countries. The Confucian societies of Asia including China, Korea and Japan, all have strict hierarchical societies where many individuals accept authority without questioning. Furthermore, many of these countries prioritize community over individuals. For instance, in South Korea, the country's economy grew remarkably in the 1970s under the Saemaul Undong which was based on Korean traditional communalism that provided rules for local autonomy and collective cooperation.¹³ It is quite ironic that communalism and respect for community is attributed to economic success in Asia while its

¹¹ Bola Udegbe, “African Families in a Global Context,” in *African Families In A Global Context*, ed. Goran Therbon (Goteborg, Sweden: Elanders Infologistics Väst AB), 94.

¹² Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Vintage, 2011), 30.

¹³ Djun Kil Kim, “A Schumpeterian Analysis of the Saemaul Undong Movement in 1970s South Korea within the CDD Framework,” *Seoul Journal of Economics* 28, no. 4 (2015): 416.

considered as the impediment to development in Africa. This double standard extends to comparison between sorcery in Africa and religion in the West. Regardless, scholars often focus on scrutinizing Africa.

Is Asian Culture better than African Culture?

Another common mistake by many scholars is that they compare Asian culture and African culture in order to argue that the former is superior to the latter in promoting economic growth. However, scholars tend to romanticize Confucian values although they were once considered backward. Samuel Huntington, who is an influential American political scientist, begins his book *Culture Matters* by comparing South Korea and Ghana in the 1960s. He argues that both countries had comparable levels of per capita GNP, similar divisions of economy among primary products, and comparable levels of economic aid.¹⁴ However, he contends that thirty years later, Ghana's per capita GNP was one-fifteenth that of South Korea's GNP.¹⁵ Then, he uses culture to explain the differences in economic growth. He writes that "South Koreans valued thrift, investment, hard work, education, organization, and discipline. Ghanaians had different values. In short, cultures count."¹⁶ Here, Huntington tries to prove that Ghana failed to grow economically because Ghanaian culture was not as disciplined as Korean culture. However, I consider that Huntington hastily came to a conclusion without looking at the history.

In the 19th century, Asians' hard-working Confucian values were considered as an impediment to development because Asian countries failed to develop as much as Western countries. Consequently, China was defeated by the British during the Opium War and Japan

¹⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *Culture Matters*. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xiii.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

was forced into unequal treaties with America. Many Asians at the time doubted their Confucian tradition and Japan even denounced the old tradition to be backward and underwent the Meiji Restoration.¹⁷ However, many scholars romanticize and overemphasize Asians' cultural influence on economic success by referring to the 20th century. Consequently, many would argue that Asians' hardworking culture brought remarkable economic growth during the East Asian Miracle of 1965 to 1990. I do agree that the hard-working culture partly attributed to the East Asian Miracle; however, Cold War interest was more important than culture in terms of developing Asia.

East Asian Miracle would not have happened if there had been no antagonism between global superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. East Asian Miracle coincided with the Cold War era. It was a period when the United States feared Communist expansions into Asia including the People Republic of China. Consequently, the United States exerted greater influence in the Asia-Pacific region to ensure that other countries continue to remain under the control of the United States. For example, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan were particularly important for the United States, considering their proximity to the communist countries of China and North Korea. Therefore, the United States invested massively both economically and militarily. Between 1946 to 1976, the United States provided 12.6 Billion dollars in economic and military assistance to South Korea.¹⁸ This amount was similar "to the amount of aid received by the whole of Africa."¹⁹ Furthermore, from 1953 to 1967 Taiwan received 3.64 Billion USD in economic and military assistance mainly in the form of grants. Moreover, the United States

¹⁷ Augusto Lopez-Claros and Valeria Perotti, "Does Culture Matter for Development?" *World Bank Group: Policy Research Working Paper 7092* (2014): 3.

¹⁸ Richard Stubbs, *Rethinking Asia's Economic Miracle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 106.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

government pumped massive amounts of money into the Japanese economy since the post-World War II.²⁰ Therefore, it would be a mistake to compare Ghana and South Korea's economic success solely through the cultural narrative because South Korea benefitted from massive amounts of foreign aid, whereas Ghana received few loans.

What other possible explanation for Africa's under-development?

Many scholars hastily criticize Africa's individual cultures, however, there are many other consequential factors to explain Africa's under development. I will argue that circumstantial (third) factors such as geography, colonialization, and global system impede Africa's development. First, Africa's geography could be a disadvantage to the development because its tropical climate is more vulnerable to natural disasters. Renowned American economist Jeffrey Sachs argues that tropical climates are vastly more underdeveloped than temperate zones.²¹ In fact, twenty eight out of the thirty richest countries in the world are located in temperate climates.²² A possible explanation for this outcome is that tropical climates are less productive (due to high soil erosion and high incidence of pests, and exhaustion under rain forest conditions) and infectious diseases are more prevalent; therefore, life expectancy is lower, labor productivity is lower, and education levels are low.²³ Moreover, Sociologist S. Colum Gilfillan supports the claim that geography is critical to development. In his article "The Coldward Course of Progress," he argues that "an essential consideration determining the scene of world

²⁰ Ibid, 96.

²¹ Augusto Lopez-Claros and Valeria Perotti, "Does Culture Matter for Development?" *World Bank Group: Policy Research Working Paper 7092* (2014): 16.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

leadership in civilization...is mean temperature.”²⁴ Gilfillan even considers that temperature is a deterministic factor for development. He shows the history of human progress from the fertile valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates, to the Nile Valley, to Athens, China, London, Paris and New York where civilization progressed to colder locations.²⁵ These findings suggest that geography and climate affected Africa’s underdevelopment more than culture.

Furthermore, colonialization has contributed to Africa’s underdevelopment. The entire African continent was colonized by Europeans during the 19th century. During this period, countries’ natural resources were looted, human capital was exploited while leaving scars to African cultures. In short, the colonial past has significantly undermined the developmental capacity for the continent. Furthermore, the de-colonization process was carried out under the interests of Western countries. In *The White Men’s Burden*, William Easterly argues that the West imposed boundaries that encouraged ethnic conflict which further divided the continent. He writes:

“First, the West gave territory to one group that a different group already believed it possessed. Second, the West drew boundary lines splitting an ethnic group into two or more parts across nations, frustrating nationalist ambitions of that group and creating ethnic minority problems in two or more resulting nations. Third, the West combined into a single nation two or more groups that were historical enemies.”

For example, the Rwanda Genocide is an outcome of ethnic division by the West that led to mass killing between the Hutus and Tutsis. I will argue that the colonial period and de-colonization

²⁴ S.C. Gilfillan, “The Coldward Course of Progress,” *Political Science Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1920): 408.

²⁵ Augusto Lopez-Claros and Valeria Perotti, “Does Culture Matter for Development?” *World Bank Group: Policy Research Working Paper* 7092 (2014): 17.

process not only damaged to the African cultures, but also, significantly undermined the future developmental capacity of the continent.

Moreover, neo-liberal policies and globalization have contributed to Africa's underdevelopment. In the 1980s, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank presented the Economic Recovery Program to relieve Africa from debt; however, their neo-liberal policies further accumulated debt in Africa.²⁶ Part of the economic recovery plan includes removal of government subsidies and price controls, privatization, removal of protectionist measures, and cuts in public expenditure.²⁷ Consequently, local companies have been wiped out by foreign companies because subsidies were reduced for local products while tariffs were alleviated for foreign products. For example, China was one of the beneficiaries of neo-liberal policies in Africa. Shortly after the policies by the Bretton Wood Institutions, cheap Chinese products dominated the African market, which forced local industries to shut down. From northern Namibia to central Kenya, traditional products and retailers have been edged out by Chinese businesses.²⁸ Moreover, David Shinn argues the Chinese are accountable for the loss of 250,000 jobs and 37% of Africa's textile capacity in recent years.²⁹ Neo-liberal policies and globalization perpetuate Africa's underdevelopment because they encourage rich countries to prosper while poor countries are further marginalized. Therefore, in a world where the global system creates dependency for Africa, cultures have less role to play.

²⁶ Akinpelu O. Olutayo and Ayokunle O. Omobowale, "Capitalism, Globalization and the Underdevelopment Process in Africa: History in Perpetuity," *Africa Development* 32, no. 2 (2007): 105.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Chris Alden, "China in Africa," *Survival* 47, no.3 (2005): 156-157.

²⁹ David H. Shinn, "The China Factor in African Ethics and Human Rights," Paper presented at the 2006 Oxford-Uehiro-Carnegie Council Conference (2006).

Conclusion

Many scholars hastily claim that African culture impedes development; however, it is an invalidated claim. First of all, culture is continuously evolving according to circumstantial factors surrounding the country, and it is unclear how much culture affects development. Because, there are other third factors such as geography, colonialization, and politics that affect both culture and development. As history and other research suggests, third factors contributed to Africa's underdevelopment far more than cultures. Regardless, many scholars hastily criticize Africa's culture as an impediment to development. Many scholars try to prove how certain aspects of African culture impedes development, even though these values are also prevalent in other advanced countries. Furthermore, scholars attempt to refer to Asian Confucius culture as ideal for promoting growth. However, they fail to include failures of Asian Confucianism in the 19th century and Cold War interests of 20th century that were far more consequential than Confucianism itself.

We should not make a generalized claim that African culture impedes development. Because if we put too much emphasis on scrutinizing individual cultures, it might end up justifying exploitative nature of the global system. Instead, it is important for us to understand circumstantial factors that play a significant role in shaping individual cultures. It is not to say that we should ignore cultural aspect completely and avoid making any judgements, because there are critical issues to be resolved such as gender inequality and abuse of women in Africa. What is more important, however, is to continue trying to resolve atrocities done to human dignity while looking at the problem of Africa's underdevelopment within the context of the international system, and offer solutions accordingly.