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Culture as Catalyst and Constraint: Navigating Socio-Economic and Political Realities in West Africa

Dr. Ancy Elezabath John

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Christian College, Chengannur, Alappuzha District, Kerala

Aiswarya M S

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Christian College, Chengannur, Alappuzha District, Kerala

Abstract

The paper examines the way that culture in West Africa can function as both a hindrance and a promoter of economic and political development. Although it does not regard culture as merely an obstacle or as a factor that speeds things up, it maintains that cultural influences can be understood by considering their connections with history, the social and economic environment and the global economy. It traces the course of these forces through history, starting with the transformation of the African empires by their borders, moving on to the formation of modern identities and institutions, and ending with the role that resources play in shaping culture. The text illustrates that cultural resources can serve as a catalyst via mutual aid savings schemes, informal trade, trust-based networks, education, youth entrepreneurship, remittances from the diaspora, and creative sectors such as Nollywood and Afrobeats. It also examines the way in which the same or similar cultural beliefs can hinder development by reinforcing hierarchies, perpetuating gender inequality in relation to property and education, overlapping customary and state institutions, and leading to competition among ethnic or religious groups for government resources. In the political sphere, networks based on chieftaincy and community support provide legitimacy but at the same time reinforce patronage and weaken accountability. The study looks at the shift in people's ideas concerning modernity and belonging which has been caused by migration, digital media, and the hybridisation of culture, as well as the deep inequalities revealed by resource extraction, climate change and displacement. We can conclude that the development of West Africa is the result of the interaction among values, history, institutions, and globalization, and that any policies which regard culture as a barrier or consider it as the only means of action are likely to fail.

Keywords: West Africa; Culture and Development; Informal Networks; Chieftaincy and Politics; Globalization; Resource Inequality

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Introduction

Culture in West Africa is the manner in which people live their lives. It comprises the ways in which people speak and listen, their religious and ethical beliefs, the systems of authority they have and their artistic expressions. West Africa hosts ethnic groups including the Igbo, Yoruba, Akan, Mande, Wolof and Ewe. It is therefore appropriate to talk about the variety of cultures in West Africa. West Africans see themselves as individuals who place importance on being part of a group. The area concerned is that of humanity in terms of society and culture. Culture shows people how to take part in and work together within society and it has an effect on people's preferences as well as setting the rules for interdependence. When the state carries out changes in economic and political matters, the cultural structure of society is altered. Hence the present study makes use of the terms "catalysts" and "constraints" in order to describe the way in which culture influences the economy, society and politics. A catalyst is a resource which helps and accelerates change, while a constraint is a value or resource that maintains existing social inequalities.

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of culture in bringing about economic and political changes in West Africa as well as the way in which culture hinders change by preserving traditional ways, identities and social structures. Culture should not be regarded merely as a barrier to or only as a promoter of development in West Africa; rather it should be studied in conjunction with the region's social and economic conditions, historical processes and the global economy.

Historical and Cultural Foundations

West Africa had developed sophisticated cultures and political organisations before the arrival of the Europeans. The ancient empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai were based on trade across the Sahara Desert. Down in the southern part of the region, the empires of Oyo, Benin and Ashanti also functioned as trading centres and centres of culture. Without a central state, various social and political systems governed West Africa, and disagreements were settled by bodies such as lineages, age grade groups, secret societies and councils of elders. Both kinship ties and ritual played a role in determining the power of a chief or a king, and at times customary norms and practices restricted those powers.

The establishment of colonial rule put an end to these patterns. At the Berlin Conference in 1884 and 1885 the European powers drew up borders which disregarded the existing political boundaries. In some cases peoples like the Ewe and the Hausa were split between different nations, while in other instances separate groups were combined into a single colony. The colonial governments also made use of particular languages for administration, for the legal system and for elite education, thus producing a significant gap between people who spoke the official language and those who did not. Indirect rule in the colonies enabled certain local leaders and made them instruments of imperial control, at times leading to the creation or consolidation of ethnic identities which had not been very distinct before. The effects of this colonial rule still have an impact on identity and on institutions. The state that came about after colonial rule carried over the previous borders and administrative systems. Alongside these were customary law, chieftaincy and local religious practices. Indigenous practices did not just survive or disappear; they evolved. For instance, chieftaincy still exists in Ghana and Nigeria as an acknowledged institution, its function having changed to that of development brokerage, land administration and ceremonial leadership. It is essential to understand this inheritance if we are to analyse how culture functions today.

Culture as a Catalyst for Socio Economic Change

In many African communities there are established customs concerning the helping of one another. In Ghana the practice is known as susu and among the Yoruba in Sierra Leone it is called that as well, enabling members to put money together and in turn receive it. Such groups offer loans to

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individuals who are unable to use banks. They depend on the trust that has been developed through family relationships, the local neighbourhood and faith. In areas where the state is weak, burial clubs, which are based on unions and spiritual groups, provide a sense of protection and social security.

In West Africa a great deal of work is carried out in the informal sector, culture playing a vital role here. Trade networks rely on reputation, connections based on kinship and a common faith or ethnicity in order to maintain agreements in the absence of formal courts. The Mouride community in Senegal is an example of how a sense of spiritual duty supports trade links running from Dakar to Europe and North America. Sellers in the market in Senegal who are influential in countries such as Togo and in southern Nigeria demonstrate that women's businesses have always brought money back to the family and strengthened the community.

Education offers a route to social mobility and cultural transformation. The schools established by missionaries and colonizers created elite classes who subsequently played leading roles in nationalist movements. Nowadays, families make concessions in order to send their children to school, viewing this as the primary means of ensuring security. Since communities regard learning as important and contribute money to it through scholarship funds, the culture thus directly contributes to the development of human capital.

In parts of the world where the population is young, young people are changing economic life in West Africa. There are thriving innovation hubs and startup ecosystems in Lagos, Accra and Dakar. Young entrepreneurs apply their knowledge of local markets to develop mobile payment, logistics and e-commerce services. Although formal employment opportunities are limited, the vibrant informal hustle culture fosters resilience and independence. Every year migrants transfer billions of dollars to their home countries and in some places these remittances exceed both foreign aid and export revenues. The reason for sending money home is a sense of duty towards one's extended family and community. The money is used to pay for education, health care, housing and small businesses. Moreover, diaspora networks also transmit investments, skills and knowledge.

The cultural sector, including areas such as music, film, fashion and art, has become more important both in terms of the economy and in terms of the region's global influence. Nigeria has one of the world's film industries and Afrobeats is popular all over the world. Actors and musicians from Nigeria and Ghana also take part in this market. These industries provide employment opportunities. Demonstrate how cultural assets can be turned into economic assets without requiring a great deal of government assistance

Culture as a Constraint of Socio Economic Development

A cultural system designed to promote cooperation could have the effect of reducing opportunities if it ends up strengthening hierarchy or leading to marginalization. Certain traditional social structures are based on classes which are generally inherited, such as those determined by birth, family lineage or descent. In the Sahel and in other places too, caste-like divisions or the long-standing effects of slavery influence marriage, access to land and reputation. Even when individuals from lower-ranked groups or castes achieve a higher status, they may still encounter disadvantages which the law does not remove.

Although women are important to the economies of West Africa—particularly in agriculture and trade—they usually have fewer opportunities. In customary societies land rights and rules about inheritance tend to benefit men and thus restrict women's access to security and credit. Early marriage and the norms which determine the kind of work girls do and the education they receive result in lower levels of education among children, especially in poorer and more rural areas. These norms are

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not rooted in culture since culture instead reinforces them together with poverty and the lack of effective legal enforcement.

The customary and statutory systems can function side by side; for instance, land might be subject to tenure and at the same time require registration at the state level. This situation causes uncertainty and exposes owners to conflict. People may select their chief or an elder instead of going to court. Although this choice may be seen as legitimate, it can undermine the rule of law if both of these systems operate without clear administration and enforcement. Ethnic identity has a way of bringing people together; however, when the state uses the question of who belongs as a means of awarding jobs, contracts, and money, people end up feeling excluded and developing distrust. Numerous states have engaged in conflict because people desire power based on their religion, for example Nigeria's civil war (1967–70) and more recent communal riots. The real problem is not that ethnicity exists, but that it is exploited in political and business disputes.

For families and people living in rural areas, the cost of school is particularly difficult since they usually fail to obtain school buildings or teachers. Rules relating to language also prevent learning from taking place as children who begin school in the official language find it hard to keep up, which in turn keeps the ladder high because the value of education is not the same for everyone.

Culture and Political Realities

In West Africa people have connections with their nation, with their ethnic group, with their religion and with the place where they were brought up; the concept of being a citizen seems much more distant than that of family and a sense of belonging. Arguments take place regarding who is considered a 'native' and who is a 'settler' in a town, demonstrating that political loyalty is questioned even within a single country.

Traditional chiefs, emirs and kings are still important, particularly when communities need assistance and when disputes have to be settled as well as when the land has to be managed. Governments generally permit these traditional leaders to remain and assign them certain responsibilities. This arrangement can make the government appear more responsive to the people and can aid in making decisions, but it also confers on the leaders a degree of power which is difficult to control.

Cultural and community networks can be used as a means of engaging in political activity; religious groups, clubs, youth groups and traders' associations all serve to gather votes, share news and safeguard their leaders. The fact that Ghana has held calm elections and experienced peaceful changes of power demonstrates that a well-developed civic culture can support democracy. However, the same networks can be employed to sustain patronage politics in which connections within a group determine who gets the votes.

Forming the nation state has been difficult. In some countries symbols, a common language and rules of power sharing have been introduced in order to reduce the disputes between ethnic groups. If governments appear to be neutral then people are able to develop an identity in addition to their local one. But when governments seem to favour one ethnic group ethnicity becomes a basis for people.

All three countries – Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – have experienced coups during a period which has seen ten years of conflict in the Sahel. A number of reasons have been advanced – such as the state of the institutions, financial difficulties and disagreements about security policies – but the fundamental issue is that people are dissatisfied with their leaders and believe that foreign control is excessive. The concepts of legitimacy, dignity and sovereignty are central to the way civilians perceive military rulers.

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Globalization, Migration, and Cultural Transformation

For ages West Africa has been connected to the rest of the world through migration and trade. The movement of people across borders has led to social and business relationships, whether through the free movement rules of ECOWAS or via family and cultural connections. The colonial and modern diasporas in the Americas and Europe – just as during the Atlantic slave trade, under colonial rule, because of the civil war in Sierra Leone and as a result of today's migration – still maintain contacts with West Africa by means of money, ideas and action.

Digital technology has accelerated these connections. Young people in West Africa are now able to build up audiences, campaign for various causes and share music and jokes with people all over the world – for example, the online campaign in support of Nigeria's #EndSARS protests in 2020. At the same time, it introduces ways of behaving from abroad, which in turn kindles dreams and sparks debates concerning tradition and identity. The result is a combination of cultures. Local languages such as Nigerian Pidgin, as well as local and international fashion styles and Islamic, Christian and indigenous customs, are all mixed together. Ideas of modernity are not merely copied from the West; they are discussed here in Nigeria. Young people determine what "Nigerian" and "authentic" mean and this process of debate in turn affects the economy and politics.

Resources, Environment, and Inequality

Natural resources are essential to the economies of West Africa: Nigeria and Ghana have oil, Ghana, Mali and Burkina Faso have gold and other minerals, and cocoa, cotton and groundnuts are produced in the region. Yet wealth has not always benefited everyone, since powerful groups take the money and the local communities near the sites where resources are extracted often suffer environmental and social consequences.

Land and water are not economic goods since they also serve to carry identity, history and deep spiritual significance; sacred forests and rivers which are ancestral or have a spiritual importance cannot be given a market value. When such sensitive places are polluted by oil spills or mining as has taken place all over the Niger Delta, the livelihoods of the people are affected and their cultural identity is undermined. Environmental problems have become an issue, for example the situation in Ogoni.

An aspect of inequality is displacement: whenever mining, dams are constructed and large-scale farming takes place, the people who are engaged in farming and fishing are driven off. Climate change makes the situation worse, since the shrinking of Lake Chad and the expansion of the desert in the Sahel cause herders and farmers to clash over land, and this kind of fighting in turn leads to more conflict. Traditional methods of knowing—such as the management of water, the selection of crops and moving seasonally—are valuable tools for coping and require fair access to both land and money.

Conclusion

African culture is not merely an obstacle to progress and not only a solution; it has the ability to advance progress, or to hinder it. The real economic and political strength that comes from networks of solidarity, the spirit of setting up businesses and learning, the actions of young people, links with people in the diaspora and with cultural businesses can all be undermined by social hierarchies, gender roles, disputes over who should lead, ethnic conflicts and the unequal distribution of resources.

To sum up, the political economy of West Africa is the product of the kind of situation that arises when values, history, institutions, the economy and global forces come together; the borders and identities of nations stem from their histories and it is the institutions that determine how cultural resources are produced and shared. The economy decides whether certain cultural practices are

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retained or discarded and global media influence the parts of culture that continue to change. Policies which regard culture as a barrier or as something to be managed or constructed are likely to fail.

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