

Chapter 14

Re-Centering Culture in Development Administration in Africa: Remedies for Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The role of culture in development remains controversial in the literature. However, within the African context, both historically and in contemporary times, arguments vilifying culture remain rife. This continues a process of decentering culture from the discourse and practice of development on the continent. This chapter argues against this trend and calls for a recentering of culture as a positive element in the administration of development in Africa. Drawing on the Nigerian experience, the chapter provides some remedies for the country in particular and the rest of Africa in general. The chapter maintains that without bringing culture back into the practice of development on the continent, current developmental challenges are likely to persist into the future.

INTRODUCTION

Culture, broadly defined as peoples shared understanding, is often identified as a dynamic phenomenon that is capable of evolving over time (Chang, 2008; McClelland, 1961). For instance, but rather erroneously, in explaining the lack of socio-economic progress in Africa, some scholars argue cultural practices relating to communitarian values, mores and milieus are to blame. Hence, it is not unusual to read narratives of different cultural practices amongst different African countries and/or societies being the

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harbingers of underdevelopment. Consequently, in the administration of development in many African countries, the cultural albatross is invariably seen as a developmental roadblock in the vicious cycle of poverty and underdevelopment that many African countries are currently mired.

Despite the incoherence of the negative interpretations often accorded the role of culture in African development, nuanced understanding and appreciation of the positive roles of culture in development and its administration remains sparse in the literature. For this reason, this chapter provides some explanations on how cultural practices can play important positive roles in development, thus it seeks to make a modest contribution to the literature on culture and development in Africa. The chapter argues that Africa's development has been hampered by the "de-centering" of culture from the discourse and practice of development. Central to this argument is the need to focus on the positive cultural practices of Africans as subjects, not objects, of their own destinies. In other words, development and its administration will only proceed sustainably in Africa when it considers the cultural attributes of Africans in the making and shaping of their living conditions; mainly through their involvement in the planning and implementation of development policies and programmes. For this reason, the chapter addresses the question, how can culture be re-centered in the discourse on development administration on the African continent?

Following this introduction, the chapter proceeds in three sections. The first section provides a conceptual framework linking culture and development administration. The second section provides a historical overview of how culture has been used to justify African's underdevelopment and how the economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s further displaced efforts at (re)instituting culture through "people-centered" approaches to development. The third section examines the role of culture in development in Africa with an illustration of how Nigeria can benefit from a culturally inspired people centered development process. This is followed by a concluding section that calls for a re-centering of culture in the discourse and practice of development administration in Africa.

CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Defining culture is a herculean task for most scholars. This is due partly to the elusive nature of the concept in both theory and practice. At the same time, while generic conceptualizations abound, operationalizing culture into measurable variables remains a challenge in several respects (Keating, 2008). Nonetheless, attempts to define and operationalize culture continue. According to Hall (1997, p. 18), culture refers to peoples "shared meanings or shared conceptual maps." In this wise, Hall (1997) argues the interactions of different individuals, groups and various societies are mostly constructed around their shared interpretations, ideas, and knowledge of certain things and events. Along this line, Wedeen (2003, p. 213) defines culture as "semiotic practices." For Wedeen, conceptualizing culture as "semiotic practices" can be understood on two levels. One, "culture as semiotic practices refer to what language and symbols *do*" (emphasis in original) and two, "culture as semiotic practices is also a lens" through which people engage in meaningful interactions. When put together, semiotic practices according to Wedeen often entail "meaning-making" processes within which people infuse these practices with their own understanding and interpretations of their world.

While cultural mores and milieus can be considered as shared understanding that are common amongst certain people, the processes are not immutable as meaning-making processes involve elements of continuity and change over time and space. Although shared cultural values may distinguish a people from

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