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**Crossbreeding Cultures:
The Culture Gap in Sub-Saharan Africa**

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**Crossbreeding Cultures:
The Culture Gap in Sub-Saharan Africa**

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Summary

This Working Paper explains the dynamism of cultural systems changes using the genetics – memetics analogy. This is used for understanding the changes that globalization brings to the societies in Sub-Saharan Africa. The main feature of contemporary African culture is its hybrid nature and an existing culture gap between traditional and modern layers of culture. The culture gap problem is demonstrated on the example of political system, where many Western institutions were implanted, however even they kept the form of their Western blueprints, they are performing qualitatively different functions. A good level of understanding political institutions is important especially for development co-operation policies.

Keywords: culture, Sub-Saharan Africa, politics, development co-operation

**Křížení kultur:
kulturní mezera v subsaharské Africe**

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Abstrakt:

Working paper vysvětluje dynamiku proměn kulturních systému na základě analogie genetika - memetika. Tento koncept je využit k charakteristice změn společností, které do subsaharské Afriky přináší globalizace. Je zdůrazněna hybridita současné africké kultury a s ní související kulturní mezera mezi tradičními a moderními (či globalizovanými) sférami kultury. Kulturní mezera je demonstrována v oblasti politického systému, kdy byly do Afriky přeneseny formy původem západních politických institucí, avšak přes vnější podobu nabývají tyto implantované politické instituce řadu funkcí, které jsou pro současnou Afriku velmi typické. Správné porozumění fungování politických institucí v současné Africe je důležité především v oblasti rozvojové spolupráce.

Klíčová slova: kultura, subsaharská Afrika, politika, rozvojová spolupráce

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Introduction

Modern societies in Sub-Saharan Africa had to and still have to face many serious problems. African governments are often criticized for their bad performance by western politicians, the media, NGOs and scientists as well.

It may be useful to recall here that the development of such institutions like the state, democracy or human rights took many centuries in Western culture. Looking back into history we can say this process was gradual and quite bloody. State, in the modern meaning, became to be predominant with Richelieu's conception of *raison d'état* (Kissinger 1999: 55), but the ideas of state and nation (the national state) were not joined until the 19th century and the outbreak of nationalism. The roots of modern democracy could be found in the independence of the USA or in the French Revolution of 1789 when a new idea appeared: namely that the state should be ruled by "citizens" (or "people"). Evolution of the meaning of "citizen" and the condition of suffrage took many more decades (universal suffrage in Switzerland was not introduced until 1971) (Klíma 2003: 186-188).

On the other hand, Africa could not enjoy such a long process of political (and not only political) institutions development (Sandbrook 2000: 1). In the time of reaching independence, institutions like the state (even the national state according to the Western blueprint) or the universal suffrage were imposed out of the blue and from the outside. African societies were expected to accept these institutions not in centuries, but in days.

From this point of view, modern African history (often so traumatic) can be seen as a period of cultural accommodation, when African societies are slowly getting used to these non-African institutions. Imported parts of the institutional-normative layer of culture (Lehmannová 1999) are becoming Africanized and, simultaneously, more traditional elements of African culture are changing as well. What took centuries to achieve in Europe, Africa has been doing for decades. There are plenty of consequences of this complex process and this paper deals with its effects on the socio-political environment in postcolonial Africa. However, prior to the application of these thoughts on the development of Sub-Saharan Africa, some deeper general insight into the evolution of cultural systems is necessary.

1. Cultural Evolution

Culture serves as an adaptive mechanism for humankind. It helps human societies orient in reality, deal with the environment and keep society itself together. In general, culture is everything we have inherited or gained from the previous generations in a non-biological way. Culture is always tied to a distinct society. As societies evolve with new generations, so evolve their cultures. This evolution can be described using analogies from biology. Genetics has its parallel in *memetics*¹ and the term *meme* could be used for the unit of cultural information in analogy to the *gene* as a unit of biological inheritance.

In autochthon isolated societies the culture evolves only slightly. It is learned, almost unaltered, by new society members and changed only by random modifications (mutations) or in response to environmental changes. The biological analogy of this process is *asexual reproduction*.

When it comes to contacts of different cultures, a new quality appears. Cultural ideas (or memes) may transfer from one society to another through processes of *diffusion* or *acculturation*. Cultural patterns are recombined, similarly to sexual reproduction. Various layers of the cultural system have different dynamism and this has the result that in the case of different memes it takes a shorter or longer time for completion of the process in which the meme is proven to be dominant and accepted or recessive and rejected². In general, the technological memes require less time to prove their dominancy (a Kalashnikov rifle is objectively a more powerful weapon than a spear, a tam-tam drum a less effective way of communication than a cell phone).

The advantages of sexual reproduction were to a large extent explained in biology. Similar conclusions bring scientists from the field of the game theory when investigating genetic algorithms³. The processes of globalization obviously support such *sexual reproduction* of cultures. From this analogy we could conclude that in the *long-run* this way of reproduction could be favourable for cultural systems as well. However, the question stands, what is the *long-enough-run*, because in the short-run many negative effects arise, especially when the “parent” cultures are more different. In relation to the slow dynamics of some deeper layers of cultural systems, we can describe these cons of cultural intercourse as the *culture gap*. *Long-enough-run* here requires to be counted in generations. In this sense, contemporary African culture is too hybridized at the moment and will remain to be such a hybrid for at least next few generations.

¹ See i.e. Blackmore (2000) or Dawkins (1989/2003).

² Using Mendelian inheritance terminology.

³ See i.e. Coveney and Highfield (2003: 253-255).

Fig. 1: How do cultures evolve?

Interaction of societies	Changes in culture	Analogy in biology
Isolated autochton societies	Culture is learned almost unaltered, small random modifications/mutations in a reaction to changing environment	Asexual reproduction
Interactions with similar societies (like Pre-colonial Africa)	Migration/interchange of similar <i>memes</i> , without stronger impacts on the coherence of cultural system	Sexual reproduction Inbreeding
Interactions with more distinct societies (like Africa in globalising world)	Dramatic changes, cultural patterns are being recombined, hybridizing of culture	Sexual reproduction Crossbreeding

Source: Author

2. The Culture Gap

In contemporary Africa a culture gap can be identified, however, in a slightly different meaning than this term was defined by W. G. Ogburn⁴. Present African culture can be labelled as hybrid socio-cultural system. This means that into the environment of traditional African culture, different originally non-African institution (and of course non-African material culture / or technology / or civilization layer of culture as well) has been implanted. Within the institutional-normative layer of culture can be found both imported elements (or memes), generally those more formalized as i.e. political system, public administration, laws) and indigenous elements, generally less formalized as customs, traditions, ethic standards based on deeper layers of culture as i.e. value paradigm.

From another view this can be described as a different level of acculturation⁵ within African societies, as the process of acculturation hit different parts of the society by a different intensity.

⁴ According to Ogburn, the culture gap appears between certain layers of culture due to their different dynamism of propensity to change. Here we argue that the culture gap in Africa is within the institutional-normative layer of culture. However, this discrepancy is not so important as it could be perceived being based on different vies of cultural system only.

⁵ Aculturation is a process of social and cultural changes, caused by contacts of different cultures. Classical explanation of the term *aculturation* was presented together by R. Redfield, R. Linton and M. J. Herskovits in 1935. According to their definition, aculturation includes phenomenons that appear when groups of individuals originating from different cultures enter into permanent and close contact, which is causing changes in original cultural patterns of one or both (or all) groups. From this point of view, aculturation is connected

The imposition of the Western model of the society which ignored African societal patterns complicated terribly the development of Sub-Saharan Africa. It resulted into application of alien (and not working) development strategies to dealing with African problems based on modernisation or Marxist paradigms (Kalu 2001: 40-41).

Different dynamism of changes of values and institutions or norms is causing a tension within the society. Wide masses of population in rural areas are still deeply influenced by traditional African culture. On the other hand, public administration is based on institution based on visions of ruling elites, which form usually the most acultured part of the society. From these reasons, one of the most important determinants of the contemporary African culture is strong cleavage between a traditional core of culture and some alien elements of the institutional-normative layer of African culture. The efficiency of western-based institutions in African conditions is problematic. These institutions are being modified into shapes that are typically African, however, not African from the point of view of traditional African culture. The modernity originating in the West is getting Africanized (i.e. *neopatrimonialism*⁶ in the politics).

The effects of meeting cultures are definitely not new to Africa, as it is a region with a strong nomadic tradition of migration. However, prior to the colonial era, most interaction between different cultures were between relatively similar cultures (of course there are exceptions, i.e. the Bantu migration into the southern part of the continent inhabited by Khoisan groups of hunters-gatherers or the activities of Arab traders). In this sense, Africa has a long tradition of cultural inbreeding. The rise of colonialism and later accelerating globalization brought to Africa interactions of very different societies. African culture started to crossbreed. The result is modern African culture.

The African way of modernity is often misunderstood by Western observers. Usually is thought to be irrational and negative. As Patrick Chabal notes, it is

above all with diffusion of cultural elements (or *memes*) and cultural complexes (or *cultural chromosomes*) and with migration of ethnic groups in space. On the level of individuals, aculturation appears as a process of social learning. (Maříková; Petrusek; Vodáková 1996: 47).

⁶ Postcolonial African political systems are often described as *neopatrimonial*, strongly dependent on patron-client network (Thomson 2004: 119). In *patrimonial* government all the power is in hands of one individual that runs the state according to his or her own needs. All the members of the political system and dependant on this single leader and are loyal to her or him. Here can serve as a good illustration the famous quotation of the French king Louis XIV – „*L'etat, c'est moi*“. Neopatrimonialism can be understood as in praxis patrimonial rule performed within the framework of existing institution (usually established according to Western blueprints), which are, in theory, expected to be impersonal. In such a system personal relations of politicians remain to be more important than relations of institution they represent. (For explanation of neopatrimonialism in Africa refer to i.e. Sandbrook 2000: 18).

important to keep in mind the fact that the Africans are able to exist almost simultaneously and regardless to any coherence in various and even contradictory positions. Based on different circumstances, they can think in both extremely archaic and very modern way (and anything in between). In black Africa it is not only acceptable but even useful to act in all of accessible discourses (Chabal 2004: 173).

There are many illustrations of memes' migration and its consequences from Sub-Saharan Africa:

Complex composition of the society, with certain classes connected to traditional Africa and others connected to modern or even post-modern Africa (see i.e. Thompson 2004);

Religious syncretism;

Shifts in gender relations (see i.e. Soetan 2000).

3. Culture Gap and the Socio-political Sphere

We can argue that any society needs for its development coherent and viable cultural system, including the working institutional-normative layer, which serves as a regulator within the society. The wider is the culture gap between the traditional and the imported part of the cultures system, the bigger is the risk of an inner deep and hardly solvable breakdown. In socio-political sphere this implicates, that successful development, stability and also freedom and democracy (in its broadest meaning that is not limited to the Western model) is more probable in societies with lower friction within the cultural system. The current hybrid nature of African culture therefore brings severe consequences.

The idea, that a more coherent cultural system is a necessary condition (not sufficient, of course) for a more free and democratic society, can be investigated now, using several African states as examples.

The Freedom House earmarks 11 African countries as free (Freedom House 2006): Cape Verde, Senegal, Mali, Ghana, Benin, Sao Tome and Principe, Namibia, South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho and Mauritius. From different reasons it seems, that in these cases the clash between the tradition and modernity (or better say post-modernity) within the cultures of these societies is relatively limited. We can distinguish three groups of these states based on different historical experience.

The first, very distinct, group is formed by three small island states – Cape Verde, Sao Tome and Mauritius. These islands were not permanently inhabited until the modern era and therefore they can be described as immigrant states. Immigration (regardless to its usually enforced basis in these cases) brings a certain will to build something new – new societies, new cultures, new states.

In the second group we can find states with visible links between the pre-colonial and post-colonial political system, or, in other words, with stronger influence of traditional culture on the modern politics. These states include Botswana, Lesotho, Mali, Benin and Namibia and to the certain level Ghana as well. Botswana, Lesotho and Mali are landlocked countries, which were hit by colonialism later and less intensively. Botswana has a House of Chiefs in its constitutional system and the success of Seretse Khama was surely based also on the fact, that this first president of Botswana was also hereditary chief of a large Batswana group. Lesotho is a kingdom ruled by traditional king. In the case of Mali we cannot find formal incorporation of traditional elites into the political system however their importance is recognized informally. What is more important here is the long tradition of Malian statehood dating back to the ages of Empire of Mali. This historic Malian tradition is much stronger in comparison to many other African states with less famous history, as most of the African states are artificial products of colonial Scramble for Africa. Relatively influential are the traditional elites also in Namibia (above all the Ovambo kings) and in Ghana (the position of traditional elites even improved after democratic changes in 1990s). The level of traditionalism within the Beninese society can be seen i.e. from religious demography – the majority is of traditional animistic beliefs, the share of animists is among the highest in Africa and religious syncretism is common. Both Mathieu Kérékou and Nicéphore Soglo, the most significant persons of Beninese politics of previous decades, referred frequently in their political rhetoric to vodun cultus (the predecessor of American – or Caribbean – Voodoo).

The third group (or the third factor lowering the inner cultural tense) is typical by its relatively longer time for cultural accommodation and includes states which exposed for a longer period or more intensively to the non-African influence. Senegal, Ghana and South Africa are examples.

In the area of Senegal was for a long time a meeting point of African, Western and Islamic culture. In Sub-Saharan Africa it was Senegal, where the French influence was the strongest. France brought here the French political institution quite early. The regular elections were held regularly in four major cities of Senegal as early as in the second half of the 19th century. Senegalese society therefore had already longer time to face up to Western (and Islamic) influence. Senegalese culture may be from this reason more stable, as its different compounds has more time to align on each other. Senegal is today one of the most developed African countries of those which lack larger natural resources. This Senegalese performance could be an example of viable symbiosis of different cultures, or, in other words, a culture based on a viable recombination of memes of various origins.

Ghana (or the Golden Coast) has similar history in the English speaking part of Africa. Long and intensive European presence in South Africa is obvious.

To conclude this investigation: apart from relatively unimportant island states, the more coherent culture can be caused by (i) relatively longer time to accommodate the change (or longer time for picking out the dominant memes of both – or all – cultures) or by (ii) allowing the traditional memes to persist and in this was to limit the hybrid nature of the culture.

4. Focus on Political Institutions: Forms and Functions

As it was already said, some elements of culture are more easily transferable into other cultures, for others it takes much more time to be fully incorporated. This is also happening during the process of cultural intercourse between African and Western culture. Let's look at the system of governance for example. Although institutions like parliament, elections, courts of justice or central banks were introduced into African states – partly during the colonial era, but above all by the postcolonial acultured elites – from the later performance of these institutions it is obvious⁷, that their introduction was to the large extend only formal. New institutions, very similar to their Western counterparts, approached in Africa, but their functions differed dramatically.

It is important to understand, that such an institution, like i.e. parliament, is a complex thing, consisting of many attributes. It is much more like a *cultural chromosome* rather than a single *meme*. It has some formal aspects (representative building, assembly of well-paid people, rights and responsibilities described in the constitution, etc.), it has also some more hidden aspect, like real functions (real power and position in the society, respect, motivation of MPs, etc.). Different aspects of the idea of parliament are embedded into different layers of cultural system and therefore some aspects of parliaments are more easily transferable than others. Postcolonial African history provides many empirical examples.

African states started their independence with similar constitutions (as they were inspired from Paris or London) (Le Vine 2004: 161), that established many political institution according to Western blueprints. Parliaments (continuing with this example) were assembled and looked like their European counterparts. However, quite quickly, in many countries they degraded into *rubber-stamp* parliaments (Ayittey 1999) and gained their specific functions within the African neopatrimonial political system. They usually didn't start to perform their regulatory and control tasks (as Western-style parliaments are supposed to do), and regulatory functions within the political system of the society remained

⁷ See i.e. George B. N. Ayittey's works – (Ayittey 1992), (Ayittey 1999), (Ayittey 2005).

vacant, as traditional institutions (like elderly councils), were destroyed because they were perceived both backward and dangerous to new “modern” leaders.

To conclude how the culture gap influences African political systems. Many western institutions were implanted into African states. However, this implantation was often formal only, as the institutions based on Western blueprints did not performed the same task as their original counterparts. Contrary, they were diverted and deformed into shapes, which would serve the needs of ruling neopatrimonial elites. In the same time, traditional political institutions that were regulating the political life in indigenous societies were removed as symbols of African backwardness.

This important distinction between the form and the function is important in international relations, especially when assessing present paradigm of development co-operation, which stresses such condition as *good governance*.

5. Practical Implications: Development Co-operation

There is one particular area, where these consequences of the present nature of African cultural system are of high importance – development co-operation, and especially the good governance conditionality of aid.

Current development co-operation policies (the New Aid Paradigm, as represented i.e. by the Paris Declaration) (OECD 2005) are stressing the need for establishing or empowering of such institutions, that are supposed to assure or control transparency and responsibility of governance (various independent electoral commissions, auditor general offices, parliaments). This means in fact, that the prescribed solution for western institutions failure in Africa is introduction of more of western institutions. This is not necessarily wrong. However, there must be more attention paid not to formal appearance of these institutions, but to the question whether they are fulfilling the tasks they have within the society.

A passed bill that creates an Independent Auditor General Office is worthless if the Auditor General is a cousin of the President of the Republic. On the other hand, an elderly council sitting under a baobab tree could have more influence on good governance. This should not be understood as a call for retraditioning of African politics, this should just stress that it is the function that is more important than the form of any institution, because to the large extent is the function independent on the form.

There is a common danger, that from the side of international donor community (represented mainly by the western donors and western advisors and consultants) western models will be prescribed, models that may or may not

Obviously the form is easier to check than the function and so the danger persists, that new institutions, that are recommended by the donors could have the same fate as the institutions already imported to Africa – the fate of being deformed into shape that will serve the needs of African elites but not the needs of African people. For example – in 90's Africa overvalued the importance of plural elections and neglected liberal government in the same time (Zakaria 2005: 120). Today many elections are taking place in Africa, however usually are manipulated by elites and are not capable to make a difference.

This is the challenge that the western donors have to take – to distinguish the form and the function.

6. How to Solve the Culture Gap Problem?

If contemporary African culture fails to play its role of regulating the society, because of its hybrid nature and lack of coherence, there are, in theory, three ways out.

The first, total retraditionalisation and rejection of all alien *memes* is unthinkable at the moment. The second and opposite – huge acculturation of the whole society and rejection of traditional memes is similarly impossible (as already tried by several African politicians in their modernization efforts based on imitation of alien methods). The only viable is the third way – sufficient accommodation of all parts of the cultural system into a working one. This without any doubts needs plenty of time, however process can be facilitated and pushed forward by suitable policies. Mutual accommodation is not only in balancing the ratio of modernity and tradition, it is complex iterating process, where important roles play redefinition of tradition and modernity, manipulation with tradition, modernization of tradition and traditionalization of modernity. This can result into some kind of pseudo-traditional modern African society. Many African regimes had already shown that the manipulation of tradition is possible. Plenty of *big men* in Africa ably stylized themselves into national *chiefs*, realistically pretended the application of some traditional consultative political mechanisms. They often also used title with certain traditional context – like *mwalimu* (teacher) by Julius Nyerere of Tanzania or *Osagyefo* (Ashanti monarchist title meaning redeemer) of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana (Skalník 2004: 188). Authenticity campaigns (like Mobutu's one in Zaïre) can be mentioned here as well.

If it was possible to effectively manipulate the tradition in order to legitimize the rule of autocrats, it should be possible to address the tradition when legitimizing democracy as well.

Conclusions

The main conclusion of this Working paper is that contemporary culture of Sub-Saharan Africa is of a hybrid nature. This brings the problem of culture gap to the African societies. The wider Culture Gap, the wider problems within the society. However, there are some Sub-Saharan countries where this problem is relatively less serious and the culture gap is not so wide. Apart from small island immigrant states, these countries include those with a history of longer or stronger interaction with Western culture (which means more possibilities for accommodation of memes of different origin), countries like South Africa, Ghana or Senegal; and also countries with stronger links between pre-colonial and post-colonial political traditions (countries that are probably less affected by Western memes), countries like Botswana, Mali or Benin.

The culture gap is causing such an effect, that while the forms of some African institutions are very similar to its Western counterparts, the functions these institutions are performing may differ to a large extent. However forms of institutions don't matter, important are their functions, unfortunately it is easier to observe a form than a function. Here's a danger in i.e. Good Governance conditionality of aid, where the often prescribed cure to African problems is of this kind: "The (Western) institutions are not working properly in your country? – Incorporate more (Western) institutions!". African countries don't necessarily need to have institutions called Parliament, they need something that will play the same role within the society, as Parliaments play in the West, regardless how it will look like.

Closing the Culture Gap requires time. All parts of African culture need to accommodate to each others. However, this time consuming process could be facilitated by suitable policies. This mutual accommodation is not linear – the solution is not in finding the right mixture of traditional and western/modern elements. Much more likely, this is a complex process of iterations, where important role play redefinition of tradition and modernity, manipulation with tradition, traditionalisation of modernity. This sounds oddly, however these are exactly the things where many neopatrimonial African regimes were very successful in order to support or legitimate their autocratic style of governance. Therefore it should be possible to do the same for the benefit of all Africans.

The effects of globalization described above on Sub-Saharan culture are of course valid for any contemporary culture. This crossbreeding of cultures brings on the one hand possibilities of swifter cultural reactions on changing environment, on the other hand, this may not lead to cultural uniformity, as the reduction of the meme pool and the decline of cultural diversity has its analogy in the importance of biodiversity.

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