Culture and Development

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This article examines the relationship between culture and development. The analysis is important because culture has been neglected in the study, planning and implementation of development interventions.

Previous studies had compared development with economic growth (Parsons, 1960) but neglected cultural variables. Many countries might have shown economic growth as measured by GNP or GDP although the majority of their peoples might have been suffering from poverty and misery.

Economic-development theory advocated a model of *modernization*, a psychic change, that is, doing away with traditional culture and replacing it with urbanization, literacy, mass media exposure and political participation (Lerner, 1963). Discarding traditional cultures was, therefore, the aim and strategy of modernization.

Weiner (1966:1-114), for instance, defined development as *enactment of values*, saying that attitudinal and value changes are prerequisites to creating a modern society, economy and political system. Social psychologists enhanced this strategy and advocated the *primacy of ideas* in development. They believed that values, motives, or psychological forces determine ultimately the rate of economic and social development. Even the *socialist model* was not exempt from the model of modernization because *collectivization* was aimed ultimately at converting the attitudes of the people through what was called *molding* for a dream of creating a *socialist personality (Amare, 1997)*.

Attempts at *modernization*, however, failed to bring about development in places where such strategies were enthusiastically adopted (Bordenave, 1977). Development theorists, then, started to blame (in heavy dosages) the pioneers of *modernization theory (Amare, 1997). Dependency* theorists (Portes, 1976), for instance, attributed present *underdevelopment* to development of the capitalist system by arguing that the observed development in capitalist ,systems and underdevelopment in the Third World are two sides of the same coin. There could have been no development of the capitalist system without *underdeveloping* the Third World countries, they argued. They, therefore, perceived development, in terms of *liberation from dependency* or liberation from integration into the global economic system. But how is isolation to bring about development?

Teheranian (1977), an Iranian communication researcher, recommended a *systems approach* to development. He criticized previous approaches as lacking in analysis of the *unique* nature of the Third World situation.

By making reference to many Development Communicators, Teheranian argued that the development process in history did not take place *all-at-once*. It was an evolutionary process which involved a series of revolutions. It started with *The Agricultural Revolution* which served as a basis to the emergence of *The Industrial Revolution* which, in turn, gave way to *The Political Revolution*. Now, the Developed World is experiencing a *Communication Revolution*. Teheranian, therefore, recommended country-specific approach to development with a possible *multiplicity* in *routes and destinations*. The

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unique nature of Developing Countries, according to development communicators is, therefore, that the progression of revolutions observed in Europe, USA, Japan, etc. is now *reversed*. Developing Countries are rather experiencing Political and Communication Revolutions simultaneously before experiencing Economic Revolutions (before Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions). At present, the access to information and communication is highly enhanced. No governments are stable now if they do not guarantee democracy to their peoples. The feudalistic or pre-capitalistic method of economic development (without democracy) can't any longer serve the same purpose, at the present era.

It is also believed that people enjoy and respect their own cultures however much backward these may be. A lose of one's culture is perceived as a lose of self identity and hence playing a *dysfunctional role* in development. Efforts at modernization were necessarily doomed to failure because the approach was to discard but not to fertilize domestic cultures. Development is, therefore, possible only by developing (enriching) one's own culture and not by replacing it by alien cultures as advocated by the followers of *modernization theory*.

Foreign cultures could be useful to domestic cultures only in the context of using the foreign culture *in fertilizing the domestic* one. This kind of fertilization would, however, require *compatibility*. If the gap between the domestic and foreign culture is wide, the domestic culture fails to absorb the complex strands of the borrowed culture. For instance, it has been argued that the Japanese culture was able to absorb the western culture of technical development only because *(Amare, 1997)*:

1. Japan was selective of the strands of the imported culture

2. Japan had the technical base to absorb the western culture into its own culture--compatibility
3. It was the right time for borrowing-- the technical distance between the two cultures was not inhibitive of synthesis.
4. The location of Japan was not convenient for being overwhelmed by a westernization process

If a highly developed culture (in technical sense) encounters a less developed one, only the *trivial strands* are transmitted (Silvert, 1964). The complex components remain intact. This is exactly what happened in the Ethiopian situation. Through curriculum importation, student exchanges, scholarships, importation of science and technology, international communications, etc., the two cultures have been in contact for more than a 100 years. Yet, the Ethiopian culture remained Ethiopian and the western is western.

Intagaki (Silvert, 1964), a Japanese scholar pointed out that cultural values can not truly be carried from one society into another in *their basic forms*. He used **Toynbee's elucidation** of the manner in which all the different elements in a cultural pattern have an inner connection with one another and form an indivisible or an organic whole. Therefore, when the process of contact between civilizations starts, there also begins to work a law governing a process of cultural radiation and reception. Itagaki explained that this notion means that, when a culture-ray of a radioactive civilization gets diffracted into its component strands (economic, political, linguistic, intellectual, technological, scientific, artistic, religious, etc.) by a resistance of a foreign social body, those strands that are the *most trivial in cultural value* receive the least resistance from the society impinged upon, and tend to penetrate *faster and farther than others.* For instance, technology achieves a faster and wider penetration than religion; advertisement

messages with consumerist values penetrate faster than technical information, etc.

Itagaki's arguments clearly demonstrate to us that the western culture did not enable use to develop our own science and technology. The most important strands, such as, technical skills, hard-work ethic, professional commitment, etc. have failed to transfer. The trivial components, such as living styles, consumption patterns, entertainment, wants, etc., have penetrated all through our culture. The latter, however, are not only less useful but even tend to hamper development as they imply *unviable aspirations*, demands beyond what the country can afford. The writer has witnessed that M. Jackson's Break-Dance took only a night to penetrate all through the Egyptian elite culture (in 1983).

Itagaki identified three forms of cultural transmission; *transplantation*—the simple movement of civilizations from one area to another, as the case of the English migration into Australia; *implantation*—comparable to the grafting of an apple tree onto a peer tree. In this case, the grafted tree (alien civilization) never changes the character of its substance in the least. At any rate, the apple tree is an apple tree and the peer tree is a peer tree. Itagaki called this the most miserable and unproductive type of transmission of civilizations.

The Third form of transmission was called *soil improvement*. It is the most productive one in that an alien civilization has a favorable effect on the indigenous civilization. The native civilization takes nutrition and improves the native soil.

The model of modernization implied development in the form of *implantation*, where a given imported technology would remain an *enclave* with little impact on development of local skills or technology and with little interaction with the surrounding people. At its best, it might reside by exploiting its new environment. To understand the effect of implanted technologies, one needs to observe the effect of the Djibouti railway, an imported technology from France, with the longest life span but with the least effect on its surrounding. Another example is the Wonji Sugar Factory which had also impacted insignificantly on its surrounding.

A model of development in the form of cultural synthesis would assume that replacement of cultures is difficult if not impossible. The only possibility could be by eradicating the culture-holders (people) as the case in Australia but which has again been recorded in history as the most barbaric and brutal human actions. The strategy of cultural synthesis also assumes that absorption of the useful strands of a developed cultural content by the borrower requires compatibility, that is, the gap between the two cultures should be narrower. There must be some kind of similarity in the *standard* of the two cultures. For instance, the Science and Technology in the 18th and 19th century Europe could have been more useful to Ethiopia if enough efforts had been made for synthesis during that time as the gap was narrower then than now (Amare, 1997).

One presently observed cultural synthesis in Ethiopia is the transfer of construction, mechanical and hard-work skills from the Italian culture in the 1940s by the mediation of the Italian lower class (army). I think the multitude of small *garages* in our country with their effective skills of automotive maintenance typified by the *Somali-Terra* are good examples of effective cultural transfer. I do not think the present architectural and construction skills effectively demonstrated by Ethiopian engineers now have their basis only in the Technology Faculty, but above all, in the technical cultural heritage with its basis in the Ethio-Italian cultural synthesis. Thanks to our fathers or grandfathers who were the most important channels for the transfer. And the

most unfortunate thing is that our curriculum did not contain any of these. Such skills were being transferred outside of the Ethiopian educational system.

A simple analogy of the argument of the need for compatibility of cultures is that it is easier to convert a Jew or a Protestant to Catholicism than to Islam. Or it is easier to make friendship among nearly equals than among unequals. The main reason for this is because of the ability to cope up with and the need for reciprocity in understanding and management of ideas.

In my analysis here, I am not trying to reflect pessimism. My argument is that development strategies should incorporate the important variable, culture, to attain development objectives. In the west, the content of the educational system was their *culture*—the totality of skills, knowledge, value, etc. These all are transferred from generation to generation through formal, non formal and informal education. The new Ethiopian generation is *over-burdened* with the requirement of learning two cultures (imported and domestic ones) through the different communication media. The result of attempting to learn all is to learn none. I think, it is not an exaggeration to argue that modern Ethiopians have absorbed the important strands of neither the domestic culture nor the foreign one in its true forms.

One of my recommendations is an integration of culture with education. Our culture must be the major *content* of curriculum, with a possibility of a synthesis with the imported one. I do not know whether or not this has ever been a political or an academic issue in Ethiopia. What every body knows is that we have separate ministries for both (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture and Information), possibly with no special interaction although conceptually one is the *content* and the other is the *means* of the same system.

I do not also think that the main problem lies in the structuring of the administrative system (having separate ministries for culture and education). The content of the educational system remained the same even during the time of the Monarch when we had the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts. The main problem lies in the attitude of the educated elite.

The *Education and Training Policy* (1994) aims at making curriculum relevant by considering cultural factors. Implementation will not, however, be easy as the inherited curriculum was developed on the model of *modernization*. It requires a completely radical approach to operationalize the intent of cultural synthesis in curriculum development and implementation. In addition to the educational system, the communication industry has the added responsibility of communicating the cultural heritage to every generation.

Conclusion

Most development theorists had ignored culture either as a dependent or independent variable in development. Those who did so, however, thought that culture was anti-development and needed to be discarded or replaced by a modern one. The consequences of such attitudes were then *dysfunctionality* (back-firing) of all development efforts. Change of culture, of course, is necessary but needs to come from within and not from without the culture. The intrusion of a foreign culture must aim at enriching the domestic one if the former is to play a constructive role.

It is, therefore, argued in this paper that culture is the most important variable in development. Culture is a dependent variable in that any development effort most aim at developing it. Culture is also an independent variable in the sense that it can either facilitate or thwart development efforts depending on how it was treated.

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