

Culture and the Construction of the Governable African

by

Chibuike Uche
Stephen Ellis Professor of the Governance of
Finance and Integrity in Africa
African Studies Centre
Leiden University

Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Shortly after my appointment as the Stephen Ellis Professor of the Governance of Finance and Integrity here at Leiden University, I visited one of my professors at the London School of Economics. While congratulating me on my appointment, he jokingly said that the title of my Chair was contradictory. This is because it is difficult to talk about ethics, integrity and good governance in Africa.

Since public opinion is on the side of this joke, I consider it my primary responsibility going forward to undertake research that will help explain the origins and causes of the widespread poor governance and ethics in Africa and hopefully influence the continent's governance practices in a positive way.

I am of the view that in order to meaningfully understand the widespread inefficiency of the diverse governance institutions in Africa, there is need to understand Africa in the context of its culture. While some have argued that African culture impedes the workings of African institutions, I will argue that it is the imposition of alien institutions on Africa, without taking into consideration its cultural specificities that is the main cause of the governance crisis in the continent.

This is true for many governance institutions across all sectors in the continent including business, economic and political systems. I am convinced that probing the underlying dynamics that have helped create the current crisis in governance in Africa will be of immense benefit for the future development of the continent. I will now go ahead to make my case.

It is public knowledge that the bar for attaining expertise in African Studies is a low one. I was once told that for scholars based outside Africa, a sufficient condition for being

recognized as an expert on any African country is to visit the said country for at least a couple of days. When such a scholar changes plane at the airport in the concerned country, then it becomes a country of interest. While this may sound like a joke, the reality is not significantly different.

The above low expertise bar is at least in part because of the shrinking importance of Africa in the global economic arena. This low bar has contributed greatly to our relatively poor understanding of the contextual dynamics of Africa. This is troubling especially given the fact that Africa is increasingly becoming the epicenter of the world's problems. It is for instance alarming that Africa, which hosts majority of the countries with food security issues, also has the fastest growing population.

It is estimated that by the year 2100, the African population, which currently stand at 1.2 billion, would have tripled. One nightmare for developed countries is the potential impact of this for global migration. One does not have to be a rocket scientist to realize that in future foreign governments and interests will increasingly want to look up to their specialized centres on Africa, like the ASCL, to provide policy relevant knowledge that explains the social, economic and political dynamics of the continent. Please note that my interest today is not about the role of the scholars based in Africa and African governments. This is because it is their failure to lead and act from the inside that is causing problems in the outside.

Historically, however, detailed knowledge of the Africa's cultural, economic and political dynamics has always been important to foreign economic and political interests. The importance of contextualizing African studies was recognized and documented as far back as the 19th Century.

Arguably the best known advocate of the need to understand Africa in its context at the time was Mary Kingsley (1862-1900). The above view was well documented in her two books- *Travels in West Africa* and *West African Studies*- which were based on her voyages in Africa. Although she was of the opinion that Africans were inferior to Europeans, she vigorously challenged the commonly held belief at the time that Africans were simply primitive savages. Specifically, she argued that the so called fetish culture and religion of Africans were very sophisticated and effectively helped to ensure the smooth functioning of the various sectors of African communities.

Based on the above, it was not surprising that Mary Kingsley was very critical of the missionaries for dislodging the African fetish culture and replacing the African gods with Jehovah. She specifically argued that such sudden and violent overthrow of longstanding institutions and culture will cause anarchy anywhere in the world.

Such chaos have been further complicated by the fact that most Africans till date hold their fetish culture and religion close to heart. This is not surprising given the relatively short history of the advent of Christian missionaries and colonial rule in the context of African history.

Mary Kingsley also argued that it was in the interest of British trade, British rule and the true civilization of Africa that the continent should “have the customs suited to his climate and to his nature; under which his people may freely develop the beast that is in them, physical and mental, even if it be different from ours”.

Mary Kingsley’s insights into Africa were widely appreciated by the foreign interests in the continent at the time. Professor John E Flint has also suggested that she “was the intellectual and philosophic spokeswoman for the British traders in West Africa”.

The need to continue the work of Mary Kingsley led to the formation of the African Society (now the Royal African Society) in 1901. The impact of Mary Kingsley’s philosophy on African culture and development was made explicit in the inaugural speech of the first President of the African Society, the Marquess of Ripon, who was a former Secretary of State for the Colonies thus:

I know there are some people who think that all there is to be done in regard to any country outside the limits of European civilization is to land there and occupy some position on the coast and then proceed to what is called in these days 'open up the country'... and offer to the natives in the exact form in which it exists in Europe the blessings of European civilization... I am not quite sure whether this is the safest or best way of proceeding. I am not quite sure whether the true mode of dealing with these new races with which we are brought into contact is to pour upon them in a raw state large doses of English, or French, or German civilization, and without enquiring, or caring to know anything about their previous opinions or history [and] to think that we are doing them an inestimable benefit by forcing upon them forms of government and of society which are to them, I should imagine, altogether abhorrent.... Oh, civilization what crimes are committed in thy name!".

Unfortunately, the above strong words were rarely matched with action. More tragic however is the fact that postcolonial African governments and scholars based in the continent have also done little to enhance the understanding of Africa in the context of its environment.

As a scholar of Africa, I have in the past questioned the appropriateness of existing institutions and practices in Africa for African development without fully understanding the complex role of culture in these dynamics. Going forward, this will no longer be the case.

The adoption of practices that developed in the context of other civilizations and environment in Africa is widespread. It is always embarrassing, for instance, to see professionals in tropical Africa consistently wear clothing designed for temperate regions.

Western laws have also sometimes been adapted without reference to the specificities of Africa. Some professions have also been more focused on mimicking western practices rather than servicing the real needs of their local environment. One such profession is the accounting profession.

In my previous research works on the accounting profession in West Africa, I have consistently made the point that the accounting profession should be shaped by the needs and dynamics of the local environment. Unfortunately, both the profession and the related accounting laws have developed in ways that are detrimental to small indigenous businesses which are by far in the majority.

The speed with which African countries, under pressure from international agencies, have adopted international accounting standards that are unsuitable for the majority of local businesses also have similar fault lines. The prevalence of accounting rules which are ill adapted to the specificities of the local environment always impose unnecessary costs to local businesses sometimes forcing them to operate outside the law. It is the struggle to survive in a regulatory environment that is alien to the specificities of Africa that make Africans and their business and social space difficult to govern.

Initially, it was widely argued that the problem with Africa was its lack of institutions. That argument is now redundant. This is especially so given the fact that most African countries are now awash with all manner of governance institutions established for diverse sectors of their local economies. These have had little impact on the quality of governance in the continent. As William Shakespeare rightly noted, the hood does not make the monk.

Some have however argued that the poor governance in Africa is entrenched in its culture. According to the Economist, “brutality, despotism and corruption exist everywhere—but African societies, for reasons buried in their cultures, seem especially susceptible to them”.

I am however convinced that poor governance in the continent has more to do with the near total neglect of African cultures in the construction of governance institutions across most sectors in present day Africa. As Mary Kingsley argued, before the ‘discovery’ of Africa, the fetish African traditions were effective in making African people and spaces governable.

For the avoidance of doubt, I am not in any way suggesting that all institutions and cultures adapted from the west are useless for Africa. I am also not saying that all African cultures and practices are still useful in the context of the present time. What is needed is a synthesis of parts of both systems that suit the context of Africa and Africans at the present time.

While some African cultural institutions and practices have long lost their relevance, some have remained effective. Few Africans, for instance, doubt the efficacy of African gods to promptly deliver justice especially when covenants are broken, false information provided or justice perverted either in traditional matters and after such gods have been invoked by the contending parties.

The question is not whether African gods (and traditions) have the powers ascribed to them or not. What is important is that the belief system of the Africans developed in the context of the specificities of the African environment. It is the widespread belief in the efficacy of these traditions that made the African man and space governable before Africa was ‘discovered’ by the west and their culture and religion ridiculed.

Unfortunately, Western style governance institutions that reign supreme in most parts of the continent have little connection with the real beliefs of Africans. Most Africans do not trust such institutions nor believe in their efficacy in ensuring justice. It is therefore the corruption of such alien institutions that is mainly responsible for the poor governance in the political, economic and social arenas of Africa.

In conclusion, going forward, I will champion research that will improve our understanding of the potential role of culture in enhancing governance in Africa. Specifically, I will explore how a better understanding of African culture would help to meaningfully address various research questions and practical problems in the diverse areas of governance of finance and business in Africa.

Undertaking studies that contribute meaningfully to Africa’s development will increase the utility value of African studies for diverse stakeholders in the continent. This will be a

befitting legacy to the Chair I occupy which is named after a sterling scholar who was fascinated by the rot in the governance of Africa.

I thank you all for listening.