

Cultural Conflicts behind 2014 Outbreak in West Africa

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Abstract

The global society has been astonished by the 2014 outbreak of Ebola haemorrhagic fever in the western African countries. While the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global health emergency, local residents were uneasy about the government's quarantine measures and scenes of resident-government conflicts were frequent in the West Africa. Funeral practices, among other traditional practices of culture, are condemned for increasing the spread of Ebola virus.

In view of the cultural conflicts behind the 2014 outbreak, the present essay argues that traditions are not necessarily to be considered as obstacles. They need only to be adjusted. It will be all human beings' loss to transform different cultures into a single universal culture. To create a suitable environment for development accordingly does not have to be singularly based on liberal and neo-liberal theories.

Keywords: Ebola Virus, NGO (non-governmental organizations)
modernization theory, tradition, Africa, public health

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Introduction

The global community has been astonished by the outbreak of Ebola haemorrhagic fever beginning in mid-March of 2014 in the western African countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global health emergency, pointing out that the hazardous nature of the disease was greatly underestimated. Indeed, the high mortality rate and the fast spreading speed of the disease are unprecedented, but what is more shocking is the reactions of the local people in Sub-Saharan countries¹.

Up to the present, Africa has remained the most underdeveloped part of the world. While the factors of the African underdevelopment are yet to be identified, the Ebola outbreak exposes that the deficiency of resources in Sub-Saharan countries, such as drugs, medical equipment and all kinds of infrastructure, largely results in the spread of the disease. On the other hand, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which offer humanitarian aids and a variety of services to those countries, derive substantial legitimacy and ideology from donor countries. The present essay, therefore, argues that the activities, goals, and mindsets of NGOs can only be properly understood in the context of liberal philosophy.

Despite the end of the colonial era, African people still live in a highly unequal society, where resources are scarce and infrastructure is extremely underdeveloped. There are arguments commonly known as modernization theories derived from a western model holding that development is a linear process, a process of social evolution. According to this theory, economic development providing the physiological need to sustain lives actually causes

¹ Sub-Saharan African countries include Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo (Brazzaville), Congo (Democratic Republic), Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Reunion, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Western Sahara, Zambia, Zimbabwe. <http://www.loc.gov/rr/amed/guide/afr-countrylist.html>

traditional social/political structure to split. Traditional culture is considered as an obstacle to a more “civilized” world.

The cultural implications hidden in the splits have yet fully emerged. Composed of many dynamics and variables, including tradition, religion, history, philosophy, language, geography, economics, etc., culture itself creates competitive judgements of values. Thus, to single-handedly attribute the spread of Ebola virus to the culture of African tradition of funeral practices is to shoot at the wrong target.

African continent has long been represented as a place of heathen and uncivilized people, with the stigmas of savage and superstition. Traditional funeral practices are condemned for increasing the possibility of transmission of Ebola virus in the 2014 outbreak. Total abolishment might not be a proper answer to the way we treat tradition in a globalization era, in which people are more closely connected and interlinked. The more human travel, the more Ebola virus can be transmitted. Used as a kind of weapon, the virus can possibly create bioterrorism owing to cultural conflicts between hegemonic “civilized” countries and countries at Islamic regions.

2014 Ebola Haemorrhagic Fever in West Africa

Ebola virus belongs to filovirus family and is highly pathogenic for human and nonhuman primates. The filoviruses, including Marburg virus and four serotypes of Ebola virus, are enveloped, non-segmented, and negative-stranded RNA viruses (Geisbert 344). There have been only few documented cases of the Marburg virus since 1976: four outbreaks from 1976–79; six outbreaks from 1994–96; nine outbreaks from 2000–08, and five, including the current outbreak since 2011 (Bagcchi 375).

Ebola virus may be transmitted to others through blood and body fluid contact. Other body fluids, such as sweat, tears, vomit or urine, only pass on these viruses when blood is present in the fluid, but the risk is relatively low. Researchers have found in rare cases and reported that Ebola virus can travel for short distances through the air under laboratory conditions (Leffel and

Reed 189). Institution of basic isolation procedures is viewed as conventionally sufficient means to curtail outbreaks (Leffel and Reed 187).

Spread is also likely to increase through traditional funeral practices. Friends, family and community members would touch the infectious body in this kind of practice (Bagcchi 375). In previous outbreak happened in Uganda from August 2000 to January 2001, the WHO banned funerals in an effort to stop the spread of Ebola virus. Besides infections in the hospital, attending funerals and intrafamilial contacts are said to be the most likely means of transmission (Scully 14). The Liberian government has accordingly ordered that all corpses infected with Ebola virus should be cremated in spite of strong opposition from the local community members who requested the bodies be buried in the neighborhood ("Riot," CBS News). What the opposition between the resident and the government reveals is that those who handle the interventive measures see the outbreak as a health issue without trying to understand the cultural aspects of the epidemic.

Being a zoonotic disease, Ebola is transmitted to people from animals. As certain outbreaks have been associated with caves or mines infested with bats, bats have been proven to be one of the potential hosts of the filoviruses (Feldmann 849). Consumption of bats' meat or contact with bats' excretions could result in infection of a human, which could in turn trigger multiples of human-to-human transmission. Traditionally, bats are cooked in a peppery soup or smoked. Now bat soup, a natural reservoir for the virus, is banned by the Guinean government to halt the spread of the virus (Bagcchi 375).

On August 16, 2014 when the outbreak was ongoing, a crowd of several hundred local residents gathered, chanting "(There Is) No Ebola in West Point." After the crowd drove away a burial team and their police escort, a group of armed residents looted a clinic and freed the quarantined suspect patients. Claiming that the Ebola epidemic is a hoax, some residents living in the West Point slum took action to resist against the authority's measures by taking away medical equipments, bloodstained sheets and mattresses from the clinic.

Violent conflicts between authorities and residents took place in West Point on August 20, 2014. Residents threw stones at security forces who

fired into the air to disperse the crowd. Terrence McCoy, a reporter of *The Washington Post*, describes the mob as follows: “Its members were angry their community had been used to isolate Ebola patients. They were upset they couldn’t see the patients inside. They were suspicious of the whole operation.” Locals put the blame on foreigners whom they think the disease arrived with (“Armed,” CBS News). Liberia’s President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf blamed the rising case toll on denial, defiance of authorities and cultural burial practices (Larimer).

The first suspected case was reported by Liberia and Sierra Leone. On August 29, the confirmed and suspected cases in the current outbreak are 3052, with 1546 deaths (WHO 1). According to the report issued by WHO, the situation is worsening in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The WHO announced in August that it will take at least six months to control the situation (BBC). US President Barack Obama called the outbreak “a threat to global security” and announced that he would send 3,000 US troops to affected regions (Jozwiak).

The Dilemma Caught between Tradition and Modernization

When the term “modernization” is used, it usually means domestic investment and educational growth that help to create industrialization, which in turn leads to economic growth, societal integration, and more stable institutions for providing social welfare. International trade and investment are viewed as socially beneficial, and are able to achieve economic development, technology transfer, and improvement in social welfare. Thus modernization promotes social well-being in the long run (Bullock and Firebaugh).

At the peak of the cold war of the 1950s and 1960s, modernization theory embodied the highest aspirations of economic growth and democracy. It represents the faith of neo-liberalism from the developed world. Neoliberal theory suggests a free market system stimulating economic development, technology transfer, and improvements in social welfare. However, modernization theory failed to capture the complexities of the development

of African countries. Fifty years after the 1950s, African countries still failed to get rid of impoverishment. Sub-Saharan Africa has remained the world's poorest region and the highest headcount poverty rate (UNSPSC 3).

Back to two hundred years ago, the industrial revolution divided those people living in the cities of England. The division between the bourgeoisie and the urban proletariat became clear. In the 1890s, one-third of the population of London was living below the level of bare subsistence, and large numbers of lives were lost on starvation. Private philanthropy was the preferred solution to social need and private expenditure far outweighed public provision (Manji and O'Coill 568). Even though voluntary philanthropy was also adopted within the African continent in the European imperial period, the problem was hardly solved because the actions did not seek to redress the social circumstances that caused poverty. On the contrary, as Firoze Manji and Carl O'Coill in "The Missionary Position: NGOs and Development in Africa" have claimed, charity actually serves the purpose of enhancing colonial control in Africa (569-71).

NGOs were also driven by ideological goals when several development plans started in the 1950s. The real problem was that the dominant discourse of development was framed in the language of deep paternalism (albeit accompanied by the rhetoric of participatory development). The developing world is described as unordered, not modern, corrupt, not honest, and irrational (Manji and O'Coill 573-74).

What happened to the poor during the British Industrial Revolution is ongoing in Africa, except that there are no strong state-supported institutions in African countries to satisfy the need of the citizens. The modernization theory suggests that to abolish old traditions can change the plight of underdeveloped countries characterized by impoverishment and inequalities. A number of discourses also impute the unwanted reality of poverty to the failure of "westernization." People in Africa are thus deemed as "uncivilized," which roughly equals "underdeveloped," despite the fact that the latter is a

more precise description.² As such, the social hierarchies are reproduced and the unenlightened are destined to be the exclusive objects of the development (Manji and O’Coill 574).

Modernization theory holds that traditional societies, adopting more modern practices, will be on the right track of development. In the case of 2014 Ebola outbreak, traditions, such as caretaking methods in Africa, are blamed for creating detrimental effects on the prevention of the virus. In order to achieve “barrier nursing,” waste disposal and other key procedures have been devised inexpensively and practically in Africa (Feldmann 856). However, people get infected from gorilla, chimpanzee and duiker carcasses as traditional foraging strategies of hunting and scavenging are still widely practiced in Central Africa (Lahma et al. 74).

NGOs’ Characters and Activities in Africa

In January, 1961, the United Nations resolved that the decade of the 1960s would be the Decade of Development. Its international assistance extended to a much broader agenda other than economic growth. Since the 1980s, self-regulating mechanisms in a free market and the realization of civil society have been stressed. NGO carried out programs in critical areas for promoting development in Africa. While playing a prominent part in contributing to an emancipatory agenda in Africa, NGO has been criticized for its paternalistic role in trying to liberalize African people from economic, social and political oppressions (Manji and O’Coill 568). Many donor states have turned to NGO as a solution for the worry of giving too much to developing world and unwillingness to expand UN agency’s capacity (Reimann 64).

Conventional wisdom holds that NGOs foster a constructive awareness and harmony between various dimensions of individual and group identity. Individuals and groups can recognize a mutuality of interest and thus NGOs’

² As Manji and O’Coill point out, “underdeveloped” is interchangeable with “uncivilized” in these discourses (Manji and O’Coill 574).

activities can advance the formation of civil society (Fowler 328). Although NGOs' participations involve international politics, it is clear that NGOs have the character of "socialization" that shapes states to adopt internationally accepted behaviors. At least United Nation and its agency, the World Bank, encourage states to adopt more universal ideas of liberal fiscal regulations. NGOs' "holier-than-thou" attitudes would shadow the reality that they have acted in consolidating a neo-liberal cultural hegemony. To foster civil society is to teach the developing world how to remedy their institutional weakness and strengthen democracy.

Numerous works take liberal individual paradigm as an answer to the contemporary Western problems. Civil society consists of group representatives who engage in conversations with other members in society. Every individual can represent his/her own interest. During the Enlightenment era, the writings of Hobbes and Locke initiated a new intellectual and political tradition in which the individual, as a political actor, can assert his right. They commenced the bud of Western individualism. Since then, individualism and economic freedom are often seen as pre-conditions for liberal democracy which also flourishes the formation of civil society. Makau Mutua also notes:

Western political democracy is in effect an organic element of human rights. "Savage" cultures and people are seen as lying outside the human rights orbit, and by implication, outside the regime of political democracy. It is this distance from human rights that allows cultures to create victims. Political democracy is then viewed as a panacea. (Mutua 205)

Ultimately, NGOs, by their very nature, derive both their sustenance and legitimacy from the donor community, which is largely composed of the educated elite living in urban areas in the Western society (Shivji 39). In "The Silences in the NGO Discourse: The Role and Future of NGOs in Africa," Issa G. Shivji identifies three types of elites who engage in NGOs' activities. The first type of elites refers to those who have been previously

suppressed by the authority. They saw NGOs as a possible terrain of struggle for changes. The second type is moral-driven and altruistic. The third type, being mainstream elites, is actually the former government bureaucrat who seeks a second or third career to increase money and gain reputation (Shivji 39). It is not surprising that the elite have faith in liberal democracy and neo-liberal economic ideas.

In an article published in 1989, Mburu noted that NGOs' plans were only short-lived. NGOs did not have confidence in African governments' efficiency and had little or no relationship with local health systems. Weak administration, low accountability, unreliable controls and corrupt officials all exist in the Third World (Mburu 593-95). The short-lived and small NGOs' projects did not build extensive trust in the local community. Instead, they only made Liberian locals believe that the Ebola virus was brought by foreigners and the cremation of the corpses caused residents' great anxiety.

The Metaphors of Savage, Victims and Saviors

Mutua asserts that the Western academics constructed a three-dimensional compound metaphor, depicting three images of people involved in human rights movements. The three images are savages, victims and saviors. Usually, African states are classified as "savage" because of their negation of humanity. The victim is a person whose dignity has been violated by the "savage." Then the "savior," or redeemer, will protect and safeguard the victims. The United Nations, NGOs and Western governments, and charities are the saviors who can create a better society based on particular values which are ultimately a set of culturally based norms and practices containing liberal thoughts and philosophy (Mutua 201-04).

According to CBS News, riot police were called to central Liberia on Saturday to put down a demonstration by crowds. The Ebola virus spreads with body fluids after touching or handling corpses. Crowds blocked a traffic carrying highway to protest the government's delay in collecting infected bodies ("Riot," CBS News). This incident characterizes the image of "savage"

and “victim.” The Liberian government acted as a crude figure who suppresses the victim suffering from the dread of being infected.

In Mutua’s study, the role of the savage, which the African national government is forced to play, also implies ignorance besides barbarism. Even African researchers and writers are influenced by this three dimensional metaphor. They put ordinary African people in the “savage” context and they align with “instructors/saviors” from developed countries. In a paper written by two African writers and two Japanese researchers, the writers altogether impute the transmission to “ignorance in the communities” and use a condemnatory language to describe the African communities’ refusal of foreign medical professionals. They write:

Ignorance in the communities affected also plays a large role in the further transmission of the disease, and in the recent West African outbreak, there have been reports of communities in denial, with some people believing the disease was caused by the devil, or was brought in by politicians and even foreign medical personnel, resulting in infected individuals and their families not wanting to receive medical attention. (Changula et al. 9)

The image of the “savage” is vivid in their description. African people are unwise, ignorant, and unreasonable to the extent that they refuse to accept help from foreign medical personnel. However, this image does not perfectly fit in the three-dimensional metaphor, because the victim must be constructed as innocent and pitiable (Mutua 230). If their nationals become roguish or unreceptive to liberal reconstructionists’ framing language, then the government will most likely be denied help from the “saviors.”

There are 16 officially recognized ethnic groups and more than thirty spoken languages in Liberia. Liberia, whose official language is English, is the only African country founded by United States colonization. Thus, it is only natural that upon such an occasion Liberia’s President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has been weighed down with his coordination with the WHO and concerns from international media. Local government is often greatly

influenced by the actions of international actors. On the one hand, Liberia desperately needs the support from rich countries and international organizations. On the other hand, Liberia's government, acting as the "savage," needs to demonstrate its recognition of Western modernization and took violent measures to quickly control the spread. As such, condemning cultural burial practices helps President Sirleaf build up the image of a "civilized" ideal he pursues.

Traditions and Anxiety in the Outbreaks

A paper published in 2008 written by two members from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and one African member working in the Ministry of Health and Population of People's Republic of Congo already noted the problem happening in the previous outbreaks in Africa. Local residents viewed foreigners as intruders when an outbreak control team composed largely of foreigners and government representatives entered the village from the distant capital. Uproars rose with creation of committees and control programs (Bausch et al. 155). As the traditional funeral practice is so important in the lives of the African residents, it has been a serious concern for the African community since the previous outbreak because the dead were likely to be buried in unfamiliar settings (Bausch et al. 156).

Noting the importance of kinship in relation to the funeral practices, Cobbah points out that

Africans emphasize groupness, sameness, and commonality. Rather than the survival of the fittest and control over nature, the African worldview is tempered by the general guiding principle of the survival of the entire community and a sense of cooperation, interdependence, and collective responsibility. (320)

The cohesion of the African family is derived in a large measure from the existence of explicit rules of appropriate behavior. To Africans, the whole group comprises both the living and the dead. An individual lives within a

continuum of the dead, the living, and the yet unborn (Cobbah 321-23). In this context, there is no doubt that how to perform a traditional funeral ceremony has a deep cultural meaning to Africans. Kinship and African communalism also explain why Liberian residents in Monrovia were upset because they couldn't see the quarantined patients inside the clinic.

WHO, the governments and the health professionals have been concerned that the Ebola virus will transmit from the dead body to the living via contact. A culturally acceptable solution is not to demand that all victims' bodies be cremated but how the funeral should be held. If proper segmentation can protect people from being infected, then wearing disposable medical gloves or other protective clothes can be alternatives to local residents in the funeral practice. However, this solution might not be practicable for the reason that the scarcity of resources restricts the capacity for practicing alternatives. The quarantine center in Monrovia was formally a school. Daniel G. Bausch also reports that in Africa some quarantine wards are set up in hospitals that already have other services available, while others are located in local health clinics or in remote areas offering little modern medical care (Bausch et al. 155). Help from WHO is also limited. WHO has announced that it needs \$71 million US dollars to fight the outbreak while the current budget has already been cut from \$469 million for 2012-13 to \$228 million for 2014-15 (Youde). How the money from donor countries should be spent is also a challenge for WHO, the local governments and NGOs.

An African country like Liberia has a wide variety of ethnic groups living in the country with a certain extent of frictions. There are also vestiges of mistrust for foreigners from the colonial era. It would not be surprising that dissatisfaction to the isolation ward is high or even violent. It is also understandable that many of the local residents deem the disease arriving with foreigners. A person who is going to be quarantined is often considered being treated by mask-wearing foreigners and sent to a place waiting for death. Limited contact with family members also adds to the uneasiness.

New Challenge to Fight the Disease

A culture-as-obstacle view would fail local residents' eagerness to change the situation. A new awareness of paternalism and a deeper understanding of African perspectives will help health professionals to fight the endemic challenges. Indeed, local residents' ignorance is a hard fact that is not to be ignored when one tries to deal with their resentment. The point to explain all the measures needed to stop the disease to local residents is to use a language that is understood in African culture and tradition.

Ignorance occurs in the situation when returning to their community, the survivors are often ostracized (Bausch et al. 156). And the community in turn is confronted with a mysterious and fearful scourge of the disease whose cause is imputed to sorcery or poisoning (Bausch et al. 154). However, as Cobbah points out, on top of the ignorance is that the African worldview places kinship in a position that is superior to the individual and that the main African spirit is not grounded in self-interest but in social learning and collective survival (Cobbah 324). NGO, foreign/local health professionals, and government agencies can make good use of the concept of "collective survival" to emphasize the necessity of the entire medical/quarantine measures. Honors given to those who survive from the disease are also important because they take the risk for their group and community. Employing the concept of "collective survival" can justify the medical measures while not offending local cultural sensibilities. Extra care is essential to reassure that the patient and the community understand the goal.

Reasonable means should also be taken to prevent further transmission. Bat soup is banned by the Guinean government to halt the spread of the virus. However, local governments should take a further look into the way these bats are cooked. Eating smoked bat meat is possibly an indirect means of transmission. However, it needs more research to find out the risk of transmission when boiled bat meat is eaten. If fruit bats are common and traditional protein sources to sustain life, then the authority should consider not to make the ban last permanently.

Conclusion

There are two competing idealized discourses of development. The first maintains that economic growth can be separated from social, cultural, environmental and developmental views in society. The second maintains that development is an integrated and intertwined process involving economic, social, cultural and environmental magnitudes (Bradlow 195). The two discourses lead to different views of development. Western Liberal philosophy do not secure that its followers can create a developed society free from impoverishment and infectious diseases. If economic growth can be separated from social, cultural, environmental and developmental values, public health and sanitary standards can also be independent from neo-liberalism thinking.

The present essay supports cultural pluralism. It will be all human beings' loss to transform every culture into a single universal culture. To create a suitable environment for development accordingly does not have to be singularly based on liberal and neo-liberal theories. Researchers have observed that inter-group interaction did not produce structural assimilation while producing a high degree of cultural assimilation in the United States (Melson and Wolpe 1118). Simply accommodating to a single universal culture cannot successively erase the social hierarchies and inequalities that have already existed. Furthermore, cultural change does not guarantee a linear economic evolution or advanced industrialization.

Traditions from the old world are not always evil and they should not be eradicated. They only need to be adapted when social and economic infrastructures change with the time.³ As Samuel P. Huntington proposes

³ For example, in some African countries, if a man pays "bride-price" to a woman's parents, the parents can forcefully marry off their daughter. One report finds that men who are already infected with AIDS/HIV pay bride-price to "buy" a wife. Actually "bride-price" still exists in Asia. However, in some countries, woman will not be forced to get married for wealth even after the man paid the money. In Taiwan, bride-price now is only viewed as a form of cash gift. A person who pays can bring a civil suit to the court and ask the other party to return the "bride-price" under certain circumstances. This shows that being changed into other forms, traditions can still be preserved in a modern society.

that in the future, cultures will most likely have more influence than sovereign states, cultural traits tend to endure the force of modernization (24). Modernization does not have answers to all problems and it even creates new problems.

While the uncivilized/modern and underdeveloped/developed division results in various kinds of dynamics, universal human rights do not impose one cultural standard. This is also true to the global health governance issues. Both African and non-African countries should concern about these cultural backgrounds while fighting against infectious diseases in Africa. Ultimately, the question remains to be the ways these measures are placed with a reasonable explanation under African cultural context.

See

<http://africanvibes.com/wordpressnew/2009/09/26/discussion-should-bride-price-be-abolished-and-made-unconstitutional/>

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