

***THE CONCEPT OF PROGRESS IN DIFFERENT CULTURES –
Culture and Progress in Namibia: Contradiction or Concurrence?***

by

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Scope

The main title beckons a number of questions, for instance: *What is “progress”? What is culture? And eventually, How does culture relate to “progress”?* The terms “progress” and “cultures” denote abstract notions – if not concepts – and require a measure of interpretation with respect to each culture’s context and progress.

The theme links to such a large number of conceptual challenges, like history, anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, economics, and many more, that it is difficult to limit the scope of discussion. There are thousands of cultures and sub-cultures, and progress means many things to many people and at different times. What is progress in one culture may be perceived as totally irrelevant or taboo in others. What is considered as great progress at one time in history may be perceived or ridiculed as insignificant in another timeframe.

It is arguable that Namibian cultures are well studied, documented and understood, for much of a Namibian culture is vested in oral history. For the purpose of this paper, I confine my contribution to the challenges and progress of cultural development in Namibia. This is, however, not a discussion of Namibia cultures in isolation and a global contextualization is considered.

Society and Culture

Culture may be defined as a sum total of man’s manifested activities in the process of being and becoming part of a society. The pattern of values, self-expression, belief and world outlook determine the identity of a community. Culture defines the individual or the collective - feelings, relationships, organizations, status, and time. So strong is culture that it determines a society’s certain genetic imprints, political course and economic performance.

Human beings have always lived within a social context (Jarvis, 1992). People are born into a society at a specific time in history, and they acquire something of its culture that influences their thinking, behaviour and way of life, and indeed their economic standing. People live in societies and they experience the patterns and routines of these societies, and it is only through reproducing such patterns that societies can achieve stability and maintain continuity – obviously with the necessary variations. Most individuals have accepted this need to conform, acting presumptively within the social situation or merely assimilating behaviour. A number of processes operate simultaneously in the creation of social reality. People create and ‘habitualize’ their actions, and these actions then assume the appearance of objective reality. Other people tend to accept the objectivity of the culture into which they are socialized. But that objectified culture is not value-free, nor does it operate in a neutral manner. It always tends to favour those who already exercise power within it, whether they are merely the existing members of a group or whether they are the power elite of society. This is why **Karl Marx** speaks of a false class consciousness, and why other theorists, too, regard consciousness as something that is false and from which people need to be emancipated.

Maslow’s theory of basic motivational needs include affiliation needs, the social needs of belonging: the individual wants to belong, to be accepted in the community, to give and receive friendship and affection and to find a place in the group. Growing up as a member of a specific community with the same culture, beliefs and values, has the advantage that a person has the opportunity to fulfil the basic human need of belonging to a group. It also has the advantage of developing an identity and a certain amount of recognition and appreciation from others belonging to the same cultural community. However, while the importance of growing up in a specific cultural community should be recognised, the dangers should also be recognised. People prefer ‘habitualized’ action, the “known”, and stability or even apparent stasis is comfortable, and change can be frightening. But growth and change are the result of learning or adaptation to a constantly changing world.

The Concept of Progress in Different Cultures should therefore recognize the fact that knowledge is constructed in the mind of the individual and cultural beliefs and values play a major role in this regard, but progress implies that people or society reflect back on their society, transcend their social environment, and demonstrate their individuality to become active participants in a ‘modern’ world.

In recent and current times in the history of the “modern” world, we have witnessed the construction of treaties, associations and unions for political and economic reasons. These unions are forging new

cultural dimensions into blocks, generally with the dominant cultures subsuming or 'consuming' the small ones – wittingly or unwittingly. At the same time we have witnessed racial, ethnic, cultural and religious conflicts all over the world. In many parts of the world, and especially in Africa with colonization, the reconstruction of national boundaries has in many cases split a cultural, ethnic or religious entity, which now poses a serious challenge to national identity and stability.

Each of us interprets situations in our own unique ways. **Sternberg** (1987) explains how the concept of intelligence may differ in different cultures, for example, in the North America culture, taxonomic sorting is considered an intelligent strategy. However, when research was done with a Nigerian ethnic group, it showed that they did not sort taxonomically, but rather sorted functionally. They were smart enough to sort taxonomically, but their conception of the intelligent way to sort was not the same as the test makers' perception. He argues: "People may not agree as to what is intelligent. But one might say that cross-cultural examples are exotic and strange and tell us little about intelligence within our own culture." He is of the opinion that a theory of intelligence should specify how intelligence relates to the internal world of the individual, to the external world of the individual and to experience. He firmly believes that intelligence can be taught and basis his assumption on the fact that: "We teach intelligence to children from the day they are born."

Paul (1987) also explains that our *primary nature* is spontaneous, egocentric, and strongly prone to irrational belief formation and that people need no special training to believe what those around them believe, what their parents and friends believe, what is taught to them by religious and school authorities, what is often repeated by the media and what is commonly believed in the nation in which they are raised. People need no training to think that those who disagree with them are wrong and most probably prejudiced. People need no training to assume that their own most fundamental beliefs are self-evidently true or easily justified by evidence. I contend this is a matter of instinct and aptitude to survival.

On the other hand, according to Paul, people need extensive and systematic practice to develop their *secondary nature*, their implicit capacity to function as rational persons, to recognise the tendencies they have to form irrational beliefs, that it is perfectly possible to have an overwhelming inner sense of correctness of one's views and still be wrong. I contend this is point and result of "civilization".

The idea of "progress"

There is not a *a priori* concept of "progress". "Progress" is always a social construction, the meaning of which has to be ascertained with reference to the life-world in which it is being used. This does, however, not prevent hegemonic societies to elevate their idea of "progress" to the level of universal truth claims. A case in point is globalization, where the powerful nations and dominant economics define and dictate growth and development to less powerful and small nations.

"Progress" (*descriptive*): A first approach as to the meaning of "progress" may simply *compare "progress" to change and alteration*. In this sense all societies change, i.e. all cultures change. It should, however, not be regarded as a very adequate conception of "progress", since it would reduce the concept of "progress" to the notion of change, absent any direction or objective.

"Progress" (*normative*): Usually the concept of "progress" denotes advance towards completion, maturity or perfection. Under a social perspective it may be understood as the way of orientation towards a societal state, which satisfies the aspirations to the *good life*: This idea denotes a life free from the vagaries of social disorder, unrest, and war, but also a life free from sufferance like famine, natural catastrophes, etc. Then, against the backdrop of a normative concept, societies do progress if it can be observed that their change direction is in line with their defined development objectives of "progress". I would understand such a development as an endogenous/intrinsic conception of "progress", because the socio-cultural ramifications, i.e. the identity of the reference society, would remain unaffected by the attainment of development objectives.

This may be exemplified with reference to the *Ovahimba* culture. The Ovahimbas are pastoral people who do not imagine a meaningful form of existence without cattle or livestock. This form of life, which has not been tainted significantly by intrusions from Western life-worlds, comes with a number of collaterals, i.e. rituals, for instance around ancestor worship, which cannot be detached from the Himba-conception of the *good life*: Developmental objectives (supra) need to be explicated within the

remits of this ontologically defined reality, which then acquires the status of truth claims, if only for the members of the reference society.

“Progress” (*normative: ethno-centric/occidental*): The normative concept of “progress”, as explicated above, remains politically neutral. This is because the various endogenous/intrinsic conceptions of “progress” do not compete with each other for a universal position. After the WW II, however, and through the activities of the United Nations, in particular the UN-declarations on Human Rights (1949), the idea of “progress” in the conception of the Western World became entangled with the observation of a certain idea of man. Point of departure is the 18th century fiction of classical theory that society consists of a set of individuals, each of whom acts to achieve goals that are independently arrived at, and that the functioning of social systems consists of the combinations of the actions of *independent* individuals.

The notion of "culture"

The notion of culture is scintillating, and most difficult to pinpoint. Therefore allow me, before I venture into assertions about the relation between extant Namibian cultures and “progress”, to set out the meaning of culture for the purpose of this discourse. This should enable us to measure our taken-for-granted, and rather idiosyncratic *a priori* concepts of culture against a scientific explication.

In “*Toward a General Theory of Action*” **Talcott Parsons** and **Edward Shill** refer to culture as follows: “A shared symbolic system is a system of ‘ways of orienting’ plus those ‘external symbols which control these ways of orienting... Such a system, with its mutuality of normative orientation, is logically the most elementary form of culture.”

For **Max Weber** culture was a basic feature of any action, and thus, of any social process. This is, because for him action and social processes carry a specific meaning, which, once reconstructed, enables us alone to explain any such action or social process. Weber answered the question as to the source of culture with the definition of a culturally defined situation. A culturally defined situation shall be: “a finite section of the senseless infinity of the world, which, against the backdrop of a human perspective, has been given meaning and significance”¹

According to the sociological perspective, this (mental) section is being constantly reproduced by individuals, who by means of their actions reinforce – time and again – the cultural meaning, i.e. those “external symbols” which give action an orientation. The cultural meaning thereby, acquires the quality of separate social objects, constructs or systems, existing seemingly independent from the actors. In Weber’s sociology such social objects have been described as “protestant ethics”, or “capitalist spirit”; but also the construct of “progress” is well in the picture.

Culture and meaning – as a cultural system – anchor first and foremost in the actors themselves. At the same time they are, however, part and parcel of those collectives and cultural objectivations, of which the actors form part, and which are sustained by their actions. This is nothing strange or enigmatic: The physical source of culture consists of the memories of human actors – it could not be any different! But the shared mental representations, the models and symbolizations, or the cultural systems for another word, build the ligament between external and internal, i.e., the objective and subjective components of a situation, which lend itself to be acted upon in particular ways, and “thereby” bringing about social consequences. The “carrier” of culture is then not only the individuals, but also the collectives, which they form.

Due to this double nature of culture, cultural models must always be publicly represented through cultural manifestations. Public representations take usually place through rituals and ceremonies, which are then also public confirmations of societal ideals: The enactment of rituals and ceremonies can only be carried out by individuals, but their performance occurs in collective and uniform ways on the basis of collectively shared mental models, often expressing a collective context.

¹ “*ein vom Standpunkt des Menschen aus mit Sinn und Bedeutung bedachter endlicher Ausschnitt aus der sinnlosen Unendlichkeit des Weltgeschehens*”

Eventually, the fundament of culture is knowledge. On the one hand there is evaluative knowledge, i.e. assessments and motives for action, and cognitive knowledge on the other hand, which refers to expectations and “theoretical” knowledge about “practical” outcomes of actions. This aspect of culture is important, because it allows me to reflect on the theme with respect to Namibia.

Namibia and the concept of ‘progress’ in its ‘cultures’

A hundred years of colonial domination of Namibia characterized by calculated extermination, racial segregation, ethnic fragmentation, economic exploitation and cultural subjugation, has left a social order which needs revolutionary transformation.

The case of the *Herero* nation since 1984 is a classic example, where **Gewald** describes the manner in which the Herero of Namibia struggled to maintain control over their own freedom in the face of advancing German colonial control. The German-Herero war led to the destruction of Herero society in all of its pre-war facets. Said Deputy Governor Tecklenburg to the colonial office in 1904: “*Every Tribal organization will cease. Werfs deep in the bush which try to avoid political supervision will not be tolerated. They would provide focal points for memories of tribal life and days when the Africans owned the land.*”

This subjugation continued under South Africa's occupation, leading to further isolation in every part of Namibia. Thus, the foremost action in the development of a culture that will interact positively with the other key sectors of economic and social development is the designing of a national cultural action that re-establishes and consolidates ethnic and national cultural identity suppressed by apartheid.

If we look at our geographical region, for example, we can confidently say that in the meantime, the *idea* of progress as an extrinsic concept has taken root in the normative systems of most of the sub-Saharan states. Democratic constitutions sport the societal ambitions and aspirations to social justice “à la occidental”, which connotes certainly the *idea* of the good life as explicated herein.

In Namibia the concept of the *good life* is for instance reflected in Article 1 (l) of the Namibian Constitution where social justice is defined as a paramount objective of society. Besides the entrenched human rights positions of Chapter 3 of the Constitution embody the idea of social justice, since their acknowledgement signifies an individual entitlement to equal participation in the advancement of society, and eventually to its own welfare as set out in Article 95 of the Constitution with the title, “Promotion of Welfare of the People”. We can confidently say that Namibia as a nation state has undoubtedly subscribed to the concept of “progress”, as defined by the Supreme law.

This is evidenced by the creation of several national structures and adoption of several national documents. The Namibian government has addressed culture and the arts in a variety of ways, basing its action on Article 19 of the Constitution. A government ministry responsible for culture was established to provide education and preserve, promote, develop and enhance culture and the art for the benefit of all. This ministry is also responsible to facilitate access to, and promote the use of all sources of information for the purposes of education, research and recreation. The government has facilitated the preservation and development of Namibia's cultural and arts heritage by participating in world fora and international organizations such as UNESCO, and by engaging other national governments in bilateral cultural and arts programmes.

Closer to home, the following are examples of progress made in the preservation and development of Namibian cultures and the arts. Directorate of Arts and Culture, Directorate of Library and Archives Services, Division of National Heritage and Culture Programmes, National Arts Gallery, National Arts Theatre, National Monuments Council, Namibia Book Development Council. Several national documents testify to progress and development, and the efforts of the government to ensure understanding and support of culture and the arts: “*Towards Education for All: A Development Brief for Education, Culture and Training* (1991); and “*Report of the Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training*” (1999), and the *National Policy on Science and Technology* (1999), and *Vision 2030*. The preservation and use of the indigenous languages through the formal media - radio, literature and national celebrations - individual or collective, speak to progress advancing culture in a new world.

Notwithstanding, the idea of “progress” now being normatively represented in all states, it is doubtful whether this concept has permeated to the same extent the various cultures, which can be

distinguished, first and foremost along ethnical boundaries of the diverse groups constituting society, for instance in Namibia.

The modern hegemonic conception of “progress” is hinged upon particular socio-philosophical assumptions, which only developed theoretically as from the epoch of enlightenment. At the time of arrival of the colonial powers in sub-Saharan Africa, these assumptions had not yet gained much normative power. Relations between the sovereign and his subjects, and between the subjects *inter se* were shaped by status, and it is only a relatively recent development that the relation between the state and citizens on the one hand, and the citizens among themselves on the other hand, has become the object of negotiations towards contractual relations, epitomized by the notions of democracy and freedom of contract. In the sociology of the law, this development has indeed been discussed under the *‘transition from status law to contract law’*.

The emergent phenomenon of contract law on the way to modernity goes hand in hand with the invention of *individual* legal capacity. In Europe, for example, the capacity to be the bearer of rights and duties vested for a long time still (until the end of the 18th century) in the community of a house (homestead). There were gradual differences, but full legal capacity was by fact only afforded to persons who had become economically independent from the communal/cooperative enterprise. Around the time of the Great French Revolution (1789) an individual was bound to the status acquired by birth, and there was little social permeability. The turnaround in Europe came with the French Code Civil (1803), which read in Art. 8 cc: “*Tout Français jouira des droits civils*”; and in Art. 1134 cc: “*Les conventions légalement formées tiennent lieu de loi à ceux qui le ont faites*” (Engl.: The conventions, which have been legally formed, become the law for those who have made them”). Under the ancient regime, i.e. the feudal order, social engineering that refers to the manipulation of the social order, was largely beyond imagination. The potential for change was small because all actors, whether kings, barons, or peasants acquired social roles, and with that neither the destiny of the person nor of the society was a matter of choice.

This picture changed with the advent of enlightenment, epitomized by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (Koenigsberg), and the success of the natural sciences went parallel to the liberation of man from the chains of a social status acquired by birth. This (eventually) resulted in an unprecedented improvement of the livelihoods of people. It resulted also in the modern (occidental) perception of the individual actor, endowed with free will and a measure of autonomy. The temporal coincidence of economic success and individualism, led also to the belief that the improvement of livelihoods is dependent on this modern (occidental) idea of man. It has been mentioned before: In the aftermath of WW II, the occident, facilitated through the ever-increasing economic domination of the world economy, has elevated this ethnocentric world view to a truth claim, which has since then become the benchmark for “progress”.

For most citizens of occidental societies, “progress” (*normative: ethno-centric/occidental*) is an endogenous/intrinsic conception. This is so, because having shed off most of the symbols of cultural identity other than the above mentioned tokens of modernity (Rule of Law, Democracy, Human Rights, Individualism), the exigencies of “*progress à l’occident*” holds nothing alien identity threatening for them. This must be different for cultures, which receive their identity through symbols other than the tokens of modernity.

Tradition, Culture and Progress

Perhaps “progress” has had the most negative effect on the culture of the African and Namibian people. Generations of the past lived a coherent life, with culture being argued to be progressive. Progress in other areas of life has had a devastating effect on the culture of purity, sincerity and oneness. Crossbreeding of people may enrich culture if the association is symbiotic rather than dictatorial. But what one sees is a master-slave cultural gyration that has led to the pollution of the weak and poor at the expense of the rich and powerful.

What influence has the contract law had on Namibia? The customs, or “communal law” or “traditional law” is now heavily eclipsed by the “legal law” – the law of the state. Thus community or cultural activities and certain customs, such as traditional marriage, are only recognized by the state according to the Roman Dutch law. Is this progress? This is a token of modernity, which does not “progress” a culture but rather conforms a culture to the “will of the state.” The consequence is a

steady or rapid dilution of a culture, causing wanted but mostly unwanted changes – for the demise of such a culture.

If we look at extant nominal cultures (“Khoi San”, “Nama”, “Himba”, “Owambo”, etc.) in Namibia it is a view through a kaleidoscope. But we may locate the cultural facets on a continuum, which connects extreme individualism at the one end and extreme communalism at the other end. It may be hypothesized that the further a nominal culture is located in the individualistic part of the continuum, the more advanced it will be in terms of “*progress à l’occident*”. It has to be borne in mind, that what may be said with regard to a nominal culture, is a reference to the measurable variables of the groups, but has only a probabilistic bearing on individuals originating from a hearth of this culture.

The dichotomy in cultures continues to exist in Namibia. It is now the belief of many that an extreme form of individualism is practiced by the White people. The Germans, English and Afrikaners belong to an economically advantaged group in Namibia. They live in small nuclear family setups, driven by material gain. Their existence defines nature. On the other hand, an extreme form of communalism is practiced by the San people. The San people belong to the economically most disadvantaged groups in Namibia. They live simply from nature as a community where one hunts for the community. Their existence is defined by nature. Individualistically, and in the political sense, these cultures exist in ‘harmony’. But the influence of the external and dominant environment on the indigenous cultures is changing the latter, not necessarily to their benefit. This is merely change not progress in that culture.

In the last century, indigenous Namibian cultures underwent significant transformation. During colonization, the indigenous people (in the form of families etc.) were driven from their foundations and scattered or dispersed into Bantustans or into neighbouring countries. With the breaking of traditional barriers through free movement and inter-cultural co-existence, the lost linkage in a family or culture many times never was reconnected, and the roots were lost forever. With independence, the exposure of Namibia to the world has resulted in many things Namibian appealing to foreigners. The easiness with which foreigners “invade” indigenous cultures and claim intellectual property is not progress in that culture.

With new technologies driving the world, the preservation of indigenous cultures is in great danger. The television, the computer and international travel and migration are hugely influencing the traditional way of life. On the one hand, the older generations would like to cling to tradition: life has a meaning; self-respect is important; crime was minimal and people could move freely; industrial progress has led to urbanisation that has changed the face of that peaceful harmony of yester years. On the other hand, the younger generations are more interested in the “new things” which are “more interesting” and will “take them places”. They speak common languages more and more, and in the process lose their culture through dilution or loss of language.

Progress versus Development

Let me return to the origin of this paper. What therefore is progress? Progress has been defined as “improvement or growth or development”. Others have perceived it as the act of moving a goal forward. Scientists would like to define progress as “a series of improvements in human life marked by inventions and discoveries”. In any case, the definition is as varied as human endeavour, but all have a common denominator “a change for better”. But is it always for better? Progress is seen a necessary “evil” without which life will be monotonous, archaic and frustrating. However, with progression or changes come the other side of the coin - the side effects of change. While some will consider progress made in one area of activity, say in medicine or technology as a progress, others may see it rather as a change for “worse”.

The stage, the men and the action constitute the premises of change that constitute progress (or retrogression, as the viewpoint may be). Incremental change in stage of life, in man or in activities may be perceived as positive-progressive or negative-retrogressive. A change is progressive if the *balance of impact* on other areas is a net positive change. On the overall, progress is made if the overall benefit of the change affects more people, animals, oceans, rocks etc in the positive way than in the negative.

Mental aptitude or IQ (intelligence quotient) is not defined by culture. Any society can produce a genius, an inventor or entrepreneur. How that individual develops and excels depends on the environment and opportunities available to him or her. From infancy to stardom, education is the

agent of “change for better” or progress or development. But has it not led to advancement of high technology fraud and maladjustment and to a society symbiotic disorder?

The old generation were self-motivated and worked from “cock crow till chicken go to roast”, timing was by shadow and the cock, but they exhibited dignity of labour and hard work. The industrialisation has brewed a new opportunist group of “lazy drones” who will not only wait for manna to fall from the sky, but that the manna should fall directly into their mouths - no need to make effort. We have truly progressed in laziness. As we have witnessed, the television has resulted in such laziness that addicts - children and adults - are prone to obesity. This has happened in the “developed” world, and it is happening in the “developing” countries, especially amongst affluent people. Dominant or “popular” culture is so pervasive that globalization is fostering predispositions of the poor to the rich.

“Progress” in economic activities has its wins and woes, stretching from benevolent satellite communication to globalisation which was once conceived as the ultimate solution to exploitation. However, recent events in WTO negotiations have shown the ugly side of globalisation, especially as it affects the “poor nations”. Military progress has introduced a race against humanity and nature. The more weapons we invent the more we must live with “balance of terror”.

So as we reflect on “progress”, we should ask the following questions: Has progress in urbanisation and globalization been fair to culture? Has positive changes in science been accompanied by commensurable changes in culture? Has advancement in science and technology been all user-friendly and environmentally helpful? Is the world now safer with the sword of nuclear holocaust hanging on the head of humanity and waiting for the press of the button by a “superman president” or suicide bomber?

For the greater part of international debates, there is still discrimination amongst states, confusing growth with development. Those who drive the world economy have drawn imaginary lines on the cultural map, referring to “developed” and “developing” states. Western, “democratic” countries are normally referred to as “*developed*”, whereas non-Western countries, whether democratic or not, are referred to as “*developing*”. In this context, there is lack of differentiation of the concepts of *economic growth versus development*. *Growth* is defined as a quantitative indicator in the sense of gross social product and of investments, whereas *development*, refers to economic, social and human progress in which man remains the motive as well as the objective. (The **Constantin von Barloewen Expose**). The lack of clear reference to the economy or culture in these definitions distorts the status of a nation’s cultural richness and development. Therefore, the cultures of “developing” states or societies are looked upon as inferior in comparison to those of “developed” or superior states or societies. This has given globalization such imperative dimensions, so much so that small or developing nations are at the mercy of the big nations whose goods, inventions services – indigenous to those nations or stolen from developing countries, have and are permeating the developing countries to the level of threatening the survival of the indigenous cultures. But who is paying attention?

Conclusion

Progress in Different Cultures is determined in how far a society or country, or their parts have progressed in terms of understanding the powers that shaped their culture, in becoming more perceptive to their world, in having better experiences of themselves and others and having a better understanding of contexts within which their choices and decisions are made. This understanding is its measure of its ability to cope with drastic and rapid changes with respect to the rest of the world.

The antithesis of clinging to our beliefs in the face of contradictory evidence and without having a clear idea of our reasons for holding them, is critical thinking. Progress does not mean denying our culture, but understanding who we are and where we come from. For this process, critical thinking, which includes rational thinking, reflective thinking, analysis and evaluation as well as open-mindedness, is required. Because, only through a strong identity of the “self” shall we acquire the necessary self-confidence to open ourselves to others viewpoints, believes and values and not feel threatened or fear a loss of identity when having to co-exist with people from other cultures.

Change is good if it has a *net balance impact* on the generality of the people, animals, oceans, air and other actors in the ecosystem. Namibia has seen many faces of change or “progress”. As more Namibians become exposed to other cultures and the national system of laws and practices, the more

change we shall see in our own cultures. The old traditions and cultures and their meanings are diminishing or dying away, and we must do enough to guide progress and preserve the good in our cultures.

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