

Cultures of Innovation of the African poor

On the articulation of multiple modernities in African societies and
African diasporas in Latin America

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Abstract: The globalized Western culture of innovation often blocks viable indigenous innovation cultures. In African societies and in African Diasporas in Latin America, cultures of innovation are largely represented by informal, not formal institutions. This is one of the reasons why they have been largely underestimated. Crucial for their proper understanding is a threefold structural differentiation: first, between innovation cultures embodied in formal and informal institutions, second, between cultures of innovation within the realm of the informal sector, and third, between innovation cultures of different transnational social spaces. An exploratory comparative analysis of the articulation of these different structures of innovation cultures reveals their complementary, mutually reinforcing, or conflicting relation. The repercussions of competing, even antagonistic agencies of local innovative strategic groups, confronted with globalized modernization approaches of the West, are analysed on the base of comparative studies of innovative cultures of Africans in Benin and the African Diaspora of Haiti and Brazil. This shows significant contributions of indigenous cultures to the empowerment and well-being of the African poor in Africa and Latin America.

Keywords - economic development; cultural change; innovation; social structure; Benin; Haiti, Brazil

JEL-Codes: O31; Z1; E26; Z12; Z13; O57

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1. Cultures of Innovation and Development

The advancement of scholarly knowledge about cultural change and development is considerable, but the 'white spots' in cognitive map grow even faster. The comprehensive approach to development which will be adopted in the following with reference to Armatya Sen is not restricted to economic growth. It includes advances in general well-being, empowerment and freedoms as well as the enrichment of human life through culture as essentials of development (Sen 2004:39). Outdated hypotheses about mono-cultural readings of a nation's past or about cultural determinism, which were considered inspiring truth, turned out to be heroic oversimplifications of little prognostic value (Sen 2004:38-44). Nevertheless, they remain cherished by many experts and scholars alike, not least, because they bolster the self-assurance and provide ready-made concepts in distinguishing between social peers and strangers. Stimulated by Max Weber's stimulating thesis on the Protestant ethic as the spirit of European capitalism, as well as by Joseph A. Schumpeter's vision of the economics of innovation (Swedberg 2002; Heertje 2006), generations of social scientists searched for similar inspiring innovation cultures which could promote economic growth in developing countries. Although a tendency still prevails to underrate the role of culture in development, despite the 'cultural turn' in social science, there is a consensus that culture matters². The question is rather: *how* do the multitude of facets of different cultures impact on development (Sen 2004)?³

No culture is inherently good or bad, a simple truth which, however, has to be emphasized in view of fashionable theses on the 'clash of cultures' and 'axes of evil'. Yet, under certain conditions its propensity to change and influence perceptions of power and values can lead to considerable improvements in general well being: the European Age of Enlightenment or the globalized advocacy for the recognition of Human Rights are two well-known examples. The fundamental ambivalence of the impact of culture renders its analysis tricky and particularly stimulating at the same time.

A holistic understanding of the linkage between culture and development as summarized above is the underlying rationale of the concept of Cultures of Innovation, developed in more detail by the UNESCO (2004) and scholars as D'Orville (2004) and

² There exist several – sometimes contradicting – concepts of the interface between culture and development in social science (Swedberg 2002). For a profound critique of the essentialist view of culture see Meagher 2006:591-92. - In the following, I hold with the general approach of Rao/Walton (2004), who regard culture as those interactive 'aspects of life that facilitate the comprehension of relationships between individuals, between groups, between ideas and between perspectives.' It is crucial to recognize culture as neither homogeneous nor static. Otherwise, cultural prejudice and determinism easily lend themselves to cultural prejudice, alienation, political tyranny and doubtful theories (Sen 2004: 44-50).

³ For an overview on the vast body of literature on development and cultural change cf. Rao/Walton 2004; Sen 2004; Masolo 2003; Elwert 1996; DiMaggio 1994; Herbig 1994.

others. Cultures of Innovation are informal institutions⁴, which are often based on shared values or value systems. They fulfil important orientation, motivation, coordination, and legitimization roles in the actual performance of innovation processes (cf. Heidenreich 2001; Shane 1993; Hofstede 2003)⁵. Moreover, they are relatively stable modes of cognition, behaviour and social organisation, directed towards 'development'. Schumpeter's distinction between "innovation" and "invention" is crucial to our understanding of Cultures of Innovation as it focuses on the dissemination and implementation of inventions. These processes are not just driven by the strong will of a charismatic individual entrepreneur but mainly stimulated by the economic, political and cultural institutional framework of a society (cf. Schumpeter 1934 [1912]; Swedberg 2002). Social networks and the societal dynamics of self-reflection and collective aspirations are the very base of Cultures of Innovation (Borras 2003:38). The concept provides a methodological framework for the delimitation and analysis of elements and strategies of innovative dimensions of culture and cultural innovative agency.

The following comparative case studies are intended as an exploratory study, i.e. to identify key problems and to formulate relevant hypothesis within the framework of a contribution to theory-building on the concept of Cultures of Innovation. They provide 'thick descriptions' in the Geertzian anthropological tradition (Cyrenne 2006: 318-19). Although they grant no robust tests of these hypotheses, they nevertheless indicate that an undifferentiated analysis of innovation inducing cultures is doomed to fail. The emergence of Cultures of Innovation and its impact on the social setting of the African poor is a process which depends to a large extent on the articulation with competing cultures. Only a differentiated analysis, taking due care of the articulation of different strands of cultural or social innovations and their linkage to social stratification, transnational social spaces and globalization as outlined below, makes for their explicatory and prognostic power.

Today as in the past, Cultures of Innovation have existed not only in industrialised countries but in nearly every region of the world, including African societies. Examples of Cultures of Innovation are to be found in different realms: religion is obviously one of them, as Max Weber's famous thesis about the Protestant ethic as the spirit of capitalism suggested. A more recent example is provided by a case study of new Christian and Islamic movements as the modernizing forces behind Nigerian informal entrepreneurs (Meagher 2009). Ethnic networks of migrant entrepreneurs or the cultural foundations of trading diasporas as drivers of modernization are other examples, as

⁴ On the concept of informal institutions in politics and society, developed along similar lines as in economics, and on its high relevance for African societies, Kössler 2007; Meagher 2007, Chabal/Daloz 2006. For an overview on informal institutions in politics and economics Jütting et al 2007.

⁵ Complementary concepts of 'regional innovation systems' have been developed in economics since the early 1990s (Braczyk 1998:2-27; Thomas 2000). However, as they concentrate on the formal sector and institutions, they can difficult be applied to the analysis of the African poor in the informal sector, which is the target group of the present article as explained below.

demonstrated in studies of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in West Africa (Kohnert 2010) or Igbo informal enterprise and national cohesion from below (Meagher 2009a).

However, there is no *Passepartout* of cultural change. The quest for universal growth inducing cultural essentials in developing countries, as propagated for example by mushrooming Pentecostals all over Africa, failed as much as the transfer of globalized Western concepts of structural adjustment, pushed by international donors during the 1980s⁶.

Pre-conceived ideas, which might have worked within the European cultural setting, did not act up in the face of the socio-cultural heritage of African societies. Neither did the opposite, the idealization of Négritude or other 'authentic' traditional African cultures. For our purpose, it is important to take into account the diversity of mutually competitive systems within any given culture. Not everything which is considered 'modern', is development oriented at the same time, as was demonstrated by the critique of unilinear theories of modernisation of the 1960s. The political economy of occult belief systems showed, for example, the profound but ambiguous impact of different facets of the modernity of African belief in magic and witchcraft on day to day politics (Geschiere 1997; Comaroff/Comaroff 2000). Depending on its local environment and linkages to transnational social spaces these occult belief systems assumed an amazing spectrum of social and political roles e.g. in post-Apartheid South Africa, extending from an emancipatory impetus to delaying development agency (Kohnert 2003).

Even seemingly static cultural factors, such as custom, tradition, religion, or ethnicity, have been re-invented or adapted to changing requirements of societies. In many cases, they are not backward oriented, but to the contrary, represent multiple modernities of developing areas (Geschiere et al 2007; Ferguson 2006; Deutsch et al 2003). Therefore, it would be misleading to put the blame for lacking development in Africa on the cultural heritage, as supposedly incorporated in 'traditional African institutions', which are frequently considered in a simplistic and deterministic manner as customary barrier to democratisation or economic growth⁷. The underlying dualistic concept of culture (modern vs. traditional) ignores the reality of a universe of different co-existing, and often competing cultures within a society.

Cultures of Innovation depend on space, time and context specific frameworks. They are a significant part of multiple modernities, influenced by globalization and transnational networks and social spaces (Featherstone 2007; Pries 2001; Robertson 1995; Sassen 2001). This has a crucial impact on the innovative agency. Instead of continuing reliance on a supposedly universal model of the 'rational actor', research

⁶ On the quest for the spirit of global capitalism in the 1990s, promoted by new protestant ethics in Africa and elsewhere, Comaroff/Comaroff 2000; Meyer 1998; on the failures of structural adjustment policies Stiglitz 2002.

⁷ For a sharp critique of culturalistic and essentialist positions of outstanding examples of doubtful oversimplifications of the role of African culture as an impediment to modern economic development, Sen 2004:44-50 and Meagher 2006.

should focus on the unexplored potential of indigenous⁸ Cultures of Innovation, which often follow a specific culturally bound rationality. Cultural innovations are closely linked to the evolution of mankind itself, and cognition is culturally bound since early childhood (Tomasello et al 2005; Ramachandran 1998). Actors are neither determined by ratio nor by social class alone, but strongly influenced by strong emotions, like love, shame or hatred, the longing for fame and honour which is all closely related to their cultural setting. Therefore, rational behaviour and agency are at least as much influenced by deep-seated emotions as by empirical knowledge. In contrast to the Cartesian postulate on the fundamental separation of body and soul (*cogito, ergo sum*), human decision making, by its very biological structure, is never determined by rational reasoning alone but guided by emotions grown on, and deeply embedded in, the respective culture of the actor (Damasio, 1994:325-28). Thus, the rationalities of agents of change in Africa and elsewhere are culture-specific, as they are grown on, and embedded in their specific cultures. Usually, social actors act rational in the context of existing informal institutions. The latter may be considered inadequate by Western development experts, nevertheless African local agency is not necessarily irrational, as was aptly demonstrated among others by Thomas Bierschenk in his study on rational herdsmen (Bierschenk/Forster 1991) or his analyses of the territorial logic ('logique du terroire', an expression borrowed from Bako-Arifari) of the decentralization process in Benin and elsewhere (Bierschenk et al 1998: 49).

2. African Cultures of Innovation driven by informal institutions

Multiple Cultures of Innovation vs. globalized Western concept of modernization

For African and Afro-American Cultures of Innovation too, the breeding ground is the informal, not the formal sector (UNESCO 2004). Hitherto, academic interest and research focused on innovations in the formal sector. Analyses concentrated on the state, national political or economic elites, considered to be the most important driving forces of change. Their innovative agency or management qualities were mostly linked with supposedly universal values of democratization and economic growth, and with globally propagated concepts, like good governance, accountability, structural adjustment and free markets. Unfortunately, the neglect of informal Cultures of Innovation prompted the disregard of crucial potentials of innovation, particularly in the poorest African countries and in the African Diaspora of the Americas⁹. Redirecting

⁸ As '*indigenous*' or 'local' I consider those cultural innovations, which are rooted in the proper culture of the people employing these innovations, in the sense Brigg/Sharp (2004), Diawara (2003) and Masolo (2003) and used the term.

⁹ The term 'diaspora' indicates at the same time a condition, a process and a discourse (Manning 2003; Zeleza 2005: 41-42), whereby 'Africa' represents not only a geographic unit with its own history, but at the same time an imaginary space: Crucial element of the African Diaspora is the shaping of its culture by the experience of repression and exploitation, and the resistance against it (Byfield 2000:4-5). This

research towards the cultural framework of informal institutions is indispensable because of the following reasons.

First, because of the utmost importance of informal institutions for LDCs in general and for the African poor in particular (Meagher 2007; Kössler 2007; Chabal/Daloz 2006). To guarantee their survival, the poor, who can no longer rely merely on their local cultural heritage (e.g. traditional norms of reciprocity and solidarity, rapidly disintegrating under the pressure of globalisation), have to look for innovative solutions within their social setting, meaning the informal sector. The quest for these solutions is strongly influenced by Cultures of Innovation.

However, and this is the second reason which will be explained in detail below, significant structural differences exist not only between Cultures of Innovations of the formal and the informal sector but also within the informal sector, depending on its social structure. Both differences have serious repercussions with regard to the developmental trajectory.

Thirdly, the fault lines between the formal and the informal become increasingly blurred in various ways by globalization. This has been demonstrated with respect to different standards for culturally induced innovations between the so-called 'useful' and 'useless' development regions¹⁰ by Ferguson (2006:380), who took 'governance' and investment criteria concerning strategic investments of oil-multinationals as examples. The enclaves of the 'useful' Africa are not any longer delimited either by national frontiers, or by the divide between the formal and informal, but by boundaries of transnational economic and social spaces. The chains of transnational enclaves of 'useful Africa', e.g. of oil fields exploited by oil multinationals in West Africa (often backed by powerful hidden national interest), function apparently according to rules and ethics beyond the official discourse on governance or on codes of conduct of international development cooperation. The poor in these regions are regularly excluded from the 'useful Africa', as shown by the example of the Niger Delta. They have to obey special laws, which result in their exclusion and marginalization within the context of globalized capitalism. One way to address these adverse effects of globalization on pro-poor growth is the quest of the stakeholders (i.e. the poor and their allies) for indigenous Cultures of Innovation.

Finally, the impact of globalization on culture is accompanied by new forms of (re-)construction of social and cultural identities, including a new dynamic delimitation of ethnicity and their specific cultures respectively. The political economy of strategies of exclusion or of political instrumentalization of ethnicity and religion deals with instructive examples (Berking 2003; Kohnert 2003). In addition, globalization is geared toward the integration of new elements of a universal culture, which are more often than not adapted to the local conditions in order to maintain the identity of the group in question (Berking 2003). Globalization is not just a question of growing uniformity, but at the same time of diversification, the creation of new cross-cultural social spaces of

structural formation is a central denominator of both the marginalized and poor people of Africa and of the African Diaspora. On the state of discussion of concepts of the African Diaspora, see Gomez 2006.

¹⁰ Terms apparently coined with allusion to the French Gaullist interpretation of *l'Afrique utile* vs. *l'Afrique inutile*.

meaning and livelihoods. The concept of 'glocalization' (Robertson 1995) is especially helpful for the understanding of globalization with reference to social agency and cultural differentiation (Giulianotti/Robertson 2007). It is typical for the configuration of innovative groups in the informal sector of Africa and the African Diaspora in the Americas as will be shown below in more detail.

Differences between formal and informal Cultures of Innovation

In spite of the strong articulation of modes of production of formal and informal institutions, there are decisive differences between the Cultures of Innovation of both sectors. These differences concern both their social and economic structure and the political evaluation of their impact. Generations of innovative Hausa, Fulbe, Igbo and Yoruba entrepreneurs in West Africa, for example, contributed effectively to the economic integration of the region through parallel cross-border trade between Nigeria and its neighbours. They thus established a sustainable culture of transnational trade networks (Kohnert 2010; Igué/Soule 1992; Meillassoux 1971). Although pursuing similar goals as the regional organization ECOWAS, they were accused by the latter of undermining national economies through their illegal activities. Consequently, they were harassed by the state (Meagher 1997).

With regard to structural differences, it is to note that informal Cultures of Innovation are based mainly on local oral traditions and empirical indigenous knowledge, whereas their formal equivalents rely heavily on written sources, positivist science and school knowledge on a global level. As a rule, the former are adapted to their respective natural, economic, social and political environment with a relatively strong propensity for flexible response to external shocks. Even though their relevance is mostly restricted to the micro or meso level, they bear significant potential for innovations in the poorer sections of the population even on a national level and beyond (Meagher 2009; 2009a; Diawara 2003).

Indigenous Cultures of Innovation are especially relevant for developing countries like Benin or Haiti, but also for the marginalized populations of African descent in emerging industrialized countries like Brazil, notably because of their exceptionally limited access to resources vis à vis resource-rich countries or upper classes. It is open to debate, to what extent there are still niches for the development of indigenous Cultures of Innovation of the poor under conditions of glocalization, i.e. of marginalized people who are out of necessity involved in both local and transnational social networks of friendship, kinship, migration or commerce in order to guarantee their livelihood. (Briggs/Sharp 2004; Masolo 2003; Diawara 2003). The outcome largely depends on the articulation with other Cultures of Innovation and with figuration of transnational social spaces, as will be demonstrated below.

Towards a comprehensive approach to the analysis of Cultures of Innovation

Recognizing informal Cultures of Innovation as distinct from formal ones, as explained above does not suffice. It is open to question, whether an approach based on the assumption of unstructured 'informal cultures' is methodologically sound. Besides the inter-sectoral divergences of formal and informal Cultures of Innovations, there are also strong indicators of intra-sectoral differences. This is not to deny the existence of common intersections of informal Cultures of Innovation. However, more recent studies demonstrate that it is crucial, to take into account not just the impact of the heterogeneity of informal institutions in general. Its stratification according to different socio-economic strata, as recognized by the World Bank (2006:187) and ILO (2002) is a pre-condition for viable analyses of the socio-economic setting of the African poor. This, however, has repercussions for the methodology of Cultures of Innovation as an analytical tool as well. In a setting where informality prevails, like in West Africa and in social spaces reigned by poverty in general, structured varieties of informal Cultures of Innovation are more likely to be found than the unstructured 'fit for all' type. The former may be differentiated according to space (geographic as well as social space) and/or cultural setting, notably according to class, generation, ethnicity, religion and gender. And we should always bear in mind that innovative cultures of the rich are not necessarily useful for the poor too.

Therefore, I propose in the following a more comprehensive approach to the analysis of Cultures of Innovation which takes into account not just inter-sectoral, but also possible intra-sectoral potentials and cleavages. More precisely, I shall focus on one of its most crucial varieties, the impact of differentiation according to socio-economic stratification, and its representation and articulation in different regional and transnational contexts.

The articulation of multiple Cultures of Innovation and its impact on the livelihood of the poor in developing countries, its linkages, mutual reinforcement or obstruction, is especially interesting with regard to the comparison of cultures in Africa and of the African Diaspora, notably that in the Caribbean and Latin America. What matters in this respect is not just the common socio-cultural heritage, but even more its actual embeddedness in common transnational social spaces, as indicated by the ongoing discussion of concepts of the African Diaspora (Manning 2003). This vision, namely, to rewrite global modern history 'from below', taking African migration over the centuries as an integral, yet, still unfinished process, could contribute to overcoming the prevailing Eurocentric interpretation of 'modernity' in general and of the linkage between culture and development in particular (Patterson/Kelley 2000; Manning 2003; Zeleza 2005).

African Cultures of Innovation in Benin, Haiti and Brazil are especially suited for an in-depth study of these articulations, not just because of their common socio-cultural heritage, but because the continuing cultural exchange, which is not restricted to bilateral contacts but concerns the exchange of Cultures of Innovation between Africa

and the global African Diaspora as well. In times of globalization, the figuration of embeddedness of conflicting groups and cultures is influenced to a growing degree by transnational social spaces. Again, their impact is ambiguous, it can be conflict reducing or enhancing, innovative and development oriented or retarding, as the following case studies will show. The latter, to emphasize it ones more, are meant as an exploratory study for the generation of hypotheses only. They are mainly based on a review of the literature, evaluated against the background of substantial field experience of the author within the realm of socio-cultural aspects of development, including the political economy of occult belief systems in Africa.

3. Case Studies: *vodun*-based Cultures of Innovation and empowerment in Benin, Haiti and Brazil in times of globalization

A significant number of innovation supporting cultures were inspired by religion. Well-known examples are the impact of protestant ethics on the growth of European capitalisms mentioned before, or the popular movement for democratization and human rights, driven by the liberation theology in Latin America since the 1970s (Smith 1991; Hayes 1996). In the following, I shall analyze the less known example of popular movements for empowerment and democratization in Benin, Haiti and Brazil. They share as a common denominator the strong influence of Cultures of Innovation inspired by an enlightened *vodun* (including its Afro-American equivalent), combined with related different denominations of Christian orientation, on democratic transition and empowerment of the poor.

I. Benin: *Democratic renewal promoted by a 'return of the religious'*

Benin, formerly known as Dahomey, has a reputation as both, the *quartier Latin* of francophone Africa and the cradle of *vodun*. The Benin democratic renewal (*renouveau démocratique*) which started in 1989, thereby putting an end to nearly two decades of autocratic rule, was welcomed as a model for democratization in sub-Saharan Africa. Not least in light of its spread effects, Benin provides an illustrative example of the impact of innovative cultures on democratization, rooted in, and inseparably linked to transnational social spaces, as explained below. Contrary to a widespread belief, the second wind of change in Benin was less determined by the globalized effects of the fall of the Berlin Wall but was prepared and triggered off by popular indigenous opposition movements. As shown below, they were inspired by development-oriented ethics of Christian institutions, which closely interacted with agents of change encouraged by a modern *vodun*. While creating different, often conflicting Cultures of Innovation in the 1980s, they nevertheless upheld a common aim, paving the way for the fall of the autocratic Kérékou regime (Banégas 1995; 1995a):

(i) Ambiguous role of African religion and of grass-roots political movements: The democratization process in Benin had been initiated and promoted to a great extent by the 'return of the religious' (Mayrargue 2002), as represented by rival popular movements. An universalistic *vodun*¹¹, as well as Pentecostals, both inspired by modern anti-witchcraft cults, and the local Catholic church, were united in their opposition to the 'socialist project' of the Kérékou-area (1972-89) which increasingly rang hollow in the ears of most opponents (Tall 1995; 1995a). Whereas the Marxist policy of the Kérékou-regime in the 1970s and early 1980s regarded African religions and their representatives as a 'relict of feudalism', being highly suspicious of the role of the Catholic church as well; both played an important role as mediator and broker of the *renouveau démocratique*. This resulted in a change of roles in its leading ranks, as reflected in the new role of Mgr. De Souza, archbishop of Cotonou, who became president of the National Conference and of the interim government. But the failure of the 'socialist project' resulted also in a new legitimisation of an enlightened *vodun*, of charismatic Christian churches (like the *Chrétiens célestes*), and of new anti-witchcraft cults (Tall 2003:77, 87). However, occult belief systems, notably the *vodun* and the belief in magic and witchcraft, played an ambiguous role in Benin's development process (Kohnert 1996:1351; Tall 1995). Depending on local historical pre-conditions and the actual social setting in different provinces, not all 'traditional authorities' (like village heads and *vodun* priests) were necessarily 'progressive'. Some of them acted as intermediaries and facilitators of indigenous innovative capacity that promoted empowerment, others operated as stumbling blocks of any change of the status quo (Elwert-Kretschmer 1995; Tall 2003). Thus, on the eve of the electoral campaign for the presidential elections in 1991, the contender of M. Kérékou, and subsequent winner of the elections, Nicéphore Soglo, was poisoned and nearly died. The crime was attributed to political adversaries of Soglo, who were accused of employing witchcraft with the help of *vodun* witch doctors¹².

(ii) Conflicting cultures of opposition movements imposed the democratic renewal. Indigenous opposition movements in Benin at that time can be broadly classified as belonging in two categories: popular movements of resistance 'from below', strongly influenced African religions, traditional leaders, and the 'politics of the belly', and elitist opposition movements, more attached to Western culture, including Christianity. The former comprised organizations from different denominations, notably trade unions and peasant groups which opposed the payment of the *per capita* tax, obstructed or circumvented public regional integrated development programs (CARDERs), and promoted a general climate of passive resistance and civic disobedience (

¹¹ As represented by the syncretistic movement for the inculturation of Christianity and the reinterpretation of the *vodun* (*Mewihwendo*, or *Sillon Noir*, Adoukonou 1989); or by the *Atingali* and *Glo- and Kpe-vodun*, imported from Ghana already in the 1930s, Tall 1995; 1995a; Mayrargue 2002; Aguessy 1993.

¹² According to own interview of the author with Nicéphore Soglo on November 22, 2000, during the international conference 'Africa works!?' in Munich; see similarly interview with Soglo, in: *L'Intelligent – Jeune Afrique*, No. 2094, 27.02.2001, p. 33.

Kohnert/Preuss 1992). The outlawed communist party (Parti communiste du Dahomey, PCD, founded in 1977), which established its headquarters at grass-root level in two rural districts (Djakotomé, in Mono province, and Boukoubé in Atakora), strove to unite these socio-cultural forces in a common opposition front since 1988 and played an outstanding role in the organization of mass protest in December 1989 (Banégas 1995:29).

The opposition groups of the elite, spearheaded by the student and teachers unions, were embedded in the informal network of the *quartier Latin* of francophone Africa. They too had a decisive impact on the democratization process in general, and on the organization of the sovereign National Conference (1990) in Cotonou in particular. The latter initiated a peaceful alternation of political power structures in Benin at the national level (Adamon 1995; Heilbrunn 1995; Nwajiaku 1994). This *renouveau démocratique*, based on popular modes of resistance but organised by an educated elite, embracing different ethnic, regional, professional and religious groups of the civil society, was admired and imitated as a shining example by other African countries. Even marginalized groups, like peasant- and local development associations received a chance to participate in it (Banégas 1995a). However, the grass-roots opposition movements, the 'primitive rebels' in Eric Hobsbawm's terms, who had paved the way to this first successful civil coup d'état in Africa, were later disregarded and deprived of the fruits of their resistance.

II. Haiti: Democratic transition, driven by subversive Cultures of Innovation, inspired by vodun

The specific blend of religious Cultures of Innovation (*vodun* and Catholicism) that stimulated democratic transition in Benin had an impact in Haiti as well, although in a different manner. Nevertheless, the stakeholders, as well as outside observers, went to great length to stress the common African roots of their venture with lasting repercussions. Haiti is the only country worldwide, where African slaves, guided by transnational networks of resistance (e.g. the *Black Jacobins*, Featherstone 2007), as well as by a transformed *vodun* as liberation theology, defeated their colonial masters, establishing their own free state already in the 19th century. Since the 1980s, the democratic transition was again driven by subversive Cultures of Innovation, inspired by *vodun* and Christian liberation theology.

(i) The Haitian vodun acted as modern driving force of democratic transition, along with trans-national networks of liberation theology, against the firm resistance of the religious and political establishment: Since the slave rebellion of 1791-94 and the subsequent liberation of Haiti, the Haitian variety of *vodun* (*vaudou* or *vodou*, in French spelling), dominated by Dahomean and Yoruba elements, imported by the slave trade, was the religion of the people, and crucial in forming the Haitian ethos and nationality. About 90 per cent of the population adhere to it. In informal politics, *vodun* had always had a great impact, both on the local and the national level. Various political

leaders instrumentalized the cult with ambiguous effects, ranging from the emancipation from slavery to the brutal oppression by the tonton macouts, who were assisted by corrupted *vodun* priests under the Duvalier dynasty, which ended in political turmoil in 1986 (Rotberg 1997:28-9; Laguerre 1990; Michel/Bellegarde-Smith 2006). However, the overwhelming part of the elite, politicians and development experts alike, publicly denounced the *vodun* as superstition, relict of the past and impediment to development (Rotberg 1976: 356).

In the beginning, Catholicism, recognised by the Concordat of 1860 as the only official religion in Haiti, tried in vain to eliminate *vodun*, even though it maintained a fragile peace with its rival on the operational level by incorporating elements of its liturgy in its own service since the 1950s (Corbett 1988). The hierarchy of the Catholic Church upheld its critical attitude *vis à vis* popular liberation movements like the *Ti Legliz* movement up to the present days.

To counteract dictatorship and gross human rights violation by the Duvalier regime and its successors, a grass-roots movement for the empowerment of the poor and marginalized, called *Ti Legliz* (Creole, literally meaning 'small church'), came into being in the 1970s. Religion, both *vodun* and the Haitian variety of Christian theology of liberation played a decisive role in this movement¹³. They progressively transformed these ecclesial base organizations into 'grass-root communities' with a threefold vocation, religious, social and political. The movement gained full momentum with the religious-political campaigns of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a charismatic Catholic priest of an impoverished parish in Port-au-Prince, in the aftermath of the deposition of 'Baby Doc' (Duvalier jun.). Subsequently, the movement expanded fast, through the formation of thousands of *Ti Legliz* and similar *Tet Ansanm* peasant groups, notably in the countryside and among the youth and slum dwellers in the cities. They were considered as cradle of the '*l'Organisation populaire Famni Lavalas*', forerunner of the renowned party '*Lavalas*' or '*Famni Lavalas*' (Creole, 'family avalanche' in English, referring to the biblical flood); a title borrowed from a popular peasant song (Kuelker 1998; Corbett et al 1999; Taylor 1992; Rotberg 1976) designed to bring Aristide to power. As a consequence, the movement was deemed a serious menace by the power elite that acted accordingly. Politically motivated persecution, intimidation, torture, imprisonment and murder were at the order of the day. Even the US-government and the CIA, which sided with the Haitian political establishment, realized the revolutionary potential of *vodun* as being greater than that of the Haitian Communist Party at that time (cf. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, in: Corbett et al 1991), an assessment which proved to be quite

¹³ One indicator for the 'marriage' between Haitian liberation theology (*teyoloji liberasyon*) and *vodun*, was the close linkage with the famous 'Boukman's Prayer' as a base of the *Ti Legliz* philosophy. The prayer, inspired by the wisdom of *vodun*, had been already once before the call to action by Boukman Dutty, a *houngan* or *vodou* priest, that launched the Haitian Revolution, on August 14, 1791, at the Bwa Kayiman *vodun* ceremony. Some two hundred years later it contributed again to the formation of specific Haitian liberation theology (website: <www.margueritelaurent.com/campaigns/campaignone/presswork/freepreisoners.html#prayer>, accessed: 16.06.06).

accurate. Notwithstanding, the death of thousands of activist, and at least nine unsuccessful murder attempts of the movement's leader, four years later in December 1990, J.B. Aristide became the first freely and democratically elected president in the country's history. The population celebrated the event as a 'second independence', with reference to the liberation from slavery some 200 years ago. Yet the traditional power elite, the military and economic establishment, reacted with a roll-back strategy. Only eight months later, Aristide, the legitimately elected leader, was ousted the first time by a military coup on September 30, 1991.

Vodun was officially recognized as state religion besides Catholicism only by the second Aristide government (2000-04) in a desperate act of populist legislation in April 2003. This constituted a significant step in guaranteeing religious freedom and in breaking down Haitians social class structure. Thus, during political transition, antagonistic Cultures of Innovation within the realm of Haitian's informal institutions, each reinterpreting *vodun* in their own group's interest, portraying themselves as an agent of change and 'modernizer', were interlocked in a deadly confrontation (Averill 1997).

(ii) Popular music, stimulated by a modern interpretation of vodun, was crucial in installing a subversive freedom culture, promoting democratic transition: There is an exceptionally strong relationship between popular Haitian music, power and politics. This was brought to the fore by the stimulating work of Gage Averill (1997). His ethnographically informed social history of the linkage between power politics, culture and pop music establishes four points: First, 'Haitian politics and more generally the struggle for power have insinuated themselves into every arena of musical expression. Popular music, as a discursive terrain, is a site at which power is enacted, acknowledged, accommodated, signified, contested, and resisted.' (Averill, 1997: xi-xv). Second, just like in the realm of the political economy of religion, the instrumentalization of music in politics is highly ambiguous. It can and has been used both as tool to justify and camouflage despotic rule, like under the pretext of '*noirisme*' by the Duvalier's regime, as well as a means of the struggle for empowerment of the oppressed, as illustrated below in the case of the *angaje* (politically engaged) music of pop-groups like Boukman Eksperyans. Third, since the 1950s, the message, songs and rhythms of *vodun* have increasingly been incorporated into popular Haitian music, albeit not in an unchanged 'traditional', but an adapted modern way, corresponding to the actual social and political conditions. Finally, the Haitian diaspora, forced into emigration by economic need or by political harassment, played a crucial part in creating a specific Haitian freedom culture (*Kilti libète*, in Creole) with their engaging poetry, drama and music, linking 'traditional' peasant culture with progressive politics. The 'unfinished migration' of the slave trade, combined with continuing fluctuating migration of Haitians of all classes, due to different, often opposed economic or political reasons, contributed to a dynamic liberating culture with an engaged poetry,

drama and music, which had a profound impact on the essentially trans-national composition of Haitian identity, including its intimate relationship to the West African *vodun* cosmology (Averill 1997: 161-207; Kuelker 1998).

III. Brazil: *The Brazilian African Diaspora - Empowerment of the poor, guided by Afro-Brazilian religion: the candomblé and quilombo movement*

Brazil is the 5th most populous country of the world, and at the same time one of the states where inequality is most pronounced (Gini coefficient: 0.61). People of African descent constitute about half of total population. They suffer under a long history of marginalization since the early days of the slave trade. The Afro-Brazilian community (about 80m) is renowned as the largest Nationality group of African descent next to that of Nigeria, and it constitutes the major group within the global African Diaspora.

(i) Racial marginalization in the aftermath of the slave trade was encountered by Afro-Brazilians with recourse to their common African culture: Poverty has a racial face in Brazil, which was often denied by government sources and the power elite alike. Both favoured the ideology of a Brazilian 'racial democracy' (Hanchard 1998 for a critique). Black-headed households account for 64 per cent of all poor people in Brazil. There were 35.5m black against 19.6m white people living in poverty in Brazil in 2001, and the racial divide is still growing. The mean income in black-headed households is 42 per cent of that in white-headed households (Ferreira et al 2003:73). The generation-long resistance of black people against oppression, inequality and marginalization was met with severe repression. The covert recourse to their common African cultural heritage was their decisive strategy to circumvent the most brutal forms of repression, and at the same time to guarantee effectiveness and sustainability of resistance. This strategy shows interesting parallels to the Benin and Haitian example which should be followed up by future research in more detail.

(ii) The quilombo movement, candomblé and the Movimento Negro, backed by trans-national social spaces, were crucial arenas of Black empowerment.

Since the early days of slavery up till now, the most crucial social space that allowed for black resistance in Brazil was within the realm of religion, notably African religion, which the state and the church consequently were keen to suppress (Myatt 1995:64-7). There are different denominations of *vodun* related forms of belief in Brazil, the most prominent of which is *candomblé*¹⁴. Closely linked to these religious social spaces of

¹⁴ According to official estimates there exist only three million believers (1,5% of total population) who officially declared *candomblé* as their religion. However, the official census is chronically biased and underestimated. Because of centuries of official persecution of Afro-Brazilian religion, many adherents

hidden resistance was the *quilombo*-movement¹⁵. It originated from settlements of runaway slaves. Currently, it comprises black Afro-Brazilian communities formed on the basis of solidarity and their common belief. Afro-Brazilian religion became closely linked to the *négritude* philosophy, imported by African intellectuals who had studied in France and England, and to the *Movimento Negro*, emerging simultaneously in Brazil in the 1930s (Myatt 1995: 71, 109). In 2003 there were 2,228 *quilombos* with about 30m hectares of land and some two million inhabitants all over the country (Universidade de Brasília (UnB) Agência 2005).

The resurgent *Movimento Negro*, basically a product of the black elite and progressive circles of the theology of liberation, became increasingly politicised in the 1980s, entering several of Brazil's political parties (Hanchard 1998: 123-9; Myatt 1995:108, 152-5). With its vigorous campaigns for the recognition of Afro-Brazilians' civic rights, it contributed significantly to the acknowledgement of the *quilombos* in Brazil's constitution in 1988, the year of the 100th commemoration of the slave liberation. Again the majority of members of the *Movimento Negro* belonged to the intellectual black elite. Therefore, it is crucial to underline the bearing of social class and belonging on the capacity to mobilize black empowerment in Brazil (Myatt 1995: 155; Hanchard 1998:77-98). Even the encouragement of racial consciousness of the African poor, which was certainly effectively done by the *Movimento Negro*, does not necessarily lead to corresponding political actions of the stakeholders. In this respect, the socio-structural divide is reflected in corresponding class consciousness as well as in political resistance (Hanchard 1998:160).

(iii) Black empowerment and the quilombo movement were obstructed by regional and local power elites in the cause of a global culture of progress. Despite the support of empowerment of the black poor by the black elite in Brazil, assisted by a vast trans-national social network of cooperating local, national and international agencies, like Human Rights Organizations, the Church, Brazilian universities, or even the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, they were confronted with continuing resentment. The Brazilian state, notably on the regional level, and even more local power elites with hidden vested interest, obstructed the quilombo movement in the name of progress. A UN report on racial discrimination in Brazil revealed several examples of gross human and civic rights violations concerning the quilombolas (members of quilombos). It summarises: 'Their lives are in the hands of the landowners and farmers, and they feel as if they are still slaves, without any rights. Despite the 2003 Presidential decree recognizing their rights as citizens (notably their land-tenure rights, D.K.), the acts of violence against them have increased' (UN 2006.14-5). Apparently many municipalities or landowners preferred more profitable 'modern' investments, like

do not want to expose their belief officially (Prandi 2003). According to Afro-Brazilian organisations, about 70 Million Brazilians, i.e. some 90 per cent of the black population, participate in the service of *candomblé* or other Afro-Brazilian religions.

¹⁵ In the language of the West African Yoruba, '*quilombo*' means 'housing'. Many slaves rebelled and constituted *quilombo* communities as territories of housing, resistance and social organization.

tourism, urban development schemes or commercial agriculture, and they obstruct access of the quilombolas to land and basic amenities, often misusing funds meant for the development of the quilombos for other purposes.

(iv) Obstruction of candomblé by neo Pentecostals, assisted by market-oriented trans-national religious networks. A clash of local and global cultures of innovation within a nation: Since the late 1970s, US-dominated neo-Pentecostals promoted a 'Holy war' against Afro-Brazilian religions and attacked candomblé as an incarnation of the devil, following the doubtful example of the Roman Catholic Church in colonial times. Thereby, they aggressively promoted a clash of cultures within the Brazilian nation. They were assisted by institutional racism of local or regional governments (UN-2006; Prandi 2003:6; Jeffrey 1997). The most notorious neo-Pentecostal was the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (Universal Church of the Reign of God, IURD), founded in 1978, which claimed 3.5m members in Brazil and maintained missions in 35 other countries (Jeffrey 1997). The church propagated a 'theology of prosperity' in which individual money-making was considered as pleasantly to God. It was widely criticized for corruption; however, the enormous financial means of the globalized Pentecostals facilitate their campaigns. One example is their control over the media, acquired through heavy internationally backed investment and supported by the neo-liberal concepts of an 'open markets ideology', as propagated by the international donor community (Jeffrey 1997). In addition, the Pentecostals threatened priests of the candomblé temples (*terreiros*), assaulted their worshippers and financed aggressive campaigns of conversion aimed at adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions. This led among others to the discrimination of school children and adults who dared to confess their religion. State agencies did not intervene against this religious intolerance and open racism, on the contrary, the police often assisted in the aggression (UN 2006: Nr. 46).

4. Potential of indigenous Cultures of Innovation in times of globalization

Enlarging the range of choice by providing stimuli for innovative actors and by improving the competitiveness of cultures and ideas can be a crucial means of promoting development. However, we have to give due regard to the serious problem of asymmetric power relations in a globalised world, where the power elite, interested in maintaining the status quo, often counteracts a development orientated competition of cultures (Sen 2004). The hubris of the unilinear modernist ideology, still propagated by many Western and African experts alike. It is not only tainted by the dangers of euro-centrism and top-down approaches but also diverts attention from exploring the potential of indigenous cultural innovations. Even worse, it tends to undermine the

informal structures of indigenous cultures, the ground on which local innovations might otherwise flourish.

In general, Cultures of Innovation proved often to be powerful stimuli for agents of change. However, awareness does not necessarily lead to political action, and not all informal Cultures of Innovation have positive effects on the fate of the poor. In order to have a sustainable positive impact, they must be embedded in a development enhancing social structure with a minimum of the required equality and social mobility.

The case studies presented above indicate that indigenous cultural innovations are c. p. more suited to promote sustainable development than externally induced innovations with a questionable potential of adaptation, notably if they are reduced to one-dimensional categorizations and identities.

Trans-national social networks play an increasing role in promoting the interaction of cultures and in transmitting informal cultural innovations which might be more readily adopted than innovations imposed by official aid or formal institutions. The impact of pluri-local social spaces on the interactive process of cultural change and on the diffusion of informal innovations is not restricted to the educated elite. It concerns different social strata, including the African poor, on macro, meso and micro levels, as shown above in comparative case studies.

To put it in a nutshell, the globalized western culture of innovation, as propagated by major aid institutions, does not necessarily lead to empowerment or poverty alleviation. On the contrary, it often blocks viable indigenous innovation cultures. However, the latter are not *per se* the better alternatives. All depends on their embeddedness in development-oriented social structures.

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