The making of Kenya’s unique cultural heritage

An argument: Kenyan values include tolerance of other viewpoints. PHOTO | FOTOSEARCH

IN SUMMARY

• Let’s know our history, appreciate it and decide how we want to build the country culturally into the future.

As Kenyans, we strongly identify with our culture. If a stranger from a faraway land came up to any of us and asked us to describe ourselves or explain who we are, we invariably would include aspects of our cultural artifacts, values, beliefs, or behaviours.

Business Talk concludes its three-part mini-series on culture by embracing culture that makes us who we are and celebrating our differences rooted in deep historical realities.

Kenyan cultural artifacts include perimeter walls surrounding compounds, dual urban and rural homes owned by the same nuclear family, western-style fashion with flares of African influence in fabrics and colours, many football pitches, as well as, on the negative, areas with minimal rubbish collection.

Kenyan values include our national unity in the face of crises, tolerance of other viewpoints, and community support for life events such as weddings and funerals, respect for elders, sense of home by continual return and deference to “shagz” (village), among many other values.

Positive behaviours that make us uniquely Kenyan include our vibrant sense of humour, not relying on one source of income like Americans do but by our operating economic “side hustles” in addition to our main jobs, politeness in group professional meetings, our prolific love for swimming, extended greetings upon seeing friends and colleagues, and arguably negatively, tolerance of bad behaviour in others often manifested in various forms of corruption allowed.

Digging deeper into our Kenyan culture, we find subcultures that originate from special interest groups or from ethnic communities. Fascinatingly, not many individuals understand how cultures formed centuries and millennia ago.

Why might our aggregate Kenyan culture differ from Zambian or Indonesian culture? We must first understand the difference between antecedents, mediators, and moderators as variables.

Researcher Richard Nisbett pioneered the genesis of cultural formation in his landmark book the Geography of Thought. Essentially, the geography of an area influences how that region develops its values and behaviours.

Geography exists as the root cause of culture, or put another way, the independent variable. However, the cause then passes through two mediating variables. The geography influences the types of main ancient economic activities undertaken by the society.
A land with relatively poor quality soil and numerous islands with a mostly calm large body of water, like Greece, would tend towards more of a fishing economic foundation.

A fertile region perhaps in flood plains, like Egypt, or valleys, like China, would foment an agricultural-based society.

An area with plentiful natural fruit plans, like Samoa, or excessive natural game, found in ancient Zambia or indigenous Great Plains America, develop hunter gatherer economic activities since the land provided in plenty without much human manipulation necessary.

Finally, semi-arid areas difficult to grow crops but far from large bodies of water often birthed societies with heavy reliance on livestock, such as inland Somalia and southern Ethiopia.

**Upset neighbours**

Next, the ancient economic activity influenced the amount of dependence one family had on a neighbouring family. Reviewing the main types of economic activities in the ancient world that included agriculture, hunter gatherer, livestock, and fishing, which types of societies required neighbourly assistance more often? If you guessed agricultural societies, you answered correctly.

Agriculturalists require assistance from others beyond their nuclear families most frequently and typically during harvest and planting.

Inasmuch, families dependent on farming would prove much less likely to tell their neighbours their true feelings about life matters over fear that they might upset their neighbours.

An upset family or individual living nearby would be far less likely to assist another family that would then hurt their economic survival.

Since agriculturalists in ancient times required much more assistance from others in the community, you get very polite cultures originating from these areas.

As an example, China served as the dominant culture in ancient East and Southeast Asia. These regions value harmony, peace, coexistence, and community togetherness.

So, a citizen of Thailand even in today’s modern world would be far less likely to show outward negative emotions in a business meeting than a comparative citizen from Australia.

In Kenya, ancient agricultural-based societies such as Kikuyus, Embu, and Luhyas, for example, even in today’s culture would be much more polite and calm in interpersonal interactions hiding personal emotions so as not to upset others.

Ancient economic activities formed the basis for our modern cultures. Not every societal member fits precisely within norms, but cultural averages may be observed.

**Hostile office environments**

Further, a society attempting to survive and thrive in a desert or semi-arid area but still through agriculture yield the most polite and professionally calm and passive workers since neighbourly assistance might be required far more frequently than regular agriculturalists.

In Kenya, the Kamba people historically largely utilised agriculture, but in very difficult environments with less dependable rainfall. Therefore even today Kamba workers, on average, can tolerate harsh hostile office environments more than others.

In Europe, the Romans idealised Greek culture and spread it throughout much of Europe. As a fishing-based society, the Greeks valued the truth and pursuit of knowledge because their citizens did not require neighbourly assistance in order to achieve economic survival.

So Greek originating cultures throughout Europe, North America, and Australia developed much more direct cultural behaviours of speaking the truth directly and quickly even if it harmed future interpersonal relationships.

In Kenya, the Luo ancient economic activity of fishing yielded a culture that valued direct, open, and honest feedback.

Pastoralists who utilised livestock historically also retained little need for neighbour assistance and therefore cultural behaviour of more immediate and direct discourse thrives to this day in Kenya as personified by the Maasai, Samburu, Pokot, and Turkana people.

In summary, the geography influences the ancient economic activity as a mediator that influences whether neighbours are needed for economic success that influences the directness of cultural behaviours.

Numerous moderating factors, such as overpopulation in urban India and Nigeria, put pressure that changes the behaviour that came from the ancient economic activity.
What moderators might impact Kenyan cultures? Do not look down on other cultures because they differ from yours. Know our Kenyan history, appreciate it, and decide how we want to build Kenya culturally into the future.

Scott may be reached on scott@ScottProfessor.com or follow on Twitter: @ScottProfessor