

Does climate affect people's culture?

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A group of cultural dancers. Research says temperatures will affect the way people behave. FILE PHOTO | NMG

Why do some groups of people behave differently than other groups? What drives the variance between our ethnic communities?

Colonialists often arrogantly and incorrectly ascribed culture differences around the world to the superiority or inferiority of racial brain capacities. No region felt the brunt of racial stereotypes in colonial times with lingering unconscious biases more than sub-Saharan Africa. Ironically, caucasians and Asians have traces of primitive Neanderthal DNA through ancient comingling while black sub-Saharan Africans hold no trace of Neanderthal DNA and live in the epicenter of human evolution of superior brain function that originated right here in sub-Saharan Africa. So, for this and many other scientific reasons, anti-African brain capacity biases are rubbish.

Modern sociologists have pondered instead that climatic effects may partially explain observable culture differences across nations, regions, and clusters. Prolific social psychologist Geert

Hofstede and later Robert House and his co-researchers made firm associations between climate, rainfall, humidity, and cultural behaviour and opinions.

Business Talk takes a detour this week from its education in Kenya mini-series to bring readers the results of breaking research conducted by the United States International University of Africa and Durham University in cooperation with USAID and Global Communities just released in the Co-operative University of Kenya's African Journal for Co-operative Development and Technology.

The research team surveyed over 500 agriculturalist co-operative members across nine different ethnic communities in 12 counties in Kenya. Among other research objectives, we desired to investigate whether climate correlated with different behavioural and organisational practices. The team expected a few linkages but were stunned upon finding strong and consistence correlations.

Upon investigating average historical annual temperatures in different regions of the homelands of ethnic communities where surveys were conducted, strong links were uncovered with each degree increase in temperature.

The communities that live in the warmest temperature climates in descending order are Mijikenda in the hottest areas with an average historical annual temperature of 27.22 degrees Celsius followed by Taita, Luo, Luhya, Kamba, Kisii, Embu, Kikuyu then lastly Kalenjin who live in the coldest areas such as Usain-Gichu County with a historical annual temperature of 17.65 degrees Celsius. The research team then surveyed co-operative members about their organisations and their societies.

Interestingly, the hotter the area annual average temperature, the less communities focused on or acted on long-term planning. The lack of future orientation and instead attention paid to the here and now as the temperatures increase was the strongest statistically significant culture correlation in the study. Additionally, the warmer the temperatures then the more likely communities become complacent, calm, and accept mediocrity through being less assertive and less demanding of one another, less kind and polite in interpersonal interactions, and less solution-seeking and innovative in their organisations. Co-operative members in warmer temperature areas are also less committed to and less enthusiastic about their organisations.

Ethnic communities in warmer climates also held less tolerance for power distance meaning that they believe that power should be shared equally amongst all members in the society and that leaders should be questioned and held to account when disagreements arise. The Mijikenda demand more societal power equality while the Luhya and Kalenjin communities accept and tolerate power inequality the most. The power distance acceptance as temperatures cool did not attribute to the decreasing amount of bottom-up participative leadership in co-operatives in different areas. Ironically, co-operative leaders in ethnic communities in warmer temperature climates involved their members less in decision making and instead tended to make the decisions themselves.

However, temperature does not correlate with the level of community feeling in collectivism. Whether in warm and colder climates, Kenyan members of co-operatives still felt similar degrees of community cohesiveness, interdependence, relatedness, and societal duties and obligations. Warmer temperatures also did not correlate with performance orientation in ethnic communities. Kenyans uniformly shared similar perceptions about societal and organisational performance standards.

In closing, let us understand our differences and similarities and get to the root causes so we can banish bias and misunderstanding from our hearts and minds. The government of Kenya, donor partners, NGOs, and organisations must understand that differing managerial approaches are needed in varying climatic areas of our nation.

Consider the vast range of elements that are in play when working to create positive changes in the counties and be able to make informed recommendations rather than using a 'one size fits all' approach to development.