

Introduction and Overview to the Special Issue on Africa's Moral and Affective Economy

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The purpose of this special issue is to allow a better insight and appreciation of Japanese scholarship on Africa. Japanese academics interested in Africa have been actively studying various aspects of African rural life. Agricultural economists have focused on the production side while anthropologists have taken a special interest in the social and cultural side of rural life. Although not exclusive to Kyoto University, the center for Africanist research in Japan has been concentrated to this old and venerable institution of higher learning in what was once the capital of Japan. Understandably, the Japanese have published their work first and foremost in Japanese. Their body of knowledge about Africa is contained in monographs, edited volumes, and journals published locally.

Those of us who have been fortunate to work and interact with Japanese Africanists are aware of the interesting empirical work that they are doing. This special issue contains seven separate contributions that showcase Japanese studies of Africa. The various authors have different disciplinary backgrounds but they are all sharing a cross-disciplinary perspective on the continent. Some are senior academics who have done research in Africa for many years while others are doctoral students still in the process of finishing their degrees.

The general theme of their work is "things African." They are interested in indigenous values and institutions and how they fare in the context of increased exposure to external forces. Their work is theoretically and conceptually located in the moral and affective economy sphere with its focus on informal institutions and practices. In addition to my own work on the economy of affection these authors have taken their lead from the research on the moral economy in Southeast Asia by James Scott.¹

The conclusion that can and should be drawn from their research is that the informal institutions and practices that are associated with a moral or affective economy continue to be a vital part of social and economic life in Africa. Indigenous concepts and practices are, if not reinvented, at least continuously adapted to changing circumstances. As the contributions to this volume demonstrate, this is true for people in urban as well as rural settings. Principles of reciprocity remain important guides for social and economic behavior. The articles published here also indicate that this phenomenon is common in different countries. The volume contains

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studies carried out in Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda.

In order to do justice to the theoretical and conceptual context that the various authors have chosen for their work, it is necessary to begin with a discussion of some of the key terms used or alluded to throughout the issue. Thus, the first section of this paper covers the economy of affection and the moral economy – their origin, definition, and place in the study of Africa. The second section focuses on the distinction between formal and informal institutions – an important point in studies of African social, economic and political phenomena. The third section will provide an overview of the content of the various individual contributions to this issue.

THE ECONOMY OF AFFECTION AND MORAL ECONOMY

The economy of affection and the moral economy are part of a conceptual lineage that goes quite far back in social science historiography. Some may argue that Emile Durkheim's distinction between mechanical and organic types of solidarity is the beginning. Others may refer to Weber and his differentiation between traditional and modern forms of authority. Yet others may point to Karl Polanyi's seminal book, *The Great Transformation*, and his notion of substantivism in contrast to capitalist economics.² To this can be added a series of anthropologists, e.g. Marshall Sahlins, whose work has built on these early pioneers.³

The common denominator in these early studies is the transformation of society that follows from the spread of the market economy or capitalism. To be sure, this is not the only variable that matters in this process. Many would point to technological development and industrialization. Others would point to urbanization or the impact of education. Whatever the role and importance of these other factors, capitalism is of special significance when it comes to understanding the economy of affection and the moral economy. The latter two constitute alternative forms of political economy. They are not purely structural as the Marxist version of political economy is in its emphasis on formal institutions like market and state. Nor are they just based on the assumptions associated with *homo economicus* – the autonomous individual capable of making rational choices to maximize his self-interest. The moral and affective types of economic action discussed in this issue are embedded in social relations and cultural conventions. Individual behavior and choice in these economies are fully rational, albeit in a given context. Rationality in the economy of affection or the moral economy, therefore, must be understood as contextualized as compared to the abstract version associated with rational choice theory. Comparison is not impossible but it is a challenge because of contextual specificities. Such comparisons can never be stretched to the point of being organized under a single formalized theory.

This may be viewed as a major shortcoming of these alternative political economies, yet it is precisely because of the limitations inherent in formal theory that the social sciences need more than one lens to interpret social reality. Formal theory is really only helpful in the study of phenomena that are predictable, e.g. votes in legislatures where party loyalties are known in advance and issues can be arranged on a stable ideological spectrum. Attempts to study social and political reality outside such stable institutional environments inevitably imply such severe

reductionism that the study loses sight of the more interesting research questions to be asked. The economy of affection or moral economy help us throw light on forms of social, economic, and political behavior that are significant, yet not covered by concepts in mainstream political economy.

The notion of moral economy in contemporary social science studies is foremost associated with the name of James C. Scott (see above), and more specifically his study of peasants in southeast Asia. Partly because of his Asian focus, he has attracted much attention among Japanese social scientists interested in peasant economies. Scott argues that social practices among peasants in southeast Asia are based on two moral premises: (1) the norm of reciprocity and (2) the right to subsistence. This translates into a fear of technological innovation and social change. Peasants adopt the “safety-first” principle or what economists would call a risk-averse position vis-a-vis their environment. Instead of taking on these challenges, peasants seek social insurance in the form of support from family, friends, and neighbors. These relations of mutual support are sometimes lateral (among equals) at other times vertical involving a relationship with a patron. According to Scott, patron-client relations have been on decline since capitalism began to make an inroad in the countryside. As a result, these producers on the land – subsistence farmers, tenants, and agricultural laborers – have become increasingly dependent on their own wit. Theirs is not the conventional class action, but rather non-compliance with rules and regulations, sabotage, evasion, and deception – what the same author in a subsequent volume refers to as the “weapons of the weak.”⁴

The economy of affection is a close equivalent to the moral economy that has been used in the study of African social and political life. According to Hyden, this type of political economy is an outgrowth of the prevalence of a peasant mode of production, in which rural producers have yet to be captured by state or market.⁵ In this pre-capitalist order, households place greater emphasis on social reproduction and subsistence than on production and profit. Because agricultural technology is simple, there is little specialization and hence limited social differentiation. The wealthier members of a community are not rich because they own land on which others are forced to till. Instead, their wealth stems from owning a larger plot and having more family members to cultivate it. The economy of affection blends economic and social rationality: individuals are rational in the sense of pursuing strategies that are embedded in local social contexts. Hyden defines the economy of affection as “a network of support, communications and interaction among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affiliations, for example, religion.”⁶

Like the moral economy, the economy of affection is a way for peasants to cope with circumstances that are threatening their livelihoods. There are some significant differences, however, stemming foremost from the differences in level of development between southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Because market and state have penetrated society more effectively in southeast Asia, the moral economy is more a direct response to the inevitable exploitation of the poor that tend to be associated with these processes. The existence of an indigenous state legacy and the longtime exposure to capitalism in countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia as well as the concentration of people and the reliance on more sophisticated agricultural technology have facilitated a process of capturing the peasants that are just beginning to happen in Africa. To be sure, the aim of the colonial state was precisely that of

capturing the peasants for its own ends, but since independence much political energy has been spent on dismantling that structure and weakening the capacity of the state – and the market – to influence life in the rural areas. Economic liberalization has not transformed agriculture or promoted rural development. Instead, it has led to an accelerated migration from the countryside to the urban areas.

This process of migration has also changed the nature of the economy of affection. When confined to the rural areas, it tends to rely on relatively stable reciprocal solidarities. People are ready to exchange labor at critical points in the agricultural season. They also chip in to regularly assist each other at times of important family occasions, notably the birth or baptism of a child, youth initiation, weddings, and funerals. These reciprocities tend to be quite specific and they are taken for granted as obligations to others for purposes of enjoying a form of social insurance that otherwise would not be there. Some of these specific reciprocities continue to survive as members of households move to the urban areas. Rural-urban ties continue to be important, especially among first and second generation of urban migrants. The important thing, however, is that old social ties are amended and new ones invented to perpetuate economy of affection types of relations and behaviors. Many of these tend to be generalized in nature and some are ad hoc arrangements at times of hardship. They also involve relationships that cut across previous, quite strictly demarcated lines of reciprocal interaction. As several articles in this issue demonstrate, the social significance of precapitalist social relations survive. They constitute the mental frame within which individuals make choices and behave.

The economy of affection and the moral economy, as portrayed by Scott, differ in the following two respects. With regard to *presence*, the former is more prevalent and central to social and political life than the latter. The moral economy, while important to local peasants, is rather peripheral to the economy at large in any southeast Asian country. In Africa, by contrast, the economy of affection is at the core of social and political life. In addition to the phenomena discussed in this issue, the economy of affection is at the root of clientelism and other forms of both lateral and vertical forms of reciprocity. Most importantly, the relations between rich and poor have yet to “snap” in the sense of leading to land alienation and being replaced by capitalist types of social exploitation.

The two economies also differ with regard to *function*. The moral economy is primarily a defense mechanism. It is reactive in the sense of being a way for marginalized people to counter the influence of external social forces that threaten their livelihoods or lifeworld. Whether material or cultural values are at stake, peasants, according to Scott, get together to protect themselves by engaging in evasive action, deception, and other forms of non-compliance with orders or demands from more powerful groups or institutions. The economy of affection also serves as a defense mechanism but it transcends that particular function. It serves the purpose of maintaining social relations and also social advancement. In this respect, the economy of affection is entrepreneurial. Poorer members of society seek out richer members, not just relatives, to obtain a “loan” that would allow him to e.g. build a house, buy the necessary equipment to start a business, etc. Richer ones seek out poorer ones to build a power base that can be used for political purposes.

The economy of affection, therefore, is more prevalent and more varied than the moral economy. Although both are alternatives to conventional types of political economy, the former

has a more dominant influence of society and its development. In fact, it is so strong that it easily subverts conventional models of development based on state or market, a topic that lies outside the scope of this particular issue.

As another aside, it should also be mentioned here that the moral and affective economy is becoming a global phenomenon. At the empirical level, it is increasingly applied to Africans in the diaspora: traders and others who live in Europe and North America engaging in reciprocities of various kinds, e.g. helping new migrants to get a place to stay or a visa to reside. At the more normative level, Sayer applies the notion of “moral economy” to the conditions of developed societies where the market economy is well institutionalized.⁷ His argument is essentially that social scientists need to think beyond utilitarianism and rejuvenate a more radical political economy that is based on such principles as justice, equality and respect for public goods. Human agency is more than just pursuing one’s self-interest. It also implies judgements of responsibility and morally-guided action.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS

Institutions are typically understood as rules of conduct; organizations are the actors performing within a particular institutional framework, either complying with or challenging it. Recent literature on neo-institutionalism is characterized by two controversies. One concerns whether an institution is merely the sum total of individual actors working together or it has a life of its own, influencing the choice and behavior of individual actors. Scholars like Ostrom would tend to see institutions as creations by rational individuals capable of both designing and terminating institutions at their will.⁸ In this theoretical scenario, institutions are dependent variables explained by the rational choices of individual actors. Other scholars, coming out of a sociological or historical approach to institutions, e.g. March and Olson, argue that institutions have an influence on human behavior and choice.⁹ Individuals are being socialized by social entities, e.g. family, schools, organizations, that convey the importance and value of specific institutions. The latter, therefore, are independent variables explaining why individuals behave in certain ways or make certain types of choices.

¹⁰ Compliance with state regulations and the principles of neo-liberal economic order – the “good governance” package – is being advocated as inevitable prerequisites for development. Institutionalization, therefore, means formalization. Another is empirical. Scholars find it hard to study things informal. They are hard to identify, even more difficult to measure. The emphasis, therefore, tend to be on formal institutions, the rules that are written and that are tested in the open. Because informal institutions are not so easily transparent, they are typically left out altogether or spoken of only in general terms as part of “culture.” A third reason is epistemological: the tendency to deny agency to informal institutions. Informal institutions are not just customs and conventions that do not change. As articles in the issue demonstrate, informal institutions are constantly being subject to change, including efforts to stabilize them. Institutionalization, therefore, is also possible in the field of informal institutions. The challenge is that understanding such processes are more labor-intensive and do not easily lend themselves to generalizations in the context of an abstract formal theory. Informal institutions

exist in the “gray” zone between economics and culture and that is where the research frontier is, especially in Africa, but not just there.

Social science research is better served by an inductive approach that begins with the identification of a research problem that requires careful consideration of which theory or method is best suited for understanding and analyzing that problem. An increasing number of social scientists, unfortunately, approach the study of social and political problems with ready-made solutions – theories that they wrongly assume are sufficiently robust to explain issues regardless of cultural and historical context. This is not meant to deny the value of comparative research, only to suggest that comparisons based on abstract theory are inevitably only telling a very small part of the whole story; hence, it is useless for purposes of prediction – a principal ambition of the social sciences.

¹¹ In developing countries, it is more often part of pre-modern reality: ways of resisting, coping with, and taking advantage of formal institutions imposed by formal state institutions – and, often, international bodies like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

This issue deals with informal institutions that are a product of the affective and moral economy. Other informal institutions may have a different origin. The point, though, is that regardless of origin, informal institutions matter more, not less today. The work that the Japanese researchers featured here have done is an important contribution to knowledge. They operate at the frontier of today’s social science research.

THE INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The seven contributions to this issue can be divided into two groups. The first four deal with a set of reciprocal arrangements that are leftovers from precolonial times: labor and food exchanges that help members of a local community overcome labor bottlenecks while simultaneously sharing the fruits of their labor in the context of a “beer party.” The remaining three contributions deal with the reinvention of informal institutions inspired by affective solidarities among formal business entrepreneurs as well as informal sector traders in an urban environment.

Soichiro Shiraishi discusses the influence of the monetary economy on traditional labor exchange practices among the Sabiny people in eastern Uganda. While beer has given way to money as a medium of exchange, the short-term exchanges that are characteristic of the modern economy are still conducted with the help of locally meaningful terms that grow out of the traditions of the Sabiny. Capitalism does not obliterate informal institutions, but creates conditions in which they are reinvented.

does not produce conflict.

Sayaka Ogawa offers fascinating insights into the evolution and management of informal institutions among local middlemen and smallscale retailers (street peddlers) in Mwanza, the second largest city in Tanzania. Particularly interesting is a local credit system that balances the pursuit of profit with social norms that draw inspiration from the economy of affection. She demonstrates that reciprocities can survive and stabilize relations even in fluid urban contexts. The fellowship that emerges among these smallscale business people does not stem from

building trust in the conventional manner that Westerners think of. Instead, trust comes from being able to handle tricks that members keep making against each other. These acts are the equivalence of jokes in a joking relationship aimed at testing the temper of a stranger and deducing trust therefrom.

Tadasu Tsuruta, finally, discusses the contemporary relevance of moral-economic concepts that people in Tanzania, using the country's *lingua franca*, Kiswahili, have invented in response to external economic and cultural influences. The important message that his article conveys is that linguistic terms and concepts in Kiswahili are multi-faceted and straddle notions that are disaggregated into more specific terms in the English or French language. Things like joking and mutual aid, dance and politics, as well as wit and cunning, go together with very different social implications than they have in modern society. At the same time, it would be a mistake, Tsuruta argues, to consider this to be just a leftover of traditional life. The interesting thing about these concepts is that they cannot be placed in pre-arranged Western categories. Thus, they prompt us to probe their cultural content and rediscover the extent to which moral and affective relations are important in contemporary Africa.

Notes:

1. Goran Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania : Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry*. Berkeley : University of California Press 1980; Goran Hyden, *No Shortcuts to Progress: African Development Management in Perspective*. Berkeley : University of California Press 1983. James. C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. New Haven CT : Yale University Press 1976.
2. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*. Boston : Beacon Press 1957.
3. Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*. London : Tavistock Publications 1972.
4. James. C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*. New Haven CT : Yale University Press 1985.
5. Hyden 1980, *op.cit*.
6. Hyden 1983, *op.cit*. p. 8.
7. Andrew Sayer, "Moral Economy and Political Economy", *Studies in Political Economy*, vol 69, no 1 (2000), pp 79-104.
8. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*. New York : Cambridge University Press 1990.
9. James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *The Rediscovery of Institutions*. New York : Cambridge University Press 1989.
10. Douglass North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. New York : Cambridge University Press 1990.
11. Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*. New York : Cambridge University Press 1997.

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