

The Last Emerging Market: From Asian Tigers to African Lions? The Ghana File.
Nathaniel H. Bowditch. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1999. 201 pp.

Nathaniel H. Bowditch, a self-described “public entrepreneur”, went to Thailand as a Peace Corps Volunteer in 1966 and subsequently worked in Malaysia and Sri Lanka, as well as New England, in a variety of economic and community development positions (p. xiv). In 1990, he went to Ghana as a United Nations project advisor. He writes that “none of [my previous experiences] prepared me for Ghana” (p. xiii). Nevertheless, he predicts that “an ‘African Miracle’ will become *the* global economic story in the first decades of the next millennium” (p. xv). This book is a successful attempt “to penetrate Ghana’s deceptively complex culture and, in so doing, to entertain, inform, and raise some of the issues, questions, opportunities, and dilemmas that must be faced by Ghana and a world increasingly ready – perhaps even eager – for the emergence of Africa” (p. xii).

Part One is about Ghanaian culture, the significance of money within it. For Ghanaian businesspersons, “religion, family, and the rest of life all intermingle with the business” (p. 151). Bowditch shows how behavior regarding time and money that might appear to Westerners to be unethical or irresponsible can be viewed in a more favorable light from the perspective of the traditional cultures of what is now Ghana. Ghanaians frequently “borrow” money from *obroni* (Caucasians), without considering themselves obligated to repay the “loans.” But this is in a culture where people who have more money than they need traditionally share with those who have less than they need: “I also came to understand that I, as a relatively well-to-do father, shouldn’t necessarily ask for the money even though it was a loan, because I didn’t really need it” (pp. 47-48). Failure to prepare business plans can be explained by an environment of great uncertainty, in which what is needed is cunning or cleverness in dealing with whatever situations arise: “In an uncertain world, planning doesn’t seem to work well because there are just too many unknown and unforeseen, moment-to-moment contingencies to plan for” (p. 58). And many cases of what Westerners call bribery or corruption differ little from gift-giving in traditional Ghanaian cultures.

After working in several administrative positions, Bowditch extended his time in Ghana with a research grant “to study Ghanaian culture and traditional West African business practices vis-à-vis Ghanaian business development and management practices” (p. xiv). He interviewed fifty-three Ghanaian and *obroni* business owners, managers, and economic-development professionals and discusses these interviews in Part Two. Part Three includes citations of a wide range of sources – “perspectives and perceptions of individuals with little or no relationship to Ghana” – followed by Bowditch’s own conclusions, with numerous comparisons between “Asian tigers” and “African lions” (p. 160).

Bowditch’s thesis is that “today’s young lion cubs (Ghana, Uganda, Namibia, Botswana, Cote d’Ivoire, and many more) are just like their tiger-cub predecessors of twenty-five to thirty years ago” (p. 171). But, though there exists the potential for rapid economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa, there is much work to be done if the lion cubs are to follow in the tigers’ footsteps: “Africans are clearly watching and lusting after the prosperity that has emerged in Asia. However, they seem more interested in finding an easy way to get there than in learning from the tough decisions and hard work demonstrated in Asia” (p. 179).

A more important question than Bowditch’s – whether African nations can attain the economic prosperity of the Asian tigers – is whether they can do so without destroying the non-material wealth of

their own traditional cultures. Bowditch uses the Western categories of “capitalism” and “socialism” in analyzing Ghanaian business culture and how it needs to change. As he sees it, the challenge is for African nations to participate in the “global free-enterprise system” or “worldwide capitalism” (pp. 126, 173). In contrast, there is “the family-based African socialism that governs traditional family and village life” (p. 95). He states that “African socialism” is “not a political movement but a sociological phenomenon” and writes of “the challenges to capital accumulation by a fierce African, family-based socialist tradition” (p. 152, 181). But traditional African cultures do not fit into the categories of the contemporary West. The fact that the family is important has nothing to do with state ownership of the means of production. Both capitalism and socialism, as well as all compromises between them, are incompatible with traditional African cultures, because they are materialistic.

Bowditch writes of “a one-world philosophy, called *free-enterprise democracy*”, and maintains that “Ghana will have to develop both a competitive national economy *and* a free-enterprise management culture” (pp. xvii, 70). The challenge for Ghana and other African nations, however, is to develop a philosophy of business management that will enable them to increase productivity and reduce poverty without destroying the traditional family and religious faith. Such a philosophy of management must be rooted in neither Adam Smith nor Karl Marx, but in traditional African philosophy.

While not distinguishing African from Western philosophical traditions, Bowditch does provide insightful suggestions concerning what a theory of business management appropriate for Ghana and other African nations might look like. Because the family is so important, “every responsible and respected business in Ghana will have to care for the life, village, and families in its orbit” (p. 160). Religious faith is also inseparable from business: “Divinities simply cannot be ignored when undertaking anything of importance in one’s life, and business is no exception” (p. 165). What Ghana needs is a theory of business management, unlike anything the contemporary West can offer, consistent with these truths. Although Bowditch’s book is written primarily for business and development practitioners, it contains citations of scholarly works and insights that could be incorporated into a philosophical theory of Ghanaian or African business management.

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