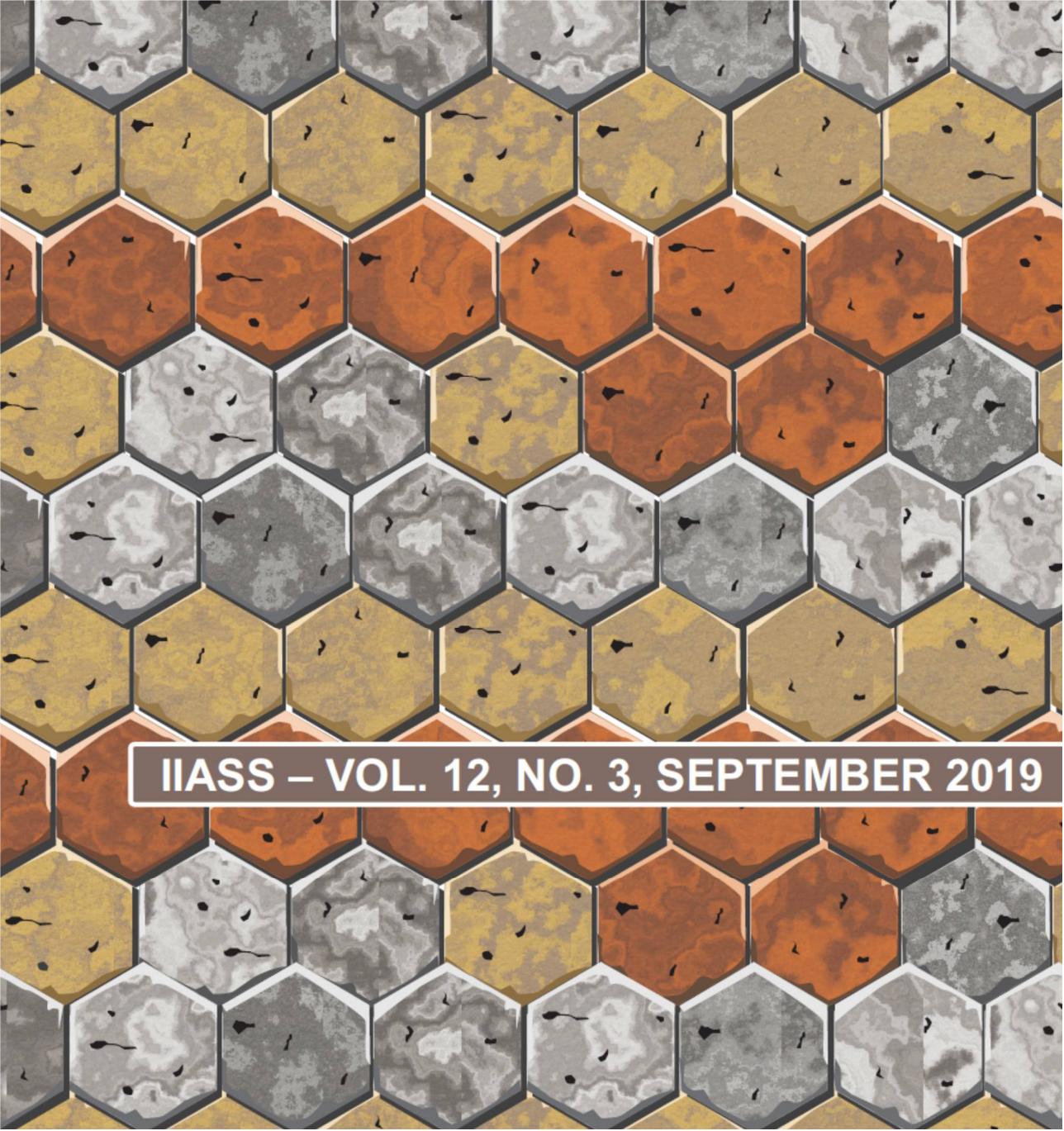


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# DECOUPLING DISCOURSES OF CULTURE, GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT: PRAGMATIC REFLECTIONS FROM ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY PERSPECTIVES

Forzo Titang Franklin<sup>1</sup>, Thebe Philip<sup>2</sup>

## **Abstract**

The elaboration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) as a road map for promoting development and alleviating poverty has unabatedly necessitated the incorporation of gender and culturally inclined development frameworks in interpreting and implementing development aid interventions in developing countries. However understanding "effective" sustainable development processes still proves problematic given the wavering dynamics of cultural processes in economic development. This essay examines the nuanced intersection between culture, gender and development as embedded in economic anthropology discourses. It further explores the economic/culture nexus that challenges contemporary sustainable development debates, by examining the underlying epistemological and theoretical paradigms of culture, gender and the economy as a process that shapes economic behaviours and inherently influences the social and economic structure of varying rural communities and societies. We argue that the social relationships that underscore the socio-cultural embeddedness of economic resources such as land and their access thereof, inadvertently fosters power relations that deepens gender disparities in economic development and stagnates conventional rights based approaches to local development. The essay concludes on the need to critically reorientate development thinking and knowledge that will attenuate a common ground for a "rights" based approach to development, and bridge the culture and gender nexus within economic development.

**Keywords:** culture; development; economic anthropology; societies; gender; economy

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## **Introduction**

### **Contextualizing Development in Anthropology**

Does it ever seem like you have more adversity in your life than others? As if everyone around you is having an easier time of things than you are?? Do you ever ponder about the possibility of having a world characterized by improved and sustainable livelihoods for all? We all seem to be getting increasingly concerned about our livelihoods and thoughts of a better tomorrow that extends far beyond ideals of technological innovation and economic growth (which for centuries has been considered an actualization of the development process). Regardless of our knowledge, regardless of the basis on which ideals emerge, the parody and complexity surrounding the concept of development says it all. One therefore begins to question what the real reflection of the concept of development is. How do we perceive it? By this, we draw inferences from Hart's Development Critiques in the 1990's in which, paradoxically, the advancement of globalization has rather tended to resuscitate processes of inequality in the world and stagnated the development process. This point has been further compounded by Hobart's *An Anthropological Critique of Development: the Growth of Ignorance* in which is clearly ascertained that the development discourse has been repeatedly stifled with the notion of technological innovation and economic growth, an epistemology that is continuously posing problems to repositioning the concept, to include a socio-cultural perspective.

Definitely, it is not alien knowledge that development is a multifaceted concept and process, to which there is no universally accepted definition. The wealth of knowledge existing on development leaves one pondering on the need to redefine and reposition epistemological approaches surrounding the development discourse. In this regard, I am tempted to perceive development as a process that goes way beyond political, economic and technological processes to encompass a humanistic perspective that considers more the livelihoods of people and communities at large. Development is a people oriented growth process that underpins first and foremost the inherent concerns, needs and aspirations of the people for whom it is meant. This brings us to pinpoint the assertions brought forward by Maslow's "Hierarchical" Theory of Needs that identifies human self-actualization or fulfilment as the highest point of satisfaction, without which and we quote "concepts of state economic sufficiency, technological innovation, strong unified states, removal of trade barriers and economic growth are meaningless and far from providing concrete approaches to the development paradigm" (Herath, 2008). We therefore, wouldn't be doing society justice if the

development discourses is not perceived from local epistemology but from Western knowledge, because society in itself is a social system.

### **Economy vs. Culture Nexus: A Note on Epistemological/Theoretical Underpinnings**

The question of ascribing “behaviour” to economic processes has ostensibly proved problematic for the scholarly field of anthropology and economic growth. Can an economy “behave”? Can such behaviour be harnessed and or controlled? Who determines how the economy acts? Are economies socially embedded? How do economic activities and processes influence gender relationships, with regards to monopoly of power on access and ownership of factors of production? These draw us to pragmatically question and or deconstruct how socio-cultural configurations of societies and communities determine or shape the nature of economic processes. However, underscoring in much more practical terms what practices constitute economic processes and which reflects a harmonious way of life of a people or community becomes of essence. The formalist approach of “logical thought” as the basis of producing, exchanging, storing and consumption of goods puts into focus individualism and rationality of human thought, having as sole desire to maximize profits for personal gains or interests. This is sharply contested by the substantive approach which argues from the standpoint of relativism and conversely underscores the variability of human lifestyles and behavioural patterns, as key “shapers” of economic processes. It therefore becomes wholly problematic if one surmises all individualistic actions that involve exchange as economic processes.

To the substantivist, the bone of contention is to determine how we can compare economies and economic processes of diverse cultures, recognizing per se that each culture or society uniquely defines the economy in its own way, without being judgmental. This argument invariably characterized Malinowski’s pitch on the social embeddedness of economic processes with which he chastised Western understanding of economic anthropology. The concept of relativism revelled throughout his discourse to which he ascertained that the economy is more than a material world. To him, the economy encompasses social links evident amongst human beings and the actions they undertake to maintain existence of such relationships (Malinowski, 1967). On one hand, Malinowski clearly and existentially placed in total contesting spheres the “egoism” and materialism of Western economic societies and the much more intriguing processes of actions, way of life and societal obligations of “traditional” primitive societies on the other, to conversely debunk formalist views on economic processes.

Malinowski's emphasis on understanding cultural modes of life of communities and the way they relate to each other to determine or explain economic processes, positioned anthropology in the discipline of economics as a more "humanistic" approach of understanding and explaining economic behaviour, hence challenging the basic tenets of the formalist approach to economic thinking. Prescribing a set of standards according to which economic behaviour is organized is seemingly a problematic discourse for substantivist approach to economic thinking. One can unquestionably argue that the social in itself is what guides and or crowns human relationships; and the complexity of such relationships goes far beyond surface levels of economic orientation, but is deeply rooted in the very fabric of a community's mode of life and shared social relationships. The field of economics has seemingly usurped the place of anthropology in determining human economic behaviour, laying emphasis on the material than on the social. Modes of production and consumption of goods are dependent on people's materialistic tendencies and the various socio-political contestations surrounding gender economic relations, given that they have the "rational" capacity to make a choice.

Though most economists and anthropologists share common knowledge that individuals form the basis of every society and or community (Petrella, 2006), the conflicting discourses and binaries emerge thereof from their understanding of what shapes economic behaviour and how economic anthropology can be approached from a holistic perspective. The concept of the "invisible hand" in theorizing market economics clearly attests to the contested classical views of economic behaviour (Smith, 1776). The emphasis on the pursuit of one's own self-interest brings into focus the very argument brought forth by Malinowski on the materialism/social embeddedness dichotomy of economic behaviour. For instance if one considers the process of exchange of goods on the basis of economics, how then can we substantiate processes of gift giving common in most African settings within the economic behaviour debate?

Nonetheless, economic anthropology is marching on rapidly beyond the confines of the discipline of economics. In spite of the various complexities of the field one cannot simply chastise the material and rational sphere of economic processes. Anthropologists can contribute massively to this engaging field by employing per se ethnographic research that will enable a clearer understanding of the cultural undertones and expressions of economic processes in non-western societies on the one hand, and even in Western societies themselves on the other. No entity is a "standalone" and in so far as humans interact

with each other in continuous social relationships, there is bound to be ideas and systems of common interconnectedness. It is thus not an overstatement to ascertain that the discipline of economic anthropology is more or less entwined with cultural processes of economic activities, and shifts continuously towards the social reproduction of economic relations as a whole (Narotzky 1997). But one key tenet of this discourse, is affixing a *gender oriented* framework on the access and consolidation of factors of production, which seemingly becomes problematic in advancing conventional development thinking and cultural processes of economic activities. Consequently, the premise of Malinowski's argument on the *rational capacity of individuals to make a choice* appears negligible of the existence of complex interdependent societies characterized by unequal power relations, especially in poor and developing communities in the Global South.

### **Engendering Land Ownership and Access in Sub Saharan Africa: A Fallacy of Conventional Development Thinking?**

The changing discourse in customary land tenure and title rights signifies ultimately the interplay of complex social relationships characterized implicitly by unequal power relations between social groups as exemplified in colonial periods and processes of land tenure. The multiplicity of actors and stakeholders in land tenure processes reveals the recent shift from individualistic approaches to land ownership rights to encompass a broader and pluralistic plethora of new entrants, whose intervention seemingly minimizes the overtly customary systems of determining land access and creates more economic benefits for vulnerable and marginalized groups. This change in policy approaches to land ownership and or tenure prescribes a "new paradigm" towards land reforms that allows for local solutions in securing access to land (Toulmin and Quan, 2000). One might however argue that though such an approach is imbued with the propensity to mitigate power relations existing between "landed" elites and the poor peasant class as of the old, it conversely doesn't go beyond that to underscore the gender disparities and or inequalities that are albeit present as regards land ownership rights and access.

The fallacy of such thinking on land tenure rests on the supposed negotiability of relations that determine access to land, and the increasing indistinctness that characterizes the current state of land tenure practices especially in Sub Saharan African countries. A case in point is justified in Tanzania which underscores the socio-cultural embeddedness of land tenure from the "*perspectives of social relationships and as an outcome of processes of negotiation*" (Odgaard

2003, 71). However as previously ascertained, we contend that understanding the socially embedded relations characterizing land tenure warrants us to go beyond mere arguments and approaches of customary land tenure, to deconstruct the context in which such relationships occur and the possible gender implications that may arise. Recently, gender discourses evolving from social conflicts over land rights, access and ownership in the African setting are seemingly rooted in contemporary discourses of land tenure based on previous critiques of the colonial exhortation of customary land tenure practices. The current situational dynamics of land grabbing processes within sub Saharan African countries, puts into question the institutional and legal frameworks governing access to land and render indistinct and gullible the premise that customary land tenure is inextricably an issue of who owns what when and how. The emphasis on negotiation as to who gets what, when and how becomes nuanced in the discourse of land being “socially embedded” which seemingly fosters these inequalities. The focus on social differentiations and class formations seems to override the arguments put forth on deconstructing contemporary discourse on land tenure.

However, Pottier (2005) underscores the fallibility of customary land tenure based on colonial derivatives to which end, he criticizes the failure of colonial customary land tenure laws and or practices of not being essentially holistic to consider the complex issues that arise as a result of land access and ownership by families, groups and communities in Sub Saharan Africa. The multiple processes that emerge as a result of negotiating access to land and property rights and draws our attention to the various socio economic strains and interconnections between property and access (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Within this framework disadvantaged groups especially women are bound to benefit less from this resource particularly due to their “low” bargaining power, but most especially due to the fact that women in general are not protected by the cultures of their own communities especially as regards property ownership and access to land. This purely restrictive view of women’s ability to own or access land builds on evolutionary perspectives of colonial customary land tenure practices, and continues to fuel this disparity most especially amongst rural subsistence settings in sub Saharan Africa. Yngstrom as seen in Pottier (2005) even asserts that “*gender is critical to understanding how these processes unfold*” (Yngstrom, 2002). Nonetheless, in as much as we acknowledge that land tenure systems are changing with time, more complex structures and considerable power relations are being created in this whole development conundrum.

One therefore begins to question how anthropologists can generate a level ground of social understanding. How can we deconstruct binaries emerging from land tenure discourses to ascertain equal rights based conventional development approaches that will consider in its entirety social issues emerging from property rights and access to land? How can we use discourses on marginal gender inequalities within the land tenure and property debate as a “*connecting bridge*” in understanding the almost albeit complex assertions on property ownership and land access? One will thus need to go beyond critiques of social differentiation in property ownership and access to land, to understand the context within which gender claims of rights to land ownership and access intertwine.

### **Conclusion**

Culture, gender and development do not exist in a vacuum and are intricately linked to one another. With the elaboration of the SDG’s, the attainment of gender and culturally inclined development processes occupies primacy of place in development interventions and aid. As earlier mentioned, the socially embedded relations characterizing economic processes necessitate the emergence of binaries and a critical lens through which development could be reviewed. The influence of anthropology on the contemporary development debate is therefore essential. I therefore find myself questioning, the need to underscore the various theories and discourses on development and to re-orientate thinking and knowledge based on cultural inclinations and local epistemology. The intermittent constructions between development, culture and gender undoubtedly raise questions on achieving sustainable development, but yet, there lies possible pathways to tackling the concept of development in its entirety along cultural lines and local realities.

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