Modernist urban planning as a tool of acculturation: implications for sustainable human settlement development in Cameroon

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A B S T R A C T

Modernist urban planning, the version of planning that originated in Western Europe during the post-1850 industrial period, is interrogated as a tool of Western acculturation. Previous studies have focused narrowly on the strategies that have been employed to impose Western spatial structures on non-Western societies. The present study is broader in its focus as it examines implications of supplanting indigenous planning principles and practices with Western varieties. Qualitative techniques employing data culled mainly from secondary sources are employed. Cameroon constitutes the empirical referent of study. It is shown that by supplanting indigenous African practices in the built environment, modernist urban planning has effectively complicated sustainable development efforts in the country. To succeed, the paper concludes, planning initiatives must be contextualized to account for local conditions in Cameroon.

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Introduction

Acculturation connotes the systematic supplanting and domination of the values, beliefs and worldview of one group by another. Acculturation involving dominant groups imposing their culture on weaker ones exists wherever two or more groups from different backgrounds coexist physically or otherwise. The increasing universality of Western cultural artifacts and languages suggests that Westerners have been more successful than other dominant groups in undertaking large-scale acculturation. Imposing Eurocentric values on non-Western societies constituted a primary objective of the colonial project. It remains a prominent feature of contemporary globalization initiatives. Some of the most impactful efforts in this regard have occurred in the spatial planning domain. Thus, there is no question that modernist urban planning is a potent tool of Western acculturation.

The need to understand this dimension of modernist planning was first highlighted in the 1960s by Abu-Lughod (1965). At the time, she decried the fact that researchers had ignored so common a phenomenon as the supplanting of indigenous physical and spatial structures by Western varieties. Abu-Lughod noted that "we have no real case studies of the introduction of Western urban forms into non-Western countries" (Ibid: 22). Yet, the process by which Western spatial structures have been introduced and/or are introduced in non-Western societies is not only of academic and policy interest. It is, perhaps above all, a manifestation of cultural change (cf., Njoh, 2002).

A few works have since attempted to heed Abu-Lughod's clarion call (see e.g., Chokor, 1993; Njoh, 2002; Simon, 1992; King, 1980, 1976). These works are deficient in one specific respect. They have focused narrowly on the strategies that Westerners and agents of Western civilization have employed to impose Western spatial structures on non-Western societies. Consequently, there are large gaps in knowledge of other aspects of this phenomenon. For instance, little is known regarding the socio-economic implications of adopting planning tools, principles and practices from developed countries in less developed ones.

This paper employs qualitative techniques based on data culled from secondary sources to contribute to efforts

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addressed to filling these gaps. Specifically, it combs through a wealth of historical and contemporary data for evidence of efforts to supplant indigenous tradition and culture in an erstwhile European colony, namely Cameroon. The focus is particularly on the urban planning domain, where indigenous spatial structures and practices have been supplanted by Western varieties under the rubric of modernist planning. Modernist planning refers to "the approach to urban planning that developed in the post-1850 industrial period in Western Europe and other advanced capitalist countries" (UN, 2009: 47). The paper takes off in the next section by reviewing the concept of acculturation. Next, it examines specific instances of the use of modernist planning as a tool of Western acculturation. Following this, the paper analyzes the implications for socio-economic development of supplanting indigenous urban planning practices with Western varieties.

The concept of acculturation

As the classic works of Boas (e.g., 1888) and Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936) suggest, acculturation is by no means a new concept in the social and cognate sciences. Currently, the concept is often taken to be synonymous with the term assimilation. In this case, it refers to the cultural modifications that occur among members of foreign groups as they seek to adapt to a new environment—their 'home away from home.' This is the definition typically employed or implied by the growing number of studies focusing on immigrant populations in culturally dissimilar regions or countries (see e.g., Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznick, 2010; Tadmor, Tetlock, & Peng, 2009). Conspicuously absent from the literature are studies focusing on the acculturation that takes place when dominant groups invade and impose their culture on their less dominant counterparts. This latter type of acculturation has always constituted a primary objective of the colonial project. Accordingly, it is sometimes referred to as cultural imperialism.

One of the most concerted acculturation initiatives under the banner of colonialism occurred in Africa in the 19th century. However, works scrutinizing acculturation as an element of the colonial and neo-colonial projects did not emerge until the post-World War II era. These works have gone under different appellations, including "neo-colonialism," "soft imperialism," "economic imperialism," "structural imperialism," and "cultural dependency and synchronization" (Rauschenberger, 2003). Most of the works on this subject have been pre-occupied with the U.S. cultural hegemony and its dominance of the cultural commodity exporting industry. Consequently, other important facets of the phenomenon have been ignored. More noteworthy is the fact that modernist urban planning has seldom been treated as a tool of Western cultural imperialism. A few works not necessarily catalogued under cultural imperialism have focused on the introduction of Western planning models in non-Western societies (see e.g., Abu-Lughod, 1965; King, 1976, 1980, 2003; Njoh, 2007). However, there remains a dearth of knowledge on the specific effects of these models on non-Western societies. In what specific ways do these models affect life in non-Western societies? To adequately address this question it is necessary to appreciate the models as a tool of cultural imperialism. Some (e.g., Rauschenberger, 2003) have suggested that the effects of cultural imperialism are first and foremost cultural in nature. It is also conceivable that some of the effects are of an economic/ecological, social, and political nature. Thus, it is possible to talk of cultural imperialism as having cultural, economic, social, economic/ecological and political implications for societies at the receiving end. We retrace the evolution of efforts to supplant indigenous practices in the built environment in Cameroon before exploring these implications in the case of Cameroon.

Supplanting indigenous practices in the built environment in Cameroon

Cameroon (see Fig. 1) is the only country in Africa that was colonized by three European powers, viz., Germany, Britain and France. Despite their different national identities, Cameroon's erstwhile colonizers were unified in their relentless pursuit of efforts to supplant the country's indigenous land tenure and spatial planning systems with European varieties. The ink on the treaty authorizing the German government to take-over Cameroon had hardly dried when German colonial authorities enacted policies designed to Westernize the territory's traditional land tenure system. One of the earliest and best known steps in this regard was taken as far back as 1896 (Njoh, 2003). The Germans were certainly not alone in this regard. The French and British who assumed control of the territory subsequent to the conclusion of World War I, and the commensurate ousting of the Germans from Cameroon, are on record for also taking steps to westernize the country's
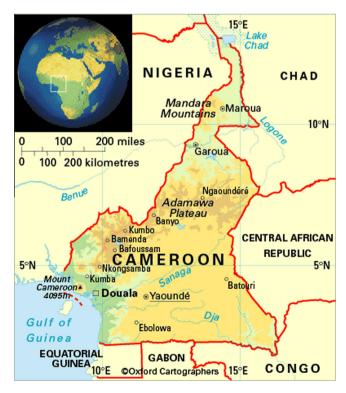

Fig. 1.