

RELIGIONS AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: SOCIAL CAPITAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

Shi Yuhua

Renmin University of China,
P. R. China.

Abstract

Since Max Weber put forward the proposition of “Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism,” the relationship between religious culture and economic development has been a subject of ongoing debate. The rapid development of East Asia in the second half of the 20th century turned East Asian Values into a challenge to the Protestant ethic. However, the spread of Protestantism in sub-Saharan Africa has not brought about economic achievements comparable to those in Europe or East Asia. Any examinations of the relationship between religion and development in Africa must, on the one hand, consider the characteristics, influences, and interrelations of Africa’s three major religions—Christianity, Islam and traditional religions. On the other hand, recognize that African development involves not only economic growth but also the development of social capital and politics. African civilization places greater emphasis on the development of social capital than on political or economic development. The three major religions in Africa have played significant yet distinct roles in these three aspects of development, with varying focuses and degrees of influence, while also facing certain obstacles that hinder progress. Among these three dimensions, religion has the weakest promoting effect on Africa’s economic development. The limited contribution of religions to the key drivers of economic growth, coupled with the constraints African states face in exercising economic sovereignty, has meant that African economies remain only “semi-embedded” in African societies and traditions. The characteristics of African civilization suggest that Africa can only pursue a path to modernization that aligns with its own cultural traditions.

Keywords: Christianity; Islam; African Traditional Religion; Social Capital; Political Development; Economic Development; Semi-embedded

Introduction

Africa stands as one of the world’s most spiritually vibrant continents, where faith shapes identity, social order, and daily life where religion is not merely practiced but lived. The continent’s spiritual landscape is dominated by **Christianity, Islam,**

and African Traditional Religions, whose adherents constitute approximately **50%, 40%, and 10%** of the population, respectively. Between **2010 and 2020**, sub-Saharan Africa witnessed a remarkable **31% growth in its Christian population**, reaching **1.1 billion believers**. By **2020**, Christianity accounted for nearly **62%** of the region's population, while **Islam represented about one-third**, reflecting a deeply rooted religious pluralism that continues to define Africa's moral and cultural fabric. Since 2018, Africa's Christian population has reached 670 million, thus surpassing Latin America and making Africa the continent with the largest Christian population in the world (Perbi & Ngugi, 2022). How do religions affect Africa's development? Has religions brought more advantages than disadvantages, or more disadvantages than advantages to Africa's development? These are the questions this paper is going to explore.

From Protestant ethic to African civilization

Max Weber (2001) explored the impact of religion on economic development in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He argued that Protestantism fostered the virtues of diligence, thrift and dedication, which contributed to the development and industrialization of Protestant regions in Northern Europe. In contrast, Other religions such as Catholicism, Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism and Hinduism failed to produce modern capitalism due to various shortcomings.

Weber's views sparked significant academic debate worldwide and have remained highly controversial. Some critics argued that the rapid development of East Asia over the past three decades has disproved Weber's theory, but this is in fact a misinterpretation of Weber's ideas (Pye, 2000). In his another book *the Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, Weber (1951) said that both China and Japan could, on the basis of "East Asian values," assimilate the capitalism that had already been fully developed technologically and economically. Atiemo (2020) points out that India, the core state of Hinduism, has embraced the principle of capitalism and democracy as one of the biggest democracies in the world. Yang Guangbin (2023) believes that Weber's two books are not merely academic texts, but political works disguised in academic form, promoting cultural imperialism and the superiority of Christian civilization. Zhao Xiao (2007), on the other hand, affirmed the positive significance of the Protestant ethic and its moral norms for the long-term healthy development of market economy. Despite the controversies surrounding Weber's theory, his intellectual legacy lies not in the answers it provided, but in the big question he raised—the interrelationship between religions and development. This is precisely why "Weber fever" has endured over time (Sun, 2010).

The question is: in the decades since the end of World War II, why have some Third World countries, which all began as late-developing nations, achieved remarkable developmental success, while others have remained in poverty and backwardness? Does this suggest that some cultures are more conducive to economic growth than

others? After comparing the development of Ghana and South Korea, Samuel Huntington was astonished to find that the economic data of the two countries were very similar in the 1960s. Thirty years later, South Korea developed rapidly and entered the ranks of developed countries, however, no such changes had occurred in Ghana. Huntington (2000) believes that many factors played a role in this extraordinary difference, but culture had to be a large part of the explanation. South Koreans value thrift, hard work, education, organization and discipline, while Ghanaians have different values. In short, cultures count.

Curiously, Rumi Hassan (2017) found that the cultural differences between Ghana and South Korea are not as great as Huntington suggested, since both countries have large Christians. The proportion of Christian population in Ghana and South Korea is 71% and 31% respectively. South Korea, once a member of the Confucian cultural sphere in history, has created not only the economic “Miracle on the Han River” but also the cultural “miracle of missionary in modern era (Wang, 2000)”. Through comparison, it is clear that the “cultural” here is not a singular concept, but a plural one. Though South Koreans embraced Christianity, they still retained their traditional “East Asian values”, thus getting closer to what Weber calls “Protestant ethics”; While Ghanaian Christians still preserved their African traditional religions, bringing about differences in Christian culture compared to that of South Korea.

So, can we say that “East Asian values” are superior to African traditional culture? Or must Africans learn from East Asians to achieve economic development? Cultural progressivism and cultural relativism adopt sharply opposing positions on this issue. Cultural progressivists contend that less advanced civilizations ought to learn from more advanced ones, yet this thread of thought would easily slide into cultural superiority or even fascism; Cultural relativists, however, insist that no civilization is inherently superior to another, as each civilization is deeply rooted in its unique environment and historical context. From the perspective of cultural relativism, preserving civilizational diversity is far more important than pursuing the so-called “progress”. But cultural relativism may also lead to complacency and stagnation of development.

In fact, after the periods of rapid economic growth, East Asian countries have encountered developmental bottlenecks, marked by serious social challenges such as the real estate bubble bursting, fertility rates declining, population aging, social atomization, loss of faith, environmental pollution, and decline of happiness. Japan has experienced the “lost two decades” since the collapse of its bubble economy in the 1990s; China has entered a prolonged period of economic downturn since 2015; South Korea today has the lowest birth rates in the world. According to a survey, in the year of 2024 the fertility rates in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan of China and mainland China were 0.7, 1.2, 0.9 and 1.0 respectively, lower than the United States (1.6) and the European Union (1.5), and far below India (2.0) and Africa (4.0) (PRB,

2024).

Which path of modernization should Africa take? Is the East Asian model applicable to Africa? This requires prudent deliberation by African leaders and researchers, rather than blind imitation. Ethiopia, after overthrowing the Mengistu military regime in 1993 and established a dominant-party democracy and ethnic federalism, was once expected to replicate the East Asia's "developmental state" model. However, frequent domestic ethnic and religious conflicts, together with the outbreak of the Tigray War in 2021, cast a shadow over Ethiopia's "developmental state" model. Francis Fukuyama (2019) bluntly stated that Ethiopia did not qualify as a "developmental state". India, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, is closer to the reality of Africa than East Asian Countries that have already completed nation-building and forged national identity in ancient times. Since the second half of the 20th century, India has achieved state-directed "slow but steady industrialization" (Kohli, 2004) while maintaining cultural diversity and political federalism. Today, under the leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India adheres to capitalism and Hindu nationalism as its guiding ideologies. Having surpassed China to become the most populous country in the world, India is expected to overtake Germany to be the world's third-largest economy. While India's economic investments in Africa pale in comparison to China, but India shares deeper cultural, religious and commercial ties with the continent. As the largest rice exporter in the world, India includes four African countries—Benin, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and Togo—among its top ten export destinations (WITS, 2024). African countries are supposed to balance short-term and long-term interests, national and social interests, as well as economic and cultural interests when choosing a path of modernization in line with their actual situations.

It should be recognized that a country's development refers not only to economic development but also to political and social development. Unlike "economic development" and "political development", "social development" is not a rigorous academic concept. It is often combined with "economic development" in the expression "socio-economic development". Therefore, for most developing countries, the core issue they have to deal with in the process of modernization is the sequence between political development and economic development.

The first generation of Western political scholars after World War II believed that economic development would bring democracy to Third World countries. But the frequent military coups took place in these countries in the 1960s and 1970s showed that economic development led not to political development but political decay. Huntington thus proposed a theory of political order, arguing that building a strong government is the only way for third-world countries to develop. Yet, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the arrival of the third wave of democratization made Huntington begin to doubt his theory of political order. In *The Third Wave: Democratization in the late Twentieth Century*, he reaffirmed the value of

democracy. But shortly afterwards, he once again questioned the universality of Western liberal democracy and the subsequent theory of “end of history”, and wrote a highly controversial book titled *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1997). In the book, he divides the world map into nine major civilizations, among which he refers to the region south of the Sahara and west of Rift Valley as “possible African civilizations”. Huntington emphasizes that Western civilization is unique, not universal; The West should not attempt to promote its values to non-Western societies because the differences among civilizations are basic and fundamental. Forcing other civilizations to accept western values will not only provoke clashes between civilizations, but also infect non-Westerners “western virus” and “cultural schizophrenia”. Therefore, non-Western countries should pursue a path of modernization that aligns with their own cultural characteristics.

The particularity of Africa lies in the way it prioritizes the importance of different dimensions of development. In African civilization, social development comes first, followed by political development, and economic development. The social development here refers specifically to the accumulation of social capital. The Political development includes three aspects: the formation of early African states, anti-colonialism and decolonization, and democratization. The elements of economic development involve human resources, capital accumulation, economic institution, technological innovation, resource endowments, industrial policies and so on.

Religions and social (capital) development in Africa

According to Putnam’s (1993) research, social capital referring to the trust and norms generated among the group members through their interactions can promote cooperative behavior to enhance social efficiency. The reason why northern Italy was more developed and democratic than the south is that the north had the spirit of civic participation and social capital which were absent in the south.

There has been extensive researches on social capital worldwide, but most of them regard social capital as an instrument rather than a purpose. In other words, the ultimate goal of creating and accumulating social capital is to achieve economic and political development. But this point ignores Putnam’s (2000) perspective in another monograph on social capital—*Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*. By observing the phenomenon of “bowling alone” in American communities, he noticed the decline of American citizen participation and sought strategies to revitalize American society. Putnam stressed that social capital is not just an instrument for promoting economic growth and democratization but an end itself. Trust and community connectedness are essential for a sound personality and fulfilling lives, whereas a society full of distrust and hostility is unimaginable. Social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy (Putnam, 2000).

In African civilization, social capital is not merely a tool but a purpose—the first and foremost purpose. The great importance African people attach to social capital is reflected in its distinctive cultural traditions. One of the most well-known proverbs is that “the African works to live but doesn’t live to work”, which is very close to Bentham’s (1823) utilitarian philosophy. He believed that the maximization of happiness is the purpose of life, right in stark contrast to the asceticism of the Protestant ethic. Actually, ascetic elements are not entirely absent in Africa—Sufi Muslims on the continent exhibit certain ascetic features (Jin, 2009). Yet Bentham (1823) maintained that the principles of asceticism never was, nor ever can be, consistently pursued by any living creatures. The African has an inexhaustible need for communication and prefer interpersonal warmth over content. Everything is a pretext for celebration: birth, baptism, marriage, birthday, promotion, election, return from a short or a long trip, mourning, opening or closure of Congress, traditional and religious feasts. African considers any person he meets a friend until the contrary is demonstrated (Etounga-Manguelle, 2000). During my six-months fieldwork in Africa, the number of hands I shook with strangers—especially with African Muslims was more than that I had shaken in the previous thirty years of my life. In conversations, I found most Africans speak openly and conceal little of their real feelings, and are eager to share their joys or sorrows with others.

The core of the African “Ubuntu spirit”, unlike western individualism, lies in the idea that “I am because we are”, emphasizing that each person’s well-being and value depend on relationships with others and community. The “Ubuntu Spirit”, in some degrees, shares some similarities with the concept of “benevolence” in Confucianism of East Asian, as both highlight the social relations to human existence. The difference is in that Confucianism places greater emphasis on the hierarchy in social relations and restrictions of individual behavior through rituals and proprieties, while African culture highlights equality in social relations by establishing various horizontal social organizations to help each other, communicate friendship and share happiness. Putnam (1993) believes that, compared with vertical networks, horizontal networks are more helpful to accumulate social capital and solve dilemma of collective action than vertical ones. Religions and religious organizations are one of the most important sources of happiness for African people. At Dunamis International Gospel Centre in Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria, I witnessed Pentecostal Christians praying through music, dance, and acclamation, which helps believers release stress, alleviate loneliness and anxiety, and gain a sense of belonging. Professor Ibrahim Uthman of Department of Islamic and Arab Studies at Ibadan University told me that,

“Today Nigerians have been found to be the happiest people in the world. They are also the most religious and tolerant people in the world. Religion is keeping people happy because they believe that even they don’t get comfort and necessities of life in Nigeria, they believe they will be compensated by god in the year after, so that is giving people succor and solace. However, in Europe and America, a lot of people

are stressed and unhappy even though they have comfort. Western people used to be Christians, but after Renaissance they started abandoning Christianity and become agnostics or atheists.”

However, social capital does not always bring harmony and happiness but conflicts and sufferings instead. Putnam (2000) distinguishes between two types of social capital: bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital helps to reinforce the reciprocity and solidarity among group members, but it tends to be somewhat exclusive. For example, social networks based on ethnicity may provide its members with social and psychological support. Bridging social capital, by contrast, refers to networks of interaction and trust between different groups and classes. Bridging social capital can generate broader norms of reciprocity, while bonding social capital will confine people inside their own small circles. In some cases, the two types of social capital can reinforce each other; while in others, some kinds of bonding social capital may discourage the formation of bridging social capital and vice versa.

In many Africa’s ethnic and religious conflicts, we always find high levels of bonding social capital within ethnic groups and lower levels of bridging social capital between the groups. Universal religions (Christianity & Islam) and African traditional religions differ in their effectiveness at promoting these two kinds of social capital. Christianity and Islam, as monotheistic religions, both claim their universality while also exhibiting strong exclusive tendencies. In Africa, universal religions can promote the formation of both social capitals, or promote the formation of bonding social capital at the cost of impeding bridging social capital. Generally speaking, in countries dominated by one single religion, for example, Islam in North Africa and Christianity in southern Africa have both served to strengthen social cohesion among ethnic groups. But in the regions located on the “civilizational fault line” where Christian and Islamic civilizations encounter in Africa, universal religions primarily promote bonding social capital and secondarily bridging social capital. For instance, the Islamic jihad in West Africa in the early 19th century amalgamated Hausa and Fulani people in northern Nigeria into the Hausa-Fulani Muslims. At the same time, the spread of Christianity in southeastern Nigeria created a religious gulf between the north and south as well as long-standing distrust and conflicts between Igbo Christians and Hausa-Fulani Muslims. Similar patterns have occurred between the northern and southern Sudan, northern and southern Chad, and northern and southern Cote d’Ivoire.

African traditional religions that are mainly characterized by ancestral, animistic and totem worship, such as the Oduduwa “God of the Sky” worship in the Yorubaland of Nigeria, the Golden Stool worship of the Ashanti people in Ghana and Voodoo in Benin, have played a major role in promoting bonding social capital. At the same time, due to the lack of systematic theory, African traditional religions are usually intertwined with witchcraft. Their organizational capacity and durability

are relatively weaker than those of universal religions. Since the 19th century, the expansion of colonialism and Islam in Africa has greatly squeezed the living space of African Traditional religions. For instance, the failure of the Maji Maji uprising in Tanganyika in the early 20th century destroyed the credibility of indigenous faith and paved the way for Christianity's rapid growth there (Iliffe, 1979). However, some scholars argue that contrary to some might believe, Christian religion, far from being put an end to witchcraft in Africa, has legitimized it. The existence of Satan is recognized by the Bible and the White Fathers, thus confirming the existence of sorcerers and other evil persons (Etounga-Manguelle, 2000). In other words, African traditional religions have undergone transformation under the impact of universal religions, actively syncretizing with Christianity or Islam. This syncretism means that traditional religions can also, in some circumstances, contribute to the development of bridging social capital.

Among ethnic groups on the “civilizational fault line”, such as Yoruba Muslims and Christians, Oromo Muslims and Christians, Nuba Muslims and Christians, people of different universal religions coexist by sharing traditional religious beliefs. Inter-marriage between Muslims and Christians within the same ethnic group of Yoruba, Oromo and Nuba is very common. These Christians and Muslims harmoniously live together in the same family. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abi's (2016) doctoral dissertation *Social Capital and Its Role in Traditional Conflict Resolution: The Case of Inter-religious Conflict in Jimma Zone of the Oromia Regional State in Ethiopia*, examines the important role that the “Religious Peace Forum” in the Jimma region of Oromo people played in enhancing social trust and resolving conflicts between local Christians and Muslims. Another typical example is Nigerian President Tinubu, who is a Yoruba Muslim but his wife is a Yoruba Christian. To some extent, the Yoruba have served as a buffer between the northern and southern Nigeria, analogous to the role of a “buffer zone” in geopolitics. Therefore, the Yoruba, a multi-religious group based on traditional religious consensus, might be termed “buffer ethnic group”. In short, diverse forms of traditional religions have played the role of “social integrator” and “social adhesive” in the social process of Africa (Zhang, 1999).

Religions and Political Development in Africa

The second dimension of how religion influence Africa's development is political development. Africa's political development can be divided into three aspects: the formation of early African states (pre-colonial centralized states), anti-colonialism and decolonization, and democratization. Christianity, Islam and traditional African religions have all played significant roles in these three aspects.

In the pre-colonial period, the formation of early centralized states in Africa had a significant impact on the governing strategies chosen by European colonizers during the colonial era. Although most nation-states in today's Africa do not inherit directly from their early states, the early states deeply influenced their

political culture and national identity of modern states through political traditions, religious legitimacy, ethnic identity and trade networks. The states formation in Egypt and Maghreb was inseparable from the expansion of Islam in North Africa. The division of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia in North Africa can be traced back to the 13th to 16th century when the Maghreb was divided into three dynasties: the Marinids, the Ziyenids and the Hafsid (Niane & Ki-Zerbo, 1998). Senegal and Guinea were culturally connected with the Islamic kingdoms of Futa Toro and Futa Jalon respectively, both established during the Islamic jihad in West Africa at the end of the 18th century. The predecessor of today's northern Nigeria was the Sokoto Caliphate formed in the early 19th century Hausa Jihad; Ethiopia, which regained independence in 1941, inherited directly from the Ethiopian Christian Empire; Madagascar's predecessor was the Merina Christian Kingdom; and Zanzibar's predecessor was 18th century Oman Sultanate. By contrast, the most of the early states in sub-Saharan Africa were based on traditional African religions. The Ashanti Kingdom and the Dahomey Kingdom were founded upon Golden Stools and Vodun respectively; The Yoruba Kingdom practiced the worship of the Oduduwa "God of the Sky", and the Zulu Kingdom of South Africa practiced the worship of ancestors and the belief in the supreme deity (Unkulunkulu). Similar cases also include the Luba Kingdom and Lunda Empire in Congo, as well as the Antongo Kingdom in Angola. Today, except for Morocco, Swaziland and Lesotho where monarchs still have substantial power, most of these kingdoms no longer exist as political entities. Nevertheless, they keep alive widely as cultural symbols and participants in local governance. In Kumasi of Ghana, I witnessed a grand ceremonial procession of the Ashanti kingdom: people dressed in traditional attires, singing and dancing as they accompanied the king to mediate disputes among local chiefs.

In the aspect of anti-colonialism and decolonization, universal religions and traditional religions have also played a crucial role in rallying people and political mobilization. Colonial aggression provoked Islamic jihad in Sudan and Somalia, dealing a heavy blow to European colonialism; The Ethiopian Empire utilized Christianity for the war and defeated Italy in the Battle of Adwa, just as Emperor Menelik II heroically declared, "Ethiopia has need of no one, she stretches out her hands unto God (Boahen, 1985)." The people of Tanganyika, under the brutal German colonial rule, got united by "Maji Maji" holy water and created the largest anti-colonial uprising in East Africa. As for decolonization for independence, Algerian Muslim nationalism was ignited by France's obstruction of its independence; Sultan Mohammed V sided with Muslim nationalist movement, which demanded independence of Morocco (Shillington, 2019); Libyan leader Gaddafi sought to mount a radical Muslim revolution in order to rid the country of "western influence" and the exploitation of the country's mineral resources, and to establish Libya as a major unifying force in the Arab Muslim world (Shillington, 2019). Similarly, after World War II, Christianity in Africa was characterized by "decolonization". As Christianity is an ally of colonialism, decolonization must

start from the church. The African Independent Church, which was established after the indigenization of Christianity in Africa, played a prominent role in the decolonization process of Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya. A notable resistance movement of the period was the Independent Church Movement led by Malawi Baptist pastor John Chilembwe. Having studied in the United States and embraced the idea of “Africa for African”, Chilembwe founded the Providence Industrial Mission in 1900 and used the church to fight against colonial rule and the brutality, exploitation and inhumanity of European settlers (Linden, 1971). Starting with an resentment and rejection of colonialism and foreign missionaries, the desire for Africans to lead the church eventually made it an instrument of national independence (Li, 2024).

The effect of religions in promoting democratization in Africa is relatively complex. Broadly speaking, Christianity, Islam and traditional religions have all contributed to strengthening bonding social capital, mobilizing social forces and expanding political participation in building pluralist democracy. Unlike direct democracy and elitist democracy theories, Robert Dahl’s (1983) pluralist democracy theory is that power arrangements in society are competitive, and decision-making results from government efforts to reconcile conflicts among various interest groups. In Africa, religious organizations and traditional ethnic groups are naturally “interest groups” on the way to pluralist democracy. Although this form of democracy—marked by oligarchic features such as prebendalism, clientelism, and religious conflict that hamper the formation of a national identity—is distant from what Barrington Moore (1974) called “middle-class democracy”, a pluralistic and mutually constraining social structure is nevertheless a necessity to realize democracy.

In practice, the democratization process in Africa has not yet been satisfactory, although some progress has been made since the 21st century. According to the Free House ratings of 2024, only five countries on African continent (South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Ghana and Senegal) and three African Island Countries (Mauritius, Cape Verde, Sao Tome and Principe) have consolidated their liberal democracies; While eighteen African countries are classified as “partly free”, including Tunisia, Cote d’Ivoire, Senegal, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Zambia, Kenya, Madagascar, Comoros, etc. And the remaining thirty-plus African countries are are rated “not free” (Freedom House, 2025).

From the perspective of religion and politics, several reasons account for this. Firstly, advancing democracy in Christians-dominated countries of southern Africa is easier than that in Muslims-dominated countries of northern Africa. According to Huntington’s study of the “Third Wave” of democratization, there is a strong correlation between Christianity and democracy due to the features of Christianity such as the separation of church and state, individualism, and encouragement of capitalist development. In Southern Africa, the spread of Christianity has clearly facilitated the development of capitalism and the formation of civil society.

Secondly, the Christian churches played the critical role as a planner and an organizer at the beginning of the democratization process in Africa; During transitions and crises of democratization, churches acted as mediators and monitors; In the process of democratic consolidation, they helped to maintaining social stability and supervising the exercise of power by taking advantage of the unique social functions (Guo, 2010). For example, Archbishop Tutu of Cape Town was involved in promoting racial reconciliation and democratization of South Africa; The Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) established in 1978 served as a core platform against the apartheid regime of South Africa and later helped accept exiles and promote national reconciliation after Namibia's independence in 1990 (Horn, 2010). However, the Christianity is not a master key to open the door of democracy. South Sudan, the youngest Christian country in the world, remains under the highly authoritarian rule of President Kiir more than two decades after independence. The situation is no better in another two Christian African countries—Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of Congo, which suggests that Christianity is a conducive but not a sufficient element to achieve democracy.

In contrast, Islam contains elements that are compatible with democracy, such as egalitarianism and voluntarism, but it also contains components that are incompatible with democracy. For instance, it rejects any distinction between the religious community and political community. Therefore, it is unclear whether “Islamic democracy” is a contradiction (Huntington, 2010). In Senegal, religious leaders and workers provided crucial support for the rural mobilization and presidential election of the Senegalese Democratic Bloc (BDS) established by Senghor (Huntington, 2006), who later declared, “It was the imams in the mosques who made our triumph” (Foltz, 1966). During the Arab Spring democratization movement across North Africa in 2011, with some notable exceptions, the role of Islamic politics in the crucial events of the Arab uprisings appears to have been largely muted, drowned out by a broader protest movement shaped by a non-ideological civic identity (Al-Arian, 2018). Even so, the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the biggest beneficiary of the fall of Mubarak's regime in Egypt. But the Brotherhood's political success was short-lived: the Morsi government supported by the Brotherhood was overthrown by a military coup after roughly one year in power, and the succeeding military regime under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi promulgated a new constitution in 2014 that, relative to the 2012 constitution, was widely characterized as rolling back the Brotherhood's gains, and as embodying a more secular and rationalist orientation (Wang & Guo, 2022).

Among today's North African Arab states, only Tunisia and Morocco have made certain progress in democratization; Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Somalia and Algeria remain under authoritarian rule. One notable exception is Mauritania, the only Islamic republic in Africa and one of the poorest countries in the world with a per capita GDP of just over \$2,000. But in the last two decades, Mauritania has been more democratic than its wealthy neighbors like Morocco and Tunisia. Since the

restoration of an elected government in 2009, the country's democratic system have remained functioned normally and experienced a historic "democratic transfer of power" in 2019 with a two-term limit for the presidency. However, as an elected President, Ghazouani used to be a professional military officer, his democratic adjustment remains incomplete and political power has not been fully transferred to civilians (Milošević, 2020). Ghazouani was successful re-elected in 2024 and will continue to face domestic challenges such as slavery, poverty and inequalities (Knoskova, 2024). Whether Mauritania's democratic system can be consolidated in the future requires further observations.

Meanwhile, Islamic extremist forces and terrorist organizations in Africa have also become important factors threatening Africa's political development and democratization process. Since the Islamic State suffered setbacks in the Middle East after 2014, it has gradually shifted its footholds to the impoverished and vulnerable Sahel region of Africa. Boko Haram, active northeastern Nigeria and around Lake Chad, holds the banner of anti-Western education and anti-modernization; The Islamic Maghreb al-Qaeda in northern Mali and western Niger seeks to expel the Western influence and establish a fundamentalist government; Al-Shabaab In East Africa is trying to overthrow the Somali government and establish an Islamic state. The key factors for African countries to advance democracy is to cooperate internationally to combat terrorism and make continuous efforts to improve African people's livelihoods and educations to eradicate the soil of religious extremism.

In African countries located on "civilizational fault line", the democratization process has generally been more successful than in North Africa. In Kenya, Ghana and Benin where Christians are the majority and Islamic fundamentalists are relatively few, secular states with separation of religion and politics have been established, so Christians and Muslims in these countries have largely coexisted peacefully. After democratization, the ruling parties in these three countries have largely rotated among different ethnic groups or coalitions, and their pluralistic democracies become increasingly consolidated. In Nigeria, however, the strong Islamist presence in the north has produced a pattern in which governing parties effectively alternate between northern and southern parties, and voting in successive elections is often clearly divided along religious fault lines. Although Tanzania still maintains a dominant party system led by Revolutionary Party (CCM), it has, like Nigeria, developed an informal political tacit in which Christian and Muslim candidates take turns to be the president. This practice of "taking turns" reflects a delicate balance not only between Christianity and Islam but also between religion and politics. Distinct from the classical models of theocracy (unity of religion and politics) and constitutional principle of secularism (separation of religion and politics), the relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria and Tanzania actually belongs to the third type—the accommodation of religion and politics.

In contrast, the state power in Chad has long been held by northern Muslims, while the southern Christians have been persistently marginalized. The north–south tensions, together with factional competition among Muslim groups for leadership, have triggered frequent civil wars and intensified authoritarian rule. Chad also failed to achieve a successful transition in the third wave of democratization. This is the ongoing consequence of the cyclical nature of rebellion, of tensions with neighboring countries, of persistent contestation of electoral processes, of the weakness of public institutions, and of the low degree of confidence among the citizenry in the state’s capacity to claim a monopoly on legitimate physical violence across the national territory (Toulou, 2020). Cote d’Ivoire also suffered a north–south civil war in the early 2000s but restored order relatively quickly after the conflict. This recovery stemmed from President Alassane Ouattara, a northern Muslim, incorporating southern Christian elites into government after he assumed power. He also established a “Dialogue, Truth, and Reconciliation Commission” and implemented policies of economic growth to foster national reconciliation (Meng, 2021). The situation of Ethiopia after the civil war with Eritrea lies roughly in between the cases of Chad and Cote d’Ivoire. Since the 1990s, Ethiopia experienced rapid economic growth, but that growth exacerbated economic disparities between north and south, also among the ethnic groups. The challenges including Eritrea’s independence, Tigrayan separatism and conflicts, Somali-region (Ogaden) insurgencies and Islamist oppositions within the Oromo people, have repeatedly tested the governing capability of the ruling coalition party (the former EPRDF and the present Prosperity Party) and the integrative capacity of Ethiopia’s ethnic-federalist system.

Overall, religions’ contribution to the political development in Africa has been somewhat less pronounced than its contribution to the development of social capital. Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religions all made comparable contributions to anti-colonial and decolonization struggles. Both Islam and traditional religions contributed a lot to the formation of early states in Africa, while Christianity has a prominent impact on democratization. The African examples demonstrate that religion is not merely, as Karl Marx put it, the “spiritual opium” that numbs the people; Instead, religions have functioned as a “spiritual weapon” in resisting colonial rule, fighting for independence and advancing democratization.

Religions and economic development in Africa

In the pre-colonial period and the era of the slave trade, Africa’s economic development was closely tied to religions. The ancient trans-Saharan trade dominated by African Muslims was primarily a luxury trade. Actually, the Arab slave trade had existed for centuries before the trans-Atlantic slave trade started. The trans-Atlantic trade, which began in the late 15th century, greatly expanded the scale of the former slave trade. The trans-Atlantic trade proceeded smoothly due to the close collaboration between European slave traders and early African states

such as the Kingdom of Ashanti, Dahomey, Benin, Ndongo and the Sultanate of Zanzibar, which were founded on the ideological basis of African traditional religions or Islam.

As Karl Polanyi (2001) observed, acts of barter are usually embedded in long-range relations implying trust and confidence. In the Dahomey Kingdom, ancestral worship is the core of its social organization. Economic activities in Dahomey are traceable in the palace and the Annual Customs of the state sphere, and in the voluntary work teams and mutual aid associations, as well as in the sib compound and its ancestor worship in the non-state sphere (Polanyi, 1968). The continuity of this social tradition was so strong that the abolition of the slave trade in the early 19th century did not lead to economic collapse of these early states; instead, it helped them quickly adapt to the economic transformation from the slave and luxury trade and to the processing and exportation of essential commodities such as palm oil and cocoa. The Sokoto Jihad, which broke out in northern Nigeria in 1804, further facilitated the economic integration of the Hausa commercial city-state. After the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, the new Fulani aristocracy replaced the old one and were careful not to become as corrupt as their predecessors, and greater respect for Islamic law ensured greater justice for the general Hausa population. Trade flourished and Kano in particular became a major market center (Shillington, 2019).

However, during the colonial period, this situation was completely reversed. As the expansion of capitalism with violence and brutality in Africa, the African economies began to “disembedded” from its social traditions. Consequently, as discussed in Section III of this paper, anti-colonial movements prompted by universal religions or traditional religions swept across the continent. In Polanyi's words, the continuous expansion of the market met by a countermovement checking the expansion in definite directions (Polanyi, 2001). Yet, with the exception of Ethiopia, nearly no African state was able to resist the colonial conquest of Europeans armed with advanced weaponry. Colonial rule severely damaged Africa's political, economic, and cultural ecosystems, disrupted its normal trajectory of development and became one of the key reasons for the Africa's long-term underdevelopment.

By the 1960s, motivated by currents of nationalism and socialism, African nations had gradually gained political independence. Yet, economic sovereignty remained in the hand of their former colonial powers—a phenomenon that Nkrumah (1965) called “neocolonialism”. While a number of African countries tried to reclaim their economic sovereignty through nationalization, the results were far from satisfactory; What's worse, in the 1970s and 1980s, socialist-oriented states such as Ethiopia, Benin, Tanzania, Angola and Mozambique encountered widespread setbacks or even large-scale famines. After the end of the Cold War, neoliberalism swept across the African continent, and the vast majority of African countries began to adopt

multiparty democracy, economic privatization and market economy. Despite economic growth since the 1990s, African countries are facing the risk of losing economic sovereignty again. Nkrumah's warning in *Neocolonialism: the Last Stage of Imperialism* are still worthy of reflections today. Recovering the concept, the discourse of neocolonialism is a necessary step towards a more authentic study of the predicament of many African countries as they engaged "old" and "new" donor institutions and corporations, as well as foreign investors (Langan, 2018).

It can be said that the current relationship between Africa's economy and social traditions is neither the "embedded" state of the precolonial era, nor the "disembedded" state of colonial era, but rather a "semi-embedded" or "semi-disembedded" state in between. Today, Africa's economic structure is only partially integrated into indigenous society while partially detached from it. The semi-embedded condition prevents Africa's economy from integrating into ethnic groups, social customs and religions in Africa, so as to hinder the further economic development.

Religions contribute the least to economic development compared with social and economic development in Africa. According to a quantitative study by Qayyum & Sabir (2020) on the relationship between religious piety and economic development in 110 countries in the world, religion has played an important role in economic development in Asia and Europe, but for Africa, religion has positive association with economic but it is not significant. Tedika's (2014) statistical analysis of religious diversity and economic development in sub-Saharan Africa shows that religion or religious diversity has no statistically significant impact on the institutional and social aspects of development in sub-Saharan Africa, while religious polarization and religious fractionalization have economically and statistically significant effects on investment in Sub-Saharan Africa. The weakness of religion's contribution to economic development in Africa can be explained by the "semi-embedded" theory.

According to the principles of development economics, essential elements for economic development include human resources, capital accumulation, natural resources, economic institutional, technological innovation, industrial policies and so on. The three major religions in Africa can only exert indirect influences—either facilitating or impeding—on some of these elements.

First, the relationship between human resources and economic development could be analyzed from three dimensions: size, quality and structure of population, among which population quality includes factors like education level, professional skills and health (Yao, 2017). The strong religiosity of Africa evidently contributes to maintaining a high fertility rate (above 4.0), which is the highest among all continents in the world. In addition, approximately 60% of Africa's population composed of young people and this proportion is expected to remain at a high level

by 2050 that promises Africa's potentials in economic development. In terms of literacy and education, the teaching of Bible and Koran undoubtedly improved literacy rates and cultural competence of African people, especially in remote and poor areas. Islam and Christianity also help to prevent and control the spread of HIV. Overall, North Africa and Muslim-majority countries have a lower proportion of HIV than the other regions in Africa, largely due to the constraints of behaviors regulated by Islamic law. Meanwhile, the Christian Church has provided financial, personnel and technical support for healthcare in Africa, making significant contributions to HIV prevention and treatment (Zhou, 2017). But obviously, the efforts of such social organization cannot substitute for public services at the national level. In southern Africa where HIV is rampant, the role of the churches is very limited.

Religions also pose several disadvantages for improving the population quality of Africa. The emphasis on religious knowledge among Africans may hinder their absorption of modern science and social science knowledge. Some Muslim parents in Ethiopia choose not to send their children to school at all. This applies particularly to girls, whom many local Muslim parents do not want to be educated in a mixed sex environment. Instead, there is scope for children's education in *madrasas*, established around mosques. But few *madrasas* engage in formal academic education and graduates from such schools are often disadvantaged in terms of future employment opportunities (Haynes, 2007). In addition, the prevalence of the three major religions in Africa means that African countries have quite a few religious festivals and holidays, particularly in countries alongside "civilizational fault line", where Christian and Islamic festivals are designated as legal holidays. Together with African traditional religious festivals and national political holidays, there are four sets of holiday system in these countries. The abundance of day-offs makes it difficult for African people to cultivate a sense of urgency for work. This, coupled with African Christians' adherence to weekend rest and Muslims' commitment to five daily prayers, stands in vivid contrast to the "overtime working culture" in East Asian countries. Frankly speaking, the effect of this situation in Africa has two sides. As mentioned in the first section, the relaxed and joyful atmosphere in Africa increases bonding social capital at the cost of lower economic performance, while the tireless work of East Asians boosts material wealth at the expense of social atomization and spiritual emptiness.

Besides, economic development also depends on capital accumulation, much of which in Africa comes not from inside but outside. The ways African states obtained foreign capital are partially related to religious factors. During the Cold War, aids from western countries and the Soviet Union were driven by ideologies rather than religions. For instance, after World War II, newly independent Ethiopia aligned itself with the capitalist camp headed by the US and received Western military and economic assistance; however, following the 1974 revolution, Ethiopia shifted to the Soviet socialist camp and began accepting Soviet aid. Similarly,

Tanzania and Zambia got infrastructure supports from China largely due to their socialist practices. After the end of the Cold War, the conditions of Western aid to Africa altered to democratization, market economy, protection of human rights, anti-terrorism, etc. China, in contrast, attached no political prerequisites to its aid for Africa. This enable authoritarian countries such as Sudan, Eritrea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Uganda can also receive international financial support. As for the aid from some small and medium-sized developed countries, religious kinship may influence their choice of African recipients, such as South Korea and Israel, where Christianity prevails, tend to provide aid to Southern Africa and East Africa, and less to Muslim countries in West Africa and North Africa. This may manifest some certain religious affinities, but the main determinants are objective factors such as geographical location, political stability and technological compatibility, etc.

In comparison, financial supports from Islamic and Arab countries exhibit a stronger degree of religious affinity. Traditional financial mechanisms and foreign loans are often accompanied by heavy interest burdens, which have driven some African countries into debt traps. In this case, Islamic finance has emerged as an alternative solution, offering interest-free loans in accordance with *Sharia* principles. Islamic financial products (IPF) should be in line with five key principles: (1) prohibition of interest (2) profit and loss sharing agreements (3) asset-backed financial transactions (4) prohibition of speculation (5) contracts must be *Sharia*-approved and sacred (Issahaku et al., 2024). This financial model—eschewing interest and emphasizing the sharing of both profit and risk—undoubtedly fosters a sense of identity and cohesion among Muslim communities, thereby making it highly attractive. According to regulations, the basic condition for membership of the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) is that the prospective member country should be a member country of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The OIC now has 57 member states, 27 of which are African countries that include not only Muslim-majority countries in North and West Africa (except Eritrea), but also several Muslims-minority countries, such as Togo, Gabon, Uganda and Mozambique. Notably, the second president of Gabon, Omar Bongo, who was originally a Catholic, converted to Islam in 1973 in order to bring Gabon, a country with a 90% Christian population, into the OIC and to build closer ties with oil-producing countries (The New Arab, 2023). Nigeria and Zanzibar both applied to join the OIC in the late 20th century, but confronted strong oppositions from domestic Christians. Ultimately, Zanzibar withdrew from the organization, while Nigeria withstood the pressure to become a former member of OIC.

Overall, the role being played by Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) in the past three decades towards improving the economies of African countries is indeed commendable (Daud & Abdul-Razak, 2011). However, the IsDB covers only half of African countries and its economic strength is not as powerful as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. So the role of Islamic finance in promoting

Africa's economic development remains relatively limited.

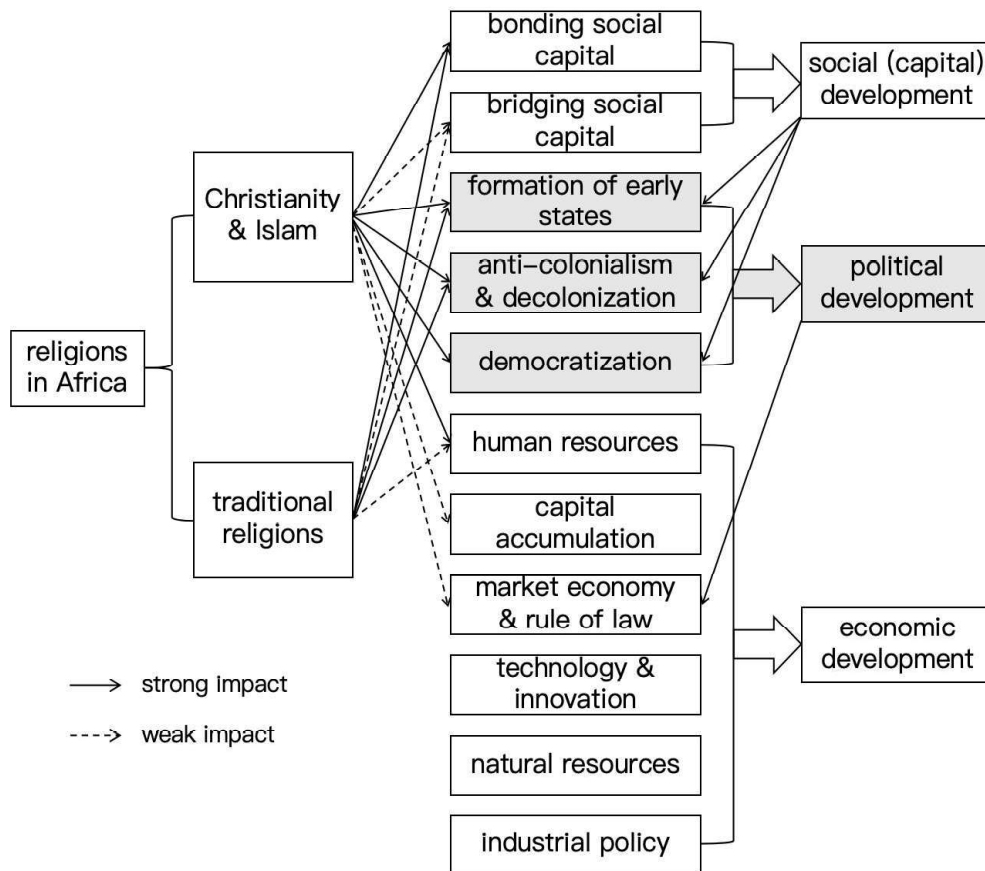
Religion's third channel of influence on Africa's economic development lies in the realms of market economy and the rule of law. One essential prerequisite for the development of market economy is a clear system of private property rights, yet traditional African tribal and religious cultures are lack of such concept of private ownership. In traditional Black African societies, tribal land and assets are communally or semi-communally owned. African traditional cultures and religions emphasize collective well-being over individual gains and prioritize righteousness, moral duty, mutual assistance and common defense (Li, 2011). Nyerere (1970) pointed out that communal ownership of land is traditional in Tanzania—it was the concept of freehold which had been foreign to them. Based on this idea, Nyerere launched the Ujama socialist movement in Tanzania, which was successful in politics by integrating national identity of Tanzania, but disastrous in economy for causing severe economic recessions and great famine in the 1970s and 1980s. A similar situation occurred in Zimbabwe under Mugabe's rule. Rapid and enforced land reform—seizing land from white farmers—resulted in an economic collapse and sharp currency devaluation. Moreover, in recent years, large-scale incidents of looting and damage targeting foreign businesses frequently occurred in countries such as South Africa, Angola, Mozambique and Kenya. The business environment and the rule of law were certainly undermined by the disturbances that was bound to be harmful to its economic development.

In contrast, both Christianity and Islam recognize the legitimacy of private property and land ownership, and each has developed its own comprehensive legal philosophies. Although western concepts of the rule of law originated from ancient Roman legal traditions, the covenant spirit in the Bible is the soul of the rule of law. The prohibition of theft in the Ten Commandments of Moses is essentially a protection of private property; Likewise, the Koran explicitly affirms private property and land ownership: “Eat not up your property among yourselves unjustly except it be a trade amongst you, by mutual consent” (5:29); “And He caused you inherit their lands, their houses, their riches, and a land which you had not trodden (before). And Allah is Able to do all things” (21:27). In this sense, the spread of Christianity and Islam in Africa has, to some extent, helped to cultivate civic awareness and respect for the rule of law, thereby indirectly promoting the economic development. Moreover, religious belief also contributes to the accumulation of social capital, which strengthens social norms, reduces transaction costs, and thus facilitates the growth of market economies.

In addition, factors such as technological innovation, natural resources, and industrial policies—each crucial to economic development—are beyond the scope of religious influence. In Africa's major industries today, agriculture and services are, on the one hand, largely “embedded” in the continent's indigenous societies. North Africa produces wheat and cotton; West Africa is known for cocoa, palm oil,

cassava, and cotton; East Africa produces coffee, tea, cloves, and sisal; while South Africa exports fruits, wine, and dairy products. Agriculture provides employment for more than half of Africa's population, underscoring how deeply it is rooted in the continent's soil of culture. Africa's service industry is of unique features: tourists to Africa are always impressed by the hospitality and the vibrancy of its cultural.

On the other hand, Africa's manufacturing is obviously insufficient and its infrastructure still need improving. Yet the ownership and core technologies of many associated industries are not held by African countries themselves but controlled by foreign capitals. Nigeria, for example, despite being an oil-producing giant and a member of OPEC, has to import refined oil products because the core refining technologies are in the hands of foreign companies; At one point, the country is still facing domestic fuel shortages that I experienced during my fieldwork in Ibadan. Similarly, the mineral development of Africa's gold, diamond, lithium, iron and limestone resources is largely participated by multinational corporations, with relatively low levels of local participation—often giving rise to feelings of alienation among local people. I interviewed Bishop Kukah of the Sokoto Diocese in Nigeria in 2024. He told me that, "Most Chinese industrial parks in Nigeria are closed off, and Chinese workers rarely interact or play with the local people. The locals feel that Chinese people are strange and mysterious. Therefore, Kukah suggested that cooperation between China and Africa should not be just about economy and there could be more cultural and people-to-people exchanges to bridge the gap. In conclusion, the limited contributions of religions to Africa's economic development, along with their limited economic sovereignty, means that Africa's economic development is "semi-embedded" in Africa's politics, religions and social relations.



The influence of religions on Africa's development

Conclusion

The development of Africa includes social capital, political and economic development. Religions have both positive and negative impacts on Africa's development, but in general, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. The nature of African civilization determines that Africans put the social capital development first, political development second, and economic development third. In terms of the social capital, the three major religions in Africa have a strong role in fostering the bonding social capital, but relatively weak in bridging social capital; While religions strengthens the cohesion within one ethnic group, they may also lead to tensions and even conflicts among different ethnic groups. In African countries located on the "civilizational fault line", traditional religions can perform as a "social adhesive" between Christians and Muslims; In terms of political development, all three major African religions have played a prominent role in the process of anti-colonialism and decolonization. Islam and traditional religions contributed significantly to the formation of early states in Africa, while Christianity has been more influential in advancing democratization. Africa's multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition has created a social structural foundation for the practice of pluralist democracy. However, Islamic extremism and the

theocratic traditions in some Muslim countries can negatively affect Africa's democratization. At the same time, the adherence to Christianity is not in itself a sufficient condition for African countries to achieve democratic transformation.

As for economic development, three major religions have all played a positive role in boosting Africa's human resources and maintaining a high fertility rate. Christianity and Islam have made notable contributions to improving literacy, cultural quality and health of African people. However, abundant of religious festivals and diverse forms of worships shorten the working hours of Africans, which would be detrimental to Africa's economic growth. Christianity and Islam have also helped to cultivate an awareness of the rule of law in protecting private property, thereby promoting the development of the market economy. The Islamic Development Bank has also provided financing opportunities for about half of African countries and promoted economic cooperation among the relevant countries. Moreover, religious factors cannot directly influence the technological innovation, natural resources, industrial policies and other elements essential for Africa's economic development. Therefore, the limitations of religious contribution to Africa's economic development and the inability of African countries to fully control their own economic sovereignty show that Africa's economic development are "semi-embedded" in its societies.

To enhance the positive role of religion in Africa's development, efforts can be made in the following aspects. First, in terms of social capital, greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening the bridging social capital, particularly by using the the African traditional religions to bridge the gap between Christianity and Islam. At the same time, African states should cooperate in combating religious extremism on the continent. Second, in aspects of political development, the significance of Africa's three major religions on early political practices and national independence is supposed be fully acknowledged. Simultaneously, efforts should be made to transform the model of relationship between religion and politics into separation or accommodation. Finally, in terms of economic development, African states and transnational enterprises should advance the economic development in a way that is embedded in Africa's traditions, religions, and societies, rather than detached from them. It is also necessary for multi-religious countries in Africa to establish a more rational holiday system in order avoid excessive festivals affecting the economy. Rome was not built in a day, and Africa's development cannot be accomplished overnight. Historical experience has repeatedly proved that attempts by African states to escape backwardness through radical reform strategies always lead to greater humanitarian disasters. The characteristics of African civilization determine that Africa can only pursue a path of modernization consistent with its own cultural traditions. Compared with development models rooted in Western Protestant ethics or East Asian values, the development experience of India with high cultural heterogeneity could be more meaningful to Africa.

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