

Research paper on difference in response to conflict through 3 different cultures...

[Politics](#), [President](#)



Culture, when broadly applied, is a term that can be used to describe virtually all avenues and aspects of human life. In his textbook *Cultural Anthropology*, Richley H. Crapo defines it as “ a learned system of beliefs, feelings, and rules for living around which a group of people organize their lives; a way of life of particular society” (Crapo, 2013). Perhaps the most astounding thing about humanity is the vast diversity in culture that emerges in different groups of people. The differences in culture come from a variety of factors, the most important being geography. One important marker of culture is how it resolves conflicts; this essay endeavors to compare three very different cultures in terms of how large-scale conflicts are resolved. Nordic-Icelandic, Kenyan-Swahili and Indigenous Mayan cultures differ vastly in their geography in terms of climate and distance from the other. A primary factor in the different ways they approach conflict resolution comes partly as a result of the unique geography of each culture. As a nation, Iceland has always been an interesting case study for geologists, sociologists and anthropologists alike. Its barren geography interests the latter, while the former are interested in a culture that lives on such a barren landscape. The influence of Scandinavian culture is important when understanding Icelandic culture; Karen Oslund, in her book *Iceland Imagined*, quotes early Iceland explorers Paul Gaimard and Xavier Marmier (1842): “ Iceland can not be entirely separated from the Scandinavian countries. From the point of view of the historian or linguist, it is the place of origins of the Scandinavian people, their traditions, language, and poetry” (Oslund, 2011). Where Icelandic people diverge from the roots of their traditions is very much a result of their isolated and unique geography. According to Oslund, “

From the point of view of the physicist, of the naturalist, Iceland is, in a similar way, the source of Scandinavian climate and regular and irregular phenomena” (Oslund, 2011).

Iceland was settled in 874 AD when it was discovered by the Scandinavian sailor Ingólfur Arnason. The settlers and slaves the Scandinavians brought to the island were a mix of Irish and Nordic descent; there is an ongoing debate between scholars as to whether Norse or Irish traditions played a more important role in the development of Icelandic culture (Oslund, 2011). For much of its history, Iceland was ruled by Denmark (and later Norway).

Iceland gained virtual independence in 1904, but it was not until June 1944 that it became an independent republic capable of self-governance. The population of Iceland to date is 319, 014 - approximately the size of a mid-sized US city. The small population is a reflection of the harsh geography, which in turn influences how Iceland, as an autonomous people, is able to respond to and resolve conflicts.

In recent memory, one of the biggest crises to shake Iceland was the 2008 financial crisis, which hit Iceland much harder than the rest of the world. Iceland responded to it in a unique way when compared to the approaches employed by other countries. Iceland’s crisis was both economic and political, since it led to the devaluing of all three of the country’s major commercial banks. As a result, they were unable to refinance their short-term debt, causing a run on deposits in both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Relative to the size of the country, the crisis led The Economist to call the crisis the “ biggest crisis of an economy that any country has ever suffered.”

As the world as a whole suffered from an economic crisis, Iceland had a uniquely huge problem on its hands. In order to fix its issues, both political agility and swift legislation had to be exercised in order to save the whole country from national bankruptcy. While, in many countries, political pundits often complain that the same individuals responsible for the financial blunders that caused the 2008 financial crisis are still in power, Iceland took drastic action and actually fired the bankers that were responsible for causing the problem.

Iceland's financial crisis was blamed mainly on its constitution, which had been in place since 1944, despite its original status as a provisional document. Its creators had planned to discard it by 1946, but the constitution remained in place - largely because of its own failings, which bifurcated power in ways that the UN in 2007 called a human right's violation (Wade and Sigurgeirsdottir, 2012).

The swift resolution to the Icelandic financial crisis shocked many who were looking in from the outside, as they quickly drafted, wrote and approved a new constitution that addressed their problems. This action is deeply rooted in Nordic culture, which tends to have strong family cohesiveness, and can be left leaning in how they feel their government should support them. Icelandic culture shares many of these parallels with its parent society; in their report "Iceland's Rise, Fall, Stabilization and Beyond," Wade and Sigursdottir discuss the speed with which the people of Iceland took to the streets with a 'Pot and Pan revolution' to protest the government's negligence in allowing the crash:

"The council decided to invite the people of Iceland to participate in its

proceedings via the Internet. The decision was a natural one in view of the fact that the constitutional revision process was set in motion by the Pops and Pans, ordinary people from all walks of life who took to the streets after the crash" (Sigurgeirsdottir & Wade, 2012).

95% of the 320, 000 people living in Iceland had Internet access; the 5% that were not connected, mostly the elderly, were invited to join the proceedings through the mail. This allowed the Icelandic people to have quick and easy access to the constitution redrafting process and watch it happen.

The preamble of the new Icelandic constitution reads: " We, the people of Iceland, wish to create a just society where every one of us has a seat at the same table." The 2008 Icelandic financial crisis was a conflict of national proportions. Its insular society is due largely to its barren and desolate geography, mostly located in the capital city of Reykjavik. This connectedness enables the people of Iceland to solve their problems in a very cohesive manner, unlike other countries and cultures that cannot respond to national conflicts as quickly due to their populations being more spread out.

A recent example of other countries having difficulty dealing with their problems occurred the year before Iceland's financial crisis in the post-election violence of Kenya's 2007 presidential election. The complex politics of Kenya are dense and difficult for outsiders to understand, as a web of disparate allegiances are weaved from forty-two tribes composing the country. In elections, there are family and tribal powers that retain much of the nation's political capital. In the 2012 presidential election, Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga were the son of the country's first president and

vice-president, respectively.

When Kenyans went to the polls in 2007, certain regions of the country descended into a violent chaos that it is still recovering from. Dubbed The 2007/2008 Post Election Violence, thousands of Kenyans across the country lost their lives and 600, 000 more were displaced in ethnic clashes. A quarter million are still living in refuge camps, or with friends and relatives away from their native soil (Okia, 2011).

Clandestine arms of certain political establishments are suspected of fanning the flames of that violence. The constitution enacted after British rule was amended to the point of creating a quasi-dictatorship with unchecked executive powers. This resulted in the upper-class claiming a great deal of land, and using their positions to improve their lot while leaving the rest of the country in the cold.

Kenyan's most visible national conflict is a land dispute. Dr. Richard Bosire, professor of political science at Nairobi University, says people go to the polls with an axe to grind; the wounds of historical injustices have yet to be healed with the Land Issue being front and center. " Many people," he says, " feel that they were dispossessed by white settlers and now their land is in the hand of wealthy Kenyans who used political power to obtain it" (Okia, 2011).

Uhuru, the contested winner of the 2012 election and son of Kenyan's first president, owns vast expanses of land appropriated by his father after the British Crown relinquished it. He has mostly avoided the issue and accused the opposition of " hate speech" when asked to demonstrate how his land was acquired: " If politicians continue to throw cheap shots at each other to

distract from real issues, effective land reform will never materialize” (Okia, 2011). In this way, Uhuru represents a corrupt establishment; a common thread among conspiracy theorists is that Uhuru ran for president to protect himself from international justice and retain the land his family owns from his father’s land grab.

Kenya’s land dispute is an ongoing one, without a clear resolution in sight. Its forty-two tribes and their divided alliances make it difficult for a sweeping solution like Iceland’s when they found themselves in a serious national financial crisis. These divided allegiances stem from the country’s geography; Kenya’s culture is diverse because the vast tracks of land separating them have caused diverse communities to grow.

Likewise, Guatemala has a property distribution problem that stems from a have and have-not culture. However, this comes not from its geography, but the quasi-caste systems of the Mayans and then the coming of the Spanish, which created a socially stratified society.

Many Guatemalans are mestizos, descendants of indigenous Guatemalans and Spanish ancestry. In the capital, the elite have, for the most part, maintained their European bloodlines with the poorest indigenous villages retaining their Mayan identity. The Caribbean coast is where descendants of African slaves (garifunas) can be found.

The major religion of Catholicism was brought by the Spanish, but the Guatemalans held strong to their own identity and mixed their own local religious traditions with the new religion brought from Spain. Guatemala carries visible and silent societal scars from a 36-year-long civil war that broke out when a CIA sponsored coup overthrew the country’s legitimately

elected leftist president, Arbenz. This led to a succession of dictators that led Guatemalan armed forces to killing 200, 000 people over the course of its history. The UN-sponsored Truth Commission later assigned 93% of the blame for these atrocities to the armed forces (Brett, 2012). The atrocities began with students, workers, and opposition figures being victimized by state-sponsored terror; rural Mayan farmers and most non-combatants were targeted and killed. (Brett, 2012). In 1999, US president Bill Clinton stated that it was wrong of the United States to have provided support to the Guatemalan military, as it carried out these atrocities. The United States' involvement in the Guatemalan Civil War has been widely written about, most notably by Guatemalan Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberta Menchu, a Mayan woman who told her story of war horrors in her controversial book, *I, Rigoberta Menchú. Bitter Fruit* recounts the role that the multi-national corporation The United Fruit Company (now known as Chiquita) played in fanning the flames of violence in the nation in the interest of shareholder profit. In 2011, the World Bank ranked the average national income per person at only \$2, 870. More than half of the population identifies as Mayan, and these are generally the groups of people whose families have been forced off their traditional land, comprising much of the country's poor. Though there are many proposals of how to fix Guatemala's woes, there is no real progress currently being made towards a solution. (Bret, 2012) Iceland's ability to respond to national crises makes the case for smaller, cohesive cultures being better able to respond with speed to these conflicts. Guatemala and Kenya both show the scars and wounds that can emerge

when different cultural groups are forced to forge a national political identity, while retaining their own individual cultures.

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