

Humanizing Industrialization?

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Political Economy, Markets, and Institutions**Humanizing Industrialization?: Japanese Productivity Methods, Ethiopian Factories, and Low Modernism in Foreign Aid**Elsje Fourie^{1 a}¹ University of Maastricht, Maastricht, the Netherlands

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The past decade has seen a gradual convergence between the modernizing, top-down development agendas associated with “new donors” to Africa and the human development agenda more commonly linked to traditional donors. But while instruments such as the Sustainable Development Goals now demand both industrialization *and* empowerment, donors still struggle to reconcile these competing expectations. This article uses a variety of qualitative data to examine one such project: the attempted transfer of Japanese management techniques (or *kaizen*) to workplaces across Ethiopia as part of Japanese official development assistance. Asking why and how the Japanese and Ethiopian governments pursue these aims, the article finds an intervention that is low modernist in design: its goals and logics are modernist but tempered by a respect for local knowledge and a preference for evolutionary over revolutionary change. The fact that Japan is the donor to promulgate such a paradigm is no coincidence, I find, given the historical origins of kaizen and Japan’s long-standing hybrid role in international development debates. Low modernist interventions such as Ethiopian kaizen demonstrate the utility of moving beyond dichotomies (China/West, growth/equity, efficiency/empowerment). But in both Ethiopia and the Japanese aid apparatus, powerful centrifugal forces still make low modernism a difficult balancing act to achieve.

Visitors to the Peacock Shoe Factory on the outskirts of Addis Ababa are greeted by the sight of neatly stacked and color-coded inventory boxes, “30-second rule” boards designed to allow workers to quickly find any tool they need, and lines on the floor to direct foot traffic. Wall posters exhort readers to “Sort, straighten, shine, standardize and sustain,” and workers are required to regularly submit suggestions to management on how the workplace can be made more efficient, comfortable, and safe.

The Peacock factory floor is not typical of Ethiopian workplaces. Instead, it showcases a set of management techniques and practices found more frequently in Japan and referred to in Ethiopia under the catchall name of kaizen. Perhaps even more surprisingly, these techniques were transferred to Peacock not by Japanese managers—the factory is locally owned—but through a project of official development assistance (ODA). Since 2009 the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Ethiopian government have been engaged in an intensive “high-level industrial policy dialogue” aimed at enabling Ethiopia to emulate aspects of East Asia’s rapid industrialization. The flagship project to emerge from this process has been the attempted implementation of kaizen throughout the country. Today, Ethiopia is viewed by JICA as the most successful case of kaizen transfer to Africa. The state-run Ethiopian Kaizen Institute (EKI) claims to have trained 109,920 em-

ployees in more than 761 workplaces¹ and through a City Kaizen Movement is now trying to popularize the methodology in schools, hospitals, and other public bodies.

As this article will demonstrate, kaizen is a particularly difficult concept to define due to its complex transnational origins, emphasis on flexibility, and myriad manifestations. However, [figure 1](#), in which JICA has attempted to summarize its approach to kaizen for a lay audience, is a useful starting point. In kaizen, a range of practical and visual features exist to encourage workers at all levels—but particularly on the shop floor—to continuously reflect on and improve their daily operations. Groups of frontline workers also meet regularly in order to suggest improvements to management, and this is claimed to increase not only their efficiency but also their job satisfaction and sense of ownership.

Kaizen transfer to Africa has not yet occupied a large part of Japan’s aid budget, generated much discussion among other donors, or concerned many development studies scholars. But the puzzle remains: why do Japanese and Ethiopian actors invest their expertise and money in fostering convergence between the two countries’ enterprises, and how do they implement this agenda? Japan is neither a key trading partner nor a historically important donor to Ethiopia. But this particular ODA project, I argue here, nevertheless has much to tell us about the shifting goals, ide-

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¹ EKI, “Good Practice: EKI,” presentation at the 2018 Kaizen Knowledge-Sharing Seminar, hosted by JICA and NEPAD, July 3, 2018, Durban, South Africa.



Figure 1. JICA's principles of kaizen

Source: JICA (untitled JICA pamphlet on kaizen in Africa, 2019). © JICA.

ologies, and instruments of global development cooperation. The thinking behind Ethiopia's kaizen project is emblematic of Japan's long-standing attempts to straddle the divide between different donor groupings, and to thereby reap symbolic and material rewards. Even more importantly, it demonstrates what a *low modernist* aid project—one that aims simultaneously for national economic takeoff and human development—might look like in practice. At the same time, it faces centrifugal forces both in its formulation within Japan and its realization in Ethiopia, demonstrating the fragility of this compromise and the difficulties of combining such ambitious goals into a single agenda.

The data for this research is derived from four groups of sources. First, I conducted forty-three semistructured qualitative interviews with thirty-seven individuals during a one-month research stay in Ethiopia in 2016, a two-month research stay in Tokyo in 2019, and an international conference on kaizen in Africa in 2018.² A second source of data consisted of conference ethnography conducted at the international conference, as well as another devoted to strengthening overall Japanese engagement with Africa.³ Third, I visited five factories between 2016 and 2019 that claim to use kaizen: a Toyota plant in Japan, a Toyota plant

in South Africa, a Toyota supplier in South Africa, an Ethiopian textile factory viewed by JICA and EKI as highly successful in implementing kaizen, and an Ethiopian textile factory viewed as unsuccessful in implementing kaizen. All of my visits to African factories were accompanied by Japanese delegations, allowing me to observe the policy transfer process firsthand. Finally, I conducted a policy discourse analysis, drawing on the many English-language reports, training manuals, and other documents that kaizen dissemination to Africa has generated.⁴

The data described above do not allow me to assess how kaizen is experienced by frontline workers in Africa or the extent to which kaizen actually contributes to current African economic growth. Although these are both areas with great potential for future research, this article instead seeks to understand how Japanese and Ethiopian policy actors construct kaizen as a development intervention. By exploring why and how these agents design and implement this particular intervention, we will be able to arrive at a better understanding of the emerging development paradigm and the role of Japanese aid within it.

This article begins by briefly outlining the current academic discussion concerning the development approaches

² See conference in note 1. Of the thirty-seven interviewees directly consulted on kaizen, twenty were Japanese, twelve Ethiopian, and five from other countries. Japanese interviewees comprised primarily kaizen consultants and aid officials, while Ethiopian interviewees comprised mainly kaizen consultants, kaizen promotion team members, factory managers, and employees of EKI. An additional twenty Ethiopians were interviewed in 2016 during a pilot study on manifestations of modernity and modernization in Ethiopia; these included several government ministers, senior advisors to the prime minister, and civil society representatives.

³ The 7th Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), held in Yokohama, Japan, in 2019.

⁴ Although this study focuses on the Ethiopian case due to its centrality to Japan's kaizen promotion in Africa, five other sub-Saharan countries have launched JICA-funded kaizen projects since Ethiopia's initial pilot. In addition, a handful of African countries, such as South Africa, encounter kaizen piecemeal through small amounts of Japanese FDI.

of “traditional” versus “emerging” development partners. While studies in the early 2000s generally identified substantial differences between the two in scope, aim, and modality, a growing group of scholars now views these approaches as slowly converging. The article goes on to introduce the concept of “low modernism,” arguing that single aid projects can, at times, seek to combine the top-down and bottom-up logics of divergent development paradigms. It ends by examining whether Ethiopian *kaizen* is such a project and by reflecting on the implications for both Japanese ODA and global development interventions.

LOW MODERNISM AND THE CONVERGENCE IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT PARADIGMS

The early 2000s saw increasing numbers of former aid recipients begin to provide development assistance beyond their borders, prompting intense discussion among scholars of development. “New” donors, many studies pointed out, tended to focus on the national structural and macroeconomic imperatives that both the Washington Consensus and human development paradigms had neglected (Gore 2000; Hickey 2012). They tended to prefer the modalities of trade, investment, loans, and technical cooperation over more strictly defined ODA (Kragelund 2008). They often eschewed the political conditionalities of the “good governance” agenda (Woods 2008), arguing instead for the right of sovereign national governments to steer the sequencing of their own countries’ political and economic reforms (Peerenboom 2011). Development goals such as civil society participation, poverty reduction, social empowerment, and democracy promotion were overshadowed by a renewed emphasis on industrialization, technocratic expertise, economic “takeoff,” and infrastructure development (Fourie 2015; Mawdsley, Savage, and Kim 2014).

Scholars often disagreed about the desirability and effectiveness of this new direction. Naim’s (2007) fears of “rogue aid” and Brautigam’s (2009) characterization of Chinese engagement with Africa as the “dragon’s gift” represent opposite ends of a spectrum along which studies found varying degrees of recipient country ownership, mutual benefit, and on-the-ground development in so-called South-South development cooperation. A number of studies also rightly emphasized that categories such as “new” and “old” or “traditional” and “emerging” development partners were always blurred and inexact, given the diversity of donors not belonging to the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC), as well as the often large gaps between Western discourses and practices of development (Sato et al. 2011; Kolstad and Wiig 2011). Despite these important caveats, however, many would agree that a number of non-Western donors—led by but not limited to China—were in recent decades largely responsible for bringing modernist concerns back into the development mainstream.

The distinction between “modernisation redux” (Mawdsley 2012) and the human development agenda of most DAC donors persisted through the late 2000s but has in recent years begun to blur. Many development theorists now point to a gradual erosion of this divide (Kragelund 2015; Li and Carey 2014; Mawdsley 2016). On the one hand, Western donors are increasingly adopting the rhetoric of “win-win” and using blended finance to invest in development initiatives openly aimed both at benefiting their own private investors and stimulating economic takeoff in recipient countries. On the other hand, China’s new International Development Cooperation Agency represents a clear at-

tempt to craft the country’s first development *aid* policy, while its increasing engagement with DAC, the World Bank, and other mainstream fora indicate a growing interest in global poverty reduction (Kragelund 2008). Similarly, Kondoh (2015) points to the recent emulation of several DAC norms in the foreign aid programs of certain Gulf States.

Never before has foreign development assistance been expected to achieve so many competing goals. The more that convergence occurs, the more donors and development partners are called on to balance what might be called bottom-up, poststructuralist logics with top-down, neomercantile imperatives. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for example, call for “industrialization” (SDG 9) and “economic growth” (SDG 8) but also for “wellbeing” (SDG 3), “participatory and representative decision-making” (SDG 16), and “decent work” (SDG 8). In the absence of an overarching development paradigm—the SDGs have been accused of lacking a “theory of change” (Kenny 2015)—it becomes difficult but important to understand the synergies and trade-offs between these competing logics.

One theoretical concept, developed relatively recently but for an entirely different era of development, has the potential to contribute to this debate. Gilbert (2003) has coined the term “low modernism” to describe the efforts of agrarian economists to increase agricultural outputs in the United States in the 1920s through massive engagement of farmers and rural citizens. The early New Deal agronomists, Gilbert argues, advocated “moderate state-led reform,” “participatory modernization,” and the institutionalization of local knowledge systems rather than their wholesale replacement. The author distinguishes between “organic intellectuals” (who, despite their urban educations and technocratic mandates, came from midwestern farming families) and eastern urban liberals whose reformist visions were vastly more top-down. The former presided over schools of philosophy for agricultural extension workers and discussion groups for male and female farmers, hence Gilbert’s (2015, 9) definition of “low modernism” as “decentralized programs that involved local citizens in substantive, meaningful ways.” Low modernism, he argues, views grassroots participation, democracy, and economic productivity as inextricably and symbiotically intertwined in a virtuous circle.

Gilbert’s term is an offshoot of Scott’s (1998) seminal “high modernism,” which, in contrast, denotes an extreme belief in the modern state’s ability to bring about progress through the administrative ordering of nature and society. Scott famously chronicled the follies of high modernist schemes, from the urban planning of Brasília in the 1960s to the villagization of rural Ethiopia under the Derg dictatorship in the 1980s. In so doing, he demonstrated the dangers of ignoring *metis*—the valuable practical, firsthand experience that all targets of outside intervention possess. Development efforts that ignore *metis*, he argues, invariably succumb to hubris and authoritarianism, resulting in their failure.

Historians have found the concept of low modernism useful in recent years. McVety (2008) has highlighted how the low modernist visions of American agricultural extension programs in Ethiopia in the 1950s clashed with the high modernist vision of Haile Selassie. Fischer-Tiné (2018) has demonstrated how American missionary-run rural reconstruction projects in interwar colonial South Asia sought to combine “self-help with intimate, expert counsel,” thereby creating complex, multilevel epistemic communities incorporating villagers and other subaltern populations. This proved so attractive to the embryonic “devel-

opment” community, he argues, that global low modernist logics, for a time, even began to circulate internationally before high modernist postwar agendas supplanted them.

Both variants of modernism assume that local practices must be altered in the interests of capital accumulation, increased agricultural or industrial productivity, and the pursuit of higher material living standards. And indeed, the DAC and non-DAC approaches I referred to earlier also seem to now broadly share this assumption, particularly regarding Africa. The success of former World Bank chief economist Justin Yifu Lin (2010) in bringing his “New Structural Economics” into the very heart of the World Bank’s Africa policy attests to this.

On two questions, however, low and high modernism give significantly different answers. First, *who has the necessary expertise and legitimate mandate to enact this process of modernization?* Under high modernism, the state and its elites attempt above all to make society “legible” in order to control and order it from the top down—hence Scott’s title *Seeing Like a State*. Grassroots experience and behavior are seen as deficient by definition, having led to the very problems that elites are trying to solve. Social engineering, informed by the insights of scientists and planners outside the target community, is thereby legitimized and the politics, chaos, and unpredictability of human social life discounted. Low modernism, on the other hand, sees some inherent or at least instrumental value in local know-how. Although the historical accounts of low modernist projects differ on the degree to which this is the case, there exists at least some genuine appreciation, as expressed in both project design and implementation, of *metis* and democratic decision-making.

The two modernisms also, by extension, differ on the question *how fast and how far should the process of modernization proceed?* High modernism is preoccupied with “transformation” and “revolution” (cultural and otherwise). Only a “truly radical break with history and tradition” can allow for the realization of its “nearly limitless ambition” (Scott 1998, 93–94). At its most extreme, the road to utopia means “wiping the slate utterly clean and beginning from zero” (Scott 1998, 569), but even less radical high modernist planners see nothing wrong with the arm of the state reaching into the most private and personal domains of its subjects in order to enact and accelerate change toward the common good. Low modernism, in contrast, is willing to accept a slower rate of change in exchange for some degree of local ownership and does not collapse the distinction between the public and the private spheres. McVety, for example, points to the verbs used by American agricultural extension officers in Ethiopia in 1953 to describe their mission (“explore,” “broaden,” “encourage,” and “assist”) (McVety 2008).

The importance of low modernism, I argue here, goes beyond its ability to describe a handful of historical projects. In a contemporary development era marked by an unprecedented recognition of both the rewards and the dangers of modernism, how do traditional and emerging development partners make sense of it all? One way is by granting different mandates to different institutions, so that (to name just one example) China’s EximBank continues to finance large dams in Africa while its new development agency turns its hand to gender equality and poverty reduction. Another approach, however, is to combine top-down and bottom-up logics into a single development project or intervention. The next sections of this article present Japan’s kaizen promotion in Ethiopia as one such project, where grassroots empowerment and worker discipline are connected in inti-

mate and surprising ways.

HOW KAIZEN CAME TO ETHIOPIA

Japan has long occupied a rather unusual place in the rough schema I have drawn above, defying categorization as a donor. As the first non-Western country to join the DAC, Japan is neither “Western” nor “Southern,” neither “traditional” nor “emerging.” It has therefore historically walked a fine line between harmonization with DAC and adherence to principles now associated with Asian donors such as China and South Korea (Manning 2016; Kim and Lightfoot 2011). Thus it has championed the concepts of “human security” and “self-help,” in addition to establishing such typically “human development-friendly” instruments as the JICA Microfinance Fund for Women’s Empowerment. However, its focus on infrastructure development in Asia (usually realized through contracts tied to Japanese businesses) and its close association with the “developmental state” model has often placed it at odds with the DAC and the World Bank. When Japan was induced by Tony Blair and other Western leaders to double its aid to Africa in the wake of the 2005 G8 Gleneagles conference (Payne 2006), it was faced with a dilemma: should it approach Africa as it had approached the development of its Asian neighbors in previous decades, or fall in line with the expectations and principles of the continent’s traditional donors?

Just as Japan’s history as a donor has predisposed it to the blend of logics we now find in overseas kaizen promotion, Ethiopia’s history of engagement with industrializing nations in the Global North has made its leadership particularly interested in emulating Japanese industrialization. Since the 1800s, a series of Ethiopian leaders—primarily from the Amhara ethnic group—have engaged in various top-down efforts to construct a modern independent state free from colonial rule and equal in status to the most “advanced” powers of the age (Bahru Zewde 2002). In doing so, they have grappled with classic modernist concerns such as the nature of political authority, the pursuit of industrialization, and the position of the individual in relation to the collectivity. Attempts at modernization have often entailed the emulation of outside models in isolation or in combination; these have included the British Empire, imperial Russia, Hoxha’s Albania, and the Soviet Union (Clapham 2006).

Most notable for this study is the case of the “Japanizers,” a group of prominent intellectuals who in the 1920s and early 1930s urged the adoption of a “Japanese model” due to the speed with which Meiji Japan had been able to transform itself from a feudal to an industrial power (Zewde 2002; Clarke 2004). To Ethiopian admirers, the country had—particularly in its victory over Russia in 1905—proved that certain non-European nations could stand on a par with their European would-be oppressors, just as Ethiopia had once demonstrated its own ability to resist Western domination. In a book titled *Japan Endamen Salatanach* (How Japan modernized), intellectual Kebede Michael (quoted in Bahru Zewde 1990, 2) held that “the only country that has succeeded in safeguarding her independence and in charting her own path of educational progress is Japan” and urged his countrymen to “examine her history and follow her example.” Such exhortations were not confined to academia. It was a prominent Japanizer who drafted the Ethiopian constitution, modeling it so closely on the Meiji Constitution of 1889 that numerous clauses found in the latter survived transition to the former more or less intact (Bahru Zewde 2002, 110). A visiting British minister remarked in surprise on even Emperor Haile Selassie’s “dream

of Ethiopia as the Japan of Africa” (Bahru Zewde 2002, 7).

Meles Zenawi, the prime minister who presided over the establishment of the high-level policy dialogue that brought kaizen to Ethiopia, was no exception to this tendency.

Meles’s rule was marked by a desire to emulate the staged structural transformation many East Asian “developmental states” had undergone in the twentieth century due to export-oriented industrialization, technocratic leadership, and a rejection of rapid economic liberalization (Meles Zenawi 2012), and this left its mark on virtually every government policy. This was particularly true after 2007, when a violent and highly contested Ethiopian general election renewed Meles’s search for models of industrialization that combined economic growth with single-party rule (Fourie 2015). Japan is, of course, not the only state to have achieved this—the developmental trajectory of reform-era China was also a key source of inspiration (Fourie 2015). But the phrase “developmental state” was, after all, coined to describe Japan during its economic heyday (Johnson 1982), and this had left Meles very favorably disposed toward the Japanese example.

The coming of kaizen to Ethiopia was thus the result of the tensions a newly global Japan was grappling with, combined with unusually fertile conditions in the recipient country. It was due to this confluence of circumstances that a series of strategic interventions by a handful of globally connected Japanese academics grew into an Ethiopian national productivity agenda. I heard in many interviews an identical “origin” story: Meles and a development economist from the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)—a Japanese government-funded think tank—had been introduced to each other by Joseph Stiglitz at an Addis Ababa meeting of the Initiative for Policy Dialogue in 2008. GRIPS staff had brought with them a GRIPS report on JICA’s implementation of kaizen in Tunisia.⁵ According to a JICA staff member who was present, “Meles read the Tunisia report on the first day, and on the second day he suddenly told JICA ‘I read your document and I want Ethiopia to follow the same path.’”⁶ A management training program funded by the World Bank’s Japan Trust Fund and carried out by Japanese researchers had already sensitized Meles to the concept. The prime minister now requested Japanese assistance both in widespread kaizen implementation and in creating a broader bilateral Industrial Policy Dialogue between GRIPS and Ethiopia’s political leadership.⁷

Interviewee after interviewee—from both Ethiopia and Japan—emphasized the “huge pressure” that Meles exerted on JICA and on his own government to implement kaizen rapidly and completely. “Meles made such a strong request that at first we were like ‘Wow!’,” one Japanese respondent from GRIPS told me. “He put it onto the policy menu for African governments; it would have taken at least five more years otherwise.”⁸ A Kaizen Unit was formed within Ethiopia’s Ministry of Industry in 2009, and Japanese kaizen trainers were sent into twenty-eight factories as a pilot pro-

ject. The project was expanded in 2011, with the establishment of a dedicated Ethiopian Kaizen Institute (EKI), the introduction of kaizen to technical and vocational education training institutes, and the training of sixty-five EKI consultants. A public awareness campaign was launched, with a National Kaizen Month at its center.⁹

The third phase of JICA’s kaizen project began in 2015 and will conclude in 2020. This phase has seen EKI consultants sent into several enterprises in the manufacturing sector, as well as the establishment of a PhD in kaizen at Mekele University. The City Kaizen movement has promoted kaizen trainings in the public sectors of those regional capitals that host industrial parks (see [figure 2](#)). It is through these parks that the government has staked much of its hopes in attracting foreign direct investment (Oqubay 2015). It was also at the beginning of this phase that GRIPS advised Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn to incorporate kaizen into Ethiopia’s second Growth and Transformation Plan; the plan indeed mentions the concept a staggering twenty-seven times (FDRE 2016). Finally, this phase saw JICA commit \$27 million to the construction of the TICAD Human Resource Development Center for Business and Industry, a facility that is to serve as EKI’s new headquarters and disseminate kaizen throughout Africa. Kaizen has been implemented to varying degrees in a dozen African countries (Jin 2018), and JICA established an African Kaizen Initiative within the African Union’s New African Partnership for Africa Development (NEPAD) in 2017. Japanese policymakers are consistent in their assessment of Ethiopia as a “top runner” and “successful case” (Jin 2018, 53, 57) that will lead this process.

THE LOW MODERNISM OF JAPAN’S KAIZEN PROMOTION IN ETHIOPIA

Even before the motivations of individual kaizen disseminators are explored, a glance at the institutional and financial shape of JICA’s kaizen promotion to Africa indicates a hybridity long established in Japanese development assistance but relatively new in the African aid landscape. As Lemma (2018) explains: “Kaizen is effectively located in the ‘middle’ of JICA’s approach to private sector development, nested within its SME development strategy... [and] supported by [both] its local economy development strategy... and its trade and investment promotion strategy.” The project staff charged with disseminating it are, furthermore, located in the organization’s Industrial Development and Public Policy Department. In short, kaizen is meant to help small African businesses contribute to national industrialization while facilitating Japanese investment.

The modalities by which kaizen is promoted in Ethiopia follow a similar pattern. In keeping with the principle of “self-help” with which Japanese aid has long been associated, EKI and its 168 staff members are funded by the Ethiopian government. The new TICAD center is funded by Japan-

5 Several interviewees admitted that the Tunisia kaizen project is now generally seen as having been unsuccessful.

6 Interview, August 16, 2019, Tokyo.

7 This industrial policy dialogue ran from 2009 until the resignation of Meles’s successor in early 2018 and represented—together with Germany’s technical assistance—the only direct bilateral relationship between a DAC donor and Ethiopia. The dialogue has been extensively documented by Japanese participants; see, for example, Ohno and Ohno (2019).

8 Interview, July 31, 2019, Tokyo.

9 A detailed chronological account of the implementation of kaizen in Ethiopia between 2009 and 2018 can be found in Mekonen (2018).

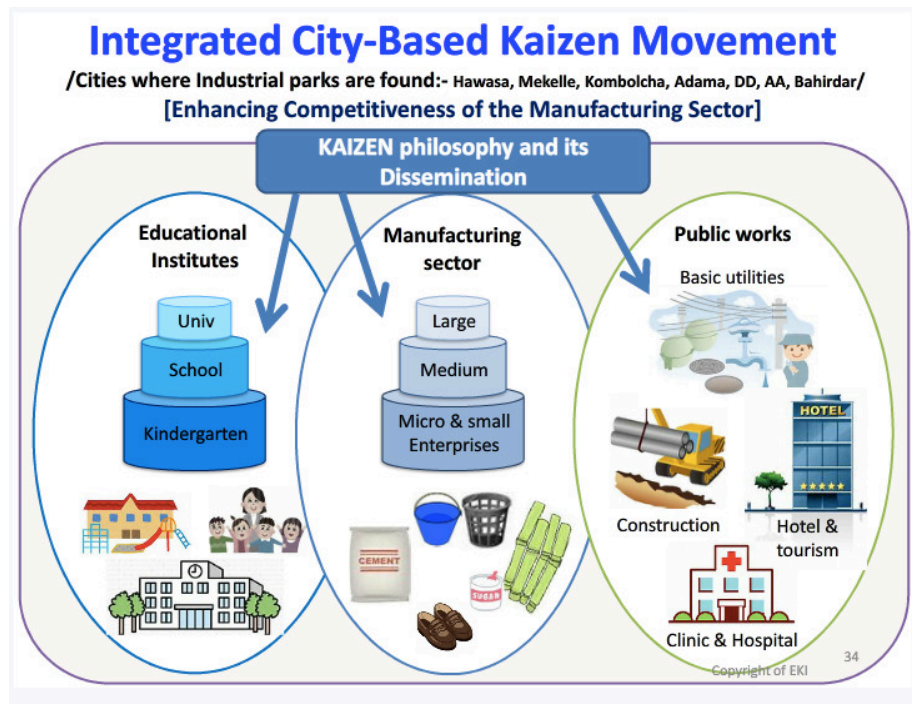


Figure 2. The City Kaizen Movement

Source: EKI presentation, 2017. © EKI.

ese ODA, although the money is paid directly to a Japanese construction firm.¹⁰ The bulk of the cooperation, however, is in the form of private Japanese consultants contracted by JICA and is therefore classified as technical assistance. Kaizen therefore uses two of JICA's distinctive three modalities (grants, technical cooperation, and investment). The almost complete lack of Japanese private investment in Ethiopia makes the third type of transfer mechanism virtually impossible thus far—unlike in Asia and the United States, where a vast literature has chronicled the role of outsourcing and transnational joint ventures in spreading kaizen (Recht and Wilderom 1998; Mair, Florida, and Kenney 1988). But here, too, kaizen is envisioned to set in motion a virtuous circle that will eventually result in increased Japanese investment (Sonobe 2015, 11).

KAIZEN IN ETHIOPIA: WHOSE KNOWLEDGE AND WHAT KIND OF KNOWLEDGE?

Much of this article has sought to argue that JICA's kaizen promotion to Ethiopia represents a blend of approaches and modalities—in contrast to donors' traditional separations between industrial and private sector development, between aid and trade and between knowledge-sharing and grants. This blend would be fairly unremarkable, however, were it not for the fact that this project also represents a surprisingly rare attempt at bridging those foreign interventions that exalt modernization and those that reject it.

In order to explain why this is the case, it is necessary here to delve more deeply into *what kaizen is* and how it has been interpreted by the Japanese aid apparatus. At their

most basic, the characters *kai* and *zen* in Japanese combine to mean “change for the better,” or positive change. But this apparent simplicity in fact belies complex political compromises and countless reformulations not just outside Japan but within Japan's own industrial history.

The term *kaizen* was first associated with the concept of national modernization in the 1920s and 1930s, when the Japanese Ministry of Education launched a series of rural *seikatsu kaizen* (“daily life improvement”) campaigns in conjunction with the country's burgeoning “women's movement.” In an effort to make daily life more scientific, hygienic, and comfortable, women's organizations urged their members both to participate more in the public sphere and to apply the latest scientific methods to their home-making endeavors (Garon 1994).

In the years immediately following World War II, kaizen became linked to industrial recovery. Two key developments helped to bring Taylorist ideas of scientific management, statistical quality control (QC), and labor rationalization into mainstream Japanese industrial practice. First, the Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers (JUSE) was established in 1946, with the explicit aim of implementing Western theories of quality control throughout Japanese industry (Tsutsui 1996). Second, an extensive program of technical assistance funded by Japan's American occupiers ran between 1955 and 1962. This entailed the sending of 3,568 Japanese managers to the United States on study visits, as well as a series of highly influential lectures and trainings by roughly 100 American consultants on Japanese soil (Tiratsoo 2000). This technical assistance program was facilitated by the Japan Productivity Center (JPC), an or-

¹⁰ Interview, JICA project officer, September 13, 2019, Tokyo.

ganization created by the Japanese and American governments in 1955 with the purpose of improving the national efficiency of Japanese businesses.

A now-classic study of Japanese postwar industrial relations defines Taylorism as “managerial programs that imposed centralized expertise on workers” (Gordon 1998, 70). And indeed, the systems of industrial productivity that took root in Japan during this era served to inculcate in workers the idea that their working hours now belonged to capitalist firms with a keen and justified interest in increasing their efficiency and labor discipline. But several factors also combined to moderate the high modernism of Taylor’s original vision and give it a more decentralized, participatory slant. Japan’s communist left had emerged from the war with the only credible claim to having opposed fascism throughout, and this initially greatly bolstered the size and strength of trade unions. Over the coming decade, the American and Japanese governments used violent coercion to marginalize the more radical trade unions but simultaneously advocated more conciliatory methods to convince the rank and file to support trade union leaders who were amenable to “co-operating” with management (Gordon 1998). One such device was the QC circle, a small group of frontline workers through which the eliciting of worker suggestions for improvement was institutionalized throughout the factory. Another was a reluctance to use layoffs to cut costs, despite the dire lack of capital at the disposal of most enterprises at the time. Savings, instead, would come from small, incremental improvements: ordering the parts for an automobile only as they were needed, for example, rather than routinely. Small behavioral modifications and a fervent rejection of *muda* (waste), rather than large-scale restructuring or investment, would hold the key to Japanese competitiveness. Managers would need an intimate and intensely practical knowledge of the *gemba* (factory floor) in order to drive what was essentially an inductive process.

Over time, a set of tools have sprung up in an effort to accord the Japanese reinterpretation of scientific management the status of a distinctive approach. The 5S methodology (in English: sort, straighten, shine, standardize, and sustain) aims to create an organized and tidy workplace. PDCA (plan, do, check, act) is an iterative four-step process to help workers and managers identify and solve practical problems on the *gemba*. *Jidoka* (often translated as “automation with a human touch”) (Baudin 2007) usually refers to features on the shop floor—such as pull cords or buttons—that allow frontline workers to stop the production line in the event of a problem. Much of this codification occurred only in the 1980s and 1990s, when admiration of Japan’s most financially successful manufacturer, Toyota, spurred emulation of its methods across the Global North. Books such as Imai’s (1986) *Kaizen: The Key to Japan’s Competitive Success* and MIT’s *The Machine that Changed the World* (Womack, Jones, and Roos 2007) positioned the approach (referred to sometimes as kaizen, sometimes as lean manufacturing, and sometimes as the Toyota Production Method) as crucial to regaining American global competitiveness. In an ironic twist of history, by 1997 *Foreign Affairs* was able to report that “there is hardly an American manager who has not taken up kaizen” (Hirsh and Henry 1997).

THE SOURCES OF LEGITIMATE EXPERTISE IN KAIZEN

Management studies has long debated the extent to which kaizen is uniquely Japanese, and therefore transferable to other cultural and organizational contexts (Recht and Wilderom 1998; Lillrank 1995). Another, more sociological discussion debates the credibility of kaizen’s claims to be “a democratic form of Taylorism that empowers workers” both inside and outside Japan.¹¹ It is not within the scope of this article to take a position on the first question, as we are interested here more in the motives behind kaizen dissemination than in the impact on Ethiopian productivity. On the second question, however, it is important to understand how the disciplinary and emancipatory logics of kaizen interact and to situate these within the broader context of ODA to Africa. This can be done partly by examining the features of kaizen itself but also partly by understanding how Japanese and Ethiopian disseminators interpret these features. In each case, the operationalization of low modernism outlined in section 1 makes this question more tangible.

First, therefore, we have to ask ourselves *whose expertise is privileged* and taken seriously when Ethiopia is urged to industrialize along Japanese lines. There are two levels of power relations to consider here: the relationship between donor country and recipient country expertise, and the relationship between in-country elites and frontline workers. As far as the first is concerned, there is a clear hierarchy between Japanese and Ethiopian technology itself, which flows in one direction only. Despite the euphemistic labeling, this has been the case in virtually all large-scale “technical cooperation” projects since the heyday of Truman’s postwar Point Four Program. Nevertheless, there is also evidence to suggest an unusual degree of developing-country ownership in this case, partly due to Ethiopia’s famously strong bargaining position vis-à-vis all of its donors (Furtado and Smith 2009) and partly due the prominence that principles of self-help, recipient demand, and capacity building have played in the branding of Japanese ODA (Ampiah 2012). All Japanese projects in Ethiopia operate within this relatively equal power dynamic, which is nevertheless distilled to its purest essence when an intangible workplace methodology is transferred with virtually no hard infrastructure or Japanese investment to accompany it. Thus capacity development *is* the project, not merely a lucky side effect or a means of ensuring its sustainability.

My research uncovered numerous examples of Ethiopian agency, from the forcefulness of Meles’s initial demands to GRIPS to the content of decisions made by the Ethiopian government in the decade that followed. One bureaucrat who had no experience of kaizen until the government agency he was heading was chosen to host the first kaizen pilot went on to become one of the most ardent advocates of the movement and the first director of the EKI. It was under his leadership that Ethiopia’s Mekele University was persuaded to offer the world’s only PhD in kaizen, the Finance Ministry was induced to pay EKI consultants at the highest civil service pay grades, and a detailed inventory of kaizen-related concepts was catalogued and translated into local languages.

Some of these developments went against the advice of

11 This quote is taken from the influential study of Rinehart, Huxley, and Robertson (1997, 128), which views kaizen as primarily coercive. See also Kucera’s (2000) review article of several books that raise similar concerns. For a more optimistic view of kaizen as “democratic Taylorism,” see Adler (1995).

Japanese consultants. Ethiopia's PhD program was developed with some reluctance by a Japanese member of JUSE who states: "I initially shared JICA's skepticism, but Ethiopia strongly requested a homegrown PhD."¹² EKI's home ministry has changed twice in eight years, a development that Japanese respondents suspect is due more to political infighting than questions of efficacy but to which they can only respond with bemusement. In other areas, JICA has brought EKI around to its way of thinking, particularly as regards planned moves to gradually make EKI an independent, self-funded organization.

The co-constructed nature of Ethiopian kaizen gives the concept a mutability and indeterminacy that is unusual even by the standards of traveling technologies. This allows the director of EKI, for example, to equate kaizen with *medemer*, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's philosophy of national unity.¹³ It also leads to some tensions among Japanese disseminators; some advocate that "in order to brand Japan, let's call everything kaizen from now on"¹⁴ and point to the fact that Japanese culture is not as "strong" as American or Chinese culture as a reason for kaizen's attractiveness among recipients. Others, however, express concern at the lack of standardization. One senior JICA manager justifies the organization's post hoc decision to commission an official kaizen handbook as follows: "When I arrived, there were already six projects going on [around Africa]. I asked my staff, 'What is kaizen?,' but no one could answer and no one had a common understanding."¹⁵

Contrary to what might be assumed, the demand for the standardization and formalization of kaizen is particularly strong from the Ethiopian side. The inductive, practical, and hands-on nature of kaizen led most of my Japanese respondents to express worries about the utility of Ethiopia's kaizen PhD:

Kaizen is just hypothesis and verification, not theory.¹⁶ Kaizen is the *gamba* thing, it's not academic research or anything. The best kaizen people in Japan are not academics but factory managers.¹⁷ Kaizen is really just about teamwork—we don't need geniuses.¹⁸

This is not to say that the recipient in this case strives toward complete mimicry. A lot of the Ethiopian discourse emphasizes adapting kaizen to Ethiopian circumstances and translating its precepts into local languages, even if substantive examples of this adaptation are difficult to come by. One tangible example is the replacement of QC circles with Kaizen Promotion Teams; in Japan, the former are horizontal and quasi-voluntary, while in Ethiopia the

latter are usually attached to company-wide kaizen promotion offices and mandatory for all workers. Ethiopia's process of kaizen dissemination has also been far more state-led than was the case in Japan; both Japanese and Ethiopian respondents ascribe its initial success to this attribute.

There exists somewhat of a paradox, then, between the low modernist cultivation of recipient ownership and the centralized way in which this co-constructed knowledge is enacted in a state with high modernist tendencies. This tension also reaches into the most contentious dimension of kaizen—namely, the empowerment of workers themselves. Kaizen in Japan is a method for motivating workers by inculcating discipline, punctuality, and rational thinking, but also creative problem-solving and initiative. Personal responsibility for the well-being of the team and the corporation becomes both a carrot and a stick. Thus even the proponents of kaizen admit that its rewards are mainly symbolic,¹⁹ while the critics view this self-policing and rule internalization as highly stressful (Garrahan and Stewart 1992).

The postwar social contract between Japanese management and moderate labor also represented a delicate compromise between the prototypical developmental state and the workers on which it depended, but JICA has been hesitant to make the labor politics of kaizen explicit in Ethiopia. On the one hand, the JPC discusses industrial relations in some of its trainings for senior EKI consultants,²⁰ and EKI uses Japanese-provided indicators to measure worker morale in company appraisals.²¹ On the advice of one particularly influential Japanese consultant, EKI in late 2019 promised to launch a pilot project that would assess how economic gains achieved through kaizen had been shared with workers.

On the other hand, there is little to suggest that these gains have already been shared. This is surely partly because they have thus far been modest and difficult to measure, despite a few promising but small-scale quantitative studies.²² But even those Ethiopian companies recognized as star performers in kaizen implementation have come under criticism for their treatment of their workers. Two of the three recipients of JICA's 2019 Africa Kaizen Award were Ethiopian enterprises. One of these has been found by researchers to subject shop-floor workers to abuses such as sexual coercion, verbal abuse, forced overtime, and punitive wage deductions (Worker Rights Consortium 2018, 17–22); the second has been subject to worker complaints that wages have remained low despite productivity increases arising from kaizen.²³

Retrenching surplus workers in the wake of such pro-

12 Interview, September 24, 2019, Tokyo.

13 Interview, August 26, 2019, Tokyo.

14 Interview, September 19, 2019, Tokyo.

15 Interview, September 18, 2019, Tokyo.

16 Interview, Japanese consultant on the Ethiopia kaizen project, August 30, 2019, Tokyo.

17 Interview, JPC manager, August 23, 2019, Tokyo.

18 Interview, former Japanese consultant on the Ethiopia kaizen project, September 3, 2019, Tokyo.

19 As JICA's Ethiopian kaizen officer explained, "The first rule of kaizen is that you don't talk about salary." Interview, May 29, 2016, Addis Ababa.

20 Interview, EKI trainee, August 30, 2019, Tokyo.

21 Personal correspondence, Japanese consultant, September 12, 2019.

22 For an overview of the evidence on productivity gains, see Lemma (2018, 23–24).

ductivity increases does not appear to occur in Ethiopia's "model" kaizen factories, if only for the potentially disastrous effect this would have on kaizen's public image. But this says little about the job satisfaction of workers, who often simply leave their positions or work more slowly when they are unhappy rather than displaying overt dissatisfaction.²⁴ There is also a tendency among senior EKI staff to ascribe such covert resistance to "laziness" and to view kaizen as entirely outside the realm of union activity. "Kaizen is for the benefit of the company, unions are for the benefit of workers," says one EKI representative,²⁵ but most of these firms have no functioning unions. My research indicated that kaizen does increase the level of contact between workers and management but did not uncover instances where this contact resulted in institutional or policy changes. One study (Desta et al. 2014) also suggests that many kaizen promotion teams do not function as intended.

JICA staff expressed differing views on the extent to which the organization should emphasize the bottom-up dimensions of kaizen. According to one senior manager, "Ethiopians are very proud of their way of doing things. I really wish we could get them to gainshare, but we should stand back a little bit until they realize what they have to do."²⁶ Others felt differently. There is little overt discussion of worker rights and industrial relations even among JICA staff and consultants, but there is nevertheless an implicit assumption that kaizen promotion teams were a necessary first step in giving Ethiopian workers (most of whom are women from rural subsistence-farming households) a voice within a hierarchical working culture. "Kaizen and 5S make it easier for women and disabled people to work," one consultant chided me. "Before going to [the issue of] human rights, it is important to think about gender issues and diversity."²⁷ And indeed, while kaizen may appear to some to be little more than an apolitical dimension of human resources development, even a partial realization of its claims would do much to challenge the deep assumptions and power hierarchies along which many Ethiopian companies still operate (for a description of these, see Beyene, Shi, and Wu 2016).

On the question of whose knowledge counts in Ethiopian kaizen, then, Ethiopian elites have a substantial amount of autonomy, reflecting both a diffusion of power within the traditional aid hierarchy and a brake on the emancipatory potential of kaizen within the country. Kaizen does represent a real attempt to take *metis*—the knowledge that comes from doing—seriously. Hence the kaizen dictum "go to the *gemba*." The most popular Japanese kaizen consultant in Ethiopia speaks very little English or Amharic, an indication of just how practical and hands-on his training on the shop floor is. To some adherents, kaizen is little more than a powerful way of learning how to learn (Hosono 2020), and this sets the philosophy apart from the hubris of high modernism. At the same time, its disseminators re-

main firmly modernist, seeing the empowerment and participation of workers more as a means to industrialization than as an end in itself.

THE DESIRED PACE AND SCOPE OF MODERNIZATION

This article also proposed a second, related characteristic of low modernism—namely, a recognition that modernization serves people best when it proceeds gradually, with a recognition of its moral and practical limits. Again, here, we see this recognition built into the fabric of kaizen while simultaneously observing tensions both within the Japanese aid apparatus and between donor and recipient.

Kaizen has proven a malleable concept, but academics and practitioners alike generally agree on its incremental and low-cost nature. When introduced in the United States, kaizen has almost always been presented in stark contrast to the radical, expensive, high-tech, and management-led innovation reputedly favored by Western enterprises (see, e.g., Imai 1986, 2-4). In Ethiopia, too, Japanese and Ethiopian disseminators alike emphasized this aspect of kaizen. When I first visited Addis Ababa in 2010, economic planners were full of enthusiasm toward the concept Business Process Re-engineering (BPR), which the Ethiopian civil service had drawn from American firms in order to improve the productivity of Ethiopian public and private sector workers. By 2016 BPR was greatly reviled among my interviewees as having led to worker layoffs, unattainable standards, and top-down restructurings. It was no longer being implemented in Ethiopia and was being positioned as the polar opposite of kaizen.²⁸ My Japanese respondents, too, praised kaizen's "seemingly mundane" impact on African workers. "We inject small successes into them day by day," said one; "even if they just change the location of a garbage can, we praise them."²⁹

Here, too, however, kaizen is pressed into the service of Ethiopia's ambitious industrialization agenda in a way that does not always keep the original logics intact. The single most frequent point of disagreement between JICA and EKI appears to have been the speed at which the latter wanted to implement kaizen across the country. "I had big fights," says one former JICA official with a smile, "but I knew [Ethiopian bureaucrats] had no choice. We were saying, 'You shouldn't dash,' but they were under so much pressure from the prime minister."³⁰ The aforementioned director of EKI corroborates this: "If you demand from JICA, and if you show them results, then they are responsive. They sometimes got angry at me—but I kept demanding, and then they started laughing at me, and now they love me. They have never disappointed me."

Ethiopia's drive to implement kaizen is strikingly ambitious, competitive, and performative. There is immense pride among Ethiopian disseminators in being labeled the most successful case in Africa and in now being tasked with

23 Interview, Japanese consultant, August 22, 2019, Tokyo.

24 Interview, Japanese consultant, September 19, 2019, Tokyo.

25 Interview, August 26, 2019, Tokyo.

26 Interview, September 18, 2019, Tokyo.

27 Interview, JPC manager, August 23, 2019, Tokyo.

28 Interview, former director of EKI, July 4, 2018, Durban.

29 Interview, manager at Toyota Tsusho, September 24, 2019, Tokyo.

30 Interview, former JICA official, August 16, 2019, Tokyo.

spreading kaizen throughout the continent. EKI has created a five-step model for kaizen dissemination: “If you follow strictly these steps, it will be successful.”³¹ A central plank of this model initially involved building the capacity of local governments to disseminate kaizen within their respective regions, but lack of progress has led EKI to undertake these activities itself on a national level. This process—more territorially and sectorally ambitious than anything consciously enacted even in postwar Japan—may indeed need this level of centralization in order to meet its aims. It has led, however, to the following situation, as described by the Japanese leader of the bilateral industrial policy dialogue:

In Japan, kaizen was always customized and one-to-one, we never managed to roll it out in such a standard way across entire cities and regions. So mechanical and standardized—we never had that. All the PowerPoints are the same, for instance. That kind of thing doesn’t happen in Japan, but I understand why [EKI] have to do that.³²

The goal of “mindset” change was one shared by all Ethiopians I spoke to, as well as most Japanese. Japanese respondents continuously referred to kaizen as a holistic philosophy that had the potential to change Ethiopian culture, although one expressed discomfort with this blurring of working life and home life. In addition, because of the dissemination model in use in Ethiopia, Japanese consultants are generally never directly tasked with persuading frontline workers to change their working practices. Perhaps for this reason, claims of cultural transformation generally went much deeper on the Ethiopian side:

We Ethiopians are good at telling stories to our kids. We used to tell stories about dangerous animals like hyenas and lions. Now, with kaizen we are starting to tell our children stories about ants and bees to encourage them to work hard. And we are starting in the education system to encourage incremental innovation.³³ The workers took it to heart. The husband started discussing [family issues] with his wife—this is big for us... We men were not used to assisting at home. But we are changing our attitudes.³⁴

While Ethiopian adherents of kaizen therefore aim for change that is fast, visible, and deep, it is very difficult to accomplish all three dimensions in parallel. Even in Japan, kaizen has a strong performative component: awards and prizes are often used to motivate employees, adherence to 5S is partly gauged visually, and Toyota’s shop floors are replete with cartoons exhorting and admonishing workers to follow certain rules.³⁵ In Ethiopia, however, visible change is particularly emphasized, with results that suggest an

equation of aesthetics with mindset change. I could not find any instances of overt worker dissatisfaction at being incorporated into KPTs or being asked to change their behavior on the shop floor, but I did encounter several conflicts resulting from perceptions that certain workers or companies had unfairly been awarded a prize. This rather suggests that little has changed on many shop floors below the surface level and that indeed “many KPTs are silent.”³⁶ The Ethiopian response to this charge is to emphasize that basic “Level 1” kaizen has now been spread widely and will pave the way for “Level 2” kaizen, but evidence for the former is often limited to the before-and-after photographs taken when a kaizen project is launched in a particular factory. Even the Ethiopian Chief Commissioner’s reference to “stories about ants and bees” evidences a desire to demonstrate commitment rather than evincing actual cultural change, as these insects have long featured, to at least some extent, in Ethiopian folklore.³⁷

The closer one gets to the coalface, the more doubtful it seems that widespread “mindset change” has thus far taken place. Three varied sets of experiences demonstrate this and are therefore worth quoting extensively. The first belongs to two Japanese consultants, who spoke about what they had observed on the factory floor:

Most Japanese companies use daily, just-in-time kaizen. Everyone practices it automatically as they go about their day, and I’m just not sure this happens in Ethiopia—or at least we’ve never seen it. They don’t have the mindset yet. When a company starts kaizen, the kickoff is like a ceremony, it’s very ceremonial. Like a festival. It does help them to make small improvements, but after one year the festival is finished, and we have to start again. So a worker will keep his chair facing in such a way that he has to turn every few minutes, without thinking to change this.³⁸

This corroborates observations made by an Ethiopian researcher during his own tour of factories claiming to use kaizen:

It is sad to note that a number of firms and educational institutions, recently observed while I was in Ethiopia, are abusing the kaizen concept in order to give their companies an instantly memorable identity... Companies that use kaizen need to realize that by definition kaizen has to be deeply ingrained in the minds of both workers and managers. It involves process-oriented thinking; is people-centered; is directed at people’s efforts based on a teamwork approach; involves a change of attitude; shows commitment to improvement; involves the entire workforce; and assumes that every worker has an interest in improvement running across

31 Interview, director of EKI, September 26, 2019, Tokyo.

32 Interview, August 22, 2019, Tokyo.

33 Response to audience question, chief commissioner of Ethiopian Civil Service Commission, JICA side event at TICAD VII, August 27, 2019, Tokyo.

34 Interview, former director of EKI, July 4, 2018, Durban.

35 Ball (2003, 216) defines performativity as “a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change.”

36 Interview, Japanese kaizen analyst, September 22, 2019, Tokyo.

37 In fact, it is likely that Aesop—originator of the well-known story “The Grasshopper and the Ant”—came from present-day Ethiopia (see Lobban 2002).

38 Interview, Japanese consultant, August 30, 2019, Tokyo.

functional responsibilities. It believes that workers are the most important asset of a company, and that the “bottom up” participatory process involves front line workers taking the initiative to clarify problems and come up with solutions, motivating and empowering employees to have the information and skills needed to make decisions on a wide range of issues concerning their own working environment. As found everywhere within Ethiopian enterprises, just posting the 5 basic kaizen activities on the wall...can be seen as window dressing. (Aselegn Desta 2013, 9)

Finally, a young EKI consultant tasked with training workers in one of Ethiopia’s kaizen “success stories” nevertheless expressed a number of frustrations:

We have to be strict and keep fighting. The workers know they have to do something, but we have to go back every day and check, and often it is wrong. The workers might be tired, or distracted. They know what they have to do, but they still wait for you to tell them... In Ethiopian culture, it is difficult to tell people to change, or that they are doing something wrong. We have to be indirect. We always have to say things like “slightly” or “maybe you should”... And sometimes people think I am a different person now, that I am somehow foreign. I am still Ethiopian and one of them, but now because my job is to implement kaizen they see me differently.³⁹

My aim here is not to suggest that the Japanese approach is somehow “correct” and the Ethiopian approach “incorrect” but rather to understand how difficult it is to break a social practice up into its component parts and reconstruct these in a different context while keeping the original logics intact. There are also indications that the social practice of kaizen is changing even in Japan, where factors such as the casualization of employment has diluted its modernist ethos.

Just as Japanese workers become less and less amenable to modernist programs of any kind, Japanese development cooperation must contend with pressures to emulate a variety of more top-down and bottom-up agendas. The triennial Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) has, since its inception in 1993, acted as a barometer for Japanese policy on Africa. In 2016 kaizen promotion played a central role at TICAD VI; by the time of TICAD VII, in 2019, the focus had shifted to infrastructure building and the promotion of Japanese investment. Even the shift in conference theme (from “Advancing Africa’s sustainable development agenda—TICAD partnership for prosperity” to “Advancing Africa’s development through people, technology and innovation”) speaks to a move toward what the development community is increasingly labeling “Innovation for Development” (OECD 2019; Jauhainen and Hooli 2019). The emphasis on physical infrastructure is a direct response to the challenge of China, and particularly to what one commentator—in a direct reference to Scott’s high modernism—sees as China’s attempt to make development “legible” (Gonzalez-Vicente 2019). It is more diffi-

cult to trace the emphasis on innovation to a single donor. As critics of the emphasis on technology-driven “disruptive” innovation have pointed out, however, “innovation is often framed from an individualistic dimension, embracing the ideal entrepreneur as seeking profit maximization” (Jimenez and Roberts 2019, 183).

Most of JICA’s kaizen disseminators assured me that these shifts spoke more to the need for donors to constantly renew their discourse than to a real substantive shift away from Japan’s trademark emphasis on human capital and small-scale incremental innovation. That may be true for now. But funding for kaizen dissemination in Africa is unlikely to increase in the future, these respondents agreed, especially now that Ethiopia could take up more of the responsibility. In addition, some did reveal tensions within Japan’s aid infrastructure:

There is probably a mixed perception of our program within JICA. The people who like kaizen believe in capacity development that comes from within. They have to believe in trial and error... But the others who are more outcome and performance oriented want to see how kaizen has really improved the industrialization, what are the contributions, what are the impacts.⁴⁰

We haven’t seen an increase in industrialization [stemming from the Ethiopia kaizen project], so I wonder whether the Japanese government is satisfied. But if we have managed to change working culture, that’s good enough for me... The Japanese government may have different ideas.⁴¹

I share the sense of crisis. The Foreign Ministry’s ambassador for TICAD doesn’t like kaizen; he says it’s not fancy and too simple. The same with the president of JICA.⁴²

I don’t really understand why kaizen is now suddenly being labeled as “innovation” when we’ve always taught our African counterparts that it is a different thing. This change has only happened in the last three months.⁴³

In short, kaizen is closely associated with slow change that, while far-reaching, is bounded in important ways, giving it a distinctive low modernist flavor. This lends it a precarious position in a country with a deeply statist legacy such as Ethiopia. It also makes it vulnerable to the various global neoliberal and high modernist agendas that it seems all donors must navigate even in this era of partial convergence.

CONCLUSION

Until recently, foreign powers tended to justify their development assistance to Africa either by emphasizing the empowerment of previously marginalized groups and studiously ignoring structural economic forces, or, in contrast, by treating empowerment as a luxury that would have to wait until industrialization and capital accumulation were well underway in recipient countries. While these narratives are still powerfully present, the emergence of the

39 Interview, May 14, 2016, Addis Ababa.

40 Interview, JICA project officer, September 13, 2019, Tokyo.

41 Interview, JICA project officer, September 14, 2019, Tokyo.

42 Interview, former JICA project officer, August 16, 2019, Tokyo.

43 Interview, Japanese consultant, August 30, 2019, Tokyo.

SDGs, in all their contradictory glory, has also spurred a desire to reconcile these top-down and bottom-up logics.

Donors may attempt to do this by adding new programs to their repertoires or through mainstreaming efforts such as the EU's Policy Coherence for Development. But a much smaller number of programs also attempt to grapple with development's—and modernity's—contradictions more directly. Although JICA's promotion of kaizen in Ethiopia is by no means the only such initiative, it is not surprising to find Japan so well-represented here. Once a marginal donor by Western standards, Japan's distinctive blend of caution and modernism now seems to place it at an increasingly well-trodden juncture.

JICA's current construction of kaizen in Ethiopia belongs in that small group of prior development interventions that historians have termed *low modernist*. Returning to JICA's diagram (figure 1, in this article's introduction) a striking mix of disciplinary and emancipatory features and desired outcomes can be seen. In her study of restored Japanese peasant woodlands, or *satoyama*, Tsing (2015) has found a delicate combination of conscious human disturbance and coexistence with the rest of the ecosystem. In a country halfway across the world, Japanese aid officials are trialing something not altogether different.

This is not to say that these efforts are necessarily successful, sustainable, or altruistic. The debate continues between those in Tokyo who see kaizen as central to “Japan-brand ODA” and increased Japanese influence in Africa, and those who view the idea that Japanese working culture (whatever that may be) can be transferred to Africa is altogether too quirky and quixotic.

Less ambivalence exists among those Ethiopians tasked with disseminating kaizen to the country's factories and public institutions. Here the agenda has been given a decidedly high-modernist bent, just as in the Ethiopia of Haile Selassie and McVety's (2008) analysis. Even if it were true, however, that “kaizen will never fail in our country because it is a high-level political agenda,”⁴⁴ what happens when those strongmen who set the initial agenda make way for embattled reformers such as Ethiopia's current prime minister? For state building and industrialization have historically usually been accompanied by violence and expropriation, and Ethiopia has been no different. For as long as Ethiopia's “high modernizers” have been drawing lessons from their foreign counterparts, their efforts have been met with grassroots resistance and contestation (Regassa, Hizekiel, and Korf 2019). At the time of this article's writing, these tensions again threaten to boil over into civil war, imperiling not only the kaizen project but the entire drive toward export-oriented industrialization. In an ironic twist, as an Ethiopian kaizen expert remarked to me, kaizen aims to change Ethiopia's “top-down political culture,” but it is precisely this culture that may prevent it from actually being fully implemented, especially in the public sector and in public-owned enterprises.⁴⁵ These tendencies are not helped by Japanese disseminators' tendency to downplay Japan's own complicated history of industrial relations and

to depoliticize the story of kaizen's emergence. They are also not helped by the personalized nature of kaizen dissemination in Ethiopia; with the decisive ending of the Meles era—as well as the replacement of EKI's influential founding director—the impetus for this particular kind of transformation has visibly slowed.

High modernism has an intrinsically and deservedly negative connotation, but low modernism's legacy is less clear. To some of its chroniclers, it ultimately remains damned by its modernist underpinnings. To others, its revolutionary potential has never been fully realized. What I hope to have made clear here is the ability of the concept itself to capture an approach to development interventions that takes us beyond tired dichotomies in the study of foreign aid. It is my hope, therefore, that this concept can be applied beyond the history books—and beyond stories of Northern practitioners—to our current dilemmas. So pressing are most African countries' needs for both structural transformation and social justice that any serious attempt toward progress in both realms at least deserves a closer look.

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44 Interview, director of EKI, August 26, 2019, Tokyo.

45 Interview, May 19, 2016, Addis Ababa.

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