Chapter 1

Communication and African Culture: A Sociological Analysis

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There is need to attain self definition and knowledge of African Cultural while Africa undergoes change and external influence. (Leslie 1973)

With an area of about 11.7 million square miles, Africa is the second largest of the continents and the most compact. Its population was estimated in 1987 to be about 601 million (World Almanac, 1988), comprising over 5,000 ethnic groups. This diversity has given rise to differences in language, religion and other cultural identifiers which have prompted some culture scholars to see Africa as a land of many cultures. But, in spite of the differences, the fundamental basis of the values, norms and mores of Africa remains unique. Hence it is also talk about the African Culture.

The first problem one faces in the discussion of the concept of culture in Africa is that of resolving this conflict between the monolithic thrust implied in the concept of African Culture, and the multiculturality perspective in the concept of African cultures. Numerous research studies have been conducted on this issue. Some of these studies affirm that, because of the multietnic nature of African peoples, there is no identifiable body of traits which can be referred to as “African Culture.” For example, Fortes (1972) has posed the question:

By what criteria can we include under this rubric (African Culture) both the culture of the Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari — those pastoral, pastoral, peasants, hunting and collecting folk — and the traditional patterns of life and thought of the sophisticated, materially wealthy, politically and socially complex, militarily organised kingdoms of West Africa — Asante, Benin, Yoruba and Hausa?” (p. 18)
Other adherents of ethnic pluralism and assumed diversity of cultures in Africa include Turnbull (1962); Hunt (1963); Levine (1966); Cohen and Middleton (1970); Middleten (1970) and Olomolaiye (1972). Even though these other adherents do not explicitly deny the existence of any authentic African culture, they are all heavily inclined towards ethnocultural pluralism. The implicit question all of them seem to be asking is: If multi-culturality is a fact of the African cultural environment, how can one speak of an African culture?

Dualism/Marginality

Before we take up the views of scholars who have tried to provide answers to the question, it is necessary to recognize that there is a middle-of-the-road view of culture in Africa. What one may refer to as the cultural marginality or dualism perspective. This view partially agrees that there are some cultural patterns which remain distinctively African, rather than ethnic, characteristics. However, it adds that because of cultural interaction between Africa and the West, these cultural patterns have been tremendously modified or transformed into something which is neither African nor Western. In support of this view, Turnbull (1962) has pointed out that the contemporary African stands in-between the African tradition and the Western tradition; that he belongs to neither of the two traditions and consequently experiences some feeling of loneliness. In this regard, Sandra (1979) draws attention to Chinua Achebe's 

"African writer finds himself in a very ambiguous situation... On the one hand, he affirms the dignity of his own culture and that of his language. On the other hand, he uses a Western language, and often, his cultural references are Western." (p. 1)

This dualism or marginality perspective questions the extent to which the various aspects of African culture are totally African. And adherents of the perspective either suggest that a hybrid culture is emerging in Africa or admit that both African and Western cultural patterns are co-existing in the contemporary context.

Africanity

A third group of culture scholars strongly believes in the existence of authentic African culture that is easily identifiable and has a powerful imp-

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The primary cultural phenomena and interactions of pre-colonial West Africa extended beyond the boundaries of contemporary nation-states, retained major similarities in institutions, languages and artifacts, and remain and have provided institutions and mechanisms for inter-ethnic interaction and incorporation (p. 34).

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The problem of cultural marginality and its implications for African culture, then, is that these facts of culture are different from what prevails in the United States among Americans and other Western people. His position falls in line with that of Ademuwagun (1971). He notes that a study of African cultures as reflected in American students and found significant differences. One of the many typically African cultural traits is polygamy. Another is considerable deference to age and seniority - a cultural trait that founds on the use of first names unless within the same age group. Ademuwagun (1971) and Ayisi (1972) and with those of Boucher (1969) and Mair (1969); Ayisi (1972); Maquet (1972) and

African culture has also been found to differ significantly in many respects from European and other cultures. Jahn (1961) asserts that "African Culture is a culture of the 'Here', of the Kunti; while present-day European culture has become a culture that emphasizes the 

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Interrelationship of Communication and African Culture

Any discussion of African Culture must be limited to a few aspects in order to be focused enough to help comprehension. This is because, in both scope and depth, the richness of African Culture is almost without limit. Informed established norms, mores and values, and how there are interwoven communication have a symbiotic relationship. Culture determines the code, context and meaning of communication; and communication is the life-wire of any culture; without communication no culture can survive. The basic principles that are discussed below have generated traits that affect or underlie the reason why people communicate, how they communicate, in what context and with whom they communicate.

Communication here refers to what occurs in 'traditional' or rural African environment, where 'pure' African culture predominates. The two major systems of communication - verbal and non-verbal - that obtain everywhere are also operational in the African communication environment. But while the elders in Africa have the right to communicate mostly verbally, the youth and younger generations in general are, by tradition, expected to communicate mostly non-verbally. Because of their little experience in life, the young are expected to watch, listen and act according to what is seen and heard, and as much as possible, act and adapt. An example of this is from the Wolof of Senegal, in which a child looks everywhere and very often sees nothing, but Asochi of Nigeria holds the view that "the child may have a cock, but it must crow in the compound of the elder.'

Transmission of culture in most rural African societies is almost entirely through interpersonal communication, carried out in dyads, small groups (village meetings), village school and social forums and funeral occasions. Also, in the interpersonal context, the market-place, the gongman (mediator), the gong, the flute and the drum which are significant channels of communication, information dissemination, and entertainment. Though used differently in different communities, their widespread use attests to their cultural significance. In the main, they play the triple role of informing the community, mediating interpersonal communication and serving as tools for entertainment. However, the gongman is almost invariably a political message bearer. Using the gong to gain attention, he delivers important messages from the leader and, or his council to the community. When the flute and the drum are used for the purposes of the government of the community rather than for entertainment, they are each seen as 'emergency channel'. They are used to inform the community of serious impending dangers, catastrophes, flagrant violations of taboo, death of the leader, visit of important dignitaries, declaration of war, etc., and to summon the community to meetings.

As we have pointed out elsewhere, communication in traditional African communities is a matter of human inter-relationships (Moemeka, 1984). In such rural settings, communication is almost always a question of attitude to one's neighbour. Therefore, acceptance or rejection of information and new ideas is dependent on how such an action will affect established relationships, which, invariably, have been shaped by the culture. When communication is vertical, it follows the hierarchical socio-political positions within the community. Consensus, what a person says is as important as who he is, both the WHAT and the WHO are generally in consonance with public expectations or societal norms. If another person, in other words, carries within the community, will carry them certain cultural limitations as to what to say and how to say it. Horizontal communication is based on a number of criteria among which are age-grades, occupation, geographical proximity and ethnic affinity. Basically, therefore, communication is carried on strictly according to the established norms and mores of the community. These norms, mores and values derive from some basic principles, five of which are discussed here.

The Supremacy of the Community

In Africa, the community takes precedence over the individual, although it depends on him for its existence, stability and progress. This African cultural trait is exemplified in Nigeria which has more than 400 ethnic groups, all of which place the interest of the community over that of the individual. In the Benue State of Nigeria, urgent personal matters are, of necessity,
suspended if there is a call for community manual labour. In the North of the country, individual grievances are, at best, ignored if they are at variance with the wishes or interests of the community as a whole. In the Bush, rural rules rather than 1964).

In all the communities, if an individual has the right to speak, his words may be heard but they are not always taken at face value. When public issues are thrown open for discussion, he is given a hearing if he wants to contribute. In fact, tradition demands that he should "say his mind" in order to be seen as contributing to the government and welfare of the community. It is only after a decision has been taken and given a ritual binder that further opinions and views from the individual become irrelevant. Before then, such views and opinions are regarded as very important. It is the synthesis of such individual views and opinions which form the basis of community decisions.

The Sanctity of Authority

Every community, big or small, monolithic or multi-ethnic has a leader. The role of this leader differs from community to community; so also is the amount of power bestowed on the office. However, the leader is the first citizen of the community and is generally given the honour and prestige befitting that position. Among very many ethnic groups, he is both the temporal and spiritual head of the community and is therefore seen as representing divine providence. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, for example, popular maxims regarding the leader calls him "the King, the Commander and the Wielder of Authority, next to the Almighty" (Okeleji, 1970, p. 205). This exalting maxim agrees with the proverb among the Ashanti of Ghana which says of the king that "after the elephant there is no other animal." The leader is, however, expected to be above reproach. Whether he rules supreme of rules through a cabal, his community expects of him no less than what his status and honour bestowed on him demand. The demands of the supremacy of the community affect even the leader who is not above the community.

Respect for Old Age

In Africa, old age is honourable and old men and women are treated with dignity and respect. The aged are seen as the repositories of wisdom and knowledge and, therefore, as assets of great value to the community. Hence the Fante of Ghana hold that "the word of the elder is more powerful than the thunder". In addition, it is strongly held that living to a ripe age is evidence of a life of justice, chastity, fair-play and high integrity. A life well-spent observing and respecting the norms and mores of society. The aged, therefore, serve as examples for the youth to follow. Here lies the significance of an Ashanti proverb which warns that "when a child does not listen to the words of his father (eldest) he eats food which has no salt"; and of the Indian that "a child who demands to be his own master (does not take advice from eldest) sleeps in the cold".

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However, the number of years of life alone does not always dict respect
and recognition. It is expected that nothing but words of wisdom and good
continuously come from the elders for the benefit of the community, they
advice, in general, is not easily set aside or ignored. The aged guide the com-
tions of the people. The older one is, the greater the respect one gets, but
the greater the responsibility for guarding and guiding the community. The
acknowledged in Africa. The Sidamo of Ethiopia have their Irna that is
political gerontocracy; and the Ibo of Nigeria, their Ogbia, that is genera-
giving due respect to age in Africa.

Religion as a Way of Life

Religion pervades the life of the African. Commenting on this religious-trait
in the African, Muti (1969) has observed that “wherever the African is, there
a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral

The African may not be a Christian but Christianity is not all that there is
in religious belief or reverence to the Almighty God. It is not lesser gods
who must intervene between man and the Almight.

Because religion pervades all of his life, the African does not make form-
and the non-religious, or between the spiritual and the material areas of life,
the religious part tends to be overshadowed because the ‘best’ way of
community which, in turn, are based on the religious beliefs of the commu-
it is particularly pervasive because the gods through which the people seek
the streets, along the footpaths and in the market place, on
retribution, they inspire awe and fear. Their symbolic presence greatly helps
to ensure that individuals abide by the norms and mores of the community.

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Conclusion

The five philosophical foundations or basic principles that underlie the culture
determine, in traditional Africa, who say what to whom, when, why and
in what context. In other words, the culture determines the basis, content,
context and direction of communication in the community.

Each of the five ‘pillars of African culture can be reified as communica-
tion source and seen as communication itself. Once assimilated by the indi-
vidual, each of them communicates its own values, and thus helps to guide
individual and societal behaviour according to the culture of the commu-
ity. For example, the Utility of the Individual demands adherence of
selfishness, reward for considerate behaviour, concern for the under-
privileging, love of one’s kinship, respect for life and the right of participa-
tion. Its basic injunction is that the community should recognize every
member as useful and every member should be concerned about the welfare
of every other member.

The bonds of society are the shared symbols, rituals, values and beliefs
of its members, and it is in these that the ‘meaning’ of the society is contain-
ed (Ross, 1976). In African communities, through communication, social
bonds direct individual actions towards meeting social approval, and guide
social behaviour towards the development of the life of the community and
of its culture. Differences in details notwithstanding, the modes and systems
as well as instruments of communication and existing cultural traits are all
informed by basic cultural foundations which are African rather than ethnic.

References

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Unity: The Cultural Foundations, Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization
Culture, women and the media are three concepts that have caused extensive debate especially with regard to development strategies in developing countries.

Culture, which for many years has been considered irrelevant to development, has in the 1980's received increasing attention as a crucial component of the development process. It has been argued that development strategies have, in the past, over-emphasized economic growth at the expense of the social and cultural factors which are also crucial to the process. (Colelta and Kidd 1980; Swantz 1985; UNESCO 1985; Nieuwenhuijze 1983). Development agents are at the moment struggling with ideas and programmes on how to integrate culture into the development process.

The centrality of women to development is not a question of debate. Women constitute over half of the population in developing countries and bear the heaviest burden of the production and reproduction processes. Yet women continue to be subjected, oppressed and exploited through intricately woven economic, social and cultural systems that see women as inferior to men. (Mascarenhas and Mbiti, 1983; Atsu, 1979; AAWORO 1985). Development agents are, therefore, preoccupied with how to surmount the problems arising out of this situation. Since the declaration of the United Nation Decade for Women in 1975 numerous efforts have been directed at policies, programmes, research and projects aimed at bettering the condition of women. Although quite a lot has been achieved in this respect, the problems are far from resolved.

The importance of communication to development is proven by the colossal amounts of resources and efforts poured into establishing and developing communication systems and infrastructures. The mass media have seen considerable expansion in the developing countries. New technologies and approaches to reaching larger audiences have been supported by