COMMUNICATION ETHICS AND UNIVERSAL VALUES

Edited by

CLIFFORD CHRISTIANS
MICHAEL TRABER

CHAPTER 9

Communalistic Societies

Community and Self-Respect as African Values

ANDREW AZUKAEGO MOEMEKA

> *In an age and society which decry increasing noise pollution, hype, deceptive advertising infotainment, oversexed and violent media messages, slick and superficial conversation, and hollow communication in general, can we learn about communication ethics from earlier quieter, possibly wiser ancestors.*
>
> —Cooper (1994, p. 328)

In the modern industrialized world, ethics is seen as a "cloud" of what ought to be done. Systems of moral principles hang up in the sky for everyone to observe but not necessarily for drawing long-lasting positive inspiration. In the individualistic environment of modern societies, actually adhering to the standards boldly written in the clouds has become a mark of weakness or of living outside the realm of reality. Not only is most ethical behavior, at best, based on the definition of the situation, but it is fast becoming a matter of merely personal choice. The age-old moral advice that relates means positively to ends has been turned around. We no

longer insist that means should justify ends but rather that ends must justify means. It no longer matters how one's goals are achieved; all that counts is reaching them.

In communalistic societies (Moemeka, 1994), communication is a matter of human interrelationships. It is engaged in principally to confirm, solidify, and promote communal social order and secondarily, to maintain or improve interpersonal relationships. Therefore, effectiveness is an extremely important first step. But the greatest emphasis is placed on the way expected goals would affect current and future relationships. This is why, in communalistic societies, ethics is not a distant and loosely followed guideline for behavior. It is, instead, synonymous with communication rules, that is, tacit understandings about appropriate ways to interact with others in given roles and situations. These conventions are constrained through normative, practical, or logical force (or some combination of these) sanctioned by a cultural ethos. Hence, ethics in these societies is not a question of personal choice but a matter of social and cultural demands. Individuals do not just say or do whatever they want; words and actions are based solely on what is considered appropriate within the social system. The overriding principle is not the individual's comfort but society's welfare.

Ethical demands in communalistic societies are very closely tied to both verbal and nonverbal communication rules that are designed to ensure communal social order; ethics, therefore, plays a major role in determining who says what to whom, when, under which conditions, and for what purposes. Both content and context of communication are normatively determined. The appropriate level at which exchanging ideas should occur and the appropriate atmosphere for specific types of interaction are based on the ways they might affect the social order as a result of their possible impact on established interpersonal relationships.

In Africa, as in all communalistic societies, ethical demands and communication rules are given the status of primary social values with religious implications. There is no distinction in these societies between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the nonreligious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life (Mbiti, 1969, p. 2). A crime in law is a moral vice and a religious sin; a duty is a moral obligation and a religious imperative (Moemeka, 1984, p. 45). When people violate the rules, not only do the living punish them socially (and sometimes legally), but

also the spirits of the dead are believed to frown at or even punish them. This socioreligious union has imbued moral values in communalistic societies with a commanding influence on people's lives. From the Igbo of Nigeria (Moemeka, 1989) to the Shona of Zimbabwe (Gelfand, 1973), and from the Ashanti of Ghana (Moemeka, 1989) to the Shuswap of Southwest Canada (Cooper, 1994), the primary role of communication ethics is sustaining social order.

Communication in the more authentic communalism of rural Africa is carried out almost entirely through the interpersonal mode in dyads, small groups (for example, family meetings), and large groups (for example, village meetings). The marketplace, the village school, social forums, and funeral occasions also serve as very important channels for messages and exchange of information (Moemeka, 1981, pp. 45-46). Ballads, storytelling, and praise-songs are used to relive the exploits and experiences of past and present generations; thus they help to educate and guide the younger generation. How to communicate, what to communicate with whom and in what manner are all culturally regulated. For example, vertical communication follows the hierarchical sociopolitical ranks within the community. What individuals say is as important as who they are. Sociopolitical status within the community implies certain cultural limitations about what to say, to whom, how, and when to say it. Culturally, the degree of free expression for the individual is constrained by age and position.

African culture also imposes constraints on verbal and nonverbal interpersonal communication. Whereas elders have the right to communicate verbally and openly, young children and youths are generally expected to communicate mostly nonverbally with their elders. When they do use words, they should do it quietly and in private. This seemingly discriminatory cultural practice is intended to drive home the need for the young to listen and learn. Because the young have limited experience, they are required to watch and listen and act according to what is judged to be best for them in the context of the community's welfare. This is kept alive in different communities by relevant adages, such as that from the Wolof of Senegal: "The child looks everywhere and very often sees nothing, but the elderly person, while sitting down sees everything." The Aniocha of Nigeria extend this belief by conceding that although some children may see something, no matter how hazy, they have no cultural right to announce

publicly what they have seen. They must tell it to the elders because "the child may own a cock, but it must crow in the compound of the elder."

Communication ethics that is expressed in cultural values and attitudes is informed by a number of philosophical principles that provide the rationale for the unique communication pattern in communalistic cultures (Moemeka, 1984). These fundamental principles, which Jahn (1961) has called "the philosophical foundations of African culture" (p. 26), are basic to the understanding of all aspects of the culture. They include (a) Supremacy of the Community, (b) Value of the Individual, (c) Sanctity of Authority (Leadership), (d) Respect for Old Age, and (e) Religion as a Way of Life.

Deriving from each of these fundamental principles are myriad overarching normative values to guide different aspects of people's communicative behavior and guard against infringement on the community's communication rules. Some of these underlying values, such as honesty, selflessness, and truth, are common to more than two principles; others such as charity, obedience, and valor are related to specific principles. But whether they are inclusive or exclusive, their impact on the individual's communication behavior and subsequently on the community's communication climate are far-reaching and socioculturally pervasive. For example, the principles of the Supremacy of the Community, the Sanctity of Authority, and Religion as a Way of Life underscore the necessity for recognizing that individuals are not all-powerful and self-sustaining citizens whose communication acts are guided only by assuming creative coordination (Cushman, 1989, p. 90). Communication content and patterns are not decided by interacting individuals solely on the basis of what is good for them. Instead, the philosophical principles implicitly but firmly demand the overarching ethical values of humility and respect. These, in turn, recognize a higher authority to which one should defer and because of whom the individual should acknowledge the necessity for appropriate communication behavior.

The principles of the Value of the Individual, Respect for Old Age, and Religion as a Way of Life underscore the need to respect human life and individuals as persons and the need for truth, honesty, and charity (love of, and service to, one another). The ultimate goal of these overarching human values is to give unswerving credence to the supremacy of the community. They also underscore the all-important cultural need for members of the community not to do (nonverbal communication) or say (verbal commu-

nication) anything that could put them in disrepute. Instead, they are to always strive for and maintain self-respect by not damaging the community's reputation and creating a negative image of its people. To understand how these demands affect the individual and the community in specific and practical terms, each of the five fundamental principles needs to be examined in their relationship to communication ethics.

The Supremacy of the Community

The most fundamental difference between individualistic and communalistic cultures is their completely opposite views regarding the individual's status vis-à-vis the community (society). In the former, individuals are supreme and first in importance and the community is second. Anything not directly serving the individual's interest is regarded with suspicion. In the latter, the community is given pride of place as a supreme power over its individual members. Individuals exist first to serve the community and second to benefit themselves through such communal service. The guiding dictum is "I am because We are." The value of such a communalistic principle lies in the unity that it sustains, the selfless service it generates, and the valor (honor) that it inspires.

The community's welfare takes precedence over the individual's. But individual needs and aspirations are not ignored; rather, they are seen as extensions of community needs and aspirations. The rationale is the cultural belief (proven over centuries) that communal welfare immediately or eventually benefits all members of the community. This unspoken belief that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" helps keep alive the ties that bind individuals to the community. Subtly but firmly, it strengthens the feeling of oneness among people, underscoring the bonds of common purpose and of a common destiny.

When people are bonded with one another in the name of their community, they are usually willing to make tangible and intangible sacrifices for one another. This finds expression in direct and indirect contributions to the community: what individuals have done for themselves that has a salutary effect on the community, what they have done for their neighbors in the name of a common destiny, and what they have done to directly improve the community's sociocultural and economic life. Manual labor from members in rural communities and financial and educational services from those

living in urban settings are common demands. But whatever the service requested, community members from whom it is demanded are required to accept the responsibility as a binding duty. Following the adage that "the head of the elephant is as heavy on the elephant as the head of the ant is on the ant," services are demanded from all, everybody according to their strength and situation. In this way, no one is left out or overstressed, and all are seen as expressing, in practical terms, their appreciation of the community. No wonder communalistic societies are able to demand and count on the sacrifices of their members. It is not uncommon for urgent personal matters to be set aside if they conflict with community needs, for individual grievances to be played down (some, in fact, ignored) if they contradict the community's interest, and to forbid individuals from saying what is not in the community's best interest though very important to them personally.

It must be noted, though, that most of what is presented as problems or needs or aspirations of the community are, in fact, issues that at least some community members consider personal. For example, constructing a feeder road—seen as a purely community-related welfare issue—is actually a need very close to the heart of farmers (for transporting their products) and traders (for exchanging goods). And the practice of making a communal demand for sacrifices of time, money, and energy to provide for the widow and children of a deceased member turns a personal problem into a communitywide duty. For each of these tasks, every qualified member of the community, that is, all adult males and unmarried adult females—except those excused for acceptable reasons—are required to contribute. Sometimes, especially among the Igbo of Nigeria and for services of a strictly manual nature, the help of boys is demanded. They fetch drinking water, prepare and keep clean the spot for relaxation, and do any other thing adults need to not be diverted from their work.

Communication among members about the community always revolves around what individuals have done or can do (or both) for the community and not vice versa. Meetings, conversations, and discussions that surround the unique position of the community as a supreme authority concern the frequency, quality, and value of each individual's contribution and how such contributions have influenced the community's social order. The greater the contribution, the more individuals are seen as upholding the community's good name.

Making positive contributions to the community earns one respect and the blessings of the elderly and of community leaders. But for those who

could make positive contributions but fail to do so, the "reward" is harsh treatment—mental, financial, and physical punishment. Distant community members (sons and daughters who live and work in the city) who fall into this category of defaulters may be prevented from returning to the community. And able-bodied members who cannot make financial contributions are required to pay with manual work or other services of a physical nature. The tacit implication here is that no one, except those chronically ill and the disabled as well as those officially excused, can refuse to participate in community service without facing sanctions.

Not only do defaulters suffer, but their close relatives are also subjected to humiliation. Parents are castigated if their children consistently renege on community service. Sarcastic remarks are made before friends and relatives about those family members who fail to meet this demand, and wives are sneered at if their husbands default on their cultural debt to the community. The principle of the community's supremacy demands selfless service to it and self-enhancing activities on its behalf. Being in the community means being with the community.

The cost of not only being physically present but being actively participative is so physically and emotionally high that members of the community jealously guard its good name and image. They would do anything for the community for which they have sacrificed so much and around which their whole life revolves. Especially before strangers, one's community is the best that ever existed. No evidence to the contrary is ever strong enough to dispel the claim that the community is supreme over its individual members and superior to other communities.

For all intents and purposes, every community member is expected to present the community in a good light in all places and at all times. Whereas one may criticize different members, one is traditionally bound to treat the community as sacrosanct. Individuals live and individuals die; but the community endures.

The Value of the Individual

The encroachment of Western values has diluted African tradition in urban settings. But in areas that are still authentically communalistic, the sanctity of life is an absolute value. For example, suicide and murder are seen as abominations, and they are visited with serious legal and social

punishments. However, legal decisions and social actions against such abominations or any other antisocial behaviors are not taken haphazardly. Each case is considered on its own merit, and decisions and actions are based on the principle of impartiality to stress and sustain the values of justice and fairness. All (both the living and the dead) are considered useful members of the community until proven guilty. The body of a person found guilty of suicide is "carelessly buried" far out in the forest to ostracize that person's spirit. The convicted murderer is usually banished from the community forever. In the past, some communities required that murderers self-destruct, that is, kill themselves. Relatives become targets of direct and indirect scorn, sarcastic remarks, and public and private repulsion, even long after the offenders had been duly punished.

High value is placed on life because communities see people as the highest form of wealth. In most communities, people's wealth is measured by the quantity and quality of their children. In like manner, the community's wealth is measured, first and foremost, by the quantity and quality of its individuals (who are, in effect, children of the community). The community holds them as very important and treats them with respect and dignity. Individuals are useful not only to the community as an entity but also to other individual members. Therefore, the individual's value finds expression not only in community service but also through honesty and trust in interpersonal and group relationships and charity.

Communalistic communities enjoin members to serve as (a) looking glasses to other members, that is, as instruments that help members "see how others see them" and (b) as useful companions that help other members live as comfortably as commensurate with the community. A person without food is fed by a neighbor; widows depend on the generosity of the community; farmers who suddenly fall sick midway in the farming season have their farm work completed by the community; children who misbehave know that they will be punished, not just at home by their parents, but on the spot, by the first adult to find out what they did (Moemeka, 1989, p. 4). Communal acts have had such an indelible influence that their praises are sung daily in adages and proverbs. The Fante of Ghana express their communal ethos with the adage, "The poor kinsman does not lack a resting place;" and the Zulu of South Africa say, "Hands wash each other to keep the fingers clean."

The worth of individuals also involves aiding the community by being fair, truthful, honest, and trustworthy with one's neighbors. If members of

a community do not trust one another, a false sense of social order is created at best; at worst, disorder sets in. Both of these possible outcomes have a negative impact on the community. The Igbo nation in Nigeria warns against such a disservice with the adage, "Two members of the same family should not need a lamp to eat from the same plate even in the darkest corner." To assure appropriate social order in any community, its members must live clean lives. They must be able to depend on and trust one another. This is true for any society—communalistic, collectivistic, or individualistic. There are differences, however, in the way each society reacts to individual actions that threaten or disrupt the social order. Antisocial behaviors, such as dishonesty, cheating, stealing, false accusations, and lying, are serious social crimes in truly communalistic communities. Punishment for committing such crimes is not only physical in nature but also emotional. When there is doubt as to a statement's truth or when it is reported that someone has been falsely accused, the community or the kindred (depending on the weight of the statement or accusation) summons a meeting to resolve the issue. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, such meetings to determine the veracity of the statements or actions under dispute are usually held late in the evening when farmers, market women, and itinerant traders have all safely returned home. Generally, these truth-determining, dispute-resolving meetings begin with the culturally sanctioned conviction that "Telling the truth does not consume a long wick." The ethical implication is that those who lie not only create an environment of mistrust but, more importantly, waste the community's time, energy, and material resources. Therefore, they must be made to pay dearly for their acts of falsehood.

Deserving special mention is the unique type of punishment against false accusation and lying seen by some Igbo communities as very painful active deceptions. Among the Aniocha, these antisocial acts are particularly abhorrent. This group of Igbo communities views lying as forcefully but deceptively shifting the balance of power among community members. Deceivers are seen as having stolen power from the deceived. "The person deceived is reduced in stature, symbolically nullified, while the impostor is temporarily powerful" (A. Klein as quoted in Henry, 1989, p. 459). In Aniocha communities, actions are taken to reverse such shifts in the balance of power through deception. Those found guilty of falsely accusing others or of lying are made to walk the streets, using a gong to announce their presence, and publicly recanting the false statements they made, as well as apologizing both to the community and to those falsely accused.

Even long after those convicted have been punished officially, they are subjected to emotional punishment—name-calling, sarcastic remarks, repulsive treatment, and suspicion. They are denied the right to be trusted by the community. Once convicted, forever guilty! Nor is that all. Their crimes also rub off on members of their immediate families, their friends, and acquaintances. This is why parents keep a close eye on their children, and friends watch over one another.

The Sanctity of Authority (Leadership)

All societies accord to their leaders the authority to lead, but the form of and the extent to which authority is exercised differs from one society to another. In general, communalistic societies in Africa have two culturally recognized levels of leadership—formal and nonformal. The formal is composed of (a) the officially appointed or selected leader of the community and all subordinate sociocultural and political leaders that govern with him and to whom they are responsible and (b) parents and guardians who are responsible for those under their care. The nonformal level of leadership is predicated on one of the major characteristics of communalism, that is, the fluid type of leadership structure that derives from the philosophy of gerontocracy or leadership by elders.

Whereas formal community leadership positions are almost exclusively reserved for men in most West African communities, they are open to women in East and Central African communities, especially in Zambia and Tanzania. In Nigeria, among the Edo and the Aniocha, women also play very important leadership roles. Though they may not be appointed to community leadership as such, they have the exclusive right to the leadership of the women in the community. The leader of the women—referred to as the Queen of the community—is a highly placed member of the community's government, commanding as much respect as the community leader.

The community leader in communalistic societies is the first citizen. Once appointed or selected, the leader is bestowed with the honor and prestige befitting that position and is treated with utmost respect and dignity. In many communities, the leader is both the temporal and spiritual head and therefore is seen as representing divine authority. For example, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the leader is "the King, the Commander and the Wielder of Authority, next only to the Almighty" (Okediji, 1970,

p. 205). This eulogizing maxim agrees with the proverb among the Ashanti of Ghana that says of the leader that "after the elephant there is no other animal."

The high honor and respect reserved for the community leader, however, must be deserved. Leaders are expected to be above reproach. Communities require of them no less than what their status demands. They must live exemplary lives; otherwise, they not only lose their leadership position but also fall into disrepute. The demands of the community's supremacy are in force even for the leader. They lead, but are not above, the community. As an Aniocha moonlight song warns, "If the mouth that speaks does not have the cooperation of the rest of the body, it would lose its power of speech."

Next in authority to the community leader are parents and guardians who, in fact, occupy the first leadership role in the lives of individuals. They have the primary responsibility for bringing up their children. Communalistic societies recognize their unlimited right of supervision and control. Parents and guardians, too, are required to lead not only by what they say but more important by what they do. Any dereliction of their parental duties makes them unworthy of the dignity of parenthood and thus guilty of disservice to the community. Both these negative outcomes always result in social sanctions.

Just as parents are required to dutifully perform their roles as parents so are children expected to carry out their own duties as children. They are required to respect and obey their parents according to the demands of the culture and to personally and fully take care of them in old age. Children who disobey, quarrel with, or disregard their parents are looked on with disdain and contempt; those who verbally or physically abuse them are charged with parental assault by the community and severely punished. Neglect of aged parents is culturally repugnant and socially despicable. It is treated as a violation of the sanctity of parenthood and a disservice to the community. Though not officially punished at the community level, such neglect incurs verbal and nonverbal condemnation. At the close family level, however, the story is different. Family members cajole, admonish, and warn recalcitrant children of the consequences of not providing for their aged parents. If such children continue to ignore these warnings, some other family members take over the task of caring for the elderly parents. But the children face the wrath of these family members on the death of the neglected parent. During the burial ceremonies, the defaulting children

are subjected to humiliation and heavy fines for their insolence to parenthood.

One of the major characteristics of communalism is gerontocracy—a fluid leadership structure in which everyone is involved, except the very young. This is the nonformal level of leadership that is buttressed by the African adage: "It takes a village (community) to raise a child." It emphasizes the fact that the responsibility for ensuring the existence and maintenance of social order lies with everyone old enough to contribute. Those who find themselves in situations in which they are the oldest persons around are expected to assume the leadership position in that situation and to dutifully represent the community. Those over whom these individuals exercise this normative on-the-spot leadership are also expected to recognize and respect their authority. But to earn this respect, these "impromptu" leaders must be seen as fair, honest, and culturally committed. If such leaders have not been of good behavior in the community before this time or are perceived as partial or arrogant or self-serving, their leadership will be challenged. So, even in this fluid on-the-spot leadership structure, leading by example is extremely important.

Respect for Old Age

The traditional respect for the aged required of all is closely related to the sanctity of authority on the nonformal level. Therefore, much of what has already been said under nonformal leadership also applies, directly or indirectly, to this fundamental principle of Respect for Old Age.

In communalistic Africa, old age is honorable and old men and women are treated with dignity. The elderly are seen as the true repositories of wisdom and knowledge and, therefore, as assets of great value to the community. The longer they live (until senility sets in), the wider their cultural and social span of authority becomes within the community and the more the community expects of them. The future of the community, though not placed in the hands of the aged, is intricately linked with the type and quality of advice they give. Such advice is hardly ever set aside or ignored. As the Fante of Ghana say, "The word of the elder is more powerful than thunder."

Traditionally, living to a ripe age is believed to be a providential reward for a life well spent, meticulously observing and respecting the norms and

mores of the community—justice, fair play, integrity, honesty, respect, and charity. Therefore, the aged are good examples for the youth to emulate. This elder-youth sociocultural relationship is so important that there are many adages and proverbs that communalistic societies use to call attention to it (Moemeka, 1996). The Igbo of Nigeria, for example, warn that "Children who demand to be their own masters (to be left alone to do what they want) sleep in the cold." Self-gratification on the part of the young, irrespective of repercussions on others and on society, leads to dire consequences later in life. And the Igbo reinforce this adage with another that points out that, "What the young cannot see even if they climbed the tallest of palm trees, the elderly can see clearly without even standing up." The exalted position bestowed on old age in communalistic societies requires a high degree of service and exemplary behavior from the aged. Old age alone without appropriate ability for guidance and without a reservoir of goodwill deriving from appropriate social behavior does not earn honor and respect. To be seen as useful to the community, and to earn the prestige reserved for them, the elderly are required not only to guide the community by advising community leaders but also to educate, admonish, and guide the inexperienced and the young. Just as the communalistic culture demands that the younger generation must respect, listen to, and learn from the elders, so it demands from the elders appropriate action to provide conducive learning experiences for the younger generation. To guard against any dereliction of duty with regard to this sociocultural expectation, the Igbo of Nigeria constantly remind themselves that, "To foresee danger and not to forewarn is the bane of elders; to be forewarned and not to listen is the bane of youth" (Moemeka, 1996).

Religion as a Way of Life

Religion is an all-important part of the social order of communalistic societies—religion meaning any organized way of worship through which a people express and manifest their spiritual relationship to the Almighty. Religion pervades life in communalistic Africa. It gives force to the fundamental principles discussed earlier, and it is the ultimate justification for whatever is culturally acceptable. Religion is used for safeguarding social order and protecting social norms, communication rules, and ethical standards (Moemeka, 1994). "Wherever the African is, there is his religion; he

carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting new crops; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony" (Mbiti, 1969, p. 2).

To communalistic Africans, religion is not just a gloss on actions and behavior but an inseparable part of the rationale for anything done or not done. As a result, there is no formal distinction between sacred acts and secular behavior or between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Communalism demands that people's lives reflect a solid blend of the secular and the religious. Thus, people's behavior is guided not only by social and cultural rules and regulations but more important, by religious expectations and imperatives.

Religious norms also influence what and how individuals speak and live. In fact, religion helps create the conducive atmosphere in which meeting the demands of the fundamental principles of communalistic social order is assured. The religious symbols representing the ancestors or gods through whom most communalistic societies seek favors from the Almighty are physically near, and their presence is felt everywhere—in the home, in the village square, in the marketplace, along the footpaths, and in the streets. This symbolic proximity strongly implies the actual presence of ancestors or gods whose perceived watchful eyes help to ensure that communication rules and regulations are obeyed and that norms, mores, and moral obligations are observed. Thus, the task of maintaining social order is made much easier than it would be without the impact of religion.

"It's People Who Make People Become People"

The five fundamental principles or philosophical foundations and their underlying ethical values discussed earlier underscore traditional African culture and reflect in general the basis of the type of social order that obtains in strictly communalistic societies (see Moemeka, 1996). Each of these principles communicates its own values and thus helps to guide individual and communal interactions according to established communication rules. For example, the principle of the Value of the Individual demands that members of the community have considerate hearts, show positive concern for the underprivileged, abhor selfishness, love one another, respect life, and be committed to community service. All these reflect the wise saying of the Aniocha of Nigeria: "It's people who make people become people";

or, as the Japanese strongly believe, "One becomes a human being only in relation to another person" (Gudykunst & Antonio, 1993, p. 27; Yoshikawa, 1988, p. 143). The ethical injunction of charity toward others does not apply only to members of one's own community. It is required to be extended to strangers. "Those who refuse to give drinking water to a thirsty stranger," says an adage, "do not deserve to be called human beings." The implication is that the value of one's own community is acknowledged by helping others and treating them as fellow humans like members of one's own community. "The practice of hospitality," says Idowu (1962, p. 159), "is essential among the Yoruba and kindness involving generosity is accounted a great virtue." This is part of what imbues the individual with self-respect.

In a communalistic environment, communication is not just an ever-present act constitutive of every other act; it is the bedrock and sustaining power of social relationships and social order. Hence, individuals are wont to be on guard about the content of what they say verbally and nonverbally; but more importantly, they are concerned about the ways the context of what they say might affect existing or future relationships. To refuse to answer the community's call for public service, to speak openly before authorities without first being addressed by them, to deride the genuine efforts of an underprivileged person, to make careless remarks about another person or about the community, to show disrespect to the elderly, or to disregard religious injunction would all affect existing relationships and have a negative impact on possible future relationships.

Alongside the fundamental or overarching communication rules and ethical principles discussed earlier are hundreds of more practical, down-to-earth ethical demands and rights that serve as institutionalized safety valves. To laugh when it is inappropriate to do so (for example, during a religious ceremony), to show off how much you have to eat when many around you are hungry, or to give to the community less than you can afford when others are giving their utmost are some of the examples of nonverbal communication that implicitly go against many of the communication values of communalistic societies. An example of an institutionalized safety valve with regard to verbal communication is the unspoken leeway allowed boys and girls of dating age to converse in private in spite of the communication rule that forbids such private conversations. Parents and guardians tend to turn "deaf ears and blind eyes" when boys and girls of dating age

are talking together privately, provided such a *tête-à-tête* does not last too long and is not held in very secluded areas.

Most of the values of Respect for Old Age are related to the values of the Sanctity of Authority, both of which reflect a unique pattern of interaction within communalistic societies. The two fundamental principles and their interaction values would seem to create what most Western communication specialists describe as the dominance-submission environment but what communalists see as an appropriate environment in which "water seeks its own level" for the benefit of all. This not only reduces conflict situations but also brings into focus the normative injunction for reciprocal sensitivity toward one another.

The demands of these fundamental principles are not one-sided. Just as the culture gives those in authority the right to the respect and obedience of those over whom they exercise authority, so it gives so-called subordinates the right to be treated with dignity and respect. But both respect and obedience on the one hand, and respect and dignity on the other, must be earned. Parents and elders must say what is appropriate at the right time; show good examples in speech and in deeds; perform their responsibility of educating, guiding, and protecting the young; and in general, uphold the community's ethical standards of behavior. The younger generation, on their part, must be willing to listen to and learn from their parents and the elderly, respect the elderly by, for example, giving up seats, helping to carry heavy loads, listening to their advice, and, in general, showing good behavior both at home and outside the home. For the sake of social order, to each is given the appropriate communication right, and from each is demanded the appropriate communication duty. A happy balance between the two creates a communication environment in which ethical values are seen to strengthen the supremacy of the community and positively promote self-respect for individuals and, therefore, ensure a conducive social order in the community.

The collective impact of the five fundamental principles strengthens the bonds that sustain communalistic societies. These bonds, which find expression in unique ways of avoiding interpersonal strife, disharmony, and social disorder, are the shared symbols, rituals, values, and beliefs of the members of the community; and it is in these that the meaning of communality is contained. Chief among these bonds are the ethics of communication (of interpersonal interaction) and the culturally prescribed communi-

cation rules (which are inextricably linked with the people's ethics of communication). They are strengthened and positively revitalized when those to whom the people look for guidance and leadership are perceived as transparently honest in their interactions and communicate according to the demands of the community's culture.

Communalistic Values Under Siege

The communication ethics of communalistic societies has been criticized for two main reasons. First, it is held that because of the wide range of ethical demands, communalistic societies operate a closed and autocratic system of communication. This, it is argued, tends to stifle free speech and opinions, especially for women and the young. Second, the demand for complete obedience to authority and the community is said to stifle individual initiative and tends to create a culture of dependence. To what extent these restrictions have been validated is a matter of opinion. But granted that they are in fact true, they would seem to constitute a small price to pay for a social order that celebrates being-with-the-community as central to human life.

The communication ethics of what we have called "authentic communalistic societies" of Africa has long been eroded and is now being challenged by (mainly young) Africans in the name of personal freedom. They tend to claim freedom as a personal right rather than recognize it as a communal right from which each person derives his or her rights to act or interact—but only in such a way as not to selfishly disregard the rights of others. These modern youths claim the right to say and do whatever makes them feel good, whether or not such acts fall in line with established norms or adversely affect others. However, there still are communities in the rural areas of Africa where individuals willingly and proudly submit to the supremacy of the community, where actions and omissions have both sociocultural and religious connotations, where obedience to authority, self-respect, love of and respect for others, and service to the community are seen as mandatory for social order. In these areas, freedom to act individually takes into account the ways such action would affect others. In these relatively unadulterated communalistic communities, freedom is exercised only when one recognizes how one's own rights in search of self-satisfaction can affect other people's exercise of their own rights.

In the modern world, however, communalism has lost much of its strength to the encroaching and diluting powers of two types of social order—individualism and collectivism. Individualism denotes a social order in which the individual takes precedence over the community. In collectivism, individuals are primarily considered part of the "masses" rather than members of a community. Collective rights are upheld, but the ultimate goal is safeguarding the individual's freedom. When a people (especially their youths) borrow from another culture, they usually borrow the outward signs of the culture rather than its soul. Even though both individualism and collectivism uphold freedom, they also demand that freedom be exercised responsibly and with self-respect to give positive effect to its exercise. But what modern Africans seem to have borrowed is freedom only and not freedom as a foundation of responsibility and self-respect.

> Today, the division between those standing firm in favor of the communalistic demands of ethics and those who oppose most of such demands is very clear. They use very contradictory communication codes, communicate on different arenas of the social environment, and have opposing views on what should constitute the "good" and for whom. (Moemeka, 1996)

The conflict between the traditional and the modern is most pronounced in the activities of the modern media of mass communication. The mass media, universally acknowledged as the watchdogs of the government (in the interest of the nation), have virtually become in Africa the watchdog for the government (in the interest of remaining in office). Almost completely owned by the government, African mass media institutions (especially the broadcast institutions) regard the adage that "he who pays the piper, dictates the tune" as a categorical imperative. Hence, in general, African media personnel operate on the basis of what Pratt (1994) has called the "ethical philosophy of African governments" (p. 54), which he identified as a mix between antinomianism and situationism and which Merrill (1975) has criticized as "non-ethics" or "anti-ethics" (p. 10). News and information decisions are rationalized, based on what the government has judged to be appropriate in the context of the situation. More often than not, such decisions reflect what is good and fitting for the government in power and not necessarily for the nation.

African governments operate under two basic assumptions. First, they see themselves as the constituted authority and therefore covered by the

cultural principle—Sanctity of Authority. Second, because they seem to see themselves as the nation rather than as representatives of the nation, they also claim cultural protection under the Supremacy of the Community principle. But they call on these two fundamental principles only insofar as conferred rights are concerned; they pay little or no attention to the expected responsibilities. Nor do they apply in their day-to-day activities the principles of Respect for Old Age, Religion as a Way of Life, or even the Value of the Individual. Shamelessly, the contents of modern media conspicuously reflect these conditions. For example, in news coverage, the prominence of the source almost always takes precedence over the consequence of the event. Balance, fairness, and truthfulness are treated as relative criteria, at best, for news selection and presentation as well as for information dissemination; at worst, they are treated as antigovernment journalistic requirements.

Denis McQuail (1983, p. 94) has developed a theory that explains the practice of the mass media in developing societies (which, until recently, were completely communalistic). Called development media theory, it states, among other things, that in such societies, the media are required to join the government in the task of nation building but that in this collaborative venture, the government is presumed to have the right to sanction the media in the interest of the nation. Media personnel therefore have little or no room to maneuver. By tradition, they are expected to respect constituted authority and to work for the good of the community (the nation). But by modern standards of African democracy, it is not up to the media to determine what is good for the nation. That task is exclusively reserved for the government-of-the-day. In broadcast institutions, media personnel have no opportunity whatsoever to question the government's dictates. Those who raise their voices do so only in private, and they are usually ridiculed by their colleagues who believe that there is nothing wrong in dancing to the tune dictated by the government. In the print media, many voices have been raised against the self-protecting ethics of the government. But almost all those who have raised such voices have found themselves either in police custody or in prison. The struggle, however, continues.

This amounts to what Okigbo (1994, p. 75) has described as the ethics of indecency. Not only have truth, objectivity, and factual background information been virtually replaced by the exigencies of contextual appropriateness in favor of the powers-that-be but also the satisfaction of morbid desires is being glorified, whereas service to others and to the commu-

nity, continence, temperance, self-control, and respect for others are at best ignored; at worst, they are derided. The consequences have been all-encompassing—affecting not only the mass media but also interpersonal interactions. In most urban areas in Africa, words and actions that are taboo in authentic communalistic societies are frequently used without any remorse or sanction. Intimate sexual relationships between boys and girls (roundly condemned in rural communities) are now not just tolerated but expected among city youths. Service to the community, which used to be a task of joy, is now perceived as an imposition by many city dwellers. Religion and religious principles as practiced under communalism are scorned, and respect for elders is seen as anachronistic.

Conclusion

The ultimate driving force behind these modern but disturbing patterns of behavior is personal freedom, that is, the right to do and say whatever one wishes, irrespective of who is hurt or happy. The consequences of such a morbid desire for freedom—armed robbery, greed, drugs, teenage pregnancy, deceit and falsehood, bribery and corruption, to mention but a few—are exacerbated by the poor economic conditions under which most city youths live. These social ills are even encroaching on rural communalistic communities, because interaction between the urban and the rural areas is constant. Just as "bad money drives out the good" in economics, so antisocial actions drive out the prosocial behavior in sociocultural relations.

Herein lies the importance of Cooper's (1994) statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter. If a communication environment based on personal freedom and the collective rights of modern representative governance has created, or is contributing to, myriad cultural, socioeconomic, and political problems, can we find solace in communication ethics as practiced in authentic communalistic communities? Is it possible in today's world to apply the demands of communalistic communication ethics in its entirety? Or can we attempt to create a hybrid ethics that could eliminate the weaknesses of the old and the new but maximize their strengths? These questions are not only important for the future of Africa but are of relevance for communication everywhere else, or indeed, for what is now called our global cultural environment. We may legitimately ask in the field of communication ethics: What contributions can communalistic societies make

toward informing and upholding universal human values in today's new communication environment?

Many African media practitioners, now working in cities, grew up in a communalist environment. Many would remember the values bequeathed to them, and some practice communal norms when staying with rural relatives. Others wish—with some nostalgia—that these values would contribute to the ethical stance of modern mass communication. Hence, Moemeka and Kasoma (1994, p. 41) have called on African journalists to practice the moral virtues that made African communalistic societies tick: courage, bravery, fortitude, respect, endurance, hospitality, generosity, magnanimity, truthfulness, kindness, and hard work. All these are elements of the five fundamental principles that serve as the sociocultural foundation of a healthy social order under communalism. Okigbo (1994) calls for a closer and more positive identification of journalists with their people. Journalists "must be perpetual students of their society; they get energized by the society that nurtures their journalistic ambition to educate, entertain and, above all, contribute to the overall development of the community" (p. 87). Similarly, a group of journalists from East and Central Africa resolved to make their traditional cultural values more relevant for their work.

> We are happy and proud to discover in the African traditional way of life great insistence on the values of communal solidarity. These values can be observed in many of our customs; the extended family, the sense of hospitality, communal rites, symbolic rituals and drama which strengthen community relations, and systems of verbal communication which help to create a consensus. There also existed in the past a great emphasis on constant communication within the "total community"—living with the dead through prayers, offerings and rites, as well as the living among themselves. We realize that these values are a precious treasure that need to be preserved and adapted to the more complicated conditions today. All efforts must be made so that the modern means of social communications will help to perpetuate and enhance them. (Makunike, 1973, p. 41)

Regardless of whether African journalists operationalize the inherited moral principles in their work, African media audiences are likely to negotiate meanings of media messages in terms of their communalist ethical norms. Okigbo (1995) argues that African societies are

> in the twilight zone between full urbanization and traditional status. In such communities or societies the full effects of modern media are being moderated

> by the enduring traditional practices and beliefs (social norms) which serve to give character and assign roles to communication. The majority of Africans have to make sense of modern communication in the context of their societies' values, traditions and norms. Any conflict between the new and the old is usually settled in favor of the latter. Therefore, no comprehensive knowledge of contemporary African communication can be gained without a perspicuous understanding of how the social values and norms relate to information exchange and management. (p. 5)

Behind this assertion is an ethical core value that can be exemplified by what the Lozi of Zambia call *likute,* "which variously means respect, appropriateness or good taste" (Kasoma, 1994, p. 28). *Likute* is the main moral principle by which people's actions are judged and by which they have self-respect.

> A self-respecting journalist would not compromise his or her dignity by doing things which are morally wrong. Journalists who do not have *likute* are not honorable, and consequently cannot be entrusted with the task of contributing to improve their society. (p. 32)

Contributing to improving society, as we have seen, is the most fundamental principle of communalistic ethics. It explains the African media's overriding concern to be in the service of nation building and socioeconomic development. Even capitalist newspaper proprietors in Africa (of whom there are many) would dare not call their newspapers an industry for profit but would stress their contributions toward national cohesion and economic development.

National cohesion and integration may be seen as a postcolonial expression of the supreme value of unity and consensus in communalistic societies. Social and political disintegration is Africa's ultimate nightmare; consensus and unity are its panacea. In a policy statement, journalists from East and Central Africa identified commitment to unity as one of the main goals of the media.

> Newspapers and periodicals in Africa must be especially committed to fostering unity . . . unity of the nation and common brotherhood and unity of our continent and all mankind. We will expose and condemn any disruptive forces which attempt to destroy unity. Our task is the reconciliation between men and groups of men to promote peace and unity. (Makunike, 1973, p. 38)

The concern for national cohesion and unity has, however, a harmonic counterpoint: the ethical norm of solidarity with the sick and elderly. As individuals and as a group, these people demand special attention and receive a specific call for action in communalistic ethics. Hence, Kasoma (1994, p. 34) has pointed out that another virtue African journalists could well adopt from their own heritage is the special love and care for the sick, aged, and handicapped. Reporting on such people should be done with empathy to arouse public support for them rather than using their situation for information and entertainment. Genuine Africans do not only want to know that individuals are sick; they are more interested in knowing what is being done to help them recover or alleviate their suffering.

These examples, which could be extended, demonstrate that the communication ethics of African communalistic societies—even under current postcolonial conditions—is not just a romantic musing from the past. It continues to nurture and, above all, to inspire media workers in modern mass communication. In spite of Africa's dire economic conditions, and in spite of the ruthless political exploitation of some of its leaders, there is an abiding current of ideas and ideals that upholds the African protonorm *par excellence*: respect for human dignity.

Human dignity is accorded in truth-telling, without which human interactions could not function in harmony. Human dignity is expressed in the essential being in and being for the community; human beings who are not anchored in a community tend to be adrift. And human dignity, above all, is recognized in the special care and love given to children, the sick, the poor, the elderly, and the physically or mentally handicapped. Material gains and advantages matter little in African communalistic societies. What makes Africans rich are human relationships. African culture is essentially a culture of human relationships, and therefore, a culture of affective communication, with high ethical norms and demands.

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