

IM – Italy: Italian Ministries

SIM (East Asia) – Singapore

SIM (South Korea) – South Korea

- 3 **Clarification** – AWM conferences are 'strongly encouraged' but not compulsory. We encourage all missionaries to make provision for conferences in their budgets. Some missionaries coming from the Majority World have had partial bursaries to help cover the expenses of these events

SOME COLLECTIVE THOUGHTS ON AFRICAN CULTURE: A COMPILATION OF PERSPECTIVES FROM AFRICAN BROTHERS & SISTERS

Compiled & Edited in November 2009 by Brother Keith (Fraser-Smith)

Introduction

This paper is a commentary on sub-Saharan African culture that is *collective* for both practical and cultural reasons. It needs to be practical as all the contributors are very actively engaged in local ministry and also cultural because the roots of African culture are collectivist rather than individualist and our working together makes manifest this fact. To avoid being accused of stereotyping the beliefs, values and behaviour that are the cultural 'software of the mind'⁴ we have deliberately called the article '*Some collective thoughts on African culture*'. There are four main reasons for not attempting to be more definitive in this assertion.

Firstly, every one of the 48 sub-Saharan African countries is different and within every country there exist many subgroups. Wikipedia estimates that over 2,000 languages are spoken in Africa, underscoring the diversity of this huge continent.

Secondly, the spectrum of traditional to post-modern behaviour is very broad and many of the contributing correspondents wrote about the rapid changes that are happening within sub-Saharan African culture. European colonialism has had a lot of influence on African culture. Among the professional, political and business elites tradition is being supplanted by Western attitudes and behaviour. The general thinking is that to be civilized is to be westernized.

Thirdly, the contributors only represent about 5% of the African countries.

Fourthly, the transformation that Christ brings in the African believer's life cannot be underestimated. One contributor wrote this: 'When I saw your questions I was taken aback because now that I am a new creature in Christ I



struggle daily to put away the obvious African habits which are against the new life.' Another of our team summed up the overall challenge to understanding multi-cultural Africa in these words: 'In a sense we can say there is no such thing as African culture. For example, there are significant cultural differences between cultures in Sothern Nigeria and Northern Nigeria: a person from northern Nigeria may have more cultural similarities with a person from Niger Republic than with a person from southern Nigeria. In the same vein, there are significant differences between cultures in West Africa and in Eastern Africa and between cultures in Anglophone countries and Francophone countries.'

Our hopes and expectations of this paper are that our non-African brothers and sisters would understand us better and that the suggestions we offer would help us to grow together in Christ and create new synergies as our cultures complement one another. We pray that as a result our harmonious witness to our neighbours will be more effective to the glory of God.

To maximise the use of this article in the multi-cultural team setting, Don Little has submitted a series of questions that can be used to explore these issues in greater depth. In fact, these searching questions can be asked of any cross-cultural context (They are listed in this endnote).⁵

So we begin in an appropriate fashion with greetings.

Greetings

Greetings are important in most African cultures. If you are seeing or meeting a person for the first time in the day, you should say a short word of greeting as appropriate to the time of day or situation.

In their book, *Into Africa – Intercultural Insights*, Yale Richmond and Phyllis Gestrin write, 'Like all other personal interactions, greetings in Africa are social events, and if you try to shorten them, you will be considered rude.'⁶

It is normally expected that people shake hands when they greet one another though shaking hands between the genders may be subject to local and religious convention.

Family

The centrality of the family, especially the extended family, is the cornerstone of African society. 'Collective living' says it all. The extended family is still very much around, but globalization is affecting this and the nuclear family is taking centre place these days. Like many parts of the Arab world, people take pride in the fact that they are from a big extended family and would consider it strange if you said that you didn't know your extended family. In the cities, you can hide under the cosmopolitan cover and have a nuclear family of some sort but in the rural areas it is impossible. Tribalism is an offshoot of the communal system of life. My community is more

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important than the other, so I have to take care of my own first before others. Then the more enlightened tribes look down on the others.

To illustrate this family mutuality as it might manifest itself within the multi-cultural team, a contributor wrote:

If a Team Leader makes phone calls once or twice a week to an African team member and says to him, 'Brother I just wanted to hear your voice and be sure you are doing OK', then this African team member will think him the best fellow around and will easily overlook other shortcomings. Family members should look out for each other. The group comes before the individual. When majority have agreed on a course of action, all should unite in its implementation in family spirit. There is room for individualism as long as it serves the overall group interest.

Related to the concept of extended family is land. One contributor commented, 'Land is a link with the history of my family and clan. This is part of my root, identity and ancestry.' Another wrote of how forebears are very important, especially in traditional African society where ancestors are to be revered and worshipped.

Family Roles – men, women, children and the elderly

Generally speaking, African society is a 'masculine' society. Those who do not conform to the 'macho' image would be looked down upon and would be called names like 'girlie or gay.'

Traditionally, women were seen as the weaker sex and treated as such but 'Western civilization has changed all that now', wrote one contributor.

One area where different family traditions may impact the multi-cultural team is the different ways we bring up our children. One African brother wrote: 'It used to be a very communal thing – everybody raises the children together. It is normal to leave your children with your parents if you can't handle it or your job is too demanding! Your children can be corrected and even disciplined by the neighbour or cousin next door!' In the multi-cultural team context it is especially important that couples with children communicate their level of tolerance of other people correcting their children. It might also be necessary to consider what other kinds of interaction with their children parents find comfortable, considering that in some cultures touching, hugging and kissing are the norm. In multi-cultural settings, careful observation, reflection and discussion of behavior between parents and children can avoid misunderstandings and resentment.

The place of the elderly in African society continues to be important. It is the children's responsibility to look after the elderly; either having their elderly parent(s) live with them or taking care of them in their own homes until they die.

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Where the elderly don't have children it then becomes the community's responsibility. That is why some Africans would go to any length to get married and have children. It is very common to hear statements like 'who would take care of me when I'm old?'

The responsibility of the children toward their parents; whether elderly, sick, dying or in sudden death, may take an African mission member off the field suddenly and for an indefinite period of time. Western mission members need to understand and respect that their African counterparts may have different obligations and family expectations regarding extended family crises than they themselves.

Marriage

Traditional marriage rites can precede Christian services. Listen to one brother writing:

In the Yoruba culture, you have the choice of whom you will marry but the families play a very important role. Some families would not allow you to marry their son/daughter unless you come with your family's support and if they feel there's something wrong somewhere, then they could refuse to give their blessing. Very few marriages occur without both parents' consent. I remember during the traditional negotiations for my wedding that it was like I wasn't even consulted – the elders from the two families met and the next thing I knew we were pronounced husband and wife!

Another brother says that it is no longer the practice in his own family that the parents choose a wife for their son. However, he would agree that the elders still have a say in handling the marriage rites.

Community

It has been said that an individual's existence can be summed up by the phrase, 'I am because we are.' One question we asked ourselves was, 'How do Africans feel when they are alone?'

One person wrote, 'We are used to a communal lifestyle and feel sad when alone.' Another contributor said, 'They feel badly and are seen in a negative light. It's said of that person that he is like a cannibal.'

An important lesson for our multi-cultural teams to learn is that the major challenge that Africans find in working with Western missionaries is community. It could be summed up in this quote: 'I've not been on a mission long enough to give an accurate assessment, but I think it would be the issue of communal lifestyle. I know of several people on multi-cultural teams struggling with the seeming individual lifestyles of Westerners and that makes them severely lonely if they are single.'

Don Little has written, 'Clearly, this need for community is a central part of Arab culture, and the natural instinctive understanding that Africans have of this dynamic has potential significant benefit in helping other teammates understand and help create effective community among the church groups we are seeking to nourish.'⁷

Demonstrating concern for a person's welfare is more important than respecting his privacy. This relates to African openness, transparency and vulnerability. In regard to this aspect, one contributor wrote: 'Generally, yes, if they don't feel threatened by the people or the environment. Africans are usually very open to discuss personal things – the belief is that my problem is the whole community's problem.'

However, another brother said, 'It's hard to talk about personal things in public and a person would feel humiliated or shamed.'

These two comments illustrate that context is significant when discussing personal matters with Africans and that bluntness, brashness and frankness can be stumbling blocks to those from collectivist societies.

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Hospitality

Visitors are always made to feel welcomed even if the visit is unexpected. Times have changed, but a stranger was always given food and a place to lay his head. One way honour and intimacy are demonstrated is through lavish hospitality.

'The law of karma is immutable.' This was a newspaper heading in The Post (South Africa – July 16, 2008). In the West we associate karma with Oriental religions, but one of our contributors expressed this: 'Hospitality is very important because of the African belief in the law of karma, that you might be in a needy position tomorrow so if you take care of strangers today you would reap what you had sown. The basic society was very primitive and they needed to be hospitable just to survive. Hospitality in the African mind is that nobody should come to my place without having something to eat and drink and a place to sleep if he needs it.'

Hospitality communicates to an outsider how much you accept the person.

Honour, shame and respect

We are familiar with the categories of honour and shame that are part of Arab society, but they are also strong factors in African society.

One contributor wrote: 'Honour is related to personal dignity and mutual respect. We desire acceptance and equal opportunity before we feel welcomed in a group or new environment. Demonstrative respect for elders is universal to African cultures. If consensus cannot be reached in a decision-making situation then we will defer to the opinion of the elder. However, age has to be matched

by living honourably.' As another contributor wrote, 'An older man who is the village drunk doesn't get much respect.'

Another contributor commented, 'If a brother is in need and you are in a position to help but you only prayed with him, that would be shameful and not honourable.' Shame and honour are very tangible and objective realities within African society, as in Arab culture, and Westerners need to be cautious not to treat them as mere subjective emotions.

'Power distance' and leadership style

A very important area for our multi-cultural teams is leadership style. Geert Hofstede identifies 'Power Distance'⁸ within culture as one the defining characteristics of a society. This is demonstrated in different ways within African society. One contributor said: 'I could be wrong but I think I've seen a preference for an authoritarian figure. I think the general trend is towards someone they respect and who is effective on the job. Certainly not a dictator!'

Another wrote:

We generally defer to chronological superiority. Respect for elders is high on our value scale. Greater responsibility lies with the older person. He has to watch out for the welfare of the younger person and should make the greater sacrifice when the need arises. In a cross cultural/multicultural setting, the leader (TL, etc), even if younger in age, carries the responsibility of the older person. To illustrate, if a team member did not come for a team meeting and he did not indicate ahead that he will be absent, then the onus lies with the team leader to find out why the team member was not in the meeting.

This reminded one of us that in Arab society if someone doesn't turn up for an appointment; a meal, a Bible study or a meeting, then the onus is on the person who made the invitation to contact the person and find out why they didn't come. This is counter-intuitive to the West where the person who doesn't turn up is expected to apologise.

Relationships

Personal relationships are the glue that holds society together. Regular communication is essential to keep relationships from going rusty. For example, if you have not heard from a team member for a while you should call the person to find out how he is faring. Phone calls should not be only to pass on information but also just to say, 'Hi.'

Attitude to time

In the literature, sociologists refer to the Time/Event⁹ orientation as one factor in defining cultural behaviour.

Traditionally in Africa, time is viewed in periods and not in terms of a point in time like minutes and seconds. There is a popular saying which goes thus, 'The white man has the clock but we Africans have time.'

One contributor summed up this point well: 'The society is an organic whole, a community; and the most important element of society is people so rather than keep an appointment with the person you are yet to see, you focus on the person at hand, right now, even if it means you would be late for the appointment you have. It is dishonouring to the one in your immediate presence to rush away from him, especially if he has come a long way to see you.'

Money and possessions

Attitudes to money and possessions can be the source of misunderstanding and tension in a team. One person wrote:

Traditionally Africans do not count money to the last penny; some persons may disagree with me on this point. This is because we have inculcated some western ways and our cultures are increasingly becoming blurred to us. Generally we will not hold it against a person if he cannot account for a small amount of money, just the way auditors do when accounts are audited. Financial independence is low on the value system scale in most African cultures; indeed, asserting financial independence is counter to the herd spirit and collective living which are stronger value systems. Relationship supersedes money and this must always be demonstrated. Where money issues are involved, it should be demonstrated that the relationship is more important. Traditionally we tend to have a laid-back attitude to money and do not hold tightly to money, though this is changing. Generosity is high on our value system; in fact the respect shown a leader and the trust reposed in him correlates with his 'perceived' generosity.

Reflecting on the case of a financial need another contributor commented: 'My family and friends would rally around me. It is usually an expectation that they do this although things are gradually changing and some level of individualism is entering the culture, but the rule of thumb is that I expect family to help in financial difficulties even though I probably won't ask them.'

This collective attitude may be extended to the multi-cultural team where Africans may have an unconscious expectation that resources are shared in the mission family, especially in times of crisis. This is illustrated by the question, 'How are the poor cared for?' One contributor answered: 'The poor are considered to be the

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community's responsibility and are to be taken care of by the more privileged. That is one reason for the high incidence of street begging in Africa.'

Please note that we do not define who the 'more privileged' are in the mission context.

Planning and maintenance

Related to the question of finances is the topic of planning and maintenance within Africa society. One contributor wrote: 'Africans generally have a problem with planning and the few of us in professions involving planning face the brunt of this malaise. Most people I know don't live on budgets and to mention keeping track of expenses would be met with ridicule! This is the reason for massive infrastructure in most African countries rotting away because they were never maintained!'

Another contributor gave an illustration in which he was the manager of a church planting project that involved a social welfare project. The local people were very enthusiastic to have the facility and services, but they were not prepared to make any concrete plans on how to achieve the end goal. It was only when our brother drew up a project proposal with a fixed date on which the project was to begin that anything was achieved. In fact God raised up a Non-Governmental Organization that implemented the plan for the community without them having to contribute to its cost.

Languages

English and French are the lingua franca of Africa but Africans sometimes speak their African language within the family and among themselves. One contributor wrote: 'Western education and the desire to look civilized are gradually eroding African languages. Most educated Africans use the national lingua franca instead of local languages. I learnt to speak English first before my local language and attended a private and exclusive elementary school where it was an offence to speak in 'vernacular' ,as they call it, and where you got punished for speaking your own local language!'

Another wrote: "There's an on-going debate in most African countries facing this crisis and there are arguments on both sides of the divide, but I feel that this is gradually eroding the culture. There must be a way to balance things up. I personally have friends who were raised in Nigeria and can't speak their (African) language. Some are just learning to speak their own language now.'

Our pool of contributors is very small but in general, though often speaking English or French and an African language, all of them wrote that they don't find learning languages easy.

Decision making

The response of one contributor to the question, 'How do Africans make decisions?' reminds me of the resonance of collective cultures and clearly

illustrates the potential effectiveness of globalization. He wrote, 'There is a strong corporate participation in decision-making in African culture, whether the family or the group. Normally, the decision would be binding and each person would know their role.'

Another commented that, 'Decisions are made very spontaneously. The major factor taken into consideration is a desire to please people (usually), so that gives a general people-orientation to the people and culture.'

In answer to the question, 'If an African is asked for directions to a place he/she doesn't know, how does he/she reply?' was this comment: 'It depends on where – sometimes, especially in the rural areas, the overwhelming desire to be hospitable to a stranger would make some to try to describe a place they don't know themselves! Or they delay you trying to find out the place for you when you can easily move to someone else.'

Though generally a high 'Power Distance' culture, Africans like to contribute to a consultative decision-making process. This is important to register in the multi-cultural team context. Team leaders need to be prepared to invest time in both public and private, group and individual, discussions when shaping team policies and strategies.

The supernatural

Many books have been written on the worldviews of Africans, but the perceived proximity of the supernatural to the natural world is pivotal. One contributor shared that 'Non-believing Africans believe very strongly in the literal existence of the supernatural. You'd be seen as odd to believe otherwise and very few Africans would claim a secular atheistic worldview.'

Understanding the traditional worldviews will help the secular-tainted Western Christian to better understand the immediacy of Biblical spiritual warfare that is often characteristic of our African brothers and sisters. It is a strength that they bring to missions, especially in the setting of folk Islam.

The Rt. Reverend Michael Doe, in a book review on *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* by Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, quotes him as saying: 'For Africans the theological issue is not the Western preoccupation with whether God exists, but what kind of God, and whom, in their contemporary context, this God is for.'¹⁰ This perspective immediately connects Africans with Arab-world Muslims for whom God is equally an undisputed fact.

Communications

In answer to the questions, 'How important is body-language in Africa?' and 'What part of the body do Africans speak most with?' one contributor wrote: 'Quite important, and in cross-cultural communication it is important to learn the non-verbal communication in the specific African community. I would say Africans use mainly the face and the hands for body language.'

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Another contributor mentions that when a stranger visits a home and the family members present want to communicate something among themselves without the person understanding, then they use their eyes, hands, legs and other body parts to convey the message between them.

Geert Hofstede observes that, 'Lots of things which in collectivist (read African) cultures are self-evident must be said explicitly in individualist (read Western) cultures.'¹¹

Nigerian pastor Anwuri is quoted in an article by Del Chinchén as saying, 'We (Africans) don't counsel through our words. We counsel through our actions.'¹²

Sport

It hardly needs saying, but soccer is the number one sport in Africa. One brother wrote: 'Some are crazy about football/soccer while others are not, but in most parts of Africa soccer is like a national sport. You need to see Lagos when Manchester United is playing, or it's the Champions' League finals. You won't believe you're still in Africa with all the hype about football teams that most of the people watching would never get to see play live!'

Miscellany

Education is also seen as very important. Today Western education plays a significant role.

Music has a long tradition in Africa and in most societies it is very important. Originally it was used to express devotion to the deity or gods. It remains a significant source of entertainment.

In one of the International Orientation cross-cultural exercises, participants are asked to evaluate how attached they are to their regional or national *food*. It is one area most people are ready to make compromises in, yet it still remains very important for Africans. One contributor wrote: 'It feels like Africans have an attachment to their food and you would see most of them travelling even to the West with all kinds of local foodstuff. A worker was going to another African country and on being asked what she needs prayer for, her answer was to be able to survive without eating 'eba'¹³ which she'd been eating every night all her life!'

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Western individualism and the Gospel have had a significant impact on traditional African culture. However, collectivist traits still dominate in many areas and resonate with Biblical beliefs, values and behaviour. We can celebrate and learn from African attitudes to community that can only enhance our own understanding and relationship to those among whom we minister. As our African brothers and sisters bring Biblical insights from their unique backgrounds into missions, let us celebrate our diversity together in glorifying our Heavenly Father.

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- 1 Greet Hofstede, *Cultures and organizations – Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1991.
 - 2 **Family Roles:** How might these impact team life expectations? Does the team become a substitute 'extended family' for Africans? Are other team members expected/welcomed to have an active role in helping with children? Share any examples of where unvoiced expectation have led to misunderstandings between Western and non-Western colleagues on a team?
Marriage: In addition to the expectation of how marriage partners are chosen are there other aspects of the way marriages are lived out that would be of interest to share in the team setting? Are there particular expectations of how African couples relate with Western couples on a team? Are the expectations for the nature of a marriage relationship (between the husband and wife) somehow different between Western and non-Western couples?
Community: How much do Africans expect the team to be their new community? How much do they anticipate finding their community identity and needs met through their relationships with local friends and believers? Do you have any examples of how the importance of community impacts team life and your collective ministry? Share any thoughts or examples about the impact of community in relating to Arab culture?
Honour and shame: Given the African instinctive understanding of honour and shame dynamics, Africans have the potential to considerably help the rest of their team relate effectively to this reality. Westerners can sometimes understand honour and shame in their minds but not feel it or be sensitive to it deeply. Share examples of ways that honour and shame play out in team life.
Relationships: Since the strength of teams is in their ability to relate well together, any examples or suggestions about how Africans see this in action in a multi-cultural team ministry situation would be helpful.
Planning and Infrastructure: Any practical examples of how this impacts team life and expectations?
 - 3 Yale Richmond and Phyllis Gestrin, *Into Africa – Intercultural Insights*, Intercultural Press, Inc., 1998, p. 91.
 - 4 Don Little – written in a personal email to Keith Fraser-Smith, October 28, 2009
 - 5 <http://www.geert-hofstede.com>, *Power Distance Index (PDI)* that is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. This represents inequality (more versus less), but defined from below, not from above. It suggests that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. Power and inequality, of course, are extremely fundamental facts of any society and anybody with some international experience will be aware that 'all societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others'.
 - 6 Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Person Relationships*, Baker Book House, 1986, ch. 3, p. 37.
 - 7 Michael Doe, 'Thinking outside the Western Box: Enculturation is not a surface adaptation', *Michael Doe reflects*, Church Times, February 27, 2009.
 - 8 Ibid., p. 60
 - 9 Del Chinchin, *African Psychology: Established Counselling Techniques and Practices*, EMQ, January 2004, p. 55.
 - 10 Wikipedia – 'eba' is a staple food eaten in West Africa, particularly in the Southern parts of Nigeria made from cassava (manioc) flour, known in West Africa as *gari*.
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