COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

Cover design and inside illustrations: N. W. Nnyanzi

Title of Cover Design: "So Far yet So Near".

Contents

African Communication instruments: N. W. Nwanzi.

Chapter 1

Communication and African Culture:
A Sociological Analysis

Andrew A. Moemeka
University of Lagos
Lagos, Nigeria

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 600 million (World Almanac, 1988), comprising over 5,000 ethnic groups. This diversity has given rise to differences in language, religion and other cultural identities 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 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 multi-ethnic 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 gentle, peaceful, propertyless, 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 — Ashanti, Benin, Yoruba and Hausa? (p. ix).

Other adherents of ethnic pluralism and assumed diversity of cultures in Africa include Turnbull (1962); Hunter (1963); Levine (1966); Cohen and Middleton (1970); Middleton (1970) and Olorunsola (1972). Even though these other adherents do not completely 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 any 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 recognise that there is a middle-of-the-road view of culture in Africa. What one many refer to as the cultural marginality or dualism perspective. This view partially agrees that there are some cultural patterns which retain some 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, Sanda (1979) draws attention to Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* which depict the conflict of cultures which the authors perceived as attendant on the process of cultural interaction between Africa and the West. Ricard (1970) put the problem succinctly when he observed that "the (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 im-

pact on the behaviour and world-view of the African. This group does not deny ethnocultural pluralism in Africa; nor does it deny cultural dualism. But it gives prominence to the reality of African Culture as distinguishable from either the cultures of different African ethnic groups or from Western, Eastern and other cultures. This distinctive African culture is what Maquet (1972) has called Africanity and Uchendu (1988) has used to underscore the cultural implications for African Unity.

Two studies are particularly relevant here. The first is that by Ademuwagun (1971) who compared different aspects of African culture as manifested by African students in the United States with aspects of American culture as reflected in American students and found significant differences. One of the many typically African cultural traits is polygyny. Another is considerable deference to age and seniority – a cultural trait that frowns on the use of first names unless within the same age group. Ademuwagun (1971) holds 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 those of Southall (1969); Mair (1969); Ayisi (1972); Maquet (1972) and Ajayi (1988).

African culture has also been found to differ significantly in many respects from European and other cultures. Jahn (1961) asserts than "African Culture is ... a culture of the 'How', of the Kuntu; while present-day European culture has become a culture that emphasizes the thing, Kintu, above everything" (p. 237). The uniqueness of African cultural form or Africanity has also engaged the attention of Maquet (1972). He notes that a study of the monograph on the cultures of certain individual African societies would reveal tremendous similarities of cultural forms. Maquet also argues strongly that Africanity is reflected in various aspects of culture such as marriage, family, lineage system, belief system, value orientation, production system and world views. This is particularly true of the West African sub-region where Aina (1988) found enough evidence to be able to conclude:

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

What the adherents of a distinctively African culture are saying is that, in spite of differences in details and the impact of acculturation, there are cultural values and attitudes which transcend ethnic boundaries in Africa.

This is the stand taken in this chapter. It is a stand which recognizes that "cultural values and attitudes are informed by the philosophical foundations of African culture, which are basic to the understanding of all aspects of the culture" (Jahn, 1961). This philosophical base forms the thrust of our discussion of the relationship between communication and culture in the African environment.

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. Our discussion here is, therefore, confined to five of the basic principles that inform established norms, mores and values, and how there are interwined with communication. It is important to point out here that culture and 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 youth are expected to watch, listen and act according to what is seen as best for the people as indicated by the elderly. This norm is buttressed by many proverbs and adages. An example of this is from the Wolof of Senegal which says: "The child looks everywhere and very often sees nothing, but the elderly man while sitting down sees everything". In a like manner, the Aniocha of Nigeria hold that the "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 (family meetings) and large groups (village meetings). The market-place, the village school and social forums and funeral occasions also serve as important channels for disseminating cultural information. In addition, story-tellers,

ballard chanters and praise-singers relive the exploits and experiences of past and present generations and thus help educate the younger generation.

Of particular importance are three instruments — the gong, the flute and the drum — which are significant channels of communication and information in the political life of the African. 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 violation of taboos, death of the leader, visit of important dignitaries, declaration of wars, 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. Consequently, 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. In other words, statuses within the community carry with 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 Bendel 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 interest of the community as a whole. In the East, rules rather than rulers or individuals are the essential mechanisms for social order (Green, 1964).

In all the communities, if what an individual has to say is not in the interest of the community, no matter how relevant and important it may be to that individual, he would be bound by tradition to "swallow his words". He may, of course, whisper his complaints into the ears of those who may be able to help in ways that would not conflict with community interest. This concern for the welfare of ALL instead of that of a FEW is upheld not only among the ethnic groups of Nigeria, but also among such other groups across Africa as the Wolof of Senegal, the Akan of Ghana, the Kikuyu of Kenya, the Tutsi of Burundi and the Zulu of South Africa.

The Utility of the Individual

This principle places emphasis on collective responsibility and co-operation. If the community depends on the individual for its existence, it goes without saying that the individual is considered very important, even though his importance is only in the context of the welfare of the community. The community enjoins its members each to be his brother's keeper. In this way, it discharges its responsibility for guiding and protecting the welfare of individuals. The man without food is fed by his neighbour; the farmer who suddenly falls sick mid-way in the farming season has his farm-work completed for him by the community; the widow has a right to expect to live on the generosity of the community. This cultral trait which transcends ethnic and linguistic groups in Africa finds expression in some aspects of African oral literature or proverbs. The Fante of Ghana transmit this value with the proverb: "The poor kinsman does not lack a resting place"; the Igbo of Nigeria with: "Two children of the same mother do not need a lamp to eat together even in the darkest corner"; and the Zulu with: "Hands wash each other".

Another area where the utility of the individual is recognized in is the generation of ideas. In spite of the supremacy of the community, the in-dividual does not see himself as a slave but as an important member of the community which he serves and whose peace, good government and pro-gress will eventually be of direct benefit to him. Tradition confers on him the right to say how he thinks the community should be run. 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 fur-ther 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 title 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 befit-ting 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 max-im regarding the leader calls him: "the King, the Commander and the Wielder of Authority, next to the Almighty" (Okediji, 1970, p. 205). This eulogizing 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 or rules through a cabinet, the community expects of him no less than what the 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 power-ful 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. Herein lies the significance of an Ashanti proverb which warns that "when a child does not listen to the words of his father (elders) he eats food which has no salt"; and of the Igbo that "a child who demands to be his own master (does not take advice from elders) sleeps in the cold".

However, the number of years of life alone does not always elicit respect and recognition. It is expected that nothing but words of wisdom and good counsel should come from the aged. In order that words of wisdom may continuously come from the elders for the benefit of the community, they are given a place of honour in the government of the community, and their advice, in general, is not easily set aside or ignored. The aged guide the community, leading it to actions that would fall in line with the cherished traditions 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 importance of age in the government of the community is traditionally acknowledged in Africa. The Sidamo of Ethiopia have their *Lua*, that is, political gerontocracy; and the Igbo of Nigeria, their *Ogbo*, that is generational system of social order. Both derive from the culturally inherent trait of 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, Mbiti (1969) has observed that "wherever the African is, there is his religion; he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony" (p. 2).

The African may not be a christian; but christianity is not all that there is in religious beliefs or reverence to the Almighty God. It is out of great reverence for the true God that the African resorts to going through lesser gods who must intervene between man and the Almighty.

Because religion pervades all of his life, the African does not make formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, or between the religious and the non-religious, or between the spiritual and the material areas of life. The African community is both secular and religious at the same time, but the religious part tends to be overshadowed because the 'best' way of behaviour at any one point in time is dictated by the accepted norms of the community which, in turn, are based on the religious beliefs of the community. The part which religion plays in the life of the African and his community is particularly pervasive because the gods through which the people seek the blessings of the Almighty God are symbolically very near, and their presence is felt everywhere — in the village square, in the market place, on the streets, along the footpaths and in the home. Being gods of immediate retribution, they inspire awe and fear. Their symbolic proximity greatly helps to ensure that individuals abide by the norms and mores of the community.

Conclusion

The five philosphiocal 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 communication source and seen as communication itself. Once assimilated by the individual, each of them communicates its own values, and thus helps to guide individual and societal behaviour according to the culture of the community. For example, the Utility of the Individual demands abhorrence of selfishness, reward for considerate behaviour, concern for the underprivileged, love of one's kinsman, respect for life and the right of participation. 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 contained (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

Achebe, C. (1960). *No Longer at Ease*. London: Heineman.

Ademuwagun, Z.A. (1971). "Miscommunication in Cross-cultural Context: The Dilemma of African Students in the U.S.A." *Ibadan*, No. 29, pp. 27-32.

Aina, Tade (1988). "The Limitations and Prospects of Culture as a Basis for International Co-operation in the West African Sub-Region". In *African Unity: The Cultural Foundations*. Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization.

Ajayi, Ade (1988). "Resilience of African Traditional Institutions and Cultures". In *African Unity: The Cultural Foundations*. Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization.

Ayisi, E. (1972). *An Introduction to the Study of African Culture*. London: Heineman.

Cohen, R. and Middleton, J. (1970). *From Tribe to Nation in Africa*. Scranton, Penn.: Chandler.

Fortes, M. (1972). "Introduction." In E.O. Ayisi (Ed). *An Introduction to the Study of African Culture*. London: Heinemann.

Andrew A. Moemeka

Green, M.M. (1964) *Igbo · Village Affairs*. London: Frank Cass & Co.

Hunter, G. (1963). *The New Societies of Tropical Africa: A Selective Study*. London: Oxford University Press.

Jahn, J. (1961). *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture*. London: Faber & Faber.

Leslie, O. (1973). "African Aesthetics and Literature," *Ufahamu*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 4-7.

Levine, R. (1966). *Dreams and Deeds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mair, L. (1969). *African Marriage and Social Change*. London: Frank Cass.

Maquet, J. (1972). *Africanity*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mbiti, J.S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heineman.

Middleton, J. (1970). *Black Africa: Its Peoples and Their Culture Today*. New York: Macmillan.

Miller, G. (1951). *Language and Communication*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Moemeka, A.A. (1984) "Socio-cultural Environment of Communication in Traditional/Rural Nigeria: An Ethnographic Exploration". *Communicatio Socialis Yearbook*, Vol. III, pp. 41-56.

Okediji, O.(1970). *Sociology of the Yuroba*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.

Olorunsola, V. (1972). *The Politics of Cultural Sub-Nationalism in Africa*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Ross, R. (1976). "Communication, Symbols and Society". In Hughes, C.C. (Ed). *Custom-Made: An Introductory Reading for Cultural Anthropology*. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Sanda, A.O. (1979). "Cultural Self-Comprehension in Ethnically Plural Societies: The Case of Sub-Saharan Africa." In Molefi K. Asante et al. (Eds). *Handbook of Intercultural Communication*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.

Southall, A. (1969). *Social Change in Modern Africa*. London: Oxford University Press.

Soyinka, W. (1963). *The Lion and the Jewel*. London: Oxford University Press.

Turnbull, T.M. (1962). *The Lonely African*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Uchendu, V. (1988). "Toward a Strategic Concept of Culture: Implications for Continental Unity." In *African Unity: The Cultural Foundations*. Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization.

Ricard, A. (1970). "Literature and Cultural Pluralism". A Talk on African and Afro-American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (translated by A.R. Eyowe.).

World Almanac (1988). *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 1988*. New York: Pharas Books, p. 522.

Chapter 2

Culture, Women and the Media

Penina M. Mlama
University of Dar es Salaam
Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

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-emphasised economic growth at the expense of the social and cultural factors which are also crucial to the process.(Colleta 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 subjugated, oppressed and exploited through intricately woven economic, social and cultural systems that see women as inferior to men (Mascarenhas and Mbilinyi, 1983; Alasebu, 1979: AAWORD. 1985). Development agents are, therefore, preoccupied with how to surmount the problems arising out of this situation. Since the declaration of the United Nations 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 collosal 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