

Intercultural Communication¹

To communicate successfully it is crucial to understand and take into account the culture of all partners when deciding on both, the information to be conveyed and the methods and media to be used for communication.

The following chapters refer to sub-Saharan Africa, which is extremely diverse. However, despite this diversity some relatively constant features can be described, which then also allow to use the general frame to analyse and better understand any other culture in Asia, Eastern and Western Europe, etc.

1 Cultural universals

People who are firmly rooted in one culture and not familiar with others are completely unaware of how strongly their own culture moulds their thoughts and feelings. This process is so automatic that it cannot be objectively questioned or even identified as a phenomenon of particular interest. Even people's dealings with fellow members of their own culture are governed by a naive concept of psychology, a belief to the effect that simply being human is the key to understanding one's fellow human beings. But life experience brings about the realization that other people's feelings, perceptions and thoughts are quite different, and that more conscious engagement with these differences is required, not only to relate better to others, but also to categorize one's own behavioural traits and to control them more consciously.

The first occasion on which someone comes intensively into contact with a foreign culture can be an exceptional psychological challenge, for which the well-worn label 'culture shock' is no exaggeration. Once the previous faith in cultural universality is shattered, differences between people from different cultures begin to clamour relentlessly for attention. Eventually the base for comparison is sufficiently large to crystallize subtly into categories, and these provide the means to name and classify the cultural differences that have been experienced.

Anthropological researchers had to follow exactly the same route, and to this day they have not concluded the task of listing the essential characteristics of distinctive cultures and searching for the underlying common features, known as cultural universals. In any case it would be unrealistic to await a definitive conclusion, because all cultures are constantly adapting to altering conditions, and subject to more or less rapid cultural change.

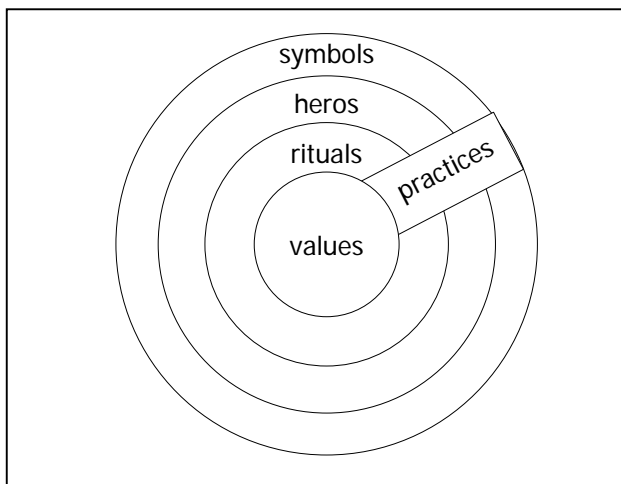
Although there are almost countless definitions of culture, we would like to take up and discuss just two, which provide a useful orientation and makes this theme more easily accessible.

Culture can be briefly described as shared participation in human learning processes. HOFSTEDE (1993,18) probably means the same when he speaks of '*Collective mental programming*'. He developed the "onion model" in which he explains the various components that can be used to analyse a culture. The picture of the onion tells that the first and visible shell are 'symbols', followed by the next layers 'heroes', 'rituals' and 'values' which form the centre of the onion (see fig. 1).

Symbols are words, gestures, pictures, and objects that have a certain meaning. This meaning is only known to those who share the same culture. Examples: words of a certain language, flags, status symbols. New symbols develop quite quickly, old ones disappear. Others regularly imitate symbols of a cultural group. Therefore, symbols represent the first layer.

¹ Extract from: HOFFMANN, V. 2000: Picture Supported Communication in Africa. Fundamentals, examples and recommendations for appropriate communication processes in rural development programmes in sub-Saharan Africa. Markgraf, Weikersheim, 147-168. (FGB: 3865)

Figure 1: The „Onion model“: Manifestation of culture on various levels



Source :HOFSTEDE 2003,22

Heros are persons (alive or dead, real or fictitious) who have characteristics that are highly estimated and valued within a culture and serve as a model.

Rituals are collective actions that may be unnecessary to achieve targeted objective but which are socially necessary within the culture. It includes all forms of greeting and showing respectfulness, social and religious ceremonies, etc.

Symbols, heros and rituals can be summarised as **practices**, i.e. something that is visible for observers from outside, but their cultural importance cannot be understood by the outsider as the meaning exactly lays exclusively in the way how these practices are interpreted by the insiders.

Values are the core of the culture. They are an attribute of individuals as well as of collectivities, and culture presuppose a collectivity. Values can be described as explicit or implicit conceptions of the desirable, of an individual or a group, which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of actions. Values are invisible, and one can only conclude on them through the way people behave in different circumstances. There is a distinction between the desirable and the desired. The desirable sometimes is far from real behaviour but rather gives orientation what we asses as “right” or “wrong”, to criteria for “agreement” or “rejection”. The desired is much closer to real behaviour but yet people can behave different to what is desired.

Norms are normal forms of values that exist within a group or a category of people i.e. what is accepted to be looked at by the majority of a certain group.

GOODENOUGH (1963) summarises his understanding of a culture and differentiates as follows: Every cultural system develops particular:

- Ways of perceiving, thinking and symbolizing
- Conceptions of cause-effect relationships
- Value conceptions
- Rules for interacting with people, living creatures and material objects.

Since people live in very diverse environments, the ways in which they learn, think and communicate also vary considerably, and it should come as no surprise that the outcomes of shared learning processes prove to be very uneven. This is why the four areas defined by GOODENOUGH provide a good starting point from which to identify and describe cultural differences.

2 HOFSTEDE's cultural dimensions²

In the area of value conceptions there is already an impressive body of empirical data. HOFSTEDE (1980) developed a survey to establish work-related value conceptions, and went on to deploy it comparatively in 50 countries around the world. He began with the members of multinational corporations (starting with IBM employees in the 1970s) and gradually surveyed respondents from

² Source: DAHL Stephan 2005

many other groups. He subdivides the sphere of work-related value conceptions into four fundamental dimensions:

- High or low power distance
- Individualism versus collectivism
- Strong or weak tendency to avoid uncertainty
- Masculinity versus femininity

And later added a fifth dimension as: long-term orientation.

Power distance is defined as *"the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally"*. (HOFSTEDE, 1994,28) The power distance concept is clearly more far-reaching than the work place alone. Power distance is often reflected in the hierarchical organisation of companies, the respect that is expected to be shown by the student towards her or his teacher, the political forms of decentralisation and centralisation, by the belief in society that inequalities among people should be minimised, or that they are expected and desired.

The second dimension proposed by HOFSTEDE is **Individualism/Collectivism**. The concept is one of the most frequently discussed and researched concepts. HOFSTEDE defines this dimension as: *"individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty."* (HOFSTEDE, 1994,51)

This concept is the most popular among the HOFSTEDE dimensions. It is frequently cited in a variety of intercultural research, as HOFSTEDE points out, sometimes confusingly and confused with other dimensions (1999). It may not be extremely surprising that this dimension is popular: It is the dimension that is most easily grasped and frequently encountered when looking at other cultural behavioural patterns.

Masculinity/femininity is an equally powerful, yet often understated, dimension. HOFSTEDE defines this dimension as follows: *"masculinity pertains to societies in which social gender roles are clearly distinct (i.e., men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life); femininity pertains to societies in which social gender roles overlap (i.e., both men and women are supposed be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life)." (HOFSTEDE, 1994,82-93)*

HOFSTEDE points out that this dimension is often neglected. Maybe the controversial name given to this dimension has somewhat influenced the popularity of it. Equally, it appears often to be confused with Individualism/Collectivism (HOFSTEDE, 1999; MOOIJ 1994, 1998).

Uncertainty avoidance is the final dimension present in HOFSTEDE'S original work. HOFSTEDE defines uncertainty avoidance as *"the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations."* (HOFSTEDE, 1994,113) This dimension is fairly easily grasped, and can often be seen reflected in business negotiations.

In his later work, HOFSTEDE (1991) introduces a fifth dimension. The long-term orientation dimension is the result of his co-operation with Michael Bond, who links this dimension to the work of Confucius. HOFSTEDE describes long-term orientation as characterised by persistence, ordering relationships by status and observing this order, thrift, and having a sense of shame, whereas short-term orientation is characterised by personal steadiness and stability, protecting your "face", respect for tradition and reciprocation of greetings, favours, and gifts.

The work of HOFSTEDE is probably the most popular work in the arena of culture research. Although the work provides a relatively general framework for analysis, the framework can be applied easily to many everyday intercultural encounters. It is particularly useful, as it reduces the complexities of culture and its interactions into five relatively easily understood cultural dimensions. The price to pay for this ease is empirical inconsistency, assessing values by responses to questionnaire items creates languages and translation problems and is generally questionable, especially as HOFSTEDE has altered the items over time.

3 The dimensions and the position of different countries

HOFSTEDE sets up normed scales on each of the four dimensions from 0 to 100, on which he can then plot and classify national average values. As it turns out, the 50 countries he surveyed fill almost the entire significant space. In other words, considerable distinctions emerge which at least confirm the survey's capacity for differentiation.

From his results, HOFSTEDE first draws conclusions about typical national characters, and more specifically, on the validity and applicability of general management theories. On the basis of his results, HOFSTEDE is forced to reject the idea that one particular style of management could lead to optimum functioning of an organization regardless of the cultural context. From our perspective it is also interesting that there appears to be a set of constant differences between industrialized and developing countries, differences which are considerably greater than those identified between developing countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa.

In the work published by HOFSTEDE there is still relatively little data on Africa. In 1983, for example, out of 50 countries surveyed, one set of results was from South Africa and a second set from West Africa which consisted of a summary of results from Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone. A third source of data is BOURGOIN, 1984, who publishes data gathered in the Ivory Coast using HOFSTEDE's survey.

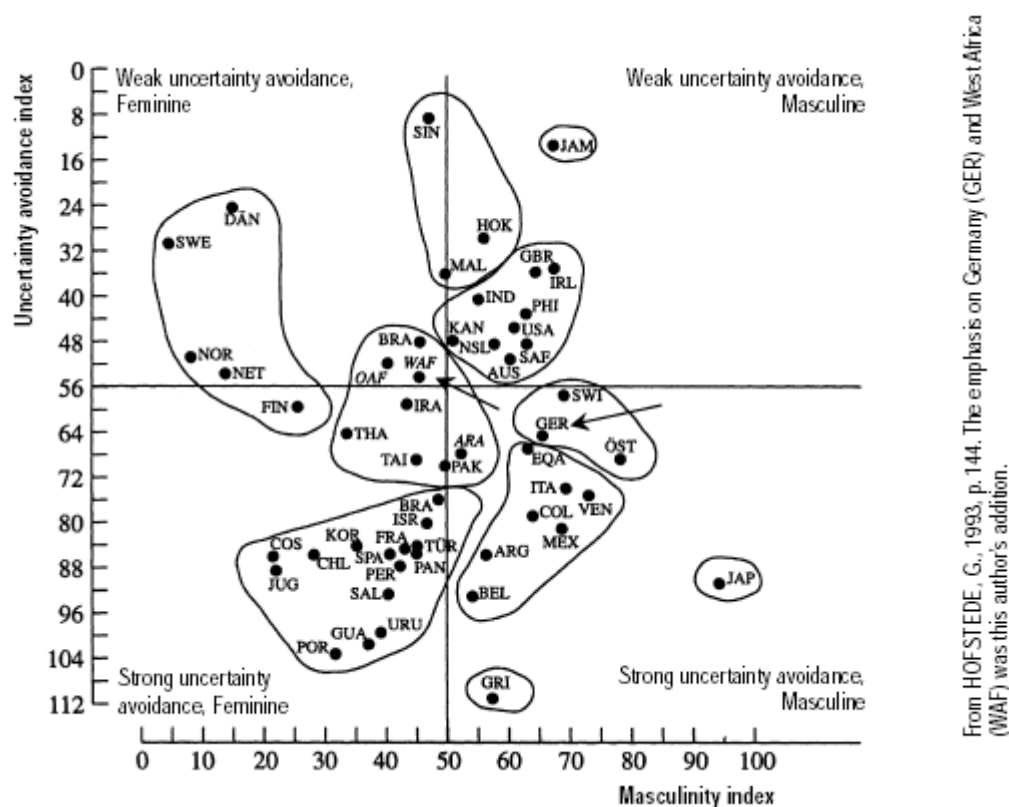
Although the selection of pre-defined value-ratings relates mainly to working life, and the nature of the classification and interpretation of results is bound to be biased towards European ideas of culture, even so HOFSTEDE's published work still provides fairly important empirical reference points and demonstrates considerable correspondences and parallels with reports and observations on African culture from the field of cultural anthropology. To my mind, it is not only quite useful to be able to compare such detailed information with one's own reality, but even more useful to be able to do this within a framework of international comparisons – even if the work-related values are a somewhat restricted sub-set of cultural values. By permitting cultural relativization, this allows knowledge of one's own cultural background – central European in the author's case – to become less of an absolute reference point.

The most distinctive values for West Africa are seen on the dimensions of '**individualism / collectivism**' and '**power distance**'³. Whereas all the industrialized countries have noticeably high values for individualism and low values for power distance, West Africa is on the diametrically opposite side of the scale with very high values for collectivism and for power distance. These differences apply more or less generally between industrialized and developing countries, as can be seen from figure 2.

Figure 2: The position of 50 countries on the scales for 'power distance' and 'individualism/collectivism'

³ Power distance covers phenomena such as social inequalities, especially of power and wealth. Power inequalities are seen for instance where levels of hierarchy are particularly numerous. Hence HOFSTEDE also occasionally refers to hierarchical distance.

Figure 3: The position of 50 countries on the scales for ‘masculinity/femininity’ and ‘uncertainty avoidance’



Before the aspect of world-view and religion with special reference to sub-Saharan Africa is discussed in greater depth, I will first pursue one distinction that applies worldwide, separating cultures into two groups in a similar way to the differentiation between industrialized countries and developing countries. Depending on the way in which social knowledge is handed down from generation to generation, a distinction can be drawn between literate cultures and oral cultures.

4 The tradition of oral transmission

As a rule, the cultures usually encountered in Africa are traditionally non-literate. Anecdotally the exceptions to this are two tribes in West Africa, the Vai and the Mum, who developed their own writing systems (HAILY 1957,79). There are also many African societies in the Sahel countries which have been in contact with the Islamic religion since the late Middle Ages and thus learned to use written Arabic (GLINGA 1989,91).

These exceptions to the rule of orality are extremely significant. They provide evidence that even if writing is introduced and used in a society, that culture will not necessarily develop along the same lines as European culture. Despite exposure to writing, in these East African societies orality has remained the dominant communication and transmission system to this day. Admittedly, "*the Tarikh of Timbuktu which were compiled by African law scholars in around 1600 and represent a piece of historiography of the medieval kingdoms of Ghana to Songhai*" (GLINGA 1989,91) show that an Arabic-language written culture existed in medieval West Africa which took on the task of documenting historical events. However this was probably very much the exception. Normally no written records were kept, whether of history or of myths and rites, and the use of writing did not result in anything akin to the rationalization seen in European society.

Oral transmission can never take place completely verbatim. As in the children's game of Chinese whispers, the chain of listening, memorizing, recalling and repeating leads to a continual alteration of the messages. If things go well, only the sound of the words changes, but usually the meaning of

the message also alters. Even the best mnemonic technique can only alleviate this defect but not completely remedy it. Memory aids of all kinds are well known in oral cultures (GOODY 1977, ONG 1987, 39ff). Rhythm, sound, alliteration, end rhyme and set turns of phrase make memorization easier, especially when these words are regularly used, repeated and refreshed in memory. Rhythm can be attached to melody, and songs are usually easier to retain than spoken verse or prose. Ultimately songs can be synchronized to the rhythm of physical activity when working or dancing. Texts which play a vital part in ceremonial occasions will be the best retained due to their meaning, for example prayers, incantations and ritual formulas such as those uttered upon initiation, marriage, burials, days on which the ancestors are honoured, and so on.

Proverbs and sayings help to safeguard collective knowledge or traditional wisdom. Since life's rich tapestry is quite difficult to condense into neat formulas, there are usually other proverbs which contradict the message of any given proverb. Proverbs have authority and no one takes issue with them. Instead, in the case of a dispute in which proverbs are deployed in place of arguments, the erudite speaker uses a stock of alternative proverbs in response. Riddles, fables and fairy tales are also popular encodings of collective truths and moral standards.

This exclusive use of the transient medium of the spoken word to transmit cultural traditions is still very widespread and results in great plasticity of the information handed down. Each time it is re-phrased, it is automatically adapted to the current situation and audience. Within a short time, information communicated in this way can become completely distorted, as is often seen when rumours are spread or information circulated 'on the grapevine'. To prevent this, knowledge of importance to society as a whole, such as principles for dispensing justice, is always decreed and implemented in a highly public manner which keeps it alive within the culture. Otherwise it is transmitted by particular specialists like the 'griots' of the Sahel region who pass on the tribal history, epics and myths. This role is usually hereditary; knowledge is passed on within a family and there is a high level of specialization and practice in the authentic performance of epics. With this mode of transmission by one small and stable group of individuals, the effect of adapting the message to different situations and audiences produces far less of a distorting effect, because it is not cumulative. Between performances the griot is ultimately able to preserve the core of the message fairly constantly⁴.

We can gain a broader perspective on the difference between oral cultures and literate cultures by looking beyond the different forms of knowledge-generation and transmission. In orality and literacy, GLINGA (1989, 92) sees two fundamentally different modes of social organization: *"The prime characteristic of a dominantly oral society is not the oral nature of the communication network, but the fact that orality achieves social cohesion in a different way than literacy does. In Africa the mode of organization achieved by means of orality consists of an all-embracing sacralization of society and all its routine activities. The sacral in Africa is the socially significant manifestation of orality. Its practical manifestations are in mythical thinking and ritual action. The concept of the sacral'...'designates the social procedure under the conditions of orality for legitimizing public laws, customs and reinventions of social identity. In contrast to the concept of the sacred used in the religious sense, sacralizations, as the term is used here, are not instigated by religious dogmas or authorities. The most interesting aspect of the sacral is its function as the decisive, collectively binding instance of authority which can endow a new tradition with the character of law. In the oral African societies there are numerous apparently time-honoured traditions which in reality date*

⁴ With ritual utterances, at times the exact opposite of adaptation can be observed. Pains are taken in transmission to keep to the original wording, e.g. in secret languages or ancient languages (the language of the ancestors), whose meaning can no longer be understood by all, or perhaps by no-one at all. Thus there are tribes whose modern languages are quite different but who retain similar litanies. The transmission of such texts takes place partly in secret societies or religious training establishments, functionally equivalent to our 'monasteries'.

from quite recently and have only gained the appearance of historical transmission through the collectively accomplished act of sacralization."

The process of sacralization is clearly separable from religion, which I deal with in more detail in the next section, because the sacralization of non-religious spheres of life, such as historical traditions, can be observed everywhere. *"Whereas religion tends towards a conservative written enshrinement of its dogmas, sacralization under oral conditions designates a continually developing process of reformulating social ideals and principles. Sacralization consists of a collectively binding endorsement of the given society's specific history. This progressive re-evaluation of history occurs under the conditions of orality through a permanent revision of myths and rites."* GLINGA, 1989,93).

5 Close world-view and Bantu religions

Sub-Saharan Africa is largely settled by ethnic groups who live from sedentary agriculture. From the centre of the drier regions, which are more suited to nomadic livestock herding than to agricultural use, various pastoral tribes have dispersed from north to south and formed inter-relationships of greater or lesser intensity with the agricultural tribes. In the north-west these were Arabic tribes such as the Mauri or the Tuareg, and in the East they were Nilotic peoples, such as the Batutsi or the Masai. Each ethnic group brought its own material and conceptual culture with it, and confronted the culture of the settled peoples in very different ways. Where peaceful cooperation could not be achieved, the pastoral tribes generally gained the upper hand (for example the Mauri and the Batutsi). These processes explain a great proportion of the cultural diversity observed today in sub-Saharan Africa⁵. However the farming tribes, which are mainly Bantu or Sudanese in origin, have a surprisingly large amount in common, including fairly universal elements of culture.

The term Bantu provides an initial conceptual insight because it can be divided into the prefix 'ba', which means 'people' and the root word 'ntu', meaning 'the essence, the life force'. The ba is encountered in Central African tribal names such as Batutsi, Bahutu, and Batwa, or Bamileke and Bakossi in Cameroon⁶. The concept of 'ntu' (TEMPELS 1955, JAHN 1958,1964, KAGAME 1976) has become a key concept for understanding African philosophy. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire), for example, there was an institute of philosophy named 'Centre NTU'. Bantu philosophy was presented for the first time by TEMPELS⁷ who distilled it from his life as a missionary in the former Belgian Congo, with the help of his training in the philosophy of religion. It is not confined to Bantu peoples. In a postscript to TEMPELS' book, Jahn-Heinz JAHN emphasises on p. 147 its validity for all Africans even in Haiti or Brazil⁸.

The 'ntu', the life force flows through the entire cosmos, the whole of material nature and all living beings. This element of the Bantu religions, where even the inanimate natural objects are seen as

⁵ Only rarely did power-wielding clans develop in the old African peasant cultures with a divergent relationship to nature and business, which colonized the neighbouring peasant tribes. Examples might be the Mossi Kingdom in what is now Burkina Faso, or the Fon in the Dahomey Kingdom, modern Benin. Normally the peasant cultures remain acephalic, i.e. organized in small decentralized local groupings.

⁶ Cf. HALLE EKANE, 2005

⁷ In the literature, certain aspects of TEMPELS are very contentious. HOTOUNDJI accuses him of writing the book only in order to boost his missionary work and enable successful colonization of Africans. Others doubt whether the philosophy described is really a philosophy or consciously exists as such for Africans. Cf. HOTOUNDJI, P., 1993, MASOLO, D.A., 1994. For the purpose of this work, as a heuristic concept and as an initial rough introduction, in my view this criticism can be disregarded without any problem.

⁸ Without citing a source, he quotes in this connection: 'The famous American anthropologist Prof. HERSKOVITS writes: "It is interesting that so many ideas which Father TEMPELS presents as coming from the Congo are so similar to those that I have found in the Sudanese tribes on the Guinea Coast. They are the same conceptions as we find in regions such as Haiti, Brazil and Surinam in the New World."

permeated with life force, was the cue for early missionaries to confuse the pre-existing religion with a nature religion, which they labelled as 'animism'. For an understanding of the metaphysics of the Bantu peoples, however, this term is not particularly helpful.

A more relevant approach appears to be that of R. HORTON (1967), who compares the African world-view with the Western scientific system and reveals many functional as well as structural parallels. It serves to order and explain a diverse reality by means of cause-effect relationships, which originate from the transcendental as the centre of causation but are provoked by causes in daily life and in individual behaviour. Thus empirical and mythical thinking become complementary and interdependent.

"Life force, life growth, life influence and life status are the central concepts both for the ontology and for the psychology of the Bantu." (DANNEMANN in TEMPELS 1955,122). The life force permeates the entire cosmos and connects all categories of beings (MOCK 1980,29ff). The intensity of the forces exerted between the connected elements varies in relation to their positions within a strongly hierarchical order. At the point where all the life forces converge is the all-embracing power of God, the source and the origin of universal power. There is only one true and supreme divinity. It is not possible to contact God directly. This is only possible for those who have already come closer to him than the living, by dying. Every living person is a link in an eternal chain between the dead, the ancestors, and unborn descendants. Communion with the life force is essentially mediated through the ancestors. Among the living, the old are nearer to death and thus face a more immediate prospect of becoming ancestors themselves. They are therefore best equipped to mediate with the ancestors and request them to influence divine forces. This explains their special authority and the respect which all the living are expected to show to the oldest members of their family and their tribe.

Communion with the force of the ancestors proceeds along genealogical lines, either matrilineal or patrilineal. This underlines the significance of kinship ties. Not all ancestors are equally important or equally powerful. This otherworldly ranking corresponds to the state of affairs in this world where not every family or every head of family possesses the same social status. The dead are in permanent symbiosis with the living, and even among the ancestors there are still continual shifts in status explained by their interplay with the living. The more frequently an ancestor is invoked, the more sacrifices that are made to him or her, the more that ancestor's influence over other forces will increase.

For the living, the central location and origin of life forces is the earth. This is where the ancestors are buried and where the life force is carried over into the rest of the inanimate natural world, and into plants, animals and people. Eating is the intake of life forces and cannot therefore be understood purely as a physiological and biochemical process. The earth is imbued with the force of the ancestors and their benign influence guarantees its fertility. Hence farming is inseparably bound up with sacrifices to the ancestors, and prayers for forgiveness are offered to the earth before it is tilled.

Being at one with nature and the surrounding world increases life force, uplifting the sense of life. Separation, isolation and conflict have the opposite effect. This applies not only to the social world but presumably also on the intellectual plane. Analytical thinking is based on separating what is apparently intertwined. Intellectual deconstruction, the separation between thoughts and reality, between man and the world, between the word and the denoted object, and constantly asking 'why?' are inappropriate modes of behaviour which have a detrimental effect on life force. This distinctive difference from European thinking is expressed by SENGHOR (1967,199) as follows: *"European reason is analytical for the sake of utilitarianism; African reason is intuitive out of empathy."*

Closely connected to the world-view and philosophy of the Bantu religions are some central value conceptions. Some of them can be traced back directly to the religion and confirm the results obtained by HOFSTEDE using his value conceptions questionnaire (collectivism and power distance). MOCK (1980,46ff) sets about compiling a list of such general value conceptions, and mentions:

- The ideal of interdependency
- The law of solidarity
- The concern for continuity
- Hierarchical thinking
- Equality and sharing
- The virtue of justice
- Solidarity through labour
- Dialogical behaviour
- Active wisdom
- Self-control
- Openness and adaptability

I will not quote MOCK's explanations one by one, because these largely consist of quotations from other sources. Instead, I shall just offer some brief elucidations of these 11 points.

Interdependency is the central concept. Everything is connected with everything else. Nothing happens without consequences. The individual is inconceivable without the group, particularly the family. The life force is transferred from parents to children. Outside of the family, in the absence of intimate ties and fellowship, life is absolutely meaningless and unimaginable. Freedom of the individual would threaten the existence of the family and the community. High-level dependency, on the other hand, bolsters up the kinship group and creates security and a sense of belonging.

Mutual dependency also requires reciprocal solidarity. Not helping the weak, the old and the needy to the best of one's ability, not sharing in proportion to one's possessions, or failing to offer a gift when one is expected inevitably results in disgrace and is penalized with the contempt of the social community at the very least. In disputes over the causes of sorcery or witchcraft, central factors are always envy and jealousy of others who are materially better off.

Concern for continuity means primarily concern for the perpetuation of the line of ancestors, for the integrity of the family. The survival of one's own group, its unity, its well-being and its life force is the primary goal of every traditional African. The group counts among its members the living, but also the ancestors and the yet unborn. In turn, this continuity plays a part in reinforcing the individual's dependency on the family, because it may be possible to rebel against one's own father, but never against the invisible ancestors who are all-powerful and ever present.

The principle of continuity gives rise to hierarchical thinking, where seniority and primogeniture are the principles that count. The life force is passed from the forefathers to the living, from father to son, from first-born to second-born etc. Thus even within the closest family there can be no equality, and this model holds true for the whole network of extra-familial social relationships. Hierarchical thinking is a deeply rooted African trait.

The essential corrective for social inequality and dependency is provided by the principle of solidarity and the law of equality and sharing of possessions. The merit of ownership is in the ability to share generously. This is drummed into children from an early age. Anyone who shows too much individuality, or tries too hard to set themselves apart from the group, automatically comes under suspicion. A proverb states that only sorcerers and witch-masters live alone or eat alone.

Equality and inequality exist side by side. The horizontal line of equality, especially among those of the same age, is paired with the vertical line representing continuity between the generations and authority. This is bound to lead to tensions, and they need to be alleviated by seeing justice done in order to satisfy the general striving for harmony and solidarity. Injustice shakes the foundations of the social order and provokes general dismay and condemnation. The dispensation of justice aims to

achieve the fairest possible compensation for injured parties or their next of kin, and to pacify and reconcile the disputing parties as completely as possible. To this end, the guilty party is traced and brought to account. The definition of justice is culturally determined and is more intent on remedying the ideological damage to the life force than any material damages that have arisen.

A key element uniting the different groups is shared work. A natural part of working together will usually be eating and drinking together. This source of solidarity is underpinned by the joint ownership of vital goods, particularly the rights of ownership over land inherited from the forefathers. Shared work not only brings more rapid progress but also substantiates the spiritual bond with the rest of the cosmos, lets the life forces flow. The solidarity of work makes it impossible to exploit the law of solidarity parasitically. The proverb makes this clear: *"If a stranger arrives as a guest, then feed him for three days. But on the third day put a hoe in his hand."* (MOCK 1980,51).

The striving for solidarity and harmony is expressed in an extraordinarily dialogical mode of behaviour. Despite the hierarchy and the great difference in authority, there is a form of democracy that defines the public discourse, both in the village and within the extended family. The traditional 'palaver' is a forum in which all have the chance to state their point of view. The ideal chief waits until such time as a consensus has formed among those present. He then makes this conclusion known as his own – authoritarian and wise – decision. Dialogue defines not only the public discourse but also the vast majority of daily affairs in Africa. Careful listening is a skill practised from the cradle. In accordance with the diversity of groupings to which one may be attached, such as peer age-groups, production communities, consumer groups or savings communities, a large part of the daily routine is taken up with nurturing social relationships by means of communication, and with fixing and altering social arrangements and agreements.

Active wisdom refers to the consistent enactment of the world-view and value conceptions in one's own behaviour. Wisdom stands for the virtue of 'being', which takes pride of place over 'having' and 'doing'. It is evidenced in a pure spirit, a certain way of living, in taste, humour and serenity, and is seen as coupled with age.

Self-control is rated as one of the highest virtues. From early childhood onward, and as part of the initiation rituals for adolescents, young people are taught to be able to hide their discomforts and emotions. Bearing pain stoically is considered to be the highest form of self-control. But confidentiality, the keeping of secrets, also belongs to the virtue of self-control.

Finally, openness and adaptability are personal virtues which are already enshrined in the world-view. Despite all their traditions, Africans have been remarkably quick to adopt certain innovations from elsewhere, for instance, many of the crop species which are widespread today such as maize, cassava, cocoa and the oil-palm. These plants were only introduced to Africa from other continents in the course of contact with Europeans but today they are integral to African life. Islam and Christianity were willingly accepted as forms of religion in large areas of the continent, probably because the basic structures of these religions were in harmony with the traditional religion. But on closer appraisal, one can ascertain that even the missionary-converted African has remained a traditional African at heart, and while the superficial forms of the new religion have been adopted, there remains a fundamental loyalty to the traditional world-view, its rules and its scale of values.

Possibly it is this very capacity for openness and adaptability, especially in rather superficial matters of form, which has enabled Africans to maintain the central values of their traditional culture until now, at least as far as rural social communities are concerned. The state of affairs in the towns will be the subject of the next section.

6 Urban-rural dualism

The original Africa, untainted by Europe, as depicted in the reports of the first explorers and missionaries, no longer exists. Even the remotest villages now interact with the international community. Money, goods and information are in circulation. Migration of labour, the motor car, commerce and the transistor radio all keep up the flow of interaction. The traces of contact over many centuries with European civilization can no longer be eradicated. Missionary work, slavery and colonial rule have had an impact throughout the continent, albeit to varying degrees, and left deep scars.

In view of the foreigners' superior technology, initially their weapon systems and subsequently their modern transportation and communications technology, most Africans are experiencing a permanent state of shock and the aftermath is a deep-rooted sense of their own inferiority and backwardness. This is also expressed in the consumer-like attitude to foreign 'aid', which stems from a kind of eternal protraction of childhood (POSTMAN 1982); in a literate culture, the illiterate can never reach adulthood. A far less common response is to recognize the drawbacks attached to western civilization and the particular absurdness of white people in the African context and measured against African value conceptions.

The main people likely to express more critical distance and retain their self-respect are older people and authority figures in the villages, and a minority of African intellectuals who are campaigning for a revitalization of traditional African values, particularly through the medium of literature. This is in a context where relatively rapid social change is an inevitable fact. The only debatable points are how rapidly and in which direction this will take place.

Today's Africans are migrants between two worlds (TURNBULL 1963, GOODY 1987), belonging to both but subject to very different and often contradictory demands from each. This condition affects society, its different communities and each individual person, and is designated along with the title of this section as dualism. The ends of the dual scale have been labelled north and south, urban and rural, because most of the current areas of tension between traditional and modern Africa can be ordered on this continuum. This continues to be true in the age of globalization, which just accentuates the divide between rich and poor, extending it across all countries and nations as a worldwide trend. Lengthy formal education and integration into international economic cycles are the characteristics of the 'new rich' (SACHS 1999), and labour is increasingly devalued in relation to capital.

Towns were the gateways of colonialism (KI-ZERBO 1981) and after independence they remained the centres of modern centralized state power and European-influenced bureaucracy. Towns are the islands of active literate culture in a sea of orality, which is still the main organizational principle in the rural communities. Towns feature central electricity and water supplies, comprehensive sewerage networks, international transport connections, and a high level of division of labour and professional specialization. They are the advance guard of industrialized culture in a continent where the agrarian tradition is deeply ingrained. The division and specialization of labour in towns is the motor for increasing monetarization and materialization of all aspects of life, which also results in increasing individualization and differentiation in wealth.

Modern technology makes relentless demands on its users to maintain it in working order. To import a technology is to import a new mentality. In order to maintain and repair a car properly, there must be order, cleanliness, punctuality and the utmost care and precision. Imported technologies, goods and styles of consumption bend people to their requirements, although people are not usually conscious of this and have no defence against it.

The arrival of the central state, which did not exist in large parts of sub-Saharan Africa in the pre-colonial era, enriches the urban-rural continuum with a whole array of other contradictions and areas of conflict.

Most states in Africa south of the Sahara claim themselves to be sole owners of their territorial land. There is no conception of land ownership in the traditional culture, but only of long-term or tempo-

rary rights of use. The long-term right of use belongs to the descendants of those who first took possession of the land. The current rights of use are administered by the oldest member of each such 'inheritance community', who can even redistribute land in the case of special need⁹. As long as enough land is available, even outsiders are allocated land to farm. Permanent crops may only be planted by those who possess long-term rights of use. If permanent cultivations are accepted then the right of long-term use transfers to whoever has planted the long-term crops.

Traditionally, land cannot be disposed of, given away or sold. As long as the modern state does not intervene directly in land use, then as far as village inhabitants are concerned everything stays the same as before. Anywhere that the state tries to enforce its ownership claims, however, there will always be conflicts. This is a regular occurrence in the vicinity of towns, but also where roads or public utilities are to be built. A legal compromise can seldom be found since the modern law is incompatible with the traditional, and the state can only enforce its legal claim where it has the requisite force to do so. Purchase and sale of land is becoming normal in the towns and urban hinterlands. Usually a notarized document proves title to ownership. Land registers are still little used.

In the history of central Europe, the transition from traditional land ownership to written title placed the peasant class at a considerable disadvantage to the nobility and clerics, and sowed the first seeds of later peasant uprisings. In Africa today it is largely the officials who profit from the transition to written title of land ownership, both as registrars susceptible to bribery, and as the most important category of purchasers. However in more general terms the officials are only the thin end of the wedge. A whole phalanx of other proponents of literate culture and formal organizations is likely to follow their precedent.

Land ownership law is only a special case of the law in general. Here, too, the state attempts to give additional validation to the written law. The principles of state law are founded upon the Roman understanding of law from which European systems are derived. This diverges in considerable measure from traditional legal understanding, and predictably enough a variety of conflicts arise. To date, very few African states have succeeded in establishing a comprehensive and effective central state administration which can enforce central state claims right out to the remotest villages. Thus between the modern and the traditional system of order, all kinds of compromises are made. Where the state acted prematurely to abolish traditional institutions, it soon became apparent that it lacked the capacity to enforce state regulations. Meanwhile local rules and mechanisms for order had become equally toothless and a level of chaos was setting in which was undesirable from all perspectives. The usual compromise consists of setting up the local leaders in remote villages as recognized representatives of the state administration. Otherwise state functionaries deal rather tentatively with the local authorities and seek cooperation as far as possible.

The decisive constraint on over-rapid and extensive modernization consists of the very effective traditional system of social organization which still reaches into the towns, and the value conceptions and philosophy which define this organization. Almost all Africans, even those born in the towns, still have 'their village' from which they are neither able nor willing to separate completely. The ancestors are buried there, the family has its true homeland and a centre for its life force there, and one must return there, at least on the occasion of important ceremonies, to be reassured of one's social belonging and identity. Ceremonies still remain the focus and framework of social life and the most important occasions for affirming the traditional social norms. Even the adoption of another religion such as Islam or Christianity changes nothing fundamentally. The external framework of ceremonies can be varied but the social function of the ceremonies is largely retained. In urban-rural dualism the ceremonies can be seen as one of the most effective ties which hold the two worlds together.

⁹ At village level, many places have two traditional chiefs, the 'village chief' who takes care of the general administration, and the 'land chief' or 'earth master' who is also the land priest and in charge of all questions of land use and allocation.

However this bond which upholds the traditional world is not exactly idyllic, because in large measure it consists of deep-seated feelings of fear. These stem from the strict childhood upbringing and initiation, and are reinforced in the present by rational anxieties that nothing is enduringly reliable in this world apart from family ties and from the strong belief into witchcraft and its omnipresence in every day life. Ceremonies, then, are the symbolic expression of social belonging, this last remnant of security and dependability.

7 Communication infrastructure

Naturally it is only possible to give a general description of the communication infrastructure within narrow confines. There is extreme variation according to geographical and economic circumstances. Where more general descriptions are not possible, I will at least indicate the principal factors here (DOOB 1961, LOHISSE 1974, MELKOTE 1991).

Not only was writing virtually unknown in traditional African culture, but pictures were also infrequently used. Where images were seen, they tended to be wall paintings, mainly ornamental and seldom iconic images. The best known are the bold symbolic figures of the old Dahomey Kingdom in South Benin. In contrast, three-dimensional art works are very widespread everywhere, especially in the form of cultic masks. Another instance is the way the Ashanti, for example, artfully shaped the weights used for gold trading into the form of figures (GRAAP 1987). Figure 4 shows a map from the year 1957 showing the known distribution of wall paintings.

Figure 4: The distribution of wall painting in Africa



Source: HASSELBERGER 1957,231.

The construction of a general network of streets, tracks and roads is developing apace in all the African countries. The greater the density of settlement, as a rule, the more accessible an area becomes. The road networks are also better developed near larger towns, ports and airports. In the tropical rainforest regions, ships and boats play an important role in local transport. The vast majority of all road connections, especially in remoter and more rural areas, are not properly made up and are often impassable for over half the year, even in four-wheel drive vehicles. During the dry season the road connections are always repaired sufficiently to allow motor vehicles to pass. The purchase and sale prices of goods reflect the distances to be covered and the state of the roads.

The transportation of precision-engineered or electronic devices, as used in modern communications technology, is beset by three main problems: extreme vibration during transportation by road, extreme dampness in the rainy season, and dust fine enough to penetrate any joint during the dry season.

The population is relatively mobile, people enjoy travelling and usually have a command of several local languages which is tremendously useful for exchanging information verbally. Every self-respecting village holds a weekly local market, and every African tries whenever possible to visit one of the area's regional market days once a week. Markets are not just forums for transacting goods and services, but specifically also opportunities to exchange information.

If the family system is patrilocal and exogamous, the male offspring stay in the village and the females normally marry outside. So as not to lose contact with their families, the married women leave their husband's residence at regular intervals to spend periods of time living and working with their own families. Young men also leave the family to search for paid work. However, when traditional festival and ceremonial times come around, even the members of the extended family living in far-off locations return to congregate in the home village. All these migrations, which are not in the least impeded by modern state boundaries, promote direct verbal communication and the trans-regional exchange of information.

Of all the modern media of communication, radio is certainly the most widespread. No village is without its transistor radios, and no shopkeeper fails to stock a selection of batteries. Of course the radio is especially popular for its music programmes, and beside modern rhythms listeners particularly enjoy hearing their own folklore performed. But spoken-word programmes of every kind will always attract an audience too.

There are still a small number of African countries south of the Sahara where television has not yet been introduced. Television is found principally in the capital cities, only extending further out in a few of the better-off countries (EMMELMANN 1991). Viewing with satellite receivers and video recorders is still restricted to relatively wealthy groups and, unlike the situation in the North African countries, the equipment has not become standard in the villages. Accordingly it is an uphill struggle to have domestic productions made, and apart from news programmes and long-winded political appearances the standard fare on television consists of cheaper productions from around the world. The official language of the country is a further factor, limiting not only the television programmes but also the cinema films that can be imported.

A regular cinema programme is on offer in every African city nowadays, but this is not usually true of places any smaller than the provincial capitals. The films are almost exclusively imported products with a large proportion of action films originating from India and East Asia. Video, together with the sale and hire of video tapes, is generally on the increase (KLEE 1989).

The telephone network is not very dense and terminates in the provincial capitals. For village dwellers, the telephone is virtually insignificant as a medium of communication. However that changes very rapidly when the mobile phone networks extend their access into particular areas, and the handsets are quick to follow.

Access to the Internet is being delayed on a broader front. The necessary satellite connections and high performance cables are simply not available in most countries south of the Sahara. South Africa is the only exception to this (BRÜNE 1998).

On the other hand, the school network must definitely be counted as part of the communication infrastructure. All African states have undertaken considerable efforts to develop their formal school systems, and the only constraints have been the rural exodus and high youth unemployment in the cities. For all classes of society, schooling is the principal means of gaining social advancement.

Families today make great sacrifices to enable their children to gain a decent education, partly in the hope of ensuring that they themselves are well provided for in old age (ARNOLD 1989).

The structure of the school system and the type of final accreditation awarded is largely carried over from the colonial period and reflects the school system of the colonial country. In the high schools and universities in particular, a large proportion of foreign teaching staff are employed. Teachers make up an absolute majority of all French development workers, for example. Determining the nature of scholastic requirement, and the contents of curricula and textbooks is a highly effective way of transferring European norms of thought and behaviour into the African setting.

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