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ABSTRACT

This paper gathers information on the values, cognition, and educational background of African students studying at universities in the United States. The section on values notes that Americans are task-oriented individualists, while Africans are primarily relationship-oriented collectivists. These values of sharing and relationship orientation mean that the African may have difficulty with the notion of strict deadlines for class projects. In the section on cognition the paper shows that due to sociocultural differences the African may not appear to perform on a sophisticated level. Americans and Africans differ in their organization and development of thought. Americans think in a linear fashion, systematically, sequentially, logically and use specific, explicit language. The typical African thinks globally and non-specifically and as they are a high-context, oral culture, they do not emphasize details. The section on educational background notes that Africans often have two different types of experiences: in the family children receive a moral education through observation, imitation, and listening in an informal setting; and in school they often experience an authoritarian, colonial style, British-model education. Additional sections address the African's expectations for the American teacher (an authoritarian and formal style) and nonverbal aspects of communication (differences in facial expressions and in personal space needs). (Contains 68 end notes.)

THE AFRICAN STUDENT IN THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

DORIS RILEY

THE AFRICAN STUDENT IN THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

As we move closer toward the reality of a global village, university professors see more and more of the seats in their classrooms filled with foreign students--individuals who have a different world view, different values, different thinking processes, and different educational experiences than do their American counterparts. Communication between teacher and student, in itself a challenge, now becomes even more complicated as the teacher must recognize and overcome cultural barriers that may impede learning.

For the intercultural communicator, each foreign culture seems to have its own set of factors that must be understood in order for successful communication to occur. For teachers who desire to gain such understanding, resources are available that explain the educational needs of students from many cultures, particularly Asians, Latin Americans, Europeans, and such domestic cultures as Mexican Americans and African Americans. Research for this paper, however, revealed a dearth of information relating specifically to the needs of the African student in the American university classroom. As more and more Africans arrive on American campuses, it will become critical that more substantial research be done in this area.

Studies in tangential areas clearly indicate that significant differences exist between the African and American cultures. It is therefore important that American teachers educate themselves about these differences and develop for these students some means of transition into the American system.

VALUES

A fundamental difference between Americans and Africans is their value systems: generally, we are task-oriented individualists, while Africans, like most third world cultures, are primarily relationship-oriented collectivists.[1]

The development of these opposing values begins at an early age in each culture. American parents, according to Grindal, foster in their children a "high disposition

toward achievement and autonomy" through what he describes as "severe independence training." Such training includes early weaning, encouraging the child to perform tasks before he has reached the degree of physical maturity required to easily accomplish them, and measuring the child against high standards of achievement. These pressures, says Grindal, cause the child to suffer from anxiety. But when the child is rewarded for his attempts and successes by loving parents, a pattern is established that creates within him a strong motivational force:

> The individual who has had this kind of experience in early childhood anticipates success each time he tries to achieve in later life, for this was the pattern of early striving; but because success is not a foregone conclusion, he forever feels a need to try another task and reassure himself.

The American, then, seems to be driven to succeed.

In contrast, the environment in which the African child develops promotes dependence and sociability. Unlike the American child, the African infant is not weaned until a later age, he has his needs satisfied immediately, he is not encouraged to perform motor tasks beyond his developmental ability, and he receives no encouragement to act independently. Instead, says Grindal, "parental attitudes concerning the dependency and innate warmth of infants reinforce behavioral dispositions in the direction of sociability and affective dependence."[2]

Individualism, so treasured by Americans, is unimportant to the African. In fact, it is viewed as a weakness. The opposite value, uniformity, is considered a strength.[3] This value is such a fundamental part of the African makeup that it is difficult for them to think as individuals. According to Ilene Foote, a missionary to Congo and a former English professor, African students have trouble writing about their personal feelings because they have not been taught to express themselves; instead, they are always trying to fit a group identity.[4]

Because they are people-oriented, Africans value relationships more than Americans do. They view us as cold and distant, obsessed with success to the degree that we sacrifice everything for it, including those values most precious to the African. According to one African student, Americans have no deep relationships. Another's assessment is that we "are really not interested in other people's lives."[5]

The opposing orientations of Americans and Africans become quite apparent when examining the way members of each culture function within a group. In the United States, although we are focused upon the "team effort," the purpose for a work group's existence is to accomplish a task. What little attention is paid to the social aspects relate to how they affect production.[6] To Africans, groups have much greater social significance. Whereas in an American group the primary focus is on achievement, in an African group, the most important purpose is social interaction; the amount of work accomplished is secondary. Committees meet regularly and do not often accomplish much (at least according to the American perspective.) Additionally, the social hierarchy within the group is more significant to Africans than it is to Americans; positions and rank are taken very seriously.[7]

The strongest social unit in the African culture is the family. Of all concerns, it is of primary importance in the life of the African; its welfare supercedes that of his own personal well being. Characteristically, for the African, the motivation for success comes not from a desire for personal, individual gain, but from the desire to raise the status of his family. According to Foote, when one climbs to the top in Africa, he brings his family with him.[8]

African students observing our culture are quick to note that their relationships with their families are much stronger than those of Americans. They also describe a greater respect for elder family members than exists in America. According to Vany Rwego, a student from Uganda, Americans are more nonchalant with their elders and seem to lack the training she had: "As children we were brought up and shown the

manner in which we were to talk to our elders and how we are to act." [9] Vany's training follows the traditional pattern described by Joseph A. Lijembe of the Muluyia tribe::

> Children were trained from their earliest years to be respectful, obedient, and mannerly, these being the standards by which adults became acceptable to society. All parents, and fathers in particular, were very stern with children who in any way departed from such standards.[10]

The African, then, above all else, values membership in a strong family hierarchy. This value may affect the behavior of the African student in what some consider to be a positive way. According to several professors and instructors at LeTourneau University, an institution with a proportionately large population of international students, their African students have been consistently polite and respectful of their authority.[11]

The dichotomy of individualism versus collectivism is manifested as well in the conflicting values of individual ownership and communal sharing. Whereas the American jealously guards his private property, the traditional African concept is that within his family and community, no one owns anything; everything belongs to everyone.[12] For example, if someone has a fruit tree in his yard, everyone is welcome to pick its fruit. Additionally, it is considered rude to say "no" to someone if he asks to borrow something. According to Foote, even the ownership of information is often considered to be communal, rather than private. For example, sharing answers on an exam may not be considered cheating.[13]

Related to the value of ownership is that of privacy. To Americans, privacy is so important that its invasion can lead to legal action.[14] Privacy is of much less concern to the socially oriented African.[15]

Another important value difference between Americans and Africans is that of openness. Africans perceive us to be very open and honest, even blunt. One Ugandan student sees this as positive in some ways, yet also as negative in that at times we seem to have no consideration as to the effect our blunt comments have on others.[16]

Africans, on the other hand, tend to withhold their thoughts and feelings.[17] To Americans this can be confusing and frustrating. Tim Stafford, a missionary to Kenya, describes his experience with this culture:

> Their welcome was sincere, for they are a sincerely hospitable people But they maintain a deeper reserve, and they will not give themselves fully to you until they have watched you a long time. . . As they are more cordial and polite than we are, we can easily misread them. I had to learn to listen more carefully, alert to the slightest shadow of reservation.[18]

One reason Africans are reserved in expression is to avoid disappointing someone or hurting his feelings. For example, Africans will rarely say "no"; they consider this to be very impolite. Another reason is to avoid appearing vulnerable, which, in their culture, is considered to be a weakness.[19]

In addition to openness, Americans attach importance to other values that Africans do not hold as particularly significant. Whereas Americans cherish personal freedom, Africans live in society that rigidly confines its members to roles.[20] Carol Muumbi, a Kenyan student, explained that in her country "the rules are clearly defined. I knew what was expected of me, what I would do, where I would live..." Carol found that when she came to America, she had so much freedom to choose that she was overwhelmed.[21]

Another difference between the values of these cultures is their attitudes about change. Whereas Americans embrace change and progress, Africans generally do not accept new ideas as quickly.[22] In academic disciplines in which change is inherent, such as technical fields, the African orientation could pose a challenge for both the teacher and the student.

These cultures contrast as well in their concepts of time. Americans tend to feel a great deal of time pressure. This is perhaps related to our task orientation. As one African student observed, we "press to finish a job within a specific time and sacrifice

everything to accomplish it."[23] The African student, having less experience with such time pressure, might have difficulty adjusting to the idea of class project deadlines.[24]

Americans strive also for punctuality. Africans, however, are not so concerned about promptness. For example, one African student said that in his country a person needs to be on time only if he is meeting someone who is considered to be more important than he.[25] Also, the African tends to be event oriented, rather than time oriented. For example, in Congo, if someone shows up at a social event, such as a church service, he is considered to have participated in the event. It doesn't matter at all if he is late.[26] According to Muumbi, however, Africans try to be prompt for business meetings. She believes, therefore, that tardiness in the classroom should not be a problem once the student is made aware of expectations for promptness.[27]

In summary, the typical American professor is himself and expects his students to be individualistic, task and deadline oriented, territorial, open, and progressive. His African student, however, most likely can be defined in opposite terms. Because he has a different set of values, his needs, motivations, and expectations are in many ways different from those of his American classmates.

COGNITION

For many years Western science viewed African reasoning capacity as inferior. In 1929 Bentley wrote:

> The African Negro. . . does not think, reflect, or reason if he can help it. He has a wonderful memory, has great powers of observation and imitation . . . and very many good qualities . . . but the reasoning and inventive faculties remain dormant. He readily grasps the present circumstances, adapts himself to them and provides for them; but a careful, thought out plan or a clever piece of induction is beyond him.[28]

More recent studies show this view to be fallacious. According to Cole and Scribner, "There is no evidence, in any line of investigation that we have reviewed, that any cultural group wholly lacks a basic process such as abstracton, or inferential reasoning, or categorization." Rather, they hypothesize that sociocultural factors influence which cognitive processes are employed by a cultural group in a given situation. Therefore, although the African may not appear to some to perform on a cognitively sophisticated level, he most definitely does reason, according to his own framework, and he has the *capacity* to reason in the same way as we do.[29]

Traditionally, Africans have been recognized for their excellent memories. This trait is considered typical of nonliterate cultures who rely on mnemonic devices, such as rhyme, rhythm, and repitition, to enhance their memories. According to Cole and Scribner, however, nonliterate people are not generally superior in memory. They equate an African cowherder's ability to recall particulars of a cattle transaction the previous year to an American ten-year-old baseball fan's ability to remember players and batting averages. "The cowherder's feat of memory seems outstanding only because what is socially important to him is irrelevant to the Western observer," and vice versa.[30]

Although our capacity for memory is not significantly different from the African's, our reasoning processes are. This becomes quite apparent when an American teacher reads a paper submitted by an African student. It seems "out of focus" because the "rhetoric and sequences of thought violate the expectations of the native reader."[31]

The basic difference between American and African cognition is that we organize and develop our thoughts differently. Americans think in a linear fashion -- systematically, sequentially, logically. Since we are a low context culture, we use specific, explicit language, as well.[32] According to Kaplan, who has studied compositional styles of various cultures:

> The thought patterns which speakers and readers of English appear to expect as an integral part of their communication is a sequence that

> is dominantly linear in its development. An English expository paragraph usually begins with a topic sentence, and then, by a series of subdivisions of that topic sentence, each supported by examples and illustrations, proceeds to develop that central idea and relate that idea to all the other ideas in the whole essay, and to employ that idea in its proper relationship with the other ideas, to prove something.[33]

We expect, then, that written communication be complete, detailed, unified, and coherent.

The typical African, on the other hand, thinks globally and nonspecifically, as do natives of most third world countries.[34] Because they are a high-context, oral culture, Africans generally do not worry about details. Rather than focusing on one thing at a time, their thought is holistic, "composed of many thoughts at once, which may or may not integrate or be logical, and which may have no logical progression." [35] According to Kogan, who has researched gender differences in cognitive styles, the global thinking style is associated with enchanced sensitivity to people and with interpersonal relations." The African thinking style, then, correlates with their value system.[36]

Blaschke expresses concern that the global orientation of Africans may impede their progress in the world of technology, which he believes requires linear organization.[37] Gordon Moore, an aviation instructor at LeTourneau University who has worked with a number of African students, agrees that they have difficulty with technology, but he attributes this difficulty to their lack of technical experience rather than to any cognitive limitations.[38]

Another area of cognitive function, visual perception, can cause a problem for Africans in the classroom: they tend to have difficulty interpreting some visual material, particularly charts, cartoons, and representations of three-dimensional objects.[39] Cole and Scribner, citing several studies, attribute perceptual difficulty to lack of exposure during childhood to photographs and three-dimensional drawings.[40] Studies show that even after years of Western-style schooling, African university students still often interpret three-dimensional representations two-dimensionally.[41]

Additionally, the African may be handicapped in our system because he does not seem to demonstrate a great deal of creativity, a capacity associated with cognition. From her observations in Congo and from her experiences with African students from other countries, Foote notes that the culture is not innovative. They can copy something, she says, but they seldom invent anything. This is likely because they are not encouraged in their training to be creative, which in turn may be a reflection of the African attitude toward change.[42]

It is important for the teacher to recognize that what appear to be deficits in thinking ability are most probably related to values, environment, and training, rather than to any inferiority of cognitive capacity. These deficits can be overcome with appropriate transitional instruction. Kaplan, for example, describes exercises to facilitate the teaching of rhetorical structures to the foreign student. One such exercise requires the student to rearrange the sentences in a scrambled paragraph in an order that to him appears to be correct. The teacher then "demonstrates the diversity of views represented in the classroom. Students are then presented the original version and the instructor explains and justifies the order."[43] As we come to understand the differences between the thinking styles of Africans and Americans, we can create additional bridging methods to ease these students into the Western ways.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

In addition to understanding the African student's value system and thinking style, it is important for the teacher to be aware of his previous educational experiences. Interestingly, two quite opposite experiences comprise the education of most Africans.

Traditionally, family members are the initial and fundamental educators of the child. The object of his early training is both practical and moral, as Apoko of the Acholi tribe, explains:

> People take great care to see that children are given all the necessary training in order that they will be hard working and useful men and women in the society . . . Great attention is paid to all aspects of children's "moral" development. They must learn to obey those who are older . . . Everybody who is closely related to the child takes part in, and contributes, toward the child's education.[44]

The primary methods of learning in this system are observation, imitation, and listening.[45] According to Cole and Scribner, most of the learning takes place "in real-life situations, where the meaning is intrinsic to the context." Rather than explaining to their children what is to be done, the adults show them. The learning is informal and unstructured.[46]

A high value is placed on listening, which would be expected in an oral culture. Some believe the primary learning channel of such cultures is auditory;[47] a great deal of teaching is achieved orally through songs and educational stories.[48] Children who are not good listeners are considered to be useless, and any questions considered unnecessary are evidence of poor listening.[49]

Superimposed over this traditional education is the experience of the colonial school system, which in many ways conflicts with traditional values and practices. Lijembe, who came from a highly traditional tribal background, describes the confusion he experienced upon entering school:

> I had done, while a child at home, what my parents had asked me to do. But there was never much wrong if the work was not finished or if it was badly done. Somebody would complete or perfect it. At school it was different. The teachers expected me to do my work carefully, quickly, and accurately. If it was badly done, I would be punished -- either flogged, detained at school, or given a number of bricks to make. If the work was well done, on the other hand, I would be praised. On a number of occasions, I was given prizes for good performance. . . The discipline of our parents, their rewards (if any), and their punishments, had formed in us no strong motives for doing our best, which was what all the formalities of the school were aimed at.[50]

Most African schools follow the British academic tradition. Grindal, who studied the schools in Ghana, noted "a mood of rigidity and an almost total absence of spontaneity." Classes begin promptly, and "each lesson lasts exactly forty minutes." There is little discussion of subject matter; rather, both teacher and student read from the text. The teacher then drills the students by asking the questions at the end of the chapter, none of which are designed to stimulate thought. No supplemental explanation of the material is provided; the focus is totally on the text. Grindal observes that "all subjects except math are lessons in literacy which teach the student to spell, speak, read, and write."

The relation between the teacher and students is rigidly authoritarian. In Ghana, for example, students are expected to demonstrate their respect by standing as the teacher enters the classroom. The lessons themselves seem to be an exercise in intimidation and submission, as Grindal describes:

> During the lessons the student is not expected to ask questions, but instead is supposed to give the "correct" answers to questions posed to him by the teacher. . . When the teacher asks a question, most of the students hurriedly examine their books to find the correct answer and then raise their hands. The teacher calls on one of them, who rises, responds (with eyes lowered), and then sits down. If the answer is wrong or does not make sense, the teacher corrects him and occasionally derides him for his stupidity. In the latter case the child remains standing with his eyes lowered until the teacher finishes and then sits down without making a response. . . The child learns to unquestioningly accept the directives and knowledge imparted by authority figures. . .[51]

According to Foote, the French schools of Congo are similar in their focus. Teaching methodology is limited to lecture: the teacher talks, and the students take notes. At the end of the year, a comprehensive examination is administered. These students are not challenged with higher level questions and discussion; rather, they are expected to merely repeat what they have been told. As in Ghana, the teacher is considered to be the

expert. Students believe everything they are told, and they do not question the teacher's knowledge or challenge his authority.[52] But interestingly, students from large cities in Kenya and Uganda described somewhat different learning experience.[53] They indicated that a significant part of their schooling did involve discussion and problem solving. It is puzzling that their observations differed from those of American observers in other parts of the African continent. Perhaps teaching methodology differs from country to country, perhaps it differs between schools in large cities and those in smaller communities, or possibly the students who responded in this way define discussion and problem solving differently than we do.

In analyzing the African's education, it appears, then, that many are not taught to think on what we would consider to be a higher level. Neither the informal training of the family nor the formal instruction of the colonial school stimulates questioning, analysis, and evaluation. When they enter the American university, therefore, Africans must be gradually guided toward independent thought. For example, in a composition class, rather than immediately asking the African student to write an essay arguing for or against the thesis of a book, the teacher might first ask him to write a summary of what the book says, then write about the way in which his culture would handle the situation described in the book, and then to contrast the way the situation was handled in the book and the way he would handle it.[54] The development and implementation of such strategies no doubt require a significant degree of interest, energy, and patience. But without such transitional steps, the African student may experience great frustration in our system.

THE AFRICAN'S EXPECTATIONS FOR THE AMERICAN TEACHER

Based upon their past experiences, African students come to the American classroom with a certain set of expectations. They expect the teacher to behave like African teachers and to have similar expectations for their students.

The African expects the American teacher to be authoritarian in manner, and for the students to be respectful in return. Although they seem to like the relative informality of the American class environment, Africans have difficulty respecting the teacher, and this can be a bit confusing: since they rely totally upon the teacher for information and truth, it is important that they can respect him. As mentioned earlier, the typical African teacher attempts to appear invulnerable. Americans, however, are considerably more comfortable in our fallibility and quite often admit our mistakes. But the African wonders about a professor who would say, "I don't know the answer; I'll have to look it up." In Africa, most teachers would give the student a wrong answer rather than admit that they don't know something.

Additionally, whereas American teachers often share aspects of their personal lives with their students, African teachers rarely do so, for they would not be taken seriously as professionals. And unlike the American teacher, the African teacher seldom jokes because such behavior would be considered inconsistent with a teacher's professional image.[55] The African student, therefore, may not know how to respond to a professor's humor. (It should be noted also that such subtle forms of humor as sarcasm can easily be misunderstood by foreign students and should be avoided in the classroom.[56])

The African student is careful to maintain a formal relationship with the teacher, and avoids taking any action that might appear to place him on an equal standing with his superior. For example, Frances, a student from Congo, was reluctant to visit his professors in their offices, because it would appear that he was trying to raise himself to the teachers' level. If he could not gain their attention while in the classroom, he would not pursue a conversation.[57]

The primary goal of the African student, conditioned as he is to please the teacher, is to recite back what he thinks the teacher wants to hear, to assume the opinions he thinks the teacher holds. To do so in some parts of Africa has in the past been of

primary importance. Foote says that in Congo, as well as other countries previously under Marxist rule, if a student expressed a view on an exam that was not congruent with that ideology, he would fail the exam.[58]

In the American university, arguments of two or more sides of an issue are common, with the teacher acting as a moderator who avoids imposing his views; in many cases there is no right answer. Understandably, the African student becomes frustrated when he cannot pinpoint what the teacher's opinions are or which answer to a question the teacher believes is correct. Says Foote, "The student doesn't know where to begin to do what the teacher wants him to do," and he often makes the wrong assumptions.[59]

Because the American teacher and his African student hold such different expectations regarding their roles and the learning process itself, numerous opportunities exist for miscommunication. Although neither should be expected to abandon his ways, an *awareness* of the other's expectations should facilitate learning.

NONVERBALS

An additional factor in student-teacher communication is nonverbals, and again, there are some significant differences between the two cultures in their body language. First, because we Americans are permitted to openly express our feelings, it is relatively easy to "read" an American face.[60] On the other hand, as previously mentioned, Africans are less open and it is harder to interpret their feelings from their facial expressions. The smile, in particular, is a common vehicle for expression in our culture, but in Africa, when someone smiles, he can be perceived as silly and irresponsible. Although in a social setting, Africans smile a great deal, in class they tend to be more restrained and introverted.[61] Africans tend to be less direct than Americans in their eye contact, as well. Wolfgang reports that West Africans avoid direct eye contact, particularly with authority figures.[62] Foote notes that generally African women avoid eye contact with men, and men are shy about contact with women teachers.[63]

Another important nonverbal to consider is that of personal space. Thompson explains the American's sense of personal space by defining three "zones" that each allow for a particular type of social interaction. First is public space, which includes everything beyond four feet of the person. Next is personal space, which extends from eighteen inches outward to approximately four feet in all directions. This is the space "reserved for good friends and for discussing personal business." Finally, the intimate zone extends outward to approximately eighteen inches. Any interaction within this space is considered to be intimate. When a stranger enters our personal space, we unconsciously back away to reestablish the "proper" personal boundaries.[64]

Relative to Americans, Africans have a considerably smaller personal space and are more comfortable than we are in close proximity to others. As a result, they may approach Americans more closely than we would like.[65] The American teacher, then, may perceive the African student as aggressive and feel that he is being crowded. It is important, however, that in such a case the teacher overcome the urge to back away.[66]

Although Africans have a smaller personal space than Americans, any attempt to touch them may be misconstrued, says Foote, especially when the student is female and the teacher is male, and there is not a significant age difference between the two parties. This is because traditionally, African teachers often demand sexual favors from female students to pass.

Certain gestures can be misunderstood also by Africans. For example, handing a person something with the left hand is considered impolite, for in the African culture, this hand is thought to be dirty.

The female teacher should be aware also that certain types of clothing can be distracting, particularly that which reveals much of the leg. In Africa, women cover their legs; the lower body is considered to be much more sexual than the upper body. The problem with such dress is not necessarily that it would be arousing, but that the student would consider it to be inappropriate for an authority figure.[67]

In summary, when dealing with an African student, the teacher should be sensitive to nonverbals, both the student's and his own. He should understand that an African will probably not be as facially expressive as an American. Also, such a student may feel less comfortable with direct eye contact, and the teacher should recognize that lack of eye contact does not necessarily indicate lack of respect; in fact, it likely means the opposite. The teacher should be aware also that the African may, without any intent of intimacy, enter his intimate space, and that at the same time the student may be uncomfortable with touch. The teacher should be sensitive also to how the student may react to his gestures and dress.

In conclusion, the differences between Americans and Africans pose a problem for effective communication in the classroom. However, with education and effort, the cultural obstacles can be overcome. AaronWolfgang, a noted authority on intercultural communication in the classroom, places much of the responsibility upon teachers for accomplishing the tremendous challenge of intercultural communication:
"[They] must be culturally flexible and versatile and learn to operate within their students' frame of reference. To do this teachers must make. . . much effort to become aware of their cultural preferences and to respect those of their students."[68]

END NOTES

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[38]Moore.

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[42]Foote.

[43]Kaplan 16-17.

[44]Apoko 47.

[45]Cole and Scribner 177; Foote; Grindal 31.

[46]Cole and Scribner 177.

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[49]Grindal 31.

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[54]Foote.

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