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ABSTRACT

This paper notes that most Americans believe that Black African firms operate their businesses along European lines. Within America's business community, the study of Black Africa now enters its third decade of benign neglect. Reasons for Americans remaining blind to Black African business principles include ignorance of Africa's complex past, Africans' use of management styles outside the normal range of western commercial thought, and dislike of commercial ambiguity which is sometimes encouraged by Black African cultures. African tradition impacting the small entrepreneur in starting a firm is discussed, focusing on both identifying overt behavior and analyzing underlying principles. The discussion addresses: financing a firm, organizing a firm, in-house decision making, staffing, and client relations. Recommendations include: consider the "kinship" factor, recognize the importance of "playing to" the elders, consider the impact of "African time" on launching a venture, personalize the manager's authority, reward employee seniority and age, adjust to office "chat," adjust the commercial pace, seek allies, do favors, ask favors, and affiliate with local firms. (Contains 24 references.) (JDD)

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PAPERS ON INTERNATIONALIZING BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

"YOUR SON IS MY SON"

BLACK AFRICAN MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES:
AN OVERSEAS MARKETERS GUIDE

By: Jeffrey A. Fadiman, Ph.D.
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San Jose, California, USA

With: André-Marie Henckollas and Jean-Claude Kimbouri
Republic of Congo

"It is our stand . . . that a concerted effort should be made . . . to study systematically and identify the salient features and the underlying principles of the indigenous African work organizational systems with a view to adopting such features and principles in organizing work in industrial and other modern work places."

Augustine I. Ahiauzu (Nigeria)
Spring, 1989

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DO AFRICAN MANAGEMENT METHODS EXIST?

Do Black African businessmen have their own systems of commercial management, uniquely rooted in their own traditions and ideals? Or do they run their firms along European lines, drawn from the business traditions of former colonial powers? Most Americans I know--businessmen, academics, lawyers, even journalists--would opt for answer two. They are sufficiently "liberal," not particularly racist, and rather in favor of Africa--to the degree they consider it at all. They do not, however, believe that "modern" Africans manage their firms according to African principles. Rather, they feel such ideas belong to a primitive past. African businessmen of the 1990's, they suggest, do best to deal with westerners by using western methods. Conversely, we need only deal with them in western ways.

Surprisingly, many Africans I know would also choose option two. Once, for instance, I asked a well educated Congolese, whose mother owns a trucking firm, how his family firm was structured. He said it had no structure. I asked him why he said what we both knew as untrue. With perfect composure, he replied that he gives that answer to every White, as he had given up expecting them to understand the facts. "Our firms are not structured," he added, "in ways Whites understand." It is easier to give them the reply they expect. "None."

His sentiment may be widely shared. Within America's business community, the study of Black Africa now enters its third decade of benign neglect. This is evident from even the most cursory review of commercial trade literature appearing since the 1970's. Asian and Western European studies proliferate; the Middle East, Latin America and Eastern Europe are expanding. Africa is almost absent.

The books considered for my academic courses provide stunning examples. I teach Global Marketing/Management to graduate business students in Silicon Valley. One book, "The World Class Executive: How To Do Business Like A Pro Around The World" (Chesenow), suggests entrepreneurial methods for use in Europe, Asia, S. America and the Middle East, but not Africa. A second, "The International Businesswoman of the 1990's" (Rossman), suggests ways US women can deal with Europeans, Latins, Arabs and Asians, but not Africans. A study of "Anti-Americanism: Origins and Context" (Thornton), analyzes anti-US feeling in Europe, Arab nations, Pakistan, China, Russia, and even Canada, but not Africa. There are exceptions, of course, but a list of this type can get long.

This neglect is reflected in a different way within that literature that does deal with Africa. Computer searches on the topic do turn up articles in management-related journals, as well as occasional popular pieces. Yet, for every ten articles dealing with African managers within essentially western firms, only one deals with managerial principles from uniquely African perspectives (e.g. Handwerker). Most others deal with African adjustments to European firms.

Once again, Africa is absent, in the sense that its unique contributions to global business and managerial theory are being ignored.

This pattern is even more sharply displayed at the cutting-edge "global" economic conferences, which meet in particularly prestigious settings every year or so. Consider the Annual World Economic Forum, in Davos, Switzerland: a widely respected gathering of leading policy analysts, corporate executives and political leaders to consider the most pressing problems from every major region on the globe--except Africa. In 1993, it was excluded (Kaplan).

Surely no further examples are required to illustrate the pattern. Black Africa is a commercial blind spot; a mote in America's corporate eyes. In the minds of most US business personnel, it remains:

> "The most exotic place they can imagine--and the last place to contemplate doing business" (Strugatch).

Yet, Africa could be labeled as a "closet millionaire," hiding both the mineral and agricultural wealth that future generations will require to survive: gold, diamonds, chromium, platinum, manganese, uranium, asbestos, antimony, "sweet" oil, 40% of earth's hydroelectric power and millions of acres in potential farmland (Gaily). We purchase eight to ten billion dollars in goods yearly from Black Africa, including one-third of all our imported oil (Cotter). In short, Africa always had economic potential. In consequence, it developed complex, sophisticated commercial traditions that go back 1,000 years. Surely its current managers and marketers, the recipients of that commercial wisdom, have concepts they could teach us.

IF SO, WHY CLOSE OUR EYES?

1. Historical: Ignore Their Past?

There are at least three reasons why we remain blind to Black African business principles. One is our ignorance of Africa's complex past. Having long since bought into the "dark continent" mythology, most US business people simply do not know what it can contribute. Compare, for instance, the history of two middle-sized kingdoms: Portugal and Africa's Kingdom of Kongo. When Portuguese first reached Africa (1400's), they often found neither "savages" nor "tribesmen," but citizens of well organized kingdoms little different from their own, with comparable social structures, economic institutions and means of generating wealth.

Portugal, for example, "discovered" Kongo (parts of today's Republic of Congo and Zaire) in 1483. Both nations were organized as kingdoms, containing competing clans of nobility, soldiers, fishermen, traders, peasants and priests. Both sides grew grain and cotton, mined metals, brewed alcohol, and waged war with body armor, swords, bows and spears. Both sides were soon Christian, as leading clans adopted it by 1500, along with Latin. By 1506, both kings wrote one another in

Portuguese. By 1520, a Kongo prince, baptized Catholic in childhood, had come to Rome, addressed the Pope in Latin, and requested diplomatic relations (Davidson).

Kongo, however, sought trade. Portugal sought slaves, and trained Kongolese to seize each other. Two hundred years later, Portugal had grown rich on human labor and Kongo had collapsed. For generations, the skilled, strong, and beautiful had been enslaved. Farming, weaving, mining and every other industry were shattered. The remaining population divided into hunters and hunted. By 1890, when the explorer Henry Stanley passed through Kongo, he noted both its beauty and lack of people. He knew nothing of its history--for the same reason we now know so little; what is destroyed is often lost to the memory of men--even the destroyers.

That destruction recurred across Africa. Kingdoms across the continent were defeated; their inhabitants reduced to savagery to survive. Deprived of their own social order, they accepted that imposed by Whites. Knowing nothing of the past, later White rulers equated the poverty they saw with lack of ability to create wealth. They saw non-western educational systems as lack of education, thus ignorance. They saw non-western religion as lack of any religion. They saw lack of a formal writing system as inability to communicate. In short, they saw the African mentality as a blank slate, on which nothing was written before they came.

Today, these ideas are dismissed as racist. We know more, thus have greater respect for African forms of religion, education, oral literature, etc. Is it possible, however, that some racial residue remains within contemporary business? How often do we equate the lack of western commercial practices with lack of any business practices, which we reinterpret as lack of business acumen, sophistication, or effectiveness. Consider the mentality of this western businessman who wrote:

> "Let's start with a thumbnail sketch of our prime target: the African consumer . . . I would describe the average African consumer as very unsophisticated and more often than not, illiterate . . . this means he is susceptible, in fact, very receptive to advertising" (Omana).

Subsequent commercial approaches may thus be shaped to fit these preconceptions. Do US businessmen still apply the blank slate concept to African managerial styles?

2. Philosophical: Outside Our Mental Range?

There is a second reason we ignore African management styles. Often, they lie outside the normal range of western commercial thought. We simply have no US parallels for what they do, thus cannot see why they do it. Most African firms are structured, for instance, along the lines of an extended family, rather than the chain of vertical command we draw from military models. Company interactions are thus based on kinship obligations, rather than the supervisor/subordinate relationships we internalize and thus expect. However, few US business personnel have extended families, thus few know how they function. Lacking these parallels, how can they understand the operation of an African extended family-firm, where 300 employees may be related?

Similarly, the African hiring process is based on nepotism. One is not hired just for what or even who one knows, but because one is related--however indirectly--to the hirer. He will work well because of obligations that he feels to kin. Should he not do so, he would be difficult to fire, lest those kin be shamed. Here, we not only lack parallel procedures, but forbid the practice. Now should we understand what is happening and why? No wonder many Africans, motivated both by courtesy and a wish to avoid conflict, respond to such questions as we ask by evading detailed responses and telling us what they (the Africans) feel we want to know--i.e. nothing.

3. Contemporary: We Dislike Commercial Ambiguity

We pride ourselves on tolerance. That does not extend, however, to ambiguity within commercial settings. When doing business, we seek precision and predictable results. We need to predict the results of each action before we begin it. Thus, we "formalize" most business interactions to make them more predictable, at first on paper and then internalized as in-house rules (Stewart/Bennett). This is certainly true within our immediate workplace, where we expect to find only machines that work just as advertised. It is true with our commercial proposals, which we compose expecting predictable results. It is true with subordinates, whom we train to behave in predictable fashion. It is reflected in our rising need to quantify even obviously intangible data, both to forecast future actions and evaluate the past.

In contrast, Africans take equal pride in ambiguity. Certain facets of their historical, literary and social tradition actually work against being specific. In West Africa, for instance, oratorical traditions encourage verbal ambiguity as a form of verbal art. Thus, business is most "artfully" conducted through the use of proverbs, with each side delighting in its ability to decipher hidden meanings, thus permitting conversation to flow at several levels. Africans everywhere consider it a mark of eloquence to flavor their speech with them (Ahiauzu). Their goal--for which we once more have no parallel--is not commercial efficiency but intellectual challenge.

This is also true for numerical traditions. East Africans, for instance, learn from childhood that citing the exact amount of one's material goods (whether cattle, commercial goods or contraband) will bring calamity upon the speaker. Central Africans learn that stating specifics is considered rude, abrupt and ill mannered, while adding a dash of verbal ambiguity adds grace to conversation.

Africans cite solid societal reasons to justify these ambiguities. For Americans to dismiss them and demand specifics may simply create anxiety among their African counterparts. Intellectually, the latter know westerners expect specifics; emotionally they find it more satisfying to follow tradition and remain vague. That, in turn, causes anxiety among Americans. The consequences are predictable. Neither side will understand.

MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS: AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

Let us consider these management principles as they occur in the more communal areas of Central, West, and Eastern Africa. The Central and West African aspects of this research, conducted by two Congolese associates, drew on the experience of African businessmen from the Central African Republic, Senegal, Mali, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and their own Republic of Congo. The results were then compared with my own East African research in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Secondary sources contributed additional comparative data from Zaire, Zambia, Liberia and Malawi.

There were substantial differences in how informants from each country felt things should be done. Beneath them, however, lay degrees of similarity which each informant recognized--often to their surprise--as a uniquely African system of management. Certainly several aspects of this system seem similar enough to permit generalization. As a result, while respecting differences, this article focuses on those similarities that seem most clearly to contribute to that system as a whole.

Each of these managerial ideals is rooted in centuries of African tradition. That can be troubling to us. Lacking centuries old traditions of our own, we often underestimate their dogged staying power. Certainly, decades of contact with non-African commercial interests (US, European and now Asian) have often eroded their operation, blurring differences between them and the foreign practices with which they must contend. As a result, many contemporary African firms have fully westernized. Others function most effectively as an amalgam of both local and foreign ideas. Informants describe them as having "White skin and a Black core." Sometimes, both world views function simultaneously. In other firms, one style (e.g. punctuality) predominates in foreign interactions, while the other is reserved for personnel in-house.

Nonetheless traditional managerial ideals remain intact within the minds of even the most "westernized" African businessmen. This is particularly true of the current generation, nearly all of whom grew up in rural, tradition-ruled environments. This manuscript reflects those ideals, as standards to which all informants felt they should aspire. Like Americans, they have been programmed by their early upbringing with values that carry over into their commercial lives. Like an undertow in the ocean, these values "pull" at their emotions, offering intangible but nonetheless identifiable counterweights to foreign practices. It can be commercially useful for us to recognize this inner conflict, acknowledge Africa's collective lifestyle, then consider how to modify our business style to work with them.

Let us therefore consider the methods that African tradition offers less wealthy ("small") entrepreneurs in starting a firm. Often, they lack access to adequate capital, sources of credit, influential connections and market knowledge of potential clientele; they would have only each other. How would they "manage" the problems inherent in:

--Start-ups: Financing a firm

--Structuring: Organizing a firm

--In-house Decision-Making

--Staffing: hiring, motivation, termination

--Client Relations: Creating and retaining business

Let us examine each of these in turn, initially to identify overt behavior (what is done), then to analyze the underlying principles (why they do it). Only after understanding their perspective, can we take action of our own.

I. START-UPS: FINANCING A FIRM

A. Funding Structure: Two Options

1. Mbongo ya Libota: The Family Fund

Western banks exist throughout Black Africa. When lending start-up funds, they use western criteria. That often excludes smaller African entrepreneurs, who perceive these banks as rarely willing to lend the financing required for start-ups. The lenders frequently perceive individual applicants as high risk due to lack of capital, while entrepreneurial groups are perceived as lacking clearly identifiable decision-makers, organizational structure and financial procedures.

As a result, African entrepreneurs all too often look to tradition for guidance. Often, that advise is expressed in proverbs. Because proverbs are handed down from older generations, they provide a distilled version of the wisdom of times past (1986). Many follow the advice of a proverb heard in various forms across Africa:

> "Hoe your own shamba (farm), and harvest sweat;
> hoe that of your kin, and harvest wealth."

To those rejected by foreign banks, there are only two sources of potential start-up wealth. The first is their own extended family. Congolese call this "Mbongo ya Libota" (family fund). Kenyans describe it as "Shamba ya Pesa" (money farm). Remember that African extended families can number in the hundreds. Notwithstanding, each individual is actively aware of his obligations to every other.

Thus, when one individual seeks funds to launch a business venture, he may turn first to his extended family. Their responses--through seeming cumbersome to us--follow a traceable pattern.

(1) Initial Loan Request

The initial request for funds is made to someone closely related and older than the entrepreneur himself. Ideally, he (or she) asks a grandfather, father, uncle, or lacking these, a more distant older relative. Tradition requires this elder to serve as the younger person's spokesman in transmitting the request along appropriate family channels.

(2) Credit Check

Tradition then requires clan elders to gather in a family conclave to debate the request. If the issue is considered significant and/or the requested sum is large, more distant clans send spokesmen to the gathering, until each family segment is represented. Interestingly, the debaters consider not only the merits of the proposal, but the proposer. In essence, they run the verbal equivalent of what we would call a credit check. The solicitor's character is discussed in depth, as well as his prior financial behavior, current financial position, obligations to elders, domestic stability and community reputation. Here, the applicant who displays "bad character" is clearly a financial risk as well.

Such a debate can run for many days. There is no set time limit, and "delegates" sustain themselves on food and local drink. Participants may come and go, taking the opportunity to consult with both their wives (often sources of communal gossip) and other elders, either distantly or even non-related. Eventually, consensus forms and funds may be granted--although often neither in the amount nor the form originally requested.

(3) "Loan" Approved

If the request is granted each household in the extended family contributes what it "can and should." No fixed sums are formally levied, nor do all contribute equally. Rather, donations are based on the elders' consensus as to what each donor should provide. That consensus is based, in turn, on their perceptions of each household's current economic and social standing in the community. Householders are motivated both by peer pressure and peer competition. Thus, leading families donate far more than good sense suggests they can afford. Their sons and daughters, studying on skimpy scholarships in France and California, contribute what few dollars they feel they should. Their distant cousins, working for a pittance in Senegal or Saudi, remit a precious few coins. Everyone contributes; that is their moral obligation.

(4) Terms of Repayment

Interestingly, the funds thus donated are most often described as "loans." In fact, no monetary reimbursement may be expected. No written contract would even be considered. Rather, the recipient incurs an entirely ambiguous obligation to every donor--to stand ready to contribute to them on request, whether with time, laoor, intellectual assistance or funds. Beyond that, he must be equally ready to assist members of the lender's family, down to children as yet unborn.

2. Likelemba: The Rotating Fund

A Congo proverb states, "One finger cannot wash the face." Nor can one family easily finance a firm. A potential entrepreneur may also seek start-up funds beyond his own extended family, within the community at large. Nowadays, this procedure is facilit ed by the tendency of migrants from every part of Africa to gather in tribal clusters around the edges of large cities. Within these clusters, they organize themselves by occupations. Thus, a man who hopes to start a trading venture in precious metals would have no problems finding members of his own dialect group, tribe and even occupation on whom to draw.

The first steps are similar to those used in requests for family funds. The applicant petitions a respected elder (ideally kin) for funds to launch a venture. This elder assembles others within his age-group; kin, colleagues, comrades and even friends-of-friends. If some like the proposal, they may form a "likelemba" or rotating fund. Likelemba have no fixed number. Nor must members be kin. One Congolese informant joined a group consisting of near kin, distant kin, in-laws and "old friends." Each joined simply because they wished to and were accepted. Thereafter, some sent a spouse, son, cousin, friend or friend-of-friend to represent them. Thus, while kinship counts in forming likelembas, they can also provide a means to tap funds outside the extended family.

Notwithstanding, most likelemba retain a family nomenclature regardless of their commercial size. Thus, the female leader of a fund is called its "mother" (mama ya likelemba), while members refer to themselves as its "children" (bana ya likelemba). The distinction is important, for the familial feelings members display reflect their financial trust, both in one another and the uses to which the funds are put. The fund leader (male or female) must gather and then disburse the money. Contributions are decided by consensus, though simplicity suggests each member provide similar sums. Collections may be public, to allay fears of monetary misuse. Traditionally, they combine the elements of a feast, beer-drink, group discussion and fund allocation.

A rotating schedule of recipients is set by consensus. Factors affecting the order of distribution may include age, economic and commercial need. Each month, the entire collection is disbursed to a single donor. Thus, each individual within a 24-person fund asking each member to contribute $1,000 per month, would receive $24,000 once within two years. Ideally, each member would use not only likelemba capital but the members' connections to generate additional capital. As the fund's designated time period ends, members gather one final time to feast, drink, debate and decide whether to extend it into another cycle.

The likelemba system is most advanced in Cameroon. Tontines, as they are known in that nation, provide investment credit for the vast majority of citizens, handling more money than the official banking system. The most prosperous tontines, having lasted over decades, are increasingly bankrolled by the wealthy. The most urbanized now charge interest rates and repayment times are short. Nonetheless, where banks suffer frequent loan defaults, tontine members seem to constantly repay (Schissel).

B. Underlying Principles

Americans often believe their African counterparts lack access to capital, especially in rural areas. This need not be true. Although western outlets may indeed be closed to them, there are several traditional alternatives, only two of which are mentioned here. The success of these two methods can be judged by their sheer geographic scope. Rotating funds appear throughout Africa. "Likelemba" itself is used in Congo and Zaire. In Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and the Ivory Coast, it is called "Pari." Sierra Leone calls it "Ossusu." Togo, Senegal and Cameroon use the term "Ristourne." Even in distant New Orleans, descendants of slaves once known as "Kongos" and "Guineas" form "marry and bury societies," not even knowing that they operate along traditional African lines.

The principles that guide this type of capital formation can prove relevant to US firms seeking to do business in Black Africa. Consider the following:

(1) Members are "Related"

Where possible, all participants are kin, either near, distant, marital or "fictional" (old, trusted friends, who interact as "brothers"). Thus they have prior obligations to one another. As we admire technical intelligence, Africans take pride in "social" intelligence: the ability to remember every single kinship tie throughout their lifetimes, and the rituals, obligations and behavior appropriate to each (Ahiauzu, 1989).

(2) Gender is No Barrier

Men and women both participate. Sex is no barrier to leadership. Either sex can initiate requests for funds, rule on others' requests, form unisex groups or lead groups composed of both sexes. The commercial access of West and Central African women is particularly relevant. Female entrepreneurs have founded trading, transport and luxury/service and real estate enterprises that have frequently become trans-African or even trans-continental in scope.

The mother of one informant, for instance, owns a Congo trucking firm (using male employees), and has recently expanded to renting government-owned railway cars. The "Drianke"

("Big [business] Women") of Senegal operate merchandise between Paris and Dakar. The "Dioula Mousso" ("Big Women Traders") of Mali have expanded their activities to Guinea, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. The most successful "Mama ya Zando" (market mothers) are known as "Nana Benz" (mothers of Mercedes Benz) for the car that has become their trademark.

(3) Payment: Based on In-house Obligations

Likelemba agreements are based neither on written contractual obligations nor abstract trust, but the obligations members owe one another. Thus like the family funds, they require no written business plans, contracts, lawyers, bankers, interest or even repayment. Instead, pressure to keep up financial obligations is primarily based on feelings of personal obligation that have no parallels in US society. To fail in one's obligation (e.g. to refuse to contribute on request; omit a payment, etc.) would incur:

(a) Intense personal shame, due at least partially to . . .

(b) Awareness of the shame felt by one's kin, who would regard it as a loss of family honor. Thus, family members could be expected to apply methods of peer-pressure ranging from verbal disapproval to threats of witchcraft to ostracism and expulsion from the unit. This is due at least partially to . . .

(c) Similar pressure from the community, where financial delinquency can lead both to public gossip and the public use of "shamesongs," exposing both the delinquent individual and his dishonored family to open ridicule. This is at least partially due to fear of . . .

(d) Ancestral retribution. Traditionally, any failure to meet familial obligations was believed to generate ancestral anger. These spirits, watching constantly over the living, would respond by "cursing" the delinquent, thus triggering either illness or calamity. Such misfortune could strike the delinquent himself (perhaps as a psychologically-induced illness), but could equally harm his kin, in-laws, friends or whole community.

(4) Enforcement: Based on Pride and Shame

Africans often speak of their extended families in proverbs. One from Tanzania declares:

"The plain is filled with hungry jackals
(but) the cleverest lie near your fire."

Extended African families are no more or less dysfunctional than those of the west. Thus, individuals who normally might dislike and thus avoid each other, must often interact due solely to blood ties. To reduce conflict, many Africans stress create complex webs of mutually binding obligations, which individuals must fulfill in order to maintain peace.

In West Africa, for instance, each extended family member must intermittently visit all the others; keeping appropriate contact, sharing appropriate food and exchanging appropriate gifts, simply to recognize and thus nurture the relationship. In consequence, every member knows whom to visit, which forms of address, deference, gifts and services to offer--as well as whom to expect as visitors in return (Bowman). Similarly, each family member knows what actions must be taken to aid all other family members--both in times of crisis or to provide chances for success. To meet one's kinship obligations promotes internal, familial and communal harmony. To neglect them promotes both private and public anxiety.

Thus within commercial settings, each member of a fund has an urgent stake in others meeting their financial obligations, to the point of actively assisting them to do so. The financial process operates from the perspective of a fictional family in order to obligate participants more firmly to each other, thus making them responsible for one another's needs.

> "The success of some family members creates empathy in others, who expect to profit both from trickle-down and seeking future favors in their turn . . . "One has only to look at the high rate of financial reliability (in the traditional financial system), compared to the high percentage of non-performing loans (from western banks) to appreciate the importance of traditional ritualistic and social guarantees" (Dia).

The system's goal is clearly to weld individuals together into a permanently functioning and increasingly experienced financial unit, through sharing and resharing the type of financial experiences that create commercial trust.

C. Recommendation One: Consider the "Kinship" Factor

Consider the impact of kinship on the minds of those Africans with whom you hope to deal commercially. It may prove particularly important if financial obligations are involved. Are you dealing with a single individual? Might it prove prudent to ask to whom, within the host community, he/she is related? A person without kin might be an errant genius; but he might also be an outcast, thus cut off from many of the normal sources of information, supply and credit and assistance that make ventures run and thus insure that he can meet his obligations.

Consider dealing with a group; a clan, a family, an ethnic guild, or a likelemba. Initially, the sheer visibility of such a unit may make it far easier to judge their commercial reliability, than might be the case with a single individual. Thereafter, the uniquely African combination of personal, familial, communal and spiritual pressures may do more to insure that reliability than either our traditional reliance on a written contract or an appeal to foreign courts of law. Ultimately, you may have nothing more to lose than capital; they have an on-site reputation to retain.

II. STRUCTURING: ORGANIZING A FIRM

A. Administrative Structure

Most western firms are structured like most western armies. We use a vertical pyramid, with a single head and clearly defined, linear chains of command. Within them, we prefer equally well-defined divisions of labor, with each individual restricted to specific tasks. We are equally precise in defining obligations between superiors and subordinates, often by contract. Many of us not only consider this the most effective structure but the only effective one, dismissing others as comparatively primitive, "unstructured," or chaotic.

In contrast, most African firms are structured like most African villages, except where we might see a cluster of dwellings, they see a cluster of related households making up extended families. We perceive the outer structures; they see the inner relationships that bind it. As a result, they find it hard to explain their managerial structure in terms we can understand. We expect them to use western business phrasing; they prefer to use kinship terminology. In short, there is no common frame of verbal reference.

One way to bridge that gap is by analogy. An extended family forms a firm in somewhat the same way as a cla might form a village over time, as a horizontal series of concentric circles. The founder, invariably older and usually male, is at the center. Most often, he is surrounded by an "inner circle," consisting of "age-mates." These are men of his own generation who have known him throughout his life, thus share many of the experiences that make up their commercial wisdom. Beyond them is a "middle circle," consisting of their sons, most in middle age. Many may have acquired modern commercial expertise, and access to western commercial languages. Nonetheless, they remain subordinate, individually and collectively, to the wisdom of their elders. The criteria for advancing within this structure is to age.

There may be several "outer circles." Never neatly organized, they may overlap one another, or hold more than one type of employee. The nearer ones may include more distant levels of blood kin (cousins, etc.), ritually created kin, such as in-laws, and fictional kin, such as "old" (life-long) friends who behave as though members of the founding family. Farther "out" may be circles of clan (or tribal) members, friends-of-friends, "homeboys" (common background), and anyone else with close enough ties to the firm to perceive it as "family." The further from the center, the more fictional this family membership becomes, with subordinates "acting out" the proper kinship obligations without the sense of being kin. Nonetheless, the obligation to treat one another as family remains the key to membership within the firm.

This analogy is both simplified and idealized. As mentioned, many firms take on western outer trappings, while retaining their uniquely local core. African society is egalitarian within each age group, but hierarchial in group-to-group relations, with marked subordination of the younger members by the old (Dia).

Thus, recast in commercial terms, this type of firm is structured in five tiers. The founder, himself an elder, is at the peak. Below him, one often finds a "board of elders"; men of his generation who function as advisors and directors. The third level consists of supervisors, usually middle-aged, each heading departments composed largely of those related (whether kin or comrades) to themselves. The fourth may include several layers of skilled workers. Their internal hierarchy is based less on economic competence than kinship ties, in-house seniority and age. Below these one may find a level of apprentices; youngsters, sponsored by kin or comrades of the founder, who often repay the older employees to whom they are apprenticed with "traditional" gifts that may range from cash to palm wine.

B. Underlying Principles

Obviously, this model does not fit all firms. Nonetheless, there are at least four guiding principles by which many firms are organized:

(1) firm = family

The firm, ideally, should be an economic extension of a family group. This principle remains unchanged even if the firm expands and modernizes, evolving into a "kin-based corporation." Regardless of size, it should exist to enrich the group as a collective whole. Thus, it should function according to the same sets of rules and obligations used to maintain family relationships. Individuals who approach the firm from outside the family should be brought into it--whether by ritual or simple acceptance--to the point where they adhere to the rules and obligations set by the group as a whole.

(2) leadership = age

The primary criteria for leadership is age. Each of the concentric circles that make up the firm is "older" than those subordinate to it. In consequence, the founder is able to consult most easily with those "closest" to him, both emotionally and chronologically.

(3) age = wisdom

This expertise is based upon a formula equating greater age with more experience and thus with greater wisdom. Traditionally, this wisdom was based on a belief that age "cools" the blood, thus permitting elders to consider problems rationally, rather than in the heat of emotion. Moreover the task of age is to "cool" the conflicts generated by the "hotter" blood (emotionalism) of youth. Thus, as youth's role is to create conflicts, the role of elders is to use their greater wisdom to resolve them.

(4) wisdom = intuition, feelings

US businessmen believe "emotions" interfere with business. We attempt to suppress them within commercial settings, so as to decide each issue "rationally" and even quantitatively. In contrast, Africans feel the wisdom acquired through a lifetime may best be expressed in terms of how they "feel" about specific projects, as well as the character of the proposer of it. Such feelings need not be based on prior commercial expertise. Rather, they emerge intuitively as the result of extensive in-house consultation among those most concerned with each projected venture. Life's past experiences are believed to provide an increasingly accurate intuitive sense as to how one should behave within the future.

C. Recommendation Two: Consider the "Age" Factor

Consider the impact of age in the minds of those Africans with whom you hope to deal. Consider, initially, your own age--or that of the persons you send to negotiate. In much of Africa, gender is no barrier to commercial respect. Youth, however, even when backed with vast expertise, will not be considered a substitute for age. A Kenya proverb declares:

"Show me a people where calves teach (the) bulls
And I will show you (a nation of) madmen."

Would it be prudent to send your older personnel to Africa?

Consider the impact of age on the in-house authority of those Africans with whom you deal. Where do they stand in their own firm--in which the path of authority may not follow a western-style chain of command, even where one exists. Key managerial, promotional, or marketing posts may be held by younger men, appointed for commercial, technical or language expertise. They may be particularly prominent in posts requiring contact with foreigners. Nonetheless, they may also be partial or even total figureheads, outside the actual chain of decision-making. In practice, the actual currents of in-house decision-making may flow back and forth from elder to elder, unseen by outsiders but too strong to resist. Would it be prudent, on completing a first round of discussion, to ask for introductions to someone "older" in the firm? Certainly your proposal must "play to the aged," before you receive a decision.

III. DECISION-MAKING

A. Operating Procedures

US firms do not cope well with African decision-making. Three elements in that process clash with our expectations. First, in commercial settings, we seek an individual decision-maker. We admire our own ability to make decisions individually, thus seek that same capacity in those with whom we trade. We are less sure how to deal with decisions made collectively. Second, we seek timeliness. In America, we admire speed and decisiveness even within unstructured situations. In our slang, "to wing it" and "think on our feet" are considered praiseworthy. Third, we admire risk and thus risk-takers. Instead of "why," we ask "why not," reasoning that each act we take will be correctable.

African businessmen also make individual decisions. They can be as swift, decisive, and authoritarian as executives in any other culture. In so doing, however, they remain aware of their membership in an extended family and thus of their obligations to both its current members and collective past. In acting alone, an individual executive may flaunt that family's collective wisdom, simply by ignoring those he is required by tradition to consult. Conversely, by consulting "significant" comrades and kin, he has fulfilled communal obligations. In sum, most Africans find it psychologically more satisfying to make decisions by consulting others.

Stage One: Making Contact

This type of decision-making can follow four stages. Assume, for instance, that the head of a Congo firm is approached by a US project head, who wishes to propose a venture. To do this correctly, by Congolese standards, the American would first identify and then work through a "mosalisi" (introducer); someone already connected--as kin or comrade--to significant members of the targeted corporation's family (but not necessarily his firm). If the mosalisi is trusted, it will be his recommendation that opens the commercial door. Ideally, the introducer would also teach the American the proper etiquette required to initiate a business contact, including appropriate presentation of traditionally expected gifts. In fact, all three elements (introduction, etiquette, gifts) may be prerequisite to initiating an appropriate commercial relationship. Traditionally, they symbolize the outsider's wish to "join" the family.

Stage Two: Building Relationships

At this stage, Americans fall victim to their expectations with regard to time. Having completed every ritual of introduction, most Americans will immediately present a proposal in substantial detail. That done, they expect a timely and decisive reply.

In contrast, many Africans expect to spend this stage becoming closely acquainted with the outsider, in order to evaluate both proposer and proposal. They place a higher value both on interpersonal relations, and proper performance of specific "social, ritual and mystic activities" (Dia), as required prerequisites to important decisions. Both the relationships and rites surrounding a proposed economic transaction are easily as important as the proposal itself. Thus participation by both sides is prerequisite to the creation of commercial trust.

To facilitate this, most Africans prefer their visitor to simply spend the next few days (or even weeks) in conversation, most often visiting and perhaps hosting elder members of the firm. Their intention is to lay the groundwork for a future business venture by seeking values both sides hold in common. This is most often done, according to a Ugandan proverb, by "sharing liquor, laughter and soft words." Unfortunately, many Americans regard such use of time as non-commercial, thus non-profitable. The prospect of spending "days" in conversation may actively dismay them. Angered at what seems indefinite procrastination, they may retire to hotels, not realizing there may be solid business reasons for such delay.

One reason is to let the consultation process take its course. As Americans idealize haste, Africans prefer a more deliberative tempo. The Congolese proverb, "Night is the wisest advisor," reflects the wisdom inherent in taking one's problems home, to debate at leisure with family and friends. Thus, African executives may delay their response to a proposal for as long as is required for the consultative process to run its course regarding proposal and proposer.

Stage Three: In-house Data Gathering

Americans might describe the next stage as "in-house consultation." Africans call it "ndaba" (Zulu), "baraza" (Swahili), "lisanga" (Congo). In each case it means a gathering of elders, each spokesman for a larger group, to decide what action to take on a specific issue. In this example, the Congo CEO would convoke a "lisanga" of in-house elders, whom we might describe as a "board of directors." These would assemble subjective opinions (as well as "hard" data) concerning both project and project head, with each "director" consulting relevant sections heads and these consulting senior employees.

Stage Four: Outside Data Gathering

The lisanga process is repeated outside the firm. We might call this "outside consultation." Thus, those who feel night is indeed the best advisor may seek advice on at least five levels:

(a) "Significant" age-mates/kin: Those considered most knowledgeable about the issue, or simply knowledgeable per se.

(b) Significant male elders/kin: These may then consult with others in their age-groups, thus extending the consultation process geographically outward and chronologically upward.

(c) Significant female elders/kin: This may include older wives, mothers, aunts and even grandmothers. They may then consult other females outside the family. This may seem surprising within a business context, since the more elderly women would seem unable to evaluate commercial aspects of the projected venture. Informants argue, however, that they provide matchless wisdom on the human aspects of the proposal, which men cannot ignore.

(d) Significant "homeboys": These include males, beyond the family unit, who share common background with the individual who seeks advice (same village, region, dialect, schools, etc.), thus share similar views. We might describe such people as "old friends." Africans depict them as "brothers," and treat them as kin. In theory, their common backgrounds provide the basis for common values, including those useful for commercial success.

(e) Spiritual leaders: Like homeboys, these can be outside the extended family. Nonetheless, whether pagan, Moslem or Christian, they assume the role of "father," to whom individuals can turn for either temporal or spiritual advice. In addition, they may convey ancestral (or religious) blessings for a proposed course of action, that may alleviate anxiety regarding it.

B. Underlying Principles

The decision-making process is based on at least four underlying principles. Among the most significant:

1. Timelessness

A Kenya proverb states that "hot blood (conflict between people) is timeless; so is its cooling." In fact, the process of decision-making has neither a predictable rate of progress nor point of termination. Westerners assume it will be slow. That need not be so. Within this example, stages two, three and four may occur simultaneously. They may also move swiftly; Africans are as amused as Americans at the speed with which gossip can spread, and jokes concerning the "bush telegraph" are heard on both sides. Conversely, the process may take as long as is required to reach a decision that will benefit all members of the group. It will not, however, have a predictable termination time, despite the wishes of Americans.

2. Complete Participation (for Older Members)

No single person, however aged, could expect to gain such wisdom as to fully resolve the problems facing an entire group. Thus, every person must feel they have a voice in each decision that affects them, should they desire to be heard. In practice, this process is traditionally restricted to the older personnel, regardless of their commercial rank within the firm. Nonetheless, it continues until all who feel they should have been consulted, have contributed opinions towards whatever decision might emerge.

This element of complete participation is critical to implement whatever decision will be made. Often, Africans who work in western-run firms complain they are never consulted, thus "do not feel they count" in the eyes of management (Oyemelukwe) (Jones). In consequence, they are indifferent to its managerial decisions and fail to actively support them.

> "It is good if men and particularly elders like myself are listened to . . . The boss did not listen to my problems fully. Everything had to be done quickly. No time was taken to consider what I had to say" (Blunt).

In contrast, (older) Africans who work for family firms, having been recognized during the decision-making process, willingly support the results.

3. Intuitive Data; Multiple Perspectives

As mentioned, Americans pride themselves on "rational" decisions, which exclude feelings and emotional reactions from commercial situations. We focus on our increasing technological ability to quantify even the most intangible data, filtering out emotional content and reducing it to numerical basics. In contrast, many Africans pride themselves on intuitive decisions. They feel emotions play a central role in business. In consequence, they focus on interpreting what we may consider minuscule behavioral cues, hoping to sense emotional nuances that reveal commercial intentions. This same pattern applies to decision-making. Both sides begin by seeking data, but Americans prefer "hard facts," while African solicit opinion. Their goal in so doing is to expose each possible perspective on the issue, thus all possible objections. Only after these have been disposed of can positive decisions be made.

C. Recommendation Three: Consider the Time Factor

Consider the impact of "African time" on launching a venture. Americans often joke harshly about the concept, redefining it to mean something that happens more slowly than they like. Instead, consider using time on local terms. Initially, take time to both identify and cultivate an introducer. Choose someone of sufficient social class and family standing to compliment your own. Thereafter, take more time to nurture a relationship. Your goal is not to convince him of the quality of your product but of yourself.

Consider taking time to understand, practice and even actively prolong the rituals of introduction. Africans attach a far higher value than Americans to the concept of leisure; it is valued for providing the ability to engage both in ceremonies and social activities. Many of these are religious, since Africans everywhere believe in ritually nurturing the powerful links between objects, humans and the supernatural. For Americans to regard these as incidental, unnecessary, time-wasting, primitive, pagan or non-commercial would be a serious error. In fact, the emotional power generated by such rituals may prove critical in binding the participants to whatever future commitments will be made (Dia).

Consider taking the time, you must wait while decisions are made, to market yourself, rather than your proposal. Rather than labeling it "delay," use time on local terms. Do what local traditions expect. Visit. Play host. Converse. Learn local etiquette and local rituals as well as courtesies within the local language. Share not just food and drink, but something of your inner self. Remember, in Africa, this is doing business. You are sending out a signal that you care for those with whom you hope to deal. In so doing, you create the groundwork for future business interaction.

IV. STAFFING

A. Extending the Administrative Structure

Equating the firm with a fictional family is equally applicable to both employment and termination. Work relations among members are psychologically conditioned by pre-existing family relationships. Thus all members of a work group relate to one another in terms of family status, rather than written contract (Ahiauzu). Thus, in hiring, the firm simply extends its existing familial structure, either to incorporate additional members of its own group, or those from "allied" groups it feels may be useful.

Under these circumstances, filling a post falls into the category of doing a favor. An in-house vacancy may exist. However, it may also be arbitrarily created as a favor to a kinsman, colleague or comrade, who simply asks the appropriate in-house executive to hire someone with whom the person making the request has ties. In such instances, rather than the new employee adapting to the post, the job itself may be reshaped to fit him. If he is skillful, it may be expanded; if not, it may be down-sized to allow him to be of more limited service.

One result of this hiring system is that few African firms employ solely by merit. Nor do they use western methods to fill vacancies. There is rarely need to use the written word--advertise in news media, etc. No flurry of highly standardized, competitive job interviews are required. Rather, the hiring process is by word of mouth; friends asking friends (or friends-of-friends) to hire younger kinsmen. Westerners might stigmatize this process as nepotism; Africans call it caring for one's family.

Informants give three reasons why an African CEO might respond to such a hiring request. One is to do a favor for another person, thus placing him under potential obligation. The second is to return a favor, thereby discharging a prior obligation. The third--more complicated to US observers--is to discharge an obligation incurred by one's parents (or, grandparents) at some much earlier time. Thus, a supervisor could hire a youngster in return for a favor the boy's father did for his own father years ago. Neither elder might still be alive; yet, the debt would be recalled on both sides. Thus, the supervisor would create a post for the boy, both to express gratitude for past events and to place the new hire's family under potential obligatio to him in the future. A Zulu (S. African) proverb expresses this succinctly: "To give is to store for yourself" (Buthelezi).

One striking illustration of the system's commercial effectiveness comes from Kenya. The white owner of a large security firm (120 employees) briefly left the region to start a second business. He placed the security firm in charge of an African senior supervisor, an elderly, respected Luo, from a chiefly lineage. When he left, 40 Luo had been employed. When he returned, 60 more had been hired, jobs had been allotted according to age and lineage and the firm was run along Luo lines. Interestingly, the non-Luo employees agreed with the changes as "within the (traditional) rights" of those now in charge. As a result (and to the owner's surprise), employee turnover, customer complaints and damage to company property fell continuously as the new corporate culture took hold (Blunt).

There are thus clear, commercial reasons for this staffing system. The continual exchange of favors is meant to create relationships and then alliances between otherwise competing groups. Two firms whose supervisors hire one another's kin are likely to find other areas in which they can cooperate. In times of crisis, other favors could be exchanged; lines of credit could be opened, surplus goods absorbed, distribution costs shared, etc. In short, firms who hire their own kin extend their economic and commercial reach; firms who hire the kinsmen of "friends" (or, friends-of-friends) may double it.

Conversely, firing someone who works poorly may diminish that reach. In areas where alternate jobs are virtually non-existent, loss of work stops employee donations to what might be vast numbers of an extended family. Thus, releasing one individual will not only shame him, but those kinsmen who requested his employment as well as others who rely on it--thereby eliminating future chances to seek their aid. I knew a Swazi colleague, for instance, who categorically refused to work. Nonetheless, those of her kin who asked my boss to hire her were so useful to our venture that he dared not dismiss her. Instead, she was given increasingly symbolic tasks, to maintain her commercial dignity. In that instance, as in similar cases across Africa, firing is a last resort.

B. Motivating Principles

Training and motivating employees hired under this system differs sharply from western methods. We tend to regard our firms as pseudo trading posts, where we exchange time, labor, energy and skill for wages, status, advancement and authority. Our obligations to both immediate supervisors and the firm as a whole are always specified and often sharply limited by written contract. As a result, our personal lives are separated from work. Primary loyalty is neither to company nor co-workers, but our own careers.

African workers are also motivated by wages, status, advancement and authority. Nonetheless, these alone are insufficient. They work for other reasons. Among the most significant to this discussion is the pleasure of sharing work relationships that differ sharply from those in the west. Among the most important:

1. Supervisor: Fictitious Father (Personalized Authority)

To many Africans, the circumstances within they do their work are more important than the finished product. They seek a convivial work-group with which they can identify, within a larger environment that provides feelings of security. This becomes particularly important if their work is monotonous, their wages inadequate, their status low and their chances of advancement limited. In exchange for a lifetime of such labor, they expect a lifetime of security.

It is by acting as extended families that African firms provide this security. Thus each supervisor--from CEO to section heads--assumes the role of "second father" to his subordinates. This means he takes on several obligations. One is to develop a personal relationship with each of them, including knowledge of their names, the names of family members (at least three generations), their days of celebration (feasts, holy days, etc.), as well as special family circumstances (educational, health, romantic or legal crisis, etc.) that we consider too personal to share.

A second is to offer assistance, advice and even funds in times of celebration and crisis. Attending (and contributing to) feasts and funerals is often mandatory, as is "lending" (i.e. giving) small sums on request. Work infractions may be overlooked, rules may be bent or even broken to subordinates' advantage. In short, superiors and subordinates alike look beyond the terms laid down in their contracts. They expect the firm--and therefore those who supervise--to provide a sense of security by what Americans might call "a touch of home."

2. Subordinate: Fictitious Son (Personal Dependence, Loyalty)

Subordinates also have obligations to superiors that go beyond written contracts. The first is personal loyalty. This must be actively displayed by taking on a dependent (African: little brother, son, etc.) role. That dependence should be reflected by appropriate use of kinship terms ("elder," "uncle," etc..), honorific titles (Bwana, Ssebo, etc.), traditional gestures of respect (rising when supervisor enters, etc.). They may also run supervisor's errands, do favors when asked, vote as told and generally provide time, attention, information, energy, professional skills and labor on request. This loyalty is personal. It goes to a single individual; not the job-title. It must be earned, and once created, must be nourished by both sides.

Conversely, failure to maintain these obligations, even within fully industrialized settings, is cause for complaint. One Nigerian supervisor was called to appear before elders of his clan to answer a formal charge proffered against him by a kinsman in the same firm. The charge was that the supervisor did not treat him like a member of his family when at work (Ahiauzu).

The subordinate must also keep his obligations. He must, for instance, reinforce his own dependency by publicly requesting favors (advice, loans, etc.) from his superiors. To do so displays his continued awareness of the relationship. He need not, however, do anything (or accept any treatment) demeaning to his dignity. Subordinates expect specific behaviors from their supervisors: a personal relationship, politeness, respect for age/seniority and a lowered voice. Tanzanian workers, for example, are said to instantly strike if supervisors are too disrespectful (Msekwa); a conclusion I share, having once triggered a workers' strike against myself, for having simply raised my voice. In short, they expect superiors to play the role of "fictional father" without demeaning those he chooses as his "sons."

3. Rank Equals Age, Seniority

Awarding rank for age/seniority is not the same thing as merely displaying respect. It means rewarding subordinates for growing old. Western managers reward subordinates for effort, achievement, education and prior experience. These rewards take the form of increased authority, advancement wages, and status. In rural settings, African subordinates expect such rewards to be based on age. In urban regions, they have modified their expectations to include job seniority.

In Nigeria, for instance, "everyone in every firm surveyed knew the order in which each individual was hired. Within industrial settings, the belief that age itself should be given preference has been modified by feelings that seniority should be the basis for advancement, while privileges should be given older employees" (Oyemelukwe). Conversely, older Africans often find it shameful to be trained by those younger than themselves, regardless of the latter's professional and educational qualifications (Safavi). In consequence, they expect supervisors to create a working climate in which such "disrespectful" situations do not occur.

4. Peer Pressures

The individual worker is first and foremost a member of his group. Deviation from group norms will trigger group sanctions that are surprisingly uniform across Africa. In Zambia, for instance, workers who were disrespectful to older members of the group, exceeded production norms, or proposed innovations were threatened with bewitchment. They were also controlled by use of derogatory nicknames (e.g. buyantashe: progress), intended to subordinate them to group norms (Blunt).

5. Conviviality at Work

As mentioned, the circumstances within which work occurs are as important to most Africans as the work itself. The pleasure taken in their jobs comes primarily from belonging to a convivial work-unit; a "band of brothers" with whom to share the day. This conviviality may consist of several elements of which Americans should be aware. Perhaps the most important is simply the ability to talk among themselves while working. We are task-oriented, admiring concentration on the job at hand to the point where most of us work best in a silence broken only rarely by spoken interruptions.

In contrast, most Africans value interaction. As in any family setting, they feel information exists to be shared. Thus, "office chat" contributes strongly to both the usefulness and enjoyment of one's work. I have seen several business offices in Uganda, where expatriate executives had set the desks in tidy lines. Over time, African subordinates gradually pushed them together to form an increasingly compact mass, so that all data could be more easily widely shared. Their section heads, also African, had bigger desks. Yet these were placed amidst the others, so as to both generate and share the information flow. In these instances, the constant interruptions, teasing, jokes, outbursts and commercial irrelevancies that we find so disturbing simply contribute to workplace conviviality, thus facilitate their tasks.

6. Leisurely Work-pace

Most Africans insist, however, that those tasks be completed at what they consider a reasonable pace. They are members of a group, and its pace is set to accommodate the slower workers, thus maintaining harmony. Many Americans genuinely enjoy working as rapidly as possible throughout their work day. They are not competing with anyone, simply enjoying how fast they can go. Africans find this "simple pleasure" hard to understand. For one man to do this would mean surpassing others of his group, thus disturbing its cohesion. This could trigger shame, criticism, conflict, ostracism and eventual expulsion. Nigerian and Kenyan workers, for instance, have actively rebelled against managerial attempts to increase work-pace, or create intergroup competition (Oyemelukwe). In these cases, what (expatriate) managers perceived as improvements, their subordinates saw as exploitation.

C. Recommendation Four: Consider the Personal Factor

Consider your role within this working environment. To what degree would working with this system help your venture? While senior executives--by virtue of their prior western training--may treat you as an equal, their subordinates may well look to you for leadership, instruction, counseling and even loans. What role should you play: yours or theirs?

One option is to stand apart, minimizing interaction behind a facade of fax machines and formal courtesies. This will disappoint your counterparts. They want to use initial contacts to forge "traditional" (i.e. familial) bonds, as groundwork for future business interaction. Admittedly, Americans find it hard to become "fictitious fathers," even to facilitate the flow of commerce.

Notwithstanding, four adjustments in your role as leader might be made to cope with local expectations.

1. Personalize Your Authority

Your overseas responsibilities, access for corporate funds, age, aspects of your character, as well as the assumed financial power of your corporation will give you great authority in African eyes. Personalize it. Greet every individual with whom you work by full name and appropriate title. Inquire after members of their nuclear families (in Africa, spouses, children, both sets of parents), again by name and in sufficient detail that you recall what has been said. This is not the empty American formality. If your associates believe your interest is real, they will expect you to recall the detail in future conversations.

Remember family feast days, ideally with gifts traditional to each occasion. Many are seasonal, thus easy to recall. Select a same-sex mentor--always older than yourself--to teach you what is worthy of inquiry. Most important, inquire as to family problems. Many of these are also seasonal (school fees, taxes, rainy season, illnesses, etc.), thus quite predictable. Offer sympathy, attentiveness and advice where you have knowledge. If asked for loans, remember that recipients may perceive them as gifts. If this is disturbing, respond with services that help the individual in non-monetary ways. Your goal: to make those who look up to you feel your recognize their worth.

2. "Reward" Age/Seniority

Consider your reactions to older subordinates. To pay extra, simply for seniority, is a greater adjustment than most of us will make. Thus, consider making commercial rewards symbolic, rather than monetary. Displays of respect, moments of commercial recognition, dispensing privileges, all may have their intended effect, _if_ conveyed upon more senior workers as an age-group, rather than individuals.

One Kenya firm, for instance, "rewarded all its workers each time they completed a specified work period without spoilage, loss or breakage. The reward was a goat roast, in which the animals were roasted on-site for the men's dinner. Supervisors and subordinates sat and ate together, a symbolic action in that culture, where sharing meat symbolizes mutual regard. Nonetheless, the best parts of each animal were reserved for the company's elders. Thus, in an entirely unspoken fashion, they were rewarded both for work achievement and their age.

3. Adjust to "Chat"

Consider your reaction to "office chat." Many US supervisors grow angry at hearing subordinates converse while working, despite studies that suggest enforcing silence will reduce their productivity. We grow irritated when deluged by noise to the point where our concentration falters, particularly when at work. This is particularly true for those of Northern European descent. Whites entering black settlements in Southern Africa are often irritated by what they describe as a cacophony of sound. Conversely, blacks entering white settlements find them as quiet, dull and somber as a cemetery.

Yet African "office chat" may have commercial value. Western businessmen often declare that nothing they say has real validity unless they write it down. Winston Churchill, on the day he became First Lord of the British Admiralty, reflected this belief by stating he would deny anything that anyone would claim he said, unless the speaker could produce the words on paper.

Conversely, African tradition holds that "spoken words" have mystical power. To speak out connects them with a single human being, thereby providing them with life and thus a power of their own (Fadiman). Perhaps in consequence, many Africans declare that orders given them within commercial settings seem less important when placed on paper. Their oral tradition is far older than their written one, thus to internalize a concept they prefer to hear it. To attain validity, words must be spoken and heard. Only then can understanding emerge between those individuals involved. Thus the flow of words that we dismiss as office chat may in fact facilitate the flow of business.

4. Adjust Your Pace

Consider the reasons behind your own commercial pace. Why do you wish to work quickly? What would annoy you if others were slow? One reason, as mentioned, is that Americans often prefer to work at their fastest possible pace, simply for the joy they take in doing so. Often, they goad themselves to maximum speed (thus maximum production) by imposing wholly arbitrary deadlines. Such deadlines--defined as the least possible time needed to complete a task--may be imposed upon subordinates, or internalized within themselves. In either case, their creation is intended solely to heighten the importance of the project in the minds of those completing it, whether supervisor or subordinate (Stewart/Bennett).

African cultures, however, do not march to our internal clocks. Thus, they fail to respond in ways that meet our covert expectations. Deadlines carry other meanings in Africa. In Ethiopia, for example, the more time one takes on a problem, the greater one's prestige. To hurry a subordinate diminishes his prestige (Hall). In Tanzania, to hurry one's subordinates or set a final deadline implies a lack of trust and thus diminishes their honor. In Congo, hurrying any aspect of a commercial transaction provides grounds for suspicion; suggesting to observers that the "hurrier" has something to conceal. Ugandans reflect this, declaring:

"If monkeys watch you, all is well.
If monkeys run, they have seized what you sell."

In summary, we need not change character to interact with Africans. Yet, it is crucial within commercial settings to make each subordinate feel he "counts." This is particularly important for Americans. We also generate unflattering stereotypes among those with whom we do business. One of the most widely shared among Africans is that we are a cold, uncaring folk, who feel nothing for (African) people and only for the money their labor brings. There is no better way to neutralize this stereotype than to personalize each business interaction.

V. CLIENT RELATIONS: EXTENDING THE NET

A. Structure: We vs They

Many African firms rely on three methods to gain and retain clientele. Like the staffing process, these are based on the premise that new clients (like new employees) represent additions to the fictional family. Each client represents a potential relationship. Each new relationship represents a potential extension of the firm's "economic net"--the intangible network of economic interactions on which its prosperity is based. The more extensive the net, the more power its members will feel, relative to their competitors. A proverb from Malawi expresses this ideal in fishing terminology:

> "Fish for fish, hunger at dusk
> Fish for friends, remain well fed."

To which the urban Congolese reply

> "Money cannot care for you; money cannot bury you.
> Only people can."

Thus, when westerners set out to do business, they seek new sources of long-term profit. When Africans do this they seek new, long-term relationships. Within their system, "wealth" is not only tallied in currency, but the number of people who can be counted on to aid each other on request.

There are compelling reasons for this. One is based on a world view that divides humanity into two groups; those with whom one has relationships and those with whom one has none. The Xhoi-San of Namibia express this most succinctly. They refer to themselves as the harmless people, or "grazers." All others are "predators," thus invariably harmful. Since no grazer can possibly understand the motivations of a predator (can zebras know why lions hunt them?), it is wisest to perpetually evade them (Thomas). The same applies to humans. Those with whom one has relationships are harmless. All others could attack. Since no one knows their motivations, it is wisest to perpetually evade them.

Other Africans divide humanity into "brothers" and "strangers." As mentioned, relationships with "brothers" may be based on blood (kin), ritual (in-laws; age-mates), or mutual agreement (comrades). To outsiders, however, few differences are apparent. All three groups speak and act like kin, assuming the obligations of life-long assistance and protection that we reserve for nuclear families. Together, kin and comrades form a magic circle, the fictional family so often referred to, devoted to mutual protection and prosperity. These are the "ins."

Beyond this magic circle live the "outs." They too are clustered in tight, concentric circles of kinsmen and friends. Each circle is locked in endless competition for whatever wealth the land provides. They compete endlessly with one another, simply for the joy of doing so. Somali proverbs express this most succinctly:

> "My clan against the world. My family against my clan
> My brother and I against my family. Me against my brother
> Is life not sweet?" (Arnold).

By definition, outsiders are predators. Like lions, no one can read their thoughts, thus comprehend their purposes. Thus it is wisest to simply evade them.

Americans have sound commercial reasons to be aware of a world view that regards them as predators. As one informant explained to me:

> "The motives of strangers inspire fear--not of attack but of shame. If the goals of the man with whom I deal remain unknown and indeed unknowable, then I cannot know how he will behave. How then, can I know how I should behave? And if I behave wrongly, I will shame (my) ancestors and kinsmen. Better to shun him and deal with brothers."

This ancient principle can still be found in modern commerce. Although conditioned to show courtesy to every stranger, Africans prefer to restrict both social and commercial dealings to "brother," i.e. those with whom you first build personal relationships. They wish to do business only with those they come to trust--to the point of inviting them into their inner circle.

Few of us know how to cope with this world view. Those who discover it often assume our nationality, color, ethnic group and alien culture automatically classifies us as "outs." African colleagues, however, look constantly for new recruits. They may regard specific Westerners as useful contacts, particularly if they seem willing to do business in local ways. They may thus invite selected individuals into their inner circles, in such a manner as to benefit both sides.

If asked to work within such circles, US project heads should find their business prospects much enhanced. As commercial trust develops, they may transform themselves from "predators" to comrades or even fictional kin. In consequence, windows of opportunity may open--lines of credit, needed licenses, loyal distributors, etc.--to which they originally had no access. Obviously, to change from "alien" to "inside man" is good for business, thus something to which those working in such cultures should aspire.

B. Underlying Principles: Recruiting "Allies"

1. The Homeboy System

One method of recruiting clientele is through the Homeboy System. As mentioned, the system refers to a series of relationships created by individuals during each major stage of life. These relationships are based neither on kinship ties nor marriage. A homeboy (homegirl) is one with whom an individual shares elements of a common background, thus common values, ideals and (nowadays) commercial aspirations. Homeboy relationships differ only in degree. The oldest generate the strongest bonds. Thus, homeboys across Africa base this type of relationship on having shared:

--Childhood (Congo proverb: "We have shared the same shirt.").

--Transitions to adulthood (e.g. circumcision rites: all who share them become "circumcision brothers" (Kenya).

--Education/military training (same schools, military units, even if homeboys involved never met).

--Dialect or language, village or region, tribe or nation.

Homeboys use this term to address each other. It is also interchanged with family terms, such as "brother," thus reflecting a mutual decision to treat one another as kin. This implies that they accept the obligations inherent in the term. Thus, like kin, any homeboy may ask (and is morally obligated to grant) favors of another. Africans who start business ventures, therefore, would turn initially to kin. Should they need a larger pool, they would go beyond the inner circles of his family into the outer circles of his homeboys. These might pass his request to others within their family circles. Thus, the initial inquiry would expand until solutions are devised.

Homeboys feel obligated to assist one another, even at enormous inconvenience to themselves. They do this for personal, communal, spiritual and (nowadays) commercial reasons. One reason is personal advantage. Each relationship they form intensifies their sense of economic security. A second is personal pride; the feeling gained from:

> "The moral satisfaction that comes from doing what you know is right, to an extent that would make even one's ancestors proud" (Henckollas).

A third is based on personal fear. To refuse exposes them to shame before their peers and elders, as well as the chance of supernatural ("ancestral") retribution through accident or illness. Finally, they may wish to gain personal status, by placing someone under obligation to themselves.

The system also works communally. To act within it benefits not only the two individuals concerned, but eventually their kin. It functions on three levels:

--If one man asks a favor, the second may reply by asking one in kind.

--Thereafter, each may ask new favors of the other's (elder) kin.

--Moreover, both sets of elders may subsequently ask favors from one another. Thus, by helping one another, the individuals link families as well.

The system also generates commercial benefits. The mother of a Congolese informant, for example, became CEO of their family's trucking firm. She began from scratch, driving into the countryside to collect produce to sell in their city. Wherever she went, farmers dropped their normal prices, often up to half. On a personal level, they did so to help her get started. On a deeper, more communal level, they did it to repay favors done them--over decades--by her father and grandfather who had helped them in time of need. Her moment of crisis (in starting from scratch) provided their first opportunity to repay. Of course, these kindnesses carried with them the expectation she would repay them, as her suppliers (or their children) moved into times of crisis in their turn.

The homeboy system also operates effectively within urban business settings. Africans wish to be involved, on an intensely personal level, with <u>all</u> of their suppliers, agents, distributors, clientele and even distant government bureaucrats. This applies to anyone who might affect their firm. They do not feel able to control them, unless they both know them well enough to predict what they might do, as well as involve them in relationships that "make them family." US businessmen must realize that this desire for involvement may also work for them, <u>if</u> they participate in the existing system and play by local rules.

2. The Future Favor System

A second method to acquire clientele is through the Future Favor System. As mentioned, this is far more complex than a straightforward exchange. This system adds dimensions of relationship and time that have no US parallels. One method does consist of an exchange of favors between equals. It beings, however, when one person provides another with a favor on request, <u>without</u> asking for repayment. The recipient, though grateful, may not return a comparable favor until asked. Such an appeal may not come for weeks, months, years or entire generations. When it does, however, the recipient (or his descendants) will feel a moral obligation to respond. That response, however, does not cancel the interaction (as it would in the US). Rather, it re-obligates the original provider to reciprocate in turn, thus continuing an exchange explicitly intended to last indefinitely.

Relationships emerge from the inner feelings generated by this constant giving and receiving, reflecting ties far stronger than those that would result from payment. Assume, for instance, that a US project head seeks high level contacts within a Republic of Congo ministry. If he pays a Congolese contact preset fees to introduce him, the firm incurs no further obligation. Rather, the act of payment ends the whole relationship.

If the Congolese refuses the fee, however, he has performed a favor. In consequence, the relationship between both men has changed. The American (and thus, his firm) incurs an obligation. Obviously, he can return the favor. But what if the Congolese, familiar with local business practice, provides a steady trickle of new favors, essentially guiding the American through the social and commercial minefields of Congolese commerce? Logically, the American's sense of obligation should intensify. Eventually, as his own familiarity with local business expands, his methods of reciprocation should grow more refined as well. As that occurs, the Congolese should feel obligated in his turn. Ideally, since both the US firm and the Congolese extended family benefit from the alliance, it should go on throughout their business lives.

A second method consists of an exchange of favors between superior and subordinate. In Northern Nigeria, for instance, the wealthy and powerful follow what Americans might call a "big man/little brother" strategy. This means they strive to gain communal (and thus commercial) status through self-serving generosity, providing gifts and favors to a group of "little brothers," explicitly intended to place them permanently under obligation. It is this generosity that differentiates "big men" from merely wealthy ones. Rich men live in isolation; "big men" in communal splendor, symbolically surrounded by an entourage of "little brothers" who help him socially and commercially upon request.

There is no shame, however, in the little brother role. Nor does it connote inferiority. Inequalities of wealth and power are accepted as a fact of life. In consequence, subordinates play out their roles with pride; the very act of reciprocity providing social status. Unable to monetarily repay the "big man's" greater generosity, they respond with smaller but continued acts of deference, service, kindness and support--simply to remind society they remain aware of larger obligations. They also periodically reaffirm their subordinate status by asking favors; loans, advice, protection, help for kin. Meanwhile, their time, skills, energy and political support remain at their patron's beck and call.

Informants emphasize that while the system can be subject to abuse, it is not often taken lightly. Favors are not frivolously asked; to do so in the present obligates the petitioner in the future. Thus requests are only made of those you know and trust. Nor can requests be made that harm the petitioner, recipient or anyone else. To do this would rupture the relationship and thus the purpose of the system. Moreover, there must be reasonable probability of benefit in the minds of both participants. The overt purpose of generating the relationship is to help both sides, thereby laying the basis for further cooperation.

Thus, the future favors system operates with equal effectiveness among both kin and homeboys. Informants emphasize that it should be used only in two cases: celebration and crisis. In good times, people call those within their inner circle to celebrate success (marriage, employment, etc.). They feast and drink at his expense--and thereby place themselves under future obligation. In bad times, people call for help--commercial, romantic, medical, legal, financial--and thereby owe an obligation. The system exists to be used in times of crisis; a "living" alternative to social security.

3. The Rules/Exceptions System

The third method of recruiting clientele is through the Rules/Exception System. Westerners do business according to a system of rules. When entering new situations, we ask what rules exist, then try to follow them. Often, we create rules where none actually exist, believing they will add predictability to our lives. Thus, I have seen Northern Europeans actively refuse to step on grass within my yard, in the belief it was "illegal" in America. More important, we try not to make exceptions to those rules. While we may disagree with many of them, we believe in rules per se.

In contrast, many Africans do business according to a system of exceptions. They apply what rules exist, but make exceptions for kin, comrades, homeboys and others of their magic circle. By making an exception for someone, they publicly both recognize and reaffirm a pre-existing relationship. Thereby, they gain public recognition and social prestige. In addition, they place that person under potential obligation to themselves for the foreseeable future. Consider this (Nigerian?) example:

An employee with access to his company's cash was found, by a senior African manager, to have stolen funds. The firm's rules called for legal action. Instead, the manager insisted the money be returned. However, it had been spent. The manager responded by organizing a company loan for the employee, so that repayment could be made. Thereafter, perhaps assuming the thief's financial problem had been solved by the original theft, the manager refused to shift him to a less responsible, lower paid position with no access to cash. To do so--or to have fired him--would have shamed them both, since it would have deprived the employee's dependents of their major source of social status as well as income (Seddon). Here, the relationship between the two was more important than that between the manager and firm. Thus, the exception proved more important than the rule.

C. Recommendation Five: Consider the Recruiting Factor

These three systems--"Homeboy," "Favors," and "Exceptions" are clearly interwoven. On a personal level, they function as recruiting tools, drawing useful individuals into potentially profitable groups, sharing history, beliefs and aspirations. On a communal level, they maintain harmony within those groups by forging obligations among members in such fashion as to generate good will. On a more modern, commercial level, they strengthen family firms through methods--unknown in the west--that generate cooperation, alliance and even merger with other commercial units. Most important, these methods provide tools we can use to work within the system.

1. Seek Allies

There is a logical first step for Americans to take on deciding to do business within Africa. If lacking first-hand knowledge of the local markets, they can begin by enlisting key foreign contacts as company allies. Many US personnel ignore this option, focusing on product presentation from the moment they arrive. Briefcase in hand, they move directly from the airport into preset appointments, minds focused on that aspect of their product line they feel will make the best impression. In contrast, Africans placed in the same position may set product presentation to one side. Instead, they focus first upon the marketing environment within which that product must survive, seeking to identify both local rules and major players. Their interest is on forming ties that will allow them to fit in. Only then do they re-focus on positioning their product. Why should we not do the same?

We have at least three ways to nurture such alliances. One is to begin with proper introductions. Be sure your firm begins by choosing men (or women) of proper age, formal education, social status and commercial authority. Beyond that, choose "language lovers" (those who want to learn a new language), "culture crossers" (want to learn new ways of doing business), "contact-oriented" (would rather visit than fax), "conversationalists," and those with prior African experience outside luxury hotels. Once chosen, provide them with appropriate introductions (through letters, gifts, homeboys in US, etc.) to "big men" within the local business scene.

A second is to use on-site inexperience as a business tool. Spend your first weeks visiting each contact--and others they suggest--simply to inquire as to the local rules (and major players) of local business games. Assume a little brother role, thereby allowing hosts to become teachers, mentors, leaders and "big men." Invariably, business contacts will turn social; many Africans believe that socializing is how business actually begins. A third, therefore, is to spend evenings learning local ways--in this case the ways of playing guest and host. Prolong the social rituals, particularly those involved with gifts and drinking; participate, if asked, in spiritual ones. Remember, in Africa the visit is a business tool, meant less for recreation than creation of allies.

2. Do Favors: Play "Big Man"

In cultures where placing others under obligation has become a business tool, consider using generosity to generate allies. To begin the process, there are only two accepted rules:

(a) Give first. In much of Africa, initial favors are provided by superiors. By giving first, US executives initially assume that role. Through acts of generosity--both personal and commercial--

they signal a wish to form relationships. By placing others under obligation, they indicate the wish for an alliance, in the form of other favors in the future.

(b) Keep giving. Americans find it easy to give, but harder to keep giving. Within our culture recipients must reciprocate swiftly or givers feel exploited. However, not every culture shares this pattern. In nations marked by massive gaps between rich and poor, it is recurrent acts of generosity that symbolize great wealth and thus confer high status. When US firms that mean to market in these countries both have great wealth (from local perspectives) and seek high status, it seems wiser to give than receive. Moreover, it seems wiser to give generously and often, if by so doing, project heads not only show respect for local customs but seek to form alliances on local terms.

3. Ask Favors: Play "Little Brother"

When forming this type of alliance, most Americans prefer the "big man" role. Notwithstanding, that of "little brother" may prove equally profitable. Throughout Africa, administrative power is monopolized by small numbers of elite. In consequence, highly placed bureaucrats can force US business interests into subordinate and even supplicant roles. In 1974, for instance, Americans of my acquaintance discovered and laid claim to Kenya's first ruby mine. In subsequent years, however, they found themselves increasingly powerless against members of the local political elite who sought, shared, and finally took it for themselves.

In such instances, the most valuable role may be that of "little brother." Once aware of how the system works, project heads may be able to both do and ask favors so as to get those in power to assist rather than obstruct them. The story is told, for example, of a western firm operating in Zaire at a time when its economy had deteriorated to a point where government employee wages were rarely paid. In consequence, the firm found itself unable to get action on permits required by law. Approaching key bureaucrats with appropriate expressions of deference, the project head asked for the permits as a favor. Aware of the officials' monetary crisis, he supported the request with a symbolic gift--in this case selecting goods that could be sold on the black market. The funds enabled the officials to go on working, thereby retaining their administrative power and social superiority. This circumstance alone enabled them to render further services to the firm, enabling it to maintain both its "inferior" social role and profitable balance sheet.

4. Become a "Homeboy": Affiliate with Local Firms

Consider linking your firm with one or more African firms, on their terms. Why not develop the best of your local relationships into bonds meant to last a lifetime, knowing that your African counterpart will draw you every more closely into his social and commercial circles. It is true that homeboys, as defined herein, must not only share goals and values but elements of a common past. Yet, that need not shut out all Americans, particularly those with prior African experience. One friend of mine is "homegirl" to 100 Africans in Gambia, with whom she served during her Peace Corps years. Conversely, I am "homeboy" to a former Kenya Minister of Tourism and the current Vice Chancellor, University of Botswana, simply because we attended the same advanced degree program in an American university.

A shared past, of course, is insufficient without adopting the attitude required to nurture the relationship that springs from it. That, in turn, means approaching business from an African perspective. Western management thought advocates individual labor, personal achievement, and job satisfaction through maximizing corporate profit. African management thought emphasizes shared labor, group achievement and job satisfaction through maintaining family values. That attitude can be expressed most clearly with one final Congo proverb, the first few words of which provides the title of this paper.

> Your son is my son. Your friend's friend is my friend.
> Your cares are my cares. Are we not brothers?

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