

**COMMUNICATING WITH AFRICA
to foster its development**

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There is no longer any doubt that the failure of several development projects in Africa is due to socio-cultural reasons. It is not so much that African culture is resistant to progress or development, but quite simply that it is ignored, badly appreciated or even despised. The basic problem is it not the question of communication? To know how to transmit one's thoughts to another by using his system of references. To communicate is to dialogue. What a lack of mutual understanding!

Communicating Science and Technology

A permanent duality persists between science and technology. Science may be defined as the knowledge of the laws of nature which govern the harmony of the species. In discovering this harmony, man may use it the better to adapt to his environment. As to technology, it constitutes the application of science in its capacity to facilitate and improve man's quality of life. But the scientific spirit remains a necessity to favour this reconciliation.

The scientific spirit permits the opening towards progress contrary to ignorance which retards it. Science has its own logic which can only be understood within the context of a cultural environment. The acceptance of a technology which derives from science to improve man well-being is thereby, also determined by a given cultural background. Otherwise some resistance will arise among the very persons to be helped by science and technology. Such is the source of the duality linked to the lack of mutual understanding.

Some thinkers systematically maintain an opposition between tradition and modernity. This language is frequent in Africa, and stereotypes are created. He who lives in an urban centre is modern, favourable to progress, has a scientific mind and applies the new technologies. He is young and literate (generally in a foreign language). On the other hand, the person who is traditional is illiterate, lives in a rural area, is hostile to progress and technology and is old. In the scale of social values, it is better to be unemployed in the city than a peasant in a rural area. The goal of modernist development would therefore aim at the advance of science and technology while making a tabula rasa of the past and traditions.

In such a perspective, with the majority of its population living in rural areas and 80% of its people illiterate, Africa would need reconquering or its technological development would have to

follow the path traced by the West. What a financial, economic and cultural waste that would be for humanity!

On the other hand, as Professor I.A. Akinjogbin emphasizes, "Tradition, in other words, is a tried and acceptable way of doing things in the specific and political context of a people during a particular period. The greater the differences between periods, the more traditions change" (1) then there must be a different explanation for the resistance, "where it appears, when a new technology is introduced. It embodies the rejection of this new technology precisely because the pedagogy of its introduction does not take as a point of reference the culture and the world view of the people for whom this technology would supposedly be beneficial. It is not Africa that must be adapted to technology but very much the contrary.

Examples of dialogues **The tree trunk and death rites**

In the context of a campaign of reforestation and fight against desertification, measures are taken in an African country to prohibit the use of tree trunks as burial places. Why a tree trunk?... The peasants, however, defied this prohibition by pleading in favour of their traditions. Yet, the destruction of the forest must be halted. After some investigation and research, it was discovered that this tradition was linked to the fact that hyenas plundered graves.

When this was explained and alternative solutions found, tradition began a dialogue with modernity. That is an example of a successful cultural negotiation.

The mill of disagreement: In a village in Guinea, a development project to improve the living conditions of women recommends the installation of a communal windmill. Is that not an undeniable advantage of technology over the constraining task of threshing millet?

Such a change of habits also disturbs the behaviour of the community. While it liberates the women, it triggers a social disequilibrium between men and women. The women dispose of more time for social activities and consequently encounter the opprobrium of their husbands. When the windmill breaks down, the men are hostile to repairing it. A preliminary socio-cultural study should have anticipated, explained and negotiated this new mode of community behaviour.

Family planning and Islamic traditions: when the family planning programme was launched in Indonesia, the persons responsible for it encountered the resistance of the Ulemas, the local religious dignitaries. They considered the programme to be indicative of external control over the community.

(1) "Reflections on the Nigerian experience" I. A. Akinjogbin, in Tradition and Development in Africa to-day. UNESCO, Paris, 1990, p. 62

They did not fail to find references in the Koran to justify condemning the project.

Upon learning this, the leaders of the B.K.K.N. (2), responsible for the project in Indonesia sought to sensitize the Ulemas by pointing out the benefits and interest of the programme for their community. The Ulemas were asked to be the persons responsible for the programme at the local level. Once they were convinced, the same Ulemas were able to find verses favourable to family planning in the Koran.

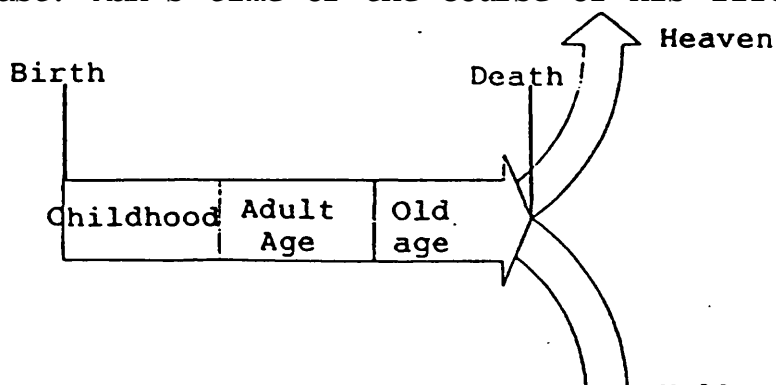
Contraception and the power of the elders: In Cameroon, the youth of a certain village informed the persons in charge of family planning programmes that their elders, both male and female forbade them using condoms and other contraceptive measures. Once again, the persons responsible for the programme neglected the cultural dimension of the problem. And what is valid for planning is equally valid in the fight against AIDS.

In order to influence a community's behaviour, any technological or behavioural innovations must necessarily be handled by the elders, since older persons are the community's intermediaries with the world outside. The consent of the elders, the guardians of culture, of the community's soul, must, in some respect, be obtained before the society can be addressed directly. In order to achieve this, it is essential to understand the cultural and cosmogonic views of the environment into which one hopes to introduce a new technology in order to achieve an aut centered development that integrates existing cultural values. But then, as far as Africa is concerned, what are the cosmogonic views to be considered?

The Ring of Life

In order to introduce technology into a given environment and have it accepted by the population, an understanding of the prevailing logic is a fundamental precondition. Contemporary Africa is multi-cultural and pluri-cosmogonic. The African's cultural behaviour respects three major world views: the Judeo-Christian, the Islamic, and the animist views.

The first two world views are linked to the two major religions in the Middle East. Man's time or the course of his life is a linear concept.

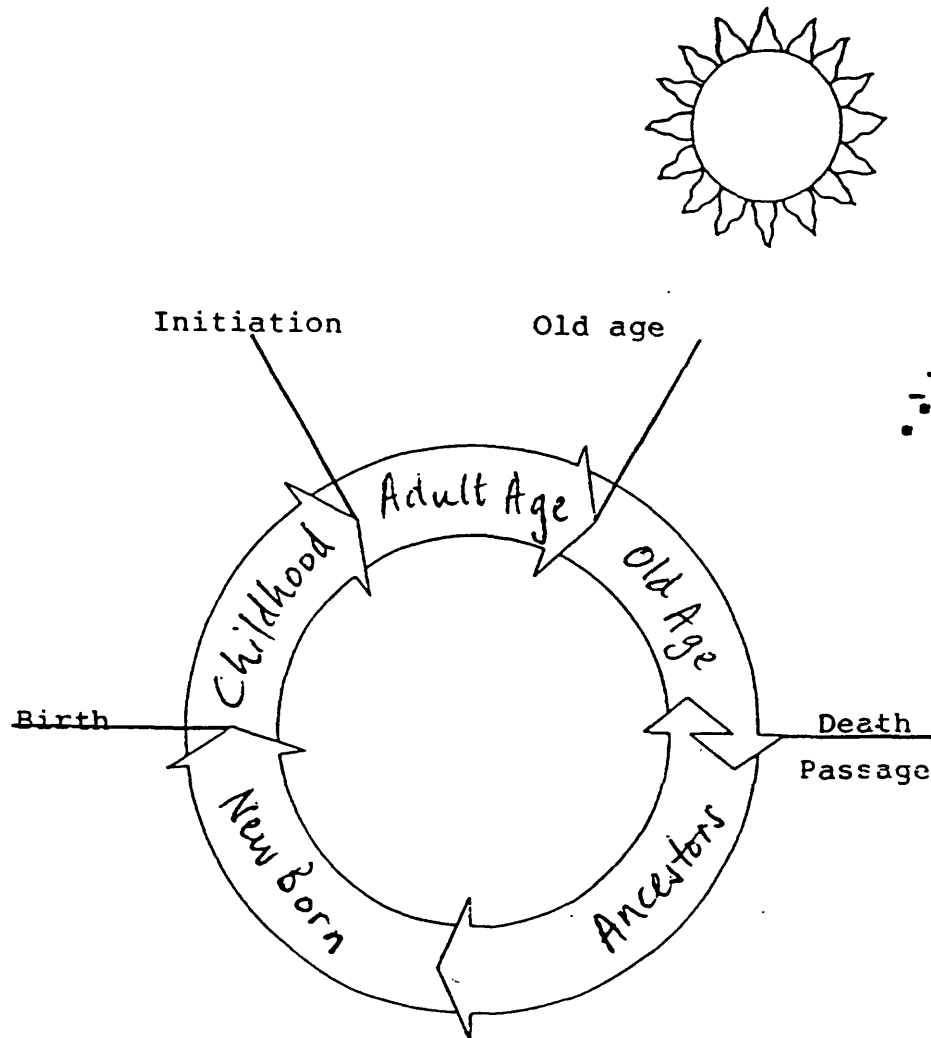


The sense of progress, of improving one's life in order to merit heaven is not alien to the emergence of several technological innovations found during periods when these religions were influential, despite exceptions, due to ephemeral dogmatism. There is a time for everything. And that is written in the Scriptures.

On the other hand, in the African tradition, the course of man's life is set in a circular view. Life "under the sun" comprises four privileged moments: birth, initiation/adult life, old age, death/passage. Upon becoming an ancestor, man has a double role to play:

- to communicate to the elders spiritual matters from the great beyond. Ancestors are not gods but because of their nearness to them have a good experience of them.
- to return to life "under the sun" thanks to a rebirth in the person of the grandchildren.

Circular animist perception of
of man's life



Within the context of such a view, since everything returns, what is the need for innovation? Since tradition is transmitted by orality," the introduction of new technology becomes more difficult. Therein arises the special interest of intermediaries, the departed, elders and old people. Whatever they approve comes not from them but from the ancestors. The closeness of the ancestors to the divinity and the constant dialogue between ancestors and old people confers a sacred aspect to the blessing of the elders. Thus, when an important question is submitted to an old person, a quick answer is not to be expected. He must first enter into communion with the ancestors in order to provide what appears to him to be the wisest answer.

Old people represent an obligatory contact for the success or the acceptance of any major change within the community. Their sphere of influence is not limited to rural areas but extends to urban areas due to the fact that every urban resident remains sentimentally attached to a village, whatever the length of his stay in the city.

Successful communication

The successful introduction of new technology requires the application of three basic principles.

Knowledge of the science and technology to be promoted: specialists must enlighten all the parties concerned by the project. They must reveal the specific interest of this technology.

Knowledge of the dominant cosmogonic views: the more one moves away from urban centres, the closer one draws to traditional values.

Vectors of communication: communication specialists may-choose the most appropriate media to promote the technology in question. In this respect, they have two tools at their disposal.

Standard media support (electronic media, printed mass-media, public meetings, interpersonal communication with social workers, the churches, mosques, schools, hospitals, theatre, songs, dance, pantomime, etc.).

Revealed symbolism: its significance must be understood in order to exploit it. The traditional context of communication contains a formidable wealth of means to transmit messages. A mere sample of these includes signs, rituals, parades, tattoos, hairdress, games, toys, dolls, tales, poems, riddles, names, etc.

Other types of communication also exist in contemporary Africa.

Communication by means of attire: brightly coloured traditional dress all have message-coded names.

Communication by means of jewellery: so-called "television antenna" hairstyles refer to the adoption or the introduction of television.

Communication by means of songs: popular songs have often been used to help market new products (MAZDA, OMO, RICARD, etc.).

Conducting a development project in Africa is a complex operation and the specific environment must be considered. Modernity and tradition coexist. The written word and the oral tradition exist side by side. Most people live in rural areas where living conditions are very difficult, on the one hand, and on the other hand, are governed by traditional values.

The contribution of science and technology can and ought to be utilized by the various peoples to improve their existence. In order for the innovations to be accepted and integrated into the cultural matrix of the environment, persons responsible for projects must develop a new form of communication to convey their message and take into consideration the culture of the population. Any attempt to normalize Africa will result in failure, bitterness, lack of understanding and misery.

Where the written word is not prevalent, there are other means of communicating and of preserving memory.