

DEALING WITH CULTURAL DIFFERENCES:

Contrasting the African and European Worldviews

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Originally published as
Dealing with Differences: Contrasting the African and European Worldviews, 1991
Communication Press, Limuru, Kenya

This version 30 November 2007
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INTRODUCTION

The material in this book is a summary drawn from several years of study and experience in East Africa. I hope it will help people from a European cultural background to learn about Africa. It may help those living in Africa or planning to live in Africa to adapt to that cultural background more easily.

Some of the material has been used in culture-study sessions in Kenya for missionaries planning to work in East Africa with various church groups. The material has also been used in other public presentations on the contrast between African and European ("Western") culture.

The focus of the book is on East Africa, and particularly Kenya, where the author lived and worked for about 25 years. Extensive contact in many African countries and several African cultures and languages provide a comparative reference base for this topic. Most of the observations and comparisons with European culture will apply to Africa as a whole. At least it should give a basis for critical comparison. The broad outline of worldview contrasts will apply to most Asian and indigenous American cultures.

Africa is a large place with varied peoples and innumerable cultural and linguistic variations. One always runs a risk in making generalizations. I hope readers will use this book as a guide to make their own observations and comparisons, based on their own experience in the specific area of Africa where they live.

I have tried to summarize a basic contrast of the African way of organizing reality and the European way of organizing reality. Perhaps the contents and perspectives herein will help foreigners in Africa

to identify possible areas of conflict,

to recognize such conflicts when they begin to arise,

to accept as natural occurrences the difficulties they have as foreigners,

to accept them in a positive manner and work through them,

to try to develop a positive appreciation of the reasons in African culture for the differences, and finally

to change enough to fit in with the African situation and work within the terms of the differences which exist.

While the book is written for the European coming to Africa, it should also be helpful for Africans wanting to better understand people of European background. Africans may understand better why Europeans act in such strange ways, and why they sometimes have such difficulties fitting into the society.

Africans may further learn how to help Europeans living in their countries if they understand the European cultural background and some of the problems this causes Europeans in Africa.

Most of all I hope it can help to smooth some of the tensions that arise at times between Christians of European and African background working together in an African setting. Many times neither side knows why the difficulties are arising.

Problems stemming from differences in culture, ways of thinking, or previous experience may be wrongly attributed to unchristian attitudes, insincerity, deceit or other moral defects. If we **realize the differences**, perhaps we can **deal with them**. Perhaps this book can be of help in "peacemaking" through understanding.

Chapter One

CULTURE SHOCK

It is difficult to move from one cultural group or region of the world to another. Most people have heard the term "culture shock." This involves more than adjustment to different types of houses and food.

The whole pattern of organization of the new place may be totally different from one's home culture. Differences may be small, at first, but many. One may experience many small irritations, sometimes unidentifiable, and these build up. Finally the irritations and disorientation build up to a breaking point.

This may result in depression, anger, criticism. Some resort to overwork to avoid contact with people. Others schedule administrative work instead of field work for the same reason.

Others develop symptoms of general lethargy or hyperactivity, depending on the individual and multiple other factors. Some have nervous breakdowns. Some develop ulcers or other physical symptoms.

Some develop symptoms of various exotic diseases, but no physical signs can be detected by medical tests. Some become critical of the nationals, or of different things in the new country. Some become irritable towards everybody.

When a Christian experiences such a reaction, he or she may identify the problem as a "spiritual" one. Not praying enough, not studying the Bible enough, not serious enough about my dedication, some unconfessed sin in my life.

A Normal Occurrence

But it is only culture shock – a normal occurrence when entering a new culture. (It may not even "set in" for weeks or months after initial entry.) Many Americans even experience culture shock moving from one region of the greatly varied United States to another.

When one moves to a new part of the world, one actually has to go through a total reorientation of personality, thought and life-style. Most people who experience severe culture shock do so because they do not know to expect it, or they do not know how it may occur.

The most insidious aspect is that the person many times cannot identify the problem. Specific problems are seen and focused on, but may not be the real problem. (Part of the problem of culture shock is that you often do not know you are having culture shock.)

Consider the period of language study which missionaries and other long-term workers in a foreign country must go through. When they first enter the country, the largest part of their time and their main efforts go into studying the language.

However, they are also learning to deal with the living situation. New schools for the children, different places and ways to shop, different types of foods or ways of packaging them, a new currency.

There are banks, but they have totally different procedures, and each person you ask gives you different information or instructions. When taking new families to open an account, it has been a common experience to find the requirements or procedures change every time.

Then there are customs and immigration matters like alien registration. Visitors may receive one set of instructions from the people in the government office in the capital city, and another at a border checkpoint. Often these matters must be handled in the foreign language which the person has not yet mastered, often without adequate support and help from experienced expatriates.

The language centre, the teacher-facilitator or the company supervisor may become the immediate focus of discontent. The specific reason for irritation or dissatisfaction cannot be identified. But since the most prominent thing in life at that time is language study, that becomes the focus of attention and the target for the release of tensions.

The language student may feel that if the schedule were just changed, if the teacher's method of testing were changed, if the pace were slowed or speeded up – then everything would be fine. But then if changes are made, the irritation still remains, and other matters are identified as the "cause" of the disorientation: problems with the language study, with the living situation, with the mission administration, with the nationals' attitudes, etc.

But the problem is simply the **disorientation itself**. Culture shock is the term for the general, often undefined, sense of **disorientation** resulting from the buildup of many small adjustments, which often in themselves might be considered inconsequential.

Uncertainty

This accumulation of experiences and social challenges causes the feeling that the individual is not in control. There is a constant feeling of uncertainty, the person may feel insecure or anxious. *Stress rises.*

There are new, and often unclear, role expectations, procedures which local people assume the new arrival should know. Procedures may change without notice and without any stated purpose.

For instance, one day I took an application to Kenya Immigrations for a Pupil's Pass for a new language learner who was coming to our program. The clerk asked me where the personal cover letter was. That was the first I had heard of it.

Same Information

I asked what the letter was supposed to say. It was supposed to give the same information already on the form letter, of which two copies were already required.

I asked when this requirement had been set, and was told it had been in force the past seven years that the clerk had been working there. I had *never* been required to submit such a letter during the **eight** years that I had been submitting such applications. (Also, during all that time this was the first time I had ever seen that particular clerk.)

Originally, one copy of the form letter application had been required, then about two years before that particular day, a second copy of the application form had been required, and then an additional letter with the same information. (I was wondering, what do they do with all that paper?)

Being Human

How does one deal with such frustrations? They may continue to occur, since some aspects of the society and its organization may continue to be unclear to the newcomer, even after years of experience and exposure.

Perhaps if a person were better prepared to know what kinds of differences to expect, or to understand the foundation for the differences in the new society, it would be easier to accept the feeling of disorientation, inadequacy, and uncertainty, and to deal with the situation constructively and as a learning opportunity.

We are all products of the cultures in which we grew up. This is neither good nor bad – it is simply a basic component of being human. We have to learn how to be human in some way. The problem is in how we look at the other ways to also "be human." We can learn to deal with the differences if we try.

Chapter Two

DIFFERENCES

The anecdotes related here will illustrate areas of differences between the European and the African points of view. These incidents will provide a perspective on areas of differences which may cause conflicts. Then an attempt will be made in the following chapter to draw a systematic comparison of the two cultural worlds.

Instant Tea

An American acquaintance of mine in Mombasa related the following incident to me. On one occasion a certain grocery store in Mombasa received a shipment of imported American instant tea, a delicacy for the American residents of Kenya. My friend happened to be out of town on the day the tea arrived. As soon as she returned another American told her about the precious shipment.

She rushed down to the store, but was disappointed to find that the shipment had already been sold out. She anxiously asked the proprietor of the store when he would be getting another shipment of the instant tea. He answered, "I'm not planning to order any more. I had one clerk doing nothing all day but putting out the tea! I couldn't keep it on the shelf!"

Now apparently there was a difference of perspective here about what was really going on! There were differences in the assumptions about the dynamics of the situation concerning this commodity! Why does this sort of difference occur? Well, my friend could not figure it out – it did not make any sense to her. That difference created frustration for her.

Both people here had the same information: the commodity had been in the store, the store was there to sell the commodity, the customer was there to buy the commodity. Yet after the product was gone, the conclusions drawn by each participant in the situation were very different. My friend thought, "You sold so much so fast, surely you will be ordering more and I will buy some as soon as you get it, making more profit for you." The merchant was thinking, "My worker was so busy, it is just not worth it!"

There was a difference in economic theory. From a Western point of view, the more you sell, the more money you make, even if each item is sold at a lower price. And if the item is selling so fast, why even put it on the shelf? Just let the customers take it directly from the cartons. From the local proprietor's point of view, it just created more work in a shorter time. Different factors were *given significance* by each participant in this event. Frustrations resulted for the foreigner. How do you deal with such differing conclusions from the same event?

Missionaries and Modesty

Somewhere I heard the story of an amusing incident in Zaire. The early missionaries there were very concerned to spread the gospel of modesty along with the gospel of Jesus.

It was the fashion in Europe for women to wear floor length dresses, with high collars. You might imagine, however, how inappropriate that type of dress was in Zaire. Thus the local African women dressed in a much more comfortable style, normally wearing nothing above the waist.

This was, of course, shocking and quite immodest in the view of the missionaries. They tried very hard to teach the local women to dress "properly." There were a few women to be seen once in a while wearing some covering above the waist, but they seemed to be few and far between. When a woman would believe in Christ and wish to be baptized, the missionaries impressed upon her the necessity for dressing in a "Christian" manner. The missionary women were even ready to get the new convert started off right by providing one proper dress to start with.

There was considerable resistance, however, to the new, strange dress code. The missionaries could not understand this, as it seemed quite clear that modesty was a desirable virtue. In other ways the local people seemed quite concerned about moral questions and personal ethics. But they continued to persist in their immodest style of dress.

The question became quite a community issue, and local leaders became concerned about the pressure from the missionaries to change the local dress code. Finally a local leader took the initiative to speak with the missionaries about this problem.

As he spoke with them, expressing his concern, the missionaries were shocked at what he revealed. It seems that in that particular tribe, the only women who wore coverings above the waist were prostitutes – and missionaries!

How much trouble could have been saved, how much misunderstanding avoided, if only those early missionaries had asked a few questions before they took it in hand to impose a foreign pattern on the local people. How ironic: the missionaries were trying to turn good, modest, morally upright women of the community – wives and mothers – into prostitutes! But fortunately those African women had their standards and were unwilling to compromise!

Permission to Leave

Social customs differ, also. I remember an instance which occurred some years ago when I was the Director of the Baptist Communications Centre in Nairobi.

We were having some repair work done to the roof. When I got ready to leave for the day, the repair crew were still working outside. As I locked the back door of the centre and prepared to leave, I informed the workers that I was leaving.

One of them replied, "Tunakuruhusu," meaning "We give you permission." I was shocked to say the least! What presumption! It was my office! I could leave when I wished! It seemed obvious to me that the workers had no need nor right to excuse me to leave.

We apparently were operating on quite different assumptions about the social situation and dynamics involved. Actually, the worker was trying to be polite and proper. When one departs from another's house, he must have permission from the householder.

While this was not his house, nor was I his visitor, I had perhaps confused him by appearing to be asking permission to leave! This would have been the import of my informing him that I was leaving, if I had been in his house.

Actually I had no social obligation to speak to him as I left. To me, however, it was appropriate to do so. It apparently confused him, and he responded in the best way he could, under the circumstances. I was offended, but he certainly meant no offense!

Telephone

One great area of frustration is with the telephone. Sometimes when I answer my telephone, it seems the person on the other end never knows when to start the conversation. The person will continue saying hello in one way or another. Consider the following dialogue.

Me: "Hello."

Him: "Hello to you." (I pause to allow the caller to continue, or say "Yes," eliciting my further comment.)

Him: "Hello?"

Me: "Hello!"

Him: "Yes, good morning to you." Or "Yes, hello."

Me: "Good morning." (Pause for caller to continue.)

Him: "Hello? Hello?" (Etc.)

One of my Maasai friends, on the other hand, just starts talking as though we were face to face, never identifying himself, or giving any preliminaries. He just begins with greetings, how's work, the children, etc. Then he goes on to report on his news: We are fine, but there's been no rain, etc.

Or a caller may not listen for the name mentioned in answering, and proceed to ask for someone we never heard of. Further, it seems that people do not listen to information or explanations. Another dialogue:

Me: "Jenkins residence."

Her: "Hello, how are you?"

Me: "Fine, how are you?"

Her: "Fine, I need to speak to Kamau."

Me: "I'm sorry, there is no Kamau here."
Her: "Is this Karanja's house?"
Me: "No, this is home of Jenkins."
Her: "Oh...I want to speak to Kamau."
Me: "There is no Kamau here."
Her: "Is this Karanja's house?"
Me: "No, this is the home of Jenkins."

And such an exchange may be in English or Swahili, or the local language. It happens quite often in this manner. Telephone skills are a basic given in a country like the USA. Children learn the correct procedure for calling and answering even before they go to school. Europeans living in Kenya should not assume such background in their new home.

Lack of experience and training is further complicated by the different cultural assumptions concerning greetings and encounter. Cases such as that of my Maasai friend illustrate the gap between visual orientation (African) and verbal orientation (European); between informal or dynamic orientation (African) and formal or procedural orientation (European). My friend greets over the telephone, where he cannot see me, in the same way he would if we were talking face to face. He knows who I am, he knows who he is; why shouldn't I recognize who he is?

Even when two Europeans are close acquaintances, they will still introduce themselves at the beginning of a phone call, because of the formal procedure required. This is part of the protocol for telephone use for the European. This background may not be brought to the use of the phone by your African acquaintances.

Conflicts and Insights

In the next chapter I will draw some contrasts between the African and the European ways of thinking. From these contrasts perhaps we can gain some insights into possible causes of frustration in relationships between people of African background and people of European (Western) background.

I will outline the basic viewpoints of the two world-views and where the two might differ. Recognizing areas of difference should help one to anticipate possible conflicts and deal with the differences in a positive manner when they are encountered.

Chapter Three

AFRICAN AND EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY CONTRASTED

A society or cultural group is an extremely complex collection of historical identity, religious concepts, relational patterns, and shared experiences of all kinds. The present character of an ethnic group or a political entity is the result of centuries of shared experiences, and entails a coherent thought-system that helps make sense of those experiences and maintain the values developed over the history of that group.

A philosophy has two aspects when considering a whole culture or people. There is the consistent worldview shared by the people and the system of social requirements and roles and beliefs within that society. The second aspect is a formal statement of this, which for the Westerner includes a rational analysis and systematic statement. Many societies have no philosophy in the second sense.

Yet the shared worldview and social identity is so clearly understood by members of that society that they could give an outsider answers to questions concerning what is expected of members of the society in various situations, and concerning the beliefs of the society about various things. These answers could lead to the construction of a "formal" statement which would represent the general world-view of the people group as a whole.

The West has a long history of formal, rational philosophy which informs us of our cultural and intellectual heritage. Through this we can trace the development and change of Western thought over the centuries, giving a better understanding of the "West" as it exists today. It is true, however, that most members of Western societies are unaware or uninterested in the formal aspects of their society's "worldview."

The contrasts drawn in this chapter are an attempt to compare general African and European thought and worldview. This necessarily involves drawing generalizations, which would represent certain segments of each broad society more than others. One has to consider the great varieties of sub-cultures in each broad grouping we are considering.

The characteristics given here for the European worldview are a matter of record. Any number of philosophies will expand and illustrate the categories given here. The characteristics given here for African societies are drawn from extensive reading in innumerable written resources, several years' experience of observation, research and living in Africa.

Religious or Secular?

The European, or what is normally referred to as "Western," culture is basically naturalistic, or scientific in orientation. Such a world may be called "secular" in its approach to and its

understanding of the world. That is, Europeans look at the world objectively. Things are believed to be in a certain, unchanging order and with an independent existence to the world and the things in the world. The world is seen as rational and regular, and it is possible to understand what is going on in the world if we investigate.

The African worldview may be considered basically religious. All things are seen to be related or connected; everything is united in existence. You cannot be objective with that sort of a world – you are part of it. Everything that is done involves you as well as everything else. In the African world God is understood as Creator, though he is far away. In the African view of reality, everything is related, thus it is basically a "religious" worldview. All that exists is "spiritual," a part of one unified Whole.

The European normally views the world as divided into "sacred" and "secular." Thus the religious realm, for many, is a separate realm from the normal activities of basic everyday living. For "religious" Westerners, commitment to God often means commitment to what is beyond this life and this world.

This does not necessarily mean an "other-worldly" ethic. Many people with this "dual-level" view of reality have a strong commitment to social justice and personal righteousness. But it does mean that they would think that the religious reality is "higher" than the "ordinary" secular sphere of human living.

"Non-religious" Westerners might also have this dualistic view, but would discount the "spiritual" sphere of reality so important to the "religious" Westerner. They might feel that the scientific view of the world rules out the necessity or perhaps the possibility of a "spiritual" reality beyond our human limitation, or after death.

Both these views derive from the dualistic concept that there is a "sacred" realm and a separate "secular" realm. This is part of the foundation of the American doctrine (both religious and political) of separation of church and state.

This "dualistic" view of the world is diminishing in the face of an increasing atomisation of reality, in which there is less of a coherent "theory" about reality and the world we live in. The world is increasingly seen in an individual, personal viewpoint. The world is considered as simply a random collection of all the specific entities that might happen to exist at any particular time, rather than in any sort of coherent unity. This is, in fact, the result of an increasing secularism which pervades the West.

Spiritual Realities

This would seem a strange pattern of reality for most Africans. Most Africans would see no need to divide reality in that way. Though God might be far away in terms of his personal relationships with humans, it would not be a common belief that there are actually two levels of reality which could be separated as the Western view indicates.

It might appear superficially that the African traditional view of the departed ancestors would indicate a "sacred" and a "secular" reality for Africa. It seems to me that, on the contrary, it actually illustrates the unity of reality for the African.

The closeness of the living to the dead and their memory indicates that there is, in fact, one reality which is shared by both the living and the dead. God is not seen as living away in some other world.

It is accepted that God the Creator is a different type of being than his human creation, but not that the world of his existence is a different one. All of reality is one, humans share the world with spiritual realities.

Things and Events

The European view of reality centers in substance, defining reality in terms of objects and their descriptions. The world is seen as composed of entities which are known by their "attributes," their descriptions. This view goes back to the ancient pagan Greek view of reality developed by the philosopher Plato and his student Aristotle.

The African view of the world is relational. Events and relationships are seen as the main components of reality. People and social relationships and obligations are the overwhelming considerations.

Identity consists in who you are related to and how you are related to them. The relationship between individuals, and their roles in events, are more critical than the individuals and their separate identities.

Predictable or Dynamic?

European philosophy traditionally sees the world as mechanical, static, ordered and regular. Reality, for the Westerner, particularly the more traditional Westerner, follows a set order, with predictable patterns. Logic is linear, the same premises will always yield the same conclusions in Western thought. Mathematical regularity is seen as representing the order of the universe. Even abstract concepts are usually seen as having reality. (For example, "time" really exists. Or does it?)

Because of the assumption of mathematical regularity, the principle of cause and effect is very important to the Westerner. Because every effect has a definite cause, it is always important for the European to ask "Why?" For every given cause there is a given effect. This leads to a sense of control over the world and the environment.

The world in the African background is dynamic and active. Things are alive; things are moving; things are changing. They are not mechanical; they are not set. Even "non-animate" entities are

understood in dynamic terms and evaluated for their relational import. There does not seem to be the concern for controlling reality (in the traditional African background), but with adapting, adjusting, appeasing, relating to it.

We mentioned earlier the dis-ease and uncertainty that a newcomer usually feels at various times in his new environment. This will occur in any new setting, until the foreigner gradually gains awareness and experience in procedure, and in relationships and roles expected. In the African setting, this dis-ease and uncertainty may continue or recur, due to the dynamic flux of the situation.

The familiar set patterns the European is used to may not occur. The relational, event-oriented factors which give stability to the African society and worldview are different from those concepts and factors which give order and form to the European worldview.

All of reality is considered as a unity, with all parts of the creation intimately related in one total reality. With all things in the world being dynamically interrelated, it is difficult to envision the same result for the same set of circumstances every time they occur. This creates difficulties when trying to get something done.

Europeans often find this when they are dealing with a host government. One may appear to have fulfilled all the requirements, seen all the people, filled out all the necessary forms for some matter. Then, just when the process seems finished, one may be told of another requirement not in the original list, another office to give approval or provide a rubber stamp, another form to fill out in order to finally finalize the procedures.

Truth

Often the requirements stated for some government or banking transaction are not in fact the actual ones required. This creates havoc with the European expectation of congruence and consistency. The European expects to be told the requirements, and be able to know ahead of time when and how they will have been fulfilled.

The concept of "Truth" is involved here. When the stated requirements or factors differ from the actual ones, it becomes difficult to know what is "real" or "true." "Truth" in the African setting may not seem to involve correspondence of the stated words to the actual situation. This will create differences and conflicts between the European and the African in discussing ethical and theological matters. The correspondence of verbal expression and conceptual formulas with the real world situations and decisions will be different.

These differences make it difficult for an African and a European to look at the same "facts" and come up with the same conclusions. Assumptions about the world, about truth and reality, are not the same.

Facts or Relationships?

In the West, knowledge is important. Thus it is very important to clarify, to explain, to get the facts. Knowledge and fact are critical to the European world. Truth is defined in terms of information and facts. Truth is understood by the degree to which statements correspond to expected patterns of logic and known facts.

Western science believes that events can be predicted if enough information is known about the event and the component entities. An event can be repeated if there are no extraneous factors. A given set of factors will always yield a given result, in the European view of reality. The principle of cause and effect again.

In the African view, the focus is on the present, the event in which we are presently involved. "Now" is primary, not the future. Further, the world is uncontrollable, because there are many factors, many entities, which we cannot control. Everything in the world is involved in cosmic events. Event and relationship are the key factors in African orientation to life.

Verbs or Nouns?

These basic differences in perspective are apparent even in the languages. In the African languages, especially the Bantu languages such as Swahili, the verb system is the key to meaning.

It is difficult for Europeans to get into the African way of thinking about things, because the Africans "do it" with verbs. **Verbs** are the words that express *action, relationship, conditions*.

In Western languages, nouns and adjectives are most important. In this "format" we have a **noun**, representing a *thing*, then we *describe* it. The world is thought of as made up of entities. The totality of reality is the sum of these entities.

Some entities are living, and these living entities act *independently*, initiating actions and *relationships* with other entities, either living or non-living.

Because the world is made up of entities, things or objects, westerners believe that if we can describe it, then we can understand it. If we can understand it, then we can control it. Then we can manipulate the world, change our environment. Nouns and adjectives – that is, things and their descriptions – are primary to a European, a Westerner. But to an African, activity and relationships are primary.

In Europe you need to think in terms of entities, discounting the relational whole. In Africa you need to think in terms of the whole, then how all the parts fit into the event or relationship as a whole.

Reality of "Ideas"

In the English language, we refer to abstractions with the same casual reference as to "real" entities. It seems that this causes us to think that there really is some "thing" in abstract reality existing in itself. This is consistent with the ancient Greek philosophical concepts, developed by Plato, which have been so influential in Western thought over the centuries.

We tend to give "life" to the abstract nouns in English and other Western languages. When we say "love," somehow we get the idea that there is some "real" thing called "love" that exists on its own out there in the universe somewhere, rather than seeing it as **a function** of activity, feeling and commitment between people.

Then there is the word "justice." As we use this noun, we get the feeling that somewhere, somehow, "out there," there exists "Justice." We give it a capital letter if we mean the concept, or "idea" existing on its own. If we could just get hold of this "Justice," we feel, we could "have" it, we could "capture" it. This concept persists, rather than justice being seen as **a function** of how people treat one another and how judgements are actually made.

This was the problem as defined in Plato's thought, which Westerners have inherited. He said that these things really exist "up there" as spiritual realities called "Ideas," and all we have "down here" are reflections of these, not the full reality.

Plato's student Aristotle tried to deal with this problem by developing a system of intermediaries, levels between the ultimates and the reflections. The "realities" or "Ideas," then, filter down to us in our human sphere of existence.

This helps to explain why we do not have "real" or "ideal" love or justice. It has lost something in the "translation" through all the levels, you might say. (It is from this philosophical concept that we get the English word "ideal." This often carries the meaning that it would be a good goal, but we could not actually expect to reach it.)

In the African context, on the other hand, these concepts are understood as references to actual relationships. The "reality" of life is in the experiences of life. "Love" is a verbal reference to the actions and obligations which express a loving relationship. Love exists if people act lovingly. Justice exists if people act justly. Social obligations are more "real" than "ideas" or concepts, in the African setting.

Scientific or Spiritual?

In the West there is a **scientific** approach to the world – Westerners want to describe things. Priority is given to amassing information. The view is: The more we understand things the better we can control them, change our destiny, control our situation, improve our lifestyle. Europeans can deal with factors that are problems for them, because reality is mechanical and static, and subject to our manipulation. Europeans think that if they can just understand the cause, they can change the effect.

Europeans assume they can direct their own development, whereas traditionally **in Africa, the world seemed spiritual**. There were factors and forces one could not know, let alone control. There were entities one could not see that affected one's life. Humans were at the mercy of the forces of the universe.

There is the Swahili phrase, when something unexpected happens, "Shauri la Mungu." This means "It is God's business, I can't help it, I don't know what is going on. We just have to do the best we can."

Contrast of Worldview Philosophies – African and European

The following lists summarize the basic concepts of the African and the European Worldviews

AFRICAN	EUROPEAN
Religious – God the Creator (though far away). All things are related.	Secular – A set order in the universe, independent existence, naturalistic view.
Spirit-World – Many factors in life cannot be known, controlled or predicted. Humans are at the mercy of the forces of life. Resignation to conditions.	Scientific Approach – Describe, Control, Manipulate; Change your destiny. Aggressive. Frustration with failure.
Dynamic – An active world seen in relational terms.	Mechanical – Static, Cause-effect. Linear concepts. Productivity; Organization.
Relationship – Truth is in Experience and Relationship.	Knowledge – Facts are important. Truth is in correlation of statement to observable, testable phenomena.
Event – Meaning Centers in the Verb: Event Primary.	Substance – Noun-Adjective: Entity and Description primary.
Focus on Present – The world is uncontrollable. Immediacy. Presence of an individual takes precedence over plans.	Predictability – Reproducible phenomena, Probability. Planning a high value. Same result from same factors every time.
Group Identity – Obligations. Commitment to the Group.	Individualistic – Rights. Commitment to Principle.

Chart first published in the book *Dealing with Differences: Contrasting the African and European Worldviews*, 1991.

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Posted on Thoughts and Resources 10 February 2005

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Stative Aspect

You will find that in Swahili the stative aspect of the verb is used very much. The stative aspect (ending) carries the meaning of description of the condition, state or situation. It does not refer to the actor (active) or the one being acted upon (passive).

The stative aspect describes the state of the event having occurred. You would be describing that something just happened, that the state existed. For example: *Birika imevunjika* – The pitcher is broken (is in a broken condition). You do not know who did it. You do not care who did it. You are describing the state, the situation.

The first question for Europeans is, "Who broke it?" That is the last thing mentioned in the African context. The stative is used extensively in Swahili, indicating the African orientation to events. Why something happens is not as important as the fact that it has occurred.

The verb expresses the resulting effect of the event – resultant condition – rather than the cause. Assessment of blame is not a primary concern as in the European context. Things are just the way they are. What happens just happens.

A European becomes frustrated sometimes in the African setting, because the European tendency is to say, "We must not give up; we must keep going, keep working. We can control, we can manipulate, we can change if we understand." The African may be more resigned and accepting of situations. That is because Europeans and Africans see the world differently.

Aggressive

For this reason, Europeans, particularly Americans, appear aggressive to the Africans. They are always charging on, because they feel they can change things, and they set out to do it. Their manner, their way of relating, their way of planning – they all look strange to the African. They want to get down to business and get it out of the way. (You will recognize the common saying, "Business before pleasure.") Problems are met head-on, dealt with directly. This is often seen by Africans as arrogance, aggression or insensitivity.

That is also why African ways often seem strange to Europeans. The thing to remember, though, is that in Africa the European is the foreigner, the European is the stranger, an alien in the African context. This burden is not always easy to bear.

The Individual

Finally, in the African situation, group identity and relational obligations are paramount. In the West things are very individualistic. Westerners believe in rights, not obligations. (Though some would, of course, say that there are obligations that come with rights. Freedom does have its responsibilities.) Western concepts of justice are developed in terms of rights and protection of those rights.

Europeans define themselves individually, and in small family groups, whereas African society is organized in very close-knit, broad family groupings. The group is what is important, the group is the point of identity. The individual is defined by his or her relationship to the group. Obligations to the group as a whole are more important than individual "rights" or privileges.

Discipline

This concept of individualism versus community shows up in the patterns of discipline. Europeans often comment that Kenyans do not discipline their children, and yet Kenyan children often seem better-behaved than European children. The significant factors in discipline are different in the two contexts. Expectations are not the same and the areas of discipline are not the same. Africans discipline their children but not in the same or perhaps not for the same things as European parents.

The process of socialization in the two societies is quite different. The teaching and training of an American child, for instance, centers on moving the child to independence and decisive action. American children also tend to be active or unruly, as they are not used to sitting still. African children may sit quietly in a long church service, but the American children will squirm, talk, play, wiggle and in general make a spectacle of themselves.

The American approach to training is basically "inductive." It seems that, in principle, Americans assume that a child should know what to do and should do what is right. (Perhaps this stems from the naive American belief in the goodness of humanity.)

This means that Americans typically teach their children by correction after the child has broken a rule. (This is the inductive approach – correction, rather than directive teaching before the act.) European parents seem to place more emphasis on individual responsibility of children for their acts. It seems that often Americans treat their children as "little adults."

In European culture there is really no specific time when a child becomes an adult. In contrast,

most African societies have a specific ceremony or rite which marks the change in social status and responsibility. On the other hand, in the African society, because everyone is a part of the single social unit, responsibility is defined in terms of group relationships and obligations, not in terms of individual initiative as in the West.

There is an event called initiation in most African cultures, at which time there is a formal change in status and role for the child, and a change in expectation for the child. From this time in the initiates life, the former child would be expected to fulfill an adult level of responsibility. The specific expectations and role obligations will vary from one ethnic group to another, and particularly from the rural areas to the cities. In the African cities focus will be more individualistic and emphasize more individual responsibility.

Initiation

At initiation, there used to be specific training and initiation in the true sense. It was initiation into the adult level of participation in the society (tribe). There was a definite and immediate change from childishness to adulthood.

In most areas there was a period of a week to a month of teaching and training in the requirements of full membership as an adult member of the society. At that time the youths were told, "You must do this, you cannot do that, now you will be responsible for this and that, because before you were a child, but henceforth you are an adult."

Circumcision and other rites were very important, because once the individual had gone past that point the individual's identity was different. Times are changing and rites of passage change also. For some peoples, the old ceremonies have passed away. Perhaps there is a nuclear-family observance of male circumcision at puberty, performed in a clinic or hospital.

In some cultures the rites are kept to some degree in principal, but adapted. Commonly the passage will be formerly noted and guided, but alternative ceremonies or rites are developed or borrowed as a substitute.

For instance, among the Maasai tribes, an alternative route is now observed to the traditional age grades. So a high school and/or university graduate will be admitted to the warrior or junior elder class. The urban-western stages of education or business performance becomes an alternative to the age-grade progress of the traditional warrior-herder society.

In the European system there is no such rite anymore. There used to be "coming out" for the young ladies. (I never could understand why there was nothing comparable for the young men.) But this custom is rare, and for a long time had been associated only with "high society" in the USA. In Western countries, the primary rite of passage for both males and females is getting a driver's license.

Other stages toward adulthood in Western societies now are: reaching legal drinking age, reaching the age for legal sexual consent, etc. Marriage is still a fairly important general social rite of passage that conveys a new role and status in society. But the importance or even observance of the rite of marriage becomes perfunctory or optional.

This illustrates a difference in the concept of what makes a person responsible and gives them obligations in the society. The child is not seen as a full participant in the African context. Perhaps the traditional *socialization process* leads the African parents of today to feel they should not correct the children because they are children.

On the other hand the process of "humanization" for the American child starts at the time the child is born and continues until the time the person dies. This is consistent with the individual concept of humanity.

It is more a gradual process in American society. Position, responsibility and authority tend to be merit-based, not age or ceremony based. One is granted greater freedom, authority or status on an individual *ad hoc* basis varying by situation and individual.

(Keep in mind in this discussion that there will be wide variations between the sub-cultures of the broad African and Western cultures.)

Public Correction

Kenyans are often offended when Americans discipline their children in public. It is common for Kenyans to use verbal correction, but they do not often follow through with enforcement of their command. For Americans it seems to be important to have compliance with reprimand or command from a parent. It appears that American parents have stricter requirements that the child to respond to verbal correction.

The American parent, however, often feels that if the child does not respond to verbal correction, it is necessary to apply corporal punishment. The corporal punishment may be mild, yet it horrifies the Kenyans. Kenyans typically do not differentiate between "spank" and "beat." When

a European parent spans a child or spats a child's hand, you will hear them say "Do not beat him!" This difference may not be common to all European and African cultures as in this example.

Americans feel the correction must be immediate if the child disobeys, or fails to respond to verbal correction. In the American background, obedience is important, but there is also the matter of the parent's pride. Parents are embarrassed if the child does not respond to verbal correction. When their authority has been defied, they feel they must follow up with some enforcement.

It seems from my observations over the years in Central Kenya that perhaps Africans have a more realistic concept of what can be expected of a child. There does not seem to be so much concern to correct children in the same particulars as are important to Westerners. It appears that there is a less stringent concept than in the West about areas in which a child can be held responsible.

Perhaps this area of difference could be summarized by stating that the Africans are not as worried as Americans about children acting as children! Their expectations may be more realistic. It might also be helpful to observe here that on the whole Kenyan children also seem to be better behaved. Perhaps this is another indication of the problems brought about by the highly individualistic concepts in the West.

This is a difficult matter to adequately represent. The significant point here is that the expectations for children and the concept of what constitutes responsible behavior differ from one society to another. The foreigner must observe and learn then critically compare with prior preferences and concepts from the home culture.

Refer to the chart earlier in this chapter for a summary of the differences in European and African worldviews.

Chapter Four

CONFLICTS

These differences in philosophy, in assumptions about the world, cause conflicts in our activities. Many Europeans are working as teachers or consultants in African countries. Sometimes, these European consultants cannot understand why their African constituents cannot understand their proposals. It is obvious to the European that there are many benefits from the suggestions being put forth.

The benefits are obvious, however, only in the framework of the philosophy the European is drawing upon – usually unconsciously. If both parties do not share that philosophy, communication is difficult to attain, commitment is difficult to obtain.

An Analogy

Even in the West there are some variations of worldview that might help to deal with the problems I am talking about. A good example is the difference in the view of the world portrayed by the science of Astronomy, with its broad cosmic scheme of reality, and the science of Particle Physics, with its knowledge of the world at the minutest level, within the nucleus of a single atom.

At the sub-atomic level, existence seems to be in chaos. Particles in the nucleus change into other particles, energy seems to be an actual entity, particles disappear and energy is left. It appears that there is no order whatsoever.

Everything seems alive and active all the time. Perhaps this is the way the world appears in the African traditional view of the world. Things are alive, and things are active, changing. The world is dynamic, not inert. There are many forces you cannot understand in this experience of reality.

Europeans view the world more like Astronomical Physics, which says that there are certain patterns that are always the same. The external world is organized on the basis of regular mechanical operations and relationships. The sun is always going to follow the same pattern. The moons of the different planets and the planets themselves are always going to be in

approximately the same position. There are cycles of change, but they are regular, bounded, recurring and predictable. These two views of the world in the scientific community may serve as a parallel to the differences between European and African philosophy.

Examples

This shows up in practical situations, like in driving in Kenya. On the way to a meeting in Nairobi, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) from my house in Tigoni, several events occurred which seemed to me to illustrate this conflict.

For one, I was travelling along the main highway, with no car at all in view behind me. Then suddenly a car just slowly entered the road directly in front of me, requiring me to adjust my momentum to avoid crashing into the intruding vehicle. The car entered nonchalantly as though the road were clear! The driver made no effort to quickly build up speed to get out of the way of the fast-moving vehicle already in the right-of-way. (There's that western word "right.") The driver felt no compulsion to avoid obstructing safe progress of the traffic on the roadway.

Now why could he not have waited until I got by? Well, he could not help my being on the road! He just needed to get out into the road. Why should he worry about that? How could he be responsible for where I was? But it was very frustrating, because I was thinking, "Look, there is nobody behind me. Just wait a couple of seconds, and I will be by."

You see cars left on the road, on the main highway. There is a shoulder (called a "verge" in Kenya), but no one has moved the car onto the verge to allow other cars to pass by. Shauri la Mungu!

The problem is, Europeans believe that you can manipulate, you can direct and you can plan what will happen. That is because we believe that there is one set result from the same set of circumstances every time. This entails personal responsibility for what happens when a person interacts with the regularities of the universe.

You cannot expect that in the traditional African worldview, because everything is "alive." Everything is changing. You cannot know what is going to result from any particular action. This has implications for personal responsibility and decision-making. Thus there will be clashes in that area.

Planning?

What about careful planning, a fetish for Americans? Look at everything and anticipate all the details of all the important meetings for the whole year. Well, why plan? You don't know what might happen at the last minute anyway.

As an example, consider a meeting of the American Women's Association in Nairobi, where I appeared to give a presentation of this topic for that group. I happened to have attended the AWA meeting the previous month with my wife, Edith.

On that occasion, the speaker was a professor from the University of Nairobi, the national university of Kenya. He was a Kenyan (Kikuyu) PhD in medicine doing research on traditional healing methods in Kenya. He was to give a slide presentation and a lecture presentation.

The professor arrived about 30 minutes late. The crowd waited, with the program chairperson about to have a stroke. The professor was accompanied by a traditional healer and two student assistants who were to set up his slide projector.

Well, it took about 15 minutes to locate electrical outlets that would work, then test the projector on the wall, as there was no screen. The professor finally got started, and read a treatise on traditional medicine. This reading went on for about 45 minutes.

Finally as he was apparently stepping down from the stage, someone suggested that he show some slides. He agreed to this, then proceeded. Several were upside down or sideways, but we finally got through the slides.

He then sat down, *never having introduced the Kikuyu healer (herbalist)* that he brought with him! Those who were interested remained afterwards to talk with the herbalist and the professor. By then it was after 12:00 noon, while the whole presentation was to have begun at 10:15 or 10:30 and ended at 11:30.

Expectations

Perhaps even for a highly educated medical doctor, distinguished in his field, there was no felt need to plan in detail. Perhaps he was still operating from a different set of expectations, within the traditional African patterns. Perhaps he subconsciously "knew" that one cannot anticipate what might be needed or what might happen anyway!

The program chairman for the American group was humiliated and about to collapse in consternation. Yet what was wrong? She was reacting from an American set of expectations. Perhaps her stress level would not have risen so high if she had not imposed her expectations on the local person who was her guest. It was an African setting! Perhaps the doctor was operating from a different set of assumptions.

Finally, in qualification, the possibility must also be considered that the problem in this case is simply a personal characteristic. There are individuals in every society that fail to meet that society's expectations for politeness, planning, promptness, consideration, etc.

The important thing is that standards for such values, and even the values themselves, differ from one society to another. For example, every society has standards of responsibility, but what is considered responsible behaviour differs widely. Various examples could be gathered to illustrate such contrasts.

Chapter Five

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Since Africans think with a different thought-system on the basis of different assumptions, conclusions they may draw from a certain set of premises may be different from those you might come to from your alien background.

A different logic system, which has a different order of priorities and gives significance to different factors, will necessarily come to different conclusions. Be slow to judge or correct. There may be factors you are not aware of.

Always keep the attitude of a learner. Try to develop a feel for the significant factors from an African point of view, and try to work sympathetically in that framework, even though it may be a strain for you. You will be rewarded by a loyal friendship and a sense of appreciation by the local people.

Greetings

Always remember the value of greetings. Greeting is much more important for Africans than for Europeans. Always take time to greet even those with whom you will have only casual contact. It is important that you recognize the existence of individuals.

Be ready always to extend your hand in greeting. Hand shaking is a very important ritual in Africa. Observe the particular forms of handshaking, palm touching, bowing and so forth, in each particular ethnic or geographical setting. A triple-shake is common in much of Eastern and Southern Africa.

In some parts of Africa, handshaking may be replaced by other hand signals. For instance, the Shona greeting in Zimbabwe is clapping both hands together. Note the manner of clapping, which differs for women and for men.

Observe also the appropriate body and head motions which accompany handshaking and greeting. This will vary from one area to the other. Note particularly the common practice of holding the right wrist, elbow or forearm with the left hand while shaking with the right. (Contrast this with the over-friendly American habit of grabbing the other person's arm with the

left hand! Be sure before you try this!)

Informal Social Time

Social communion is very important. Spend time in informal settings with Africans. Do not allow all your time with African people to be only work time. You should eat and drink with people, in homes, kiosks, during tea time at work, anywhere.

Africans are very gracious and will offer you something to eat or drink anytime you come to their house or even a place of work. **DO NOT REFUSE**. It is required of them to bring food or drink; it is required of you to partake.

This is not a social amenity – it is the core of interpersonal relationship and recognition. Be an insider at this critical juncture.

The Local Language

Learn what you can of the language. Use it at every opportunity, mistakes and all. Make it a social event when you use the language – make mistakes, laugh with them about it, and get help. This puts you on the "inside track." This effort and the friendships and camaraderie developed will distinguish you from the "foreigners" in attitude.

The language will impart to you concepts, associations and feelings otherwise unavailable to you. Going through social encounters, even minimally, will give you insider perspectives you will otherwise miss. These insights will be gained in personal relationships and "real-life" situations. Thus the language is the door to the world of the people, as indicated earlier.

Communication Style

It is important for teachers and preachers to learn the communication style of the host culture. The first few years in the new culture, much careful observation must be done.

The teacher must learn how teaching is carried out in the host culture. You may find that all the courses you so laboriously slaved through in University are totally irrelevant in your new country.

The preacher may find his careful three-point approach with abstract points illustrated by nice little stories make no impact whatsoever in the new situation. The careful homiletic preparations may be completely foreign in form and style to the new culture's members, and you find you are therefore communicating little if anything.

Why not spend some time observing some classes in local churches or schools, just to learn how to teach in the new setting? See how it is actually done, rather than assuming that the way you do it is better. Why not attend lots of worship services in local Christian churches to actually learn how local preachers preach? If the national preachers preach differently than you do, perhaps that is because there is a different style of communication for the local culture.

Being an outsider, it behooves you to learn how things are done, then try to develop the required skills and patterns. Remember that communication styles and preferences are culturally determined.

Westerners tend to think their role is to contribute the information they have. Westerners are very information-oriented. Africans, and most "Third-World" peoples are more relationship-oriented and event-oriented.

Your information may not be very valuable in Africa. Your practical contributions may be more valuable. Who you are, in relationships, to the people, is of utmost importance. Thus it is hard to carry out the Western "information-broker" role effectively, in light of local expectations. You will need to find an appropriate role allowed by the local culture. The culture determines the available or acceptable roles.

Stories

Communicate by telling stories, giving illustrations and examples, not by giving information. The Western linear cognitive approach of conveying information is a low-level mode of communication. Activities and demonstration are important in Africa. Remember, too, that you can always tell stories, even in early stages of language learning. This will enable you to communicate concepts through illustrations, with the "illustrations" actually being the primary form of communication, rather than simply a support to some rational abstract point.

Stories convey personality traits, the characters become reference examples. Read collections of African stories, in the local language if at all possible. But get a few in English to get the feeling of the storytelling pattern.

In dealing with problems or conveying information, effective formats are riddles or veiled references to a similar situation with animal characters. The Brer Rabbit stories of the American Black people are drawn directly from the African figure of the clever hare.

The hare is the hero of African mythology, admired for his cleverness. Yet he gets himself in trouble by his cleverness as well. The role of the hare in African tales is like the fox in European mythology, "clever as a fox."

Consider the African proverb, "When two elephants fight, the grass gets hurt," meaning that it is the innocent bystander, the "little guy," who pays, who suffers, when powerful people fight.

How to Supervise

When instructing or correcting an employee or student, do not use a "directive" or administrative tone. Try to instruct or direct by an approach of suggestion and example. Try to develop an informal style of authority, a camaraderie, rather than a formal, somber authority reminiscent of colonialism. That will not succeed.

Most of all, **DO NOT POINT OR WAG YOUR FINGER!!** This is unnecessarily rude in East Africa, even to menial workers.

Use a question-answer approach to clarify your student's or employee's understanding of what you mean or want. Be patient if your instructions are not carried out. Never berate the person.

Rather you should carefully retrace your steps diagnostically in order to find the gaps in what you thought you said and what was actually understood. The different assumptions will have an overwhelming effect in determining how much or what the other person gets out of what you are propounding.

The longer you are in the culture, the clearer the total picture will become and the more able you will be to understand and evaluate what you are observing. You will be able to gradually see the differences from a deeper level of meaning and purpose. Then you can make more valid comparisons of your cultural background with the African cultural background.

Handling Conflict

Direct confrontation is never appropriate as a way of settling problems or pointing out deficiencies of leadership or performance in the African context. Get help from an African friend to resolve personal or work differences.

The American way of dealing with conflict (or creating it as a way of solving problems!) is just that, and only that – the American way, not appropriate in Africa! (You might refer to Jesus' teachings for suggestions of how to deal with problems, as an alternative to the ordinary American way.)

Chapter Six

LEARNING TO DEAL WITH DIFFERENCES

This guide is adapted from a list prepared by Daystar University College (formerly Daystar Communications) in Nairobi, Kenya.

1. View yourself as a brother/sister rather than a parent or "father-figure" (paternalism). Develop the mental attitude of preferring others to yourself. Try to love people because of yourself and not because of them.
2. Try to see the differences as alternative ways of adequately being human, rather than comparing them to American or European ways. Remember that the African way of doing things may be best for the African situation. **YOU ARE THE FOREIGNER.**
3. Learn to be a good listener and listen well. Follow their agenda, work with their needs as they see them.
4. Be interested in what they feel is important in their culture. Try to see their culture from their point of view, from within the cultural context, not judging from foreign (European) values. Do not feel you must judge their views and practices.
5. Develop the mental attitude of being "all things to all men."
6. Make a friend in that culture who will be willing to serve as your cultural guide (informant).
7. Read "inside" material (written for and by members of that culture). Be familiar with what is happening in the community.
8. Gain an appreciation for their art and music.
9. Be sensitive to the proper clothing to wear. Balance it – fit in but remember you are a foreigner. (Going native can sometimes be detrimental, seen as insincerity.)

10. Use their system of space – how close should you stand to Africans in various social situations?

11. Use their system of time – how things are scheduled, how early (or late) to arrive, how long to wait for someone for an appointment.

12. Use their system of "kinesics" – appropriate gestures, movements and positions, use of the arms, face, etc. Learn what is communicated by various gestures and motions. **DO NOT ASSUME THAT YOUR "NATURAL" GESTURES FOR EMPHASIS OR EXPRESSION ARE UNIVERSAL** – you learned them from your cultural setting. You can be unintentionally vulgar or offensive, or convey the wrong, or a contradictory, meaning.

13. Learn and use the customs, with their local implications.

14. Understand the African way(s) of shaking hands – when, how, how many times, with whom, who first.

15. Become involved in "inside" activities – cultural activities, sports, national churches, community concerns, weddings, feasts and festivals. Attend local dances and celebrations where possible.

16. Learn the language of the people with whom you will be working – as much as you can for the time you will be in Africa. **REMEMBER THAT LANGUAGE IS THE "DOOR" TO THE CULTURE.** Learn the idioms and "in" expressions. Be sensitive to slang. Try to be aware of vocabulary or phrases appropriate to your social role.

17. Understand and use proper voice tones and other sounds. Exclamations and intonation for expressing various emotions are culturally determined and may not be the same as in your native culture. American speech (even in English) often sounds harsh to the African. British intonation is usually even more irritating to the Africans.

18. Watch insiders continually to gain more social and linguistic "cues" for your communication and relationships.

19. Understand and appropriately work with the local "power structure" and through local channels. **DO NOT CUT OFF COMMUNICATION BY IMPOSING YOUR OWN STRUCTURE AND PROCEDURE ON THE LOCAL SITUATION.**

20. Visit in national homes and invite nationals into your home. Plan specific time to just "hang around" in local settings. Take time to "be there."

21. Be aware that there will be differences in priorities and perceptions. Help in the way people want to be helped.

22. Be aware that their perceptions of you will be different from your own perception of yourself. Their role for you may be different from the one you might want. Adapt. IT IS THEIR WORLD – YOU ARE THE FOREIGNER.

CONCLUSION — Try to take the roll of a LEARNER.

Use frustrating or humiliating experiences as opportunities

to BETTER UNDERSTAND the AFRICAN HUMAN BEING,

to APPRECIATE THE DIFFERENCES

and to learn

to DEAL WITH THE DIFFERENCES.

First published in the book *Dealing with Differences: Contrasting the African and European Worldviews*, 1991.

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Posted on [Thoughts and Resources](#) 10 February 2005

This version 30 November 2007