

The African worldview

Only an extremely brave or gifted person would attempt to describe the African worldview on a couple of A4s! As I am neither of these two things, I want to say right at the beginning that I have set myself a very limited goal. The purpose of this article is to paint a picture of Africa in silhouette.

It seems to me that a silhouette of Africa in black and white can actually be quite helpful considering one is attempting to portray about 800 million people occupying 20.3% of the earth's land mass. Put another way you can almost fit the entire continent of Europe and all North America inside Africa. There are 1,995 languages in use in Africa; compare that with 949 for America and 209 for Europe. Overlay this complex continent with colonial history and you finish up with an even more multifaceted worldview.

I am going to suggest that current African worldview is shaped by two main influences: the centrality of community and rural/urban lifestyle. I will take each in turn.

Centrality of community

The African view of the world is dominated by a perception of reality that can be described as 'I am because we are.' (I am significant because my society gives me significance.) In contrast, the mindset of most westerners is 'I am because I am.' (I am significant in my own right.)

Let's look at the idea that community is central to life in a person with an African mindset. Personal beliefs are significant only to the extent that they reflect the general societal values. This does not mean dissent is frowned upon, necessarily. In fact the African students you meet in the West do come from multicultural societies in which tolerance and diversity are common ideas. However we still tend to view these concepts as well as democracy, religion, society or even economics, through spectacles that always bring community into the picture. Consider our view of religion as an illustration.

Community and religion

Individuals within African societies have always struggled with ideas about the nature of God, man and the world just as people in other communities have done over the centuries. The main difference however, is that the African worldview requires a god, God or gods in order for community to remain central to life. Without Deity or deities, what we are left with is a world governed by chance and by caprice. Such a world cannot, over the long term, retain community at the centre of life. Thus people who hold community as central to all of life need God in the grand scheme of things. God is the great architect; the one who owns all creation. He *directs* all things.

This key difference means that Africans tend not to question the existence of God. This, as we have seen is not out of fear of doing so. We don't question His existence because of two main reasons. Firstly, to call into question the existence of God leads to questioning the very foundation of community. (If there is no God there is no one to order life and therefore there is no meaning in community.) Secondly, questioning God's existence leads to undermining my own significance. The logic flows like this: If there is no God, there is no meaning in social relationships because there is no 'God' who orders them. Therefore my own relationships with community are of no inherent worth and so I don't have significance.

As I have already said, human relationships are the organising principle in African societies. They are the DNA of community. What we dread is to live in a society in which time, money or image push themselves to the centre displacing human relationships as the centre of life as we know it. For us that scenario spells darkness and disaster.

I have met many well-meaning people who fail to appreciate this idea in 'reaching out' to Africans. They

seem to have taken John Mbiti's famous statement 'Africans are notoriously religious' to mean you can assume most African believe in God a priori; that is, as a matter of course. This is only half true. We believe in God and in human relationships in equal measure and at the same time. It won't do to preach one without the other; both are the flip sides of the same coin.

Case study

Kapolyo is student from Zaire studying in the Midlands. He goes to a White Majority Church and is valued as a worship leader and an evangelist. Jim, the youth worker, learnt Kapolyo and a mate from Kenya were looking for accommodation and he offered them rooms in his house at the going rate. Both Africans moved in and all was well for a week. One day Jim's mother came visiting in the absence of the Africans and learnt that Jim had two paying guests in the house.

When the Africans returned, after Jim's mother had left, Jim mentioned that his mum had asked him if the situation in the house was entirely satisfactory given that both students were new to each other: she wondered if this might be an awkward situation for the Africans. The two friends did not comment but later that evening they fell talking about Jim's comment. 'Could it be' they queried, 'Jim only values us for the services we give to the church and has not in fact accepted us as equal members of the church community? Why else would his mother's comment be passed on to us?' They reasoned, 'He must see us a burden.'

The following morning at breakfast, Jim raised his mum's concerns and explained that on second thoughts he wondered if he had not been rash in taking the two friends in. He said he was not going to tip them into the street but wanted their opinion of the domestic arrangement. This conversation served to confirm to the two Africans that they had to move out. 'If we stay,' they thought, 'and we act in any way that tests Jim's patience, we will continually be in his way. We have to go.'

The upshot of it is that they decided they had to move out immediately. That morning they started looking for alternative lodgings and they moved out within the week much to Jim's surprise.

Task

1. Which historical and cultural influences led the two friends to move out so quickly?
2. Suggest how the two parties might have handled this situation differently.

The Africans felt that Jim's house was their home. As Christians with the same Heavenly Father, they are brothers/family. In this context, it was not important to them that they were new to each other. There are also effects of the years of colonial rule in relationships between Africans and Westerners, leading to their sensitivity and misunderstanding about Jim's attitude towards them.

Summary

- Do assume (generally speaking) that African take the existence of God as a matter course.
- Do not always assume that when Africans talk about God they are talking about the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- Do assume Africans will not take your religion seriously if your attitude towards life (religion, politics, society or even economics) do not bring community into the picture.

First impressions

Because the principle of the centrality of relationships is so central to African thinking our initial meetings with new people tends to be on the basis of love rather than on the basis of power.

People who meet others on the basis of power relationships show the following tendencies:

- They believe first impressions are very important. They may even mentally rehearse a future encounter. They deliberately seek to create a good first impression.
- They believe the best form of spontaneity is the rehearsed type. They will usually have a number of 'sales pitches' for different encounters. They label you as a good conversationalist or a bad one; usually on the basis of how witty you are.
- They may have an emissary go ahead of them to gather information. They may look up the information on the web or use other means to obtain *information* – the very thing power is.
- They assume the characteristics above are 'normal' and part of 'making a good impression'.

Africans on the other hand tend to meet people on the basis of love:

- We assume the other party will look beyond first impressions. This is easy for people with an African mindset to do because we assume that all human encounters diminish or enhance both parties. As people prefer eminence over insignificance, Africans always hope both parties want mutual enrichment from the meeting.
- We don't tend to divide people into good and bad conversationalists. The only things Africans demand in conversation is the ability to listen. Wit and ability to make people laugh come a long way down the list. Indeed one who is respected in society will rarely seek to make people laugh.

We believe social intelligence, not information, is the DNA of power. Observe a group of Africans chatting after a meeting, for example. Notice how the people trying to join the group are brought in. This is done by body language that says 'join in' and by words. This is done even if the speaker's point is lost for a moment. It will be found again when the new person has been welcomed in to the group. Elders are respected because they have a wealth of both wisdom and human relationships. Their large families are evidence of their success at doing the most important thing in life – nurturing human relationships. As the individual's significance is determined by human relationships, real wealth lies in the number and the quality of human relationships one enjoys

Contrast that with Westerners in similar circumstances. It is unusual to keep acknowledging people who are hovering at the edges of the conversation.

Case Study

'Don't believe everything you hear from your African friends. They are masters at flattery,' Dan said. 'When I first went to Africa I used to believe all the things people told me about how much they valued the work I was doing at the mission centre. Later I discovered they did not really mean it. I later learnt they said I was really in Africa for the sun and the wildlife.'

'Can you remember what your first encounter with the community was?' I asked hoping to offer some explanation.' 'Well,' Dan started, 'It was an unforgettable experience. It felt like the whole village had come out to welcome me. There were speeches, feasting and dancing.'

'How did you respond to the welcome? It must have felt a little over the top.' I suggested. 'Well, as I did not speak the language I simply said how pleased I was to be there through the interpreter.' 'Did you open your home to them?' I enquired. 'No, I did not.' Dan continued. 'It wasn't the done thing in those days.'

'It seems to me you fell for 'African flattery.' The big welcome was really a test to see whether you were meeting them as an equal or not. The big welcome and praise songs were a test to see if you enjoyed being treated like the expatriates they saw running around in new four wheel drive vehicles or like an ordinary man. You responded like an expatriate would and so that is how they saw you after that.

Task

1. What 'tests' do you subject newcomers to in your culture?
2. Other than opening his home to the community, what else could Dan have done to become an accepted member of the community?

Dan's initial mistake was to appear to take the welcome in his stride. An African welcome may seem spontaneous and even extravagant but it must never be taken for granted. Acknowledge the work and time that has gone into it. It is normal for the welcoming party to feign embarrassment at your profuse thanks but nothing less than full acknowledgement of the effort made is acceptable. In addition to this, it is expected that one shows delight at and eats the food offered. It is rude for example to sample only a tiny amount of the food on the plate before pleading a full stomach. Just as you shouldn't be surprised that they serve alcohol in English pubs, you shouldn't be surprised that you will generally be served food in African homes. (Sending word in time to say you would not be staying for food is acceptable.) To become an accepted member of the community, he could have found an age mate in the community, made friendship and asked him to guide him in the etiquette of the African open house tradition. He should not expect his African friend to do all the inviting. He should reciprocate by opening his house too.

Summary

- Listen, listen, listen and reflect back what you have heard.
- Don't mistake extreme politeness at face value. It could be a test.
- Do encourage the student to disagree with you. One way to tell you have made a friend out of an African student is if they feel free to disagree with your opinion.

Rural/Urban Africa

The other major influence in African worldview is the rural/urban divide. Africa can be divided into rural and urban Africa. Rural Africa is quite different from urban Africa that on the whole shares many of the characteristics of urban living anywhere in the world.

Rural Africa

There is no telling whether the African students you meet in the West have come from rural or urban Africa; that is until you ask them. However, irrespective of their origin, their worldview will be shaped by the ideas I have discussed above. You now need to overlay worldview with the dominant influences of rural Africa. There are two major maxims: If you have to choose between 'people' and 'time keeping' always choose 'people'. Secondly, there is a strong sense that 'right is right and wrong is wrong'.

Time and people

It has been said in a pejorative manner, usually, that Africans are notoriously poor at keeping time. The implication is clear; ideally we should all keep time because it is a good thing to do so. Rural Africans don't think so. They may not use the words I am going to use but the logic is entirely that of rural Africa. Some things are sacred; they are not for sale and time is an example. The clock is a piece of equipment used by the West to carve up this commodity (which doesn't belong to them) into seconds, minutes and hours. They

then create a world in which you have to buy a chunk of time from the medicine man, from the hairdresser and even from your fellow man. You can't, any longer, invite your friends to help you build your house or prepare your land for planting because no one has time any more! Rural Africa thinks it is not proper to do this just as it is improper to carve up mountains and rivers into lots for auction. Rural Africa does not like the practice of organising events in divisions of time. To do so is seen as an attempt to remove human relationships from the centre of life and to replace them with an artificial and ultimately inferior parallel world. It is for this reason there is a saying in Africa: 'they (the West) have watches and we have time'.

Right and wrong

The African worldview is not one of relatives, but of an objective view of right and wrong. There is a firm belief in good and bad, truth and lies. This social trait makes for receptive ground to talk about sin, righteousness and judgement (John 16: 8-11). The categories of sin, righteousness and judgement are the building blocks of salvation. At the present time African societies on the whole accept these categories and this makes evangelism among Africans a lot easier.

An outworking of the idea of right and wrong is that male and female roles are distinct. There is a clear demarcation of roles in the traditional family and community arrangement.

Urban Africa

Urban Africa tends to share in the blessings and the curses of modern urban living.

Time and people

Urban Africa has bought into the modern experiment of turning time into a commodity. It is not unusual for neighbours to have very little to do with one another, although the extent of isolation and individualism we see in the West is still largely unknown. People may fail to keep time but I have not met an African urban community that accepts this failure. People may joke about it – they call it African time, BMT (Black Man's Time) and many others but they aren't particularly proud of it. It is done to take the sting out of what is increasingly a cultural faux pas.

Conclusion

Relativism is alive and well in African cities – there is not the same concept of an objective right and wrong as in rural areas. This is a product of globalisation and there is little one can do to stem the tide. This means it is not at all unlikely that the African student you meet in the West might be all these things; believes in God but has no personal faith, seeks community, keeps time and is the ultimate relativist.

Africa is all these things and they all shape the African worldview.

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