“Understanding and Reaching Africans”
By
Emmanuel Ambané Jr.

What are some commonalities and differences among different African countries?

Differences & Similarities
While the single word AFRICA represents a whole continent, many might be tempted to think of Africa as a monolithic culture, while in fact, Africa is made up of 54 countries, thousands of languages, a myriad of people groups and cultures. In spite of these differences, we always share the last name AFRICA because we are one family.

Similarities

A- Physical traits
One of the similarities that Africans share ~~in common~~ is their physical traits. Even though Africans are coming from different parts of the continent, they still have the ability to identify themselves by their physical traits and values. 9 times out of 10, an African can usually identify a fellow African from any corner of the continent.

B-**Names**
In addition to physical traits, Africans can also identify each other by our names. For example, since many African cultures don’t have the suffixes (like Sr, Jr, the I, the II, and the III) African names often repeat or triple their last names as suffixes. For example, with my Father’s name being Emmanuel Ambane, my name is Emmanuel Ambane Ambane, and if I have a son his name will be Emmanuel Ambane Ambane Ambane, and my grandson will be Emmanuel Ambane Ambane Ambane Ambane and so on. Names can also indicate a specific tribe or religion.

C- **Chain migration**
Another similarity that Africans have in common is the phenomenon of chain migration which consists of setting a pattern for pursuing similar careers for a specific people group. For example, it is very common to find refugees working in meat packing plants, or Africans from specific countries working as medical doctors, computer engineers, tailors or taxi drivers in large cities like New York.

Differences
A- Religion
One of the main differences that exists among Africans is the area of faith. In fact, Northern Africa is heavily influenced by Islam, while countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are often influenced by Christianity and traditional Worship. As a result of the religious differences, it’s often common to see North Africans associating more with Muslims from the Middle East and around

the world, whereas the Sub-Saharan Africans usually form their friendship among themselves and the Christian world.

B-Personality
Another important difference among Africans is the personality dynamic. It is very common to notice that North and East Africans usually have quiet and reserved personalities, whereas West and Southern Africans have more vibrant and dynamic personalities. In fact, the record of migration shows us that West Africans go overseas more than the North and East Africans, and it is not uncommon to see West Africans impacting group dynamics by speaking the loudest and talking the most.

C-Food
While the landscape of cultural values such as honor, respect for elders, large families are common among Africans, dishes around the continent come with a variety of cuisines. This is why it is common to have different African restaurants that cater to specific communities. For example, In Washington DC, it's common to have a lot of restaurants for Ethiopians and Eritreans where East Africans can find their food, language, and fellowship.

This combination of similarities and differences has always been a gift to many Africans who are able to connect and navigate through cross cultural boundaries with ease.

Africans come from diverse and religious nations. The three main religions of Africa are: Islam, Christianity, and African traditional religions. What beliefs make up the traditional religions?

Religion

African Traditional Religiosity

As the Kenyan theologian and philosopher John Mbitti reminds us that "wherever there is an African there is religion," it is rare to encounter an African who would not identify as Christian, Muslim, or a Traditional Worshiper.

While many people in the West (North America & Europe) are familiar with Christianity and Islam, traditional worship consists of spiritual activities such as prayer, thanksgiving, and making sacrifices. For many Africans who perceive Christianity and Islam as imported religions, they have kept their worship to the God, who is the creator of the world and who lives among the people.

In his article *philosophy and African religion* John Mbiti argues that the traditional religion has enhanced the expansion of Christianity in Africa because Africans have easily embraced Jesus, the Son, because they were already familiar with God, the creator of the universe, in their own

languages as Mungu, Mulungu, Katonda, Ngai, Olodumare, Asis, Ruwa, Ruhanga, Jok, Modimo, Unkulunkulu and thousands more.

Africans & Islam

As it pertains to relationships between Christians and Muslims, they often live in harmony. One of the best ways to reach out to African Muslims is by letting them see Christ in our lives. To brew this theology in African pots, when someone has an ugly house, you do not tell that person to destroy his or her house because it is ugly. Instead, you build a nice house next to that person's house and invite that person to feel at home in your house.

Similarly, when Christians adopt a lifestyle of care, generosity, and hospitality, Muslims get attracted to the Christian faith. In our gospel outreach to Muslims, we need to remember that the faith journey towards Jesus is never a microwave process that happens overnight, but more like a crockpot process of friendship and discovery of the truths of the gospel.

Unlike in the US, where the religious debates between Muslims and Christians are usually based on words, actions are usually the translation for faith among African Muslims. After observing the prayer and service oriented life of his daughter during his visit in the US, a Muslim father from Burkina Faso told his daughter that, if he ever sees God after his death he will hug Him for showing the right way to his daughter. After hearing that Jesus was also available to him, the Muslim father embraced Christ. This is just one of the thousand stories of Christians with a Muslim Background who have come to faith because they saw Christ living among them. Sometimes building a house speaks louder than talking about materials and details necessary to build a house.

How do you build a relationship with an African Christian vs an African Muslim?

Cross-Cultural Friendship

As wonderful as cross-cultural friendship can be, it never comes without the cost of overcoming barriers and learning opportunities.

A- Barriers

1- Colonization

Due to the fact that African countries, with the exception of Ethiopia, have been colonized by Europeans and Arabs, many Africans are often on their guard and suspicious when Westerners reach out to them even though the Westerners might come with good intentions. As an African proverb teaches us that if "You see the same tree twice in the forest, you are lost," Africans are often suspicious of the hypocrisy that religion came with exploitation. It's commonly said in Africa that "When the missionaries told us to close our eyes to pray, by the time we open our eyes our land was gone and we had chains on our hands."

With the recent uprise of social injustice in North America, many Africans of darker skins have left many white evangelical churches that didn't want to address the problem of racism in the US. While many people in white churches said that they were sad to see their African friends leave their churches, the leaders of those churches were not sad enough to address the issues of racism that their African congregants have experienced. This hypocrisy of living half of the Gospel can only bring some flash back of colonization among Africans. To illustrate this hypocrisy in the comments of a Math professor from West Africa he said: "If I had not been a Christian in Africa, I would have not become a Christian here."

2- Paternalism

Another factor that can sometimes make it difficult for Africans is a paternalistic mindset. Because many Africans countries have been colonized by French, Germans, Portuguese, and British, it is sometimes difficult for Africans to trust Westerners that they might perceive as exploiters. The fact that Westerners sometimes take the initiative to do things in Western fashion is often perceived as an updated version of colonization. For example, when it comes to reaching an African community, Africans are never part of the conversation on how to best reach and address the needs of their community. For many Africans, African Homegrown ministries would have been their preferred recipe. In the words of John Mbiti: "The days are over when we will be carbon copies of European Christians," he told The New York Times. "Europe and America westernized Christianity. The Orthodox Easternized it. Now it's our turn to Africanize it."

3- Stereotypes

Another barrier that we can notice among African immigrants is often the baggage of negative stereotypes. Africans often perceive how the stereotypes of poverty, civil wars, disease, and cultural values can be used to demean and ridicule them. It's often said that "it's better to walk alone than with bad company." During a student orientation on a midwestern campus an African Dean of the University shared his frustration about his colleague who had asked him if he grew up with lions and other animals as pets.

Instead of using negative stereotypes to ridicule African immigrants, one can benefit greatly from the rich history, art, values of African cultures because Africans are MORE THAN STEREOTYPES.

4- Last on the totem pole

Lastly when it comes to identity, African students especially of darker skin tones, can often feel overlooked when compared to their international friends from other cultures. On many campuses, African students often feel overlooked in friendship and leadership opportunities. Though this is never voiced by church volunteers, we rarely see volunteers being fond of African students and their cultures in international student ministry (ISM). When I asked an international student from Ivory Coast about the small presence of Africans in international

student ministry (ISM), he told me that ISM never feels like it for us, but for other cultures who had more students and whose cultures appear to be more exotic.

Similarly, when I started attending church in the US as a non-believer, I noticed that many American friends had a special interest and care for Chinese and Indian students. Feeling overlooked and left out, I started telling people that I was from China because I wanted to feel cared for like other students. Until today I decided to be an ABC: African Born Chinese, so that love will not bypass me.

5-Hospitality

As a Jewish proverb reminds us that hospitality is a form of worship, HOSPITALITY is a bread and butter for any ministry especially when it comes to reaching those who are from group-oriented cultures.

For many group-oriented cultures where it is common for immigrants to grow up around parents, grandparents, cousins, and uncles, the concept of community in their transition to North America is often a priority need. However, in many community events, Africans often feel like the setting does not allow them to be themselves. Though people are coming together for an event, the interactions remain distant and disconnected.

To put it differently, it seems like community in western culture is more like a popcorn approach where kernels of corn come together without being connected to other kernels whereas in the African context, community is more like spaghetti where lives and stories of individuals are intertwined. It is very common for Africans to be dissatisfied and disappointed when people they consider family seem to have no time and space to fellowship with them. African Immigrants generally feel like friendship with Westerners is shallow and can sometimes expire after being part of a small group, project, or after graduation.

B-Love Languages

Just like every culture has its love languages, Africans can see the love of Christ shine in the different ways:

1-Soccer

For many Africans, soccer is the anchor of community. It's usually on the soccer field that Africans love to gather for networking, to find jobs and other resources in the community. Soccer is more than a game because it brings families, religions, and languages TOGETHER. Every soccer game is like a flashback of Pentecost where you can hear players talking in Arabic, Twi, Yoruba, Igbo, Swahili, and many other languages. As the Lord Jesus has modeled his incarnational lifestyle before us, it is very important for us to meet Africans where they are and with what they love instead of expecting them to come to us.

2-Hospitality Contextualized
As the Apostle Paul exhorts us to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us (Romans 15:7) welcoming Africans into our homes and social circles communicates to them that we are family. Because in Africa, the friends of my friends are my friends, a generous hospitality of food and gifts will pay great dividends among African Christians and Muslims. Usually if one African feels welcomed somewhere, he or she will bring others along.

In spite of the barriers of language, weather, and distance, a sister from Burkina Faso said as Africans "We will go anywhere where we feel welcome, even if the sermon is in German." Another brother from Eritrea told me that because we have the Spirit of adoption, every church, whether we feel welcome or not, is the house of our Heavenly Father, and we should make it home."

As an African proverb teaches us that a small house can hold hundreds of friends, my prayer is that God will give the ability to host hundreds of African immigrants in our hearts.

3- Be a learner
Since many Africans find themselves overseas due to some push factors (civil wars) or pull factors (education, jobs opportunity) it is important to learn and support our friends on their journeys. Just like the chicken doesn't talk about dentistry because it has no teeth, we cannot pretend to be experts on our friends' journeys, but we should ask them to educate us on their experiences. It might also be important to champion them by encouraging them and by avoiding negative stereotypes such as "Africans are poor, savage, dumb, or inferior"

4- Language
Another barrier that we see when it comes to reaching African immigrants, could be the language barrier. Many African Christians would sometimes prefer a fellowship in their own languages and among their own people instead of joining a diverse church. For example, many African communities in certain parts of the West are organized in associations in which they discuss issues and needs of their communities.

It has been very encouraging to see churches empowering African immigrants to reach out to their countrymen and women in their heart language. In Ohio the Christian Missionary Alliance is subsidizing the salaries and building of Eritrean immigrants so that they can reach out to the Ethiopian and Eritrean Immigrants in their languages "Tigrinya and Amharic." Another Presbyterian church in St. Louis Missouri is also holding a French African service in order to meet the needs of a Congolese community in Missouri. In addition, Some returnee missionaries from Nigeria are also creating a space to serve Africans in Iowa.

It's also very important for us to learn the languages of our African friends in order to communicate with refugees who have low proficient skills, and more importantly we want to learn Jesus' languages of generosity of time and acts of service.

STRATEGY

With more 631 million Christians living in Africa and an additional 141 million Africans living overseas, the global church has a significant opportunity to reach every corner of the globe with the gospel. Thanks to their multi ethnic background of navigating languages and their concept of family and joy, Africans can play a significant role in the advancement of the Gospel to every corner of the world. To illustrate this, many Africans have grown up speaking more than one language, and have been trained to navigate the myriad of cultures and people groups within their own country. To put it differently, Africans are by default cross culturally trained missionaries without assignment. Knowing that Jesus loves people more than they do, Africans believe that missions should be the role in the local church because everyone is a missionary.

Just like in the first ever migration in the Bible, Adam and Eve left paradise with the loss of the fellowship with God and the gift of toiling the ground, we can see that every migration comes with gifts and losses. For many Africans who are leaving their cultures behind them, they are bringing the gift of family with them.

In fact, in many African cultures in which the words “strangers” and “adoption” don’t exist, Africans always perceive everyone as FAMILY. This is why it is very common among Africans to refer to different folks that they meet in churches or at schools in terms of uncles, aunts, fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters. This is often shocking and sometimes makes some white people uncomfortable because they do not perceive themselves as Africans whereas Africans just perceive them as one Family.

During his first year of teaching in a seminary in Cameroon, an American faculty got confused when one of his students asked permission several times throughout the year to go to his father's funeral. In the mind of the American faculty, he just assumed that everyone has one father, so after many funeral requests he asked his student how many fathers does he have? And the student answered by saying he has many fathers including the American faculty himself.

The impact of Africans overseas can be seen clearly in Canada where a Ghanaian pastor led a multi-ethnic congregation of more than 100 different nations. In addition, one the biggest churches in Europe is a multi-ethnic congregation led by a Nigerian pastor in Ukraine. Also, we see many African students and immigrants building Christian fellowship in China and Singapore. And today with the New digital platforms such as facebook, whatsapp, Wechat, Instagram, the internet has become the new talking drum that brings the whole village together. Sermons being preached in Africa by African pastors are now broadcast around the world to thousands of viewers even in African villages where everyone has a cell phone.

As an African proverb reminds us that “alone you can go fast, but TOGETHER we can go farther” my hope and prayer is that the global church will recognize the strategic impact of the African continent who has turned from a missions field into a mission force.