



Cultural Exchange: Shared Practices or Kindred Souls

By ROOTS

Culture is the way of life of a community or group of people that share a history. It sums up their heritage of collectively solving civilizational problems and encompasses all of the unique characteristics that distinguish one group of people from another such as morals, traditions, dress, language, religion, and creative arts. “Cultural exchange” is the sharing of ideas, customs, knowledge, art forms, and other practices amongst different and often dissimilar communities. It encourages tolerance, respect, unity, understanding, innovation, and diversity in our world.

West Africa today has a largely unified culture because of centuries of exchange amongst its many peoples. The sub-region is not just a shared space, it is a shared climatic history like desertification. They also share social history like the transitions from hunter-gatherer, to agrarian, to classical slavery, to a sort of feudalism. It is the arrival of Islam Jihad from across the Sahara and the collapse of indigenous slave empires. It is 400 years of trans-Atlantic slave



trading, wars, instability, and the ethnic blending this entailed. It is another century of European colonial exploitation and the export concession economy in its different forms and common attitudes toward race. We can look at West African indigenous ethnic groups - offshoots of the Niger-Congo linguistic group like the Mandinka, Akan, Wolof, and Bassari. These societies predate the neocolonial states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) by many centuries.

The **Mandinka people** originated in the Mande heartland of today's Mali. Today they are mainly subsistence, millet, and groundnut farmers. They are predominantly in the Gambia, Mali, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, and Mauritania.

The **Akan people** probably moved south around the 11th century from the Sahel or Sahara region of West Africa into the forested region where they are now. Most of the Akan people reside in modern-day Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Togo, where they are also transitioning from subsistence farmers of cassava, yams, and plantains to cash crops like cocoa, oil palm, and kola nuts.

The **Wolof people** can be found in the Gambia, Southwestern coastal Mauritania, and northwestern Senegal. Their earliest recorded history is from the eighth century. Millet is a core subsistence crop and a main food source, whereas peanuts are the primary cash crop. The land is passed down patrilineally within a family and is managed by the patrilineal head, to whom the users pay a tithe or rent.

A sizeable portion of the Bassari resides in nations like Senegal, Ghana, Gambia, Burkina Faso, Togo, Guinea, and others. The oldest settlements from the Stone Age were small and the inhabitants here engaged in harvesting, hunting, and a primitive form of agriculture.

Similarities between peoples

Origins

The Akan, Wolof, Bassari, and Mandinka have traditions of migrating south from the region of Sahel to their current locations.



Production

All four communities are engaged principally in sedentary peasant farming; labor-intensive, rain-fed, low-productivity, and largely subsistence. All are under pressure to convert to different forms of cash-crop farming. All were once classical slave-owning cultures and currently depend on extended families and sharecroppers for surplus production.

Conservation, Preservation, and Taboo

These cultures anthropomorphized their understanding of the need to match their productive activities to nature's natural cycles by personifying the earth as a "mother" figure and creating religious taboos that prevented over-tilling through compulsory rest days. The Akan call these sacred days "dabone" (literally "bad" days). During sacred days, no farming activity is allowed. People may however bring home firewood or food harvested the previous day. Those who violate this taboo are subject to forms of punishment like sanctions, social exclusion, and appeasement. The communities also believe that violation of such taboos will result in strange bad luck. To break this taboo, one has to appease the gods with gifts such as gin, cockerel, and lamb, among others.

Similarly, taboos around "sacred" areas where farming was simply not allowed typically protected springs, watersheds, shores of water bodies, or animal breeding grounds. However, in the last two and four decades as West African societies became more integrated technologically and scientifically, those sacred days are seen as periods to protect and conserve the biology and ecology of the environment, transformed into cultural land conservation and environmental protection efforts. By doing so these sacred days now allow the land and soils to replenish themselves.

Celebration of harvest and rain

As indicated all cultures are until recently animist. They anthropomorphize nature. The land is generally conceptualized as a female principle. Responsibility for her fertility belongs to a continuum of ancestors, the living



and the unborn. Harvests are celebrated in much the same way they celebrate human childbirth. Rain is considered a gift from deities and ancestors.

Every year, thanksgiving is offered through animal sacrifices for adequate rain, land fertility, and food security. The animal sacrifices are held in sacred places led by elders and “Earth priests”. There are also moments when animal sacrifices are offered to call down rain during drought as peasant farmers rely mainly on rainfall to cultivate crops.

Gender and Land Access

Across the subregion, the status of rural women has suffered over the last 500 years or so. The prevalence of myths of earth deities that predate the traditional pantheons suggests a historical point where women enjoyed a much higher status in the production and reproduction of society due to the way the society was being organized at the time. Women held prominent positions in their communities, including serving as political heads, priestesses, scientists, farmers, and traders.

However many historical influences have contributed to the downfall of women. In no particular order, we can point to the growing “scarcity” of land, the growing militarisation of societies, and traditional politics necessary, to survive or triumph in slave wars, and the growing influence of patriarchy from Arabic-Islamic and Christian-European cultures as factors that would have cost women their equality in West African societies. Whatever the specific pathways, women in the Akan, Mandingo, Wolof, and Bassari cultures today face difficulties in securing individual rights to arable land.

Generally, access to land, use rights and ownership served as a means to secure safety nets for the African rural dwellers regardless of their occupation. Irrespective of gender, farmers in West Africa gain access to and own land through customary tenure systems. This collective ownership and access to land however became undermined by the ascendancy of individual land rights and ownership at the turn of the 20th century.

The intrusion of individual land rights and ownerships is the result of structuring Africa’s land use rights and ownerships along the line of those of the European legal systems that is resulting in the drastic change of land laws



which limits free holding to lease holding normally to a defined number of years. Civil and Common laws for instance led to the introduction of the concept of leasehold. The impact of demographic, economic, social, and cultural changes has also led to rights to the land being less secure due to overlapping claims, conflicts, and intense competition.

Consequently, women tend to access land as daughters, sisters, or wives but not as individual citizens. This seems to be the case in both patrilineal and matrilineal cultures. Many colorful traditional rationalizations are offered for this complicated “traditional” practice. These include the (male) uncertainty of the lineage of his wife’s offspring and the notion that women are only temporary family members or even that women are property themselves and therefore cannot own other property. However this complexity is justified, it has important impacts on the sub-region because increasingly food production is the sole preserve of women farmers as men tend to gravitate to cash crops. West Africa’s loss of food sovereignty is in no small degree a function of its negative gender culture. It can be argued that women’s lack of land ownership is not entirely traditional and has decreased over the years.

This cultural compatibility at the base of these societies is important for an agenda to unite and develop West Africa. It provides a common starting point and cohesiveness that is necessary for subregional progress. The people already understand each other because they have deep common roots so they can achieve that understanding quite easily. This means that they can strengthen regional institutions and find democratic solutions to their many problems. They are at home in each other’s worlds because it is indeed the same world. They place the same importance on things like extended family and clan connections.

That is different from saying that their cultures themselves are progressive or development-oriented, they have much work to do. For example, they must find a balance between animistic and mystical understandings of nature with science that enables constructive interventions to increase productivity and capture more of the commodity value chains that arise from peasant production. They must reposit their festivals as unifying events and not events of worship. Importantly, they must completely transform gender relations across the regions and expose the exploitation and repression that hides



behind all the traditional and religious justifications for male control over female life potentials. They must help people understand that in many cases what they assume are traditional values are European colonial divide-and-rule tactics; indoctrination of their ancestors by missionaries and educators for the sole purpose of increasing resource capture and repatriation to the Developed North. They must realize how much stronger they would be as societies if they had all their human capacity focused on dealing with common problems in their interest. In all, West African societies and cultures need modernization but not Westernization.