

African Friends and Money Matters

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PRA663A – Leadership in Cross-Cultural Contexts: Foundations

Martin E. Lee, February 22, 2020

When it comes to African society and their treatment of money, the overarching theme is one's duty to society. Maranz notes, "The giving, borrowing, and loaning of money and material goods demonstrate solidarity, generosity, and acceptance by society."¹ When Maranz speaks of solidarity he means, "mutual economic and social support, hospitableness, putting group interest ahead of individual interest...". Maranz notes, living in "interdependence rather than independence...rather than living in social or spatial isolation...are some of the highest values in African cultures, essential to each person;"² whereas, "persons who refuse to share, give, and loan of their resources demonstrate a refusal to be integral members of society. Such persons are considered to be selfish, egotistical, and disdainful of friends, relatives, and even of those outside their immediate social circle."³

He observes Africans are not always happy with this way of life, but they believe it is superior. He notes they feel, "People are more important than possessions."⁴ While the upside means those without are provided for, the downside may be, "for some people ambition is undermined," and "such people are quite content to live simply or even off the generosity of others."⁵

Maranz refers to one African who wrote: "By our reasoning, everyone with many goods certainly has among his relatives those who are poor and needy. Therefore, they think if these wealthy people lived up to their family and social obligations they would not, could not, have

¹ Maranz, David, E., "African Friends and Money Matters," (Second Edition, SIL International, 2015.), 75.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 76.

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amassed so many goods.”⁶ Furthermore, the writer of the letter noted the one who ignores the needs of others in society risk becoming “rejected” in society.

Another difference in the use of resources is the monitoring and reporting of the use of funds. Maranz observes, “Precision is to be avoided in accounting as it shows the lack of a generous spirit.”⁷ He notes, “It is not what a friend does. Moreover, it is foreign, threatening, and indicates a lack of understanding of the needs of ordinary people.”⁸ Instead, “People should show confidence in their friends. Consequently, calling them to account is a bad reflection on both them and you.”⁹ Interestingly, while money itself is sought after, it is viewed by many Africans as evil due to its Colonial roots and introduction, used to pay taxes. In addition, the “force” associated with the introduction of money is the accountability structure at the time of introduction. Maranz notes, “During the colonial period African leaders were not accountable to the people under them, but to their colonial masters. These in turn were accountable only to their home governments. The local people were there to be controlled, not informed.”¹⁰

Maranz observes, “Compliments are frequently given indirectly in the form of requests for gifts or loans and are often formulated as questions.” He describes how an African may compliment a Westerner’s clothing by asking for it. He recommends a good response might be, “I will give it to you when I take it off,” or, “When it has a little brother I will give it to you.”¹¹

⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁷ Ibid., 99.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 100.

¹¹ Ibid, 140.

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Such responses, says Maranz, are not considered dishonest, but “more considerate of feelings than would be a blunt ‘No, I won’t give it to you.’”¹²

It would seem the poor in all cultures might behave similarly, that is, ask from those who seem to have an abundance of resources. What is peculiar is the dance. While the poor approach the presumed “rich” in most all cultures, in many African cultures the poor do so directly and personally, and the advice to the wealthy-one approached is to respond indirectly while refusing the gift to preserve social relations. Maranz underscores that these requests are in fact compliments. He notes, “It may seem strange that these compliments are given as requests, and the responses are given as though they were real requests.”¹³ Maranz observes many insights in these simple exchanges. He explains, “The Westerner may think that if these are compliments, why not just answer with some form of, ‘Thank you for the compliment, I’m glad you like my blouse.’ But this not how the game is played.

The rules of the game dictate that the response to the compliment be given on two or three levels. The first level is to appear to take the request seriously as a request. The second is to fend off the request with a polite and phony excuse as to why it will not be granted. And the third, if the one receiving the compliment can respond on this level, what most delights Africans is to have a joke made out of it in a clever way. And better still is to be humorous or clever and, in addition, mildly embarrass the other person. In countless ethnic groups, playing word games of this kind is one of the joys of conversation.”¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 141.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

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Maranz notes, “People typically receive satisfaction from being asked for financial help, whether or not they are disposed to provide it.”¹⁵ He explained, “Africans are flattered when they are asked to help.”¹⁶ Regarding receiving such requests, one African explained, “people are looking at me, and that gives me pleasure.”¹⁷ This seems interestingly familiar to God’s interactions with man. He says, “Come to me” or “Cast all your cares on me” or “Ask and you shall receive.” Time and again God would have all mankind turn to “look at him” and I imagine that gives God pleasure.

The section on debt and funding strategies emphasized the significance Africans place on interdependence. Maranz observes, “They fear social isolation, and the only way to avoid it is by being involved with others, and social involvement includes money and goods.”¹⁸ I find this observation interesting since most economic structures in advanced cultures rely on the same concept of interdependence. For markets to function efficiently there needs to be both the buyer and seller, the producer and consumer. So, underlying both the Western and African cultures, there is this high value placed on interdependence. Uniquely, for such interdependence to work in the Western culture a high level of trust in the “markets” is required; whereas, a high level of trust in the immediate social group is required in the African culture. The social object in Western society is more institutionalized, less personal, due to the mobility and complexity of modern Western social and political structures. Another example is the use of direct versus indirect communication: in the more complex social and financial structures of the West, there

¹⁵ Ibid., 189.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 204.

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are usually many layers of interaction (usually mediated by institutions) between the rich and the poor when asking for money or help. Maranz observes, “Westerners find it very frustrating to have Africans appear to be unclear, indirect, and uninformative.”¹⁹ But, I would argue that is the case when Westerners are in personal interactions. In Western cultures, requests for aid are often so indirect they are anonymous and “arm’s-length.”

¹⁹ Ibid., 246.