AFRICAN LINGUISTIC ROUTINES AND AFRICAN CULTURE.

(or : African cultural traits encoded in linguistic routines in selected African languages.)

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> "...man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical."
> Geertz (1975:5)

The intrinsic relationship between language and culture is widely acknowledged but the extent and nature of this relationship as well as the aspects of language that convey culture remain some of the controversies in linguistic and cultural studies. There are those who assume that "language is the means by which men create their conception, understanding and values of objective reality. Language is the intermediary world (Zwischenwelt) between subject and object. As a consequence the vocabulary, grammar and syntax of a language are no mere reflection of the culture of its users. They are that culture by virtue of their function making overt the concepts, beliefs and values of the culture". (Basilius 1968:453; cp Frake 1968) Others such as Giridhar (1981) argue that some aspects of language do bear culture but "not ALL language does". (emphasis in original; op. cit. :65) For such people the lexical structure of a language but not its phonology or grammar, may reflect the culture of its users. The basic consensus however seems to be

that the vocabulary of a language conveys its culture. (cf. Sapir 1921 : 207ff ; Saville-Troike 1982 : 34ff; Whorf 1956; Wierzbicka MS a, b;)

Be that as it may, it is commonplace in the current ethnographic and sociolinguistic research that few aspects of the lexicon of a language provide excellent clues to the cultural preoccupations of the members of a speech community better than linguistic routines (see Coulmas 1979, 1981; Matisoff 1979 for examples). Linguistic routines are certain fixed and sometimes frozen forms of verbal behaviour that have become associated with standardised communicative situations in a speech community. Hymes (1968 : 126) characterises a linguistic routine as "a recurrent sequence of verbal behaviour whether conventional or idiosyncratic". [1] Such forms are produced almost automatically as soon as the appropriate situation shows up. Thus in English, "Thanks!" and "Thank you!", for example, could be automatically said by a speaker to express gratitude to an addressee for something good, be it material or non-material, that has been done for him.

For a long time, routines used to be considered as 'trivial', 'empty', and 'meaningless' conventions used in everyday interaction to express "phatic communion". Fortunately, such an idea has given way to the recognition that these routines embody a lot of social, situational and cultural meaning. Thus to understand, interpret and explain them, one needs to enter the psycho-socio-cultural system of the particular speech community that uses them. For a language learner to use routines felicituously, s/he must be aware of the appropriate situation

which requires that formula. A lot of miscommunication between interlocutors from different cultures occurs as a result of the culture-specific nature of many routines. Furthermore, one fertile domain for the extended use of a second language in different cultures is that of formulae. A case in point is the extended use of "Sorry" in African varieties of English which will be discussed in due course.

In spite of these widespread views on the socio-cultural significance of formulae, studies of routines in many languages only identify the expressions, provide "thick descriptions" of their uses and probably indicate that one needs shared social and cultural knowledge to use them properly. Researchers fail woefully to expose the very crucial components of the cultural meanings that are enshrined in these formulae. No attempt is made to explain the values, attitudes or social norms that underlie the incidence of these expressions in language. Consequently the wealth of information that routines provide about their users is lost or shoved under the rug. There is the need to recover this valuable information and make it available for use. We need to go beyond descriptions of linguistic phenomena and attempt to interpret and explicate the meanings that lie beneath them in their cultural context. (cp. Candlin 1983; Foley 1980; Wierzbicka 1979)

This paper seeks to explore, in a rather informal way, the cultural basis of linguistic routines in a couple of African languages. [2] The point of the paper is to demonstrate that aspects of African thought and reality are encapsulated in

routines in African languages. The outcome should be the provision of further independent piece of linguistic evidence for some of the often talked about African cultural themes.

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One feature of the African that is very prominent in the literature on African philosophy and religion is that s/he is religious. This is evident from the following excerpts:

Marais (1984) contends that:

> "... whatever aspect of life we may attempt to penetrate we are sure to be confronted with religion. Africa is notoriously religious. Religion is the root of existence."
>
> (p. 264)

Williams makes a similar observation when he asks: "What is religion to the African and how is it grounded in the traditional African experience?" He goes on to assert that:

> "First, religion is all-pervasive with respect to human experiences. Secondly, at every point in the universe of African reality, the person is in contact with life forces that are expressed by means of God, spirits, ancestors, natural objects, even the universe itself."
>
> (Williams 1985:435)

Many a time such claims are supported with data from the essence of ritual practices or phenomena like theophorous names (cf Dzobo 1975; Idowu 1973; Mbiti 1968.) However, to my mind, an enormous amount of evidence exists in formulaic expressions found in African languages which do not only reflect but also support some of these ideas. Consider some of the expressions employed to felicitate with a member of the community who has attained something good, for instance, if s/he has successfully completed an apprenticeship or has caught a game or

has had a baby: In Chichewa, a Bantu language spoken widely in parts of Malawi and Zambia, one of the following would be addressed to someone who has had a new baby:

(1) Mulungu wakudalitsani!
God has blessed you.

(2) Mulungu wakuonani!
God has seen/visited you.

In the same language, when somebody has gone through a terrible or dangerous thing such as having recuperated from an operation s/he could be told the following:

(3) Mulungu ngunkulu!
God is great.

What do these suggest about the speakers of Chichewa? One thing that can be said is that they think of good things that happen to people as coming from 'Mulungu' (God). He is the one who blesses or visits people with good things as a result of his magnificence. We can thus at least discern from these examples aspects of the conception of God in this society. The view that emerges is not incompatible with the ubiquitous claim that for the African everything comes ultimately from God. If we explicate the meaning of (1), for example, by characterising the assumptions, feelings, and intentions of the speaker who utters it, we could extract some of the cultural ideas encoded in it. Let's consider a situation where a speaker says (1) to somebody who has had a baby. What conversational meaning can be inferred from the communication? I believe it could be paraphrased as follows: The speaker is saying that I notice something good has happened to you, i.e. you have had a baby; I assume you feel happy because of it; I feel pleased too and I want you to know

it. The speaker is further saying that I know it is God who has done this good thing for you; I assume that you and I are aware that such things only happen to us when God wants and causes them to happen. This last component is where we find the supposed cultural idea that is shared by members of the speech community. Similar concepts are embodied in (2) and (3). There is no doubt, I maintain, that these expressions are pointers to the beliefs and therefore the culture of the Chichewa people and for that matter Africans.

Ewe, [3] a speech form spoken in the southern parts of the Volta Region of Ghana, Togo as far as and just across the Togo - Benin border, has a variety of expressions used in situations where something good has happened to someone. Some of these are:

(4) Mawu sẽ ŋu!
God is strong.

(5) Tɔgbewo sẽ ŋu!
Ancestors are strong.

(6) Ŋuwò nuwo sẽ ŋu!
Forces/beings around you are strong.

(7) Mawu wɔ dɔ!
God has worked.

(8) Tɔgbewo wɔ dɔ!
Ancestors have worked.

(9) Ŋuwò nuwo wɔ dɔ!
Forces/beings around you have worked.

The forces or beings talked about in (6) and (9) refer to spirits and other 'lesser' deities. The responses to the expressions are:

(a) Yoo, miawoe do gbe ɖa.
OK, you (plural) have prayed.

for (4), (5), (7) and (8), and

(b) Yoo, mia-tɔ-wo hǎ.
O K, yours(plural) too.

for (5), (6), (8) and (9).

These expressions echo the idea of the relationship between man and God, spirits, divinities and ancestors represented in the quote from Williams (1985) above. These formulae do not only reveal something about the structure of the religion of the people but they also tell of how the Ewes conceive of the causation of things. In fact, the routines are reminiscent of some of the claims Idowu (1973) makes about African religion. On divinities, he writes :

> "The divinities are ministers each with his own definite portfolio in the Deity's monarchial government. Each in his own sphere an administrative head of a department. They are also intermediaries between Deity and man especially with respect to their particular functions."
> (p. 170-1)

The use of (6) and (9) do indicate that the Ewes think of the "administrative heads" as being responsible in a way for the good things that happen to people.

Consider again what the ancestors are thought to be :

> "The ancestor is a departed spirit who stands in peculiarly close relation to the tribe or the family : the life of the latter has been derived from him and because he is still in existence he is still in a sense one with it; his favour or disfavour has therefore a sharply focussed relation to it and is more urgently to be sought or avoided."
> (Farmer in Idowu op. cit. :179)

Thus Africans think of their ancestors as beings who can help or molest them. They regard them as spiritual superintendents. No

wonder then that the Ewes ascribe to them the source of good things that happen to them. They have lexicalised and condensed this idea in (5) and (8). The reality of all this is that if the ancestors, the divinities, the spirits as well as God do not will that people attain or experience good things, the good things wouldn't happen, hence they must be said to be powerful or have worked in these circumstances. Can't it be said then that these routines mirror the socio-cultural reality of their users?

As far as God is concerned, there is no need belabouring the point that to the African the control, maintenance and origin of all things rest with Deity. (4) and (7) reflect this view, but the Ewes have another formula which I wish to point out to reinforce the idea. One common routine used when interlocutors are about to retire to bed is:

(10) Mawu ne-fɔ mí
May God wake us up.

Here again we see the portrayal of the recognition that as you go to bed whether you can get up the next day or not rests entirely with God. This expression thus embodies the concept that man's life comes from God. These are only a few of the expressions that encode ideas about African religion.

All along the view that permeates through the formulaic expressions is that God, spirits and ancestors are responsible in various ways for what happens to man on earth. This issue becomes more obvious when these expressions are contrasted with those used in other cultures to felicitate with people. For example, in English when somebody achieves something good, the appropriate phrases to use for him include: 'Congratulations!';

'Well done!'; 'Good on you!' and 'Good for you!'. There is no reference to God or any supernatural power, the emphasis and praise is on the individual. This is suggestive of a cultural value in Anglo-Saxon society which places much premium on individuality and autonomy.

It is quite unfortunate that the insight which can be obtained from these linguistic routines has eluded the attention of authors on African culture and in particular of those who write on the concept of God in African religion. Williams (1985) has suggested that "theological accounts of God in Africa need to consider ritual practice and anthropological interpretations of ritual ought to include an analysis of divinities vis-a-vis beliefs" (p. 437). This should certainly be done but I would add that the meaning and cultural content of formulae - the snippets of ritual used in everyday interaction - (such as the ones discussed here) should be analysed and incorporated in theological as well as anthropological discourses on God and religion in Africa.

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Another trait reflected in linguistic routines concerns the attitude of a number of Africans to the left hand. It might be hard for people from cultures such as an Anglo-Saxon one to imagine the shock that several Africans feel on account of the very liberal use of the left hand in these cultures. Such a shock is due to the fact that in a number of African sub-cultures, the use of the left hand is restricted to the performance of ablutions. Consequently, it is considered

'unclean' or 'unwholesome'. Thus if it is used in interpersonal communication, it is interpreted as an insult. Hence it is forbidden to point or wave to somebody with the left or even to something that you hold dear and identify with and for which you have some regard such as your hometown. One should not pass on something to another with the left. Some of the languages have proverbs and aphorisms that teach morals about the correct use of the left hand. (cf Dzoba 1973)

A lot of social mishap occurs with regard to this practice in cross-cultural communication. Think about the following experience of a friend during the first two days of his arrival in Canada from Africa. He went into the shop and asked for meat. The charming salesgirl with her captivating smile attended to him enthusiastically. He was impressed initially but disaster struck. The girl unfortunately passed on the parcel of meat to him with the left hand without excuse. What an insult! my friend thought. He refused to take it much to the chagrin of the girl. She called in her Supervisor to intervene but my friend stuck to his guns. He however had to learn his lesson anyway. People from different cultures indeed have different attitudes, values and meanings which are passed on from one generation to the next.

Although this practice has been established in a number of African sub-cultures, it is recognised that one can be caught in the very "web of significance" that has been spun. Thus one may not be able to use the right hand on every occasion that he has to. Situations do arise when the use of the left hand is inevitable. In such situations one has to excuse his/her

behaviour and this has been institutionalised in expressions in the languages of these sub-cultures. The expressions are used to sort of apply for and gain indemnity from violating a social norm.

In Gã, a language spoken in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana, for instance, if one has to pass on something to the other with the left s/he says:

(11) Mi - hã bo abeku!
I give it to you with my left.

In other words, be informed I am using the hand that I should not use, but I cannot help it. How else can this Gã expression be explained than to indicate that it exists because of the attitude to and the norm concerning the left hand.

In Ewe, one says:

(12) Mia lo !
Left !

and the addressee responds:

(13) Asi - e
A hand, it is

This shows that the addressee accepts the excuse and acknowledges that the left hand is also a hand so feel free to use it. Do these routines again not tell a lot about the practices and attitudes of their users? Are they not worthwhile evidence to support any claim that one can make about the views of certain Africans on tha left hand?

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One cannot talk about African cultural traits without mentioning "the sense of community, that characteristic of

African life to which attention has been drawn again and again ....Indeed to many this characteristic defines Africanness ". (Dickson 1977:4) In a sense each of the routines discussed so far has an element of this communal feeling in it. In what sense does the African talk of God, ancestors or spirits if these do not belong to the community which he is part of.

There are several practices and with them some associated linguistic routines which emphasise this same idea. Witness the ritual of greetings which has been referred to as the recitation of a litany (cf. Naden). The sheer length of the greeting encounter and the range of people who are asked about in it are indicative of the consciousness of group membership. Indeed to the African, others are "brothers" and "sisters" rather than "compatriots". No wonder English kin terms such as "brother", "sister", etc have extended usage in African varieties of English. [4]

To illustrate this trait of communality, I want to examine the extended use of an English formula in Africa that has been very widely noted. Akere (1978) makes the following observation about Nigerian English which applies tout court to "African English". He writes:

> "The form 'Sorry' in English is intended as a genuine apology for a mistake or a wrong doing, for causing some inconvenience to somebody or as an expression of regret for an action not intended but whose result adversely affects or inconveniences another person. In Nigerian English, the semantic field of 'Sorry' has become extended. It is used, in addition to the above, as an expression of sympathy or pity for a person involved in an accident or for minor things such as tripping, knocking one's toe

> against a stone and so on. In a classroom situation for example, if a lecturer accidentally drops his lecture notes or a piece of chalk his students would say 'Sorry, Sir'" (p. 414-5).

The impact of this on intercommunication between anglophone Africans and native English is rather grave. How many Africans have not been embarrassed by their English interlocutors with retorts such as "You don't have to apologise!"; "It wasn't your fault!"; "What are you sorry for?" or "You don't have to say sorry!" to their sympathetic 'Sorry' on witnessing petty catastrophes such as slipping on a banana skin happen to them.

The typical explanation offered for this extended use of 'Sorry' is that in many African languages there are formulae that are used to express both apology and sympathy and these Africans search for such a formula in English. 'Sorry' is found to be the closest equivalent and probably an unfortunate one (cp Criper 1971; Kirk-Greene 1971; Sey 1973; Spencer 1971). Indeed the following examples are all used both for apology and sympathy in the respective languages.

(14) (i) Akan (Fante) - kose

(ii) Akan (Twi) - due

(iii) Chichewa - pepa-ni

(iv) Ewe - baba

(v) Gã - kpo

(vi) Hausa [5] - samu

One objection that can be raised against the explanation is that English does have an expression, i.e. 'I'm sorry', which is used both for sympathy and apology. Unfortunately, there seem to be some factors that militate

against its choice as an equivalent for the African languages' expressions. First of all, it is made up of more than one word unlike the native words. Secondly, and I believe more importantly, the use of 'I'm sorry' as an "expression of sympathy is reserved for fairly serious matters". (Borkin and Reinhart 1978:66) The African expressions can be used to sympathise with people when the most trivial thing happens to them. Whichever it is, 'I'm sorry' is not a favourite choice as an equivalent for the African forms.

The question that must be answered is this: Why do African languages have such forms and why do they search for such a form in a foreign language to the extent that they 'mis-use' the foreigner's language? An appropriate answer, it seems to me, can be found if the routines are placed in the cultural and social milieux in which they are used. Life in African society is a morally binding corporate one. The hallmark of this communal living is that the individual has responsibility not only for himself but for the other person as well as for the group. A sense of fellow-feeling and solidarity is promoted among the members of the community through the execution of this responsibility. As such anything that happens to a member of the community is thought of as happening to others as well, hence one has to sympathise with his fellow human-being when the slightest misfortune occurs to him. I maintain that it is this characteristic of African life that explains the African forms. I, furthermore, contend that if a viable explanation is to be given for the extended use of 'Sorry' in Africa, then these

cultural facts must be recognised. There is no doubt that these expressions encode as a component of their meaning something like the speaker saying: "I feel sympathy for you (the addressee) because I think of bad things that happen to you as if they happened to me". Such a component, I would argue, is absent from English 'Sorry' and even 'I'm sorry' precisely because it is that which reflects the reality of the social context in which they are used. But, it is probably present in 'Sorry' in 'African English'. It has sometimes been debated whether English in Africa is a vehicle of African culture. (cf Grieve 1964:14; Sey 1973:10) I suggest that in this case we can say that 'Sorry' in African English is used the way it is because of the culture of the African. Thus the extended use of the English form conveys an African cultural trait.

The validity of this suggestion is borne out when we look at the cultural ideas involved in the use of 'Sorry' and 'I'm sorry' which are in conflict with African culture and therefore are not appropriate equivalents for the African language forms. 'I'm sorry' is used to express sympathy for only fairly serious matters probably because of the taboo in Anglo-Saxon culture on making overt one's emotions. Furthermore, to sympathise with somebody because of an insignificant mishap would be an invasion of privacy and autonomy of the individual (cf Wierzbicka MS a and b). I need not remind you that in Anglo-Saxon culture, members of the society strive, as it were, to keep a 'wall' around themselves in order to protect these cherished values of the culture. (Witness the outcry against the introduction of Identity Cards in Australia because it would be

an invasion of privacy). We get a clearer understanding of these routines when we interpret them in their cultural context.

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To conclude, I have been trying to show that linguistic routines are indicators of the cultural ecology of their users. They are thus a good guide to the reality of the social and cultural milieu in which they are used. I have also advanced some linguistic evidence, however fragmentary and arbitrary it may seem, to authenticate some of the much celebrated characteristics of Africanness. I would like to persuade Africanists, especially the social scientists of whatever disciplinary orientation, to pay heed to such evidence in their accounts of African phenomena.

NOTES

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1 - Recent interest in these expressions has resulted in an unfortunate proliferation of terms to describe them. In the terminological confusion the same phenomenon is referred to by labels such as: 'formulae' 'formulaic expressions' 'routines' 'politeness formulas' 'deference formulas' 'routine formulae' 'discourse routines' 'prepatterned discourse units' 'stereotypes' and 'gambits' (see Coulmas 1981). In this paper, the first three are used interchangeably in the sense of 'linguistic routines' as defined below.

2 - For various reasons, the issues have been illustrated only in selected languages. The impressions are however very instructive for many more African languages.

3 - The cluster of the dialects - Ewe; Gen; Aja; Fon; Xwla; and Xwela - now better known as Gbe (Capo 1983) used to be known by the name Ewe. The name Ewe as used in this paper refers to the

westernmost group of dialects of the Gbe language. It is the form of language that has been declared one of the two national languages of Togo.

4 - Obilade (1984) expresses a contrary opinion on this issue. He claims unfortunately that "the Nigerian does not superimpose the features of his social system on the structure of the English language, as far as the kinship terms are concerned". (p. 174) He argues that even in native speaker situations in the English world there are "ethnic groups" or "social classes" that use kinship terms in the same way. He cites the informal use of 'brother' among the Black Americans as a use similar to the one in Nigeria. He contends that this kind of criterion should not be used to define 'Nigerian English'. Maybe we cannot define 'Nigerian English' by this criterion. In the same way, I don't think we can necessarily identify someone as a Nigerian when he says: "A child who says his mother will not sleep will himself not sleep", (ibid; p. 177) because this is something which many Africans recognise as a translation of one of their proverbs. Maybe we can identify such a speaker as an African. I believe that these things can certainly be viewed as peculiarities of 'African English'. History can explain the similarity between African usage and Black American usage.

5 - Akan is a language spoken very widely in parts of southern Ghana. Twi and Fante are two of its major dialects. Hausa is a Chadic language of the Afro-Asiatic family which is spoken widely across most of West Africa.

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