Culture defines us as humans. As countries become increasingly interconnected and similarities grow between people groups, stark differences in culture remain. What makes North Korea different than Zimbabwe and Botswana different than Chile?

Do we hug, smile, shake hands, kiss, or keep stern faced when we meet a friend in public? Do we paint our homes certain colours in Spain versus Nairobi versus Bangkok? Do we value education, value helping others, value families, or value privacy?

Culture represents an identifiable unique community that conforms to basic assumptions about people and human interaction and connections to each other and to those outside the community.
Edgar Schein breaks culture down into three main spheres. First, deep beliefs and assumptions about good and bad, right and wrong, that anchors cultures. These beliefs lead to the second sphere regarding a culture’s values that inform behavior opinions. Values then inform the third sphere where we may observe different displays of culture as artifacts.

Robert House and his enormous team of researchers formed the GLOBE Framework that delineated nine different aspects of culture that one can observe behavior and values. Most scholars assign culture scores on the aspects of different countries as a whole. However, USIU-A, with support from Durham University, Global Communities, and USAID, surveyed 19 agricultural co-operatives in 12 Kenyan counties comprising nine different ethnicities (tribes). Among the many study objectives included testing different intra-ethnic aspects of culture among communities in Kenya. Many commentators assume that Kenyan ethnicities vary widely in their values and behaviors. Other observers proclaim cultural belief uniformity across our tribes.

The research found a mix between similarity and differences among our Kenyan cultures. Among the eight GLOBE Framework tested cultural dimensions, the study found that half were similar across Kenya and the other varied significantly. The four cultural aspects that Kenyans were similar across ethnicity were ingroup collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, institutional collectivism, and performance orientation.

Robert House defined uncertainty avoidance as the extent to which a society, organisation, or group relies on social norms, rules, and procedures to alleviate the unpredictability of future events. So, as Kenyans, the degree to which we come together to plan ahead for natural disasters, such as droughts, or security risks is almost the same no matter which community we come from. No one culture within Kenya prefers to plan more to avoid future uncertainty than another. As a whole, Kenyans desire to avoid uncertainty much less than the citizens of the Netherlands, China, and Japan, as examples.

Ingroup collectivism is the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in their organisations or families. Kenyans were uniformly more proud and loyal to our families than other more individualistic nations. This theme ran evenly across each tribe surveyed.

Institutional collectivism is the degree to which organisational and societal institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action. In Kenya, no matter which ethnicity we originate from, we tend to demand or push for collective distribution of resources at the local level.

Finally, performance orientation reflects the extent to which a community encourages and rewards innovation, high standards, excellence, and performance improvement. All Kenyan ethnicities on average tend to encourage lower innovation and performance than other cultures in America or Germany as examples. We do tend to tolerate mediocrity more as a cultural trend.

In each of these four cultural aspects, less than three per cent of the variance in responses were due to ethnicity, thus representing minimal differences across tribes. Stay tuned for next week in
Business Talk in the Business Daily as we detail the cultural differences between Kenyan ethnicities.

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