Attributes that define cultures

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Culture represents an identifiable unique community that conforms to basic assumptions about people. FILE PHOTO | NMG

In the fascinating quest into the history, preferences, and opinions of Kenya’s different communities, Business Talk continues this week on delineating our cultural differences and similarities.

Last week’s article detailed the meaning of cultural opinions, values, articles, and behaviours as well as how Kenyan ethnic groups were widely similar on four important aspects of culture: Uncertainty avoidance, in group collectivism, institutional collectivism, and performance orientation.
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.

The United States International University of Africa in collaboration with Durham University, Global Communities, and USAid, surveyed 19 agricultural co-operatives in 12 Kenyan counties comprising nine different ethnicities (Embu, Kalenjin, Kamba, Kikuyu, Kisii, Luhya, Luo, Mijikenda, and Taita) to generate knowledge about culture, trust, leadership, and community empowerment.

Among the eight culture variables asked to each population, four represented wide differences between the community: power distance, future orientation, assertiveness, and humane orientation.

Robert House and his team define power distance as the extent to which a community accepts and endorses authority, power differences, and status privileges.

Societies with high power distance are the least likely to challenge the authority of their leaders. Power distance stood as the fourth greatest difference between Kenyans with 4.60 per cent of the variance due to ethnicity.

The Kenyan community that scored the lowest on power distance meaning that they believe that power should be shared equally amongst all in society and that leaders should be questioned when disagreements arise are the Mijikenda.

The next least tolerant of power distance are the Embu followed by the Luo communities. The population with the highest perception that their society holds the greatest power distance are the Luhya followed by the Kalenjin. These two communities are the least likely of the nine groups surveyed to challenge their leaders and hold them to account.

Future orientation represents the degree to which a society encourages and rewards future-oriented behaviours such as planning and delaying gratification with 4.79 per cent of the variance due to ethnicity.

The community that feels like it makes the most plans for the future are the Kalenjin followed by the Embu and then Kikuyu communities. The populations that plan the least for the future and focus on solving current problems first are the Taita followed by the Mijikenda then the Luo.

Assertiveness stands as the degree to which a society feels that individuals are assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in their relationships with other people. Assertiveness comprised the second highest difference among Kenyan ethnic groups with 5.37 per cent of the variance due to ethnicity.

Many stereotypes swirl around certain communities existing as more or less assertive than others. Some commentators accuse the Luo community of being the most assertive in Kenya and the Taita as the least assertive. However, the Luo are similar to the Kikuyu population in that they both actually perceive their societies as equally low in assertiveness.
Contrary to stereotypes, the Luhya community feel that their population are the most assertive among the nine cultures surveyed followed by the Kalenjin then the Embu then Kamba then Kisii. The lowest assertiveness perceptions about their society came from the Mijikenda.

Humane orientation entails the degree to which a society encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, altruistic, friendly, generous, caring, and kind to others. It represented the greatest difference between Kenyan ethnic groups with a large 11.22 per cent of the variance due to ethnicity.

Simply put, there are significant differences between Kenyan cultures in how humanely we feel that the society around us is concerned for and sensitive to other people. The group that feels that society exists as the most humane are the Kalenjin with a very high average of 6.18 on a 7-point scale.

The second highest humane perceptions are found in the Mijikenda followed by the Kikuyu and Embu tied for third highest. The community that feels that society subsides as the least humane are the Luhya with a 3.51 average on the same scale, over 1.0 lower than any other group.

There were limitations to the study whereby we cannot make sweeping generalisations as the data only represented the summed responses of the 580 individuals that were surveyed. The surveys were not done in every county.

Therefore, the intra-culture variability within communities was not captured. Future expanded research should include multiple counties, various sub-tribes, and incorporate samples from every community in Kenya instead of only the nine featured in this study.

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