

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

MEETING OF EXPERTS ON "THE CULTURAL SPECIFICITY  
AND POINTS OF CULTURAL CONVERGENCE IN THE DIFFERENT  
REGIONS OF AFRICA SOUTH OF THE SAHARA"

Accra, Ghana, 18-22 February 1980

FINAL REPORT

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The opening session took place under the chairmanship of the Vice-Minister of Culture, Mr. S.K. Apraku, representing the Minister of Education, Culture and Sports.
2. Mr. Charles Phillips, Executive Secretary of the Arts Council of Ghana, began the proceedings by welcoming all the participants, and explained the arrangements made by the Ghanaian authorities to facilitate the holding of the meeting.
3. Mr. Augustin Gatera, representing the Director-General of Unesco, thanked the Government and people of Ghana for agreeing to host the meeting, after welcoming, in 1975, the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Africa, which laid down the guidelines of the cultural policies of African Member States and thus enabled Unesco to draw up cultural programmes for Africa. Mr. A. Gatera also set forth the objectives of the meeting, the main one being an attempt to define African cultural areas and suggest a concrete research and publications programme.
4. In his address, Mr. S.K. Apraku stressed the importance of the meeting's theme and recalled the unfounded claim of representatives of Western culture that Africa had no culture or history. Mr. Apraku pointed out to the experts that the Government of Ghana had given the Arts Council of Ghana the responsibility of organizing, developing and fostering the national cultural heritage in close consultation with the chiefs and the leaders of the different ethnic groups. Before declaring the proceedings officially open, Mr. Apraku recalled how proud Ghana was to welcome a meeting of this type, the results of which would interest not only African countries, but Africans of the diaspora as well.
5. The following experts, who were invited in a personal capacity and therefore represented neither their respective institutions nor their countries, took part in the proceedings of the meeting (see Annex I): Dr. H. Adam (Somalia), Mr. I.A. Akinjogbin (Nigeria), Mr. E. Apronti (Ghana)<sup>(1)</sup>, Mr. M. Beauvoir (Haiti), Mr. D. Cobblah (Ghana), Dr. D. Dalby (United Kingdom), Dr. E. Foli Deganus (Ghana), Mrs. H. Disbata (Ivory Coast), Prof. C.M. Fyle (Sierra Leone), Prof. E. Haberland (Federal Republic of Germany), Mrs. A.A. Hayford (Ghana), Mr. S. Hurreiz (Sudan),

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(1) Mr. E. Apronti also represented the African Cultural Institute.

Prof. L. Kamara (Guinea), Mr. D. Laya (Niger), Prof. J. Maquet (United States), Prof. A. Ndinga-Mbo (Congo), Mr. D. Ndagala (Tanzania), Prof. B.A. Ogot (Kenya), Mr. C. Phillips (Ghana), Prof. Bar-Jaona Randriamandimby (Madagascar), Prof. A. Sow (France), Miss E. Sukho (Ivory Coast) and Prof. M. Towa (Cameroon).

6. For various reasons, the following experts were unable to take part in the work of the meeting: Dr. Berehanu Abebe (Ethiopia), Mr. Abdulkadir (Nigeria), Mr. M. De Andrade (Guinea-Bissau), Mr. Damane (Lesotho), Mr. Cheikh Anta Diop (Senegal), Mr. R. Martinez Fure (Cuba), Mrs. M. Ly (Mali), Mr. S. Mbonyinkebe (Zaire), Mrs. Achola Pala (Kenya) and Mr. E. Soundjock-Soundjock (Cameroon).

7. The following observers took part in the work of the meeting: Mr. Pathé Diagne (Society of African Culture), Mr. Makany (Association of African Universities) and Mr. A. Toure (Agence de Coopération culturelle et technique).

8. The Secretariat of Unesco was represented by: Mr. Augustin Gatera, Division of Cultural Studies, Paris, Mr. I. Katoke, Cultural Adviser for Africa, BREDA, Dakar, and Mrs. M. Baugier, Division of Cultural Studies.

9. After the opening session, the experts appointed their Bureau, as follows:

Chairman: Mr. Charles Phillips

Vice-Chairmen: Mr. B.A. Ogot  
Mr. D. Dalby

Rapporteur: Mr. Bar-Jaona Randrimandimby

10. After adoption of the agenda, Mr. A. Gatera presented briefly the working documents of the meeting.

11. The experts called in question the title of the meeting itself:

(1) inasmuch as the Sahara is a populated region, the expression "south of the Sahara" excludes a part of the population that is culturally linked with the area located south of the Sahara. The experts felt that consequently, it would be preferable to omit the phrase "... South of the Sahara";

(2) the participants also considered that the current title in English was inadequate: The term "specificity" has a precise meaning in medical terminology. The term "convergence" does not have the same precision in French as in English in this context.

12. After lengthy discussion, the following English title was proposed:

"Distinctive characteristics and common features of African cultural areas, with special reference to Africa South of the Sahara".

13. One participant emphasized, however, that while seeking a translation as exact as possible of the title in English, efforts should be made not to lose sight of the problems raised in the original French title.

14. As an introduction to the discussions, the papers which had been provided as working documents for the meeting were presented briefly by each author. This led to a general discussion that served as an introduction to the different items on the agenda. On this subject, the suggestion that each item be presented by one or more of the participants facilitated the organization of the discussion.

A. Item I on the agenda: Definition of African cultural areas: specific characteristics

15. In the light of the complexity of the topic, the Chairman proposed a general discussion in order to define a method of approach. The two experts who introduced this item of the agenda presented the two oldest existing classifications: those of Frobenius and of Baumann. The intent was not to consider each classification as such, nor to take up each of the twenty-five cultural areas listed by Professor Cheikh Anta Diop in his paper, but rather to review the implications of the method of classification.

16. The presentation revealed that the guiding theme of Baumann's classification is ecology. Every human culture, in this instance African culture, is determined by geography. The determinism of environment has created husbandry and agriculture. After defining the heart or cradle where these two activities developed (Western Africa), the author explained that they spread across the entire continent of Africa. On the basis of the practice of agriculture or husbandry, activities determined by geographical requirements, man organized his family, work, means of subsistence, religion (e.g., the different religious rituals linked with raising live-stock) and his State or community institutions.

17. On the whole, the criticism of Baumann's thesis bears on its determinism. While recognizing the importance of geographical environment, which in one way or another influences human culture, the participants acknowledged the weakness of the classification, its atemporal framework and static nature.

18. The ecological reference should be combined with others.

19. After this theoretical introduction, which with regard to methodology was above all critical, other criteria for defining cultural areas were suggested. But it was pointed out as a reminder that these criteria should not be considered in isolation. The following criteria were suggested for defining cultural areas:

1. Language
2. Historical experience
3. Economic, social, political system
4. Religious beliefs
5. Artistic concepts
6. Concepts of the world and ways of thinking

20. After reviewing the above criteria, almost all the participants recognized that the most important criterion for defining a cultural area is the affinity of mother tongues, as both a means of communication and the vehicle of ideas. But if language is the essential criterion, the others should not be minimized. Language provides the criterion for the initial demarcation of areas; the others are then introduced for the purpose of specifying the characteristics of each area.

21. One participant presented a language map of Africa, which he drew up by consulting the very people who speak the major languages represented on it. Many comments were made to the author with regard to the language map. He pointed out the objective in mind in drawing up the map, namely, to make as exhaustive an inventory as possible of African languages, without being concerned with the language

policies of the States involved. On this subject, he asked the experts to suggest any adjustments which might improve the map.

22. Inasmuch as language is both a means of communication and the vehicle of ideas, the participants noted that classification of languages and cultural areas have very frequently gone hand in hand. The following list, presented as a guideline by Professor Cheikh Anta Diop in the working document that he submitted, provides an example:

- "(a) the Kwa or Gulf of Benin language group corresponding to one type of civilization;
- (b) the Mande or Mandingo group (the Mande-tan group and the Mande-fu group) corresponding to a distinct culture area or civilization;
- (c) the Neo-Bantu (or semi-Bantu) group of class languages of West Africa, constituting one cultural unit;
- (d) the Great Bantu group as such, defining another culture area;
- (e) the Nilotic language group;
- (f) the Cushitic group;
- (g) the Semitic group."

23. The classification of civilizations on the basis of social structures would have been useful no doubt, since the main criticism of that classification is that it takes account of only one parameter, however important it may be.

24. The experts noted that enough information is not yet available to enable a scientific and objective definition of African cultural areas to be made. They did however suggest provisionally, the adoption of the following framework:

1. North African-Saharan comprising inter alia the West African Sahel (particularly the northern parts of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad);
2. North East Africa;
3. Central Sudan;
4. West African Savanna;
5. West African Coast;
6. Bantu Africa (from the Southern Cameroon to Azania);
7. South-Western Africa;
8. Madagascar and Indian Ocean Islands.

Others suggested the following framework:

- Sahara-Sahel area;
- Nubian area;
- Bantu area;
- Sudan area;
- Guinean area;

25. The above essentially geographical references, suggested on a provisional basis, combined with the linguistic groups (see Annex III) should serve as a basis for determining cultural areas.
26. One participant felt that before embarking on such large-scale research, it would be wise to apply the parameters adopted above to the definition of cultural areas (or a cultural area) at the national level, then extend the study progressively to the regional level and finally to the continent. Others responded that present borders (carried over from the colonial period) generally did not respect the boundaries of cultural areas, since very often the same family, the same ethnic group and the same people were spread over several States. Some experts then attempted to explain cultural areas, taking as an example, the Bantu cultural area (see Annex IV).
27. During the discussion of the cultural areas, some experts made the following observations:
1. avoid terms of reference relating to ethnic groups, e.g., instead of Arabic-Berber, the term Sahara-Sahel or North African region should be used;
  2. abolish once and for all terms such as Hamite and its derivatives, Hottentot, Boshiman, etc. Hottentot and Boshiman should be replaced by San and Khoi Khoi, terms used by the populations themselves;
  3. reject the term Kwa.
- B. Item 2 of the agenda: Relations between African cultural areas: points of convergence
28. The examination of this item was dependent on the cultural areas which should have been defined under item 1. Since it has not proved possible to establish such areas, however, the opportunity was taken to examine in some detail the framework of specificities and convergences provided by the Language Map of Africa. It was noted that over three-quarters of the languages of Africa belong to one of two major areas of wider affinity, and that the languages of the continent as a whole may be further subdivided into around 120 'sets' of languages.
29. On the subject of the definition of 'convergences', it was recognized that these may include common features due to historical 'divergence' from a common source, to syncretism or borrowing or to preservation in a substratum. In practical terms, it was noted that cultural convergence in large urban areas (especially in capital cities) will often require these to be treated separately, and that the study of cultural contrasts in the past should not allow us to overlook the process of cultural convergence in present-day Africa (especially under the stimulus of the mass-media and of the nation-state).
- C. Item 3 of the agenda: Relations between African cultural areas and Arab culture
30. During the discussion, one participant pointed out that speaking about Afro-Arab relations should be avoided inasmuch as they are frequently clouded and vitiated by the slave trade and its deep and lasting consequences, and by prejudices and passions on both sides that still characterize contemporary times. Consequently, he asked the experts to focus the discussions on the relations between Arab and African cultures. He also made the point that we very often forget that these relations go back very far in time, to the pre-Islamic era.

31. Consideration of this item clearly pointed out that three parameters dominated these relations, namely: religion, language and trade. The experts noted that Islam and the Arabic language spread through Africa at the same time. Some experts stressed the role Africans played in the expansion of Islam. One expert pointed out that the differences between Negro African cultures and Arab culture should not be minimized. Muslim monotheism, in particular, excludes other concepts of the divinity, whereas African cultures have a monotheistic concept that sees in all gods different forms of one and the same God. Exclusivist monotheism easily leads to a closed attitude, while integrating monotheism is more open. One expert recalled the superiority complex that frequently characterizes converts to Islam with regard to their non-Islamized fellows. Others also gave examples of cultural alienation, such as the tendency of griots or certain traditional Sudanese scholars to trace the lineage of great families back to the Prophet. With regard to language, the experts pointed out different levels of the use of Arabic from country to country. In some areas, Arabic has completely superseded the local language; in others, although Arabic predominates, it is used concurrently with local languages; in still others, Arabic is used only by a minority or only in special circumstances. Finally, other areas have only used the Arabic alphabet to transcribe their own language. The meeting recognized that research into the influences of cultural exchange between Africans and Arabs should be broadened, since there is very little information on African cultural contributions to Arab culture. The participants pointed out some aspects of the influence of African cultures on Arab culture, both with regard to the Muslim religion and the Arabic language. There is a vast amount of literature in Arabic script, especially in the Sudan area, and also a large number of books. Examination of these sources would clearly facilitate better understanding of these reciprocal influences. Attention was drawn to the work of collecting Arabic manuscripts or texts in African languages that have been transcribed into Arabic (ajami script) undertaken particularly in the Sahel area. It was noted that manuscripts concerning this area are located abroad and that their restitution would be desirable.

32. After consideration of this item of the agenda, the experts recognized that another meeting should be devoted to this topic in order to treat it thoroughly.

D. Item 4 of the agenda: Relations between African cultural areas and non-African cultures

33. An expert from the African diaspora in the new world addressed the meeting. Using Haiti as an example, he showed that African language and religion are clearly the substratum of the culture of the diaspora. His contribution, which is included in an annex, eloquently speaks to this point.

34. It was pointed out that the meeting of experts on "The African Negro Cultural Presence in the Caribbean and in North and South America", which has just been held in Bridgetown (Barbados), stressed the vitality of the African cultural heritage, as revealed at once through language, religion, art and social institutions, etc. The importance of African languages is such that the meeting in Barbados recommended that Unesco should send African specialists to the Caribbean and to other countries of North and South America to help analyse the oral traditions and religious texts that have been handed down, the meaning of which is not always understood by those in possession of them.

35. One participant, whose views were shared by the meeting, was astonished that each time reference is made to African diaspora, we think of the Atlantic, but rarely of the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean or the Far East where large black communities of African origin do in fact live.

36. Owing to insufficient time, the meeting was not able to examine the penetration of non-African cultures into Africa, whether it be through colonization, evangelization, European sedentarization or the Westernization process.

E. Item 5 of the agenda: Study, research and publications plan

37. In anticipation of consideration of this item on the agenda, some experts had submitted draft recommendations and programme proposals to the Secretariat of the meeting. These recommendations are either general in character, or specific to one of the items of the agenda.

For item I - Recommendations concerning specific items of the agenda. As it has been impossible to define cultural areas, the experts recommend that Unesco should give interdisciplinary teams of researchers the mission of preliminary studies for the purpose of drawing up a cultural map of Africa. These studies should take into account both the parameters identified by the meeting and the geographical framework suggested during consideration of item I.

38. For item 3 - In order to bridge the gap with regard to the interactions between Arab and African cultures, the experts suggested the following general lines for research:

- historical aspects of Arab and African cultural relations;
- impact of Arab culture on African cultures;
- impact of African cultures on Arab culture;
- relations between Arab, Christian and African cultures;
- the image of the Arab and of Islam in the media and in African literature, and vice versa;
- monographs on Afro-Arab cultural relations (e.g., in Somalia, Sudan, Mauritania and in the countries of the Niger loop);
- detailed research with regard to Madagascar (Malayo-Polynesian, African and Arab culture) and the Swahili area (Bantu, Arab and Malagasy).

General Recommendations

39. The meeting took note of a document entitled "Proposals for a Pan-African Association of Researchers and for a Scientific Journal on Cultural Development", presented by Mr. E. O. Apronti (see annex). The document specified that the African Cultural Institute has been commissioned by its Member States to set up a Pan-African association of researchers and launch a journal on cultural development. The representative of the Association of African Universities also stated that the Secretary-General of the Association, by decision of its General Assembly, had undertaken the formation of an association of African research and the publication of a journal.

40. The meeting concluded that it was not competent to examine this question inasmuch as the responsible authorities of the two aforementioned organizations had received specific instructions from their governing bodies, namely, the Council of Ministers of the African Cultural Institute and the General Assembly of the Association of African Universities. The meeting hoped, however, that every possible effort would be made to avoid duplication and dispersion of effort.

41. In the same context, the following recommendation was submitted to the meeting:

It is proposed that this meeting of experts should recommend to Unesco the convening, in co-operation with the Organization of African Unity, of an early meeting of representatives of all inter-African organizations in the field of culture, language and education. The purpose of the meeting would be to ensure the maximum degree of effort, in the pursuit of all the common aims of these organizations. Special attention should be given to the feasibility of mutual representation in different capital cities, to the harmonization of research and seminar programmes, and to the joint production and/or distribution of publications.

Motion of Thanks to the Government of Ghana

42. The experts brought together at Accra from 18 to 22 February 1980 to study "The cultural specificity and points of cultural convergence in the different regions of Africa south of the Sahara" sincerely thank the Government of Ghana, and the Ghanaian National Commission for Unesco, the Arts Council of Ghana, the musicians and artists of Productions Faisal Helwani and all those who contributed either directly or indirectly to make their meeting a success.
43. The experts express their gratitude for the unforgettable hospitality they received and for the particularly favourable working conditions made available to them.



ANNEX I

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1989-02-18

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