

ORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN UNITY

CENTRE FOR LINGUISTIC AND HISTORICAL STUDIES BY ORAL TRADITION

FINAL REPORT OF THE MEETING  
ON CULTURAL AREAS IN WEST AFRICA  
NIAMEY, 29 APRIL TO 3 MAY, 1985

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I. INTRODUCTION

I. A meeting on Cultural Areas in West Africa was held at the Centre for Linguistic and Historical Studies by Oral Tradition of the Organization of African Unity (OAU/CLHSOT) in Niamey, on the initiative of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), from 29 April to 3 May, 1985. The following participated in the meeting :

Messrs - I.A. AKINJOGBIN	(Nigeria)
Pathé DIAGNE	(Senegal)
Djibo HAMANI	(Niger)
Marc-Laurent HAZOUME	(Benin)
Siddo ISSA	(Niger)
Lamine KAMARA	(Guinea)
Dr. K. A. MARIKO	(Niger)
Marcien TOWA	(Cameroon)

Professors Cheikh Anta DIOP (Senegal), C. Magbaily FYLE (Sierra Leone), and André SALIFOU (Niger), could not attend although invited.

There was a large number of observers (lecturers, researchers, specialists in matters of culture and information, students etc). They followed discussions and made a full contribution to them (the list of participants is appended).

2. Several documents were examined and discussed (the list of documents is also appended). It was noticed at the end of discussions that much had already been done on the delimitation of cultural



areas. Participants were of the opinion that the idea of preliminary researches could be discarded since a distinction must be made between the identification of cultural areas and the theory of the formation of those areas.

3. Mr. Mangoné NIANG, Head of the Linguistics Unit opened the meeting on behalf of CLHSOT in the presence of Pr. Abdou HAMANI, Recteur (Vice Chancellor), University of Niamey.

Mr. NIANG reminded participants that the meeting should enable them to map out, to an appreciable extent, the cultural areas of the region and determine, provisionally at least, the terminology to be used in designating the cultural areas thus defined.

He pointed out that the meeting was the follow-up of the Meeting of Experts on Cultural Specificities and Cultural Points of Convergence in the different Areas of Africa South of the Sahara organized by UNESCO in Accra, from 18 to 22 February 1980 and, of the meeting held in Niamey from 7 to 11 December 1981, on Cultural Policy and African Unity (the opening and closing addresses to the meeting are appended).

4. The following were then elected as officers :

Chairman	Mr. Marcien TOWA
Rapporteur	Mr. Mangoné NIANG

5. The Chairman suggested that the agenda of the meeting be considered and requested participants to draw up a programme of work (the agenda is appended).

6. Thanks to the Radio and Television Service of the Republic of Niger, some participants recorded, in the morning of 3 May 1985, a round table meeting on cultural areas in West Africa.

7. The meeting adopted its final report in the afternoon of 3 May and was closed soon after.



## I. CULTURAL AREAS IN WEST AFRICA

After an exchange of views on aspects of methodology, participants thought that it would be proper to state specifically the criteria to identify cultural areas. The following criteria were unanimously accepted :

- 1) Production and exchange activities ;
- 2) Social and political organization ;
- 3) Beliefs, representation and conceptions of the world ;
- 4) Work of art ;
- 5) Linguistic situation ;
- 6) History.

Cultural areas in West Africa were determined by taking into account the above criteria and the views expressed in the working papers. After lengthy and lively discussions, it was concluded that there were two cultural areas, namely : the Sahelian and the Sudano-Guinean Cultural Areas.

### I.I. THE SAHELIAN CULTURAL AREA

#### 1.1.1. Production and Exchange Activities.

In this area are found nomads and a settled population leading a complementary life and never in conflict. The people of the Sahara, in fact, depend on crops produced by farmers in the Sahel. Cereal growing and extensive stockbreeding are practised. These favoured important currents of exchange between farmers and stockbreeders. The African mode of land appropriation is observed but there are different types of land tenure. There are no land owners but land administrators. The pasture land, the hunting grounds and the salt areas intended for treatment are managed by the community as a whole. Although the people living in these regions are mostly moslems, it seems the original mode of production is little affected by the muslim law. Certain changes are however noted and some families are beginning to appropriate lands belonging to the community.



1.1.2. Social and political Organization.

Even if in some regions (Mali, Senegal), there are no longer traditional chiefs, there are still village chiefs. It is the monarchical type of social organization, a model found at all levels. Societies in the Sahel are based on the home community. The family and the village are units in which production and a specific culture develop. There is apparently what may be called a "communau-crazy" (women, foreigners and the youth organizing themselves). Although the structures are clearly graded and there is a social disparity, castes do not exist everywhere ; similarly it is fairer to speak of prisoners (captured from wars and who cannot, in any way, be sold) rather than of slaves.

1.1.3. Beliefs, Representation and Conceptions of the World.

The people living in these regions are mostly moslems. Some of them are however so much attached to their traditional conceptions of the world that the religion bears the marks of these conceptions.

Thus, should be seen in the development of "maraboutism", a way of integrating Islam, of having intermediaries between the believer and his Creator. The integration of non-moslems into islamic cities directed by sultans or sprung from a Jihad had never been a problem. Great chiefs of empires such Sonni Ali Ber and Ousmane Dan Fodio knew the difference between islamization and arabization.

1.1.4. Work of Art.

The mask is absent in the eastern part of these regions and is gradually disappearing in the western part from north to south. Nevertheless, there are rock drawings, an advanced handicraft and a very original architecture.



#### 1.1.5. Linguistic Situation.

In this region, the great facility of movement and the intermixing of people led to the emergence of widely spoken languages, languages spoken by millions of people. Some of the languages (Arabic in Chad, Hausa in Niger, Mandingo in Mali, Wolof in Senegal) are becoming more and more common languages in those States.

#### 1.2. SUDANO-GUINEAN CULTURAL AREA

##### 1.2.1. Production and Exchange Activities.

This area is characterized by a much more pronounced exploitation of the environment. There are two rainy seasons in some parts of the area (in the Sahel, there is only one), diversified farm production is practised, small ruminants and adapted cattle are reared. Corn, yam and starchy foods are grown. Millet and sorghum are cultivated by the Mandingo of the Sudan area. Fishermen and hunters are also found in the area. There is a large number of transition areas where cattle are reared and mixed farming is also practised as a result of migrations from the Sahel : millet, sorghum and corn (southern part of Benin). Finally, water transport is much developed in those regions drained by rivers. Systems of land appropriation and space control are similar to those of the Sahelian Cultural Area.

##### 1.2.2. Social and Political Organization.

The grading of social structures in this area led to a civilization more egalitarian from the social point of view and, more democratic from the political point of view. Organization of corporate bodies and a fairly advanced division of labour. Castes play a rather marginal role (except among the Mandigo). Collegial system of government and dominating function of the head of the family.

##### 1.2.3. Beliefs, Representation. and Conceptions of the World.

As it can be noticed in Black Africa as a whole, it must be pointed out that local divinities exist around a central and single God, Creator of the universe. Local divinities are specialized



divinities one may evoke with the view to submitting to them pressing problems of everyday life. Initiation here is apparently more pronounced with esoteric languages (known in some cases as "couvent languages") and a mythologic literature or a scientific literature among the Yoruba (rational ways of numeration and calculation). There is also the idea of re-incarnation as we find everywhere in Africa.

#### 1.2.4. Work of Art

The cloth and the sandal are worn in a particular way. A certain type of hair style is adopted. The handicraft (utilitarian and religious) is very rich. There is an art furniture with bold architectural designs. There is a statuary, particularly a large number of masks and an advanced music. There is also a court figurative art.

#### 1.2.5. Linguistic Situation.

Some linguistic homogeneity on the Atlantic coast from Ghana to South Nigeria is noted. On the other hand, there is much linguistic diversity in the southern region as a result of the migratory movements from the Sahel, hence the lack of homogeneity. As in the Sahelian Cultural Area, there are common languages such as Dendi, Bariba in Benin, Gulumancema in Burkina etc.

### 1.3. DIFFERENCES AND COMMON FEATURES

#### 1.3.1. Two types of differences are noted :

1°/ The Sudano-Guinean Cultural Area is more egalitarian from the Social point of view. It is also more democratic.

2°/ Less affected by the major ideological systems (islamo-eastern, judeo-christian), the Sudano-Guinean Cultural Area is apparently more pluralistic.



### 1.3.2. Common Features

1°/ There is, on both sides, a specific African mode of production characterized by an absence of land appropriation by the individual and nearly the same conceptions of the world.

2°/ The two cultural areas were, for a long time, a single geo-economic whole. From the 15th century, trade currents were established between the Ashanti and the Sahara through the Hausa country ; for instance, kola nut is grown in the Sudano-Guinean area but mostly sold and consumed in the Sahelian area.

## II. RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CULTURAL AREAS OF WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA.

The sociological and linguistic relation between some populations in West Africa and the Bantu in Central Africa is attested. Furthermore, it gives an aspect of the continuum which shows clearly that the frontiers between these two regions translate realities other than those of culture. We have already noted important migrations from the Sahel (particularly to the Congo, Zaire and Central Africa with the arrival of the Bororo in 1920 and, who introduced stockbreeding in that country). Existence of kingdoms next to societies without centralized power. Trade in ivory between Cameroon and Nigeria. It should be noted that Central Africa is not considered a cultural area as such. It is part of the Bantu area. Finally, Central Africa has more similarities with the Sudano-Guinean area than it has with the Sahelian area.

## III. RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CULTURAL AREAS IN WEST AFRICA AND THE ARAB WORLD.

These relations are marked by a number of specificities. But they differ much from those which existed between the Arab countries and the rest of the world (Europe, the East and even East Africa). Is it right to speak of the "Arab World" instead of North Africa ? It is true that there were continuous relations between West and North Africa. It must, however, be pointed out that a movement such



as that of the Almoravids was not an Arab movement but an islamization movement (conducted by the Berbers and the Black of the Senegal River Valley).

But, whatever may be the case, these relations went through various (economic, religious, cultural and political) stages. Since Islam is a system of ideological representation as well as a project of society, islamization led to new political, conceptual, artistic and mythological orders; even if with the moslem conquerors, there were a scientific and philosophical tradition as well as an emergence of local African writers from the 15th century.



#### IV. STUDIES, RESEARCHES, PUBLICATIONS

The meeting could not examine this item thoroughly. It however endorsed the proposals made by the seminar held in Niamey in December, 1981.

It recommended that studies and researches be devoted to the following areas and themes :

- philosophy ;
- African cultures, monographs (by culture or theme), identification criteria to cultural areas ; reference to ancestors, traditions on collective activities, for instance, collective fishing in ponds ;
- Myth (Shango, Ifa etc) ;
- Mode of land appropriation, the kola nut as a sign of civilization etc.

By making contact with universities, an inventory of the work done could be made and a prize system devised to contribute to research.

Among the works to be translated, mention was made of "Infaq el-Maisur" of Mohammed Bello as an important source of information.



ANNEX I

AGENDA

- 1°) Cultural areas in West Africa : definition, designation.
- 2°) Relations between West and Central Africa
- 3°) Relations between West and North Africa
- 4°) Programmes of studies, researches and publications.



ANNEX II

LIST OF DOCUMENTS

I. UNESCO

1. Cultural specificity and points of cultural divergence in West African Savannah - Yoruba Example.

I.A. Akinjogbin

2. The Upper Guinea Coast as a cultural area

C. Magbaily Fyle

3. Final Report of the Meeting of Experts on Cultural Specificities and points of cultural convergence in different areas of Africa South of the Sahara, Accra, Ghana, 18-22 February 1980.

II. OUA/CLHSOT

4. Rapport final du Séminaire "Politique Culturelle et Unité Africaine", Niamey, Niger 7-11 Décembre, 1981.

5. Culture et mythe Kanuri au Kanem - Bornou

Abdoulaye Mamani

6. Culture et aires culturelles au Niger

Kélétigui A. Mariko

7. Détermination des aires culturelles : préalables méthodologiques

Mangoné Niang

8. Document de travail.



ANNEX III

Opening Address delivered by the Head of  
the Linguistics Unit.

The Vice Chancellor,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are happy today to host this meeting of experts on the definition of the criteria to determine cultural areas in West Africa. This meeting should make it possible for the specialists you are, to map out, to a very great extent, the cultural areas of the region and determine, at least provisionally, the terminology to be used in designating, the cultural areas thus defined.

This meeting is the follow-up of the meeting of experts on Cultural Specificities and cultural points of convergence in different areas of Africa South of the Sahara organized by UNESCO in Accra from 18 to 22 February, 1980 and, of the Seminar held at this very Centre, from 7 to 11 December 1981 on the theme : "Cultural Policy and African Unity".

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is obvious that these meetings are inspired by the spirit of the All-Africa Festival of Algiers and the pedagogy of African Unity without which, no political, economic, and cultural balance can really be envisaged.

May I remind you, in this respect, that a research on the points of divergence and convergence of cultural areas spares us the



effort of perceiving in the extreme our cultural and social realities. It brings the interrogation on Africa to a level of objective characterization because, it introduces us, thanks to a rigid methodology, to a typology of scientific order. Since research on cultural areas, to be successful, requires an overall approach (that is, a central epistemology where fragmentary epistemologies such as that of linguistics, sociology and even economics meet), meetings of this kind can only take us far from our respective theoretical anchorages.

While, welcoming participants and guests on behalf of CLHSOT, I declare the meeting on Cultural Areas in West Africa open.



ANNEX IV

Closing Address delivered by the Head of the Linguistics Unit.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have now come to the end of our deliberations. May I, on behalf of CLHSOT, express my thanks to you for having participated intelligently and passionately in this reflection on our cultural realities.

I am convinced that we shall not stop on the outcome of this meeting. I am also convinced that from Niamey will emerge an issue and a more rigorous approach to the definition and identification of criteria to cultural areas.

To conclude, I shall not use the words which, in such circumstances, usually bring our deliberations to a close. I believe this is the end of our discussions in Niamey and we shall continue to look into societies and cultures for a better mastery of our destiny.

I thank you once again and wish you all, a happy return to your homes.



ANNEX V - LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

MEETING ON CULTURAL AREAS IN WEST AFRICA

29 APRIL - 3 MAY, 1985

I. PARTICIPANTS

Mr. I.A. AKINJOGBIN,  
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COTONOU (République Populaire du Bénin)

M. Siddo ISSA  
Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines  
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M. Marcien TOWA  
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YAOUNDE (Cameroun)

M. Lamine KAMARA  
Commission nationale guinéenne pour l'UNESCO  
Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la  
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BP. 964  
CONAKRY (Guinée)

M. Kélétiogui A. Mariko  
s/c SOS Sahel International  
NIAMEY (Niger)



## II. OBSERVERS

M. Maizama Issa	Ministère de la jeunesse des sports et de la culture.
Mme. Reinatou MAZOU	Institut de recherches en sciences humaines, Université de Niamey
M. Mahamane KARIMOU	Université de Niamey
M. Inoussa OUSSEINI	" "
M. Abbey DENKE	Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines, Université de Niamey
M. Joab GOZZO	" "
Mme. Mary W. KABA	" "
M. Hamidou Lailaba MAIGA	" "
M. J.D. PENEL	" "
M. Z. Issa SEYNI	" "
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M. Atoumane DIEYE	" " " "
M. Aimé Manima MOUBOUHA	Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines Université Marien N'GOUABI Brazzaville



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