Areal cultural scripts for social interaction in West African communities

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Abstract

*Ways of interacting and not interacting in human societies have social, cognitive and cultural dimensions. These various aspects may be reflected in particular in relation to "taboos". They reflect the ways of thinking and the values of a society. They are recognized as part of the communicative competence of the speakers and are learned in socialization. Some salient taboos are likely to be named in the language of the relevant society, others may not have a name. Interactional taboos can be specific to a cultural linguistic group or they may be shared across different communities that belong to a 'speech area' (Hymes 1972). In this article we describe a number of unnamed norms of communicative conduct which are widespread in West Africa such as the taboos on the use of the left hand in social interaction and on the use of personal names in adult address, and the widespread preference for the use of intermediaries for serious communication. We also examine a named avoidance (*yaage*) behavior specific to the Fulbe, a nomadic cattle-herding group spread from West Africa across the Sahel as far as Sudan. We show how tacit knowledge about these taboos and other interactive norms can be captured using the cultural scripts methodology.*

Keywords: cultural scripts, names, interactional taboo, triadic communication, speech area, Ewe, Fulfulde

1.   Introduction

In every society and in every speech community there are good and bad ways of speaking and there are good and bad ways of behaving. These ways of speaking and behaving form part of the norms and values of interaction in a community and serve as a frame for interpreting communicative conduct in a community. They are often indicative of unconscious

or semi-automatic schemas and models. They are transmitted from pa-
rents to children in socialization and their violation may lead to punitive
sanctions. Some pertain to things one should not do or say when with
other people. Some pertain to things one should not do when in certain
places, e.g. a kitchen or a bathroom or a bedroom. For instance, one
common West African norm is that one should not talk while eating, i.e.
that meal times are a period when there should be silence. This is in sharp
contrast to western cultures, such as Dutch culture, where meal times (es-
pecially the evening meal time) are a time for discussing family matters.
Some linguistic groups in West Africa such as the Gbe speaking commu-
nities[1] have sayings that reflect this banal norm of behaviour (cf. Gyekye
1996). In Ewe (a Gbe lect spoken in south eastern Ghana across southern
Togo and just across the Togo-Benin border), a saying that parents
employ to inculcate this value in children during socialization is given in
(1):[2]

(1)   *kokló   mé-nɔ-a   nú   ka-ḿ   ḍe-a*
      chicken   NEG-be.at:NPRES-HAB   thing   scatter-PROG   emit-HAB
      gbe   o
      voice   NEG
      'When the chicken is digging for its food it does not crow.'

In other linguistic cultural groups, such as the Akan (Ghana), the norm
of silence during meals is enforced by adding a threat that something very
bad will happen to you if you do not conform. Members are threatened
with the loss of one of their parents as a consequence of violating this
norm (Agyekum 2002). The social and psychological reality of a norm
of behavior as simple as not speaking while eating should be evident.
The question that arises is how to capture such cultural rules in a way
that allows for comparison across cultures. Our claim is that cultural
scripts formulated using the hypothetical semantic primes of the Natural
Semantic Metalanguage is a step in that direction (see e.g., Goddard
2000; Wierzbicka 1999, 2002, 2003, 2004). We propose the following cul-
tural script for this simple norm. Needless to say, this cultural script is
absent from continental European societies.[3]

[A]   *Cultural script for silence while eating*
      [people think like this:]
      there are times when people have to eat [M]
      when people are eating [M] at these times, it is good if they don't say
         any words

As indicated above, the cultural script in [A] is shared by members of
several distinct linguistic communities which belong to what might be

called a West African cultural area, or from the point of view of shared communicative norms, to what Hymes (1972) calls a 'speech area'. We refer to scripts that pertain to a speech area, i.e., an area in which contiguous cultural linguistic groups share similar communicative practices, as areal cultural scripts. One can think of the cultural rules concerning the use of the counterparts of Tu and Vous in continental Europe as areal cultural scripts (cf. Wierzbicka 2004: 576 for a characterization of the Polish rule, and her note that analogous scripts exist in many European languages).

The main goals of this paper are two-fold. First, we wish to explore some cultural models and norms of interaction that are shared by several different groups in West Africa. We focus on ''the role of an intermediary or third party emissary [which] is a very common occurrence in all of West Africa'' (Tarr 1979: 208), and on name avoidance in adult address. Second, we discuss the cultural rules of avoidance behavior among the Fulbe, a cattle herding group of people spread all over West Africa and into Central Africa as far as the Sudan. The behavior is linked to the cultural key word *yaage*, which can be very roughly glossed as 'respect'. The paper is structured as follows. In section 2 we give some preliminary examples of West African areal cultural scripts pertaining to the non-use of the left hand in interaction, and to pre-closings in leave-taking. Section 3 concentrates on the foundational cultural practice of third party communication in everyday interaction. Section 4 discusses the speech practice of the avoidance of personal names in adult address. Section 5 focuses on the Fulbe-specific avoidance behavior associated with *yaage* which includes more extreme forms of name avoidance, as well as other practices. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2.   Some West African interactional norms

We now give two further preliminary examples of West African interactional norms.

2.1   *Left hand taboo*

An important practice that children as well as visitors to West Africa are taught is that one should not use the left hand when interacting with people. One should not wave or point to another person with the left hand. One should not shake hands with another person using the left hand. One cannot pass something to another person with the left hand. The source of this norm is that the left hand is thought of in West Africa

(and beyond) as a dirty hand. Its use is restricted almost exclusively to the performance of ablutions. Because ablutions are traditionally thought of as 'dirty' or 'filthy', the hand that is customarily used for them is also considered 'dirty' and 'unwholesome'. Thus one should not use it when eating or to handle food that is meant to be consumed. In fact, in many communities the name for the right hand is 'the eating hand' or 'the hand to eat with'. The use of the left hand, the dirty hand, in social intercourse implies an insult. There is a repertoire of proverbs and aphorisms that teach morals about the correct use of the left hand, as well as its 'unwholesome' nature. One such proverb in Ewe is *Wó-mé-tsɔ́-á mia fi-á-á ame fé mɔ́ o* 'The left hand is not used to point to the way to one's hometown'. Dzobo (1973: 37) explains: ''the left hand is traditionally considered as an unclean hand because it is used for cleaning the anus, and so if you use it to point the way to your hometown it means that you do not think much of your hometown''. Analogous proverbs exist in the other languages. For instance in Kasem (a Gur language spoken across the Ghana-Burkina Faso border) there is the proverb *Ba ba mae gwia ba bere nabera sɔŋɔ* 'One does not point to the mother's home with the left hand'. Part of Awedoba's (2000: 148) commentary on this proverb reads: ''It is considered a sign of disrespect if not an outright insult, to use the left hand to point to a person or an object of some importance, and in the case of the mother's clan-settlement, it would constitute gross disrespect and ingratitude to use the left to point to it.''

The salience of the left hand taboo can be gleaned from the verbal and non-verbal strategies that can be deployed if one finds oneself in situations where one has to use the left hand. In such situations one must excuse one's behaviour, seek indemnity to violate a social norm. Several languages in the area have routines dedicated to this purpose. In Fulfulde, the language of the Fulbe, for example, one excuses oneself by saying *albarka* 'excuse, please'. In the Kwa languages of the lower Volta basin, the relevant routines make specific reference to the left hand; for example, in Ewe the formula is *Mia ló* [left.hand UFP] 'The left hand, I advise you'. In Ga and Akan, respectively, the formulas are as follows: *Mi hã bo abeku* [1sg give 2sg left.hand] 'I give it to you with the left hand' and *Me-m-má wo abenkum* [1sg-NEG-give 2sg left.hand] 'I do not give (it to you) with the left hand' (Ameka 1994a).

The taboo on the use of the left hand in social interaction can be captured in a cultural script as follows:

[B]   *Cultural script for left hand taboo in West Africa*
      [people think like this:]
      when I am with other people

> if I want to do something with my hands [M], it is bad if I do it with the left hand [M]

if I do something with my left hand [M], people can think something like this about me:

> "this person is a bad person"

if I have to do something with the left hand [M], it can be good if I can do it

> with my other hand [M] at the same time

if I have to do something with the left hand [M], I have to say something about it to these people

I have to say it with some words

people know what words they can say at times like this

Non-verbal strategies used to offset the infraction of the left hand taboo include using both hands, e.g., to receive or to offer something to someone else; or to use the right hand as support for the left hand. Kita and Essegbey (2001) investigated the effect of the left hand taboo on pointing gestures in an Ewe community in Ghana. They found that the taboo restrained the consultants from using the left hand to point while giving directions, even when motorically the use of the left hand would have been easier and more natural since what they were pointing to was on the left. In their debriefing many of the consultants explained that they refrained from using the left hand because its use in interaction with other people is disrespectful to their interlocutors. Such self-reports reflect the knowledge component of the actors represented in the cultural script.

2.2   *Permission to leave*

Another communicative practice common to several cultural linguistic groups in West Africa relates to leave-taking. The cultural model involved is that one cannot just take leave of one's host without first asking permission to leave (cf. Ameka 1999). The request for permission to leave is a genuine one and can be answered positively or negatively. A positive response may be accompanied by other supportive acts like thanking the visitor for coming, and expressing displeasure at having to let them go. If the response is negative, the host signals that he or she would like the visitor to participate in other activities. In some cases this may involve an invitation to have a meal or a drink with the host or to perform some other social ritual. The visitor can accede to the request and delay departure, or may decline and repeat the request adding a justification for not being able to stay longer. If the visitor agrees to stay, at the end of the other activities that were introduced into the agenda, so to speak, he or she would have to re-enact the permission seeking.

The closing of social encounters in West Africa can be divided into three phases. The first, the pre-closing, is seeking permission to leave. The second, a leave-taking phase, may comprise a formal gesture of closure and/or seeing off activity and the exchange of farewells. The third, the departure phase, is when parting finally takes place. The first phase opens up the closing, to borrow a phrase from Schegloff and Sacks (1973). It is omitted if the meeting is a chance one, and it is minimally realised if the encounter is purposeful but informal. It is obligatory and fairly elaborate if the situation is a formal one, such as traditional ceremonies of name-giving, certain types of funerals, marriages, arbitrations at the chief's court, etc. We propose the following cultural script to represent the communicative practice of requesting permission before leaving a host.

[C]   *Cultural script for permission to leave*
      [people think like this:]
      when I am with someone in this person's place because I wanted to
         do some things with this person
      if I think like this: "I don't want to be here in this person's place
         anymore"
      I have to say something like this to this person:
         "I think that there is nothing more you want us to do now
         I think that there is nothing more you want to say to me now
         if it is like this, I want to be somewhere else a short time after this
         I want to do something because of this
         I know that I can't do it if you don't say to me 'you can do it'
         I want you to say it"

The salience of this pre-closing phase of leave-taking in West Africa is reflected in the folk linguistic action labels used to talk about it in different languages. For instance, *srɛ kwan* 'beg way' (Akan) and *bíá mɔ́* 'ask way, ask permission' (Ewe). It is also reflected in the transfer of this communicative practice to the varieties of English and French used in that part of the world. There is an anecdote about a Malian studying in Paris who was invited to dinner by a French lady. At the end of the evening the Malian wanted to signal his desire to close the interaction. He said to his hostess: *On va demander la route*, literally 'One will ask for the road/ route'. His hostess understood this to mean that he was asking for a route description of how to get back home. So she replied: *On descend et on tourne à gauche . . .* 'You go down and then you turn left . . .'. Obviously the misunderstanding was due to the fact that the Malian was using the West African pre-closing strategy in France, where it is inappropriate. The phrase *on va demander la route* has become a routine expression in

West African French. In anglophone West African countries such as Ghana, similar standardized phrases are emerging. It is not uncommon to hear friends who are about to end an interaction jocularly say in English *Permission to fall out*, and the host replies *Permission granted*.

Furthermore, there are routinized adjacency pairs for the enactment of this phase in several of the languages. Thus in Sɛkpɛle, the language of the Likpe people in the Ghana-Togo Mountain ranges, the request can be phrased in one of two ways: *N-lέ ku-su bɔ́-tɔ* [1sg-hold CM-way CM-ask] 'I am asking permission to leave'; *N-tɔ ku-su ló* [1sg-ask CM-way UFP] 'I have asked permission to leave'. The response move is simply *Ku-su kpé* [CM-way be.in] 'You have permission to leave'.

The import of this permission to leave script is different from the practice in, say, Dutch culture, where there is a potential for a pre-closing but which only announces that the visitor is on the point of departing. Even though one can indicate one's intention to take leave by saying something like *Ik moet weg* (Dutch), or *I must go (now)* in English, and analogous expressions in other European languages, one does not wait to be allowed to leave. The potential for miscommunication between West Africans and Europeans in the enactment of this closing ritual is very real and understanding the different scripts that are used for interpretation is crucial.

2.3   *The permission to leave cultural script in Ewe*

A central assumption of NSM methodology is that each language has an irreducible semantic core which can be arrived at through reductive paraphrase analysis. It is hypothesized that these semantic cores will be isomorphic across languages. Given the dearth of reductive paraphrase analyses in non-English languages, some NSM practitioners have resorted to testing the universality of the elements identified as semantic primes in English by looking for their identical equivalents in canonical contexts in the other languages. The assumption is that this will also yield isomorphic sets of exponents of semantic primes in different languages (see Goddard and Wierzbicka eds 1994, 2002). Similarly, semantic paraphrases and cultural scripts formulated using the English version of the NSM can be rendered in the NSM versions of other languages. An advantage of this is that the adequacy of the semantic descriptions can be tested with speakers of the languages in the languages themselves. As an illustration of the relatively language and culture independent nature of the NSM lexicon and grammar, we propose the following rendition of cultural script [C] in Ewe (see Ameka 1994b for the exponents of some of the primes in Ewe):

[C1]   *Mɔ́-bíá-bíá* [way-RED-ask] 'Asking permission'
    [ame-wó   bu   álé]
    person-PL   think   like.this
    'people think like this'
    né   me-le   ame   áɖé   gbɔ́   le   afí   áɖé
    when   1sg-be.at:PRES   person   INDEF   place   LOC   place   INDEF
    'if I am at someone's place somewhere'
    élabéná   me-dí   bé   má-wɔ   náné-wó   le
    because   1sg-want   QUOT   1sg:POT-do   something-PL   LOC
    é-gbɔ́   lá
    3sg-place   TP
    'because I want to do some things with him/her (this person)'
    né   me-bu   ta.me   álé:
    if   1sg-think   head   like.this
    'if I think like this':
        "*nye-mé-dí   bé   má-ga-nɔ   ame   sia*
        1sg-NEG-want   QUOT   1sg:POT-more-be.at:NPRES   person   this
        gbɔ́   le   afí   sia   o
        place   LOC   place   this   NEG"
        'I don't want to be at this place with this person anymore'
é-le   bé   má-gblɔ   nya   áɖé   ná   ame   sia   álé:
3sg.SIT   QUOT   1sg: POT-say   word   INDEF   DAT   person   this   like.this
'I have to (lit. it is that I would) say something like this to this
person'
        "*me-bu   bé   nánéké   mé-li   mía-ga-wɔ   fífía*
        1sg-think   QUOT   nothing   NEG-exist   1pl:POT-more-do   now
        o
        NEG
        'I think there is nothing more we will do now'
        me-bu   bé   nánéké   mé-li   na-ga-gblɔ
        1sg-think   QUOT   nothing   NEG-exist   2sg: POT-more-say
        ná-m   fífía   o
        DAT-1sg   now   NEG
        'I think there is nothing more you would say to me now'
        né   é-le   álé   lá   me-dí   bé
        if   3sg.SIT   like.this   TP   1sg-want   QUOT
        má-nɔ   afí   búbu   le   ɣeyiɣi   kpui
        1sg: POT-be.at:NPRES   place   other   LOC   time   short
        áɖé   megbé
        INDEF   after
        'if it is like this, I want to be somewhere else a short time after
        this'

> me-nyá   bé   né   me-gblɔ-e   ná-m   bé
> 1sg-know   QUOT if   2sg:NEG-say-3sg DAT-1sg QUOT
> ma-té.ŋú   a-wɔ-e   o   lá   nye-má-té.ŋú
> 1sg:POT can POT-do-3sg NEG TP 1sg- NEG:POT-can
> á-wɔ-e   o
> POT-do-3sg   NEG
> 'I know that if you do not say to me that I can do it, I cannot do it'
> Me-dí   bé   na-gblɔ   nya   sia   ná-m"
> 1sg-want QUOT 2sg: POT-say word this DAT-1sg
> 'I want you to say this word (thing) to me'

In terms of translatability there are no serious problems, but one can draw attention to four features of the Ewe version. First, the most natural way to express the demonstrational quotative LIKE THIS is by the portmanteau *álé*; in fact, there are no simpler exponents for this phrase. Second, a more natural way to translate the initial component 'when I am with someone....', in which the term WHEN is an allolex of TIME, is to use the Ewe term *né* 'if' which is also the exponent of the conditional or hypothetical IF. This is because the Ewe term *né* has temporal resonance; any other expression would be semantically more complex. Third and relatedly, in propositions introduced by IF the Ewe version uses a different information structure from English. For instance, in the penultimate line of the English version, the *if*-clause is postposed to the main clause, whereas in the Ewe translation it is preposed and marked by the background information marking particle *lá*, as background information to the main clause. Finally, the exponent of the BE SOMEWHERE verb is the locative verb *le* (and its allolex *nɔ*). The exponents of several primes appear to be expressed as valency options of this verb, e.g. HAVE TO is expressed by *le* plus a clause introduced by *bé* 'that'; THERE IS/EXIST is expounded by the verb *le* and the object form of a situational third person pronoun yielding *li*. Such modifications notwithstanding, the scripts represented in [C] and [C1] are semantically equivalent. It is our contention that each of the cultural scripts presented in the English version of the NSM can be rendered in the exponents of the primes in the languages of the West African cultural area if the necessary investigation is done for the various languages. The Ewe illustration here is a beginning which can be replicated for the other languages.

3. Triadic communication

A fundamental mode of communication in West Africa, be it in formal or informal contexts, is to channel information between an addressor

(source) and an addressee through intermediaries. As Yankah (1995: 2) observes:

In studying the socio-cultural norms of speaking in West Africa, the scholar would have inevitably stumbled upon triadic communication—the art of communicating with another through a third party—as a remarkable phenomenon.

This phenomenon has been accounted for in varied ways. Along the coast, the system is typically said to originate from royal discourse where respect for the king or chief, as well as his sanctity, dictate the use of a spokesperson in communicating with him. This spokesperson, who holds an identified political office in the chief's court, serves as a buffer to ward off potent words. In the Sahel region, where the societies tend to be stratified into "occupational" castes (nobles, artisans, bards (or griots) and ex-slaves), the nobles are not allowed to speak in public "because of shame", hence the bards are their spokespersons (cf. e.g., Irvine 1990). As Yankah (1995: 17, 182) notes, even though the practice "may have originated within the royal domain, it has spread to all communicative settings [. . .] the mode of royal oratory discussed here has had a trickle down effect; it permeates all formal encounters involving face-to-face communication". While it is almost impossible to communicate without an intermediary in formal encounters, informal encounters also often use the triadic mode of communication. Thus an interaction between a parent and a child in the home could be conducted in the triadic mode without assuming a formal character. In informal settings one of the participants is appointed to act as the spokesperson.

Communicative interactions that require the use of intermediaries are culturally defined. In general, any social encounter which is thought of as serious, and during which significant exchanges will take place, calls for the use of intermediaries. In such transactions there could be a single intermediary for both the addressor and the addressee, or there may be one intermediary per principal participant. The intermediaries are expected to have great oratorical skills and can recast the information in an embellished form. In this respect, they are skilled in how to transmit information that is culturally unspeakable without causing offence.

There are varied patterns of triadic communication in the West African region. For instance, in some Ivory Coast communities, story telling is carried out using an intermediary through whom the story is channelled to the audience. Similarly, the Wolof of Senegal use triadic communication and intermediaries in the performance of verbal abuse:

In *xaxuar* insult poetry, women in the family to which a new bride has come hire griots—professional verbal artists—to chant outrageous poems insulting the bride, her relatives, and other members of the community. The insults performed

in the *xaxuar* are potent. They can destroy careers, and offended parties have tried to restrict these performances. But *xaxuar* continues ... because it is a wonderfully safe device through which to vent affect (Hill and Irvine 1992: 12).

The different manifestations of third party communication are modeled on a fundamental cultural schema which can be represented as follows:

[D]   *Cultural script for third party communication*
      [people think like this:]
      when I want to say something to someone
         if I think about it like this: "it is not a small thing",
         it is good if someone else can say it to this person
      (if someone else can say it to this person, I don't have to say it)
      because of this, it can be good to say to another person: "I want
         you to do it"

The pervasiveness of triadic communication in these communities has left its mark on the grammatical structures of the languages. Some of the languages have logophoric markers or pronouns (e.g., the Gbe languages), others (e.g., Akan, Sissaala) employ epistemological stance particles to signal authorial responsibility for what is reported (Ameka 2004a; see also Dimmendaal 2001 and H. Hill 1995).

Modes of communication vary from cultural area to cultural area. In western cultures, the favored mode of communication is a dyadic face-to-face one. In Aboriginal Australia, one favored mode of communication is the "broadcast" one, where the message is not specifically addressed to an addressee (Walsh 1991). In West Africa, triadic communication is the norm. Tarr (1979: 208) says that westerners can easily relate to the use of speech intermediaries in West Africa "because our culture too employs such people". He must be thinking here of people like solicitors or legal representatives who speak on behalf of their clients. Yankah (1995) provides a typology of use of intermediaries in what he calls surrogate speech. In this typology the use of intermediaries in the Western mode appropriately belongs to a different type from the West African one. While westerners can relate to the use of speech intermediaries, there is potential for cross-cultural misunderstanding, as Tarr (1979: 208) himself observes: "If a given circumstance in Culture I calls for face-to-face first person delivery but Culture II expects that the same message or communication can only be acceptable when an intermediary is employed, misunderstandings are predictable". Communicative practices may be similar across different cultural areas, but they are governed by different rules and motivated by particular values.

Another phenomenon which may be present in all cultures is personal names. Yet its pragmatic value in address is different from culture

to culture and is a source of cross-cultural misunderstanding. We turn to this topic in the next section.

4.   Avoidance of personal names in adult address

There is no shortage of literature, scientific as well as popular, on the symbolic importance of personal names in African societies in general. As one author observes:

Nigerian indigenous names, like most African names, have a high culture content. They are not simple labels used, as baggage tags, for mere identification purposes. An indigenous African name on the whole personifies the individual, tells some story about the parents or the family of the bearer and in a more general sense points to the values of the society into which the individual is born. Unaware of these facts, some Western scholars are puzzled that Africans make a "fuss" about names. (Ubahakwe 1981: 99)

Those Western scholars who reportedly think that Africans "make a fuss" about names seem to forget that these names are hardly used in everyday interaction. The non-use of names in interaction has, however, not gone unnoticed by several commentators. For example, Dakubu (2000: 54) writing on names in Dagbon, northern Ghana notes: "There are situations in which use of a given name is avoided altogether. Even when a name is not to be avoided, it does not mean that everyone can address everyone else by name without qualification". One situation in which personal names are avoided is when one is addressing adults. Instead, social or political status titles, titles based on religious or occupational role (such as 'Teacher', 'Professor', 'Driver', 'Pastor', 'Alhaji', 'Chief', etc.), are used. Kinship terms are also employed, especially in their extended senses. This strategy has been transferred to English and French, where it is not uncommon to hear someone address a stranger as *ma soeur* 'my sister', or as *Uncle*, *Aunt*, etc. Agblemagnon (1969: 91) suggests with respect to Ewe society that the use of kinship terms in address indicates that "... pour cette société le modèle des relations d'affection et d'intimité est le modèle des rapports interpersonels au sein du groupe de parenté naturelle" (for this society, the model of relationships of affection and intimacy is the model of interpersonal relationships within the immediate family).

Another widespread strategy for the avoidance of the names of adults, extensively reported in the literature, is the use of teknonyms or parenthood titles. Dakubu (1981), for instance, sums up the raison d'etre and significance of the practice of teknonymy among the Ga of Ghana as follows:

It is very common practice to call a person of either sex by the name of his or her first-born child, with the suffix *-tsɛ* 'father of' or *-nyɛ* 'mother of'. Many people ... are rarely called anything else ... It is a very widespread way of politely avoiding lineage or other personal names and indicating respect for a person as a parent and hence a responsible adult. (Dakubu 1981: 145)

Another author goes a step further and spells out the cultural rule and the taboo associated with the use of personal names in adult address. He writes, and this applies tout court to numerous West African communities:

Ibibio speaking people believe that names are worthy of respect. In this regard, children are not expected to call their elders, let alone their parents, by their names. Women who have children are usually addressed by their children's names. For example, a woman who has a child *Imé* would be addressed ... as *Eké Imé* 'Mother of Ime'. Similarly, Ime's father would be addressed not by his real name but as *Eté Imé* 'Father of Ime'. *In fact among the Ibibio it is almost taboo for a child below teen age to address an adult who has children by his or her official name*. (Essien 1986: 85; emphasis added).

Although Essien emphasizes that it is children who cannot address adults using their personal names, it is a general rule that applies to all. Thus spouses do not use personal names between themselves. The only context where such names are regularly heard is in institutional settings like schools, hospitals and in church. They are hardly used in ordinary everyday interaction in the home or the market. The rule can be simply formulated as a script as follows:

[E]   *Cultural script for name avoidance in adult address*
      [people think like this:]
      if I think about someone like this: "this person is not a child [M]"
      when I want to say something to this person, I can't say this person's name [M]

This script, as should be evident from the discussion, applies widely in West Africa and in Africa generally (see Ameka 2004b). As we shall see in the next section, it forms part of a more pervasive avoidance system among the Fulbe.

5.   Fulbe avoidance behavior: *yaage*

The Fulbe have attracted the attention of a variety of scholars as a people preoccupied with taboos. The name of one of their clans, the Wodaabe, a group of fully nomadic Fulbe living in Niger, even means 'people of the taboo'. Daily life in all Fulbe societies is governed by a rich variety of

interactional restrictions and taboos. For the Fulbe in Mali, a key word linked to tabooed behavior is the word *yaage* (in eastern Fulfulde dialects a similar concept *semteende* exists). Translation equivalents given in the literature include all of the following: 'respect, shame, reserve, shyness, fear, restraint, sense of shame through decent education, good habits, good education' (e.g., Fagerberg-Diallo 1984; De Wolf 1995; Zoubko 1996). In Fulbe society, *yaage* is pivotal in interpersonal relations and in defining what is thought of as proper conduct (Breedveld and De Bruijn 1996). A "noble" Pullo in particular (one Fulbe person is a Pullo), is supposed to show *yaage* towards a great variety of people (Breedveld 1999). Some examples of *yaage*, the verb *yaagaade*, and other related forms, are given below.

(2) *Hannde   rewɓe   njaagataako   goriiɓe.*
     today   women   feel.respect-NEG.M.INCOMPL   their husbands
     'Nowadays women do not respect their husbands.'

(3) *Eɓe   njaagoo   moodibo maɓɓe   sanne sanne.*
     they-LOC feel.respect-M.SUB teacher   their   very much
     'They feel great admiration/inhibition for their Qur'anic teacher/ Islamic leader.'

(4) *Neɗɗo   na   yaago   innude   innde   ɓiyum.*
     person   LOC   feel.respect-M.SUB name-INF   name   his child
     A man refrains from uttering the name of his child.' (Riesman 1977: 113)

For reasons of space we are not able here to undertake a full semantic exegesis of the *yaage* concept and its relatives, though it is abundantly clear that it has no exact equivalent in English. For our purposes, the central fact is that *yaage* implies "proper behavior" between people, behaviour which avoids embarrassment or shame. As a general sign of *yaage* there are many things that a Pullo should not do: including to look a person directly in the eyes or face, to eat or drink in a stranger's presence, to say things that another person would not like to hear (e.g., insults and curses), to show bad feelings, to address a person directly by name, to expose one's possessions. These are part of the norms of interaction that every Pullo knows about and which form part of the socialization process of novices in Fulbe communities. The general existence of these interactive norms associated with *yaage* among the Fulbe can be represented in a cultural "master script" as follows:

[F] *Fulbe cultural script for* yaage *behavior*
     [people think like this:]
     I have to think about many people like this:

> I want this person to know that I think good things about this
>   person
> I want this person to know that I feel something good towards
>   this person
> I don't want this person to think anything bad about me
> because of this, when I am with this person I cannot do some
>   things
> at the same time I cannot say some things

When we refer to script [F] as a "master script", we mean that additional, more specific scripts based on it are needed to spell out in detail how it is to be implemented. For example, some of the behavioral constraints could be captured as follows, making use of the non-prime terms 'eat' and 'drink' as semantic molecules: 'I cannot eat [M] when I am with this person', 'I cannot drink [M] when I am with this person'. Some of the verbal constraints can be captured as: 'I cannot say this person's name [M] to this person', 'I cannot say bad words to this person', 'I cannot say something to this person, if I think that this person will feel something bad because of it', and 'I cannot say some things, if I think that this person doesn't want to hear these things'. The constraint on "exposing" valued possessions can possibly be modeled as follows: 'if I have some very good things, it is bad if this person can see them'. The idea behind this constraint is that if the person sees these valued possessions, they might feel jealous, i.e. bad feelings and one is expected not to generate such bad feelings in another person.

Typical of Fulbe society is that the degree to which these features of proper behaviour have to be respected, and that the manner in which this is expressed, depends on the kind of relationship that exists between two persons. Since most relationships are marked by at least some degree of *yaage*, the default proper behaviour is that these prohibitions have to be observed. The fact that the default is the taboo is commented upon by people as they state explicitly that in a "joking relationship" (e.g., between cross-cousins) these rules can be broken: cross-cousins can eat and drink in each other's presence, they can say things that this person does not want to hear (e.g., insults), etc.

The highest degree of *yaage* behaviour is between people in affinal relations, that is, between spouses (and potential spouses) and in-laws. The relationship between parents and their first child, especially between a father and a first son, also evokes a high degree of *yaage* (cf. De Bruijn and Van Dijk 1995). Socially speaking, relationships that prescribe a lot of *yaage* are unequal relations marked by a lot of love/affection; everything which can potentially harm or destroy this relationship should be avoided.

Prototypically, there is a hierarchical order between the persons in a *yaa-ge* relationship: a son cannot disobey his father, a wife cannot disobey her husband, and nobody can disobey their in-laws. Nevertheless, because the one who is lower in the hierarchy always has the option of running away, or of opting out of the relationship and thereby more or less dissolving it, the one who is higher in the hierarchy is extremely limited in the exercise of his/her authority. It is therefore best if a father does not make any request to his son so that there will not be any friction in the relationship, and in-laws had better avoid each other whenever possible.

In Fulbe society, relationships that evoke the highest degree of *yaage* involve an extreme type of name avoidance. If you are in such a relationship with a person named Hammadi, for example, not only should you never pronounce the name Hammadi to address or refer to your relation, you should also not mention a name that is a variant of or is derived morphologically or hypocristically from that name, e.g. in the case of Hammadi, one cannot say names like Hamma, Hammadu and Mohammadu which are variants of it. This is reminiscent of other types of African name taboos reported in the literature, e.g., that from Southern Africa called *hlonipa* (see e.g., Herbert 1990). The taboo on the avoidance of the name does not extend to ordinary words which might sound like the name as is the case in the taboo against the use of a dead person's name in Australian Aboriginal societies (Hargrave 1992: 38–39; cf. Wierzbicka 2004: 577). So, apart from the general avoidance of names in adult address as described in section 4, *yaage* behavior adds a further restriction: the non-use of names that are related morphologically to the names of people in a *yaage* relation. In this case the name avoidance is not restricted to adults: not even the name of a child that is related derivationally to the name tabooed due to *yaage* can be uttered.

Understandably, this name-avoiding behavior and its consequences can be problematic for outsiders. For instance, a famous ethnographer of the Fulbe, Margarite Dupire, who has studied the Wodaabe (the 'people of the taboo'), extensively since the 1960s, complains in one of her papers that it is often difficult to get to know the official name of an individual "[B]ecause of the taboos that govern the interaction between persons in certain relationships" (Dupire 1970: 223). The official or book name of a person is the name that is given (by the parents) and proclaimed by the Imam during the naming ceremony eight days after birth. "This name *innde* is not often used in daily life, where it is normally replaced by another name, because the book name is the object of all kinds of taboos that do not only touch all kin who happen to have that same name . . . but also all their homonyms [i.e. names sounding like the name—FKA&AB]" (Dupire 1970: 224).

As one might expect, the Fulbe have developed a variety of alternative address strategies which often involve the use of relationship terms and titles. For example, parents are not allowed to pronounce the name of their first child and they usually quickly make up an alternative, like a nickname to refer to their first child, or they can simply call it *afo* 'first-born'. Thus, *yaage* again adds an extra dimension to the name avoidance, where the names of one's own child has to be avoided. The same avoidance of personal names exists between spouses: a woman is not allowed to say the name of her first husband nor may he, the husband, pronounce the name of his first wife. Husband and wife can either use the name of a cross-cousin with whom they have had a long-lasting joking relationship or simply say *goram* 'my husband' or *genndam* 'my wife'. The high degree of *yaage* that governs the interaction with in-laws leads to a relationship marked by complete and total avoidance, physically and socially, as well as psychologically. In-laws are never addressed nor referred to by name, but they can be talked about to other people using the term *esam* 'my in-law', without even distinguishing between mother-in-law, father-in-law, daughter-in-law, nephew-in-law, grandfather-in-law, etc.

Other words that can be used as terms of address are titles. For instance, in Mali a Qur'anic teacher will always be addressed by his title *Moodibo* or *Mobbo*. His wife, children, friends—everybody—uses only this honorific title to address him. The address terms for many people are derived from the fact that they have performed the *hajj* 'pilgrimage to Mecca'. In many cases some identifying nickname is added. For instance, Alhaji Biro was working in a ministry ('bureau'). It is possible for a man to be married to more than one Hajja. The system can become rather confusing (at least to the outsider). For example, a young girl who could surely not have performed the *hajj* could be addressed as Hajja. The origin and motivation for the use of such a term in one case was explained by a consultant, who is not in a *yaage* relation with any of the parties concerned, as follows: "The girl's proper name is Dikko, but she was nicknamed Faadi after her late grandmother who was also called Dikko and nicknamed Faadi, but then the old Afo (whose real name turned out to be Faadi) went on the hajj and became Hajja. As a result the other Faadi, although her real name was Dikko, also had to be called Hajja".

6.   Conclusion

Some years ago Deborah Tannen in her best selling book *That's Not What I Meant!* commented that the fate of the earth depends on cross-cultural

communication (Tannen 1986: 30). The fate of the earth therefore depends on a proper understanding of the underlying cultural scripts that participants bring with them into the global arena of cross-cultural communication. A fertile ground for misunderstanding concerns phenomena which seem to be "universal" or near universal, and yet are governed by different cultural scripts and motivated by very different cultural values across cultural borders. It is our hope that we have abundantly demonstrated this for the West African speech and cultural area.

The use of speech intermediaries may be common in many cultures, but the distinctive triadic communication in West Africa is often said to be motivated by a cultural norm of "ambiguity" and/or "indirection". Statements like these, however, are not very helpful in understanding the practice. We submit that the cultural scripts proposed in this paper can be easily taught to novices during socialization and are more helpful in intercultural communication.

The problem of near universal features having different pragmatic values is even more evident with respect to personal names. Though the existence of personal names as a resource for reference and address seems to be a near universal, different values are attached to their use in interaction in different cultural areas. In some societies, such as Australia, the use of first names is considered polite, even between strangers. Similarly in Dutch culture the polite thing to do when you answer the telephone is to give your full name, for example, Anneke Breedveld, before any further moves are made. When a West African, like the first author of this paper fails to observe this script, he is perceived as rude. The second author, being Dutch, also carried her speech practice of addressing adults by their names into the West African country of Mali. She constantly addressed her colleagues by name instead of titles, to the extent that one of her colleagues could always tell anybody who she sent to him because they were the only people who addressed him by his first name. It is only when one understands speech practices from an "insider" point of view that one can interact with those in the speech community without causing offence.

Even when cultural scripts are shared across a cultural area, some places within the given area may have additional, distinct scripts concerning the same phenomenon, as we have demonstrated in this paper. Thus the general West African taboo on the use of names in adult address exists as part of the *yaage* behavior of the Fulbe, but in addition there is the practice of the complete avoidance of the name, and its variants and derivatives, of a person one is in a *yaage* relation with. That is, even though West Africans may share the general script about names in address, non-Fulbe must still understand the Fulbe-specific scripts in order to avoid misunderstandings.

We maintain that one way of promoting cross-cultural and inter-cultural understanding is by the documentation of cultural scripts, not only those specific to a particular culture or group, but also the areal cultural scripts. Once the underlying scripts are known and understood cross-cultural pragmatic failure in communication can be minimized.

Notes

1. The Gbe communities occupy an area that extends from Lower Volta (in southern Ghana) across into Togo and Benin, and as far as Western Nigeria up to Lower Weme; that is, from the Greenwich Meridian to 3°E and from the Atlantic coast to about 8°N. The major dialects of Gbe from west to east are Ewe, Gen, Aja, Fon, Gun Xwla and Xwela (see Capo 1991, Kluge 2000).
2. The following abbreviations are used in the interlinear glossing: CM = class marker; DAT = dative, HAB = Habitual; INCMPL = incomplete; INDEF = indefiniteness marker, INF = infinitive; LOC = locative; M = middle voice; NEG = Negative marker; NPRES = non-present; POT = potential, pl = plural; PL = plural; sg = singular; QUOT = quotative; SIT = situational; SUB = subjunctive; TP = topic terminal particle, UFP = Utterance Final Particle; 1 = first person; 2 = second person; 3 = third person.
3. The notation [M] indicates a "semantic molecule"; i.e., a non-primitive meaning which functions as a unit in semantic explications and cultural scripts.

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