

# ANCESTRAL GUIDANCE

## in Africa's everyday life

Based on more than ten years of experience, the COMPAS network is convinced that a more culture-sensitive approach towards development is essential if the well-being of the people concerned is to be improved successfully. Key to this approach is that all cultural aspects are taken on board (especially the spiritual), and not only those that are understood and accepted by the development worker.

What is culture-sensitive? Definitions of culture are diverse and abundant. In the interpretation of COMPAS, culture can be defined as 'a set of knowledge and values shared by a society, in particular those that are indigenous and local. It is a way of life based on the worldviews of people'. The reason for focusing and building on indigenous and local knowledge and values is that doing so fits better within the local context of resource-poor rural

that what is considered culturally sensitive may differ for each region or community. However, in the experience of the African COMPAS partners, some elements of indigenous knowledge are widespread in many communities. Respect for the ancestors and their guidance in important decisions appears to be profound in most sub-Saharan African cultures. Respect for the ancestors is expressed across Africa in concepts such as *Ubuntu* (East and

### *African communities will define their way forward in close consultation with their ancestors and gods*

communities. As a result, the practices emerging from indigenous and local knowledge are often more affordable and create less dependence on development agents. However, COMPAS does not advocate rejecting all external resources, but always looks for the optimal way to combine local resources with external inputs. 'Indigenous and local' would imply

Southern Africa), *Vodoun* (Benin), *Saakumnu*, *Amaamere* and *Nyaba-Itgo* (Ghana). In an encounter I [David Millar] had with Elder Zule, the *Tindana* (Earth Priest) of my home village and over 80 years old, I asked him to explain to me why the ancestors are so important for our people. This was the wisdom he shared with me:

*'The Ancestors are our essence, our total well-being. They bind us together as one collective and sustain the solidarity of the Dagaara people - even across boundaries to Burkina and Ivory Coast - giving us one identity. They provide us with an inextricable link between the living, the dead and the yet unborn. In the world of the Ancestors, life and death are like day and night - one and the same day. It is our spirituality, our culture, our science, our arts, our way of life and our view of the world. This phenomenon is expressed in the (extended) family system, the clan system, the lineages, our totems, our beliefs, our values and our personality, even across borders.'*

Not every individual can communicate directly with the ancestors. Traditional authorities play an important role in translating ancestral or spiritual messages; the soothsayers or priests are consulted to interpret a message from the divine world. Through these media, the ancestors still provide the moral and practical basis for decision making in daily life.

*'On one occasion I was in Nandom - northern Ghana, the home of the Dagaabas. I asked a farmer I was interviewing to imagine that I had brought him a millet variety that yielded three times that of the variety he used and asked him to plant it straight away on his farm. Thereafter, when*



he goes to work on that plot, some misfortune befalls him, like being stung by a scorpion. What would he do? He told me that he would consult the soothsayer and if the soothsayer said that his Ancestors were unhappy with the introduction of that variety, he would abandon it immediately. He would not even go back there to destroy the crops but would avoid the farm completely. In no way would he compromise his Ancestors for an increase in productivity, no matter how great the increase.'

When we understand and respect the profound influence of the ancestors and spirits on the decisions made by many African communities, it becomes evident that development workers need to work more closely with the traditional

relationship we cannot cheat you. We know of cases where people have cheated with the name of the ancestors and, as a result, have lost their crops. We assure you that the activities we are about to start will not suffer. We will support and share each other's plight - provided it is in line with the ancestral rules.'

So how can development workers and communities meet the challenge of reshaping their working relationship into a more constructive one? The COMPAS network is convinced that when development efforts are based on communities' knowledge and values, the plans and activities are more likely to be community-owned and therefore more sustainable. There are, of course, also

### Interacting worldviews in Africa's everyday life

#### Spiritual

Ancestors and spirits profoundly influence decisions in daily life.

#### Social

Empathy and respect are crucial to successful cooperation between development worker and traditional authorities.

#### Material

Local and indigenous practices are more affordable and create less dependence on the development agent.

## The ancestors provide the moral and practical basis for decision making in many African communities

authorities and holders of indigenous knowledge. Moreover, ignoring the importance of ancestral guidance may frustrate the working relation between community and development worker. The elders in Bongo (Ghana) explain:

*'It is true that we play games with you [development workers coming from outside the community]. Just imagine the difficulty of paying back the loans. Parting with a substantial amount of the harvest that should sustain you till the next one is not easy, and when we can avoid this we will do so. We are sure you would do the same if you were in our shoes. But let us tell you this: with our Ancestors' way of building our*

serious controversies related to culture and faith in traditional societies. The COMPAS network does not advocate ignoring or uncritically accepting these, but is working on ways to confront the controversies and to develop alternatives in a culturally acceptable way. This culture-sensitive approach is what COMPAS calls endogenous development. In promoting culture-sensitive development, COMPAS stresses the great need for integrity on the side of the development worker. Using knowledge about local values, such as ancestral guidance, to manipulate people for the good of others is unacceptable. Unfortunately, manipulation does occur, for example Ghanaian politicians holding

out the promise of ancestral approval to gain votes. Instead, endogenous development requires development workers to support communities in defining their own wishes and finding their own ways of development. Most likely the African communities will not define their way forward on their own, but in close consultation with their ancestors and gods.



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