



Research Article

CLASH OF CULTURE: A CASE STUDY OF CULTURAL MISHAP IN THE OIL FIELD OF DOBA, CHAD

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ABSTRACT

The Chad/Cameroon development project includes oilfields in southern Chad and a pipeline system to transport crude oil to a marine terminal in Cameroon for export. The objective of this project is to fight against poverty by improving the living condition of Chadian population. The exploration and production of the Chadian oil is operated by a Consortium consisted of ExxonMobil, Petronas, and Chevron with a western dominant culture. As a result, the project has created vast numbers of new jobs but led at the same time to powerful social changes, especially cultural and political conflicts that arise. In this context, to merge the national culture within the company remains a real challenge. Our exclusive focus here is to explore the differences and similarities between the two cultures in the Doba oil field in Chad.

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INTRODUCTION

The definition of culture is a difficult work to assess. Although short, it differs very widely within its method and in seriousness. For Judith Stanford, culture may be defined as the ideas, customs, values, skills, and arts of a specific group of people. Most of us belong not solely to one cultural group but to several. For instance, our age places us in a culture such as childhood, youth, or middle age. In addition, we are all either male or female, and the ways various societies treat gender differences traditionally have created cultural distinctions between men and women. Another group we belong to relates to the country of our birth or to the country where our ancestors were born (2006:401).

There seems to be no place where the cultures meet. At the meeting point of two subjects, two cultures ought to produce creative opportunities. According to Edward Said, "all cultures tend to make representations of foreign cultures the better to master or in some way control them. Yet not all cultures make representations of foreign cultures and in fact master or control them. This is the distinction, I believe, of modern Western cultures. It requires the study of western knowledge or representations of the non-European world to be a study of both those representations and the political power they express". (Culture and Imperialism, 1993: 100). Delete here Edward Said). Obviously, the meeting point between the American culture and the Chadian one would create a clash. From the one hand, Chad is known for its collectivism and high power distance. On the other hand, the American culture is characterized by its individualism and low power distance.

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And these two different values motivate the behavior of each side in their interaction.

As a reminder, Chad has joined the oil producer countries since October 10, 2003. The exploration and production of Chadian oil is operated by E.E.P.C.I (Esso Exploration & Production Chad Inc); an American company. Subject of debates, the exploration and production of Doba Oil Basin Project is affected by the cultural and structural changes, in a context which often lacks regulatory framework. Esso Exploration and Production employs a large number of individuals coming from different communities with different languages and multicultural backgrounds. The management model applied by ExxonMobil in Chad with emphasis on personal interest and not paying much importance to social interest may not be as well-accepted by Chadians who have collectivistic values.

Sem Beasnael in his novel *The Plague of Friendship* (2002) brilliantly dramatizes the situation of the Chadian working people and invites us to reflect critically on the question of office culture, corruption, nepotism and gender. For our literary analysis, we will use Sem Beasnael's *The Plague of Friendship* as our primary source but other secondary sources can be included as well. interaction.

Different Lands, Different Peoples

Chad is located in Africa, far away from United States of America. The geographical location of Chad for instance is accompanied by a variable pattern of weather and people. This geographical distance contains also cultural differences. The country is one of the poorest and most corrupt countries in the world. Since 2003, crude oil has become the country's primary source of export earnings, superseding the traditional cotton.

With oil taxes and royalties, Chad earns a lot of money but the living condition of the people still remain a disaster due to the corruption and a wrong investment of this income.

Western culture pays too little attention to family relationships but stresses individualism while Chadians strongly value family ties. Reason why a kinless man in a Chadian community is an object of pity. The fact that western people emphasis on personal interest and not paying much importance to social interest are list of “Western” traits most commonly criticized. The Chadian system also depends on a set of social relationships which are entirely absent in the United States. In Chad most employees reside in the same city and work for the same organization all of their lives. This provides a sense of continuity and history that is lacking in many American organizations and rituals and myths from the past are important. Americans frequently huddle in temporary groups as they change jobs, careers, geographical areas, and even spouses throughout their lives.

Chadian culture in the contrary is known for its tightness to which members of a culture agree about what is correct behavior, and believe they must have exactly according to cultural norms. Chadian people believe they will receive or should give severe criticism for even small deviations from cultural norms. Sem Beasnael gives a realistic description of the Chadian community life:

In this society, life is communal. People live it together, sharing their sorrows, their joys and existing within a web of interdependency. If one of the groups has an opportunity to shoot higher than the rest, some form of compensation will be exacted from his existence (189).

According to Sem, any person from our village community will know everybody else’s lives in detail, people share all. They share everything. In addition, according to Sem Beasnael you even threaten to exclude from your group anybody who, as some of you said do not share their tribal concerns. This cultural division can even be tight in its political orientation. Political leaders in their propaganda to get vote support for example have used this North/South division for many years. During the elections, most of the time, people don’t vote according to the political program but based on the region affiliation.

There are about a hundred distinct ethnic groups in Chad and family lifestyles may differ greatly between these groups, although some eating practices are common. People gather around, seat themselves on the ground and eat together in the same plate. For example, when you come to someone’s house while he/she is eating; you are invited to share his plate. In the north of Chad, it is common to see people first eating, and then clean their hands after. No matter how dirty, your hands look. Generally, men and women eat separately.

“La boule” represents Chad in the same way that hamburger reflects the United States. Boule is the most popular food in Chad. Boule includes ingredients such as crushed millet. According to the Chadian tradition, guess is a blessing. In many places, it is customary to offer a gift to guests when they arrive. In the north, this could be tea, or dried okra powder. The right hand is used to shake hands, to eat and to give and

receive gifts. The left hand is believed to be the “unclean” hand and is not used for these activities. Chadian Muslims, for example, feel offended to eat with them with your left hand.

For safety concerns, EEPCI expatriates assigned to duty in Chad must observe some requirements about eating outside. Americans feel free to refuse specific foods or drinks without offering an explanation. This attitude is considered by Chadians as disrespectful and a lack of trust toward your host. Also in the American culture, when invited to someone’s home for dinner, it is polite to bring a small box of good chocolates, a bottle of wine, a potted plant or flowers for the hostess. This practice, for the Chadian host, does not honor. The concept of potluck as it is a custom in US that is to say everyone bringing dishes that are appealing and cooked at home is seen as disrespectful in Chadian culture. Therefore, when construction started, it has been decided to open two restaurants; a Chadian-African restaurant and a European American restaurant. The objective of having two separate restaurants, according to EEPCI management, is to facilitate access to everyone’s taste. But this decision has been automatically rejected; qualified by local employees as a measure of segregation.

Another example of cultural clash is about greetings. A handshake is the most common form of greeting in Chad. It is important for a manager assigned to duty in Chad to shake all hands in the room if meeting a number of people at once. Chadians usually make small talk when greeting to show their attention like: “How is your family?” “How is your household?”, “How is your work?” For Chadians, Americans are friendless because they are brief in their greetings.

Time is also a source of cultural clash. The voice of time speaks more plainly in USA so that time is valued as “Money” and is limited because there are so many things to do in a lifetime. If in US one has to be continuously on the move in the contrary Chadians have plenty of time before contemplating or meditating. In meetings between US and Chadian businessmen, each had an accurate stereotypic expectation about the other’s orientation toward time. Both agreed that Chadians are polychromic, with a flexible perspective on time. Both also agreed that Americans are monochromic (take time constraints and deadlines seriously) (Source: Y, T. Lee & G. 1995.). Due to “African Time”, things start much later than planned and people tend to give their time freely in both business and social situations. For example there is still some excuses of being late for meetings in Chad.

Conflict around Working Culture

Any Organization has both a structure and a culture. The structure is a framework that can be described and altered at will. The culture is much more difficult to grasp and understand; it is also much more difficult to change. In American society innovation and modification are encouraged and sought, but usually not when it comes to values and ideals. One of the major results of this orientation is that American managers are generally very open to change and are constantly introducing new programs with which they can identify and for which they can claim much of the credit; it is not sufficient for them only to build on the programs of their predecessors (Kanter, 1979). For example, employees are asked to understand and analyze certain kinds of data, to think about

ways to improve the processes and products of the workplace, and to work with others to bring improvement about. People with self-discipline, self-respect, and basic education to fit easily into any workplace. This is not always the case in Chadian culture.

The working culture in the countries of North America and Europe is largely based on analysis, rationality, logic and systems in opposite to the Chadian culture where personal relations, intuition, emotion and sensitivity are of much greater importance. One major point regarding the cultural mishap in the oil sector in Chad is the power distance, that is to say this factor which measures the extent to which the less powerful members of the society accept the unequal distribution of power, in organizations this is the degree of centralization of authority and the exercise of autocratic leadership.

Chadians are often uncomfortable with direct American communication. For example, older people in Chad are respected and feared and grey hair is seen as a sign of wisdom. Relationships within Chadian communities are based on authority and subordination. Similarly, the manager should be seen as a type of father figure who expects and receives loyalty and obedience from colleagues. Subordinates must respect the dictates of their superiors. This idea is summarized by Sem Beasnael as follow:

It is an African cultural practice in which the chiefs are praised for what they do and oddly enough, sometimes for what they didn't do. As long as it ends happily, they chief is lauded. There are some particular situations in which criticism is permitted; however, it is never direct. Should it be deemed necessary, people will use folk tales, poetry, drama and proverbs to expose wicked kings, cruel stepmothers and stepfathers. To sum it up, African leaders receive more praises than curses. (210).

African managers don't allow their subordinates and staff to get involved in the decision making process and are completely responsible for making the decisions with no participation by subordinates. This is what Sem Beasnael calls by the culture of silence and fear. The boss infuses fear in people around him and never likes criticism of any sort. And to do so, the "boss" surrounds by yes men, boot lickers. And to silence any opposition

"because you do not have the same political ideas as the ruling party, because you do not come from the same region as those who keep tight rein of power, either in the church or in the government, you can be easily removed from your job and replaced by a puppet from the local church or party in power. A man with no education can be empowered and used to lord on you, no matter how many degrees you earn from higher education, no matter the amount of experiences you acquired from abroad". (16)

The paths the job seekers follow in Chad are many and varied. Credentials were less important than personal contacts, and many found their adult jobs through the help of parents, relatives, and friends. This system, if it can be called that, succeeded for most people because jobs were plentiful and because most of the skills workers needed could be learned on

the job. If superior skills and education are the keys to success in the job market, improved training is not the royal road to success in all places and all times. What is more, low skills are not a sentence to unemployment, nor high skills a guarantee of job security. Oil sector in Chad pays relatively well and Esso Exploration and Production Company attracts more people because the company pays well its employees and offers lot of advantages compared to the public sector. Some employees of Kome portray them invested with a nobility not apparent to everyone, represent them differently as a member of a particular class, a wealthy or upper class people.

Apart from monetary rewards, EEPICI often offer employees various other benefits, including protection programs (e.g., health insurance, retirement benefits), paid time off (e.g., vacations and paid holidays), and accommodation and enhancement benefits. Unfortunately, "the pressing immediate needs of the members of my family make it impossible to save any amount of money."

In Chad, working for EEPICI is a privilege. But at the same time it is a source of frustration when it comes to the cultural clash. EEPICI Chadian worker, in fact, mostly don't understand and have some difficulties to adapt to this new environment. Office culture is totally alien from our society. Rules and rags damned. They do what they please according to native customs. If the boss or coworker loses a family members, we forfeit a lot of man-hours. Work comes to a standstill in sympathy for the friend or boss. No one obeys office rules at a time like this (11).

To illustrate, Sem Beasnael gives the example of the Rice mill factory manager who has lost his father and went home for the burial ceremonies. All the Rice mill workers closed the factory down, crammed themselves into office trucks and cars and caravanned to the manager's village. As soon as he left, the office staff and workers argued among themselves about the appropriate demonstration of sympathy. Remain on the job or support traditional values? The next thing they did was plan to follow him to his village, properly offer condolences and come back that evening in order to be at the factory the following morning.

The manager was informed well in advance that a consultant was to come from France to work with him for a few days. The manager left instructions to be called back to the office should the consultant arrives. On the same day, the consultant came from France to find the office empty, save the watchman. You see, there are the office regulations, but there is also the office culture. Through the dictates of that culture, the staff will be nice to the Boss for obvious reasons. The boss may not like it that way, but who can keep the mill workers from doing what they want to do to preserve the future of their jobs? (11-12).

In fact, Chadian society is greatly influenced by extended kinship or family groups; it is the nuclear family that is the locus of activity and identification. In Chad, people use their family name rather than first name and are honored for the past achievements. And Chadian workers have collective values that prone to emphasize cooperative work behaviors, seek help from others, and place family interests before work interests. As a result, Chadian employees working in EEPICI may be viewed as helpless, dependent, and lacking a commitment to

work. (D.L Stone, *et al.* 2007). For example, Chadian employees believe that they should wait for instructions from superiors before performing various tasks. Therefore American managers assume that Chadian employees are too lazy or don't fully cope with American values when they are isolated.

Employees in Doba Oil Field have two different work hours according to their work regime. On the one hand, we have employees under normal regime working 8 hours per day from Monday to Saturday. And on the other hand, we have the regime of rotation with a fixed schedule from 2 to 4 weeks of days on and 2 to 4 weeks off. During their on times, employees are camped in the site and are not allowed to bring their family either to go out of the camp. For Chadian employees, this work shift is antisocial because of its restriction. As a result, employees work under pressure and stress. Most express the desire to quit but never resign because of good salary. "Take it or leave it; you are paid a lot of money for your loyalty. There is enough competition for job in Chad so that E.E.P.C.I can find someone else" said one E.E.P.C.I manager to his employee who complained for his work condition. Employees have to accept because they don't have a choice.

The Chadian perception is again that Americans don't value family life that is why they isolate them from families. In addition, Chadian employees feel frustrated to work even on Sunday or Friday generally considered in Chad as "The Day of the Lord". The primary reason for this is that Chadian employees who value collectivism and are more likely to want to spend time with their families, and prefer benefit systems that offer them such benefits as paid time off. (Stone *et al.*, 2006). Consistent with these findings, researchers have argued that the greater the extent to which employees have collective values, the more likely they are to prefer benefits that provide them with security and support for family (Joshi & Martocchio, in press).

From all this, as evidenced by the current economic crisis, we can imagine a significant disconnection between the outgoing training profiles and the needs expressed by the job market, as well as a strong gap between production and demand of scientific and academic research and technology expressed by economic sector and oil industry. This example of work harassment is not only experienced in Chad. D.H. Lawrence, in his novel *Sons and Lovers* depicts a similar case.

Although Morel was a good worker, his wages grew less. When he was in the pub, he would tell stories about the pit manager, and the pit manager, who disliked him, always heard about it and did not forgive him. He gave Morel the worst places in the pit to work in, so that he could not dig so much coal and therefore earned less (1982:7).

As a consequence, this make what most foreigners who come to Africa are under the mistaken impression that African leaders have created the personality cult.

In Chad, Employees are afraid to express disagreement with their managers because discussing with your superior is an offence and power holders entitled to special privileges. When Chadian employees talk with their bosses, for example they don't even look in their eyes. "In our community, you never look directly into people's eyes when talking (it is considered

impolite to do so). While Avoidance of eye contact often suggests shyness, unfriendliness, or insincerity to North Americans, the eye contact in the contrary is typically interpreted in Chadian culture as a lack of respect (Zimbardo, 1977).

According to Chadian employees Americans' acting very moody. In Chad, it is very rude to reprimand your assistant in public. From the one hand, Chad is known for its collectivism and high power distance. On the other hand, the American culture is characterized by its individualism and low power distance. In fact, in Hofstede's (1991) 53-nation study of cultural values, the United States ranked first on individualism. These two different values motivate the behavior of each side in their interaction. For example, Chadians are used to close the door when they are in the office while Americans value open door office.

With E.E.P.C.I people are promoted based on their merit, individual accomplishment while in Chad generally the promotion is done mainly on the criteria of seniority. When it comes to promote a young employee or someone with less seniority in the company, the Chadian employees qualify this unfair. For example, individual merit-based compensation systems designed for EEPCCI may be less effective in Chad with individuals who have collectivistic values than with people who have individualistic values (Joshi & Martocchio, in press). The primary reason for this is that such systems typically emphasize the maximization of personal gains rather than the benefit of the group that could have created frustration on the part of the Chadian workers. As a result, these cultural differences are at some point most difficult to manage.

Use of "English Language only" or communicative competency

EEPCI offers English language training to its Chadian employees to insure that they correctly understand expectations associated with their organizational roles (Stone & Stone-Romero, 2004; Stone-Romeo *et al.*, 2003). This type of training typically focuses on strategies for increasing individuals' understanding of their own values, and the behavioral expectations of other cultures (Brislin & Pederson, 1976). Practically, this means that at least one of the two parties must use a second language. In part because the majority of westerners in international business are monolingual (Ferraro, 2006), English is often the bridge language. This suggests that the second language is use in international business is most often English.

In Kome 5 (Oil Field Development Area), the notion of competency is first of all related to the capacity of the employee to express himself fluently in English. Fluency in a foreign language can also cause a person to be perceived as having beliefs more closely aligned with language group (Bond, 1985). The greater the fluency of English speakers, the more likely they are to be seen as competent in other respect (Hui & Cheng, 1987). For those Chadian employees working for E.E.P.C.I must score at least 6 or more in T.O.I.C test before being promoted to the supervision position. This requirement give them a feeling of individual accomplishment but by the same time seem to be much more pressure.

As a result, this management of performance of employees / this criteria or method in E.E.P.C.I used to measure employee performance is hardly accepted and qualified discriminatory by some employees. To cite one African leader” Now it is English and dollar, which govern the world. Get used of it”. As noted above, we believe that the end result of these factors is that cross-language communication can be demanding for the native speaker of the language as for the second –language speaker.

Chad is a former French colony and EEPCI uses only English language as an official language for its business. It is significant, that English is institutionalized. English threatens French language, which seems to suffer from non-productivity. This has created a feeling of frustration for some Chadians who can see their chance to do business with EEPCI limited. For Sem Beasnael, of the use of language can be taken and abused for the purposes of class distinction if we don’t make a proper use of it, because it contains the elements of the whole culture and language.

“Language is very important. If you let your mother tongue be replaced with that of another culture, you have let yourself become dominated and subservient to cultural requirements not your own. Yours will become subordinated. You might find yourself reacting according to different cultural requirements and not according to your own which by this time, may have become severely diluted or non-existent. By keeping your cultural identity, you have the power to make use of some practices to defend yourself against adversity. That is it in nutshell (175).

It is clearly of vital importance to a culture that its common language should not decline in strength, richness, and flexibility, that it should, further, be adequate to express new experience, and to clarify change.

CONCLUSION

With the oil revenue, the republic of Chad is becoming an entirely different country. Even though the changes increased the wealth of the nation as a whole, they caused great hardship among particular classes. Confronted with the rise of consumer affluence, the reconfiguration of the Chadian working classes was accompanied by the concurrent decline of the trade union movement, and the fracture or dissolution of lived experiences of community once inherent to traditional working-class conceptions of identity and belonging.

Chad oil production has entailed other modes of thought, feeling and action: the various forms of traditional group relationship, the family, the guild, the sense of nationality – all are weakened, and so too are the competing claims of non-economic individual achievement and enjoyment.

This inclusive reordering of the components of human society tends to occur wherever industrial capitalism becomes the dominant force in the economic structure, and it naturally became evident particularly early in Chad. For some, the Doba Oil Project is a huge unproductive sink that swallowed the country’s lifeblood and gave nothing in return. This duality represented the fatal dichotomy of a system that valued materialism rather than human worth.

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