

# *To Explore the Culture Differences between China and Kenya from the Nonverbal Communication Perspective*

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**Keywords:** Cross-cultural, Non-verbal communication, Cultural contrast

**Abstract:** Non-verbal communication is an important part of the entire cross-cultural communication. Linguistic communication and non-verbal communication complement each other and are indispensable. Emphasizing verbal communication and ignoring non-verbal communication can only be an incomplete communication. This article discusses some of the cultural differences between China and Kenya from the perspective of non-verbal communication, such as High and low context, clothing, smell, time concept etc. The essay means to help people treat cultural differences correctly on the basis of understanding a culture, and continuously improve their understanding of non-verbal communication, so as to achieve mutual respect and equal communication.

## **1. Introduction**

As for nonverbal communication, different scholars had proposed various definitions. Knapp said that “nonverbal communication” referred to communication affected by means other than by words. Some definitions emphasize the significant importance of shared social customs and conventions in nonverbal communication. Apart from social customs, there are also many other factors that play a significant role in conveying nonverbal meanings. Samovar and Porter had spared no effort to explore and offer a better picture of this issue, and they esteem that “nonverbal communication referred to all those nonverbal elements that are derived from individual’s use of the environment.”<sup>[1]</sup>

## **2. The Relationship between Culture and Communication**

It is of great necessary to realize the significance of nonverbal communication in intercultural communication. According to Samovar, by exploring the basic traits of nonverbal communication behaviors, individuals could understand the fundamental manners of social members as well as the value systems of the whole society. Generally speaking, social members are unconscious of the nonverbal behavior of their own culture while too sensitive to that of others.<sup>[2]</sup> It is so obvious that nonverbal communication always causes more culture shocks than verbal communication does. Samovar pointed out that at least three principles should be noticed and followed when it comes to the method of solving issues caused by nonverbal communication in intercultural communication. Firstly, individuals should never neglect the complexity of other nonverbal behavior. Besides, it is hardly possible for one to identify or command every nonverbal behavior in a culture. However, to

get a general understanding of nonverbal behavior is possible. Finally, it is useless to generalize or classify nonverbal behaviors in intercultural or in cross-culture circumstance, because nonverbal behaviors are not necessarily the same even in the same culture, let alone among people from different cultural backgrounds. The effective way for people from various regions is to be careful enough when using their nonverbal signals.

### **3. Culture Differences between China and Kenya**

#### **3.1 High-Context and Low-Context**

There are many theories that can be used to explore some significant behavioral patterns in different cultures. Hall proposed the theories about high-context and low-context cultures according to various message systems exist in different cultures. <sup>[3]</sup>On account of this cultural diversity, it is necessary for us to realize the difference between Kenya and China.

High-context environment means individuals already possess most of the underlying information. That is to say, in the high-context cultures, many of the meanings are being exchanged and information does not have to be communicated through words.

Chinese belong to a high-context culture. Actually, people in the high-context environment tend to rely on experiences and information networks. Besides, tradition and history hardly change in high-context cultures, just like China who has a time-honored and long stable history. On account of broad message systems among family and friends, people in China do not expect, nor do they need too much underlying background information. Because they are aware of their environmental surroundings therefore they can interpret and understand feelings without speaking them out.

Contrary to Chinese, Kenyan are subject to a low-context culture. As for them, it is of great necessary to state the detailed background information clearly. In the low-context culture, very little information is involved in the context or background. Hence individuals have to talk more, speak more rapidly, and raise their voice as well.

There is an example that shows the invalid communication between high-context culture and low-context culture. It was in a daily meeting, the Chinese manager wanted to encourage the local employees to work hard rather than pretending work hard. He shared an Chinese ancient story of “lanyuchongshu”. He retold the story in his poor English and he thought it is quite easy to understand the story. However, the reality is that the Kenyan employees had no idea about the background culture of this story. And they didn’t understand the hidden meaning of this story so they really had no idea what should they learn from Mr Nanguo.

China belongs to a high-context culture, people are accustomed to understand things by the context. However the Kenya is subject to the low-context culture, as for individuals in low-context culture, they rely more on detailed, precise and clear meaning of the words they use. Actually, they always depend on explicit conversations where the entire message is completely conveyed by words.

Therefore, we need to study distinct cultural patterns so that we are able to understand, predict, and finally be accustomed to the behavior of people from other cultures.

#### **3.2 General Appearance and Dress**

Ruesch and Kess (1956) esteem that object language involves all conscious or unconscious physical appearances, such as human body and dressing. <sup>[4]</sup>Generally speaking, object language includes clothes, physical appearances, and colors etc. They all can indicate extremely significant messages that we want to show. From the communication perspective, those objects can pass nonverbal messages and show the individual’s characteristics positively.

Why the Kenya people always like wearing colorful clothes?

In the perspective of most Chinese, it is usually the aged people who wear colorful clothes. However, in Kenya most people like to wear colorful clothes. Why the Kenya people always like wearing colorful clothes? There is a saying that the people of Kenya are enthusiastic about life, They love to sing and dance. Where there is music, there is their stage. Colorful clothes can also add color to their life.

In daily life, Kenyans like to wear colorful clothes. But in formal work situations, Kenyans will attach great importance to business etiquette. They have a very detailed distinction for dressing for different occasions. For example, they will distinct occasions like full suit, business formal or smart formal. This custom may be resulted from Britain. If we make a careful observation, it would not be hard to find that people in China hardly wear the colorful clothes especially the young generations.. They will not wear colorful clothes even if it is casual dress .

The inspiration from the color difference is that, if we want to take cloth as a gift we may need to consider the likes of different culture. For example, if a Kenyan want to send her Chinese friend a cloth as a present, she has to consider which kind of color that Chinese friend can accept and like to wear in daily life. In other words, if a Chinese is considering send cloth as gift to her Kenya friend, she also need to think about the gift in perspective of her Kenya friend. Chinese may deem that gray or white is elegant. But as for Kenya they may consider gray and white are dull and lifeless.

Different geographical environment and living styles result in distinct living habits. No matter what kind of cloth the tourists choose to wear, they should make decisions according to the actual local environment.

### 3.3 Smell

Olfactory communication explores the influences that caused by the use of perfume and the smell of human body. People usually are unconscious of their own body odor but very sensitive to that of others. Hence, the study of smell becomes quite necessary.<sup>[5]</sup>

Kenyan almost like westerners they love to use perfume. So whenever you come close to a Kenyan you will smell the perfume. While most Chinese people are not used to perfume. Therefore, when a Kenyan who likes perfume and a Chinese who doesn't like perfume take the elevator together, cultural misunderstandings arise. However, in the cross-culture communication, the odor of human body is also a way to communicate with others. Sometimes it might show the characteristics and living habits as well as other underlying information. Therefore, people should respect each other' s culture on the basis of understanding.

### 3.4 Time Concept

Hall put forward two concepts of time concept: multi-directional time system and unidirectional time system. People in the one-way time system think that time is a line that can be divided, and everything will be planned in advance.<sup>[6]</sup> And Kenya and China belong to the multi-directional time system to some extent. People with a multi-directional time system often do several things at the same time. They will make arrangements in advance and emphasize that they are done. They are not so strict on punctuality. But when it comes off work time, Kenyans are very punctual. Kenyans do not think overtime is a virtue, so they often think that Chinese work very hard.

First of all, in the definition of the concept of time, Kenyans are very different from Chinese. In Kenya there is a well-known word “Kenyan time” to describe the arbitrariness of Kenyans' view of time. Time is the result of the observer's decision to observe. For Kenyans, time does not have a precise scale, but humans measure time. This is why Chinese are curious that Kenyans are always late. For example, if an Kenyan tells you that he will be there in two minutes, generally you have to

multiply the time he said ten times. Secondly, the formation of the Chinese concept of time is the rule found in agricultural production and life. People have a standard for the movement of celestial bodies, phenological phenomena, or specific social practices, such as “three poles in the sun” and “twenty-four solar terms”. Objective things are the standard, and there are rules to follow, while Kenyans take subjective consciousness as the standard, and there are no rules to follow. This is why the Kenyan people's view of time is so different from that of the Chinese in the same agricultural society.

In cross-cultural communication, we need to recognize the difference in time concepts between China-Kenya. We need to respect and understand the culture of other countries, and actively cultivate our awareness of cross-cultural communication in order to achieve success in cross-cultural communication.

#### 4. Developing the Awareness of Nonverbal Intercultural Difference

Nonverbal communication varies from culture to culture. Some nonverbal behaviors are used in different cultures to represent various meanings, while some different nonverbal behaviors are used in different cultures to express the same meanings. Therefore, being aware of these differences will help us to achieve a more successful communication.

In order to raise individual's awareness in cross-culture communication, people need to develop the feeling of empathy.

Empathy, usually characterized as a kind of sensitivity and social competence. In the intercultural communication, individuals need to develop their consciousness as well as abilities of empathy. That is to say, people need to accept and understand the others' feelings. At the same time, people should care for others and be willing to help them. What's more, the most important thing is trying to understand what the other individual is considering, or experiencing.

#### 5. Conclusion

Generally speaking, communication is the combination of verbal behavior and nonverbal behavior. But people always think highly of the former while devalue the latter. As is known to all, the differences of cultural values and outlooks might lead to distinct interpretation of the same phenomenon. Thus the study of cross-cultural becomes necessary.

In modern society, a good command of cultural variations on nonverbal communication can facilitate a better understanding or underlie the meanings of nonverbal behavior in cross-culture communication. In order to achieve this goal, the comparison of nonverbal behavior and that of English speaking countries is essential to people who participate in the process of intercultural communication. The exploration of nonverbal communication behavior in intercultural is also of great necessary for researchers.

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