Some Aghem Cultural Attributes To Consider When Designing, Developing, And Implementing A Literacy Development Program For Aghem Women

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Introduction

In Wum and other places of the North West Province of Cameroon one often hears the unique and beautiful whistling call of a certain bird. Upon asking various Aghem people to identify that bird, none was able to tell me its name either in English, Pidgin, or Aghem. So one day, while standing among a group of Aghem people interested in developing their language, I made this statement. "Birds are not very important to the Aghem people," and I explained how I had come to this conclusion. Not long afterwards, two people from that group, one older and one younger, got together to compile an Aghem list of local birds. The point here was not to prove one way or the other that birds are important to the Aghem people, but to show that an outsider's observations may prompt people to actually look at certain aspects of their culture in a new light, thereby helping themselves to make the best choices when planning and implementing their own development initiatives.

This paper is an attempt to compile for the Aghem people some of what I have heard them saying about themselves and what I have observed them doing. It may or may not be information they were aware of, but my hope is that it will be instrumental in challenging and motivating Aghem women in particular to take the initiative to design, develop, and implement a literacy program for women which takes into account five things: their busy schedules, the Aghem culture's orientation towards working in groups, their preoccupation with birth and death celebrations, and their matrilineal culture.

My second goal is to introduce the Aghem clan to other people who have not had the privilege of living among them, sharing some things I have learned about their culture.

From the outset I would like to express appreciation to H.R.H. Kangsen Raymond, Chief of Kesu-Wum for his assistance in encouraging me to explore the Aghem culture. Also, sincere thanks go to Honourable Kuchah Simon, his wife Christine, and the entire family for opening their hearts and home to us these past 18 months. Finally, I would like to acknowledge and especially thank the countless Aghem people whose input forms the core of this paper, including Rev. Aji-Mvo Joe-Set who made available to me his thesis entitled *Interplay of Development Education & African Spirituality.* (Since the bulk of this paper is essentially a compilation of Aghem quotes, and to respect the wishes of those who prefer to remain anonymous, no credit will be given to the particular speakers.)

PHYSICAL COMFORTS

What have I learned about the Aghem people? First and foremost, they are very welcoming, kind, and hospital. A stranger has no need to carry his house on his back to Wum. What is important to them? Food. "No food, no life." The Aghem love to eat, and if left to men to plan the menu, many would choose to eat corn fufu three times a day, 365 days of the year. If it were also possible, some would love to have the easy life, but for most that is certainly not the case. It is hard for the Aghem to accept that they are poor. They believe they can withstand any situation and will choose to humble themselves if necessary in order to achieve a particular goal. They value their culture and land, and would prefer to have their children work, hunt, and tap palm wine rather than go to school and be maltreated. Lacking local natural resources the Aghem have become proprietors, businessmen, wage earners, or involved in industry. Thrift and loan societies have also been established, members helping fellow members with financial needs.

ATTITUDES TO CHANGE OR INNOVATION

The Aghem say it takes time for them to accept new ideas, reacting slowly to change. Many are said to be obdurate, but when they do finally accept something they really co-operate and move forward. Some opposition, from within and without, is inevitable, which needs to be confronted in creative ways by those with a vision to effect change in attitudes and social structures. The Aghem know they can discover solutions to their own problems, while accepting also the benefit of working co-operatively with other individuals or groups interested in development.

A GROUP ORIENTATION

The principle that "one cannot succeed alone" is a corner stone of Aghem thinking reiterated in everyday sayings: a single hand cannot tie a bundle; a single bangle makes no noise; one hand cannot wash itself. How difficult indeed to clean the right hand of palm oil, njama-jama, and corn fufu without also engaging the left hand in the cleaning process. A question, however, does come to mind. Is it entirely true among the Aghem to say that "one *cannot* succeed alone," or should it say instead that "one *cannot* and *may not* succeed alone?"

The Aghem man is always jealous. This statement came from Aghem lips claiming also that the Aghem man does not want to see his brother progressing. He struggles to bring his brother down while trying himself to climb up. But both go down. Perhaps this attitude lines up with the Aghem concept of uniform wealth. No one individual should be able to gain economic advantage that does not also benefit the other members of his or her family clan. Furthermore, among the Aghem are those who believe that there should be a fair and equal distribution of common good for all members of the Aghem community.

Parallel to this thinking is the concept of uniform poverty illustrated by the fact that villagers will say "we are poor," rather than "I am poor." There is a sense of collective poverty felt by members of the rural Aghem community who are deprived of certain basic needs, such as money to buy medicine, money to pay for children's school fees, and money to buy fertiliser. The bright hope, however, is that shared deprivation goes hand-in-hand with shared resources of land, labour, skills, knowledge, and wisdom. These riches can yield a fruitful harvest for everyone. But how?

GROUP ACTION

When the town crier passes through the village quarters, calling everyone to community work, it is not long before you see one individual wielding his cutlass to clear an overgrown path. Before long, another person joins him, and then another, and then another, and soon the job has been done amidst pleasant conversation and cheerful banter. In the same way, at least one woman is needed in every village to sensitise local women to the need for Aghem literacy development. One or two more individuals then need to respond and get to work so that more and more people will come alongside to help. Before long there will be a group of women keenly interested and involved in the task of designing, implementing and developing a literacy program for women. As little drops of water make a big ocean, so also can many members of the Aghem community come together to make a mighty force.

PRIMARY OCCUPATION - FARMING

"But," women are thinking, "we are already so busy." This is indeed true. From before sunrise to after sunset the Aghem woman is engaged in numerous activities, the greatest of which is providing food for her family. If a woman does not go to the farm there is no food. In March planting season starts. Women are busy preparing the soil in anticipation of the rains, when planting will commence and carry on into April. In May they are weeding. June gives a brief reprieve. By July some corn is ready and from August up to September they are harvesting both corn and groundnuts. In October they are clearing the areas where corn was harvested to prepare the soil for the planting of cow peas in November. Harvesting continues throughout November and December when dry season also starts. In January and February they may shift to a different plot of land to prepare it for planting. Year after year the cycle continues. Day after day women trek to and from their farms, carrying a basin of supplies on their heads, walking up to one or two hours in each direction. Life is not easy. Where is there time and energy left for learning how to read and write Aghem?

NORMAL INTERRUPTIONS

Furthermore, there are countless interruptions which can pull women away from their primary occupation of going to the farm: rain; sickness in the family; little children, ageing parents, and small problems in the home needing attention; a woman's own failing health or waning strength. In addition, every week there are certain days that keep women away from their farms. On Sunday Christian women attend church. On Market Day there is buying and selling, and on Country Sunday women are forbidden to work the farms because the ancestors are out blessing the fields.

BIRTH & DEATH CELEBRATIONS - PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Would not Country Sunday then be a good day to conduct literacy classes? Not necessarily. Country Sunday is reserved for death celebrations. On this day people are often either celebrating the anniversary of a deceased relative or finishing the funeral of one who has just died in the previous eight-day week. Any development program, therefore, must take into account the Aghem person's commitment to carry on the traditional practises of birth and death celebrations. The Aghem believe that children and ancestors are the source of life and blessing; therefore, good relationships must be maintained with these living-dead, the ancestors, as well as the living, which certainly includes the children.

A birth in the family is a special event for a grandmother, particularly if it is her own daughter giving birth for the first time. She will carefully ensure that all the needed provisions for mother and baby are in place before and after the birth. In fact, for the entire next year she may keep the fledgling mother in her home, teaching her mothering skills while also providing meals for her and the new father. At the end of that year, she and a friend will go to the couple's house to formally present the child and mother to the husband.

Death is a common part of everyday life for the Aghem woman. En-route to the farm she may be compelled to turn back home upon hearing of a death in the quarter where her farm is located. She is equally compelled to visit the home of bereaved families to express condolences by her very presence. The closer her relationship is to the one who has died, the greater is her commitment of time, energy, and resources. Initially she will have already spent at least one night at the bedside of the critically ill person. Following the death, she will spend another sleepless night at the family wake and it may be her responsibility to help wash and dress the body. By morning she will need to go to the market to buy green-leaf vegetables and to have corn ground into flour. Her friends and neighbours will help her to prepare food for the many guests arriving from near and far to attend the death celebrations. Any plans she may have had for the week are dutifully set aside, and that would certainly also include literacy classes if they had been part of her planned schedule.

Any development project among the Aghem people must consider how to deal with the challenge of the frequent cancellation or postponement of carefully planned events due to the common occurrences of death. A recent incident illustrates this point. The prefecture's office issued a ruling that on May 23, 2000, all businesses were to remain closed until 2:00 p.m. while all able bodied men were to trek with their digging axes up to the site of the new water project and dig trenches for the laying of pipes. Suddenly, however, these orders were overruled by a more powerful Aghem tradition. On May 22 a chief of one of the Aghem villages died; hence, his burial would take place the following day, and no one would be permitted to work. In former times the entire Aghem clan was prohibited from working for two weeks following the death of a chief, regardless if it were the optimal time for planting or harvesting. Recognising the negative impact this restriction can having on the entire Aghem community, the people themselves have been trying to effect a change which would require only the immediate family of the chief to honour the two-week work abstention. Everyone else would be free to resume work the day after the burial.

It is reasonable therefore to suggest that members of a culture can and should be able to seek to effect desired changes in traditional practices, without violating core values, which will help them to achieve goals. Another example along these lines has to do with the practise of bringing corn fufu to funerals. If a person who dies had a wide range of influence or many social contacts, a great number of people will come to the funeral, bringing along varied quantities of prepared corn fufu. The amount of food is so much in excess of what the people can eat, that guests are sent home with spoiled food to feed their pigs. To avoid such excesses the chiefs are encouraging people to reduce the size of their food contributions.

We see then the need for women designing a literacy program to take into account the Aghem commitment to carry out traditional birth and death celebrations. While looking for creative ways to counteract the negative impact this might have on scheduled literacy events, the topics of birth and death should be predominant themes in Aghem literacy materials. Women will appreciate being able to write down and read such stories and songs in Aghem which have been passed down to them orally from their grandmothers. They will enjoy composing and publishing their own modern Aghem stories and songs. Educational materials can also be written by women for women on relevant health issues.

GROUP ACTIVITIES FOR WOMEN

Many are the activities of Aghem women, and as one might expect in this group-oriented culture, most of those activities are carried out alongside other women. Women often eat, walk and work together during which time they are also planning and making decisions. Many activities could be carried out by women alone in isolated situations, however, this is generally not the preferred manner of working. Aghem women migrate towards each other, together performing most of the following tasks: trekking; farming; cooking; raising children, including those not her own; selecting green-leaf vegetables; cracking groundnuts; plaiting hair; visiting the homes of the bereaved; attending a born-house, burial or death celebration; singing; dancing; preparing corn beer; attending a Heifer Rabbit-Raising Course, a Family Planning Class, or a Marriage Enrichment Class.

Women take care of each other, noticing when it is time to help or to take over. An older woman may add wood to the cooking fire to bring a big pot of water to a boil, and commence stirring in the cornmeal with a long wooden stick, but shortly after the corn flour is added a younger woman will take her place on the raffia stool to continue the more difficult stirring of the thickening fufu. While a woman's physical strength may be waning, younger women should acknowledge their mothers' mastery of the Aghem language, encouraging them to exercise their brains and to participate in the development of the written language.

Aghem women form solid groups of friendships, enjoying conversation and laughter while working or sitting down together to rest. They talk about family concerns or what is happening around the town – births, deaths, and marriages. A woman will go the extra mile for her friend, helping out in many ways: working her friend's farm, carrying the farming hoe and other loads on her head; sharing seed; taking care of her children; helping her with cooking and household duties. As an expression of appreciation she may receive a gift, such as a bar of beauty soap.

Not only do Aghem women prefer working together, but as organised groups they become a force to be reckoned with, as some men have experienced who have tried to ignore certain Aghem customs. Once, a group of women scattered elephant grass all over a man's compound, refusing to remove it until he agreed to comply with traditional rules. A group of protesting Aghem women can also succeed in expelling a village chief who refuses to conform to a cultural tradition.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF GROUPS THAT INCLUDE WOMEN

Aghem society is comprised of countless groups whose memberships frequently overlap and almost always include women. Groups exclusively comprised of men are jujus, village chiefs, and the society of Dua. Groups exclusively for women are *Na'atom* (Queen Mothers), village associations, dancing groups, choirs, and classes.

Most groups then, whether formal or informal, include women in their membership; households, family unions, compounds, neighbourhoods, quarters, villages, village elite, village elders, traditional healers, ALDEC – Aghem Language Development Committee, ACADA – Aghem Cultural & Development Association, Non-Government Organisations, village groups meeting outside of Wum, including the urban elite, and also the Aghem elite in the United States. Finally, there is MENFA - Menchum Family Association, a group in the US that meets annually in July, but whose membership is not strictly Aghem. At the top of the Aghem hierarchy are the groups of village gods and ancestors.

Other groups encompassing women from the Aghem community, which may not be exclusively Aghem, are catachists, church elders and lay people; choirs; youth groups; njangi - savings societies; merchants; teachers and pupils; twins, parents of twins; patrilineal families and matrilineal families.

EXTERNAL INDICATORS OF GROUP MEMBERSHIP

In some cases it is fairly easy to know when a person belongs to a particular group or set within the Aghem community. A woman, while walking past people working in a field might hear someone call out a greeting to her asking "whose child are you?" In response she may list off a string of names that starts with her mother's name and goes back three or more generations along her maternal line. It becomes clear to all to which family group she belongs. Personal names also immediately reveal if a woman fits into the category of twin or mother of twins. Friends too form little groups whose members share each other's names.

Dress is perhaps the most obvious indication of one's membership in a certain group, whether it be a family clan, a school, a choir, a church group, or a political party. Even a head decoration can indicate what level of membership a person has reached. For example, a white head tie, as opposed to a yellow head tie with matching yellow wrapper, shows that a woman is in the process of becoming a full fledged member of the Christian Women's Fellowship in the Presbyterian Church. A man porting a red feather in his cap and carrying a special bag and broom communicates to every Aghem person that he has been initiated into the society of Dua.

Even particular gestures or behaviours can tell Aghem observers that someone belongs to a certain group. Two people seen shaking left hands, with right hands also crossed over, are recognised as being parents of twins. Where an usher seats individuals in a meeting can communicate to an observer that they belong to a particular group. In a njangi meeting that includes the family and friends of njangi members, a stranger can know who is a member and who is not, simply by watching what people do as soon as they enter the meeting place. Njangi members immediately hand over some money to one particular person in the room, who by assumption is likely a member of the executive group within the savings group. Watching from quite a distance one may be able to ascertain that a particular man in a group is a chief by that fact that he does not shake hands with anyone, and that others are bowing and clapping before him.

PRIVILEGES AND OBLIGATIONS OF GROUP MEMBERS

Group membership affords certain rights or privileges, in addition to obligations and expectations. The elder son of a traditional healer is likely to have the skills of his grandfather passed down to him through his father. He is gaining access to a specific group's exclusive knowledge. Knowledge or understanding may be privy to group members alone. I, for example, was told by an Aghem woman that I would never be able to understand the topic of conversation at hand. "Only we Africans can understand," she explained. She was right. As an outsider I could not understand her explanation for a baby's green stool. She tried to explain to me that the spirit of a sick or disturbed child might leave its body, transform into a green snake, and go out into the night, moving about, eating grass. If someone kills that snake the child will die. In addition to sharing exclusive comprehension or secret information, group members might inadvertently share certain taboos or preferences. For example, among the Aghem it is considered taboo to eat green bananas, and they *all* love to eat corn fufu and njama-jama.

The privilege of wearing a group uniform goes along with the expectation that one's behaviour will not negatively reflect on the uniform or reputation of the group. I have heard it said that "you don't want people to talk against the yellow wrapper," meaning that such talk would be a bad reflection on the whole group. One of the reasons for having a group uniform is to quickly reveal one's identity or role as a member within a particular group. The uniform itself may be a symbol of the group's ideology. For example, wearing the yellow wrapper communicates to Presbyterians the conviction that this woman is now a new creature in Christ. Along these lines, it might be a good idea to commission the fabrication of a cloth to be worn only by women who have become literate in Aghem, as a symbol of pride in their language and their accomplishment.

A group member knows she is obligated to take turns at providing food or entertainment for the group, knowing that she also will be at the receiving end of this provision. Group members are also expected to help each other out so that no one needs to feel like a beggar. At any one point in time he or she might be the giver or receiver of a financial contribution, and the borrower or lender of household items. Another expectation might be that when a group member dies, the remaining members will each contribute to help the bereaved family with funeral costs, and they will be sure to attend the funeral. Keeping in mind that women belong to several different groups concurrently, we are reminded of how often she will be involved in attending funerals.

WAYS TO GET INDIVIDUALS TO CONFORM TO THE GROUP

Group members have a natural tendency to conform to group behaviours. If someone in a group starts singing, shelling peanuts, or selecting green-leaf vegetables, others tend to quickly join in. Some behaviours are not so easily adopted; the expectation exists that someone moving into the Aghem community will at least endeavour to learn the Aghem language and culture. Appreciation is certainly expressed for those who try to conform to local dialect, dress, and diet. Group members are praised from within the group for never discriminating against other members of the group, for participating fully, and for constantly providing support to the group.

Various methods, including public humiliation or recognition, are used among the Aghem to get members to conform. In a class situation it is members themselves who will tell those disturbing the lecturer to stop talking and listen. Long lists of names will be called out or posted, making public who has or has not yet fulfilled obligations of financial contributions, and for what specific amounts. Teaching is another method; members are taught to follow certain behaviours to both enhance and protect the reputation of the group. Group members will talk or shout, sometimes all at once, to the person who has not conformed, accusing her of not participating fully or of bringing shame on the group. The guilty one is expected to concede to the group's demands.

GROUP UNITY

Although Aghem people place a high value on unity, Aghem groups are not always characterised by this virtue. Earlier the group Menchum Family Association was mentioned. MENFA was created in 1989 as a forum where people from Menchum Division who are now living in the US could find ways to help out on any number of projects in Menchum. Unfortunately, as one member of this group expressed, the Aghem men and women in the US are not united, preventing them from achieving the group's goals. Disunity is a potential problem for any group that wants to see its goals realised. Attempts are made to foster unity, including the wearing of a group uniform. Songs of unity are written and sung by groups to promote unity, such as "We are one, we are together, we are one." Dances are performed symbolising the desired unity by a continuous unbroken ring of dancers. Hand movements also symbolise unity, such as crossing the two index fingers or two people slapping together their right palms, or holding hands together in a large circle. While such external behaviours may help; more will need to be done to explore culturally relevant ways to nurture unity so that group goals can be achieved.

On occasion the Aghem will purposely exclude individuals from their group by speaking in Aghem, rather than Pidgin, if they know the outsider cannot understand Aghem. A person might be warned that a stranger is in their midst by a simple comment mixed into the conversation. "There's smoke in the house," or "there's a dog hiding in the wood box" alerts a group member to the presence of an outsider.

CORPORATE/INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOURS

Aghem groups have ways of communicating corporately or behaving corporately by synchronising their actions. To give a corporate show of appreciation each woman in a gathering will clap together in unison, using the rhythm, one two, one two three, one, and maybe all shout afterward, "well done." Or in response to a leader's prompting phrase the group will respond with a different phrase. At a born-house every woman will bring a block of soap to be given to the mothers celebrating the birth of a child, or at a death celebration, every women will bring a big quantity of corn fufu or smaller quantities of corn fufu and njama-jama.

The unacceptable behaviour of falling asleep at group meetings occurs frequently enough and with good reason. Women work hard, and when finally given the chance to sit down in a meeting they quickly feel drowsy. Some will fight nodding off by keeping their hands busy, perhaps by selecting green-leaf vegetable. Aghem literacy teachers will need to explore creative ways to deal with the problem of fatigue.

TARDINESS AND POOR ATTENDANCE AT GROUP MEETINGS

Another challenge will be in addressing poor attendance and tardiness caused by the many elements of everyday life. A heavy rain shower, the death of a friend, relative, or neighbour, death celebrations, and farming demands cause many Aghem women to miss scheduled meetings. The same interruptions listed earlier that keep women from going to their farms also would keep them from attending literacy classes. Group leaders respond in various ways: waiting patiently; starting the meeting one or two hours after the scheduled time; a teacher might leave and come back later when more members have gathered; waiting and conversing, while commenting that in country fashion people are becoming very lax. The problem is not really that women do not care, but rather that women's schedules are already overloaded, being involved in many group activities while also managing the biggest demand, which is to provide food for their families.

MOTIVATION

Aghem woman are stirred to action and will go to great lengths if highly motivated, as seen by one Aghem woman who had just given birth to her sixth child. The very next day she travelled 460 kilometres to Yaounde during the height of rainy season, when the first 85 kilometres of the road from Wum to Bamenda was nearly impassable. What could possibly have motivated her to undergo such a strain? She wanted to be present at an oral interview on that very day, which was required to gain entrance into a teacher training program. This woman was motivated! How can women be motivated to learn to read and write Aghem?

The need to hear and to understand is a potentially strong motivator. For this reason an Aghem woman chooses to be a member of a small church rather than the larger one attended by the rest of her family. Sitting in a gathering surrounded by foreign voices holds little appeal for social beings. It is as if they have been made deaf which inhibits their participation in communication events. One Sunday in Wum I attended a tiny village church where most of the service was conducted in Pidgin. Sitting between stone-faced women the congregation sang songs in English or Pidgin. Later in the service, however, a transformation came over these sombre women. They stood up and started dancing, while wearing animated expressions of joy on their faces. What happened? The singing had switched from songs in a foreign or second language, to songs in Aghem, their mother tongue. This memory motivates *me* to continue being involved in the development of Cameroon's national languages.

Every group must have a vision or purpose motivating its members to get involved and to stay involved. ACADA, the Aghem Cultural and Development Association was created by a group of Aghem people concerned for the well-being of people in rural Aghem. Their goal is to involve local men, women and children in discussion and decision making that will result in self-directed change for the benefit of the rural Aghem community. ACADA also shows its support for the development of the Aghem language by its desire to make an annual financial contribution to ALDEC. ACADA should be invited and feel compelled to continue giving its support and input into the development of a literacy program for Aghem women.

As mentioned earlier, the Aghem people have an orientation or preference for working together with other women in groups. Consequently, most women are already involved in the activities of several different groups at once, often struggling to keep up with their various obligations and expectations. With this in mind, it would seem unwise to establish yet another group for women whose sole purpose is to teach them how to read and write in Aghem. The alternative would be to design a literacy program that could be streamlined or incorporated into existing groups in which women are already active participants. Perhaps innovative methods could be tried which take advantage of small groups of women meeting in kitchens to cook or under the shade of a tree to rest. Rather that expecting women to come to formal meeting places during the height of planting season, itinerant teachers might travel on motorbikes along country roads, giving short lessons to little groups of women who are taking a break together from their farm work.

Some Characteristics of a matrilineal society

The matrilineal system of inheritance and lineage is another important attribute of Aghem culture which should be taken into consideration when developing a literacy program for Aghem women.

In response to the question, "Whose child are you?" a person refers to his or her mother's family. A woman always wants to have daughters because it is the children of daughters who will carry on the family name. Grandchildren born to sons will become members of the daughter-in-law's family. A son offers to work for his father, even though it is his mother's brothers who will be paying for his school fees. A son is the connection between a woman and her brothers. Lineage does not depend on a union of marriage, which is why the Biblical model of "man and wife becoming one flesh" runs contrary to the matrilineal model of two families remaining independent while agreeing to work together for the common good. Aghem women have property and land-use rights which remain constant before and after marriage.

IMPLICATIONS OF MATRILINEAL IDEOLOGY

Aghem women are the ones who have a good understanding of their matrilineal culture and should therefore be heavily involved in thinking through the implications of this system in order to plan a most successful literacy program. Aghem economics, family structure, and traditional culture are bound up in its matrilineal roots, suggesting that any language development program of significant proportions should carefully consider all the possible implications, as well as the modern trend among some Aghem families to gradually shift to a patrilineal system of inheritance.

ATTRIBUTES OF Na'TOM (QUEEN MOTHER)

Each village chief, *Ba'tom*, rules alongside a female counterpart, *Na'tom*, who may be his aunt, sister or niece and who is considered the mother of the lineage. As an outsider I have tended to see only the authoritative power invested in a village chief, but Aghem people attribute power to this woman who can effect change while defending the interests of Aghem women. In village meetings she represents all the maternal relatives, acting as a liaison between them and the traditional council. Bearing in mind the importance of her role on behalf of women, it would seem unthinkable to develop a literacy program for women that does not include the *Na'atom* in the leadership as well as the participant level.

WOMAN SET APART FROM THE GROUP

Aghem groups have members who stand out from the membership and are treated with special honour or recognition. *Na'atom* are a prime example, but other women also take on special roles separate from the body of members in a group. There is one woman who supervises the preparation of corn beer for annual festivals. Choirs have female directors, a nun stands alongside the priest and passes out the host, a woman serves as an executive member in the Catholic church. A mother is the head of a family clan. Each of these women in their distinctive roles receives special recognition. She is given a seat of honour at public gatherings, people stand up to greet her, or wait for her to stand before getting up themselves to leave. She is introduced first in a group gathering, shown appreciation for attending and may be given an opportunity to speak to the group.

What implications might this cultural practise have for a literacy program? Firstly, these women throughout the community who have a special role within their groups should be among the first to be sensitised and informed of the need to be involved in Aghem literacy development. Secondly, they should be invited to participate in the discussions and decisions regarding the design and implementation of a proposed project. The presence of these women, however, should not over-ride the input and participation of the women who make up the core of women's groups, but special care should be made to encourage their input and participation especially during the early stages of literacy development.

AGHEM WOMEN IN FOCUS

What reasons might there be for putting Aghem women in the forefront of an Aghem literacy program? PROPELCA (Operational Research Project for Language Education in Cameroon) is a program already in place whose focus is children. National legislation supports PROPELCA's initiative to train teachers to incorporate mother-tongue curriculum within the regular school context. Why should Aghem women forfeit the opportunity to read and write their own language while their primary school children are enjoying such a privilege?

Aghem women have a rich knowledge about their culture, tied up in oral songs and stories. These could be more accurately preserved and continuously enjoyed by women skilled in reading and writing Aghem. Such skill would also benefit members of her household and clan as she teaches and models the use of written Aghem materials. Aghem women are capable of problem-solving, and could increase their credibility to share that knowledge with younger and older women, and with men and children. Any woman who can read and write in her own language will lift the heads of those who formerly paid little heed to her storehouse of knowledge and wisdom.

PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN

The Aghem woman wrestles with many problems, including poor soil and no means to put nutrition back into the life-giving ground. Ageing women with waning strength do not have the money to pay wages to helpers who could do the heavy work of clearing, hoeing and weeding. Some days it is a struggle to find sufficient affordable firewood, especially during the rainy season. Some men give women a hard time, failing to fulfil their own obligations as husbands and uncles, perhaps due to negligence or the confusion caused by the two competing matrilineal and patrilineal systems. More and more Aghem women are raising grandchildren along with the single parent who is still living under her care. Sometimes she is raising her grandchildren because both of the children's parents have died of AIDS. As noted earlier, women cope with the obligations associated with the frequent occurrence of deaths in the village. A woman must also figure out how to care for sick children when there is little or no money for medicine. She toggles back and forth between the medical doctor and the traditional healer, and often remains unaware of vital health information. She may not know exactly what vaccinations her baby received, and wonder years later why or if the child has chicken pox or small pox. She may not know that a filarial treatment must be taken in carefully controlled doses to avoid uncomfortable or even fatal allergic reactions. Many women work arduously to provide food for their families, never having had the opportunity to get an education. Aghem women need to be drawn into problem-solving processes within the context of literacy development and her problems needed to be considered while planning and implementing a literacy program.

UNIQUE ATTRIBUTE OF AGHEM WOMEN

Throughout my time in Wum I have been watching to discover what makes an Aghem woman uniquely Aghem, different from all other women. They have a particular dress code. The main outfit in the village is a blouse, two wrappers, and a matching head tie. An Aghem woman will likely be wearing dangling gold ear-rings, a gold chain necklace and pendant, and be carrying a western style purse or handbag over her shoulder. Through open-toed shoes one will be able to see her toenails painted red, matching the red paint on the nails of her left hand only. An Aghem woman never crosses her legs and never eats with her left hand. But none of this makes her exclusively Aghem, for women from neighbouring villages, like Isu or Weh, dress and behave in the same way.

Once an Aghem woman paid me the greatest compliment by her words, "I am just like you," but I was taken aback by the order of her pronouns. In my culture this sentiment would have been expressed by switching the pronouns to say, "You are just like me." I have yet to discover the exact reason for this difference in form, nevertheless, we are both probably saying that in what really matters, we are the same, sharing similar joys, hopes, and fears. But we are obviously also very different. What is the one thing that makes my Aghem friend different from me and different from other women outside of Wum? What one unique attribute will prove to any other Aghem person that she is uniquely Aghem? Of course. It is her tongue. When she opens her mouth to speak, she will speak Aghem like only a mother-tongue speaker of Aghem could speak this language.

This very uniqueness should be nurtured, preserved, and employed to the greatest possible advantage for the good of the entire Aghem community. Her control over the Aghem language is a rich resource that has not yet been fully exploited if it has been confined to the constraints of oral communication. By learning how to read and write in Aghem, women will be able to increase their comprehension and understanding of materials translated into Aghem, and to increase their range of influence over the young.

Suppose an Aghem mother has learned to read and write Aghem, and has worked together in a group with other women, including health professionals, to write and produce an educational booklet on the topic of AIDS. When this mother sits down later with her daughter to discuss ways to protect herself from contracting AIDS, is it possible that her daughter and her daughter's friends will be more inclined to listen to this humble village woman? Will her credibility not go up because she is skilled in the art of reading, writing, and producing educational materials in Aghem?

Conclusion

This has been an attempt to highlight some attributes of the Aghem culture which ought to be considered and capitalised upon during the design, development and implementation of a women's literacy program. Some cultural attributes, if ignored, may actually impede development. The purpose of this paper has not been to propose answers or solutions, but rather to suggest topics for consideration and to motivate women to initiate their own research and discussion. Aghem women putting their heads together could come up with innovative strategies which take into account the possible negative or positive impact that certain cultural attributes might have on a literacy program. Then, in co-operation with other outside organisations, Aghem women will be able to direct their own tailor-made literacy program for Aghem women.