

-MEO IUDICIO-**ON COMMUNICATION IN VILLA BRAVADO AT THE UFS**

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The University of the Free State (UFS) is an embodiment of diversity and a microcosm of the broader South African community. The diversity at the UFS exists not only among racial groups but also within racial groups. It is this intra-racial diversity that characterises a hostel called Villa Bravado in the heartland of the Kovsie campus.

Villa Bravado is a "Black" hostel. Even though it is a so-called Black hostel, it is made up of different cultural or ethnic groupings. Residents are from South Africa and the rest of the African continent. Within the hostel there are Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, Tswana, Pedi, Swazi, Venda and Coloured South Africans. Foreigners at Villa Bravado include Ugandans, Herero (Namibia), Ghanaians, Sierra Leoneans, Basotho (Lesotho) and Zimbabweans.

Being African is the common denominator amongst these ethnic groups. Certain basic values inform the cultural basis of these groups even though the differences are so distinct and prominent that differing conceptions of how to relate among each other sometimes predominate. Languages spoken by these groups include English, Afrikaans, Sotho, Tswana, Xhosa, Zulu, Swazi, Ndebele, Pedi and Shona.

The problem of diversity may not be as much as when Whites and Blacks integrate, but it certainly exists at Villa Bravado. However an approach that creates harmony among various groups has been adopted. There is a Villa culture.

Residents bring different norms with them on arrival. However in the spirit of Villa culture these are somehow downplayed. Prominence is

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given to the Villa culture above ethnically conceived norms. For example, it is a standing rule in the Villa culture that seniority is not determined by age only, but importantly by arrival date and academic seniority. For a Xhosa guy that could pose problems, because of his normative background. A Xhosa guy would expect to be attributed a senior status by virtue of how long he has been circumcised.

Villa culture is a product of negotiation among Villa residents of what is the right way to do things in a way that accommodates everyone; does not cross anyone's boundaries; and upholds the standard rules of the University. Privacy and individuality are upheld to a limited extent. The predominant behaviour is communal which is congruent to the general belief amongst Africans in ubuntu and oneness. It is also informed by the historical deprivation in the Africans' backgrounds which have brought them together into a cohesive unit. Their reaction to conflict is full of expressive communication. There is emphasis on open expression of views on subjects that affect the rest of the house.

As stated above, Villa Bravado is a hostel of diverse groups and many languages. It is, for example, difficult to reconcile the Ugandan language with Zulu or Afrikaans. The residents have agreed to use English as an "official" language in all meetings and formal activities of the hostel. This is due to the understanding that an average Villa Bravado resident has studied English at school and therefore can make good conversation in English.

The English accents vary. A Mosotho speaks in a different (English) accent than a Shona from Zimbabwe. Some ethnic groups have heavy accents whilst others have light accents. Coloureds, Vendas, Shonas and Xhosas have heavy English accents. Zulus, Herero and Sothos/Tswanas have light accents. This results in an interesting mode of conversation and sometimes misunderstanding because of unclear pronunciation. Over time however they become more familiar with each other's pronunciation.

The different groups use their voice volumes differently. Sothos and Tswanas are generally loud. Zulus and Swazis generally have lower voices. The others fall in the middle category. Zulus, at first, may misconceive the Sotho/Tswana pitch for arrogance and lack of respect, and trouble may start. However, in the Villa Bravado context, the meaning attached to voice volume seems to be something that is subliminally understood especially among those that have stayed at the hostel for a long period.

Despite English being the “official” language at Villa Bravado, Sotho or Tswana has been used quite often in hostel activities. This could be explained by the fact that most of the residents are either Tswana or Sotho or have a conversational understanding of Sotho. Remember that the Free State Province is predominantly Sotho-speaking and that there is a huge contingent of foreign students from Lesotho.

It is easier for the South African Black residents to adapt, understand and ultimately also speak Sotho within the duration of their stay at the University. However, it becomes a real uphill battle for Afrikaans-speaking Coloureds. While Afrikaans is a truly African language, it has a Eurocentric foundation. Students from neighbouring countries in Southern Africa such as Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana and Swaziland find it easier than Coloureds to adapt to Sotho because of the shared linguistic structures.

With regard to the use of time, there is nothing like African time. It is not in the African culture to allow lateness. However, it is a fact that residents at Villa Bravado are generally late at meetings – on average by anything between a minute and thirty minutes. This does not seem to cause a stir as there is an inherent acceptance that those present will determine the decisions.

Ethnocentrism and stereotyping do take place, especially in the minds of the first-year groups who also have a tendency to generalise on matters even when they have limited information. Freshers sometimes evaluate others according to their own cultural standards. Going back to the Xhosa-guy example: He (as a first-year student) may feel that others (also those who have been in the hostel for much longer) are somehow deficient in that they are uncircumcised. In that culture they are regarded as boys until they are circumcised. This may limit his association with the rest of the group. The uncircumcised members of the first year group may also feel that Xhosa men have a superiority complex and tension could ensue. It is through continual interaction that such stereotyping stops. The solution ultimately rests with time. As time goes by they get to understand each other better.

Young Africans want to be involved in decision-making that concerns their welfare. They do not vest 100% trust in leadership. That can be explained by the fact that they have historically been cheated, manipulated and downright oppressed by people in authority. Almost everything is taken with a pinch of salt.

The same goes for Villa Bravado residents. Communication or reports from the authorities are scrutinised for any short-changing. The House Committee is trusted, but is generally monitored to ensure that it does not end up transgressing the policies, ideals and expectations of the residents.

All in all, communication and therefore life in a hostel like Villa Bravado is one of compromise and continual negotiation.