



## **A unique NGO fosters cultural bonding**

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**By Tesfu Telahoun**

With increasing globalization forcing more intense interaction among the inhabitants of this rapidly shrinking world, informed cultural awareness is becoming a vital, even indispensable tool in business, education and other areas of life.

Cognizant of the importance of establishing strong and informed intercultural relations among the world's diverse communities, is the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR) a not for profit professional organization founded in the United States in and has chapters in Asia and Europe.

SIETAR is a highly regarded society at global level and holds non governmental organization (NGO) status with the United Nations, as well as an affiliation with the Council of Europe.

The stated primary objectives of SIETAR are to spur the development and implementation of particular social norms, information education and know-how that bolster and contribute to strengthen positive and enduring intercultural relations at individual, group organizational and also at community levels. At the heart of SIETAR's global program and especially in respect to her extensive and hands on experience in Africa, where she has lived for over 16 years, is Pascale Sztum, MBA, Mrs. Sztum, a belgian national engaged is in cross-cultural training and research – a very apt field in the overall scheme of things, as well as being a consultant and business education expert.

She spoke exclusively to Capital this week, about among other relevant topics, the dedicated website, [www.workingwithafricans.com](http://www.workingwithafricans.com) and how this site is striving to establish, initially, a network of informed actors in order to raise awareness about the importance and promotion of beneficial intercultural relations between and among African countries.

Mrs Sztum original undertaking in Africa was to assist people by 'fixing' problems that occur in the process of doing business. However, she soon realized that her own words, "Very quickly I understood that there were a number of inefficiencies – problems of productivity and of quality, that were related to culture, I tried to explore this dynamic and from the perspective of being very immersed in the field, I developed a strong interest in conducting research. I deserved an understanding of the intercultural aspect of communication – to find out what is actually going on when people from different cultures work together."

Mrs. Sztum is a member of SIETAR – which consists of professionals engaged in the intercultural field. Capital will publish the entirety of the exclusive interview with Pascale Sztum in issue number 492.

## The Business of culture



**Capital: -Tell us about your career...**

Pascale: - I can say I have spent my entire professional life busy in Business Education and Consultancy work. I've worked in Belgium – my homeland, France, Spain, and other countries in Europe for 8th years. I have also had the opportunity to have interacted professionally with east Europeans, the Japanese, and a host of other cultures. In the course of this experience, I had the growing realization of the critical importance of the cultural component of business interaction. I left Europe in 1992 and followed my husband to Africa, where he is a public health expert and have spent the last 16 years in various African nations. I currently represent the Society of Intercultural Education and Research in Training (SIETAR) in Africa which is a professional association of experts in the cultural aspects of conducting business.

**Capital: - Please elaborate on what you meant by the cultural component of business interaction.....**

Pascale: - Initially my objective was to [help people](#) by fixing problems related to business. However, very quickly, I identified a number of inefficiencies, problems with productivity of quality and others, that were related to cultural issues. I explored this dimension and from a keen enthusiasm for the field, I developed an interest in conducting research to understanding more about exactly what happens when different cultures work together.

People have always felt that they should prepare themselves to work with people from a different culture. If we consider business, people have been conducting trade since the dawn of time with other cultures.

So for a long period, it was thought that it was adequate to possess linguistic skills and also having to put in mind a list of do's and don'ts for the particular culture one wishes to do business with. The items would include table manners, whether gifts are in good taste or not and many others. It was once held that a rudimentary understanding of a different culture was quite sufficient for conducting business, along with perhaps, a bit of consular support from the embassy of their country.

It happens that this kind of 'preparation' has fallen into question. In the late 70's many western businesses experienced considerable difficulties when dealing with the Japanese. They could not fathom the way the Japanese communicate during negotiations and in other business interaction. The western companies lost heavily as sales plummeted. They couldn't penetrate the market at all.

The situation turned out to be in fact, a wake up call to the idea that culture matters very much and, that people are not naturally endowed to be effective with people from other cultures. Therefore, business people began to cry out for help and asked experts to tell them how to approach the Japanese and more effectively work with them. The companies almost immediately witnessed an improvement in their business after they applied some of the expert advice. So that was when the profession of intercultural trainer/coach emerged.

The objective is to offer individuals and organizations business services to help them facilitate activities in a foreign market and also to help them deal with issues and problems linked to inter-cultural differences. The intercultural [business consultant](#) plays the role of facilitator in situations where the parties have completely different approaches to each other and do not work well together.

After emerging in a very specific geographic area (Japan), the profession has developed tremendously and evolved into a global phenomena. As companies began to realize the extent to which culture influences business activity overseas, they began to invest in research and a growing body of literature on the subject emerged. The profession moved from Asia to Europe in the early 90s as Europe was preparing for the single market. A number of business in the various countries understood that they had to create alliances across borders in order to meet the demand of a greatly expanded market. The status quo of doing business obviously had to change. A striking example of this fact is for instance that of a German being unable to work with a Frenchman even though, having abolished the physical barrier of a border, there had not been a corresponding development of intercultural awareness.

At the moment SIETAR is the world's largest multi-disciplinary [network](#) of professionals numbering over 4000 members. The membership is of a very diverse background. Some are business people who help companies in various countries to

succeed in [joint venture](#) partnerships. The society itself is funded by members' contribution. SIETAR was actually developed in the United States where the business community found it necessary to create networks in order to share information. The network evolved into SIETAR and has spread around the world except in Africa.

In regard to Africa, there exists only [clusters](#) of information on the "African way of running companies or on African values as if Africa is one uniform unit. Conventionally there has been no consideration of the great diversity of Africa. East Africans (and even within E. Africa there are huge differences) are different from West Africans, etc. This reveals how poor is the research on this particular area and as a result, how difficult it is for African [entrepreneurs](#) wherever they are, to succeed on the human side of the venture. We now know that many initiatives are being taken to foster and encourage African business people to trade and establish [partnerships](#) beyond their borders. That can be bilateral, sub-regional, regional and continental.

Among the difficulties in establishing intercultural awareness is that the differences between and among cultures are usually hidden and not easily discernible on the surface.

This means that when dealing in business with a person from another country, one may be unaware of the effect of their behavior and way of communication. It's all about what we call promoting the development of cross cultural competence. This is different from cultural knowledge about others because it means that first you have to understand that your way of doing business is not the way, its just your way. This is where a cross cultural expert can help – to understand how one is different from the other and thereby avoid problems...

### **Capital: - Isn't there perhaps a risk of perpetuating stereotypes?**

Pascale: – Well, if for example you want to know how Kenyans do business you of course create new stereotypes but you can say that there does exist a national culture. You might also have people who have had exposure to other ways which are different from the majority culture. The challenge for people interacting with people from other cultures is to be aware that culture is key.

A concrete example would be the way people interpret silence during a [business negotiation](#). Let's say you try to sell a product or service and make an offer. The person in front of you doesn't reply. This may mean different things in different cultures. [Silence](#) in some cultures has a specific meaning. It may mean the person has chosen to be silent rather than embarrass you by refusing directly.

Being aware of the specifics of the culture you are dealing with is essential. In some cultures 'yes' may not mean 'yes', and "I think there will be a little problem" could mean, "I'm not at all interested"

So instead of arming oneself with a list of dos and don'ts it is much better to increase personal nuanced cultural awareness. Gestures, manners of speech, tone and inflection and other subtleties are all part of this. By the way, this intercultural education is not just for business transaction but more pertinently for working effectively in a multi-cultural setting.

A number of privileged actors outside Africa have accessed this service and benefited and I feel that Africa can also gain from this network.

The concept has even more significance to the Africa of today. Africa is experiencing unprecedented levels of economic growth and it is becoming increasingly attractive to the rest of the world. Also, Africa is drawing not just the familiar investor from the one time colonial rulers but also rising - China India, Brazil and many others.

There are intense negotiations, business dealings, dialogs for cooperation and other interactions taking place not only between and among international business people and African business but also at government level, where a better awareness of intercultural education can play a significant role.

However, in this respect, with almost no cross-cultural trainers having expertise on African cultures existing, Africans in general are at a disadvantaged to business people from other parts of the world.

My message is therefore to raise awareness about the existence of intercultural education, research and training services offered by SIETAR, and on the need for Africa to develop not only expertise to deal with non-African cultures but also expertise on the different cultures and customs within their own country. I believe that local cultural awareness is more important than teaching continental 'culture' as I'm afraid happens too often across Africa, adding to the challenges of limited resources to conduct research and develop expertise.

However, I do feel that a viable network of informed and interculturally aware African business people can be set up. We do not necessarily need to have highly trained and exclusively dedicated experts in cross cultural training.