

## **Embracing sustainability: revisiting the authenticity of ‘event’ time...**

Mugendi M'Rithaa

Keywords: *Africa, authenticity, conviviality, ‘event’ time, sustainability, ubuntu*

*The recent economic turmoil (that affected even the so-called ‘rich’ nations) dramatically reminded us of humanity’s interconnectedness. Notwithstanding, communities typically considered to be of marginal economic significance were surprisingly resilient and robust in the face of the present uncertainty. These pervasive majority world contexts represent the most significant and pivotal socio-economic and geopolitical cohort on our planet. They have relied on strategies for survival that often pass unnoticed and underappreciated – a richness that could well inform future efforts for interrogating issues of sustainable consumption. Subsequently, the quest for identifying and diffusing more sustainable ways of living has gained impetus as the global community seeks lasting solutions. This paper revisits the concept of time with particular reference to Africa for inspiration to leapfrog the continent into a more sustainable future.*

**Anais do 2º Simpósio Brasileiro de Design Sustentável (II SBDS)**

Jofre Silva, Mônica Moura & Aguinaldo dos Santos (orgs.)

**Rede Brasil de Design Sustentável – RBDS**

São Paulo | Brazil | 2009

**ISBN**

**Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Symposium on Sustainable Design (II ISSD)**

Jofre Silva, Mônica Moura & Aguinaldo dos Santos (orgs.)

**Brazil Network on Sustainable Design - RBDS**

São Paulo | Brazil | 2009

**ISBN**

## Embracing sustainability: revisiting the authenticity of 'event' time...

### 1 Our shared humanity...

Africa is home to approximately 840 million people living in 53 different countries - of these Nigeria is the most populous - with one in every six Africans being a Nigerian. The vast majority of the 2,000 languages (and related traditions) are shared among many neighbouring countries whose peoples were proximal kith and kin prior to the colonial era. The most widely spoken of these include Berber (in North Africa), Hausa (in Central and West Africa), Swahili (in East and Central Africa), and Yoruba (in West Africa). Such eclectic languages evolved from quasi-economic and socio-cultural exchange across common boundaries. These languages were further propagated through long-distance trade transactions and in their present iteration underpin the unique Afro-centric version of unity in diversity. A number of other languages (mainly diffused via commercial or colonial agency) include Arabic, English, French, German, and Portuguese. Ghana (formerly known as the Gold Coast) was the first of the African colonies to gain its independence in 1957.

The continent enjoys an abundance of human and natural resources (Fick, 2006; Jere-Malanda, 2008). Notwithstanding, two extremes are evident on the continent; on the one hand the vast majority of the denizens barely eke out a subsistence existence due to a combination of debilitating factors that Pascal Eze (cited in Jere-Malanda 2008:1) calls *PIDIC* - an acronym for *poverty, instability, disease, illiteracy and corruption*. On the other hand, a burgeoning middle-class expands its mode of wasteful and conspicuous consumption in the misguided belief that such overt consumptive imprudence reflects a (progressive) Western-leaning lifestyle. Subsequently, in terms of per capita income, the continent is home to some of the wealthiest and poorest nations on the planet. Widening income gaps within most countries further exacerbates this socio-economic reality...

Interestingly though, both ends of the continuum co-exist harmoniously and interact frequently on a number of levels, primarily in the socio-cultural domain. Further, as shall be discussed in this paper, the collective worldview engendered by a shared perception of the concept of time perpetuates this interconnectedness through life's events. This authentic interconnective bond informs the resilience of families and societies on the continent. Indeed as Mazrui (1986 cited in Takyi and Oheneba-Sakyi, 2006: 273) argues:

the African family is the most authentic social institution in the post-colonial era. In a continent steeped in artificiality, the African family is more real than many of our countries which are colonially made. [...] more real than our economies most of which are mere shadows. [...] You see, the family in Africa is vibrant in its emotions, compelling in its loyalties. It is alive and well, living right across the continent.

The pervasive ethos of *ubuntu* (or humanness) is a unique expression of the bonds that have traditionally kept African individuals and communities together (Bhengu, 1996). As Desmond Tutu (1999:34-35) elaborates,

*ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks to the very essence of being human. When you want to give high praise to someone we say, "Yu, u nobuntu"; he or she has *ubuntu*. This means that they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. They share what they have. It also means that my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life. We

say, "a person is a person through other people". [...] I am human because I belong, I participate, I share.

As Tutu (*ibid*) alludes, response to the call of *ubuntu* is through participation – everyone is invited, and everyone can contribute towards the goals and common wealth of the community. A person reaffirms their personhood through interaction with, and contribution into the lives of others. This people-centred, inclusive and participative spirit of *ubuntu* is what Africa shares with the rest of humanity (M'Rithaa, 2008). It infuses the network of relationships that provide resilience against the ever-changing socio-economic and geopolitical landscapes. It is this spirit that guided South Africa's emergence as a united democratic country in 1994 after forty years of apartheid rule.

More recently, this spirit informed the historic truth and reconciliation process in Rwanda – a country that has shown a remarkable economic growth rate of 11% despite the widespread contraction of other economies reeling from the devastating effects of the current global recession. This community-building ethos sustains the networks that support contemporary migratory practices amongst Africans in search of better economic prospects and more accommodative political milieu elsewhere on the continent. McKenzie (2009: 17) emphasizes that "proximity and networks play the most important role" in facilitating and accommodating transitory/seasonal migrants moving across and between African countries. Support from members of such "long-standing social networks" ameliorates the hardship and cost of migration significantly (*ibid*).

## 1.1 Beyond the present crises

The economic crisis that the world currently finds itself in has pushed entire economies/societies to a tipping point. Many of the so-called rich (or developed) nations now find themselves in unlikely company. The vast majority of their citizens previously went about their daily business in utter ignorance or disregard of the plight of people living in majority world (or industrially developing) contexts where the vast majority (or about 90%) of humanity subsists. The sustainability of the world's financial/economic models (and the glaringly inequitable standard-of-living and quality-of-life indices) has been brought into sharp scrutiny and found to be wanting. There is a renewed desire to find people-centred developmental and economic models to pull the world out of the present debacle and to prevent crises of this nature in future.

As discussed earlier, Africa is endowed with immense wealth in natural resources. The exploitation and extraction of these raw materials has often precipitated conflict and socio-economic upheaval. This has been the case in Nigeria where there has been an armed struggle in the petroleum-rich Ogoni region. 'Blood diamonds' from Sierra Leone fuelled gross human rights abuse and war throughout the entire region on all sides of the country's borders. The Democratic Republic of Congo (the continent's third largest country; and potentially the richest one) is still reeling from the myriad foreign armies and militia fighting over the country's extensive mineral wealth. The internally displaced peoples of Darfur are also victims of the quest to exploit Sudan's oil deposits.

The situation is untenable. The global community's insistence on adherence to acceptable moral and ethical conventions has forced governments and multi-national corporations to rethink their strategies for doing business in these geopolitical hotspots. The global community, as well as a growing number of organisations such as the Fairtrade Foundation and Transparency International are lending a collective voice for greater accountability and transparency as a prerequisite to eliminating all forms of unfair exploitation of disenfranchised producer-citizens. Similarly, it is imperative for African governments to demonstrate good governance and uphold democratic principles in their own countries (Tambulasi & Kayuni, 2005). There is an urgent need for a more equitable

and sustainable system with an emphasis on creativity and resilience. Indeed as Manzini (2009: 45) suggests, the current economic crisis presents humanity with “several possible exit strategies [and] the best of them is oriented towards more sustainable ways of living and producing. Moving in this direction there is a lot to be done, starting from the ecological re-orientation of the entire production and consumption system...” Such progressive exit strategies would need to anticipate service systems that do not depend solely on money as the *raison d'être* for interpersonal interaction.

## 2 Back to basics

Labels can be misleading. For example, Malawi is considered one of the poorest countries in the world, yet only 1.3% of firms pay for security in that country, compared to 92% of firms in the ‘more prosperous’ Cameroon (The Africa Report, 2009: 82). This challenges popular notions that inextricably link poverty with crime – due consideration of context and the definitive role of a person’s community would temper such sensibilities. Money (after all) isn’t everything, and unfettered consumerism often soils the social fabric. For many close-knit communities (especially in rural and peri-urban settings) consumerism has yet to take its hold on the popular psyche – people readily share what they have, and borrow what they don’t. As Papanek (1995: 186) argues, “consumerism is *not* deeply ingrained in the world’s cultures; it is a fairly recent and superficial phenomenon, probably arriving with the newly invented goodies of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries”.

For the vast majority of African communities, the currency of exchange is trust. People come first! In this manner the relational interdependence of community members is reaffirmed and perpetuated. Since time immemorial, traditional African societies have primarily relied on various expressions of *ubuntu* (which is an isiZulu word). *Ubuntu* is also known as *utu* in kiSwahili (spoken in Central and Eastern Africa) and *botho* in both seTswana and seSotho (spoken in Southern Africa). *Ubuntu* is evident through various forms of self-reliance and mutual assistance such as *bataka kwegaita* (communal solidarity) among the Banyakore people of Uganda, *boipelogo* (self-reliance) in Botswana, *harambee* (pulling together) in Kenya, and *ujamaa* (familyhood) in Tanzania (M'Rithaa, 2008). Similarly, in Ghana, *nobwa* (reciprocal assistance) is an invitation to family, friends or neighbours to join in the activity of ploughing the host’s farm in the knowledge that should any of the participants require assistance in future, the host would answer the call to action accordingly. These values are still alive on the continent and in the Diaspora wherever an African presence is detectable, such as in Europe and the Americas. This is true also of the African descendants in Brazil – a country with a sizeable African population.

Manzini (2009: 49) describes the dynamics of ‘creative communities’ as “an emerging number of creative people who invent and enhance new and more sustainable ways of living and producing”. Importantly, these creative communities differ in composition from traditional communities in that in the former, members elect to belong based on shared goals and objectives in order that the entire community functions and lives more sustainably. Traditional communities on the other hand find themselves linked by culture, customs or blood ties – factors that are often selective and exclusionist in nature. This paper posits that traditional African communities are sustainable by default. Many of these communities are often oblivious to this fact as they have been living in this manner for millennia. Promoting emerging creative communities would orientate elective communities in Africa and help leapfrog them into a more sustainable ways of living – by design.

A kindred concept of particular relevance to the African context is that of ‘relational services’ - those that are “deeply and profoundly based on the quality of interpersonal relations between and among participants” (Cipolla, 2009: 233). In Africa, women form the relational superstructure through which convivial social interactions happen. As caregivers

and key economic contributors, African women render indispensable services to their families and to their communities at large – an investment in women leads to a concomitant benefits for the entire community (M'Rithaa, 2008). As Cipolla (2009: 233) elaborates, in such an interpersonal service model, “no participant can be easily replaced, because together they produce [...] community, a common story”. There is ample evidence of the pivotal socio-economic role played by women, particularly in the informal economic sectors known as *jua kali* (which in *kiSwahili* means ‘[in the] hot sun’) in Kenya (Macharia, 2006); and the *second economy* in South Africa (du Toit & Neves, 2007). A strategy for enhancing the quality and efficacy of relational services would of necessity need to engage with women. There are a vast number of (mainly women-driven) *ad hoc* co-operatives facilitating micro-lending clubs and group savings/purchasing schemes on the continent wherein typically, a handful of members enjoying deeply interpersonal relationships function essentially on mutual trust. Such a voluntary group is known variously as *motshelo* in Botswana; *chama* in Kenya; and *stokvel* in South Africa. Many have gone on to formalise their membership into *bona fide* long-term investment companies.

Further, as du Toit and Neves (2007) argue, the aim of policy makers should not be to absorb the (informal) *second economy* into the so-called (formal) *first economy*. Eliminating the former would be counterproductive in the long term. Rather, progressive policy should strengthen the *second economy* by providing for greater resilience and reduced associated risk factors that act as barriers for entry therein. In view of the extraordinarily high unemployment rates in most Sub-Saharan economies, this latter approach would absorb a higher proportion of the available labour force (Orwa, 2007). Such developmental policies that place emphasis on the potential contribution of service systems (and not just products) would ultimately promote more sustainable communities and consequently, facilitate greater social equity and cohesion (Vezzoli, 2007).

## 2.1 A time for everything

Traditionally, Africans viewed time in a cyclic manner. There was a *season* and a *reason* for everything - everything had its time and place, and everything and everyone was interconnected in the circle of life. Nothing was superfluous to the cosmic order and all things were imbued with rich meaning and symbolism (Agbo, 2006). Concrete communal events and milestones often received priority over personal plans based on future projections – people were co-opted into personal projects to ensure the sustainability of the latter. Invariably, relationship-affirming activities received the utmost attention and investment in time. The life events (and related rites of passage) of birth, initiation, marriage, and death are equally valid reasons for celebrating one’s kinship and interconnectedness to their community.

This view is corroborated by Thackara (2006: 33) in his elaboration on the notions of *kairos* and *chronos* with respect to time. Thackara (*ibid*) offers the following exposition:

the Greeks [...] had two words for time *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* means absolute time: linear chronological, and quantifiable. *Kairos*, however means qualitative time – the time of opportunity, chance and mischance. [...] We are all born with a sense of event time. Before they shifted to a more clock-based way of doing things, people listened to their bodies to tell them when to do things. [...] Excessive social speed degrades social quality.

The cassava plant is the staple in many parts of Africa and is grown using organic farming methods. It is a sturdy and robust tuber that is uniquely suited to the unpredictable climatic conditions on the continent and is naturally drought-resistant. Among the Yoruba-speaking people of West Africa, the cassava plant in its raw and unprocessed form is

known as *ege*. The cassava is then processed by grating and grinding it into flour known as *gari* – this is subsequently fermented for up to five days so as to neutralise its acidic content (indigenous knowledge links high acidity with diminished eyesight). The final stage of preparation involves cooking the flour into a cake-like dish known as *eba* before serving it with a bowl of fish or other stews which is best eaten with one's hands. This example of *slow food* demonstrates the benefit of keeping *chronos* in check and allowing *kairos* its due expression (*ibid*).

In Africa, people have often seen seasonal migration as a means to survival. Historically, periodic changes in natural environmental cycles such as flooding, drought, and famine were the principal catalysts. Later, endemic diseases affecting livestock, ecological disasters, socio-political upheavals, and economic uncertainty (cycles of growth and decline) became the main incentives for migration (McKenzie, 2009). Such migratory practices are an example of how 'event' time functions at a social level. At an interpersonal level, people come first, always. That means that other projects often suffer at the expense of stronger relationships. Further, the closer the relation is to the individual, the more time allocated to the strengthening of resultant relational bonds.

An interesting example from the Ga people of Ghana illustrates this concept. The Ga are renowned for their elaborately crafted 'fantasy' coffins – they believe in celebrating the life of the departed by 'sending them off in style'. The relatives of the deceased place an order for a coffin that they feel best manifests the status (or previous occupation) of their dearly departed. The assumption is that the mass-produced coffins (known as *funu adaka* in the Akan language) are anonymous and therefore unbecoming for the anticipated event. As the deceased can only be buried once their coffins are completed (a process that could take weeks or even months) – speed becomes subservient to the perceived gravitas. A coffin in the shape of a boat or fish would be fashioned for a sailor or fisherman respectively, whilst politicians are often buried in limousine-shaped coffins to reflect their (former) power, prestige and status. On the day of the funeral, a lively carnival-like procession replete with professional mourners as well as animated choreographed dancing by a group of young undertakers-cum-pall bearers invites non-participants and bystanders to rise to the occasion. The phenomenon of the dancing pall bearers is new to Ghana (having been recently imported from Nigeria). The event is indeed king!

### 3 Sustaining the rhythm

Africa is arguably a land of paradox. Despite the many setbacks the continent has endured, the proven resilience of its people continues to befuddle skeptics and believers alike. Further, there are limits to what technical proficiency and industrial production can do – the law of diminishing marginal utilities (or diminishing returns) will set in eventually (Illich, 1973). The recent economic crisis brought this reality into sharp focus. By honouring local home-grown responses to its unique and often unpredictable contexts, Africa's experiences are instructive, offering humanity a fresh perspective on the value of interpersonal relationships in an increasingly complex world. A celebration of all of life's vicissitudes would greatly enhance conviviality and bolster resilience in various personal, communal, and societal aspirations. As Papanek (1995: 186) stresses;

"What is needed is to re-establish our connections with nature and with our own roots. Societies that provide leisure time for activities that are not profit-directed or purely materialistic, and give ample opportunities to establish strong human relationships, tend to be less wasteful and more deeply in tune with human needs".

Brazil also has an important contribution to make – its unique demographics and rich diversity and the celebratory spirit of the carnival offer glimpses of possible futures of harmonious co-existence. An enlightened vision of the future should place people at the centre of all socio-economic and geopolitical discourse and endeavour. Further, such a vision should of necessity be tolerant towards a diversity of homegrown and grassroots ideologies and practices which are content and context specific no matter how esoteric some may appear at first glance. Such practices and their concomitant ethical reasoning intrinsically promote conviviality and respect for humanity and ecology – everyone should be invited and allowed to participate as equals (van Niekerk & M'Rithaa, 2009).

Finally, in affirming the primacy of human relationships over all other socio-technical systems, our collective human family is offered a unique opportunity to re-strategize and re-prioritize through distributed (yet interconnected) economies that are patently better oriented towards a more sustainable production and consumption (Johansson *et al.*, 2005). In so doing, entire societies can leapfrog into a more sustainable and equitable paradigm (without having to suffer the consequences of wasteful lifestyles). This in the final analysis, is the most important event of our time...

## References

The African Report. 2009. *The African Report*, **19**: Oct-Nov 2009.

Agbo, Adolph H. 2006. *Values of Adinkra and Agama Symbols*. Kumasi: Bigshy Designs & Publishing.

Bhengu, Mfuniselwa J. 1996. *Ubuntu: the Essence of Democracy*. Cape Town: Novalis Press.

Cipolla, Carla. 2009. Relational Services and Conviviality. pp. 232-245 in: Satu Miettinen and Mikko Koivisto (Eds.), *Designing Services with Innovative Methods*. Helsinki: Kuopio Academy of Design.

du Toit, Andries, and David Neves. 2007. *In search of South Africa's Second Economy: chronic poverty, economic marginalisation and adverse incorporation in Mt Frere and Khayalitsha*. Chronic Poverty Research Centre. CPRC Working Paper 102. [www.chronicpoverty.org/pdfs/102duToit\\_Neves.pdf](http://www.chronicpoverty.org/pdfs/102duToit_Neves.pdf) [19/04/08].

Illich, Ivan. 1973. *Tools for Conviviality*. New York: Harper & Row.

Jere-Malanda, Regina. 2008. *And now. Positive image of Africa*. AfricaFiles No. 18393. <http://www.africafiles.org> [03/07/08].

Johansson, Allan, Peter Kisch and Murat Mirata. 2005. Distributed Economies - a new engine for innovation. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, **13**: 971-979.

M'Rithaa, Mugendi K. 2008. Engaging Change: an African perspective on designing for sustainability. *Proceedings of the Changing the Change (CtC) International Conference*, 10-12 July 2008. Turin.

Macharia, Sarah. 2006. *The urban 'informal economy' in the Global South: a feminist postempiricist study of policy discourse in sub-Saharan Africa*. [www.yorku.ca/ishd/SM.Kenya.Report.field.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/ishd/SM.Kenya.Report.field.pdf) [09/05/08].

Manzini, Ezio. 2009. Service Design in the Age of Networks and Sustainability. pp. 44-57 in: Satu Miettinen and Mikko Koivisto (Eds.), *Designing Services with Innovative Methods*. Helsinki: Kuopio Academy of Design.

- McKenzie, R.L. 2009. Migration: a constant search for opportunity. *The African Report*, **19**: October-November 2009: 16-21.
- Orwa, Bani. 2007. Jua Kali Associations in Kenya: A Force for Development and Reform. *Center for International Private Enterprise*. REFORM Case Study No. 0701: 25 January 2007. [www.cipe.org/publications/papers/pdf/IP0701\\_juakali.pdf](http://www.cipe.org/publications/papers/pdf/IP0701_juakali.pdf) [03/05/08].
- Papanek, Victor. 1995. *The Green Imperative: Ecology and Ethics in Design and Architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Takyi, Baffour K., and Yaw Oheneba-Sakyi. 2006. The Study of African Families: Concluding Remarks. Pp 273-278 in Yaw Oheneba-Sakyi and Baffour K. Takyi (Eds), *African Families at the Turn of the 21st Century*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Tambulasi, Richard, and Happy Kayuni. 2005. Can African Feet Divorce Western Shoes? The Case of 'Ubuntu' and Democratic Good Governance in Malawi. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, **14** (2): 147-161.
- Thackara, John. 2005. *In the Bubble: designing in a complex world*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Tutu, Desmond, 1999. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. London: Rider.
- van Niekerk, Johan, and Mugendi M'Rithaa. 2009. The rhyme and reason of ethical design practices. *Cumulus Working Papers*, **21**(8): 67-69.
- Vezzoli, Carlo. 2007. *System design for sustainability. Theory, methods and tools for a sustainable "satisfaction-system" design*. Rimini: Maggioli Editore.