

Afrocentric Business in Southern Africa

By Wayne Visser

In the dizzy wake of socio-political euphoria following the birth of its new 'rainbow nation', South Africa now faces the sobering task of creating an accompanying economic miracle. The prevailing mood is pessimistic, with many business and economics critics all too ready to point out the grim facts: In 1996, South Africa saw a dramatic weakening of its currency, a lower-than-expected growth in Gross Domestic Product of around 3 percent, a steady trickle of the emigration 'brain drain' of its professional skills, and an unwillingness of foreign investors to commit their resources in a crime-anxious climate with relatively high labour costs and low productivity.

But while many shiver beneath the shadow of these ominous storm clouds, a visionary core of business thinkers and practitioners in Southern Africa has their eyes on the rainbow. They see the "failure" of most African economies in terms of a neglect of their peoples to foster home-grown indigenous business cultures that are in harmony with the African soil and soul. And they are working hard to rekindle native values in business contexts, to provide the sparks needed to transform the economy into a blazing sun of new traditions in Afrocentric management.

Values - Colonial Hangovers and Ubuntu

Colonialism is a process whereby one dominant set of values gets imposed on the diverse cultures of 'conquered lands'. This has been the thread of the world's political history and is now being repeated in the economic sphere through globalisation of corporations and trade. South Africa, which was invaded by Dutch burghers in 1652 and English settlers in 1820, became industrialised with a pervasive Eurocentric mode of commerce, and more recently has begun to internalize the seductive consumerist culture of America as well. Add to this the legacy of economic marginalisation of the majority of native South Africans through the apartheid system, and it is unsurprising that traditional African ideas about trade and business have to date been totally ignored (note the root word 'ignorance').

The values inculcation that has accompanied the North Western hemisphere's footprint on Southern Africa has left many of its people culturally schizophrenic. Some of these conflicts between African and North Western culture that manifest in a business context are, for example:

- Social harmony and cohesion versus individual performance and reward;
- Participative decision making versus bureaucratic managerial authority; and
- Creative expression and motivation versus rationality and quantitative argumentation.

Underlying these dynamics is a value concept fundamental to African culture that has been largely overlooked by outsiders and hardly explicitly acknowledged by Africans themselves until recently. This is the concept of ubuntu, or African Humanism. In South African culture, it is often associated with the proverb: Umuntu ungumuntu ngabantu, which literally means, "A person becomes human through other people."

South African manager Reuel Khoza describes ubuntu as the philosophy of "I am because you are, you are because we are." It is a concept, he says, "which brings to the fore images of supportiveness, cooperation, and solidarity, that is, communalism." Zimbabwean businessman Lovemore Mbigi, who has written a book on the subject, echoes these sentiments when he speaks of "emancipating the spirit of ubuntu by building a culture based on tolerance, respect, human dignity, and solidarity."

Ubuntu is supported by a host of related socio-cultural ideas from the African heritage, for instance, concepts like illima (a cooperative effort in ploughing), inquina (hunting as a team), and ukudla (sharing food). Similarly, there is the practice of ukisisa (or 'cows never die'), whereby, when a poor person in the community is encountered, the dignity of that person is protected by someone who is better endowed with cattle-wealth communicating the need for one of his or her cows to be

cared for. This transaction in turn provides the destitute member with milk and wealth in the form of one or two calves, after which the original cow is 'borrowed back'.

Explorations of how to begin planting indigenous seeds of business management in the fertile soil of African culture, watered by the nourishing spirit of ubuntu are well underway. Much of the progress being made is summarized in two books, namely *African Management* and more recently *Sawubona Africa* (literally, "I see you, Africa"), both of which are products of a five-year research program of the University of Witwatersrand Business School called the South African Management Project. In discussing some of the delightful forms in which Afrocentric management is manifesting, I draw liberally upon these key texts.

Reward/Punishment or Recognition/Rejection?

In traditional African culture, it is socially undesirable and inappropriate to behave in a way that causes one to 'stand out from the crowd' in the way individual achievement is promoted in Anglo-Saxon culture. Why? Because this might destroy vital social cohesion in a community by creating destructive competitive behaviour, or by undermining the role of the elders and royalty as the repositories of knowledge, wisdom, and counsel.

This is not to say that individuals are not encouraged to master areas for which they display particular aptitude or a natural gift. On the contrary, skilful specialisation, whether as a healer, artist, hunter, or leader, has always been a key element in enabling communities to survive and thrive. But the context for this achievement is carefully managed through strict social rules so as to enhance the common good and maintain cohesion of the unit. More recently, this 'collective achievement' mode was strongly in evidence through the mass protest movements of the anti-apartheid struggle in Southern Africa.

Contrast this with the stereotypical workplace and educational reward systems that tend to be based on individual assessment of merit and 'healthy competition' for achievements between colleges. Might this go some way towards explaining frequent tales of African pupils with above-average IQs who consistently under perform so as to be just average, or black employees who are leaders in their communities but never seem to be considered for promotion in a white-dominated workplace?

Pioneering company Cashbuild (more about it later) have recognized this need for group harmony in African culture and hence revised their performance appraisal systems so that they are "geared to rewarding team achievements whilst also rewarding individual contributions to the improvement of the functioning of the team as a whole. In this way, the poor and mediocre performers are encouraged to raise their standards, in contrast to the situation where higher performers lower their standards to maintain their identification with the group."

According to Albert Koopman, Cashbuild's former managing director, control and motivation through reward and punishment systems are culturally inappropriate in South African and should be replaced with systems based on peer recognition and rejection. As an example, under Cashbuild's old reward/punishment system, the company could never reduce employee absenteeism and lost hours below 15 percent, despite repeated warning letters and disciplinary procedures. Then, when they used the peer group concept by simply placing red marks next to absent or late employees' names on a publicly displayed chart with no recourse of reprimand, lost hours immediately dropped to 1 percent. The fear of loss of face or rejection among peers is a powerful motivator in African culture and one business should heed.

Managerial Bureaucracy or Participative Democracy?

The search for culturally appropriate alternatives to the hierarchical bureaucratic organizational structures of the North West has deep cultural roots to draw from in South Africa. The origins lie in participative communal decision making in the tribal context, which were still firmly in operation as recently as the years of President Nelson Mandela's youth. In his autobiographical *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela recounts his childhood memories of how tribal meetings allowed for full participation by every Thembu person of the region, without interruption or intervention by the regent chief. Now he reflects on the value of his experiences:

"As a leader, I have always followed the principles I first saw demonstrated by the regent at the Great Place. I have always endeavoured to listen to what each and every person in a discussion had to say before venturing my own opinion. Oftentimes, my own opinion will simply represent a consensus of what I heard in the discussion. I always remember the regent's axiom: a leader, he said, is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble goon ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind."

Among the organizational pioneers in South Africa who are adapting this cultural heritage of democratic participation to a business context is the previously mentioned Cashbuild (Volkswagen is another). Cashbuild started as a cash-and-carry wholesaler aimed at supplying the black housing market in 1978 and despite initial success, had begun to show a decline in profits when Albert Koopman, a white Afrikaner, took over as managing director. What followed is an inspiring story of organisational and personal transformation, which Koopman describes in his book, *Transcultural Management*. The process by which he facilitated the creation of participative industrial democracy (which he also calls 'principled pragmatism') took three forms in Cashbuild:

1. The company's CARE philosophy, a consensus visionary code called Cashbuild's Aspirations with Regard to Excellence, derived from extensive history-, culture-, and value-sharing sessions among employees (within the context of a deeply divided society).
2. The VENTURECOMM system, an innovative communication and participation structure that removed the power imbalance in management/labour relationships through the empowerment of Shop Steward Committees and other representative Councils.
3. The Great Indaba (literally, 'communal gathering'), a three-day annual meeting in which every employee (worker and manager) has an opportunity to make his or her views on Cashbuild heard, and in which key decisions such as salary increases are also made (at the last Indaba it took a mere 35 minutes to conclude wage negotiations!).

New Afrocentric traditions can draw inspiration from any of Southern Africa's diverse cultures. For example, the Afrikaner practice of holding a *bosberaad* (literally 'a bush council'), which dates back to their days as Voortrekkers ('frontier travellers') migrating into the South African interior by ox-wagon, is also becoming a popular format for corporate team-building and visioning. Management and employees gather in a wilderness area surrounded by nature and away from the distractions of urban life to engage in creative discussions about the future.

Rituals and Creativity

According to Credo Mutwa, a Zulu author, sangoma (traditional healer), storyteller, and 'keeper of the African legends', the current malaise of poor work ethic in South Africa is alien to traditional culture. He refers to the ancient words *ukuhloniphaumsehenzi* in Zulu and *grommpatiro* in Tswana as encapsulating the meaning of productivity in an African context, as does the proverb *Umasebenza nqaz omdiliuyashutha*, which means literally "s/he who works with both hands prospers."

Lovemore Mbigi, when he was managing director of the Eastern Highlands Tea Estates in Zimbabwe, also knew this to be true and sought ways to translate this into a business context. He decided to introduce a modified version of the *mukwerera* ritual, an agricultural festival in Shona culture celebrated just before the planting season to prepare for the labour of sowing seed. By adapting the ritual into a Productivity Festival that celebrated past achievements and planned for future goals, while retaining many of the traditions such as spiritual ancestral consultation and endorsement by the tribal chief, Mbigi was able to integrate ancient cultural motivation with modern business objectives.

An adaptation of the 'cow lending' (*ukusisa*) concept mentioned earlier may achieve productivity enhancements in relation to new recruits who are 'skills poor' and can be asked to look after a particular machine or task until experience produces its own offspring of greater achievements and responsibilities. Contrary to popular belief, this ritualistic approach is not confined in relevance to rural areas, as Mbigi's present work with packaging company Nampak in Johannesburg and other similar experiments by the national Sowetan Newspaper have demonstrated.

The oral tradition of amasiko (according to the wisdom that "our old people are our libraries"), embracing the traditional roles of storytellers and praise-poets, is beginning to be applied in a business context too. A leading light in this sphere is Brollo Africa, a South African manufacturer of steel tubes and pipes, which began in 1993 to use a process of storytelling through industrial theatre to integrate its company in the spirit of the 'new South Africa'. Employing the professional services of Blue Moon, employees were screened and actors selected according to their dramatic abilities, after which scripts were written and performed to reflect the full variety of Brollo experiences. The results were overwhelming: re-enacting how things have been, how they were, and how they could be provided the incentive to involve all employees in a dialogue about the transformation of Brollo's values.

Another case study in this area is Group Africa, which uses storytelling, music, and dance in face-to-face marketing efforts. In other examples, the role of the traditional praise-singer has also been used, both to increase employee motivation and to give feedback to the leaders of their mistakes and shortcomings. The Zimbabwean environmental organisation AZTREC (the Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists) has even made use of dream-communication with the ancestors to initiate, shape, and guide their organisation. The richness of African culture makes the potential source of indigenous motivation almost endless.

An Integrative Vision

For Afrocentric business to evolve, there must be a reciprocal flow of ideas and learning between these synchronistic processes of transformation underway in Southern Africa and the rest of the world. Indeed, one conceptual framework for such integration has already been developed by Zimbabwe-born international management writer and consultant Ronnie Lessem. In his Four World Model, which generalizes the characteristics of the geographic 'quadrants' of the world, he finds examples of South African leaders who embody the best of each dimension. His four worlds are:

- Western pragmatic entrepreneurship;
- Northern bureaucratic rationalism;
- Eastern holistic integration; and
- Southern humanistic communalism

"African management," says Lessem, "as a dynamic whole, then, represents an interplay between the four psychological or cultural types. All four philosophical forces are required for fully-fledged reconstruction and development."

Another local source of inspiration for an integrative vision of business in Southern Africa, as I have argued in a previous article on "Holistic Business," is the great philosophical legacy left to us by former South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts, by way of his Theory of Holism. Although generally unrecognized as such, Smuts' book *Holism and Evolution*, which synergizes his own thinking with the ideas of Darwin and Einstein, is the first clear exposition of what is now more commonly known now as Living Systems Theory. In a similar way in which Fritjof Capra has applied this paradigm to economics and Paul Hawken to business, so too could the application of the ideas of holism do much to tackle the crisis of fragmentation that infects the economic and business life of Southern Africa.

For my part, I am in the process of developing an application called IMPI - Interdependence Mapping, Planning, and Implementation. This is a tool for enabling businesses to understand and begin to consciously leverage the complex web of relationships and dynamics in which they are enmeshed.

Rainbows and Sunrises

Among the most awe-inspiring natural visions in Southern Africa are her rainbows and sunrises, especially reflected in the spray and dust of the Victoria Falls of Zimbabwe. The Zulu word for rainbow is utingo lwenkosikazi, meaning 'the Queen's arch', and it is believed to be one of the curved wattle branches that support the hut of the Queen of Heaven. For the ancient San Bushman, it was the bow of the Great Hunter of the Sky. Perhaps the promising rainbow colours of a new Afrocentric business ethos will provide both the sturdy framework and the sustenance that is now

needed for our economic household. And maybe it is the very dust of Africa's monetary desert that will produce a spectacular sunrise on the horizon of Southern Africa's business-sphere.

The answers, the miracle, the pot of gold, the new dawn, as always lie deep within the spirit of the people of this great land. According to Credo Mutwa, the ancient name for the African continent is Tangawatu, which means "the vine upon which humans grow". And for those courageous enough to embrace the shadows and perceptive enough to sense the coming light, the fruit of fulfilment is ready for the plucking and the slow process of fermentation and transformation into mature wine has just begun.

Hamba kahle - 'Go well', Africa of the South.

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