

IIDE Proceedings 2014 ~ The Cultural Basis For A Sustainable Community In A South African Township



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The article reflects on the cultural basis for building sustainable communities, based on research the writer carried out with the Nova Institute in four South African townships. Changes in personhood and the sense of community are discussed, with the focus on two aspects of traditional African culture: enjoying communication with others for its own sake, as described by Steve Biko, and becoming a person by fulfilling your duties to the community, as described by Polycarp Ikuenobe.

1. *Introduction*

Towards the end of June 2014, after five months, the strike of more than 70 000 workers at the platinum mines in the Rustenburg area came to an end. It was the longest labour strike in the country's history. During these five months workers did not receive salaries, which resulted in hardship for them, their families and the businesses that depended on them. One of the mines is the Lonmin platinum mine at Marikana, where 34 miners were killed by the police during a strike in

August 2012.

The communities around the mines represent a typical picture: in many parts of Africa people flood to cities, towns and huge industries and mines in search of work, and end up in sprawling informal settlements, or as it is popularly called, squatter camps. There is not enough work for all who come. In Africa urban populations have almost trebled in the past 50 years, with informal settlements or slums as the dominant form of urban growth (Sapa 2013).

A problem that has to be faced is that countless efforts to improve the quality of life in Africa have not been very successful. Martin Meredith, in his book *The state of Africa*, wrote that, since political independence, "... more than USD 500 billion of Western aid has been sunk into Africa, but with little discernible result".

To this figure must be added the income from resources such as oil and mines that did not benefit the vast majority of the population (Meredith 2005: 683).

In August 2014, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe became chairperson of the 15-member Southern African Development Community (SADC), where he is a popular figure. Mugabe has a policy of rejecting foreign aid from the West, and in his opening speech at the SADC he urged southern Africa to reduce its dependence on foreign aid (Munyaka 2014).

The question is: what resources, both material and immaterial, are available within Africa itself to improve the quality of life, especially of the poor? And how should we understand the popularity of Mugabe in the region's official development institution, given the fact that he severely damaged the modern economy of his own country? Is there an understanding of what development should be that is different from the understanding of development in the West?

Not only politicians, but also academics plead for an approach that makes use of Africa's own resources. In 1976 Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, who later won the Nobel Prize, pleaded for "the apprehension of a culture whose reference points are taken from within the culture itself African academia has created a deified aura around ... intellectualism (knowledge and exposition of the reference points of colonial cultures). To the truly self-apprehending entity within the African world reality, this amounts to intellectual bondage and self-betrayal." (Soyinka 1976: viii). And more recently Barry Hallen objected to the extension of a Western philosophical tradition into the African context: "Africa still waits to be discovered, to speak, to be understood" (cf Hallen 2009: 61, 62).

In this article, attention is given to the cultural and mental basis that is available

in four townships in 2013, with which dignified, healthy and sustainable communities can be built. Do we find in the poor communities themselves the reference points for a form of development that is not experienced as alienating? Is the Western philosophical tradition sufficient to understand this African context, or do we need an African point of view? Do people find ways to be happy, to support each other and find meaning in their relationships, in the absence of material affluence? Where they manage, with a low ecologic footprint, to live dignified and healthy lifestyles?**[ii]**

This paper does not measure the happiness or the human development levels of the communities involved. It is an investigation of cultural patterns in comparatively recently urbanised communities.

First, information is given on the research on which this paper is based, and on the communities in which the research was done. This is followed by a discussion of what had become of two aspects of Traditional African Culture in the process of urbanisation. The first aspect is enjoying communication with other community members for its own sake, as described by Steve Biko, an influential Black Consciousness Movement leader who was killed in detention in 1977. The second aspect is the idea that one becomes a person by fulfilling your duties to the community, as described by the philosopher Polycarp A. Ikuenobe. The results of the interviews give a completely different picture of person and community from the traditional picture described by African writers. The discussion of these two aspects is followed by some reflection on the question to what extent the reference points of Western culture are adequate to understand an African community, and what resources are available in the community for authentic development.

2. The Research on which the paper is based

This paper is based on research that Nova did in 2013 in four South African townships (eMbalenhle, Lebohang, eMzinoni, KwaDela) in the Highveld of the Mpumalanga province in South Africa. The purpose of the survey was to determine the overall quality of life of households residing in these townships, in order to establish a base line for future projects to improve ambient air pollution and also other aspects of community life.

These townships are located in an area that was occupied by small towns and commercial farms until coal mines, big industries and power stations started to move in during the 1970s, to make use of the coal and water available in the area. All four townships have experienced rapid growth over the past decades. The

biggest of them, eMbalenhle, which means “pretty flower”, had a population of 118,889 people in the 2011 Census (Frith 2011) and forms part of the town area of the *Govan Mbeki Local Municipality*. The first town area of this municipality, Secunda, was proclaimed in 1976. It was a completely new town that was built with the purpose to house workers of the second extraction refinery producing oil from coal, after *Sasolburg*. The town Secunda has approximately 20,400 inhabitants. All of this has been built where there were only farms before.

The other towns where the research was done have also experienced rapid population growth. In 1960 the town of Bethal, that was proclaimed in 1880, had 4 018 White, 214 Coloured, 310 Asiatic and 7 446 Black residents (SESA 2:295); in the 2011 Census, the township eMzinoni, which is part of Bethal, had 31 283 residents and the whole of Bethal had 60,779 residents; in 1960 Leslie, that was proclaimed in 1919, had 320 White, 99 Asiatic and 2344 Black residents in 1960 (SESA 6:590); in the 2011 Census, the township Lebohang, which is part of Leslie, had 31,553 residents (Frith 2011).

The research made use of a combination of research methodologies. Extensive questionnaires were conducted with the primary care giver, or the person as close to the primary caregiver as possible, in 1,149 households (eMbalenhle 559; Lebohang 198; eMzinoni 185 and KwaDela 207), who were selected on random basis from the whole population. From this group, 47 were selected, also on a random basis, for in-depth interviews. The number of interviews makes it possible in some cases to conclude statistically that a majority or minority of the whole population adheres to a certain opinion.

The survey of households is based on the premise that quality of life is determined by the interaction between standard of living, perceived well-being and bodily functioning. It is an instrument that Nova developed by applying the needs theory of Manfred Max-Neef to 25 elements of a household, as defined by Nova, to make it possible to measure quality of life in a very comprehensive way, and also to measure the impact of a particular intervention on the quality of life of households. Qualitative methodologies and semi-structured interviews were used in an effort to hear residents’ views on a variety of aspects of everyday life as they experience it.

3. The Idea of Sustainable Communities

Why would we want to build sustainable communities? Sustainability is important both in the ecological and economic sense. Communities use products that are

produced by industries and mines. All of these pollute the water and air and damage the ecosystems and agricultural land, which could make present patterns of living unsustainable in the future. In an economic sense, the residents of informal housing and townships remain vulnerable. Many depend on government grants. These grants have increased from 3 million in 2000 to 15 million by 2011. Close to 60% of government spending is allocated to the so-called social wage package, which has more than doubled in real terms over the past decade. This package includes free primary health care; no-fee paying schools; social grants (most notably old-age pensions and child support grants); free houses for the poor and the provision of basic services to households, namely water, electricity and sanitation. Many who have, in a money metric sense, moved out of poverty have accumulated huge debts. These measures have reduced poverty, if measured in financial terms: poverty levels remain very high but have dropped from 57,2% in 2006 to 45,5% in 2011 when applying the so-called upper-bound poverty line. The numbers of those living below the food poverty line have dropped from almost 30% in 2002 to 20,2 % or 10,2 million people in 2011 (Statistics South Africa, 2014).

The improvements in income are not sufficiently based on the efforts from within low income communities, but on what people receive from the government and on debt. They may not be sustainable in the case of facing macro-economic pressures.

It is also important to talk not only about society but about *communities*. Community is important from a Christian perspective. Almost 80% of South Africans regard themselves as Christians, and Christ preached loving one's neighbour. It has been argued that the essence of sin in Christian theology is to withdraw from relations, to be curved into yourself (see for example Matt Jenson, 2006: *The gravity of sin. Augustine, Luther and Barth on homo incurvatus in se*). This implies that the Christian should tend to build relations, which would contribute to community building. That is not, however, always the case in modern societies, where people tend to "be yourself" in an individualistic way, rather than seeing themselves as belonging to some or other group (e.g. the essay by Rob Wijnberg 2011: *Hoe erbij horen vervangen werd door jezelf zijn*). In South Africa the withdrawal from relationships with those staying around you is clearly visible. In the suburb where I stay many people have lived for years next to their neighbours without having any idea who they are. While writing this article, the

father of a fairly high-income family in a modern South African suburb was arrested for keeping his wife and five children captive at home for more than twenty years, mistreating them violently. Many neighbours and family were aware of what was going on, but did nothing about it. In response to this trend, many churches in the West have rediscovered the importance of the community. In 2005, for example, the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee in the USA launched a series of publications called "Communities First" (Van Groningen 2005).

African tradition is often said to be communal in nature. Steve Biko, one of the heroes and martyrs of the struggle against apartheid, and still today a strong influence in the search for an authentic African identity, maintained that African society has always been a "Man-centred society" (sic). People would talk to each other, "not for the sake of arriving at a particular conclusion but merely to enjoy the communication for its own sake". Intimacy between friends did not occur, because "in the traditional African culture, there is no such thing as two friends": a whole group of people, who find themselves together, for example because they stay in the same area, are friends. The following quotation is important in the light of the results of research that will be discussed below: "House visitation was always a feature of the elderly folk's way of life. No reason was needed as a basis for visits. It was all part of our deep concern for each other" (Biko 1978: 41-42, from a paper that was originally given in 1971).

Many other authors agree. G-C M Mutiso of Kenya wrote: "The community, in African literature, dominates all aspects of African thought. Dances are communal and worship is communal. Property was held communally before the colonial era and there are attempts today to reinstate that practice. This inbuilt bias toward the community means that individualism is always seen as a deviance...." (Mutiso 1974: 83).

From Botswana Gabriël M Setiloane (1986) questions the idea of individualism: "The primary centre of being is the community Africans have a tremendous difficulty with the concept individual. Does such a thing exist?"

Biko's view was not a new idea. In his book *Facing Mount Kenya*, that was first published in 1938, Jomo Kenyatta, who was a leader of the struggle against British colonialism and became independent Kenya's first president, wrote that individualism was associated with black magic. An individual is "one who works only for himself and is likely to end up as a wizard. ... there is no really individual

affair, for everything has a moral and social reference corporate effort is the other side of corporate ownership; and corporate responsibility is illustrated in corporate work no less than in corporate sacrifice and prayer”(1985:119).

In his thorough discussion of African conception of personhood and community, Ikuenobe writes: “.... it is clear that there is a difference between the Western rational, liberal, and individualistic view of a person, and the African collective, communalistic, and normative view of the person.” He argues that the group or community “... is not simply the aggregated sum of individuals comprising the community. Instead, the ‘we’ as used here in African culture refers to ‘a thoroughly fused collective ‘we’”. Somebody becomes a person by fulfilling his or her duties to the community. This would explain the “... relative absence of grief when a child dies. But when an old person dies, there is elaborate grief ...” (Ikuenobe 2006: 54,56,58).

This sense of community is still regarded widely as part of contemporary African philosophy of life (Hallen 2009: 137, 138, referring to well-known writers such as Ramose, Wiredu and Gyekye).

4. The Impact of Urbanisation on Personhood and Community: Two Voices from South Africa

The erosion of traditional values was observed already in the 1960's by a Dutch sociologist, Mia Brandel-Syrier, who befriended a number of better-off black residents in a township near Johannesburg. Her research was published in two books: *Reeftown Elite* (1971) and *Coming through*. In search of a new cultural identity (1978).

“Coming through” refers to a successful entry into the modern world, or “civilisation”, as the “reeftown elite” called modern Western culture. Western civilisation represented the identity people were striving for. “This civilization was for them mainly three things: church, school and town.” Those who had entered the modern world did so by successfully coming through these three processes: Christianisation (“where it all started”), education and urbanisation. Those who had done so became the elite, they had arrived at the destination that the others were still striving for (Brandel-Syrier 1978: 8,13).

Reflecting on what she had experienced, Brandel-Syrier argued that education and modernisation had weakened traditional communal awareness “which had given sense and direction to man's life and which had determined man's values and patterned his behaviour. Nothing has come to replace it, and now there's just

nothing.” For an older generation, Christianity still provided something to hold onto, but “(F)or the modern educated and well-to-do Black the emphasis is now on the external appearance.... For him there is nothing but buyable externality...” To fill this gap, some embrace an “extreme individualism” which leads to competition, strife and rivalry. Others want to revive the “dwindling communal consciousness”. But basically, they are available for any strong leader who tells them “what to do, to think, to feel, to like.... they are in fact ready to do and think and feel *anything*.... Inwardly they are not committed to any particular place, job or education, sentiment or attitude, opinion or preference, affection or conviction. There is no necessary connection between their words and their actions. There is no role consistency, no ego continuity.... they are an easy prey for anyone who wants to use them for his own ends.” Similar results of rapid modernisation are found worldwide (Brandel-Syrier 1978: 182 -184).

The former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, came to conclusions that are very similar to that of Brandel-Syrier: the weakening of traditional culture left a gap, Christianity failed to fill the gap and it is now filled by nothing. Mbeki went one step further and tried to present a solution.

Both grandfathers of Thabo Mbeki “built the first schools and churches in their communities, both were devout converted Christians and evangelists, severe in their faith; both were prosperous, hard-working farmers” (Gevisser 2007:4). Mbeki’s father, Govan, did not accept either Christianity or his traditional culture: he was a communist, and when he died he wanted to be buried in the dilapidated litter-strewn cemetery at Zwile among the graves of ordinary working folk in Port Elizabeth, and not in his traditional Transkei where his wife still lived. “The iconoclasm of this final wish was profound, a disavowal not only of his marriage but of the traditions of clan and kinship too. It was an active and final assertion that he belonged more to the urban proletariat of Port Elizabeth than to the amaZisi of Mpukane or the Mbeki household of Idutywa” (Gevisser 2007: 768).

Initially, Mbeki followed his father. He accepted communism. In 1976, in Swaziland, he played an active role in converting student refugees from Steve Biko’s Black Consciousness thinking to the ANC ideologies (Gevisser 2007: 314; 351). He did not, however, reject Black Consciousness thinking completely, but fused it with the ANC’s understanding of international solidarity, making culture a vehicle for the mobilisation of international solidarity (Gevisser 2007: 383). When he returned to South Africa from exile in 1990 he initially made a decision not to go back to his rural roots in the Transkei, but in 1992 he did go “to his

father's birthplace for the first time to participate in his uncle's funeral, where he realized how little he knew about the place where he came from, because of the ideology of his parents and the exigencies of struggle and exile" (Gevisser 2007: 590). A few years later he began to talk the language of Black Consciousness. His biographer remarks that Mbeki first started to talk about an African Renaissance at about the same time that he was "called back home" by the elders of the clan. Going to his home made him realise that something had been lost that can be revived. Later on, after 2004, his mother hinted that it was like being "born anew" or "born again" (Gevisser 2007: 16, 781).

In an interview with his biographer Mbeki talked about the lack of a strong value framework that could give direction to all and keep this divided nation together. After the interview Gevisser (2007: 324) explained it as follows, interpreting and quoting Mbeki, who in turn quoted "the Zambian": "The bleak picture he painted of a decultured South African society was one not only of dislocation but of amorality too. Urban Africans had had their 'cultural base' destroyed, 'and there was no value system which in fact replaced it, except Christianity. But Christianity unfortunately was understood as [no more than] going to church on Sunday. So whereas the Zambian would say, 'You know, the culture of my people does not allow that I do this or that', here that connection to the culture is gone.' And nothing has been put into place to replace it. 'There is no alternative value system, except to the extent that the priest might object or the police might arrest you.' Nothing emanating from within."

It is a vacuum that has economic consequences: Mbeki complained that the people asked for help, but that he can't help them if they don't want to help themselves, and that no growth rate would solve the problem of unemployment because some people are unemployable (Gevisser 2007: 30, 690).

As president, Mbeki often warned against a culture of acquisition. The dream of true liberation is in danger of being replaced by the nightmare of the quest for personal wealth, the "orgy of victory... filling the loneliness with morbid addictions to prostitution and gambling, with the wilful smashing of the fruits of their victory..." He talked of the "demons" that advised us every second: "Get rich! Get rich! Get rich!" In a speech he said: "The meaning of freedom has come to be defined not by the seemingly ethereal and therefore intangible gift of liberty, but by the designer labels on the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the spaciousness of our homes and yards, their geographic location..." (Gevisser 2007: 694, 695, 764, 765). That is the "buyable externality" that Brandel-Syrier

had observed previously, but now in a more advanced and serious stage.

For many of those who flourished in post-apartheid South Africa, the lack of values that Mbeki observed was not filled with the notion of the African Renaissance, but by the consumer culture of a modern global economy. Some combined traditional culture and the consumer culture, as can be seen in Nkandla, the traditional home of president Zuma, where his four wives live, which was upgraded at a cost of R246m, as Public Protector Thuli Madonsela “conservatively estimated” (Vecchiatto and Marrian 2014)

To sum up: from literature we can draw the following picture: traditionally, people delighted in the relationship with each other as a group, according to many African writers. If we allow for an element of idealising the past, we can still conclude that the traditional African community is or was structured in a communal rather than an individualistic way, and that the moral person in the African view was formed by the normative attitudes, structures and principles of his/her community and became a (valuable) person through serving the community. Second, traditional culture has been strongly eroded during urbanisation. Christianity has not filled the gap completely, so that the gap that remains is sometimes described in strong terms, such as “nothing coming from within” and “now there’s just nothing”. If that happens, there is a tendency to define one’s identity by externalities.

5. Personhood and Community: Voices from within the Communities

The interviews that Nova did with 47 residents from 4 townships that are near huge industries and mines present a “view from within” on personhood and community.

The general impression one gets when reading the interviews is that respondents are fairly happy and content with their lives, even when conditions are not that good. Joblessness is high. The townships are dirty: the air is polluted, the dustbins are often not collected on time and the waste lays around in the streets, sewage often leaks from the broken pipes into the streets. Many people bathe three times a day, some even four times. And yet interviewees manage to be content in different ways: many have decided that they cannot change things, and that they have to accept things as they are and live with it. Many accept their situation but find strength and consolation in the Bible and in the church, and a positive approach and hope that goes beyond resignation. Others are encouraged by friends or family members.

On the other hand, a significantly large group exhibits the vacuum that Brandel-Syrier and Mbeki spoke about. We now give attention to this group.

5.1 *A person is strongly related to the community?*

The sense of community, as described by Biko and others, can hardly be seen in the responses.

There are the normal problems one can expect, with neighbours who are noisy, their goats that are a nuisance, etc.

Some relate to their neighbours on a polite distance: "I have no problem with my neighbours. When I greet them they greet me back". Another: "I don't have any problem with my neighbours, but it happens. Sometimes when you speak to your neighbour, she/he has changed for you that day. You greet, no response, so you tell yourself that it is the way the person is and even tomorrow I will wake up and greet my neighbour. I am like that."

Many say that they keep to themselves: "No, I don't talk to people, I just sit here at home alone because even when I look at them I get angry at them....When they look at me they think this man doesn't have anything." Another: "There is nothing I can tell you about my neighbours. I stay in my house and they stay in theirs."

For one respondent all is well on the surface or the outside, but behind that it is uncertain: "My neighbours are fine, they don't have a problem.... I will say that they don't have a problem I only see them here outside. I don't know how they are inside their houses, I don't go to their houses."

Gossiping was mentioned several times: "... my neighbours are the ones that gossip a lot.... they do gossip and.... the whole town has got criminals." Another: "... they will gossip about you, saying you are teaching your children things which are not good."

When asked about the people they trust, many gave similar answers: "... Ai, I don't trust anyone, you mean the person that I trust, no, I don't have anyone that I trust. Except for the granny that I live with, I sometimes tell her about my issues. My brothers and sisters, no." Another: "A person I trust? I do not trust anyone." Q: "You do not trust anyone at all?" A: "Yes I don't" [laughing]. Q: [Also laughing] "How is that so?" A: "I rather trust my shoe." A: "Your shoe? Rather than trusting another person?" A: "Yes, a person is not to be trusted."

The following response gives a good summary of what many have said. There is neither a good nor a visibly bad relationship, people merely stay a distance from each other: "The time that we get to talk, we talk about good things.... There is no

one that I trust except for my child, because she is the one I tell all my problems.... most of the time I don't have a problem with people. I don't spend time with them, I sit in my yard. Even if the people talk badly about me I don't pay much attention, as long as I know I don't speak badly about another person."

There are also those that differentiate between neighbours: "My neighbours are good people, but not all of them, you can count the good ones. There is one that I trust, I can rely on her even if my house burns down, I know that she is the first one that will start putting out the fire... she is a person that makes me happy, she makes me very happy."

5.2 *Service to the community?*

The phenomenon described by Ikuenobe (2006: 56,58, see above), that somebody becomes a person by fulfilling his or her duties to the community, has also disappeared almost completely in significant parts of these townships. When asked to describe their daily routine, many described a day filled with the daily chores in the house, even sleeping during the day to make the time pass. A few examples:

"When I wake up I bath, I wash my face, then I make up the bed, then I clean, then I cook, then if there is laundry I wash it. I clean, then I cook, then I wash the laundry if there is any laundry." Q: "Is that all you do every day?" A: "Yes."

"I wake up and clean and wash the laundry and feed my kids, then from there I would sit with my children and watch TV". Q: "Alright, is there something else that you normally do?" A: "No."

"I am a person who loves TV, who doesn't like walking around, who stays in the house most of the time plus I am not the kind of person with many friends. I prefer sitting alone in the house and watch TV and solve problems because my younger siblings are looking to me...there is no one else they depend on except me."

A pensioner: "When I wake up in the morning, I take a bath. When I finish I would sit down and get some tea, I would drink the tea. If I have to eat then I eat." Q: "Alright, is that all?" A: "Yes." Q: "So, daddy just sits around?" A: "Yes, I sit around, what else can I do?"

"Oh! - [laughter] I just sit and stay at home." Q: "You just sit?" A: "I don't know what to tell you. I just sit alright." Q: "You just sit?" A: "Yes, if I don't have work." Q: "There's nothing you do when you are here at home?" A: "Huh! I clean and cook, and wash clothes." Q: "Is there anything else apart from that?" A: "Mhm-mhm!" (No)

S: "I do spend my day just sitting because I am not working, sometimes to make the day go quicker I sleep and wake up and sleep and wake up in the morning, then I will see the sun set again."

Within the same context, however, it is possible not to be so turned into yourself: "Firstly I wake up and thank for the day - I pray, thank for myself, for sleeping and waking up. When I wake up I first clean then I cook for the school children. Ok, maybe I then during the day when there are no customers I sleep." Q: "Ok, I hear you like netball maybe you can tell me maybe when you train at the netball." A: "We did train early July then we left it as we are restarting again this month." (She does hairdressing at home for an income, which means she has customers.)

6. Reflection: What have we observed?

Working and resting can together be a significant part of a full and satisfying life. About half, however, have described a daily routine that involves little more than doing the daily chores in and around the house, sitting around, sleeping and watching TV. This is not exactly rest from hard and satisfying work, it is often a description of something different: a certain emptiness, a lack of vision for the future. There is little of the capacity for talking to others, little of merely enjoying their communication for its own sake, no evidence of the intimacy with a whole group of people or house visitation or the deep concern for each other that Biko (1978: 41-42) observed in traditional culture.

Churches in townships are often full, and there one finds the communal dances and worship that Mutiso (1974: 83, see above) talked about. For a large group the church does not play a role in shaping daily life, but we also found that the churches do play an important role in the lives of quite a number of residents, and cannot just be written off, as Brandel-Syrier (1978: 182) and Mbeki (Gevisser 2007: 324) had done.

Mbeki wanted to fill the gap in values that he observed with the African Renaissance, the rebirth of traditional culture and values, which did not succeed - but this culture can also not just be written off. African Traditional culture has proved to be very resilient, but there was no sign that property is held communally (Mutiso 1974: 83 and Kenyatta 1985:119, see above). For this group, everything does not have a moral and social reference, nor do they show any sign of corporate effort, corporate responsibility or corporate work (Kenyatta 1985:119). They do not evidence Ikuenobe's moral person "that has been sufficiently equipped by the normative attitudes, structures, and principles of his

community.... 'a thoroughly fused collective 'we' '... (where) the self is indeed the community" and where one becomes a person by fulfilling her/his duties to the community (Ikuenobe 2006: 54, 56, 58, see above).

In the interviews unhappiness about poor service delivery was mentioned. This has led to numerous protest actions across the country over the last years. These protest actions were often accompanied by burning and looting.

Violence, however, is only one response. The most common and enduring response is to survive by keeping quiet, even ignoring the most pressing problems. Silence is an important coping mechanism. According to the Mpumalanga Department of Health and Social Development spokesperson Mpho Gabashane, the Gert Sibande district, in which these respondents reside, has the fourth-highest HIV prevalence rate in the country, at 40.5% (ZIWAPHI 2010) – but during the interviews and group discussions nobody mentioned HIV or AIDS. They cope better with it if they do not talk about something against which they may feel powerless.

A report by Statistics South Africa (2012), *Social profile of vulnerable groups in South Africa 2002-2010* finds that household structures are "severely disrupted" and that children are disproportionately affected. However, nobody reported any significant tensions or problems between household members. What we have seen is a condition that is often the result of modernisation. Peter L Berger (1974) called it the "homeless mind", a product of the impact of modernisation on traditional identity.

Can we say that Brandel-Syrier (1978: 182) and Mbeki (Gevisser 2007: 324) are right, that there is nothing left, nothing coming from within? Have these people lost hope?

In his classic book *The nature of mass poverty* the economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1980: 56) describes the phenomenon of *accommodation* of poverty. After a prolonged experience of being poor, perhaps for generations, people accept their condition. "Poverty is cruel. A continuing struggle to escape that is continuously frustrated is more cruel. It is more civilized, more intelligent, as well as more plausible, that people, out of the experience of centuries, should reconcile themselves to what has for so long been the inevitable".

This statement may be closer to the group of respondents that we discuss here, than stating that there is *nothing* left. They do send their children to school. They do wash and clean and cook. But understanding the passivity described by some

residents as reconciling themselves to poverty, also called accommodation by Galbraith, may be the extension of a Western insight into the African context, that Hallen (2009: 61, 62) objected against. The continuing struggle to escape poverty that leads to accommodation may suggest a modern context rather than a traditional context. If we try to explain the results of the research with reference points that are taken from within African culture itself we can refer to the African writers, quoted above, who insist that individualism is foreign to African culture. That means that, when the community falls away during urbanisation, what emerges is not the type of individualism that has developed in modern Western culture, where the individual has a strong sense of identity, a strong will and a strong sense of being the master of his or her own fate. Neither has the fragmented but highly energetic individualism of postmodern culture developed. Modern and postmodern individualism have developed over centuries in Western culture, and will not just appear when traditional African communalism is eroded. For example: the fact that children go to school does not mean that there is a culture of learning. There is a general lack of interest in good education amongst large sectors of the population: "... the system has failed to reverse unacceptably low exam results or to improve the standard of teaching. The quality of education remains very poor, and the output rate has not improved... challenges include: poor teacher training; unskilled teachers; lack of commitment to teach by teachers; poor support for learners at home; and a shortage of resources in education despite the large budgetary commitments by government" (Matshidiso: 2012).

The absence of a culture of learning is related to the absence of modern individualism. In the 1980's I was teaching at the University of the North, a "black" university under the apartheid policy of the time. The university was a centre of the struggle against apartheid. There was a lot of political protest, but also cultural protest, specifically against the fact that individual success and failure played such an important role in the university. There were numerous strikes with the slogan "Pass one, pass all!" and "An injury to one is an injury to all!" - where *injury* referred to the fact that a certain student had failed a certain test or exam.

In his comments on Biko's view of community in African culture, Andries Oliphant (2008: 219) says that the European city, with its large concentration of people, became "mammoth agglomerations (that) pushed small-scale rural communities and the close association between people that they made possible, to the

periphery of society". In these urban areas people are alienated from each other. Ikuenobe (2006, 60) sees similar developments in other African cultures. Community and personhood are interdependent. Ikuenobe notes that the absence of community would leave a void in the development of the person (quoting Kwasi Wiredu): "Bereft of the traditional underpinnings of this sense of responsibility, city dwellers are left with nothing but their basic sense of human sympathy in their moral dealings with the great number of strangers encountered in and out of the work environment." Ikuenobe comments that this city dweller "has acquired the Western individualistic and atomistic ethos that is engendered by urbanization and modernization".

This last statement needs some clarification. The sense of community was very often not replaced by Western individualism, as has been argued above. What we do see is a significantly large group that exhibits what Ikuenobe (2006: 54, 56, 60) describes as a solipsistic and atomistic self.

The social construct that presents the most life-giving alternative for the present context will most probably have to be constructed with a combination of traditional African and modern Western elements of personhood and community.

In the 1990's Nova did research on coal use in townships. The picture that emerged showed the importance of the coal stove. One mother said: "My coal stove is my life, without it my life would be meaningless because I won't be able to make a warm house, cook, heat water for my children or iron for them." (Hoets 1995). Nova's own research found similar attitudes. One woman said: "Even if there is no food, but there is fire, I am still happy, because the stove brings the family together" (Van Niekerk 1998). In the urban context, where the family is disintegrating, it is very important that they come together around the stove in the evening, where the mother is providing food and family members can tell about the events of the day. This seemed to be a good combination of elements of traditional and modern cultures.

The image that emerges from the present research, nearly 20 years later, is of the mother and children watching TV. The stove, where stories were traditions were passed on and people communicated with each other, has been replaced by the TV. The impact that this will have on family relations, values, and way of thinking still has to be researched.

But the picture we have seen above is not as severe as the picture of life in a trailer park in the USA, as described by Geert Mak. Without exception the residents of this trailer park live inside their trailers, with a TV as their only

pastime. A man whose job it is to disconnect and reconnect the cable TV's in these households says that, every day, he finds there people who are dirty, who cannot read, who do not talk to each other and who have few family and friends. Cable TV is a priority, often even more so than food for the children. There is a new class of silent people for whom TV is their complete existence (Mak 2012: 141-142). In the townships discussed in this article people are not dirty, many bath three times a day. Many in the household do talk to each other and take care of their children. The question is how the wider community, such as government, the industry and the churches, should respond.

7. How should entities outside these communities respond?

For the authorities, the private sector and civil society the question is how to respond to such conditions. Should an effort be made to restore the traditional community? Is individualism the answer? Is there an ideal combination of the two? Are there other possibilities?

If there are plans to improve the quality of life in these communities, the way in which that is done must be considered carefully. Soyinka's statement (1976: viii) that African culture must be understood by using reference points that are taken from within the culture itself also applies to development: it must come from within the community itself. And Hallen's objection against the extension of a Western philosophical tradition into the African context, also applies to the mere extension of a Western developmental tradition into communities such as these: like Africa, these communities still wait "to be discovered, to speak, to be understood" (cf Hallen 2009: 61, 62).

It means that outsiders should not do things for the community that they can do for themselves; that will only increase the passivity and emptiness. Experience teaches that people often do not take ownership of whatever services, projects or products that are provided for them, if they are made into passive receivers. Before the community can develop towards a better quality of life, it must first understand itself, and speak, and be understood. That requires mutual communication between those inside and those outside the community, until we understand things the same way. Academics, both from within the African communities and context, and those outside of it, must play a role in this process of learning to discover, speak and understand.

8. Conclusion

We can conclude that there has been a significant erosion of the traditional

communal sense in the townships. This has left a certain void that has been filled by the Christian faith for some, but also by the consumer culture, while many respond with a passive withdrawal into themselves. These responses are found in many combinations. This mixture carries the risk of social unrest that may lead to violence and destruction, and the passive withdrawal is in itself damaging to the quality of life of the whole community. But all is not lost. Some family relations, especially the relation between mother and child, still serves as an important inspiration to maintain a dignified life.

The wider community, such as government, the industry and the churches, should respond to the needs of the people represented by our respondents. But before doing anything, it is essential to understand the community by using reference points that are taken from within the community itself, not excluding the insights of those who present a view from the outside. The same applies to development: it must come from within the community itself, making use of and strengthening what is there, even if somewhat damaged, such as: the contribution of that part of the community that has managed to overcome or escape the culture of poverty; the Christian faith of many; some elements of traditional culture; the relations between household members that are still providing inspiration; positive relations between some neighbours; the community activities that are going on and the general mood, not of despondence and bitterness, but of happiness and the feeling that life is, after all, good.

NOTES

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ii. The WWF Living Planet Report, 2012, p 60 asks the question: “Is a high level of consumption necessary for a high level of development?” and answers in the negative, cf Fig 39. The Happy Planet Index, which is a project of the New Economics Foundation comes to the same conclusion, for example, Costa Rica’s has a high life expectancy, high levels of experienced well-being, and a moderate ecological footprint.

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