

Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability

BACKGROUND PAPER 3

by

Petra Bakewell-Stone

Tanzania Background Paper

11 August 2008

Preamble

The primordial relationship between culture and ecology has always been dynamic and two-way. Societal behaviour and structures in their totality both influence and are greatly influenced by the environment. Perhaps due to the complexity of studying intangible socio-cultural phenomena this relationship is rarely systematically explored. Current global environmental crises, and in particular anthropogenic climate change, heighten the urgency with which we need to look closer at the way in which cultures can contribute to greater environmental sustainability.

For the greater part of the history of human habitation on Earth the impact of man on the environment has been sustainable, both due to low population densities and the types of technologies being employed. With increasing population, increasing dependence on oil coupled with a growing culture of consumerism, the destruction of natural balances (e.g. in the composition of gases in the atmosphere) has reached alarming proportions and there are well-founded fears that changes to the global climate, biodiversity and ecosystems all over the world are irreversible.

Yet the perpetrators of this rapid degradation of natural resources are a small minority concentrated in industrialised countries. The great majority of the world's population are having a negligible impact on climate change. Rather than being viewed as time-honoured strategies that are appropriate to the circumstances and have minimal negative impact on the environment, however, such cultures are often viewed as lacking in intrinsic merit and even 'primitive', 'backward', 'unproductive', 'poor', and 'disadvantaged'.

It is the purpose of this paper to acknowledge and explore the myriad ways in which traditional cultures in Tanzania and worldwide not only sustain people but actively protect natural resources in the atmosphere, hydrosphere and biosphere.

Towards a Sustainable Society

In order to help sentient beings on the path to enlightenment the Lord Buddha distilled his teachings into Four Noble Truths:

1. the existence of suffering in the world;
2. the causes of suffering;
3. the cessation of suffering; and,
4. the way to cessation of suffering.

Global crisis

If we apply this framework to the present age and our current predicament, we can see that **the existence of suffering** in the world is epitomised in the environmental, economic and social crises of our time.

Causes of Crisis

On the basis of this understanding, **the causes of suffering** are numerous and the subject of continuous investigation. Buddhism teaches that the origin of suffering in the world is attachment. This root cause relating to the human condition logically gives rise to a range of structures and systems that may be called “secondary causes” of these crises.

A growing number of authors and thinkers are now attributing global crises to the internal dynamics of capitalism and neoliberal economics. Could neoliberal globalisation be causing our multiple crises of climate change, environmental destruction, poverty, conflicts over land and water, migration and food riots? Thailand's recent bartering palm oil for rice may be an unexpected boon if it forces us to rethink the monetary system.

When global trade policies and a barrage of bilateral agreements force countries to open their markets to global agribusiness and subsidised food imports, fertile lands are diverted away from serving local food markets to producing global commodities or off-season and high-value crops. In addition to undermining household livelihood strategies and food security, this also leads to greater dependence on fossil fuels. Related societal trends include industrialisation, urbanisation, commercialisation, democratisation, militarization, consumerism and materialism. The whole system also promotes and perpetuates a technocratic approach to environmental management.

The historian Lynn White points to the Biblical notion of humans having “dominion over the earth” as a major factor leading to the Industrial Revolution and its attendant devastation of the environment. In Genesis 1:28 we are told “fill the earth and subdue, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing” which leads directly to a human-centred and domineering attitude towards nature.

Thus Christianity has established a duality between humankind and nature and insists that humans exploit nature for their own ends¹.

Unsustainable exploitation of natural resources has been reinforced by application of the Scientific method and positive rationalism which promote a reductionist approach to problem-solving, disallowing more creative and holistic “situation-improving” livelihoods.

Despite the dawning of a so-called post-modern era in which multiple truths are said to co-exist, this destructive system is expounded as *the one and only* model for development. It has been meticulously institutionalised in the “development agenda” and is enshrined in our language (which I call “Microsoft English”²). For example, we refer to nature as “the environment” which implies that it is an object separate from ourselves whereas our full dependence on and active relationship with the environment suggests otherwise. We are in fact *part of* nature, our minds and bodies in seamless continuity with our surroundings.

Thus language plays a critical role not only in reflecting but also in influencing our attitudes toward nature, which in turn result in different forms of environmental management; be they constructive, passive or destructive. Here we argue that the destructive mode of living is predominant in today’s world, and that furthermore this is linked to dominant forms of language and communication. The great paradox here is that I am using the written word and the English language to make these points, and I am therefore subject to the same limitations. Acutely aware of the way in which unhelpful language locks us into unhelpful modes of thinking and acting, I continuously try to purge my lexicon of potentially unsupportive terminologies (e.g. the “developing world”). Nonetheless this may not go far enough as some believe that literary forms themselves separate us from nature³.

Within the “development agenda”, we have embraced literally suicidal⁴ agricultural policies and interventions which are constantly pushing for modernisation and commercialisation without sufficient proof that industrialised production of cash crops is the most sustainable approach. Repeating failed Green Revolution strategies is a catastrophe in the making

¹ Although Christian theology has played a key role in cultural and ecological malformations by giving impetus to the rational, scientific conquest of nature, ecological reformation is now underway as Christians are reinterpreting basic doctrinal themes in ways that integrate ecological insight and value and re-conceive Christian ethics to encompass human relationships with other beings in the biosphere. Certain norms illuminate a biblically-informed imperative to pursue what is both ecologically fitting and socially just. These include solidarity which comprehends the full dimension of the earth community and of inter-human obligations and sustainability which gives high visibility to ecological integrity and judicious behaviour throughout the resource-use cycle.

² In order to install QwarkXpress, a popular desktop publishing programme into computers running on Microsoft systems, the user is forced to adopt the American English spelling settings and all other words and spellings are either not recognised or are automatically changed to American English. This type of mechanism insidiously forces all computer users to use the same “Microsoft English” and invalidates all other equally valid forms of expression.

³ Abram, D. (1997) *The Spell of the Senuous*. Vintage.

⁴ Here I refer to the Indian case where at least one million farmers are said to have committed suicide in the last decade, and others are selling their kidneys as a result of dependence on loans, agro-chemicals and hybrid seeds. Nevertheless, interventions in Africa such as the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) are also imposing similar corporate techno-fixes to food security problems.

considering that the three pillars on which it was built (seed technology, irrigation and ample use of fertilisers and pesticides) now look much less sturdy.

Furthermore, the current system is manifested in the monetarisation of values and cultural homogenisation⁵. It is causing unprecedented breakdown of communities and natural support systems. The psychological expressions of this degeneration include widespread depression, social alienation, crime, drug addiction, religious fundamentalism and terrorism. The concurrent health problems of such so-called Western lifestyles include obesity, cancer and diabetes, whilst those in the Global South are *de facto* subsidising affluent lifestyles and consequently facing widespread malnutrition and starvation. We can therefore recognise a complex web of interrelated factors that are wreaking havoc with our means of survival and social stability.

An End to Crisis

Nevertheless, wherever there is Man, there is hope, and we do not cease to imagine a better future. As such, we may interpret **the cessation of suffering** as a vision of self-sufficiency, whereby people not only meet their basic needs for food, fuel, water and shelter, but become active creators of wealth and abundance. This is far from being a novel concept in Tanzania and the founding father, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere himself taught self-reliance (*kujitegemea*).

As a whole our relationship with nature needs to change radically. Rather than viewing the natural environment as a set of circumstances that need to be controlled in order to bring maximum profits or short-term benefits, we are challenged to realise the intrinsic value of nature. This concept has been encapsulated in the values of the deep ecology movement, and adherents include the Norwegian eco-philosopher, Arnie Naess and American writer and conservationist, Aldo Leopold. This approach is in direct contrast to the 'domineering' or 'stewardship' relation with the natural environment.

In terms of protecting all life-forms, we need to move to a level where we see nature (including each other and ourselves) as sacred. This view is espoused, for example, in Rastafarian ideology. A great deal of research has shown that plants are capable of extrasensory perception⁶. As one of the basic building blocks of life, water has also shown sensitivities towards intention⁷. Nevertheless, the far-reaching implications of this non-human consciousness have yet to be widely recognised and are certainly far from being reflected in our treatment of nature. Since there is a great deal about nature that we do not fully understand, we would be well advised to first and foremost observe (also the first principle of permaculture). From this act of merely observing, we naturally grow to admire

⁵ In terms of food habits, cultural homogenization has been called "MacDonaldisation" as people switch to fast foods that have been heavily processed and denatured.

⁶ Tompkins, P. and Bird, C. (1973) *The Secret Life of Plants*

⁷ This is visually reflected in the photographs and research of Japanese creative and visionary, Masaru Emoto, who has published "The Message from Water". This provides factual evidence, that human vibrational energy, thoughts, words, ideas and music, affect the molecular structure of water, scientifically demonstrating that we can positively heal and transform ourselves and our planet by the thoughts we choose to think and the ways in which we put those thoughts into action.

nature and feel a desire to preserve it. As the great poets such as John Keats, realised, ‘beauty is truth and truth beauty’. By preserving the beauty of nature, we are also preserving natural harmony and health. This is the real vision of redemption.

The logical outcome of cultivating utmost respect for the natural world is to attempt to live as naturally as possible. By this I mean that we live in harmony with natural systems, and according to our own natures. Such a lifestyle would include the prudent use of plants for physical and psychological wellbeing, such as by eating a balanced diet of unprocessed and fresh ingredients. It would also include getting adequate physical exercise and rest, as well as intellectual stimulation. Actually this should be as natural as breathing⁸, not a forced transformation of the self⁹, but rather a “letting-go” and submitting to the natural law.

Ways to End Crisis

If we now consider **the way to cessation of suffering**, we can see that far from being one single way, there are a great variety of different paths. Indeed diversity should be one of the cornerstones to our approach to sustainability.

Rather than dividing the world into two mutually exclusive spheres (e.g. cultures of permanence versus cultures of disaster, or the North versus the South), I would argue that each place is unique and there are elements to learn from every human society. Moreover elevating dualisms such as capitalism versus communism, Christianity versus Islam, East versus West, is rarely productive, and potentially divisive and dangerous. It is therefore proposed that we try to downplay these dualisms and instead create and nurture more eco-literate modes of living.

Just as it is dangerous to reject indigenous cultures, by rejecting the whole of what we call “Western civilisation” we may be ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’. There are some manifestations of the modern age which can be positive if used wisely, e.g. Information and Communication Technologies such as the internet, photovoltaic cells for solar energy, and in the arena of plant sciences, effective micro-organisms that speed up the process of decomposition in compost heaps.

In assessing such technologies it helps to be grounded in principles, such as the organic principles of health, ecology, fairness and care. Without adhering to strong values we run the risk of adopting harmful technologies for short-term ends. Therefore, it is recommended that we discern between useful and destructive technologies, just as Gandiji rejected large machinery, but embraced the spinning wheel and bicycle¹⁰. On the other hand, dangerous technologies such as nanotechnology and genetic modification in agriculture are being

⁸ The breathing mechanism is a miracle in itself, whereby contraction of muscles in the diaphragm causes the exhalation of air which creates low pressure in the lungs and this automatically leads to fresh air flowing back in and continuation of the cycle.

⁹ Incidentally, Buddhism demonstrates that the “Self” is itself an illusion and moving beyond this concept is necessary if we are to become enlightened.

¹⁰ Again, the writings of Schumacher (1973) are illuminating with respect to “technology with a human face”, or “intermediate technology”.

aggressively imposed and it is therefore necessary to re-assert local sovereignty over the means of production.

Selection of technologies also needs to be grounded in a good understanding of local conditions and will therefore be place-specific. Thus we should encourage decentralised approaches to water conservation, energy production, etc. and combine modern scientific knowledge with indigenous knowledge in order to best manage locally available resources for local production and consumption. The application of appropriate technology (both environmentally-friendly and labour-saving) to meet basic needs will not only allow people to live in dignity, but will also alleviate the busy craze of modern life and free more time for artistic and intellectual pursuits. This is an alternative conception of civilisation¹¹.

Again in relation to agriculture, there are numerous examples of alternative approaches including organic farming, permaculture, bio-intensive agriculture and low external input sustainable agriculture, to name a few. Whilst industrial agriculture is considered one of the main contributors to climate change (not to mention the effect that a 100% rise in fertiliser prices is having on food production), ecological agriculture opens up a wealth of options including planting nitrogen-fixing trees, composting, nutrient-recycling and green manuring. Although these practices are yet to be strongly supported in mainstream agricultural policy, they are just a few survival strategies that will allow us to keep eating without exacerbating the greenhouse effect. As an emerging holistic discipline, agroecology recognises the need to develop our skills, knowledge and attitudes in order to improve the sustainability of food and farming systems¹².

The scale at which we act is crucial. I am not convinced that the Nation State is always the most constructive concept, nor the most beneficial system of governance¹³, particularly in Africa where it was imposed under oftentimes tyrannical colonial rule. The concept of bioregionalism¹⁴ has been advanced as an antidote to destructive societal structures. "Bioregionalism" is a term used to describe an approach to political, cultural, and environmental issues according to naturally-defined regional areas. These areas are usually based on a combination of physical and environmental features, including watershed boundaries and soil and terrain characteristics, although bioregionalism also stresses that the determination of a bioregion is a cultural phenomenon that places emphasis on local populations, knowledge and solutions and reflects a "terrain of consciousness".

In order to counter the negative effects of globalisation, there is a growing move towards acting locally. For example, the Soil Association organic certifier in the UK is actively promoting local food and has even made their standards more stringent in order to reduce "food miles" involved in global food distribution networks. Thus the organic approach, with

¹¹ Taking time to greet one another and to develop quality relationships is a defining characteristic of Tanzanian culture, which also gives Tanzanians the reputation of friendliness and hospitality. Such patience and care is also apparent in the way in which women take time to produce good meals, keep their households clean and make handicrafts. In a world without processed foods, laundry machines and other appliances, this is may be a painstaking process, and yet it is borne without complaint, and indeed with relish which illustrates maturity in terms of relationship to time.

¹² Miguel Altieri and Jules Pretty are two prominent agroecologists working on this issue.

¹³ This view is supported in Schmacher, E.F. (1973) *Small is Beautiful* and Kohr, L. (1957) *The Breakdown of Nations*.

¹⁴ Sale, K. (1985) *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision*. University of Georgia Press.

its focus on providing locally produced food for local people, can help to tackle the detrimental effect that our culture of buying cheap imported food is having on the environment. Localisation goes hand in hand with valuing indigenous knowledge and taking greater pride in local culture and ecology. The Slow Food Movement, with its emphasis on local cuisine and regional specialities is a good example of taking this thinking to its logical conclusion.

In fact all over the world, there are positive initiatives springing up which deal with the underlying flaws of the current system of dependence on fossil fuels (e.g. the Transition Towns movement in the UK) and capitalism (e.g. the Local Exchange Trading Systems, or LETS, local community-based mutual aid networks in which people exchange all kinds of goods and services with one another, without the need for money).

In order to make the transition to more localised economies, there are several concepts that can be illuminating. In addition to bioregionalism, there is the idea of “topophilia”, literally the love of place. This was coined by Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in his 1974 book entitled “Topophilia: a study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values” which defines it as all emotional connections between physical environment and human beings. It is closely connected to appreciating the spirit of place – the unique, distinctive and cherished aspects of a place. Such a phenomenon is said to reside not only in the invisible weave of culture (through stories, art, memories, beliefs, histories, etc.), but also in the tangible physical aspects and in interpersonal associations.

Furthermore, the natural sciences are revealing the inherent logic and efficacy of cooperation amongst living organisms, as supported by James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis¹⁵. Whereas capitalism pits individuals and groups in competition against one another, symbiotic and cooperative relationships promise greater mutual benefits. This type of behaviour arises naturally when we understand the interdependencies that exist amongst living organisms and within the environment.

African cultures have traditionally embraced a collective existence. The *Nguzo saba* (the Seven Principles of Kwanzaa) include *Ujima* (collective work and responsibility) and *Ujamaa* (cooperative economics). Structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and the modern market fundamentalism have eroded such ways of living, but nevertheless in Tanzania, they are often close to the surface. In living memory, Nyasa communities in southern Tanzania come together to build a house in one day for a member of their community, and the job becomes a big social occasion and joyous event. It should not be difficult to reignite this will to cooperate, especially considering the fact that the major spiritual traditions also advocate cooperation, compassion and altruism.

With a few notable exceptions (e.g. the Group of 20+, a bloc of “developing” country nations which have formed a consortium to counter the economic power of the Group of Eight economic powers), South-South cooperation is currently limited. Often such countries coexist, and fill different niches rather than actively cooperating. A greater amount of

¹⁵ This views Earth as a living super-organism that can regulate its own environment. The idea argues that Earth is able to maintain conditions that are favourable for life to survive on it, and that it is the living things on Earth that give the planet this ability.

exchange would certainly bring great benefit, although such solidarity calls for increased interaction, a greater willingness to learn and ability to empathise with fellow humans.

In terms of North-South cooperation, it is suggested that it should follow certain key principles such as: *empowerment* to strengthen capabilities to make well informed and goal-oriented livelihood decisions; *responsiveness* to authentic demands; inclusiveness to take into account cultural diversity; *precautionary* to minimise livelihood threatening trade-offs expressed by clients and *facilitation* to facilitate the interplay and nurture synergies within a total information system. Such cooperation could usefully take the form of exchange of ideas, knowledge, and skills on the basis equal and mutually supporting relationships.

Some basic prerequisites of a wholesome and fruitful partnership include the protection of the sovereignty of local organisations, and allocating sufficient time and resources to understanding the context prior to intervening. Furthermore, there needs to be greater consideration of the long-term impact on people and environment. Current trends in the provision of food aid, the dumping of second-hand clothes, and the sale of out-dated pesticides are undermining local economies and health. For the Global North, the main thing is not to adopt a paternalistic, extractive or imperialistic attitude, but rather to nurture and support existing efforts. The role of the donor should be transformed to that of the facilitator. Furthermore, people working in “development” need to be wary of good intentions; philanthropy is often a veneer for addressing guilt or the product of misplaced pity. This is often not the most constructive starting point for partnership.

Overall I would advocate a strategy that withdraws support from the current system, rather than direct resistance. As this paper has shown, there are a wealth of creative initiatives which can channel our energies towards more positive livelihoods. In terms of living sustainably and promoting improved welfare amongst Tanzanians, for example, there is huge potential for agro-processing of fruit crops. If I can illustrate with my own dream and current preoccupation, there is the example of the pineapple.

In some cultures the pineapple is a symbol of wealth and abundance. It was considered an exotic and valuable item which adorned the tables of the aristocracy in England. It is carved into Zanzibar doors for the same reason. In Bagamoyo, which is famous for pineapple production, it could be a source of great wealth and overall health of residents. There are already moves in this direction, by farmers who are converting to organic because they realise the environmental and economic benefits to be had. By processing the pulp into juice which is effectively marketed and distributed, people could create a high quality local product, without depleting soil fertility and having the added advantages of increasing incomes and offering a healthy alternative to consumers.

Whilst there must be space for campaigning, advocacy and lobbying amongst civil society in order to transform the current system, I also see a great role for practical grassroots activity, in the development of innovative and sustainable enterprises.

Furthermore, actions speak louder than words and we need to *show* greater commitment to our values, rather than just proclaim them. Tangible examples of sustainable living may be the most powerful messages that we can send, just as Gandhiji showed passive resistance through the use of home-spun cotton and his non-violent stance was evident in his dietary

experiments. A good starting point would be to adopt a compassionate attitude towards the all sentient beings.

Lessons from Tanzania

With specific reference to Tanzanian culture, there are many elements that support sustainable living. As part of a strong oral tradition, proverbs guide the way people live and promote sound environmental management. Some such Swahili sayings, which have implications for how we live in relation to our environment include:

Usipoziba ufa utajenga ukuta, i.e. if you don't fill in the cracks, you'll have to build a wall. This teaches that if we do not look after the environment we will face big problems in the future.

Mchagua jembe si mkulima: the one who is fussy about which hoe to use is not a farmer. This teaches that we need to make do with the tools available.

Ngojangoja inaumiza matumbo: the one who waits will hurt his/her stomach. This teaches that we should not delay unnecessarily for example in planting trees.

Ndondondo si chururui: a drip is not a gush. This teaches that what comes slowly is more valuable than what comes all at once.

Maji yakimwagika hayazoleki: spilt water cannot be re-collected. This teaches that some types of damage is irreversible.

Mwenda pole hajikwai – polepole ndiyo mwendo: the person who goes slowly does not stumble. This teaches that we should be steady but sure in our activities, and not rush things, e.g. getting high yields at the expense of soil fertility.

Bandubandu maliza gogo: taking off the bark will finish the log. This teaches that constant low-level destruction of natural resources will have catastrophic results.

Mtaka cha uvunguni sharti ainame: the person with desires needs to submit to conditions. An analogy could be that someone who wants something under the bed has to bend down. This is similar to the English saying 'No pain, no gain' and teaches us that we have to apply ourselves in order to reach our goals.

In addition, there are many customs, such as the protection of trees in area of ancestral importance e.g. burial grounds, which preserve biodiversity. These tend to be specific to different tribes, and are extremely numerous and varied.

Conclusion

In light of these cultural peculiarities it is recommended that communities develop their own strategies for achieving genuinely sustainable development, and drive a “real green revolution” that is holistic in its approach. For this it will be necessary to identify basic components needed, in terms of skills, knowledge, attitudes, technologies, social structures etc.

Whilst a large part of humanity may be living in a relatively sustainable way, many do so unknowingly or because they simply cannot afford to live otherwise. There are a great range of livelihood strategies that protect the environment including sustainable food production (e.g. intercropping), water conservation (e.g. terracing), the sustainable provision of fuel and fibre (e.g. agroforestry). Projects should raise awareness on the ecological rationale for living sustainably, and should actively support people to improve the productivity of traditional practices.

On a global level, it is necessary to continue to research and monitor climate change, and raise awareness about its causes, e.g. through measuring carbon footprints. The latter action would encourage people in the Global North to take more responsibility for their actions. Facilitating a dialogue between different cultures, as this project does, is considered an exemplary way of deepening joint learning not only on the nature, causes and implications of climate change and other global crises, but also on the most promising and practical responses.

Petra Bakewell-Stone

Agricultural Consultant

Afrikabisa Organics, PO Box 297, Bagamoyo, Tanzania, afrikabisa@gmail.com

Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability is a study conducted by the Coalition for Environment and Development, Finland and funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. For more information see http://www.ymparistojakehitys.fi/sustainable_societies.html