Attie van Niekerk

TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABLE WELL-BEING OF COMMUNITIES

Africa, the modern empire and Christianity

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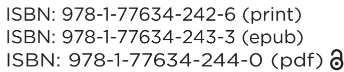

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Attie van Niekerk

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Research justification

The main thesis of this book is that the well-being of households and communities, as well as the ecology in Africa, requires sustainable, desirable, effective and affordable practices. Such practices have to be formed by a combination of available things and thoughts from a multifaceted environment and different cultural traditions. It can happen spontaneously, but it can also be designed through scientific, multidiscplinary and transdisciplinary processes. This scholarly book describes the combination of things and thoughts from traditional African cultures, modernity and Christianity in diverse local landscapes. It demonstrates that practices are needed to make it possible to transcend existing destructive ways of living.

The author declares that the contents of the book consist of the results of his own research. The book integrates three fields of research in which the author has worked over the last 40 years: church and theology in the African context, African philosophy and literature and the Nova Institute's transdisciplinary research, together with low-income households, to find meaningful solutions to everyday problems. The book presents a scientific discourse on development in Africa, which is often characterised by the hegemony of modern paradigms. The author, however, illustrates the relevance of African cultures and traditions, as well as the Christian message, for understanding development in the African context and finding ways towards the well-being of people and the planet. The writer affirms that he did not plagiarise from other sources and the intended readers are scholars in the fields of development studies, theology, and African studies.

Attie van Niekerk, Sustainable Communities Research Cluster, Centre for Faith and Community, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa; and Nova Institute, Pretoria, South Africa.

For Carol

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

AAEC	Association of African Earthkeeping Churches
AIC	African Initiated Churches
ANC	African National Congress
ANCYL	ANC Youth League
ATR	African Traditional Religion
CSIR	Council for Scientific and Industrial Research
DME	Department of Minerals and Energy
DMEA	Department of Minerals and Energy Affairs
GDP	gross domestic profit
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IRWH	Infield Rainwater Harvesting
LPG	liquid petroleum gas
MD	Managing Director
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NED	National Electrification Drive
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
SACC	South African Council of Churches
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SASO	South African Students' Organisation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SSA	sub-Saharan Africa
StatsSA	Statistics South Africa
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Committee
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
URCSA	Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa
VBS	Venda Building Society
VER	Verified Emission Reductions
VBS	Venda Building Society
VOC	Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie
ZIRRCON	Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation

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Glossary

The clarification of my general use of a few central concepts will be included in this section:

1. **Africa:** I had to choose between three terms: Southern Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and Africa. Southern Africa was a possibility because I write from the point of view of a South African who, since my school and university days, has travelled in our neighbouring countries and further away to Zambia, which is still part of southern Africa. I have been to Kenya, which is part of eastern Africa, and to Ghana, which is part of western Africa, only once. Sub-Saharan Africa was a possibility because all the mentioned countries are part of this region, and I have read many books by writers from all over this part of the continent, especially during my doctoral studies. I decided to use the name Africa instead because my thinking has been strongly influenced by African writers who talk about Africa, which usually means sub-Saharan Africa. Chinua Achebe (1976:2), for example, stated: 'Africa is not only a geographical expression: it is also a metaphysical landscape – it is, in fact, a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position'. I describe Africa from my position, as it has presented itself to me in direct encounters, through engagement and concrete experience, and through efforts to listen to what people say and what African writers have written. I tried to do so with an open mind. In my mind or consciousness, Africa has appeared as something huge and powerful but also vulnerable and wounded, something beautiful and tender but also violent and ugly – Jung's archetype of the loving and caring but at the same time terrible and destructive mother, something diverse but with a certain identity and with basic and characteristic cultural patterns.
2. **African Initiated Churches (AICs):** The term African Initiated Churches refers to a broad movement that comprises more than 40% of South Africans, and are found all over Africa. In this movement the Christian faith engages directly with, and is expressed in, the tenets of the contemporary African lifeworld. It has been known by different names, such as Zionism, Ethiopian churches, and African Independent Churches.
3. **Nyaope:** Nyaope is a highly potent and addictive drug that originated in South Africa and poses a significant risk. The chemical makeup of nyaope varies, but the most prominent substances are low-grade heroin, HIV antiretrovirals, cannabis, rat poison and detergent.
4. **Things and thoughts:** The concept of *things* that we use in this book relate broadly to the concept of technology, but *things* encompasses

more than technology. The word *things* is used broadly to refer to all that is tangible and material, including what is natural and manufactured, living plants and animals, the natural ecology and the landscape formed by humans, the physical reality and the human-built environment, even social processes. I understand the word *things* in a way that is similar to that described by Tim Ingold (2010), who sees a thing as a gathering together of the threads of life. He follows 'rather loosely' the argument classically advanced by the philosopher Martin Heidegger in his celebrated essay on *The Thing*. Heidegger reflected on the difference between a thing and an object. He argued that the object stands before us as a *fait accompli* as if it is closed in itself so that we can only see its solid surface. It is not defined by its relations with the settings in which it is placed, but exists over against it: 'The thing, by contrast, is a "going on", or better, a place where several goings-on become entwined. To observe a thing is not to be locked out but to be invited into the gathering' (Ingold 2010:4). A thing is open for a relationship; it finds its existence in the interaction with other things, while an object tends to be a closed circle, sufficient in itself.

Thoughts or consciousness refers in this book to our everyday knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and affects, our thought processes, our emotions and will, our beliefs, our dreams, our subconscious and memories, our paradigms and our theories. Consciousness is organised in patterns that can be described systematically to some degree, but not always in clear formulas. Art sometimes expresses consciousness better than science. Consciousness must always be understood in a specific context. The concepts mentality, mind, life-world and, to some extent, sense of place have comparable meanings.

5. **Venḓa:** for the sake of the convenience of the reader and to prevent repetitive explanations, the term 'Venḓa' is used throughout the book. This refers to the Venḓa-speaking tribal area in the far north of South Africa, which became the 'independent' Republic of Venḓa in 1979. This step was annulled with the dawn of the New South Africa. The then Venḓa is now part and parcel of the Limpopo province and the Democratic Republic of South Africa.
6. **ZAR:** South African Rand
7. **Zionism:** see **African Initiated Churches (AICs)** above.

Biographical note

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Attie van Niekerk studied Theology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. He was a minister of the (black) Dutch Reformed Church in Africa from 1978 to 1984 and professor at the church's theological training seminary at the University of the North from 1984 to 1993, as well as rector of the Theological School Stofberg from 1988 to February 1993. His book on four poets from Soweto and Alexandra in the 1970s, *Dominee, are you listening to the drums*?, was co-winner of the *Sunday Times* Literary Award for Political Writing in 1984. He has published several books and more than 50 academic articles.

In 1994, he became a founding member of the Nova Institute, a not-for-profit organisation that aims to enable poverty-stricken communities to improve their quality of life. Nova makes use of scientific methods, including surveys, academic debates and transdisciplinary research, in which researchers from a diversity of backgrounds, together with a number of low-income families, are engaged in a process to design and evaluate in practice, household products and processes that are effective, sustainable, desirable, replicable, beneficial and affordable for low-income households.

Acknowledgements

All roads in this book lead to the last chapter, which is mostly about projects of the Nova team.

I have used the word ‘we’ as the subject of the Nova projects in order to avoid the impossible task of having to say each time which team player did what. It is highly unsatisfactory, but for the purposes of this book, the focus is on what was done and not on who did it. I must acknowledge my indebtedness to the whole Nova team. I am most grateful to be working with all of you and for the good spirit in our team. I must add that this is not Nova’s story. I wrote about the projects where I was involved, but Nova does much more than that. My friend and colleague at Nova, Montagu Murray, read two earlier versions of the book and helped me with many constructive comments.

I met Wilhelm and Claire van Deventer when he became the minister of a neighbouring congregation and she a doctor in a local hospital in the then Venḓa. They read and assisted in rounding off the final version, giving invaluable feedback during long discussions as the thoughts unfolded. They have always been good listeners with an original perspective on things.

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My wife Carol and I have five children, and they have their own families now. Carol and I have the same mission, but she has always taken her own initiative, and we could mutually support each other over the years. That, and the fact that for all our children, in different ways, some or other aspect of the search for a sustainable, just and humane South Africa has become urgent and personal, makes me deeply grateful and happy.

Preface

Why does, as Lloyd Timberlake has observed, the African poverty trap treat competing doctrinaire ideologies with much the same contempt? And when you have answered that question, whatever your answer is, what can you do about it?

My first answer to the first question is quite simple: because of the contempt, often unconsciously, with which these competing ideologies have treated Africa, frequently by ignoring the existence of an African world.

This book is my answer to the second question. It is meant for all those who dream of and work for a dignified, sustainable Africa at peace with itself, only to find that things do not work out as one thought they might. The book is an effort to think about things in this part of the world and how we can find a way towards a delightful but at least liveable and sustainable 22nd century.

It is written in the form of a theoretical reflection on practical experience.

I grew up in the black church and in the white Afrikaans culture. My parents were missionaries who believed that the Christian faith and modern culture together are one big blessing for Africa and the world. While the church preaches the necessary values, the government, with its modern schools and hospitals, together with the business world, would ensure progress in all other respects.

My father was lecturing at the Stofberg Theological School, where future ministers and teachers of the (black) Dutch Reformed Church in Africa studied. The teaching staff was white. I was friends with the children of the staff and the children of the students. I still have periodic contact with one of each of these two groups. It was our own small age of innocence, but it was not boring. The institution was situated in the veld and we had more than enough room to play, in the open spaces, in the bushes around the brook, everywhere. We were not aware of any hidden tensions.

During school holidays, we went to the city to visit my mother's parents, who were Dutch immigrants, and to the farm of my father's parents. His father was a descendant of the first Van Niekerk who arrived in the Cape in 1671, and his mother, a descendant of the first Breytenbach who arrived in

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South Africa before 1749.[1] And they were both descendants of the Voortrekkers, the Afrikaners who trekked from the south into the northern interior, where they established two Boer republics. At the end of the 19th century, my grandfather took part in the war of the Boer republics against imperial Britain, and my grandmother was interned in a concentration camp.

On the farm I experienced something of what Van Wyk Louw (1966b: 197–212) called an 'old Afrikaans Boer culture' in which concepts such as 'fidelity', 'honour', 'duty', 'betrayal', 'right', 'wrong' and 'good' had a clear and firm meaning: doubt and war came from the outside and did not fundamentally disturb the inner firm security and confidence. They had a certain view of society, where everyone was respected and had their rightful place. Our own time, said Louw in 1940, only knew the more tragic and irreconcilable tensions, but in the old Boer culture, the battle between 'Boer' and 'barbarian', between 'Boer' and 'Brit' was always an open battle with ordinary weapons, between two sides that (apart from the 'low betrayal') stood against each other in a sort of mutual understanding. A reconciliation in an optimistic spirit was then always possible after the struggle, and the former enemies could then shake hands again. Towards the end of his life, I realised that things had not always been as clear-cut as that for my grandfather.

Nelson Mandela, too, stood for the principle of a fight between enemies who respected each other. While in detention for 27 years, he once wrote to the South African 'Commissioner of Prisons' (Mandela 2010):

> I should like us to fight over our principles and ideas without personal hatred, so that at the end of the battle, whatever the result may be, I can proudly shake hands with you, because I feel I have fought an upright and worthy opponent who has observed the whole code of honour and decency. But if your subordinates continue to use foul methods then a sense of real bitterness and contempt becomes irresistible. (p. 203)

The remarkable thing is that Mandela overcame the strong sense of real bitterness and contempt that he spoke about and came out of prison in 1990 with a message of reconciliation. We will reflect later on Mandela and what motivated him. At this stage, I only want to mention that I have personally encountered this quality of inner dignity and peace in many Africans where one would have reason to expect the opposite, in spite of the more tragic and irreconcilable tensions of our time that Louw spoke about.

I always felt that my extended Afrikaans family was like the trunk of the tree, and the small Dutch immigrant family – my mother had only one sister – like

1. See https://www.houseofnames.com/breytenbach-family-crest.

an attachment. But later in my life, during a visit to the Netherlands, I walked across a square in the Netherlands and saw the date 1615 on a tower. Suddenly, I had the realisation that my Afrikaans family was only a branch of a much bigger and older tree – when that building was built, my family was still there; in a way, it is just as much part of my history as it is of the present Dutch. There is a real but distant relationship.

It is often easier to describe my relationship with the Netherlands than with Africa. The Netherlands is physically far away, but there is a recognition of a common heritage that stretches back for many centuries. The African world is physically near; in spite of the difference in heritage, we share a more immediate common future. The African world is at times very familiar and, at other times, completely unfamiliar. There are the more tragic and irreconcilable tensions in our relationship that Louw spoke about, but at the same time there is an inspiring warmth and a joy of living.

As a teenager, we listened to the music of the swinging Sixties, and in the Seventies, I was a student at the white, Afrikaans University of Pretoria, a time in which I became aware that the modern world is not sustainable and – acutely so during a visit to Malawi and Zambia in 1977 – that it does not ensure a better life for all Africans. I became aware of the dilemma that the church is growing strongly in Africa, but with little impact on the urgent questions of the continent, such as poverty, violence and corruption. This was an unfinished task of Christian missions in Africa, to understand the calling of the church regarding the quality of life of people and to respond to that calling in a meaningful way.

After my theological studies, I spent three years on my doctoral studies in the theology of missions, focusing on modern African literature, specifically on 13 anthologies of poetry from Soweto and Alexandra that were published in that period. These townships near Johannesburg were the centre of Black Consciousness, a philosophy that bases freedom on the recognition of African identity and dignity. This decade was a turning point in South Africa's history; on 16 June 1976, the black youth of the township Soweto revolted and so unleashed the turbulent struggle of the African masses against the white minority rule, which led to a democratic South Africa in the early 1990s. I hoped that the poetry would give me a better understanding of the so-called 'black experience of life' that drove the struggle. I was confronted with the unexpected: together with the political protest against an unjust system, there was strong resistance to the modern world as such and sometimes to Christianity – the two things that my parents regarded as the solution for Africa!

My doctoral thesis was cast in a more readable form by the veteran journalist Rykie van Reenen, who became a good friend of mine and also of Carol and our children. It was published as *Dominee, are you listening*

to the drums? in 1982 and was co-winner of the influential *Sunday Times*'s literary prize for political writing in 1983.

Carol and I were missionaries among Venḓa-speaking people in the far northern rural area of the country from 1978 to 1983. Venḓa was a 'homeland' during the apartheid years. The central government's policy was to prompt these ethnic homelands to opt for political independence. There were three ethnic 'homelands' in the far north of the country: for the BaPedi, the Shangaans and the VhaVenḓa. While we were there, the local government of the Venḓa opted for 'full' independence. The other two did not follow this example, preferring to stay part of South Africa. When apartheid was abolished, Venḓa's 'full independence' was merely annulled.

In the congregation I experienced thought patterns and symbols that were very similar to what I had encountered in urban poetry and African literature, such as the importance of the earth as our mother, of death as just an episode in the circle of life and of social constructions in which the community is prominent rather than the individual person.

I became aware of the central role of the household in the African context and of the dysfunctional interaction and combination of things and thoughts originating from the African world, the modern world and the Christian message, that shaped the households of our church members. I felt that it was vital to try and understand these processes very well.

As an academic at Stofberg, the church's theological seminary at the University of the North, now the University of Limpopo, from 1984 to 1993, I encountered similar ways of thinking during endless negotiations with angry black students. The university was a centre of the struggle against apartheid, but a great deal of the protest was about key tenets of the academic processes. It was cultural protest as well.

The intense experience of thought patterns that I had read about before convinced me of the existence and tenacity of an 'African world'. I wrote about these experiences in a book, *Sáám in Afrika* (1992; literally *Together in Africa*), that was also published as *One destiny: Our common future in Africa* (1993).

I then formed an interdisciplinary team of researchers who visited low-income households in an effort to understand how our separate fields of study interacted and combined in the context of an African household. The team consisted of Dieter Holm, an architect and the dean of the Department of Architecture at the University of Pretoria and now retired; Jannie Hugo, until recently head of Family Medicine at the same university; and my brother Willem, a chemical engineer lecturing at the same university, but now at North-West University. Together, we visited households in the vicinity of the University of the North, a rural area. Some of my students

also became involved. Gradually, we came to realise that the insights we had gained needed to be taken into account in larger development projects. That is where Nova was born.

The Dutch Reformed Church's missionary movement of the 20th century started to disintegrate in the 1970s, and when the position in which I was employed closed down at the end of 1993, I arranged with the white Dutch Reformed Church, which supported the school financially and otherwise, that I would continue to work in a yet-to-be-established not-for-profit company, the Nova Institute. We then moved to Garsfontein, a middle-class suburb in Pretoria, where Carol is deeply involved in our community's activities and relationships as a volunteer.

Since 1994, I have been with Nova, for the first years as the only staff member; as we grew over the years, we worked in almost all the northern provinces of South Africa, in both rural and urban contexts – with a few projects in the southern provinces, in countries elsewhere in Africa and even a bit of work with refugees in Europe. Nova's vision is a healthy household culture in southern Africa, and my role in Nova is to develop, together with low-income households, ways to improve their quality of life. We have implemented a solution for air pollution caused by domestic coal use in more than 80 000 households and another for wood use in more than 8 000 households. These projects are discussed in Chapter 15. In some cases, Nova has worked closely with small numbers of households for years; in other cases, we conduct large-scale surveys of the quality of life of households, both qualitative and quantitative.

From 1997 until 2019 I lectured on a part-time basis at the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria. I have been the supervisor of several magister and doctoral students who have focused on the relation between the church and cultural and religious aspects from several countries in Africa.

In all of these encounters, we often found the unexpected.

■ What to expect in this book

This book is based on my experience in three fields: my modest journey of better understanding the vast African world; my work in the church and in theology; and lastly, the search with residents of low-income communities for meaningful solutions to their everyday problems.

My experience took place against the background of the encounter between three main powers: Africa, Christianity and the modern global empire. Their interactions form the main building blocks of this book. The empirical households and communities as we see them today in Africa are the product of the interaction between these powerful systems within

the local landscapes. We must engage with them if we want to promote the sustainable well-being of communities, always at a certain place, within a local ecology. There have been influences from the East and strong involvement of China in recent decades in Africa, but that will not feature strongly in this book because I have not yet personally and significantly experienced and/or studied China's impact on households – or that of the Muslim world.

After the three actors and their interaction have been considered, the focus shifts to the way they relate to each other in the everyday domestic practices of African households.

The book is divided into 15 chapters (Figure P–1).

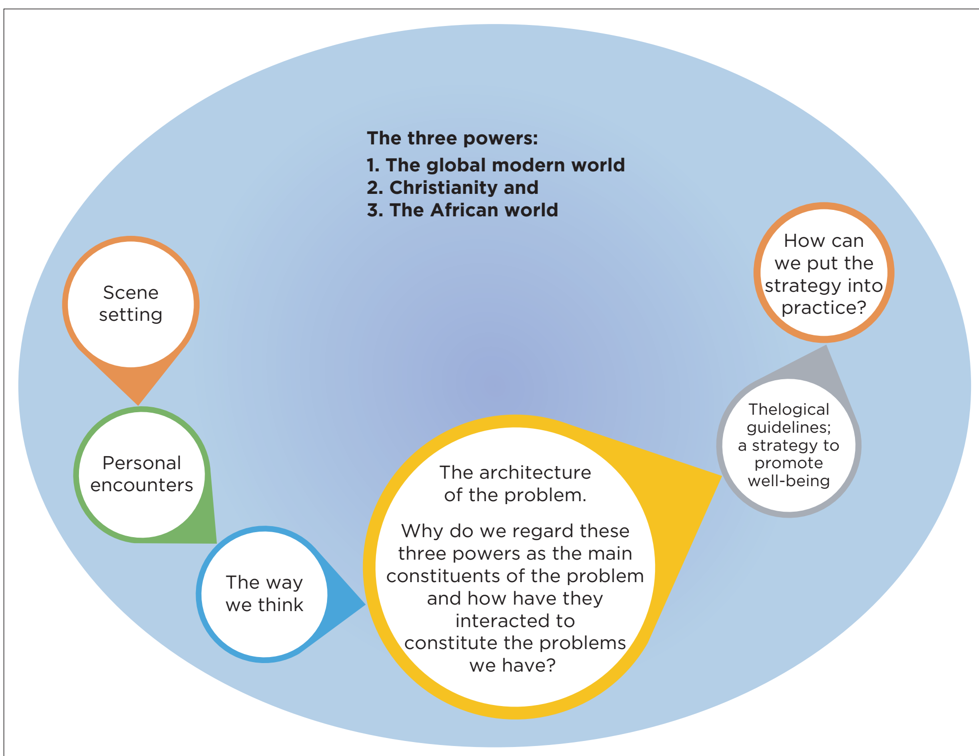

FIGURE P-1: The thought framework of this book.

The chapters are now introduced shortly.

Chapter 1: Scene setting

This short chapter gives information on the *place*, the part of the world where the struggle between the different actors that we engage with plays out. South Africa is seen within the wider context of Africa and the world.

A short overview is given of how the Western presence was established in this country, and one of its effects, a feeling of homelessness, is highlighted.

Chapter 2: Personal encounters

This chapter presents some diverse personal encounters that are meant to provide insight into the complexities of this part of the world.

Chapter 3: The way we think

The way we understand any given thing or person is strongly influenced by our way of thinking. Different people observe the same thing and form different opinions about it. That does not mean that they are all in the right or in the wrong. Things have their own nature, and the way we approach each one must resonate with it, and that requires a certain ability to understand each specific phenomenon.

In this chapter, I try to formulate a few aspects that I regard as necessary to understand events in this part of the world. These aspects include understanding the difference between complicated and complex; the prerequisite of having an insight before you can see facts; the key role of the way we relate to something or someone that we try to understand; and the interaction between technology and consciousness, or things and thoughts (refer to the glossary), in the process of culture change.

Chapters 4–11: The architecture of the problems in Africa

In these chapters, we discuss the fabric and dynamics of contemporary Africa in order to understand the problems and possibilities better.

We will look at the way that things and thoughts originating from the three strong powers, the modern empire, African traditional cultures and Christianity, have interacted and combined in the African context. The interaction between these three powers has produced some key issues that we have to deal with in the 21st century.

First, we discuss the problematic roles of the modern empire and of Christianity and the contributions they have made. We then look at the tenacity of African traditional cultures and the powerful role they often play, both constructive and problematic. We do so in an effort to convince the reader that African traditional cultures should be respected and not ignored, as so often happens.

Chapters 12–13: Thelogical guidelines; obstacles to well-being

Some of the obstacles on the way to a different Africa that we look at in Chapter 12 include modern institutions, the search for quick fixes and population growth.

A strategy is based on a certain philosophy that provides points of departure for guiding the formulation and execution of the strategy. In Chapter 13, some guidelines that Christian theology provides are formulated, which I regard as of vital importance.

Chapters 14–15: How can we put the strategy into practice?

In these chapters, we look at ways in which domestic practices can be developed. We look at case studies of efforts to find the right combination between things and thoughts. Over 25 years, the Nova Institute has executed several projects with local households to develop domestic practices for solving problems in energy use, air pollution, food security and others. What have we learned?

We conclude with a reflection on the question of how we can promote the sustainable well-being of communities.

Chapter 1

Scene setting

This short chapter gives information on the place, the part of the world where the struggle between the different actors that we engage with plays out. South Africa is seen within the wider context of Africa and the world. A short overview of how the Western presence has been established in this country is given, and one of its effects, a feeling of homelessness, is highlighted.

Africa

Africa is a wonderful mix of things and thoughts and of thoughts that became things.

Some things were here first: the land, the waters and the air and all that live in them. These things are not the expression of human thoughts.

Homo sapiens, they say, originated here about 250,000 years ago. At first, we were only a few; now, we are many. We have different ways of thinking and doing things, different paradigms and different cultures. By thinking and doing, we make different things, making use of the land, the waters and all that live in them. We have achieved much, but we have become a life-threatening danger for these things and for each other – and for ourselves.

We can still choose life, but how do we do that? And can we do that without God?

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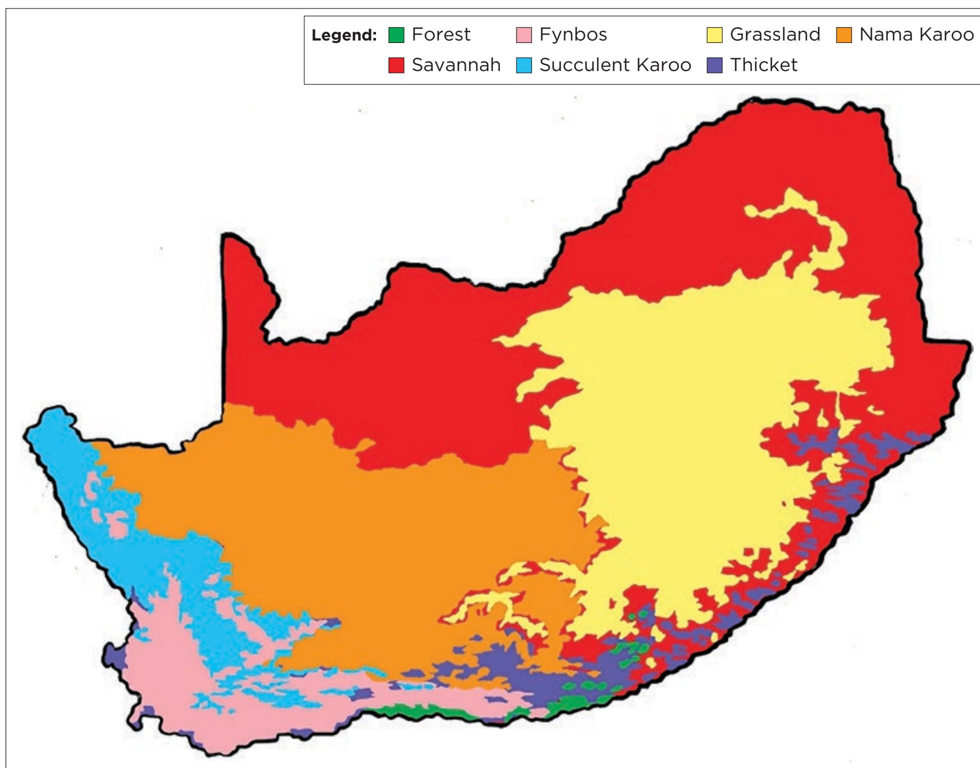
South Africa

South Africa is regarded as the place where humankind originated (see Gauteng Tourism Authority 2021: The Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site 2021).

There is diversity everywhere. Our flora is one example (see Figure 1.1).

The South African National Biodiversity Institute writes:

> South Africa is popular for its rich flora, containing an estimated 8% of the world's vascular plants, three global biodiversity hotspots and approximately 21000 species. The Cape Floristic Region is particularly interesting because of its diversity and a large number of endemic species. This biome is recognised as one of the six floral kingdoms of the world. (2021:n.p.)



Source: 'Chapter 8.3: Biospheres to ecosystems "Figure 8.5: The biome regions in South Africa"', in *Life Sciences Grade 10*, Siyavula: Technology-powered Learning. Reproduced by the publisher under an appropriate Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported (CC BY *3.0) License <https*://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.[2]

FIGURE 1.1: The biomes in South Africa.

2. See https://www.siyavula.com/read/za/life-sciences/grade-10/biosphere-to-ecosystems/08-biosphere-to-ecosystems-03#figure:biomes

South Africa is home to approximately 300 species of mammals and 850 species of birds (Iconic Animals of South Africa 2018).

The geographical topology varies from deserts to various rainforests, from mountains to savannah and long coastal plains along the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean.

The country has a rich reserve of a variety of minerals: 'In addition to diamonds and gold, the country contains reserves of iron ore, platinum, manganese, chromium, copper, uranium, silver, beryllium, and titanium'.[3]

Broadly speaking, South Africans' ways of thinking are shaped, among other things, by history and different cultural paradigms and thought patterns, which are in a dynamic process of change and mutual give-and-take. South Africa's cultural diversity is reflected in our 12 official languages, plus a number of less prominent languages, such as several Khoi-Khoi and San languages that are on the brink of extinction.

The population of the country gives another impression of our vigorous diversity: in 1904, the country had a population of 5,174,827 (3,490,827 black African, 1,117,234 white, 444,991 Coloured, and 122,311 Asiatic; SESA 1973:1). In June 2022 the estimated population of South Africa had increased by more than 10-fold to 60,604,992 (49,070,809 black African, 5,339,919 Coloured, 4,639,268 white, and 1,554,996 Indian/Asian; Statistics South Africa; StatsSA 2022:19); the names of the races have changed slightly, but the official race classification has remained basically the same.

With such a variety of things and thought patterns, one can expect a dynamic process, something like an ongoing chemical reaction, or rather, many ongoing chemical reactions all over the place, in which reactants clash and combine and are converted into different substances that continue to react with each other, while some combinations continuously break up again. Some combinations are toxic, some are wholesome. Some are unstable, some more sustainable. We can expect this process to generate heat and energy, as well as smaller and bigger explosions. It is dynamic, interesting, exciting and dangerous.

This mixture of things and thoughts has resulted in spectacular growth and wonderful highlights, while the dark side of humanity is often expressed in ugly ways. But the problem that will occupy our thoughts in this book, is that honest efforts to make things better often make them worse.

The elements combine in ways that no one can control. The question is: *What types of combinations do we need? And how can we try to make such combinations possible?*

3. See https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Africa/Resources-and-power

There are specific hotspots where the ongoing chemical reactions of things and thoughts in South Africa are relatively more concentrated, such as politics, the workplace and universities. In this book, attention will specifically be given to one of the most important platforms, namely households and local communities, as case studies of how these processes take place and how one could deal with them.

South African goodwill and cold-heartedness

There is a great deal of goodwill in South Africa. This is confirmed by a foreign visitor during the time when the country presented the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup in 2010. This visitor, an American International Development Executive in the Health Sector, Shari Cohen,[4] wrote:

> To say that I have been blown away at the hospitality South Africa has shown the rest of the world would be an understatement [...] The questions and conversations are in earnest. They are honest. And they are had with enthusiasm and a thirst to know more. South Africans are drinking deeply from the cup of humanity that has been brought to their doorstep. I would never imagine that an American World Cup or Olympics would ever be this welcoming to the rest of the world [...] I am a cynic, no doubt about that. And yet I have to admit, I'm a little teary just writing this because I leave for home next weekend and I will be leaving a little piece of myself here in South Africa. (2010:n.p.)

There is, unfortunately, another side to this country too. What Mongo Beti (1977:7) said about a certain community in Africa, that they were locked in 'internal feuds and vendettas [...] with almost superhuman bloody-mindedness' can also be said about us. South Africa is staggering under a dark cloud of scourges that include poverty, unemployment, inequality, HIV and AIDS, homelessness, hunger, horrible crime and violence towards women and children, racial tensions and corruption. There will be sufficient room to deal with these issues in the rest of this book.

Conflict and alienation

A decisive turn in Africa's history came late in the 15th century when, because of the upsurge in the search for adventure and knowledge that the Renaissance set loose in Europe, the Portuguese began to sail the seas to discover the world. In 1486, Bartolomeu Dias sailed around the southern tip of Africa.

In the 17th century, the Netherlands dominated trade with the East, mostly for spices. Before ice was used to preserve food, people in Europe used

4. See https://www.huffpost.com/entry/south-africa-rolls-out-th_b_611802

pepper. At the time, a kilogram of common black pepper was worth more than a kilogram of gold. In 1652, the Dutch East India Company, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), that has been regarded as the first multinational company in the world and one of the most powerful in world history, established a halfway station for the ships that sailed to the East. That was the beginning of the present white population in South Africa (Giliomee & Mbenga 2017:41).

From the beginning, the white people and the Khoi-Khoi had a turbulent relationship. There were wars and trading, recognition and discrimination, conflict, as well as intermarriage and cooperation. The Khoi-Khoi were gradually subdued in the southern Cape and were scattered into small groups or families. They were particularly hard hit by the smallpox epidemic of 1713, almost disappearing as an independent nation (Giliomee & Mbenga 2017:50–52). Today there are efforts to revive their national spirit and ambitions, usually as the Khoisan, together with another group, the San. They are seen as one of the small remaining groups of indigenous people of the world, who received special attention at the World Conference of Indigenous People that was organised by the United Nations (UN) in 2014.

The white people continued to spread into the interior and met the amaXhosa west of the Fish River in the 1770s (Giliomee & Mbenga 2017:75). This encounter also unfolded in turbulent ways.

At that stage, the basic ingredients that have formed South Africa until today were already present, and the 'chemical reaction' was underway, with the later addition of people from India and Malaysia, who still form important minorities.

The arrival, spread and domination of white people were the harbingers of the modern empire that is probably the most dominating power in the world today, complete with a powerful multinational company, the VOC. In the 19th century, two Boer republics, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, were established in the interior.

In 1867, diamonds were discovered in the interior, and in the 1880s, vast gold deposits were discovered in the Republic of Transvaal. Gold-diggers flooded into the Transvaal along with a variety of people, including tricksters and gangsters from all over the world. The modern empire flexed its muscles.

The impact on all spheres of life in this part of the world was profound on all levels of society. Already present were the three powers that we will discuss in Chapter 13 – money (the gold mines), power and sex. For example, thousands of prostitutes from continental Europe flocked to the gold fields, as well as hundreds of Russo-American pimps and prostitutes from New York City; together with local landlords and property

companies, they turned much of inner Johannesburg into the red-light district of Frenchfontein: '[...] the solvent of poverty and the colour-blindness of the demi-monde occasionally gave rise to its own distinctive chemistry [...]' (Van Onselen 1982:160–162).

Money and power were the main forces of what happened next. The imperial power Great Britain soon arrived on the scene. It used the conflict about voting rights between the 'foreigners' in Johannesburg and the government of the Republic of Transvaal as an excuse to interfere. Transvaal resisted the British Empire with the support of the neighbouring Republic of the Free State. The Anglo-Boer War between England and the two republics broke out in 1899. Black people were involved on both sides, but they were excluded from the peace treaty that was signed between England and the two Republics at Vereeniging in 1901. In 1910, the Union of South Africa was formed with four provinces, again excluding black people from the political system.

The way that black leaders responded to these events has had huge implications until today, which is later discussed in more detail.

The apartheid ('separateness') policy became the official policy in 1948 and intensified after South Africa became a Republic in 1961. The idea was to lead the traditional tribal areas to become independent nation-states where they could enjoy all their rights while the 'white areas' were reserved for white people. Some preferred to call it separate development, but internationally and locally it is known as apartheid. It was an ambitious idea. At an early stage many people, including people with integrity, hoped it could work, but it caused a great deal of suffering and resulted in a nightmare.

The lesson that we can learn from this applies to other cases, too: unfounded idealism, combined with the modern notion of a makeable society and too much self-confidence or arrogance, result in a toxic mixture.

In 1994 the white minority government was replaced with a democratically elected government through a relatively peaceful settlement. The powerful African National Congress (ANC) was led by Nelson Mandela, who became world famous for his reconciliatory role after being released from jail, where he had been imprisoned for 27 years as a political prisoner.

The effort to separate cultures and nations has failed, and we are in the process of building a new society – again, according to a wide variety of conflicting ideals, as can be expected in this country where there is diversity everywhere.

After three decades, in 2024, the ANC lost its majority in the national parliament and a number of diverse parties have recently formed a government of national unity – venturing into unknown territory.

■ Homecoming

Home, homecoming, is a deep longing in Africa. *Exile and homecoming* was a central theme during the political struggles against colonialism and apartheid. It is becoming increasingly clearer that it is not only a political and economic issue; modernisation is a part of the problem. Modernisation leads to a feeling of homelessness all over the world, according to Peter L Berger and others in their book *The homeless mind: Modernization and consciousness* (1974), and not least in Africa.

The longing for home is expressed in many ways. In his book *Homecoming,* Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1981) of Kenya sees building a home for all Africans as the main task of the post-colonial era:

> We need to see Africa's cultural history in three broad phases: Africa before white conquest, Africa under colonial domination, and today's Africa striving to find its true self-image [...] we are all involved in a common problem: how best to build a communal home for all Africans. Then all the black people, all the African masses can truthfully say: we have come home. (pp. xix, 4)

Today, the search for homecoming is still at the heart of prominent streams in the decolonisation movement, even though the concept has become entangled in the conflicting interests of various stakeholders in various contexts: historical, spiritual, cultural, political and economic (Schramm 2010:247).

Many African people who grew up in rural areas and have moved to cities continue to refer to their original places of birth as 'home'. And many who have lived in urban areas will be taken 'home' to be buried. The family home and the land are at the heart of homecoming. In the words of Awoonor (1976a: 165, 166), Senghor 'invokes the Black woman, the maternal principle, who is at the centre of the return to the African world [...] the call of the woman, the Earth Mother' (see Chapter 11, 'Aspects of urbanisation in Africa').

At funerals, people sing about the ultimate homecoming: 'I'm going home, I'm going home. I'm going home, to die no more' – which could have a traditional or a Christian meaning or both.

The search for a church that is 'a place to feel at home' has led to the emergence of countless African Initiated Churches (AICs) (Mbiti 1974:234).

On 27 September 2024, President Cyril Ramaphosa officiated "the repatriation and restitution homecoming ceremony of South African freedom fighters who lost their lives in Zambia and Zimbabwe during the apartheid era." The repatriation of the remains of 42 freedom fighters is part of an ongoing initiative.[5]

5.https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/president-ramaphosa-officiate-repatriation-and-restitution-homecoming-ceremony-freedom-fighters

In this book, the idea is that the different lines that are described must come closer to each other as the argument proceeds, to focus in the last chapters on how they could combine to make the concrete micro-structures of the household and the community more of a place to feel at home, in urban areas as much as in rural areas.

Conclusion

In the search for the sustainable well-being of communities, attention must be given to the global context. Regular reports by high-level bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the reports of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (e.g. IPBES 2019) paint a picture of a planet under severe stress caused by human activity. What we experience in South Africa is no different: even a casual observer can see how human activities impact biodiversity, and our country is increasingly experiencing record temperatures and drought conditions as well as devastating floods over the last few years.

This book presents a local study of global conditions; it has grown out of personal encounters with local conditions; it gives a picture of the present in the light of the past.

Chapter 2

Personal encounters

The chapter presents some personal encounters that are meant to provide insight into the complexities of this part of the world and which highlight some of the questions with which we will grapple in this book. The aim is to understand the problems better.

The consumer tribe

In 2018, my wife Carol and I visited our daughter and her family in the far north of South Africa, not far from Nthume, our first congregation. They stay close to the area that used to be known as Veṋḓa, where Veṋḓa-speaking people have traditionally lived.

Our visit was during a long weekend. Friday 27 April was Freedom Day – the day of the first national democratic election in 1994 – and Tuesday was Worker's Day. Many people took leave on Monday, which made it an unusually long weekend. During long weekends large numbers of people who work in Gauteng, the biggest industrial hub in the country, routinely go home to their families in the rural areas to the north. Gauteng, representing just 1.5% of the land range in the country, had an estimated population of 13.64 million in 2017 – nearly one quarter of the total population of the country.

On Thursday afternoon, the roads north of Pretoria, the city in Gauteng where we stay, were already very busy and we decided to rather depart on

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the next morning, when we hoped the great rush would be over. That Friday morning the highway was, however, still very busy. We stood in long lines to get through the toll gates. There was a festive atmosphere, with car radios blaring; in a few minibus-taxis, the travellers were singing joyfully.

The cars on the road were mostly in a good condition, many of them expensive luxury models. The *skorokoro* of former years – overloaded, old, rumbling and smoking cars that tended to break down so that you often saw a small crowd of people standing along the road while a few were bending over the engine or lying below it, legs sticking out, trying to fix the problem – are not often seen on the highway nowadays. People who do not have money to buy a decent car now use one of the numerous money-making minibus-taxis or a bus.

We stopped at a petrol station along the highway, a convenient oasis with a few fast food outlets, to stretch our legs and get something to eat. The centre was packed with travellers and people were milling around, laughing and talking, some shouting to make themselves heard above the festive din and noise. Long lines of people were waiting to use the toilets.

Only a few white people were part of this predominantly black pilgrimage.

The atmosphere reminded me of Harari (2014:398–406), who argued that, prior to the Industrial Revolution, the traditional worldwide pattern was that people lived within their families and local intimate communities, but modern markets and states have weakened the ties in these small-scale communities and promoted individualism in their place, as well as another, bigger sense of community. The state presented the *nation* as 'community' and the market presented the *consumer tribe*: 'The nation is the imagined community of the state. The consumer tribe is the imagined community of the market'. Harari calls them 'imagined' because the members of these 'communities' feel they belong together even though they do not know each other as people do in small-scale communities.

The dominant story of the state tells us that we must all be proud South Africans, and the dominant story of the market tells us that shopping and consuming will make us happy. But alongside these new identities, the traditional family ties of our fellow travellers are still strong enough to make people take the road to visit their families and local communities in the traditional rural areas.

Ethnic ties are strong, as was made visible in a protest that had taken place a year or two earlier. In 2016, the Vhembe municipal area, very close to where my daughter and her family stayed, was declared a disaster area after 50 schools had been either torched or vandalised. The protest was sparked by the Municipal Demarcation Board's decision to include the

Vuwani area in the Collins Chabane local municipality, which fell in the area of a neighbouring ethnic group.[6]

At the same time, the consumer tribe could be seen in the huge double-storey Thavhani Mall, with its 130 shops full of top-range products, similar to malls everywhere in the world. Thavhani Mall was opened in Thohoyandou in August 2017[7], and the modern Thavhani City is planned around it. It is a far cry from the small trading store where we shopped when we came to live in Venḓa in 1978, where goats still walked among the shoppers seeking something to eat!

We asked ourselves: is this consumer culture economically, socially and ecologically *sustainable*? We reflected on this question while observing the shoppers in Thavhani Mall. Where does the money that is spent there come from? Venḓa is not a commercial farming hub (see Olofsson 2021), or an industrial hub. Family members who work far away in the city send remittances back home. The government is a vital source of income: it provides jobs for officials, teachers, medical personnel and traditional leaders, and also grants (an issue that will be discussed further, for example, in Chapter 12).

One must assume that most of the jobs and businesses in the area around Thavhani Mall – my daughter mentioned funeral parlours, shops and the prosperity gospel churches, with car washing probably the most common – are dependent on the grants and job opportunities provided by the government. In these areas, there are very few private landowners because most of the rural areas are controlled by the traditional leaders. They have a great deal of power, including political power, and they are paid by the government.

The 'imagined community' of the market, the consumer tribe, was the first personal encounter on our trip that weekend. The second was our encounter with traffic behaviour in the 'free South Africa'.

Traffic behaviour

We travelled northwards from Polokwane (formerly Pietersburg), which is 277 km north of Pretoria. The highway now became a single road, with wide margins marked by a yellow line. If you crossed the yellow line and drove close to the edge of the road, another car could narrowly pass you

6. See https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/vhembe-declared-disaster-area-after-nearly-50-schools-torched-20160510

7. See http://thavhanimall.co.za/.

from behind without crossing the white line in the middle of the road – but if the oncoming cars do the same, it becomes a very dangerous situation.

In the middle of the road is usually a broken white line, which means that one could see ahead far enough to overtake a vehicle, if the road is clear of oncoming traffic. If there is a solid white line next to the broken line on your side of the road, you are not allowed to cross over that line. Some drivers hold this rule in contempt, as they do with the speed limit of 120 km/h – they pass at will. I saw no aggression against such behaviour – no flickering of lights from oncoming traffic that had to drive on their margin, for example. All seemed to accept that as the new normal way of driving, a joyful and reckless celebration of freedom. Some white drivers did the same.

Wilhelm van Deventer, a friend and colleague who lived and served in Venḓa for 16 years, is visually impaired and therefore dependent upon others to drive him around. He remembers that, after 1990 when the end of apartheid was announced, some Venḓas explained that the new habit of reckless driving was because of their newfound freedom and a sense of possessing everything, including the roads.

Since then, transport on our roads has expanded dramatically. Many more cars, light delivery vans, minibus-taxis, buses, trucks and motorcycles fill our roads on a daily basis. Drivers are now of a younger age, many with licences purchased from corrupt officials, or with false licences or with no licences at all. This has obviously increased the risk of fatal accidents.

What is really dangerous is that people sometimes overtake on a blind bend of the road or a blind hill. It happens everywhere in South Africa but more so in these areas when there are high volumes of traffic on the roads. Several times, my daughter or her husband had to drive off the road completely to avoid a head-to-head collision. In 2024, a school friend of my granddaughter died in such an accident in this area.

At an average of 26.6 deaths per 100,000 residents per year, African countries have the highest traffic death toll in the world; South Africa stands at 25.1 and Europe at 9; per 100,000 *motor vehicles* Africa has 574 fatalities a year and Europe 19.[8]

During a previous visit to my daughter and her family, I received a phone call that my colleague at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria, who was Venḓa-speaking and had his home in this area, had died in a head-to-head collision. The victim was, like me, a part-time lecturer. The funeral was conducted that Saturday morning. I agreed to represent the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the funeral.

8. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_traffic-related_death_rate

It was a big event, with hundreds of people in attendance. The church that the deceased belonged to is strictly Reformed, and that could be seen in many ways: a strictly Western style in the liturgy – no clapping of hands and dancing during singing, as is the habit in African churches; a sermon from the Heidelberg Catechism; strong emphasis on the church council – the church will go on because the church council is there – to name a few characteristics of the strictly Reformed church in our country.

There were many speakers, several of them professors and doctors in Theology, all Venḓa-speaking people. The whole procedure was conducted in the Venḓa language and I could still follow some of it. I was impressed with the progress that this church had made since I was there 40 years earlier.

However, something that struck me when I was a minister in this area 40 years earlier was again apparent: the way people interpreted such calamities. The accident was caused by an oncoming driver who passed another vehicle on a blind bend in the road. This oncoming driver was a minister of another church, and he was apparently drunk. I expected to hear some reference to this type of irresponsible behaviour that had caused this loss, but I could not hear even one. The message to the crowd at the funeral was to accept everything as the will of God, even an accident like this where our colleague had died a completely unnecessary death caused by extreme carelessness.

One of our students, also a Venḓa, came to greet me and accompanied me. I asked the student if I had heard correctly, that nobody made mention of the way the victim died and of the general culture of reckless driving. He replied that I had heard correctly and added: ‘Maybe it would be hypocritical to talk about that, because we all drive that way’.

The question lingered in my mind: if this church has acquired the faith and the theology and even the sober Reformed liturgy from the Dutch missionaries but not the ethics of personal responsibility when driving, when the lives of many people are at stake – if they do not even mention it at an occasion such as this one, but preach a passive and fatalistic message, how do we become a church that is an effective agent in promoting responsible, sustainable ways of living? (See also Chapter 5: ‘What is the problem? The role of Christianity’).

■ Urban sprawl in rural areas

In the 40 years since we had lived in Venḓa, high population growth and the influx of people from neighbouring countries – mostly economic refugees

but also political refugees – have increased the population in the Venḓa area beyond recognition. That is also putting a sustainable future at risk.

The free government housing schemes and unplanned urban sprawl are causing various problems. The core of the Venḓa area is against the southern slopes of the Soutpansberg mountain range. It has fertile soil and high rainfall, a very scarce commodity in South Africa – among the best in the country. Large parts of this high-potential land are being covered by houses that have replaced the natural vegetation, blocking agricultural production.

Some months later, we again travelled northwards from Pretoria. But this time 'we' were four staff members of Nova. At Polokwane, we did not proceed north but turned east towards Tzaneen and continued through Tzaneen to the Letsitele area, where we had an improved cook stove project. The area is traditionally Tsonga-speaking.

About 30 km from Polokwane is the University of Limpopo, formerly the University of the North, where I grew up from 1960 until I finished school in 1968, and where I taught at the church's Stofberg Theological Seminary and the university from 1984 until Stofberg closed down at the end of 1993.

The university was built in a very rural area in 1960, and even in 1993 it was still the same. But now it was different. It is well described by Jane Tennant (2018), 'an entrepreneur and sawmiller in Limpopo' in a journal, *Unlocking Mopani District Issue 1*:

> If you drive the long straight road out of Polokwane to Tzaneen for about 40 kilometers, a sea of suburban homes as far as you can see, will assail you. As little as five years ago, there was only grass and cattle and trees. None of these homes existed. (p. 40)

Around Letsitele, something similar was happening.

I remember Molati, the village in the Letsitele area where we conducted our first project in 2001, as a quiet rural town. In 2018, my strongest impression of the area was how many fairly big to big and even luxurious houses there were now between those of the poor – some double-storeyed – on big plots. There was even one with three storeys. They now define the character of these areas.

The housing boom in rural areas is a recent phenomenon. There are no packaged developments, no bright and shiny signboards announcing housing schemes, but there are businesses selling building materials. Local residents say that the money for the houses comes from employees in faraway mines, who prefer to build houses here rather than in the city near the mine. Jane Tennant (2018) suggests that many of the businesses may not be registered and may not pay VAT:

> The stats collected by the building and construction industry appear to omit this phenomenon [...] I feel as if I've stumbled upon another South Africa with its own unique set of economic drivers, a subculture if you like. It's growing without permission. It hasn't read, much less followed, the rules by which the game should be played. First world rules don't apply here. (p. 40)

Fellow sawmillers in other provinces had the same experience, according to Tennant (2018).

In these rural areas, the traditional leaders rule according to their own rules. It is said that the traditional leaders allow residents to build these new houses because they may see the new residents as a source of income and power. However, the modernising powers could become a threat to the traditional powers.

One day we visited the premises of one of the traditional leaders, a descendant of the founder of the Shangaan (also called the Tsonga), the ethnic group living in that area. There was a drawn-out dispute about her because she had married a person who was not from a royal lineage before she became a traditional leader, and now there was, *inter alia*, a question about her sons' rights to become traditional leaders themselves. People told us that she had to go to the high court to be installed. A young lady, a daughter of a previous traditional leader, guided us on an entertaining tour of the facility, telling us about the history, traditions and conflicts with the BaPedi and VhaVenḓa about land. She said that the founder of the Shangaan nation in that area had a good relationship with the Swiss Presbyterian Church. Her father studied in Switzerland.

The Tsonga tradition is still strong, as can be seen in the respect given to the traditional leaders who attended our stakeholder meetings.

How is the use of space going to evolve? In these areas, the big modern houses are built next to the small houses of the poor. Is that going to continue? In many places of the world, such as India[9] and the USA (Mak 2012:276), the tendency is for the rich to withdraw and group together.

In South Africa, the apartheid years separated the races into different living areas, and since then, two types of communities have multiplied that were not expected when the 'new South Africa' came into being: informal settlements spread everywhere, while numerous luxurious golf estates and gated communities sprang up, sealed off by high walls, electric fences and security services. Separate living areas for races have often been replaced by separate living areas for different classes.

The relationship between tradition and modernity still remains to be explored.

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9. See http://greaterpacificcapital.com/transforming-indias-slums-a-critical-step-in-creating-the-new-india/

Dysfunctional combinations of cultural patterns

During our years at Nthume in 1978–1983, I recognised many of the thought patterns that I had found in the African (mostly urban) literature during my studies, as mentioned in the preface, in the lives and rituals of these rural church members – and many of the same tensions.

One day, when I was visiting church members at home in a deep rural area, I dropped by one of the small, dusty stores one finds all over the area to buy something to drink. On the outer wall of the store were two advertisements. You could see them from a distance, they were big and colourful. One was of a male in a black suit lighting the cigarette of an elegant woman in a long formal dress. They stood next to a sleek car, with Big Ben in the background: *Chesterfield, London's most exclusive cigarette*.

The second advertisement showed four young people in swimming clothes, multi-racial, sitting with their feet in the bright blue water of a swimming pool or standing in the pool, with wet skins and white teeth, laughing, with Coca-Cola bottles in their hands. On that hot, dusty, dry afternoon it looked unbearably attractive.

Young people with old, worn-out clothes, mostly barefoot, bought cigarettes and Coke at the store. Older people bought maize meal (their staple diet), biscuits, sugar, sweets, milk formulas for babies, tinned fish – and, quite understandably, headache and stomach acid medication or tinctures.

The modern world raises yearnings and frustrates people. And it elicits resistance.

One day, when I was still new in the congregation, we arrived at a rural outpost near this shop. The school had been burnt down the previous night. While we looked at the smouldering ruins, I made a remark about the children who were rebellious. The response was: this was not the work of the children; it was the work of the parents because they said that the schools gave the children new ideas, so that the children started to think that they knew more about life than their parents, losing respect for the 'grey heads of wisdom'.

During my time at the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa's Stofberg Theological Seminary and the (then) University of the North, I was made the dean of the students in 1986 and so found myself trapped in history: a white lecturer in a position of authority, with angry black students who wanted to struggle against everything that I symbolised. I wanted to be on their side, but I found that I could not always agree with them.

I spent many hours negotiating with the students. Again, I was confronted with many of the thought patterns that I found so interesting in the African literature and the congregation before. It was not only a political struggle but also a cultural conflict. Students, for example, angrily rejected any form of individualism in the academic process. There were countless strikes with the slogans *Pass one, pass all!* and *An injury to one is an injury to all!* – sometimes when *one* student failed. Many students felt that it was an injury, an injustice, that someone did not pass an exam. All had to pass.

Individual responsibility, insight and hard work, a basic element of a modern university, were rejected for group solidarity. There were frequent violent clashes with government forces and frequent burning down of properties on and off campus.

In those days, there was one prominent shop where many students bought what they needed. One night the shop was burnt down. I asked some students why they did that. They replied that the shop owner, when the shop was opened, slaughtered two cattle and gave a big feast to introduce the new shop to the people. However, he had secretly killed a young child and mixed his flesh into the pots of meat to ensure the success of his shop. It worked, but they felt that he was too rich now, too far removed from them – it was capitalism. They wanted him to feel what they felt, to suffer with them.

This reminded me of my years as a minister in Venḓa. Ritual murders were very often mentioned during our stay in Venḓa, and the perception was that these murders were committed by both the more traditional people and the more modern people. To give one example: I once picked up a hitchhiker along the road. When we passed a certain shop, the man told me that God had performed a deed of justice at that place, a miracle. The shop owner hired a man to bring certain body parts of a child to him to use in rituals that would ensure the success of his shop. The man then killed, unknowingly, one of the shopkeeper's own children – an unforeseen consequence that was interpreted in the community as a deed of justice by God!

There were clashes between the modernising influences – schools, shops – and the traditional power structures. For example, the story was told that a certain local traditional leader had ruled that all women in his chiefdom had to work in his lands on a certain day. The headmaster of a local school went to the traditional leader and said that he could not allow his wife, who was a learned person, to work on the lands. The traditional leader then sent a bulldozer to destroy the headmaster's house.

Violence was not only directed at the apartheid forces. At the university, it was part of the campus culture. On a certain Friday, we had a discussion

with the vice-rector. At some time, he indicated that he had to leave for another appointment. We asked if we could continue the discussion the following Monday. He said that there was a musical festival over that weekend on the campus, and he expected one or more students to be killed during the parties and festivities. He expected that he would be occupied with discussions with their parents that Monday. And on Monday, he sent a message that this had indeed happened and that he would see us later that week. This episode is an indication of the culture of violence at the time. It is not simply a matter of the students against the authorities and/or against apartheid.

Steinberg (2023:345–346; 366) writes about the situation in Soweto at the time – a place where many of our students came from. The patterns in which violence took place are typical of a chaotic situation:

> Violence is available during insurrections to a degree it is not in calmer times, and it comes to fill the slightest fractures: between neighbours, between districts, between rival businesses, between families, between the old and the young. It is hard to count the number of such fractures in Soweto at that time: they were, by their nature, forming and re-forming from day to day [...]. Countless young men used the veneer of politics to rob and steal [...]. It is hard to exaggerate the machismo that characterized youth culture in Soweto at that time. To an astonishing degree, sexual violence against young women and girls was an anodyne fact of life.

That culture has not subsided completely today. The patterns of chaos are still there, the fractures are still forming and re-forming from day to day. South Africa is still a very violent country, although not to the degree it was in the Seventies. In some areas, human trafficking of women and young girls, sometimes under the guise of the traditional lobola or bride price, does not raise any concern. People may just say when they see an elderly man with a young girl that he has bought her.

It was not violence against white people as such. At one stage, we were only four white families that stayed next to the (then) University of the North. We often listened to the clashes between srudents and security forces (both black and white) on the nearby campus, with angry mass student singing, shots being fired and the smoke of burning buildings. Students who fled from the security forces would run past our homes. When we were in our offices during such clashes, we just kept a low profile. We were, obviously, cautious; it was a volatile situation. We often felt unsafe, but on the whole, we were safe as long as we did not get in the way – like our children's school bus that once was stoned with other vehicles on the road, and our daughter came home full of blood from a broken window. We were grateful that the stone had missed her. It was only towards the end, in 1992, that the local church council – who were black – said that it had become too unsafe for us and the church decided to move us out of the area.

■ Conclusion

We must not over-emphasise the differences between cultural worlds. They are more similar than we may think. We have a great deal in common. At the same time, we must not under-emphasise the fundamental differences between cultural worlds. They are more dissimilar than we may think. The differences are often dormant but they may manifest strongly when the pressure increases, as I witnessed in the 1980s.

The personal encounters described come from events that I encountered during ordinary, day-to-day activities which confirmed for me the existence of a world, the African world, that is different from the one that I come from. I do not think that I understand that world. What I do understand is that policies and programmes that are naively based on what we have in common, without due consideration of the existing differences, are bound to fail when under pressure and, even more, to do unintended harm.

The search for sustainable and desirable combinations of things and thoughts must be done in full awareness of the trends that move away from sustainability, trends that move in different directions or clash, combine and interact in ways that we cannot foresee.

These are the processes that we will try to understand a little better in this book. But first, we must reflect on how the process of understanding itself works.

Chapter 3

The way we think

The way we understand any given thing or person is strongly influenced by our way of thinking. Different people observe the same thing and form different opinions about it. That does not mean that they are all in the right or in the wrong. The thing itself has its own nature and the way we approach it must resonate with its inherent qualities, and that requires a certain ability to understand this specific phenomenon, an ability that one must develop, like appreciating a certain type of music.

In this chapter, I try to formulate a few aspects that I regard as necessary to understand a cultural world other than your own. These aspects include understanding the difference between complicated and complex; the prerequisite of having an insight before you can see facts; the role of the way we relate to something or someone that we try to understand and, lastly, the relation between technology and consciousness, or things and thoughts, in the process of culture change.

On a wall, somebody wrote: 'Better questions – better answers – better world'. And Albert Einstein said:

> If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know what the proper question is I could solve the problem in less than five minutes. (HQ 2017:n.p.)

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Einstein talked about a problem that he could solve. The problems that we will encounter in this book cannot be solved by us, but we must understand them as thoroughly as possible so that we at least do not do more harm in our efforts to make things better. Understanding complexity may help us with that.

■ Complicated or complex?

The traditional description of America as a melting pot or soup implies that the different cultures of immigrants from different countries merge into a new, common culture. The more recent images of a mixed salad, a mosaic or a kaleidoscope suggest that the different cultures, or elements of the different cultures, do not become one new integrated culture but a rather loose collection of cultural elements.

In these metaphors, the whole can be more than the parts; for example, the soup has a flavour of its own that is produced by the combination of the specific ingredients. And the pieces of the mosaic can, together, produce a pleasing pattern, form a picture or create tension.

However, none of these metaphors is adequate for the African context.

The metaphor of a melting pot (or soup) does not recognise the fact that the cultures that mix with each other retain something of their traditional identity, and the metaphor of the bowl of salad (or mosaic or kaleidoscope) does not adequately recognise the active interactions and dynamic processes and combinations between the different compounds that are mixed together.

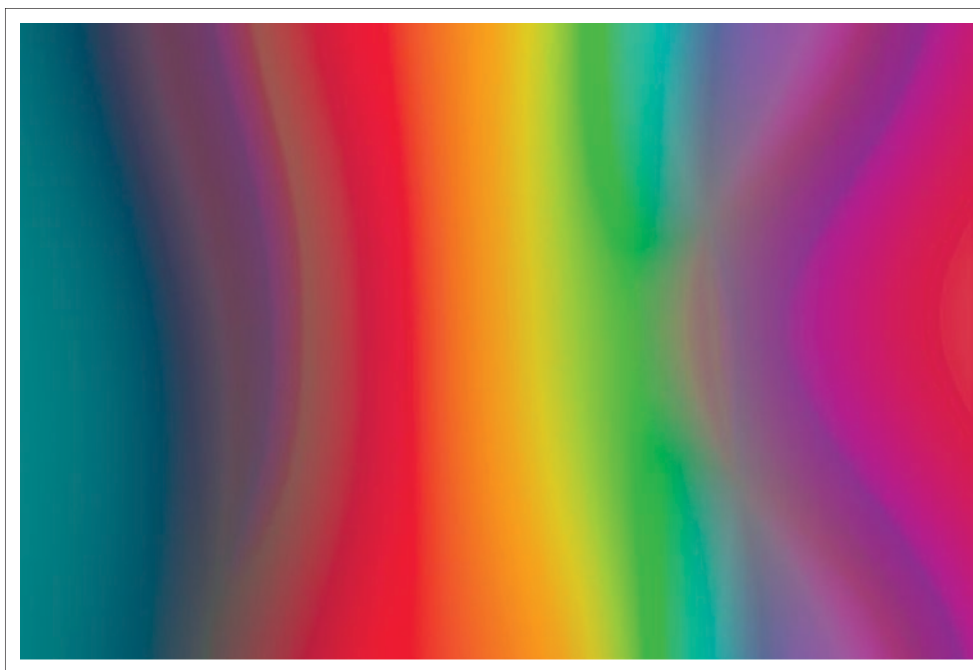
We need a metaphor that will help us to understand complexity. Situations, systems or processes can be complicated or complex – these two conditions require completely different research and management approaches.

My laptop is *complicated*: however intricate it may be, the whole system and the parts (mostly) operate according to the procedures they were designed for, and as such its operation can be controlled.

A system or process becomes *complex* if there are a number of variables that interact and combine with each other in ways that are not linear and therefore cannot be controlled. Different combinations of such variables produce different and often unexpected or unintended and even paradoxical outcomes. A given intervention is only one of several factors that influence the functioning of a complex system. However, even if you cannot control it, you can increase your influence and synergy with it, if you understand the interaction of factors very well, rationally and intuitively.

This process has been described in complexity and chaos theories.

For the purposes of this book, we can explain the chaos theory thus: when cultures meet – as the cultures of the world have done for centuries – many people think in terms of a linear cultural crossover from the one to the other, as in a spectrum of colours (see Figure 3.1). Change takes place gradually or smoothly as you move along the spectrum.



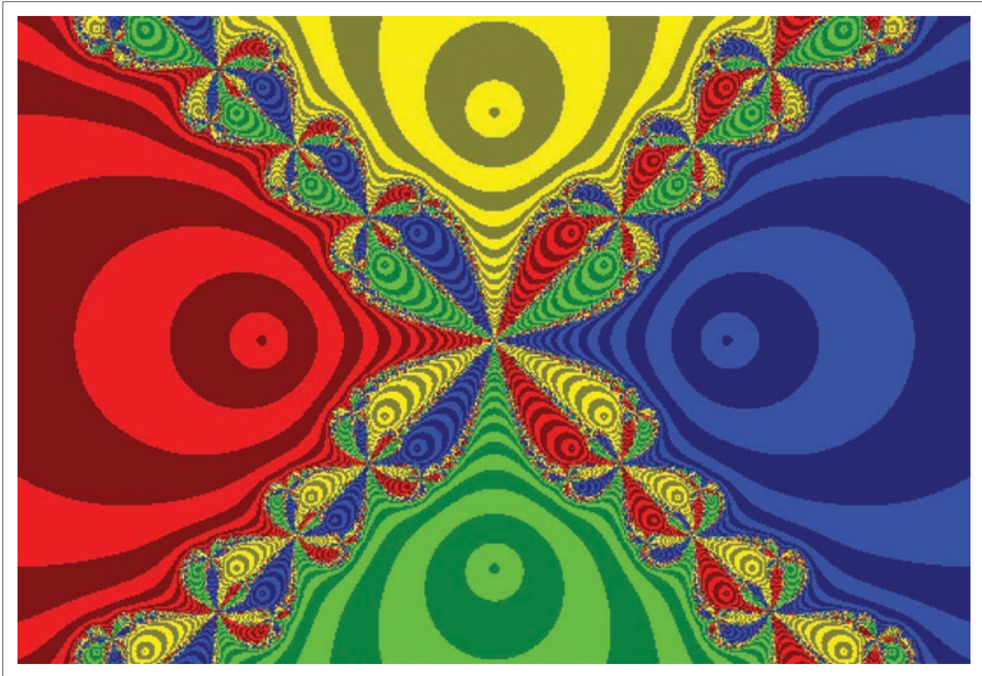
Source: 'Blurred pop abstract background with vivid primary colors', photograph by user3802032 (reference no. 9557052), reproduced for publication by the publisher under the appropriate Freepik license, a copy of which is available at <https://www.freepikcompany.com/legal>.[10]

FIGURE 3.1: Spectrum of colours

Where another colour is added, in a way where all retain their own position but at the same time interact with each other, the combinations change. The examples discussed further are based on the so-called Newton's method.

Gleick (1987:114–115, 217–220) describes what happens when four colours interact without being mixed together. What happens is that they maintain something of their own existence, but they have complex boundaries in an area between them where they mix and combine (see Figure 3.2). This is unlike a salad, where the different ingredients exist in a mixed form without forming new combinations.

10. See https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/blurred-pop-abstract-background-with-vivid-primary-colors_9557052.htm#query=color%20spectrum&position=34&from_view=keyword.



Source: Granados (1995). This diagram is available at 'Chaos: Making a New Science – James Gleick 1988: A Geometry of Nature', available from https://publicism.info/science/chaos/5.html, and has been by reproduced for publication by the publisher under the appropriate Creative Commons Attribution-Sharealike 3.0 Unported CC BY-SA License 3.0 and GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL), copies of which are available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/ and https://www.gnu.org/licenses/fdl-1.3.en.html.

FIGURE 3.2: The complex boundaries of Newton's method.

I will not try to apply mathematical theories to the meeting of cultural worlds; I only use Figure 3.2 to help us understand the way in which the combination of things and thoughts takes place. For those who are interested, the theory behind the diagram is explained thus:

> The attracting pull of four points [...] creates 'basins' of attraction, each a different colour, with a complicated fractal boundary. The image represents the way Newton's method of solving equations leads from different starting points to one of four possible solutions (in this case the equation is $x4 - 1 = 0$). (Gleick 1987:214–215)

The points of comparison between the mathematical method and the meeting of cultures are:

- Both the colours and the cultures maintain something of their own existence, even if only in an ideal form, but they have complex boundaries where they interact with each other.
- Combinations take place that produce new colours and realities.
- Change takes place in a discontinuous way. Elements of a given colour emerge sporadically, without being visible in the immediate surroundings;

in the case of cultures, an element of a given culture that has been dormant for a long period of time can re-emerge unexpectedly.
- There is chaos; you may suddenly and unexpectedly move into a situation where a new combination takes place and the whole picture changes, but there is also a remarkable order – if seen from a distance.
- With the colours, the process continues indefinitely. If you further analyse a small segment of the complex middle section, a whole new pattern of smaller combinations and new colours opens up – and that goes on indefinitely as you continue to analyse smaller and smaller sections. With cultures, the combinations also take place on bigger as well as smaller scales.

That brings us to the cases where one should not try to make comparisons, such as:

- A colour appears more prominently on the opposite side of the figure than on its own side; for example, there are more green spots between yellow (which is directly opposite green) and red and between yellow and blue than between green and red and between green and blue. With cultures, a different pattern can be expected.
- No culture can be represented by a single colour. Cultures can, in themselves, be complex.
- Cultures are much more unstable and creative than colours; they change over time because of inner tensions and/or because of outside factors. Some can be remarkably stable for long periods. There are churches in Europe that were built over a period of six or more centuries, which implies that subsequent generations had a remarkable continuity in their view of life and of the world over this period of time. Europe has also had periods of rapid change and transition, where one generation hardly understood the next and where it is unthinkable that one generation can start a certain project where the original vision lasts long enough to complete the project six centuries later.

Why do we call the interaction of cultures chaotic if there is such a remarkable order?

The chaos and the order are both true at the same time – it depends on your point of view.

Some people find themselves in a section where there is only one ‘colour’, and they tend to think that the whole process around them is simple and can be explained according to the way things work in that particular section or bubble.

Others find themselves in a border situation where things often move across a border between sections. The result is that the combination of factors that they experience changes continuously, and it is impossible

to understand or explain things according to the way they work in only one of the particular sections. It is chaotic because there is no linear connection between cause (the small step of crossing a border) and effect (the new situation). You may not know when you are about to reach that border.

South Africa and most of the world are moving more and more into this in-between area marked by fractal boundaries. Those who are in the more stable sections of the world will do well to take note of the bigger context in which they exist.

A complicated problem can be compared to a tangled knot: with the necessary perseverance, it can be untangled and the problem will be solved. In a complex situation, the different strands combine in such a way that they interact and produce new conditions that cannot be untangled. This means that a solution that fits the new reality must be found.

Einstein's advice is still relevant in this case, in the sense that only when the situation is understood is an appropriate response possible.

It is important to understand what you are dealing with: is it a complicated or a complex situation?

An illustration of complexity: A few impressions of conflict in Sri Lanka

In 1998, I experienced striking illustrations of complexity, as well as the way in which certain ideas or thoughts that have a huge influence on large groups of people and that were dormant for very long periods can emerge again with astonishing power.

I was one of about 17 fellows who took part in two work sessions of nearly three weeks in total at Brandeis, a Jewish university in Boston, USA. The sessions focused on the process of peace-making in situations of serious group conflict – we all came from different groups in four countries facing conflict: Israel, Bosnia, Sri Lanka and South Africa.

Where we in South Africa tend to think in centuries, the other three often think in terms of thousands of years. At Brandeis, the delegates from Israel, for example, said that many people in their country base their land claims on the promise of God to Abraham more than 3 000 years ago. Such stories illustrate the long-term tenacity of deep, powerful thoughts. Du Plessis (1979), an Afrikaans writer, once wrote that politics plays out on three levels: on the surface there is the powerplay of personalities and strategic moves, where one day can be a long time. Below that are the medium-term events: policies that change, five- and ten-year strategies, the impact of the global economy and wars. And then there are the deep, unclear, often

hidden movements in the collective unconscious that can take a whole civilisation in a new direction. This level determines the levels above it much more than the other way around.

There were two fellows from Sri Lanka: one Tamil and one Sinhalese. What I present does not in any way pretend to be an authoritative interpretation of their country. It is only a few impressions and quotations that I, with the insight I have from a South African background, observed and selected because I found them instructive or relevant to our situation.

The Tamil delegate explained that the direct cause of the then violence was the decision of the Sri Lankan government that Tamil students had to have better grades than Sinhalese students in order to be admitted to a university. When that happened, the Tamil youth became angry and formed the Tamil Tigers, and violence escalated from there. About half a million Tamil people were, at the time of the workshop, refugees in foreign countries.

The Sinhalese delegate explained that the background to the decision on university admission was that when American missionaries came to the country to build schools, the British colonial government sent them to the north, to the Tamils. They built excellent schools, with the result that the Tamils are, even today, generally better educated than the Sinhalese and often get better positions. The first leader of the post-colonial government, for example, was Tamil, voted in by the Sinhalese majority. The decision that Tamil students had to achieve better grades was affirmative action (also well-known in South Africa), an effort to correct inequalities inherited from the past. It is a case of good intentions that had unforeseen consequences.

Relations between the two groups had actually been very good. Intermarriage was common. The languages and cultures are very similar. The scale and intensity of the violence was, therefore, *unexpected*. The army was not prepared for it.

The time span involved is illustrated by a story from nearly 2 000 years ago that is still remembered by the Sinhalese. It is about a Sinhalese prince who could not sleep because of a dream that the Tamils would come from the north to crush the Sinhalese. The prince told his mother that he would grow up to push this threat back. His mother was horrified because, she said, the Tamils were evil and would kill her son.

In a description of the conflict in Sri Lanka, in his book *Ethnic conflict and religion: A challenge to the churches*, Theo Tschuy (1997:91–94) refers to the multiple factors involved in Sri Lanka at the time. He talks of ‘a very heterogeneous population, far more complex than a simple division

between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority'. There are the 'plantation Tamils', numbering 819,000 in 1988, who were brought from Tamil Nadu in India in 1830 to work on the tea plantations, who work hard but are ignored by the 'older' Tamils in the north and east – an explosive situation. There is tension between the lowland Sinhalese and the more rustic, landless Sinhalese, who came in rebellion against the rich Buddhist landowners, the educated middle-class and the government. The rapidly increasing population, which had almost tripled since 1946, contributed to landlessness. This combined with Marxism to fuel rebellion among the poor. There is also tension within the higher castes, both Sinhalese and Tamil, between the traditional authorities and those who became wealthy by trading and manufacturing. And there is regional segmentation. In the 1980s, when there were fears that the violence would spread to India, Rajiv Gandhi became involved. To his surprise, the fighting parties united against him, 'and in 1990 a desperate Rajiv Gandhi pulled out his troops from the Sri Lankan quagmire'. This adventure seems to have led to his assassination in 1991.

In situations where there is constant shifting of the pattern of the conflict, the constant formation and breaking up of alliances, where enemies become friends, and friends enemies, happens when there are many factors that interact. There is no stable pattern. All actions, 'good' or 'bad', have unexpected results because of the chaotic nature of the larger picture, as in Newton's method. Cause and effect cannot be predicted because the frameworks that determine events shift and change all the time – not dissimilar to South Africa.

Harari (2014) makes the valid point that one cannot predict the future because it is chaotic:

> So many forces are at work and their interactions are so complex that extremely small variations in the strength of the forces and the way they interact produce huge differences in outcomes. (p. 267)

Some of the myriad paths into the future are more likely to be taken, but sometimes history takes unexpected turns and possibilities which seem very unlikely to contemporaries often get realised.

The approach remains: to be able to solve or manage a problem one must first understand what it is.

Insight comes before facts

We must begin by trying to understand the problem, but how do we know what the problem is? Different role players from different backgrounds usually understand a given situation in different ways. They literally see different problems.

That is why we must understand that *insight* comes before *facts*.

The facts we see depend on the insight we have. Likewise, the *problem* we see depends on the insight we have.

The Dutch scholar JH van den Berg has provided us with a number of studies of the way in which new insights have led to new ways of understanding various aspects of the world in the historical development of the West. One example is a gripping analysis of medical history in the West. Certain observations, for example, that there is no gap between the left and the right ventricles of the heart – an observation which changed the traditional view of many centuries regarding the circulation of blood in the body – only became possible when the cultural context, the way we relate to the world and the way we see ourselves and how we attain knowledge, had changed (Van den Berg 1959:30–65).

Van den Berg's argument can be summarised thus: facts always rest on an insight. One who has no insight, no vision, does not see a fact. One who has an insight sees only those facts that tally with their insight; for the rest, they are blind. One who wishes to see new facts must first gain new insight (see also McGilchrist's study on the working of the brain, 2019: 163–164; 360).

In short: our insight determines what we see. It is also called confirmation bias: we tend to interpret new evidence as confirmation of our existing beliefs or theories. But we can gain new insights and change our paradigms.

I once visited an informal settlement together with Dieter Holm, an architect. He saw two traditional clay huts between the 'shacks' that were constructed out of corrugated iron, cardboard and plastic. I did not see them. That led to an interesting discussion: residents told us that the traditional hut is warm in winter, cool in summer and dry when it rains. The 'shack' is the opposite: extremely hot in the summer sun, extremely cold in winter and often flooded when it rains. Shacks easily burn down. Why did all residents not use the traditional method? Eventually, it appeared that the residents associated the hut with the farm, with the rural identity, and they came here to acquire an urban identity, a modern identity.

On another occasion, I visited an informal settlement with an engineer who worked for the Department of Water Affairs. The visit had nothing to do with work, but when we left there, he had observed all the public taps, how far they were from each other, whether they leaked or not, what happened to the stormwater – various types of detail that I did not observe.

Between 2013 and 2017, we conducted various extensive surveys on the quality of life in a number of townships. One of the main problems was air pollution caused by the domestic use of coal and other dirty fuels, as well as waste burning in the community. When reviewing the interviews with

residents of these communities, I noticed that the burning of shoes was mentioned regularly, but I gave little attention to this observation. I just regarded it as an oddity. For me, the main reason for the burning of waste was clear: waste removal services were not up to standard, so people burnt their waste to get rid of it.

At the beginning of 2018, the Nova team of about 25 people, about half white and half black, came together for three days to discuss our work. While discussing one of our projects, I made a side remark that the burning of shoes was mentioned often. A white member of the team asked why people regarded that as important enough to mention, and a black member explained: people believe that if someone gets hold of clothes that you have worn, or your hair or something close to you, they can use that to bewitch you. People burn their shoes to prevent others from doing them harm. The white member asked if this could really be the explanation, and the rest of the black team members confirmed that that was indeed the case.

Our different cultural backgrounds had the effect that we saw different facts. We understood the reports of the fieldworkers in different ways. And we most probably left the discussions with different interpretations of what the discussion meant.

Another example: Some years ago, a black medical doctor phoned me and asked if he could come and see me. He arrived at my house in an expensive new car. He said that he had come to me because he had heard that I have some experience of traditional African religions. He had grown up in a township in Pretoria. He grew up in a Reformed church, the same one that I belong to. He studied medicine, where he was friends with white and black students, mostly Christians. He then became a doctor in a township nearby and joined the local church. Every year, from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, there was a huge event at the church. They actually started on Thursday evening, when an ox was slaughtered. The meat of the ox was then prepared and used for the feast over the weekend. People remained together until late at night, enjoying the communal event. He highly appreciated it; he wished that the white Christians could join and experience this deep communion of the saints.

After a few years, however, one thing started to bother him: the importance of the event where the ox or bull was slaughtered and the blood flowed into the soil. He could not understand what it meant, and nobody spoke about it or explained what it meant – they only were deeply involved with what happened. He proposed that they take the ox to an abattoir to be slaughtered there. The congregation responded with great anger and became very negative towards him. For the first time in his life, he said, he thought about traditional African religions, about the offerings that were

made to the ancestors, where similar rituals were performed and the blood had to flow into the soil. Suddenly the doctor started to see several things in his church in a different light, and he began to worry about the traditional background of these things – things that he had never seen before because he was so used to them.

The emphasis on the blood that flows into the soil reminded me of a poem in Oswald Mtshali's *Sounds of a cowhide drum* (1972), a poem about violence and death in the townships, which refers to the blood that dripped from someone's clothes and 'joined the dry earth beneath'. Searching for an explanation of the symbolism in the poetry of the Seventies, I was referred to Dr George van der Hooft, a psychiatrist at the Groothoek Hospital in the rural areas. He was from the Netherlands and was pursuing a doctoral study on the *malopo* dance among the BaPedi, who live in that area (for a more detailed discussion of the *malopo* dance, see Chapter 9). George said that he had never seen the poetry, that he did not think he could help me. But while he was reading this poem, he began to puff his pipe. He said he found exactly the same symbols and yearnings among his patients! The poetry was not only political protest but also cultural protest, a struggle to deal with the 'Western civilisation' that had a huge impact on the traditional African way of life. It was a protest against the cold, analytical approach of the West; it was the affirmation of an African world, as Carl Gustav Jung said, and the primaeval world that was suppressed deep into the West's unconscious. This was a new insight for me.

The black medical doctor asked me what was going on. Was African traditional religion being practised under the guise of a Christian church service? I told him that I did not know but that it was possible. As a student, I had been at a conference where an African theologian of a mainline church said that the Name of God was so holy in the African tradition that people used a neighbouring tribe's name for God when they talked to, or about, their own God. The same thing happened in the church, he said: when talking to or about the God of the Bible they still had their own traditional God in mind. Tinyiko Maluleke (1998:32–33) said something similar:

> African theology has therefore never been 'pure' Christian theology. The ancestors and African spirits of ATRs have always been lurking and hovering on the horizon – sometimes they have even invaded the secluded space of Christian theologising.

Let us assume that what this professor said applies to some African Christians. How would we know to how many it applies and to what extent? It is not something that can be determined by sending out questionnaires. It can only be seen and understood by someone who has shared many experiences and events with such Christians, who has the necessary insight,

sensitivity and a well-developed awareness in order to be able to understand and appraise what is going on.

If the doctor knew nothing of the traditional religion, if he did not know the tradition of slaughtering cattle for the ancestors, he would not have been able to see the ritual at the church (and subsequently other things) in a new light – just as I was unable to understand the burning of shoes the way my black colleagues did.

I advised the doctor that there was only one way to understand what was taking place in his congregation, and that was to be interested in what happened, to take part in the activities of the church, to observe what church members did and to hear what meaning they gave to what they did (see also Chapter 6, 'The African incorporation of Christianity').

The role of the way we relate to something or someone that we try to understand

The influence of René Descartes (1596–1650) on the modern way of thinking is widely recognised. Descartes can be described as a rationalist. A younger contemporary of Descartes, Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) is also renowned for his scientific and mathematical discoveries. He acknowledged, alongside the importance of our rational way of knowing, what he called the knowledge of the heart, which has its own validity alongside the knowledge of the head. While these two types of knowledge are of equal importance, the methods of investigation and thinking things through are different (Van den Berg 1973:17). The knowledge of the heart is closely connected to the European tradition of *Geisteswissenschaft* [Afrikaans: *Geesteswetenskappe*; English: Human Sciences].

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) wrote about this type of knowledge, a type that is not merely cold and scientific. He describes a way of knowing that requires direct and respectful contact with what you learn and openness to the way that it presents itself, to what it is. To be able to understand something or someone requires a well-developed taste, to see, to feel, to listen, to experience, to endure, to fear and to love. The way in which the encounter takes place must do justice to and show respect for the phenomenon itself or the person you meet. To appreciate a good wine requires a well-developed taste, not just looking at it – or, we may add, at its price (Peperzak 2007:97–99). It would be interesting to compare this to what Nwoga (1976:17, 18, 21; see Chapter 8) described as rapport, a distinctive African way of knowing.

In this book, we make use of both forms of knowing. The knowledge of the heart is especially useful in developing new insights into a world that I, as a person with a modern background, do not know: the African world.

A slight distance could help one to see better. One cannot understand people from far away, but being too close can also make it difficult to see. The famous writer from Nigeria, Chinua Achebe, said:

> My father had been a missionary, he was retired when I was growing up; and we were Christians and in our village you had two sides – the 'people of the Church', as we were called, and 'the people of the world', the others. And there was a certain amount of distance; although we were in the same village there was a certain distance, which I think made it possible for me not to take things for granted, you see. I say this because as for some of the people who grew up with me, whose parents were heathen, as we called them, these things did not strike them. This is what they tell me today: they took things for granted. Whereas I went to church on Sunday, we prayed every morning and so on, and the rest of the village I could see from a slight distance. (Cited in Duerden & Pieterse 1972, p. 12).

Being too far, just like being too close, makes it difficult to understand. Sometimes something is so unfamiliar that one does not understand what one encounters, despite being there physically. One morning, when I was a young white minister in a black rural congregation, I arrived at an outstation of our congregation in Venḓa to visit church members. The local evangelist told me that the leader of the women's society had been baptised by the Zionists, referring to a large group of churches that practise the Christian faith within the African cultural context. This woman said that she had now been saved at last. She said that our church is a church of sinners and that the fire would burn us on the day of judgement, sparing only our heads, because only our heads had been baptised. While visiting our church members, the discussions always came back to these statements. One mother said that it could not be true, one of her neighbours was a Zionist. This neigbour was baptised in the river. Her whole body was immersed under the water three times. But when her house caught fire she burnt to ash – hands, feet, head, everything.

Such remarks (and I have experienced them often) show how real the invisible world can be in the African context, having a reality and a power that is difficult for the modern Western mind to grasp. It makes one realise that there is a world that you can sometimes come close to but where you remain an outsider.

However, as Newbigin (1983:18–20) stated years ago, our problems will not be solved within the terms provided by our culture. It is very difficult to re-examine your accepted framework of understanding, as 'the critical faculty which enables us to question any belief is itself dependent on beliefs which provide the grounds for our questioning', and that is one reason why modern people find it so difficult to open themselves to what happens in the interaction between the modern world and the African world.

Understanding how things and thoughts combine

We need a type of knowledge that will enable us to find our way in a context where modern culture must recognise the power of the thought patterns of other cultures.

In his book *Unbound: How eight technologies made us human and brought us to the brink*, anthropologist Richard L Currier describes how, over:

> ... the course of the last five million years, eight key technologies have profoundly altered the relationship of our species with the natural environment, liberating us from the natural forces that restrain the populations of all other living things. One by one, each of these technologies has initiated a major transformation, or metamorphosis, in human life and society. (2015:xiii–xiv)

Currier regards technology as a powerful enabler of certain physical developments of the human body, such as walking upright, which was made possible by 'the technology of wooden spears and digging sticks' (Currier 2015:36); the extraordinary expansion of the human brain was made possible by the technology of fire and of cooking food, because the cooked food makes the nutrition available that the human brain needs: 'The human brain can consume as much as 20 per cent of the body's available energy'; the increased brain capacity, in turn, has made it possible to develop modern, sophisticated technology (Currier 2015:68–69). Precision machinery spawned the Industrial Revolution, and digital technologies may well lead to the birth of a global civilisation.

The journalist and philosopher Wijnberg (2011:33, 34), on the other hand, refers to the role of *several* factors that have influenced the course of human life. He refers to technology (he mentions the Industrial Revolution and the growth of the Internet, which form part of the last two technologies described by Currier [2015]). He also refers to historic events such as the Second World War and 9/11 that have had an impact on our worldview that is far stronger and quicker than the influence of philosophers. But, he adds, philosophers do have a huge influence, perhaps on a more basic level; for example, there was no 'organised science' until Descartes formulated the basic principles thereof; the way people today see themselves as individuals with specific human rights can be directly attributed to the philosophy of Hugo de Groot, and the idea of progress through human control over the world originated in the Enlightenment of the 18th century. These are illustrations of the power of ideas.

In the African context, technology (things) and ideas (thoughts, consciousness) combine in ways that are different from the ways they do in Europe. In order to understand the processes of modernisation, one

should recognise the *reciprocal relationship* and interdependence between institutions that are carriers of modernity (such as technological production and mass education) and the consciousness of the community (Berger, Berger & Kellner 1974:64–77).

Interaction takes place between the carriers of modernity and the consciousness of the community: there is give-and-take. Technological production is the primary carrier of modernity (there is also education, bureaucracy, the media, etc.) and consciousness is the determining factor in the process of modernisation. *Processes in modernity and processes in consciousness that have an affinity to each other seek each other out, and form 'packages'* (Berger, Berger & Kellner 1974, pp. 64, 77). A package is a new *thing*, a new combination of things and thoughts from different sources. It has a new dynamic and meaning. Within this new context, the function of each individual element is different from the function it had in its original context.

The funeral is a case in point. In African traditions, a person who died was buried as soon as possible. It was a small-scale, local affair. All family members had to attend, a goat or ox was perhaps slaughtered, people had something to eat, they were consoled and life went on, although mourning continued in different ways. A good funeral was deemed necessary to ensure that the spirit of the deceased would not cause misfortune to those who remained behind.

In the modern context, these values and worldviews have often remained very influential, but they have been combined with modern technology. The result is a new reality, a new combination: the person who has passed away is kept in a mortuary; the faraway family members are notified through radio, letters, telegrams, telephones and, recently, by mobile or cell phones. These members come over long distances by taxis, cars, buses, trains or aeroplanes. Expensive coffins and graves, clothes, food and drink are provided, while the erection of expensive gravestones has become the latest fashion.

This new package of things and thoughts has emerged out of the interaction between the different cultures and is highly efficient and well organised in itself. Funeral undertakers thrive and burial societies provide services and finance. Organising a funeral is a well-established practice.

Its effects, however, are often destructive because it consumes resources and generates poverty, and so it creates disruption and suffering on a massive scale. I have seen people who do not have proper furniture in their homes spend huge amounts on coffins made of expensive types of wood and metal. Money desperately needed for the children and the living is spent on the dead.

Research conducted in a region of South Africa that can be regarded as representative has found that, on average, 'households spend the equivalent of a year's income for an adult's funeral, measured at median per capita African (black) income'. Similar to conspicuous consumption surrounding weddings in many developing countries, spending on funerals helps households to move up the social ladder – households that do not offer funerals commensurate with expectations may move down the social ladder (Case et al. 2013).

Religious motives often play a role. In my first congregation, I once met a deacon of our church at the bank. He told me that he had just withdrawn his savings of nine years to put a tombstone on his father's grave. It made him happy, he said, because now his father would not cause him bad luck. Those who remain behind can, if they do not observe the traditional funeral rites, find themselves in a position of *u ambara zwiambaro zwa mufu*, as the expression in Venḓa goes, meaning that they will clothe themselves in the clothing of the deceased person, that is, they will carry the consequences of his or her death for the rest of their lives.

These religious motives can be traced back to traditional African cultures, but now they have a completely different role and impact that was made possible by new technologies.

The point is: in the interaction between the modern world and the African world, new combinations of things and thoughts, new realities, emerge all the time. The question is if we can play a role in the formation or construction of wholesome combinations?

■ Conclusion

The way we understand things is not a purely theoretical activity. It is a thoroughly practical matter that has an enormous impact on the way in which huge projects are undertaken in the world and also in Africa. Countless efforts to improve the quality of life in Africa have been undertaken without any insight into the complex dynamics that take place in each context. Such actions are often based on the assumption that Africa is moving through a linear spectrum towards the Western model of modernity and that solutions that have worked in the West or the East must work in the same way here. Such approaches are not based on prolonged and open personal encounters with how things are in a given context in order to understand the local dynamics and problems better, nor are they based on a range of experiences – one can have one year's experience 30 times but that does not mean that you have 30 years of experience. Many development agents hardly take any notice of the views of African spokespersons, be they politicians, residents,

academics or artists. Such agents think they bring with them all that is necessary to know. The result is that their actions have many unintended but destructive results.

Christianity has often made the same mistake.

At the beginning of this chapter we noted Einstein's advice: understand the problem before you try to solve it. We will now, up to Chapter 11, try to understand the problems and the prevailing structures better. We will look at ways in which things and thoughts originating from three massive powers, the modern empire, African traditional cultures and Christianity, have interacted and combined in the African context. The interaction of these three powers has produced some key issues that have to be dealt with in Africa in the 21st century.

First, we discuss the problematic role of the modern empire.

Chapter 4

What is the problem? The role of the modern empire

The modern empire evolved in Europe over the last 500 years and has spread over the world in the colonial era and in the post-colonial era. It has brought progress and a better life for many. This empire has often spread over the world through force, but its real power is the attractiveness of modernity and the wonderful things that it brings, its promise of a limitless good life – so wonderful that its destructiveness is too often forgiven and the damage it does to ancient cultures and ecosystems largely ignored.

Over the last 500 years, the modern empire has changed the world, and it has brought us to the brink of self-extinction, as Currier (2015) has observed.

■ The emergence of the modern empire

Modern science is built on Francis Bacon's (1597) famous saying from the end of the 16th century: *scientia potentia est* [Latin origin: knowledge is power]. It is not searching for wisdom as the art of living, of being open to the world, of finding your way amid things that you do not control and finding a place where you can be at home. The purpose of modern science is human control over reality for our own benefit. In the modern era, science and technology have multiplied human power in an unprecedented way (Rossouw 1993, pp. 76, 78, 81, 85, 98).

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Harari (2014) attributes the emergence of the modern empire in Europe to the combination of various things: the empire's 'phenomenal and unprecedented growth in human power' over the last 500 years was the product of the interaction, the feedback loop between science, politics and economics, combined with a certain mentality (consciousness) that includes an attitude that we do not know things for certain, that no concept, idea or theory is sacred and beyond challenge, that new knowledge can be acquired through 'observation and mathematics' and that knowledge for the sake of knowledge is not the goal; rather, theories are used to acquire new powers and develop new technologies (Harari 2014, pp. 275, 278, 279).

Reflecting on the question of why this specific military–industrial–scientific complex flourished in Europe after 1500 AD and not in other parts of the world such as India or China, Harari concludes:

> The Chinese and Persians did not lack technological inventions such as steam engines [...] They lacked the values, myths, judicial apparatus and socio-political structures that took centuries to form and mature in the West and could not be copied and internalised rapidly. France and the United States quickly followed in Britain's footsteps because the French and Americans already shared the most important British myths and social structures. (2014:314–315)

Iain McGilChrist's book, *The master and his emissary: The divided brain and the making of the Western world*, gives a masterful description of this mentality, which he sees as a very dangerous development that did not occur in, say, Chinese and Indian cultures (2019:287; see also Sacks, 2012:47–49.)

A core element of this mentality, we can add, is the belief in a makeable world and in progress through human control over nature, including our own human nature and the processes of society. It is the aim to shape your world according to your own wishes, not to fit harmoniously into it. This mentality was specific to Europe at the time and deviated from the general human pattern (Berkhof 1973:528–536).

Giving due recognition to Currier's eight technologies that have formed humanity, we must understand that the West did not colonise the rest of the world because of its technological superiority, but because of an underlying consciousness or mentality. Zheng He's flagship (1418) was much bigger than the flagship with which Columbus (1492) discovered the New World (Figure 4.1). Zheng's fleet crossed the Indian Ocean and he visited several places, including Africa, but he had no desire to colonise them – he had a different consciousness (Harari 2014:324–325, 331).[11]

11. See Van Niekerk 2021:162–163

Source: 'Zheng He's ship compared to Columbus's', photograph by Lars Plougmann (reference no. 361639903), obtained from Flickr, available at https://www.flickr.com/photos/criminalintent/361639903, reproduced for publication by the publisher under the appropriate Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic (CC BY-SA 2.0) License, a copy of which is available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/.[12]

FIGURE 4.1: Zheng He's flagship (1418) was much bigger than the flagship with which Columbus (1492) discovered the New World.

Towards the end of the 20th century, we entered a postmodern and post-colonial era. An empire is being forged before our eyes, says Harari (2014:232), but it is not governed by any particular state or ethnic group; 'it is ruled by a multi-ethnic elite, and is held together by a common culture and common interests'.

Lesslie Newbigin, who was a missionary in India for many years, emphasised that the modern world emerged in the matrix of the Christian West, but:

> … this new world civilisation with its science and its technics, though formed in the matrix of Western Christendom is yet now a wholly independent entity which may be expected to live and develop without any necessary connection with the Christian civilisation which gave it birth. (1961:14)

12. See https://www.flickr.com/photos/criminalintent/361639903

The new world civilisation was born from the *Christian civilisation*. The Christian civilisation itself was the product of the combination of the biblical tradition and, among others, the Greek and Roman civilisations. Newbigin argued that not only did the Christian civilisation give birth to this New World civilisation with its science and its technologies, but:

> … there is at least a fairly strong case for the view that the mother died in childbirth […] Christianity has largely failed to come to terms with the scientific and technological child that it has brought to the birth […] at the moment that our Western culture has penetrated the life of almost the whole of humankind, it has itself disintegrated; and that this disintegrated culture is itself disintegrating the ancient non-Christian cultures with which it is in contact. (1961:14–15)

Newbigin may be right: Christianity has largely failed to come to terms with the modern empire and, as we shall see, African writers have, like Newbigin, described modern culture as 'disintegrated'. Mphahlele (1973:197) wrote: '… the Western world today is both a disintegrated and a differentiated one. So it produces disintegrated personalities. We have not yet created societies like this in Africa.'

So far, the common culture and common interests have been able to hold the modern empire together (Harari 2014:232), but it is under pressure because of threats such as being ecologically unsustainable and processes of internal disintegration. 'European imperialism' today has moved beyond political domination to an equal status between all and continues to exist because the 'Indians, Chinese, and Africans continue to develop their adopted Western culture', Harari claims (2014:226–227). The question that concerns us here is how deeply rooted this 'adopted Western culture' is in Africa and how we can overcome its disintegrating impact.

The influence that Hollywood has on Africa illustrates the potential disintegrating impact of modern entertainment.

■ The influence of Hollywood on Africa

During the colonial period, European countries such as Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, France and Britain spread the modern military–industrial–scientific complex to the rest of the world. More recently, the way Hollywood has combined money, technology and art to generate symbols, or *illusions*, has produced another powerful force.

The philosopher Johann Rossouw (*Beeld*, 6 March 2004, p. 9) argued that Hollywood, or Los Angeles, is the first global capital in the world which attained its position because of the overt and continuous creation of illusions. Stories have become so influential that many people today can only understand their own lives if it recreates some story or other. Where stories previously were supposed to reflect life, life now must reflect a story – and Hollywood writes the story.

These stories are *presented* as stories, but they have a huge impact.

In the years that Rossouw wrote about the impact of the stories told by Hollywood, I attended a conference where there was a discussion on ways to combat the spread of HIV, which was rife in the country. Social workers, nurses, church ministers, teachers, government officials and others – all people working in the community – talked about ways to restore morality among the youth. One of them stood up and asked a question that was met by silence: *Do you think you can beat Hollywood?*

Paul Richards (1999:16–21), a professor of anthropology at University College, London, describes a chilling and intricate combination of factors in an article, 'Rambo, diamonds and young soldiers in Sierra Leone'. It was estimated that between 40% and 80% of combatants in the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991–2002) were under the age of 18. The war is now 'infamous for the bizarre forms of violence deployed by the young fighters.' One of a whole number of factors that combined to produce this extreme situation was the image of Rambo. In the decade before the war, the film *First Blood*, the first in the *Rambo* trilogy, caused a sort of 'awakening' among Sierra Leone's youth: during the war, the film was widely seen in the diamond camps and the main towns of the diamond mining region. Young Sierra Leoneans seem to have read into this tale an existential point: the need to draw upon inner resources in a world of social exclusion. The violence is secondary but also celebratory. Rambo overcomes social rejection through his tricky resourcefulness.

The young cadres lived this Hollywood story. It spoke to their sense of social exclusion.

As we will see in more detail in Chapter 9, one of the most important results of modernisation is a feeling of homelessness, which is a form of feeling excluded. Rambo personified an effort to overcome homelessness through violence.

Furthermore, in South Africa, in 1999, Roshila Nair wrote an article, 'Rambo's boys: The lure of the violent father'. She reflects on a visit during the 1990s to an abandoned rural settlement in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The residents had fled the violent clashes between political parties in the region, leaving behind burnt houses and mealie plants reduced to seed:

> ... some of the fiercest combatants were children, boys between the ages of nine and sixteen who had patrolled the surrounding hills in groups, armed with guns made from scrap metal and toy guns adapted to shoot real bullets. On the pale blue crumbling wall of a burnt hut, a childish scrawl in red paint exposed the world I had entered: 'We are soldiers we kill and rape. Rambo is our hero fuck the world'. (Nair 1999:18)

The article focuses on the image of fatherhood and the masculine image that these young boys received from the Rambo films and from their own

social context: for them, power, aggression, violence and a disregard for women defined manhood.

A third example. In the late 1990s, we visited a rural community. A group of teachers told us about the way in which a few local entrepreneurs re-interpreted the traditional initiation schools for adolescent boys. They asked for a hefty fee, took the boys into the bush for a few weeks during the holidays, showed Rambo films and circumcised them. When the boys came back, they did not want to go to school anymore. They became arrogant, wanted to have sex and many wandered off to the cities.

In the early 1980s, in the deep rural areas of Venḓa, the youth wore T-shirts with slogans such as, simply, NEW YORK, with the Statue of Liberty or the lower Manhattan skyline still with the Twin Towers, or the names of American films such as *Saturday Night Fever* or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* – or a variant, *Close Encounters of Any Kind*. Bruce Lee, who was both an American- and Hong Kong-based actor, was also popular; I cannot remember that I ever saw Che Guevara or any other political or revolutionary symbols. That came only later.

Hollywood and these T-shirts are only one example of the influence that modern America has on South Africa and large parts of the world.

The 20th century 'development industry'

In August 1944, the World Bank and its sister institution, the International Monetary Fund, were founded at an international conference at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, by Western powers who believed that raising the living standards of the poorest countries would help everyone (Calderisi 2006:17).[13] In 1949, the 'development industry' of the 20th century started when the USA President Harry S Truman announced a programme to develop the 'less fortunate nations'. Before that time, 'there was relatively little serious discussion of the causes of mass poverty, and likewise very little of its remedy.' After Truman's announcement, there was a flood of conferences, workshops and publications on the development of non-Western countries. However, these deliberations were not based on an adequate understanding of the nature of poverty:

> We suppose that on social questions we proceed from diagnosis to action. But if action is imperative, we make the cause fit the action. So it was here. To recognize this is absolutely fundamental [...] [*The problem is our*] failure to understand the nature of mass poverty [...] In the great explosion of concern over poverty, we did not, to repeat, move from cause to remedy; we moved from the only available line of remedial action to the cause that called for that action. (Galbraith 1980:36, 37, 40)

13. See Van Niekerk 2021:14

Forty years later, the situation has hardly changed. The World Bank is promoting basically the same macro-economic strategies that it promoted in 1981, in spite of efforts from within its own folds, such as the initiative of James D Wolfensohn, then President of the World Bank, and Lord George Carey, then Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1998, to establish the World Faiths Development Dialogue. And the CURE Framework follows a culture-based approach to the process of city reconstruction. However, on the whole, the World Bank does not search for synergy with powerful political and cultural dynamics in Africa.[14]

The models and policies that are implemented in Africa are based on successes elsewhere, not on local conditions:

> The United States, undoubtedly motivated and buoyed by the overwhelming success of the Marshall Plan, initiated actions through an Act of Congress in 1950 to set up what eventually became the giant bilateral mechanism known as the United States Agency for International Development whose impact on global development has reached all corners of the world over more than half a century. (IDAM 2019:3)

There may have been mistaken assumptions about the role of development aid in post-war Europe. According to Mak (2004:573), there had been strong economic recovery among western European countries even before the Marshall plan played any role. The first dollars of the Marshall plan came in by the middle of 1948, while production in Britain and France was on the same level as before the war towards the end of 1947, and in the Netherlands, Italy and Belgium towards the end of 1948, when the support from the Marshall Plan did not have much effect yet.

The development of the 'less fortunate nations' was imperative, says Galbraith (1980:32–33), because of political reasons. Even though some had real compassion for the poor, there were powerful political motives behind the development industry, such as the wealthy classes' fear of the poor and the West's fear of communist expansion.

And on the receiving side, for some Africans, development aid is the continuation of colonialism; it is seen as a new way to ensure Western power over Africa, e.g. Kwame Nkrumah (1965) and R Grosfoguel (2011).

Be that as it may, the development industry has not prevented the threat of chaos in Africa. Nearly 20 years after Truman's speech, Wole Soyinka of Nigeria described the situation in Africa as 'the very collapse of humanity'. He blamed the writers for not dealing with the situation:

> In the movement towards chaos in modern Africa, the writer did not anticipate. The understanding language of the outside world, 'birth pains', that near-fatal euphemism for death throes, absolved him from his responsibility. (Soyinka 1967:16, 17)

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14. See Van Niekerk 2021:30

Twenty-five years after Soyinka used the word chaos, *Time* magazine used the term *chaos theory*:

> Africa – sub-Saharan Africa, at least – has begun to look like an immense illustration of chaos theory [...] Much of the continent has turned into a battleground of contending dooms: AIDS and overpopulation, poverty, starvation, illiteracy, corruption, social breakdown, vanishing resources, overcrowded cities, drought, war and the homelessness of war's refugees. Africa has become the basket case of the planet, the 'Third World of the Third World', a vast continent in free fall, a sort of neo-post-colonial breakdown. (Morrow 1992:40)

Chaos theory is related to *complexity theory*, which has been discussed earlier. Few development agents have taken the words *chaos theory* seriously, and fewer still have devised strategies that are designed to deal with a complex situation. In the colonial period, most programmes were implemented as if linear cause and effect applied, and many governments and development workers in Africa still continue to do so.

In the context of this book, we could rephrase *Time* magazine's *A battleground of contending dooms* to read *A battleground where contending dooms and constructive forces interact, clash and combine in different ways*.

We must not underestimate the role of selfish and even evil intentions in outside powers' dealings with Africa and, for that matter, people and powers of Africa itself. But the problem is more difficult than that: good intentions often achieve equally destructive results because of the way in which the existing elements combine. It is a context in which unexpected results must be expected.

There is a reason for the contempt with which the African poverty trap has treated all competing ideologies, as Lloyd Timberlake (1985:197–207) remarked. They all share one fatal flaw: they all have underestimated the tenacity of the African world; some implemented ideas or solutions that worked for themselves in their own contexts. They did not work with the people inside the given situation for long enough to adjust and integrate their solution within the dynamics of the local context. That also applies to the ideologies that have emerged from within Africa. The result was unintended outcomes.

From 1950–1952, Dr A van Pelt was commissioner of the United Nations in Libya. The population was very poor, and many were on the brink of dying because of hunger and illness. Van Pelt appointed two teams to investigate the possibilities of improving the conditions: one team on the terrain of the economy and one on the terrain of health care. When the two teams had completed their investigations and proposals, they met to coordinate the bigger process. They concluded that the increase in the population because of the planned health care would be more than the increase in production

because of economic growth. The result would be large-scale famine. The economic team did not see a way to improve production even more. The only option that remained was to reduce health care. After some sleepless nights, Van Pelt decided to remove the plan to increase health care for babies from the health care plan (De Jong 1968:200–201).

We need approaches that would not place us in such dilemmas.

A question that is discussed in more detail in Chapter 12 is: Does good health care indeed lead to population growth, or can it help to reduce population growth, and if so, under which conditions?

Short-term disaster relief, which can hardly be seen as inappropriate, still has an unintended impact. After a natural disaster such as a tsunami, for example, people *need* the help of humanitarian aid or insurance. In disaster-prone countries, there are public-private partnerships formed to promote synergy rather than competition between these services. These measures become part of the economics of these countries. The same happens in countries that receive development aid continuously. Terms such as war economics, terrorism economics, disaster economics and survival economics have emerged (Carbonnier 2015:148). Such aid must be carefully planned so that it does not inhibit the development of local responsibility.

This is illustrated by a case study by Patrick Marnham (1980), who has argued that food aid to famine-stricken countries tends to do more harm than good. The cause of famine is mostly not a lack of food but insufficient distribution, often for hostile political reasons. Food aid does not help to solve this problem; it often increases it because the political forces hijack the food and often misuse it by selling it to buy more weapons to even more effectively oppress those who are hungry. Even more: food aid brings food prices down and so damages the existing food-producing system. Farmers leave their lands and join the queues for food aid:

> As a way of reducing an independent and inattentive peasantry to servile obedience it beats even taxation. Aid becomes not only the moral equivalent but also the economic equivalent of war. Once dependency has been established, a price can be demanded for the food. (Marnham 1980:150)

This insight is confirmed by the remark of Timberlake (1985:212) about women in the rural areas of Senegal, who, during a drought, started to plant vegetables on a cooperative basis: 'Famine relief aid wiped out these groups, as they became dependent on gift food'.

More recently, several authors such as Robert Calderisi (2006), Dambisa Moyo (2009) and Volker Seitz (2018) have strongly argued that development aid feeds corruption, competition for resources and passivity rather than development.

Adding expertise does not solve the problem. The Sahel received US$7.5bn in 1974–1983, and there were many experts:

> The region swarmed with experts, commissions and international agencies. In 1981 for example, Upper Volta received no less than 340 aid missions. But it was all to little avail. The process of 'desertification' continued unabated. By 1980 the population reached 30 million. By the end of the century it was expected to rise to 55 million. (Meredith 1984:361)

Western donors spent over US$200bn on aid in Africa between 1980 and 1999, a sum which singularly failed in the vast majority of African countries to bring about real economic improvement (Redfern 1999).

By 2005, Martin Meredith (2005:683) wrote that, since independence, 'more than $500bn 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 2005:54–62).

Such results have caused many to oppose development aid. Others argue that poor countries are in a 'poverty trap', and that they cannot get out of that without an initial investment that can kick-start a beneficial spiral of economic growth. Banerjee and Duflo argue that it is impossible to generalise about this question:

> … the endless debates about the rights and wrongs of aid often obscure what really matters: not so much where the money comes from, but where it goes. This is a matter of choosing the right kind of project to fund. (2012:3–4)

In the language of this book: it all depends, from case to case, on the combination of things and thoughts. The top-down programmes to promote modern economic development should seek synergy with bottom-up processes where cultures and religions play a role and ecological sustainability is a priority.

■ Betrayed by the modern empire

For many millions, modernity has brought about almost all that humanity has strived for over the centuries but could not have dreamt that it could be supplied in such abundance: food security, safety, effective health care, freedom of movement, social mobility, freedom of thought, freedom of religion, human rights, entertainment and information. And many countries have achieved a good quality of life and high levels of happiness – but there is a dark side to it.

In his book, *Sapiens*, Harari gives us some insight into the character of the modern empire. He ends his book on a sombre note:

> We are more powerful than ever before, but we have very little idea what to do with all that power. Worse still, humans seem to be more irresponsible than ever. Self-made gods with only the laws of physics to keep us company, we are accountable to no one. We are consequently wreaking havoc on our fellow animals and on the surrounding ecosystem. Seeking little more than our own comfort and amusement, yet never finding satisfaction.
>
> Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who do not know what they want? (2014:466)

In a similar vein, Brian McLaren argues that the United States of America's model of society and of development, the modern world economy, is not the ideal society but the biggest problem in the world. The United States of America is the dominant power at the centre of the modern world economy and in the global network of powers. Our global civilisation has become:

> … a *suicide machine* that co-opts the main mechanisms of society – the economic, military and political systems – and reprograms them to eventually destroy those they should serve […] The global problems […] [*form*] a single system […] *suicide machine* can serve as a helpful metaphor […] for the systems that drive our civilisation toward un-health and un-peace. (2007: 5, 11–12, 52–53)

McLaren continues to argue that we must disbelieve what our current societal machinery wants us to believe, namely:

> … that we can seek prosperity without regard to ecological limits […] Our dominant societal machinery […] entices us to keep faith in its current program by making big promises: to increase wealth, cure depression, create constant sexual excitement and fulfillment, stop oppression, increase security, end poverty, overcome injustice, end discrimination, liberate the oppressed, educate the stupid, entertain the bored, and defy or reverse entropy. It never keeps these promises. In fact, it faithfully does the opposite. (2007:271–273)

McLaren does not only blame the worst elements of the modern empire – colonialism, oppression, exploitation and corruption. He also refers to these, but his main problem definition refers to those things that we have always regarded as the good things of our culture, like economic growth. The 'good' things of modern culture are so powerful because they are so attractive. They make it difficult for us to believe the insight that they faithfully do the opposite, that they betray us 'in deepest consequence', as Shakespeare (in *Macbeth*, 1.3.124–128, cited by De Graaff) put it:

> But 'tis strange:
> And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
> The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
> Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
> In deepest consequence (De Graaff 1970: 325)

Conclusion

We experience the growth of a global empire with a global power network and similar cultural styles, ideas and symbols worldwide. People across the world interact more and more, exchanging aspects of their cultures, such as ideas and types of food. While a global fusion of cultures is underway, there are at the same time those who are going in the opposite direction and are drawing back into their own cultures and religions. Former empires such as the British Empire and the Soviet Union have broken up (Currier 2015:262–264). The United Kingdom has left the European Union. Russia's war on Ukraine and the war between Israel and its neighbours threaten the growth of global networks.

It is a global process, but in each local context there is a unique mix, a different process and, eventually, different combinations and flavours.

A similar process is taking place all over Africa, in an African way. On this continent too, the modern empire raises high expectations that it cannot satisfy; it is highly destructive of the ecology and of traditional cultural patterns, often through its own actions and often through combinations with the African world. It has been described as a global suicide machine; our development has brought us to the brink of extinction.

As such, in spite of all the good that it has brought about and all the possibilities that it opens up, the modern empire may become one of Shakespeare's instruments of darkness, one of the powers that we will discuss from Chapter 13 onwards.

Chapter 5

What is the problem? The role of Christianity

We have discussed the role of the modern empire. We now discuss the problem as far as Christianity is concerned. This chapter will look at the problem of Christianity in the modern world, and the next chapter will look at ways in which Africa has tried to incorporate Christianity. One of the reasons for Christianity's failures in the modern world and in Africa can be found in the privatisation of the Christian faith. A few possible solutions are evaluated: changing our framing story, martyrdom and becoming a missional congregation. It appears that none of these are sufficient.

Christianity originated in the history told in the Bible. The word *Christianity* refers, for our purposes, to something in the field of tension between Christendom and the Christian faith. By *Christendom* we mean the problematic way in which the Christian faith had been domesticated in the West since the time of Constantine. Christianity became part of the culture, and it became one of the power structures of the Middle Ages – in chess, the bishop stands between the royals and the military. With modernity, the integration of faith and society has gradually weakened. The church is often just a rubber stamp on modern culture and way of life. *Christian faith*, on the other hand, refers to an event: a person's response to God's revelation in Jesus Christ, who is not the product of human history but its core, its meaning. *Christianity* refers to faith as it manifests in structures over time. It easily becomes domesticated in a given context, as happened in

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Christendom, but it always has the potential to break out of these confines and to bring new life and open up new possibilities.

The positive role of Christianity in history

Christianity has played a significant role in the development of the modern empire. According to Currier (2015), the seeds of our present global civilisation:

> … begin at least as long ago as the time of Jesus of Nazareth, who preached that every human being was equal in the sight of God […] and could join the fellowship of the faithful. (p. 296)

Berkhof (1973:530–533) argues that the Bible speaks of the impact of the Christian faith on and the working of the Holy Spirit in society to make it better. These statements cannot be proven or verified by experience, but if no such impact can be detected in European culture over the centuries that Christianity has been active in Europe, the statements would be proven to be untrue. If there are indeed differences between European culture and the rest of the world, the biblical statements have not been proven, as these differences could possibly be attributed to other causes, but they are also not disproven or falsified.

Berkhof concludes that there can hardly be any doubt that Europe, in the 13 centuries of its cultural existence, has diverted from the 'general human pattern'. He refers to the book that Jan Romein published in 1954: *Aera van Europa: De europese geschiedenis als afwijking van het algemeen menselijk patroon* [*The era of Europe: European history as deviation from the general human pattern*]. This deviation happened in stages. Early changes that Christianity brought about in the general pattern of the Roman Empire included care for the poor and the sick and the rejection of the divine character of the state. Christianity changed the views of the Greek-Roman world, emphasising the elements of service, humility and selflessness, coupled with a work ethic, responsibility and the principle that all people are equal. The desacralising of nature opened up the possibility of investigating and controlling nature. The Bible brought the notion that humankind is involved in a global history that is on its way to a better future. These changes made Western cultures dynamic and focused them on emancipating and humanising human existence, although the emancipation has had not only a positive impact but also a negative one: the emancipated society wants to be self-sufficient and becomes egoistic, as can be seen in our consumer culture, and destructive, as can be seen in the damage we do to others and to the creation of God (Berkhof 1973: 528–536).

Faith often provides powerful motives for the poor and oppressed to improve their lives and for the rich to work for the common good. A few

examples: the church and the Christian faith played a key role in South Africa in the struggle against apartheid. In the township of Zamdela that we discuss in Chapter 10, we found many cases where the Christian faith provided practical guidance regarding some fundamental questions by the people of that society.

Matthew Parris, who grew up in Africa, wrote that, as a confirmed atheist, he truly believed that Africa needed God: he observed that the Christians in Africa were always different from other people. Their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them:

> There was a liveliness, a curiosity, an engagement with the world – a directness in their dealings with others – that seemed to be missing in traditional African life. They stood tall […] their honesty, diligence and optimism in their work were […] influenced by a conception of man's place in the Universe that Christianity had taught. (Parris 2008:n.p.)

Parris opines that the Christian teaching of a direct, personal, two-way link between the individual and God liberated them from the great weight of fear of spirits, people and nature in tribal culture and from crushing tribal groupthink.

Many observers will disagree with Parris, but similar impacts have been observed in scientific research. Lawrence Schlemmer (2008, quoted by Swart, 2020:82), for example, investigated the role of Pentecostalism in South Africa and its potential social and economic role. He wrote:

> In the survey results we were surprised at how little impact political disillusionment seemed to have on personal morale among believers as opposed to non-churchgoers […]. Religious commitment in general imparts a buoyant mood and spiritual 'capital' seems to be correlated with social capital, confidence, patience and fortitude. Religion seems to insulate people from political and economic stress even without 'other worldly' seclusion or fatalism […]. [*A*]ll categories of churchgoers reflected sentiments of self-reliance – a critical finding in view of the mass dependence on state support in the population at large.

■ The modernising impact of Christianity in Africa – with a question mark

Beyond an individualistic level, Christianity is often regarded as an agent of modernisation and development. Seitz (2018) contends that churches and especially religious non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are very often much more effective in their sustainable development projects than public government institutions. And they are better connected with other global players. In contrast to the government, they operate at the grassroots level and therefore have personal contact with the people who are perceived as the ones in need. While state development organisations often transfer funds to different government levels, without following up how the money

is redistributed and utilised, religious NGOs would mostly invest in carefully chosen projects for which the money is meant, and it can therefore hardly be misused. This ensures greater transparency and improved quality management.

In Tony Blair's report on Africa (2005), which was written by a team of experts that included many Africans, it is said that African politics had lost the ability to mobilise people to improve their lives and that this role had been taken over by the religions, especially Christianity and Islam, who also provide health care and educational services in many parts of the continent. The report reads:

> But all across Africa there are 'failed states' in the sense that they are unable to provide the basic legal and economic frameworks, or public services like health and education, which citizens expect. There is a widespread cynicism with politicians. In the Wolof language the word *politig* has come to mean lying or deception. Voters have become disillusioned. Turnout is in decline in elections all across Africa. (Blair 2005:30)

Like Harari, this report recognises the basic role of the family, clan and tribe. But where Harari refers to the state and the market as macro-systems that have taken centre stage globally, this report refers to religions that have moved into the vacuum left by failed states in Africa:

> For too many, perhaps a majority, the state is an irrelevance or a burden. For them their primary loyalty remains with the family, clan or tribe. Increasingly, though, something else is moving into the vacuum. It is religion. Religion has always been important in Africa but at present all across Africa people are converting in large numbers to Christianity, often in its more evangelical manifestations, and to Islam, most particularly in the puritan Wahhabi form, encouraged by money from Saudi Arabia. There is also a big revival in traditional African religions, including secret initiation societies. Where the state can no longer deliver, religious movements are gaining a new attractiveness [...]
>
> Religion, particularly Islam and Christianity, offers a way to plug into globalization. Saudi Arabia and Persian Gulf countries have become part of an African trading network as well as reception zones for African migrant workers. And many of the new evangelical churches have relationships with rich churches in the United States. (Bair 2005: 30)

Christianity cannot act on its own. It is always expressed within some culture and language. The same applies to 'development', as is clearly explained in Blair's report. This report gives excellent attention to the role that traditional African cultures play, both positively and negatively, and why they must receive more attention in development programmes: 'The overall lesson is that outside prescriptions succeed only where they work with the grain of African worldviews' (Blair 2005:131).

In this respect, Blair's report is somewhat similar to the approach of the 19th-century missionary explorer David Livingstone, who showed a

remarkable understanding of African religions and culture. Livingstone held that Christianity does not give any licence for assaulting the civil institutions of human beings, including such institutions that could bring the African converts under church discipline. He held the conviction that 'Jesus came not to judge'. However, he hoped that missionaries would help make Africans 'gentlemen, civilised and Christian', a goal that confused Western middle-class ideals and values with the tenets of Christianity (Nyuyki 2017:140–141).

Livingstone arrived in Africa in 1841. He supported the British government, who wanted to extinguish the slave trade through agricultural development. This was because of the militant opposition to the slave trade that had been mobilised by the 'Clapham' group of evangelicals, of whom William Wilberforce was the best known. These evangelicals argued for the relevance of economic reasoning regarding moral issues:

> … the real remedy, the real ransom for Africa, will be found in her fertile soil. African agricultural development would undercut the slave trade at its source, by providing much more profitable access to the Western manufactured goods that Africans clearly wanted. The slave trade, demonstrably the enemy of a Christian enterprise in Africa, could be extinguished by calling forth Africa's own resources; and by this means agricultural development and enhanced trade would help to produce conditions in which Christianity would spread. Such development would in turn lead to literacy and thus to printing, to new technologies in Africa, to roads and transport, to new forms of civil organization – in fact to 'civilisation'. Christianity, commerce and civilisation had interests in common and could unashamedly support one another. Their united effect would be to improve the life and prosperity of Africans, stem the loss of population, and shrivel up the more violent institutions of African society. (Walls 1994:142)

Livingstone saw the agricultural potential of the Zambesi basin and propagated the idea that African cotton could replace the trading of slaves to America (Walls 1994:141–143). Walls concludes about Livingstone:

> Undoubtedly, he is, on the one side, the herald of the coming imperial order. He took British power for granted; he desired that it should be used for moral ends. The presence of other incomers to Africa – Boers, Portuguese, Arabs – he saw as largely malevolent […] Yet equally Livingstone is a pioneer of modern independent Africa […] In this too, he is typical of the missionary movement of his day. (1994:146)

The mood was:

> It was the gospel which had made the Western nations strong and great; it would do the same for other nations […] In the period following the First World War, one of the most popular missionary texts were the words of Jesus in John 10:10, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' and, says Newbigin […] 'abundant life' was interpreted as the abundance of good things that modern education, healing, and agriculture would provide for the deprived peoples of the world. (Bosch 1994:293)

There are several questions: were the missionaries wrong when they argued for the relevance of economic arguments regarding moral issues? Can Christianity align itself with the modern imperial power structures, even if it is for a good cause? How should we respond to Livingstone's three Cs: Christianity, commerce and civilisation? And to Blair's report that sees the churches as 'a way to plug into globalization'?

The combination of Christianity with modernity has played a positive role in Africa, as can be seen in the life of Nelson Mandela (see Chapter 7), but there was also a negative side.

Problems with the role of Christianity

At the end of the previous chapter we noted that we experience the growth of a global empire with a global power network. The core of the problem is that this powerful network, together with all the good things that it brings, has a destructive global impact. Newbigin (1961:14–15) argues that modern civilisation has sidelined Christianity that gave birth to it, that this civilisation itself has disintegrated and that it has a disintegrating impact on other cultures. Christianity itself has not come to terms with the modern world that it brought to birth.

In Africa too, Christianity has been seriously criticised, even from within its own ranks. The General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, Dr Molefe Tsele, complained that:

> African Christianity has either borne bitter fruits or none at all. For many Africans, the Church continues to be an ambiguous institution they love to hate [...] On the one hand, Christianity is more rooted in the Continent than anywhere else, on the other hand, the Continent continues to reap bitter fruits of poverty, wars, abuse and enslavement [...] we must ponder for a while on what to do to this big tree called Christianity, which is green with leaves of millions of African adherents, yet continues to fail them at their hour of need. (2001:1)

We will look at some possible reasons for these harsh words.

Privatised faith

Christianity's potential to play a significant role in society is hampered by modern Christianity's tendency to privatise faith and to separate faith from life. As a result of this, Christianity has lost its relevance to the fundamental questions of the world. In the modern world, specialists have taken over many roles that were previously played by the church – we now have psychologists, social workers, medical specialists and lawyers – causing many to conclude that the inner, private religious experience is the only space left for the church.

Lesslie Newbigin emphasised that, in the Roman world of the early church, private religion '…dedicated to the pursuit of a purely personal and spiritual salvation for its members […] flourished as vigorously […] as it does in North America today'. It was then and is now tolerated because it did not and does not challenge the political order of the day. Early Christianity wanted no part in this withdrawal from public responsibility. It refused to take such a protected position because it could not accept being relegated to a private sphere of purely inward and personal religion. It presented itself as a '… public assembly to which God is calling all men everywhere without distinction. This made a collision with the imperial power inevitable – as inevitable as the cross' (Newbigin 1986:99–100).[15]

A spirituality that pursues purely personal and spiritual salvation for its members and avoids its role in promoting a better life in the public arena (justice, charity, peace, care, responsibility, resistance to the destructive powers in the world) was a choice that early Christianity rejected.

The Dutch scholar JH van den Berg in his book, *Metabletica van de Materie* (1969), provides a gripping description of how the gap between faith and life in the spirituality of the West has developed. He shows how Christianity started to define faith as turning away from the world into one's inner experience, such as mysticism and the ascetic movement, around the year 1000 AD. Over time, Western Christianity has been influenced more and more by a spirituality that is strongly confined to inner life. It can be seen in the church architecture in Western Europe. Over the centuries, the church buildings became higher and higher, the inside of the church became more and more elaborate and impressive, while the church building's interface with the world around it was often grey and dismissive. In 1441, Thomas à Kempis wrote the manuscript of *The Imitation of Christ*; in Latin alone, there have been more than 3 000 editions of this book, which was translated into some languages before the Bible. In this book, he states that the eyes that are closed to external things and attentive to internal things are *blessed*. Thomas à Kempis was negative towards marriage and towards fellow human beings, saying that each time that he conversed with people, he came home impoverished (Van den Berg 1969:233–235).

Ignatius of Loyola was perhaps the most important missionary of Christian history, at least of the Roman Catholic Church. He was a follower of à Kempis. His spiritual exercises were aimed at an inner spiritual life, without any attention to the world outside. In the 127 letters that his pupil Francis Xavier (1506–1552) wrote to Ignatius, from his many journeys as a missionary in the jungle and on unknown seas, says Van den Berg, there is no elephant

15. Van Niekerk 2014b

that trumpets, no tiger that roars, no shark that shows its fin. The Christian had forsaken the world; he did not take notice of nature. The world was left to science and technology to develop and utilise but also to dominate and exploit. And neither the Christians nor the scientists tended to develop a relationship of care and concern toward the material world (Van den Berg 1969:258–259).

According to McGilchrist (2019: 285, 295), already during late antiquity and the Middle Ages, Christianity was lacking 'any concern with the world in which we live, their gaze was fixed firmly on theory, abstractions, conceptions and what we could find only in books'. This can be attributed to the influence of the philosophy of Plato, who taught that 'the ideas of things come to be prioritised over things themselves, over whatever it is of which we have direct knowledge'. The eternal Forms, for example the ideal table, has priority – the actual tables in our homes and in the everyday world are merely imperfect copies of the ideal form.

In his book *De eeuw van mijn vader (The century of my father)*, Geert Mak (2009:105–106) relates some events in Reformed circles in the Netherlands around the year 1920. At the time, the debates centred around the implications of the natural sciences for the truth of the Christian faith, but, says Mak, here and there people whispered the name of a Swiss theologian, a certain Karl Barth, who taught that theology and everyday life should be integrated with each other.[16] Whispered? Is it not the most obvious thing that theology and life, faith and practice, should be integrated with each other?[17] Seemingly it was not so at that time.

Karl Barth (1886–1968) is often seen as the most important Protestant theologian of the 20th century. In 1938, in his essay '*Rechtfertigung und Recht*' ['Justification and justice'; translated as 'Church and State'], Barth embarked on an effort to fill a gap in the theology of the Reformers who led the Protestant movement 500 years ago. This gap is that they did not set out what the:

> … inner and vital connection is between the service of God […] in the worship of the Church as such, and another form of service, which may be described as a 'political' service of God. (Barth 1960:101–102)

The 'political' service of God refers to the affairs of human justice and life in general. If there is no vital connection between serving God in the liturgy and the 'political' service of God, it would be possible to build a highly spiritual message and a very spiritual church, a message that 'had

16. See Van Niekerk 2018

17. My translation. The original Dutch reads: '*Hier en daar fluisterde men de naam van een Zwitserde theoloog, een zekere Karl Barth, die leerde dat theologie en het leven van alledag in elkaars verlengde lagen*'

ceased to seek or find any entrance into the sphere of these problems of human justice' – as has happened with pietistic sterility. At the same time, it would be possible to construct a secular gospel, salvation through human efforts – as has happened with the sterility of the Enlightenment (Barth 1960:104–105).

Something similar happened in Evangelical circles. According to Black (2016:59, 60, 62), in America, the interest of the evangelical churches in social concerns had, for all practical purposes, been obliterated between the years 1865 and 1930, and the social conscience of an important part of American Evangelicalism atrophied and ceased to function.

In South Africa, Dirkie Smit (2008, p. xi) critiqued a Christian spirituality of inwardness in the introduction that he wrote for a publication of WD Jonker on the relevance of the church. Smit calls a privatised way of being church, in which Christianity makes peace with its irrelevance with regard to the fundamental questions of people's lives, a *betrayal* of Christianity and the gospel itself.

Jonker argues in this book that Christianity withdraws from the public sphere to the inner private experience in response to the growing influence of science and technology. It has been done in different ways: orthodox Christians maintain the traditional formulations of the faith but live in the public sphere according to the rules of the prevailing culture and economy. The advantage of this approach is that the faith is preserved and often inspires new expressions; the disadvantage is that faith and public life exist in parallel, each in its own world. Pietism did the same but replaced the dry orthodox confession with emotional experience; it is an effort to locate faith in an aspect of human existence that cannot so easily be dismissed by rational science. Liberal theology became uncomfortable with this division and tried to express the Christian faith within the modern worldview. The advantage of this approach is that the division between faith and life is, in a way, bridged. The disadvantage is that the faith itself often becomes compromised, with aspects of the Christian message that do not fit into the modern worldview often explained away – for example, that it is not important whether the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was a historical event or not, as long as he was 'resurrected' in the lives of the believers. Theologians such as Bonhoeffer and Barth tried to interpret the Christian faith within the modern context without compromising the faith, *inter alia*, by interpreting the biblical revelation in a non-religious way. This will be discussed further in Chapter 13.

A privatised faith can easily be accommodated by the powers of the state and the market. An isolated inner religious experience easily combines with a wide variety of secular powers such as nationalism or materialism, as can be seen in the prosperity gospel. In the 19th century, the Christian

philosopher Soren Kierkegaard saw that very clearly. In his book, *Attack upon 'Christendom'*, which was published posthumously in an English translation, one reads:

> In the New Testament, according to Christ's own teaching, to be a Christian is, humanly speaking, sheer anguish, an anguish in comparison with which all other human sufferings are hardly more than child's-play. What Christ speaks of (for he makes no disguise of it) is about crucifying the flesh, hating oneself [...] about the most heart-rending sufferings due to hating father, mother, wife, one's own child [...] People had not so much as the courage and honesty and truth to say to God bluntly, 'That I cannot agree to', they resorted to hypocrisy and thought they were all perfectly secure [...] Now man's knavish interest consists in creating millions and millions of Christians, the more the better, all men if possible; for thus the difficulty of being a Christian vanishes, being a Christian and being a man amounts to the same thing, and we find ourselves where paganism ended. (1968:168, 169)

Kierkegaard was immersed in church life. He was dedicated to the church and the doctrine of the church, but he attacked the marriage of convenience between the state and the church: the state provided for the church out of the public treasury 'in return for the modest, reciprocal favour that, on political and social issues, the Church remain irrelevant and confine itself to "Quiet Hours"' (Johnson 1968: xxi–xxii).

This was clearly a situation where privatised faith became part of the culture to such an extent that it was completely domesticated by the state and had lost its revolutionary impact.

This problem has an impact on Africa too:

- Brian McLaren relates an experience he had in 2004 when he attended a gathering of 55 young Christians, mostly from Rwanda and Burundi, after the violence in which nearly a million people died in a few weeks. One of the people at the conference said that he had attended church all his life, and he had only heard the message of future personal salvation from hell – no mention was ever made of the hatred and distrust between tribes, of the poverty, suffering, corruption, injustice, the violence and killing that caused the country to fall apart – *even during the weeks when the killings were going on* (McLaren 2007:18–20).[18]
- The former president of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, started the movement for an African Renaissance because, in his opinion, the traditional values of black people had been destroyed by modernisation, and Christianity did not fill that vacuum because it was only a 'Sunday religion' (Gevisser 2007:324).[19] There is more truth to this

18. Van Niekerk 2018

19. Van Niekerk 2018

observation than one would have wished, but there are important exceptions, such as the respondents in our Zamdela survey and, as we shall see, Nelson Mandela and the struggle against apartheid (see Chapter 7 and Chapter 10).

The marginalisation of the Christian faith

The division between public life and private faith did not come from the side of Christianity only. Modern culture played a role as well.

Goudzwaard (1978) analysed the movement of Western culture away from the Christian faith during the Renaissance; this made the development of modern Western capitalism possible. During the Renaissance, the attention shifted from heaven above to the earth on which we live. Not heaven, but the earth was now seen as the true home, the destiny, of humanity. The source of hope shifted from God to our human ability to understand, control and utilise the material world and in this way bring about progress. Paradise lost would now be found, not in heaven but on earth; not through God's grace in Christ, but through humanity's control of the world; not on the basis of obedience to God's will as revealed in his word, but on the basis of natural law, which prescribes that each one should pursue their own interests. Modern Western society has evolved through the *rejection* and *sidelining* of the Christian faith. And Christianity played along in this process.

Who knows what types of culture may have developed without such a division?

A local answer to this question seems to be emerging from the African Initiated Churches, which engage in local community issues like housing, unemployment, entrepreneurship, financial empowerment, skills development, health care, rehabilitation from substance abuse, education, etc. It is both development and politics from below. They are 'constructive agents of a kind of modernity in which religion and religious faith are not antithetical to development and progress' (Swart 2019:80–83).

We now discuss a few efforts to solve the problem of the irrelevance of Christianity that leave us with further problems.

Change the framing story?

Brian McLaren (2007:20–21), who regards 'our civilisation' as the biggest problem in the world, criticises Christianity's preoccupation with religious esoterica that '... in comparison to racism, genocide, carelessness towards the poor and various minorities, exploitation of the environment, and unjust

war – seem shamefully trivial, weapons of mass distraction'. Christianity has privatised its faith and has lost social significance, so people find the church irrelevant and leave: '… our current politicians and religious leaders, as those in Jesus' days, seem hell-bent on trivial matters' (McLaren 2007: 33, 252).

Even more, when the church does play a role in the main course of events, it tends to endorse the framing story of 'our civilisation', the story that tells us what to do with our power and that keeps us on this dangerous road.

This endorsement is not only expressed by words. Dieter Holm, a retired professor in architecture, tells of a colleague who conducted a study of parsonages in the Afrikaans churches in the Reformed tradition in the 20th century. He concluded that these residences always had to be luxurious because material success was seen as an indication of God's blessing.

One must add here that the term luxurious has attained a completely new meaning since the beginning of the 21st century – the parsonages of the previous period were quite modest compared to the palaces that are quite common today, a trend of which the churches that preach the prosperity gospel form an enthusiastic part.

In a chapter titled 'The most radical thing we can do', McLaren (2007) argues that political leaders – and other leaders, also religious leaders – always check which way the wind is blowing and then adjust to that. We cannot change this inclination of leaders, so:

> … there's only one hope: we're going to have to change the wind. Changing the wind would mean changing public opinion, which requires changing the values that guide people individually and as groups, which in turn requires changing the vision of what is both possible and desirable, which ultimately means changing our framing story. (pp. 269–270)

The core of the problem, McLaren argues, is a framing story that binds and unites the main elements of our destructive society together; consequently, a logical solution would be to present a different framing story that can arrange all these elements into a different system that would lead to life and peace. Jesus provides us with such a framing story that gives us direction and hope and a chance to be saved from the global suicide machine, but it requires us to stop believing in the framing story of our civilisation and to believe in Jesus' story and follow him. That, says McLaren, is the most radical thing we can do.

This solution still contains a problem. According to McLaren, if we change our framing story, we deprive the dominant system of our confidence and consent:

> … if we transfer our trust from the way of Caesar to the way of Christ, our actions will draw their power from another source. We will have a new leverage point; we

> will be independent of the system, so our energies can no longer be co- opted by this system that has now become pathetic and pathological to us. (2007:271)

So far, so good. But how do we deprive the dominant system of our confidence and consent? How do we get independent of it?

How did Jesus do that? According to McLaren:

> Jesus challenged people in his day to stop believing the empire's empty promises and stop fearing its threat through a brilliant strategy. First he lured its dark machinery into the light, so to speak, so it could be seen for what it was [...] he walked like a lamb into the middle of the forest, so the wolves would come out of the shadows and circle around him. Then he stretched out his neck, as it were, inviting them to pounce, and they did. Ironically, though, as he exposed his own neck, he also exposed their vicious wolfishness [...] they could no longer claim to be agents of peace and promise after torturing and killing a good and peaceful man. (2007: 271–272)

Jesus was free from the powers of his day because he refused, up to the end, to play according to their rules. That cost him an uncomfortable life and a painful death, but his resurrection means ultimate freedom, the victory over the powers, including victory over death – it means that he was in the right. His kingdom is one in which the powers of the world are made powerless.

This interpretation of the way that the cross of Jesus introduced the reign of God, the kingdom of justice, peace and life, is very similar to the interpretation that Wright (2016) gives in his book *The day the revolution began* (we will come back to this in Chapter 13). These theologians break out of the confines of a privatised spirituality and confirm the relevance of the Christian faith for all of life, as well as for the modern empire.

The problem with McLaren's solution is that he tells us how Jesus deprived the dominant system of his confidence and consent and how he paid the price for that, but he does not indicate how we must do so. Must we do the same that Jesus did? Are we prepared to? Are there other ways to do it?

Many of us who have stopped believing in the framing story of our civilisation and believe in Jesus' story do not know how to become free and independent of the system *in practice*. We say that we must stop using up the resources of nature and polluting the air and the water, but we who say that mostly continue to use fossil fuels to drive our modern transport forward. We continue to buy food that is packaged in plastic, we still use up finite resources and we still pollute the world. Our relationships with the ecology and with other people, such as the distant workers who produce our consumer goods, are to a great extent determined by the larger systems and institutions in which we live rather than by the ideas we believe in. We have contracts and obligations; we have families and responsibilities. We defend ourselves against criminals. All of these entangle us deeply in the

social and economic systems that McLaren describes as the biggest problem of the world, and we do not know how to change that.

We say that the gap between the rich and poor is untenable, but the ones who say that often continue to invest in shares or to live a life of chronic poverty because we do not know how to change everything – or we do not *want* to make the sacrifices that are required.

And making sacrifices often does not change much, except for those who make the sacrifices.

An effective death?

To follow Jesus is to follow someone who did not give in to the powers that be, until the bitter end. The death of Jesus was highly effective, unlike the deaths of many people who were crucified by the Roman Empire, whose deaths had no or comparatively very little effect outside their personal context. Around 100 BC, Spartacus led a major slave revolt, and 6 000 of his followers were crucified all along the 130 or so miles of the Appian Way from Rome to Capua – roughly one cross every 40 yards. In 4 BC, Judas ben Hezekiah attempted a revolt in Galilee and around 2 000 of the rebels were crucified. The Galilee of Jesus' boyhood knew all about Roman crosses (Wright 2016:57–58).

Steele (1999) posits that ineffective martyrdom happens in modern times too. Perhaps the most famous suicide of the 20th century was that of Jan Palach, a quiet student of philosophy and history. On 16 January 1969, Jan Palach walked into the main square by the National Museum in Prague, poured petrol on himself and lit a match. He did so in protest against the way his people quietly accepted the Soviet forces' brutal occupation of Czechoslovakia, crushing the reforms that are still known today as the Prague Spring. 'As the flames tore through his clothes and began to sear his flesh, the 20-year-old student could not have anticipated the massive effect his action would have.' What might have been written off as a futile gesture became a defining symbol for a generation. His death united his nation and brought hundreds of thousands of people into the streets in protest against the Soviet occupation. His act was modelled on public self-immolations by Buddhist monks in Saigon who were protesting against the Vietnam war, but the deaths of these monks had little effect. Jan Palach's public self-immolation was later copied by others, including:

> … a wave of Indian students who set themselves alight in 1990 in protest at changes in quota systems for entry into university and the civil service. […] None of those other suicides had the impact of Palach's. (Steele 1999:n.p.)

Why do some deaths have a huge effect and others almost none? In his insightful book on the strategy of culture, CA van Peursen introduces

the concept of the trigger mechanism. Pulling a trigger is a small action that can lead to huge results – which is a good example of how chaos theory works. Martin Luther King Jr's famous speech 'I have a dream' is an example of such a trigger mechanism: while most speeches have no or little effect, this one set loose a whole movement. Van Peursen also refers to the huge effect of the death of Jan Palach and how similar deaths had no public effect. His explanation is that the effect of an event depends on the total context in which the event takes place. The effect of shifting a piece in chess depends on the given context and the position of the other pieces. If you want to change things, you have to know the rules of the game very well, formally but especially informally, as well as the dynamics of the situation, intuitively and rationally. One has to understand the social structures and how they function in order to do something that is effective. *An action is relevant if it originates in an ethical awareness of one's responsibility and a good understanding of the existing structures* (Van Peursen 1978:202, 203 [author's translation]).

We can add: presenting a different framing story will only be relevant if our words are backed up by meaningful action within a given context.

The question about an effective or relevant death was also mentioned in the struggle against colonialism in Kenya. In a novel about that struggle, a young leader of the resistance movement told his friends that they should take up their cross, deny their fathers and mothers and serve their one mother, Kenya. He said that Jesus failed because his cross did not change anything:

> In Kenya we want a death which will change things, that is to say, we want a true sacrifice. But first we have to be ready to carry the cross. I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another. So I can say that you, Karanja, are Christ. I am Christ. Everybody who takes the Oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ. (Ngũgĩ 1976:78, 83)

This quote comes from the book *A Grain of Wheat*. The book takes its title from 1 Corinthians 15, which appears on one of the first pages before the text itself begins:

> Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die. And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain.

It is possible that the church in Kenya, like the church in Rwanda that McLaren wrote about, preached a message that had no relevance to events in Kenya, and that could be the reason why the young leader felt that the death of Jesus did not change anything. But, we can ask, was *his* effort to solve the problem the best strategy, namely to take the basic message of the cross, that life has come to us through the death of Jesus, as a pattern

that can be repeated endlessly in different contexts, including the political context, without any faith in Christ himself?

This same theme – that life will come out of death and freedom out of destruction – played a prominent role among students at the University of the North during the struggle against apartheid while I was a lecturer there from 1984 to 1993. I listened to numerous sermons by our students expounding this theme. And there was a great deal of destruction and burning going on, and violent clashes that led to suffering and death.

Just like suicide, violence will only be relevant if it originates in an ethical awareness of one's responsibility and a good understanding of the existing structures. That is not always the case.

When Nelson Mandela, along with seven co-defendants, was on trial for treason in 1964, he made a speech of three hours in the courtroom on 20 April. He argued that the hard facts were that 50 years of non-violence had brought the African people nothing but more repressive legislation and fewer and fewer rights. The ANC feared that a racial civil war could break out, and they decided that sabotage would be a better outlet for black frustrations than war. He was facing a possible death sentence, and it took courage to state at the end of his speech:

> I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die. (Mandel 1995:349–354)

This speech did not have an immediate trigger effect. Nelson Mandela was sent to prison on Robben Island and was released in 1990 after 27 years in prison. He was elected to be South Africa's first black president in 1994.

For many years, Mandela's imprisonment seemed to be a fruitless sacrifice. However, the speech did play a vital role in defining him, while he was silenced by imprisonment, as an icon of the liberation movement. It was a slow trigger, but combined with other factors, it was eventually very effective.

Sacrifices must make sense within a given context. As we have seen, many self-immolations did not have much effect. But we are not likely to have any effect if we are not prepared to sacrifice anything. To believe in Christ and to be a follower of him only where it benefits us would be unconvincing.

Becoming a missional congregation?

It is not so easy to know what Christianity can and should do to produce a meaningful effect in the quality of life of the poor, and closely linked to that, in the ecology of Africa. Many churches and local congregations in

South Africa are struggling to break out of the confines of the traditional privatised religion and to become 'community churches', but there are no quick fixes.

Christianity and her theologians have made good progress with the theological understanding of what the role of Christianity should be. Good progress has been made with the question: how can the leadership of a congregation make the church members aware of this calling? But we still have to learn how the church should approach beggars in a meaningful way, help to solve hunger and poverty, assist low-income households to improve their quality of life or well-being, promote peace or combat climate change and care for God's creation, given the magnitude and complexity of the issues involved. We have left all of this for the government, the business world, the NGOs. But now we realise that if we as a church want to preach a relevant message, our words must be backed up by relevant ways of being and doing, and we have to respond to the fundamental issues of our time. The church requires a good understanding of the existing structures; she needs suitable practices to execute relevant actions in different contexts. We will come back to this towards the end of the book.

There are churches that have decided to share their properties with people in need. In his book, *Cross-border migration: Zimbabwe-South Africa Exodus*, Elvis A Masavi (2017) writes about his arrival in South Africa in 2007. In order to find a place to stay, he had to overcome his phobia of big South African cities, fuelled by the horrific stories that had been told by refugees. In mid-city Johannesburg, he found a haven:

> Of all the public places, the Central Methodist church in the central business district is one that gave me vivid memories. It was at this church that I saw thousands of homeless people accommodated at one place [...] More than once during my stay in Johannesburg and after I had left the city, I voluntarily spent nights inside this church with my fellow countrymen, and with people from other countries and parts of South Africa. (Masavi 2017:6)

At the beginning of 2010, it was estimated that there were between 3 000 and 3 500 refugees staying in the Central Methodist Church. Accommodating such numbers of people in the church premises led to logistical nightmares and problems with hygiene and health care, as well as conflicts between the refugees, between the congregation and the wider church structures, and between the congregation and the authorities. At the end of 2014, the church closed its doors to refugees. According to reports, Paul Verryn, who had led the mission for 18 years, denied that it was done under any pressure, saying that seasons come and seasons go and that it was time to close the ministry. It was also reported that the church building had taken a hammering that would cost millions to repair.[20]

20. See https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/01/south-african-church-refugees-johannesburg

In another part of the city, a minister told the story of a well-off white church in a wealthy suburb. They had gone through a process of reflecting and meditating on their identity and calling, but they had not yet decided on something specific to focus on. Then, one day, a few black children from a nearby informal settlement showed up at a Sunday service. They were welcomed and, after attending the service, they left again. The next Sunday there were a few more, and their numbers gradually grew. They were joined by adults – all of them poor, from an area where they lacked the most basic services such as sanitation. They began to use the bathrooms for cleaning up before and after the service. The congregation was divided about how to respond to this unexpected turn of events. Some argued that their calling had presented itself: their calling was to serve these people and the community they came from. Others were not prepared for the consequences: the character of their congregation would change, their neat building and facilities would not be so neat anymore, everything that they had enjoyed about coming to church would become complicated. The latter group eventually departed to a neighbouring congregation. The income of the church dropped, and the ministry had to adjust to that. Those who remained felt that they had discovered a new meaning to life and a new dimension to their faith, but is it sustainable?

There are many innovative initiatives, such as congregations that get involved in reduce-reuse-recycle programmes in various ways, but we are still trying to find our way. Poor congregations are also trying to find their way of dealing with poverty in their own midst and, because all their energy, money and time is spent on survival, there seems to be a lack of disposable resources to also address socio-economic and political issues.

Conclusion

Following the advice of Einstein, we are still trying to understand what the question or the problem is.

The basic problem that we have considered here is: Christianity, which gave birth to the modern world civilisation, the modern empire, with its science and its technology, has largely failed to come to terms with her own child and has made no significant contribution to solving humanity's current problem, namely that we do not know how to use all the power we have acquired and we do not know what we want.

Privatising faith and limiting it to the inner religious experience in an effort to escape the impact of modern science on the credibility of its message, has left Christianity open to aligning itself with destructive powers such as overheated nationalism and materialism.

Three possible solutions have been considered: changing our culture's framing story, martyrdom and becoming a missional congregation. The problem that remains to be solved in all these efforts is that we do not know how to live in a sustainable and just way in practice – we continue to live according to destructive systems and structures of the modern global culture and, in many cases, of African traditions. How to try to remedy this situation is discussed in later chapters because we still have to understand the problem better, specifically the role of the third power: Africa.

Intermezzo

We have now looked at two of the powers that have had an impact on Africa over the past centuries, namely modern Western culture or the modern empire, and Christianity or the church, especially the churches that have become domesticated in the modern empire.

We will now consider a third power, Africa. This will comprise six chapters. Firstly, Chapter 6 deals with ways in which Africa has incorporated Christianity. Chapter 7 looks at the resilience and tenacity of African culture, which has since the 1970s become a prominent influence on almost all terrains of South African life, in spite of the way that it is mostly ignored by key role players. In Chapter 8, the focus is on African agency, specifically ways in which Africans have dealt with modernity. Chapters 9 and 10 give attention to the impact of modernity on African families and on the traditional construct of the relationship between person and community. In Chapter 11, we consider aspects of urbanisation as an important context in which the search for a sustainable, dignified and humane future must take place.

These six chapters are based on an effort to listen to African writers and on what we have found in our work with households in local communities in our Nova projects. These encounters have produced an insight: that, although the African world is a powerful force in the mix of things and thoughts that forms Africa today, this powerful force has been widely ignored or underestimated, which is one of the main reasons why so many development efforts in Africa have had unexpected and often destructive results. It is an insight that I owe to African writers and to my work and relations with African people.

Chapter 6

The African incorporation of Christianity

This chapter deals with ways in which Africa has incorporated Christianity. We attend to a few problems regarding the relationship between the Christian faith and the contemporary African world. Understanding these problems better will, we hope, enable us to move closer to understanding the prevailing structures and to playing a meaningful role as Christians in this context.

We have noted Harari's insight that the emergence of the modern empire in Europe was possible because of the combination of various things: science, politics, economics, a legal system and a certain mentality or consciousness, a way of thinking (Harari 2014:314–315).

Mentality and religion are closely related. One definition of religion is that the fundamental values and worldview of a person, the ultimate meaning one gives to life, are a matter of belief – in practice, your religion. In this definition, religion shapes one's consciousness, one's emotions and ultimately one's actions within a given context.

What impact does Christianity have on daily life in Africa?

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Expressing Christianity within African culture: A case study

In modern culture, Christianity has become separated from the basic values that shape day-to-day living, and this has made room for other powers to move in. In African traditions, such a separation between traditional religion and culture is unthinkable, but the coming of modernity and Christianity have given rise to new conditions.

The opening remark of John Mbiti's *African religions and philosophy*, 'The African is notoriously religious' (Mbiti 1974:1), is often quoted. African religion and culture are so closely interwoven that when we speak of one of them, the other is implied. 'Since African culture is inextricably intertwined with African traditional religion, making a case for culture impels one to make a case for traditional religion' (Mofokeng c. 1987:51).

One would therefore expect that if one of them changes, the other will change too. However, a key problem that Christianity must face in Africa is that it has, by and large, not been able to present the values and convictions that could enable African Christians to deal constructively with the profound changes that have taken place in large areas of their cultures and daily lives. As we have seen, former president Thabo Mbeki regards it as only a Sunday religion, and a church in Rwanda had nothing to say about the mass killings while they were going on.

The problem of finding a constructive role for Christianity can be illustrated by our efforts to translate a well-known biblical parable, the parable of the Good Samaritan, so that it would be readily understandable in the African life-world.

On 25 July 1999, Mrs Masebe, a local teacher, and I visited a congregation of the Church of the Nazarene, a rural congregation at Mentz, about 35 km east of Polokwane (then Pietersburg), near the (then) University of the North. We went there as part of a team that was conducting research on providing the Bible to oral contexts. The team, consisting of academics and church leaders, selected a few texts from the Old and New Testaments for an experiment. They translated the texts, using terms that are common in the daily lives of the communities, and a dramatised version was recorded on tape. Our task was to test the response of listeners to these recordings. We took with us a recording of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37).

The congregation was quite happy to listen to the tape recordings after their normal church service, but they were adamant that a tape recording would not fit into the service itself because most of the members could read. It appeared that a person reading aloud to nonreaders is closer to oral communication patterns than an audio text, because the latter is less human and more technical and fixed.

After the normal church service we played the tape to the congregation. People responded to the content and meaning of the text and not so much to the form (the dramatisation, different voices, music, etc.).

Young adults compared different translations that could be used for 'neighbour'. That led to a good discussion. Two older women then stood up and challenged the use of the word *sepetlele* [hospital] to translate 'guest house', saying that many Christians felt that it was wrong to go to a hospital. They then adamantly questioned the use of the word *sehlare* [meaning both tree and medicine; traditional medicine is often collected from trees or plants] to translate the wine used to wash the victim's wounds. They asked what *sehlare* meant. People would think it referred to traditional medicines and witchcraft!

The congregation, mostly young, laughed and cheered the two old ladies, evidently in agreement. Witchcraft is a very real issue in that area, and, on the other hand, the nearby modern hospital is generally known as *Re boela feela* [we come back alone] – that is, when we went there to visit our sick family member, we were told that he or she was dead.

When we left the church building, a convert, a young woman, brought her traditional medicines forward. She was a *sangoma*. The congregation gathered outside to sing and pray while her medicines were burnt.

These meanings for hospital and medicine were not intended in the original text and were certainly not intended by the translators. They merely used words that they deemed familiar in this context for the sake of clarity. The word medicine, however, covers a very wide field; Inus Daneel (1970) observed this tendency very clearly among Shona healers:

> The Shona concept mushonga, in fact, covers medicaments, i.e. from the most tested serum of the Western medical man to the most harmful toxin of the sorcerer [...] their traditional African background forges a link between mushonga and ancestral worship [...] The use of medicine and idolatry are so closely bound up with each other that it is impossible to think of them as being unrelated. (p. 22; cf. p. 53)

A language has meaning within the lifeworld of the people who speak that language. The same goes for the things they use every day. One who brings the Christian message must understand the meaning of things and thoughts, also new things and thoughts that are introduced within the context of that community, as the residents experience and understand it, in order to communicate effectively. The same applies to development efforts.

These Christians are critical of both modernity (the modern hospital) and traditional religion, but the Christian faith has to be expressed in these cultures.

Processes within African churches

The South African writer Ezekiel (later Es'kia) Mphahlele repeatedly used the river as an image to describe the rift that Christianity has brought in African society:

> Leshoana. A mighty broad river with white sand. On one side of the river were Christian communities living together according to whether they were Methodists, Presbyterians or Dutch Reformists. On the other side there were tribal kraal communities. The Christians called them 'heathens'. (1959:13–14)

Elsewhere Mphahlele (1946:52) wrote: 'Here were two villages with only a river between them, yet far from each other in religious, social and educational principles'.

This division was observed in different places. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's book *The river between* (1977) is a story about Waiyaki, a Kikuyu man who, 'valuing the old folk-strength and the new missionary teaching, is condemned by both factions for his traffic with the other'.

The churches originating in Europe found it difficult to deal with aspects of the traditional religions. In 1948, the Swedish missionary Bengt Sundkler published a classic book, *Bantu prophets in South Africa*, based on extensive research among the Independent Zulu churches in South Africa. This book created awareness of the AICs at an early stage. Sundkler (1948:267) found that the importance that African Christians attached to dreams often shocked the missionaries. In the Zionist Churches it was different:

> Zionists complain that when a dreamer comes to his mission congregation and relates a dream, he is not seldom scorned and made a laughing-stock. In mission churches, they feel, the mighty waters of primitive dream life are in various ways subdued and repressed. In Zionist Churches the sluices have been opened to the full. (Sundkler 1948:273)

Sundkler (1948:267–268) drew attention to the interesting phenomenon that largely the same symbols appear in the dreams of members of the mission churches and the Zionists, as well as traditionalists among the Sotho and the Zulu in South Africa, the Ba-Ila (an ethnic group in the Republic of Zambia) and in Hayaland (Tanganyika, now Tanzania).

The missionary and later anthropologist BA Pauw (1975:7–11, 14) described a different configuration nearly half a century ago. He used the well-known anthropological theory about the contrast between small-scale and large-scale societies to interpret the relationship between Christianity and Xhosa tradition. Small-scale societies are seen as 'small in scale with regard to numbers, territory, and range of social contacts' and have a relatively simple technology and economy and little specialisation of social functions. The members of small-scale societies are highly dependent on each other; the

individuals have a relative lack of freedom; the culture is integrated within itself and the society is fairly independent of other societies. Religion is characterised by aspects such as 'service to particular local gods', emotion and magic.

Large-scale societies are marked by greater freedom of the individual, contact and communication with a wider variety of people and less dependence on any specific people. There is a great deal of specialisation in large-scale society, and a person can separate his or her various relations, for example, with people in various spheres, from each other: at work, at home, at church and at the sports club. Large-scale societies are characterised by complexity, a large degree of nonmagical religion and morality, impersonality and mobility. Large-scale societies tend to analyse things as is done, for example, in theology and in science (Pauw 1975:11, 13).

The local agents of evil, the sorcerers and witches, fit into the small- scale framework. Christianity, however, as a universal religious community, rejects magical beliefs. The large-scale agent of evil, Satan, is a universal figure and fits into the universalistic framework of the worldwide church. In intermediate societies, however, one may find that people believe in Satan as well as the more specific witch or sorcerer of the small-scale tradition (Pauw 1975:260).

A strong expression of emotion was identified as one of the elements of small-scale societies. It plays a major role in Zionist churches:

> Another feature of Zionism is the extreme emotionalism expressed in frenzied dancing, clapping of hands, shouting, speaking with tongues, and other violent forms of vocal expression, and in the violent laying-on of hands [...] In terms of the scale of society, the importance of Zionist groups lies in the fact that considered by themselves they are characterised by features typical of small- scale society – face-to-face personal relationships, emotionalism and magical beliefs and ritual, in which much of the Xhosa little tradition is preserved. Their emphatic claim to a biblical basis reflects the desire to be associated with the universalistic great tradition of Christianity, which shows a consciousness of their inevitable involvement in large-scale society. (Pauw 1975:304)

The churches of missionary origin, organised on the patterns of large-scale society, usually did not make sufficient provision for the need to express the small-scale beliefs and activities that exist in an intermediate society. One example of how that could be done is a prayer movement in a mission church where 'beliefs about the causation of misfortune through witchcraft and sorcery are openly recognised as valid', while such ideas were rejected by official church policy. Such prayer movements in the church provided for needs that the church at large did not acknowledge (Pauw 1975:289–291).

The co-existence of the two traditions was observed more than 40 years later by the comedian Trevor Noah, who grew up in Soweto and other townships:

> We adopted the religion of our colonisers, but most people held on to the old ancestral ways too, just in case. In South Africa, faith in the Holy Trinity exists quite comfortably alongside belief in witchcraft, in casting spells and putting curses on one's enemies [...] I come from a country where people are more likely to visit sangomas – traditional healers, pejoratively known as witch doctors – than they are to visit doctors of Western medicine [...] I remember a man being on trial for striking another person with lightning [...] I'm not talking about the 1700s. (p. 39)

Holding such contrasting beliefs in your mind at the same time creates inner tension. Two years before Pauw published his findings, Es'kia Mphahlele described the tension within himself:

> I was brought up on European history and literature and religion and made to identify with European heroes while African heroes were being discredited [...] I later rejected Christianity. And yet I could not return to ancestral worship in any overt way. But this does not invalidate my ancestors for me. Deep down there inside my agnostic self, I feel a reverence for them. (1973:121–122)

Finding solutions for problems such as these, and formulating a constructive role for Christianity in the African context, is a problem that must be solved by Africans. This process is underway, and it is an energetic, vast and very diverse landscape that will not be discussed here.

For the purposes of this book, it should suffice to note that the gap, where the traditional religion was often secretly practised alongside the Christian religion, and without any interaction with each other, is being bridged in various ways, although the tension still remains. Various traditional African values and styles have been imported into the traditional missionary churches. Nowadays, the liturgy is often characterised by joyful rhythmic singing and dancing, with drums and other instruments – far removed from the sober and quiet style of the missionaries. It goes further than that: for example, Leepo Modise wrote an article, 'Reading the URCSA church order with African lenses: A Belhar Confession perspective', in which he responds to 'individuals within the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) who claim that URCSA is not an African church in the real sense, as it ought to be'. He maintains, for example, that the relations in the church are shaped by 'the African expression of selfhood and ontological relations [...] wherein individualism and egoism play no part. In the African lifestyle, the individual does not exist alone, except corporately' (2020:1, 13–14).

In 2017, two scholars completed their doctoral studies with me, Peter Nyuyki from the Nso' people in Cameroon and Simon Munyai from the VhaVenḓa of South Africa. Both argued that the missionaries did not

understand their respective cultures and that it was now the task of, respectively, the Nso' and Venḓa churches to bridge the rift between the faith of many Christians and their culture.

However, it is too soon to say in which direction the process in which African traditional religions and Christianity are interacting in a very fundamental way, in countless groups and combinations, will eventually go. It is most likely that it will produce a variety of configurations. It is to be expected that it will produce, among others, various expressions of Christianity that do not compromise the Christian faith and where Africans would feel at home. That would be highly significant because of the role that such groups could play in all spheres of life.

The quantitative significance of the African Initiated Church movement, where the Christian faith engages directly with the African world, can be seen in their impressive growth: in 1950, between 75% and 80% of the black South African Christians belonged to the Western-style (mainline) churches and only 12%–14% belonged to the AICs; in 1980, the mainline churches stood at 52% and the AICs at 27%; in 1991, the mainline churches stood at 41% and the AICs at about 36% (Oosthuizen 1994:ix). In 1996, the African Independent Churches stood at 42.9% (Hendriks 2002:22). And now many mainline churches themselves want to be African.

The need to cater to different needs of the contemporary African world has found expression, apart from the AICs, in Pentecostal and charismatic churches. There are also destructive developments, such as the prosperity gospel movement (see Sarbah 2020 for similar events in Ghana).

It is noteworthy that the Pentecostal movement originated under the influence of the African-American churches in the USA in the 19th and early 20th century (Hollenweger 1974:18). This implies that the spirituality of the Pentecostal churches will probably speak more directly and strongly to many Africans than to many modernised Westerners and that it will resonate better with important aspects of the traditional African cultures than does the modern missionary approach, which has been shaped by the combination of Christian faith and modern culture (see also Swart 2019:86). Modern mainline missions brought things like education and modern medical care rather than powerful manifestations of the Spirit such as miraculous healing, protection against evil spirits and other wonders. African Initiated Churches of the Pentecostal variety bring elements of modern development into the African spiritual worldview in which they operate; Swart 2019 (pp. 86–87; p. 91) mentions radical personal transformation and a remaking of the Protestant ethic described by Max Weber. This element is not so prominent in the non-Pentecostal variety of African Initiated Churches.

Movements in African theology

Africanisation is found at all levels of income and education. African theologians have a keen interest in this topic. They take a wide variety of positions regarding traditional African religions.

On the one extreme are theologians who regard traditional African religions as *darkness,* for example, Lenard Nyirongo: *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible? The snares of African traditional religion in biblical perspective* (1997) and *Dealing with darkness: A Christian novel on the confrontation with African witchcraft* (1999).

On the other hand, there are efforts to reject modern culture as well as the Christian faith and return to traditional religions and cultures (see Chapter 7).

Then there are theologians who think of taking Christianity up in the African context, for example, TS Maluleke says: '… the possibility is not only for Jesus to become the Supreme Ancestor, but he could simply join the ranks of other ancestors who are at the service of the Supreme Being in Africa' (1996:93; see also Maluleke 1998).

A few years ago I discussed a prescribed book, *When helping hurts* (Corbett & Fikkert 2012:21–26), with a class of about 30 senior theological students, mostly black. In the book Brian Fikkert, an American missionary, relates an incident that happened while he was giving a small business course to refugees in the heart of a slum in Kampala, the capital of Uganda. During the weeks of the course, one of the attendees, Grace, told the class that she was a 'witch doctor' – but now she wanted to join the church. She burnt her herbs during a church service. For weeks she never missed a class, but one day she was absent. The class reported that she was sick. Brian and the local leader went to her house. She was very ill and could not lift her head. It appeared that she had developed tonsillitis. The local hospital refused to treat her because she was poor and had HIV. She paid her neighbour to cut out her tonsils with a kitchen knife, and the wounds became infected. Realising that she would die, Brian immediately gave the money that was necessary to buy penicillin for Grace to the leader of the class, and a week later she was back in class, looking better than ever.

On his way back to the United States of America, Brian realised that he had helped in the wrong way. The question is: what did he do wrong? The answer that is argued in this book is that giving money to solve a crisis does not help the local community to find a way to solve such crises themselves. Doing things for people that they could have done for themselves makes them as a community weaker, more dependent and less self-reliant.

But before we could get to Brian's answer in our class discussion, a student said that as an African theologian, he knew what the problem was. The lady, Grace, should not haven abandoned her calling as a sangoma, a so-called 'witch doctor'. She was God's gift to that community. She fell ill because she had abandoned God's calling.

Chaos broke out. All the students spoke at the same time, agreeing with the speaker. One student stood up and said: 'I have been thinking about this. Did Jesus rise up from the dead? He did not! He became an ancestor!' Only one said that she disagreed with the direction in which the discussions went.

This was akin to the possibility mentioned by TS Maluleke that we have just quoted, that Jesus could just join the ancestors of Africa: to say that Jesus did not rise from the dead but became an ancestor means that he is given a place in the traditional structure, which remains intact.

This viewpoint has developed over several decades. Since the 1970s, when Black Consciousness burst onto the scene in South Africa, traditional African religions have become more and more prominent. In those years, black theology and African theology were prominent in church circles, but they were not the same. Setiloane (1980:49) spoke of African theology as a spirituality that was at home in the ongoing African experience of life, 'whether the white man is present or not'. He saw black theology as a liberation theology whose reason for existence was the struggle against white domination. When liberation had been achieved, Setiloane warned, the reason for black theology's existence would disappear while African theology would remain. Black theology started in America in response to white domination and injustice, but initially, at least, followed Western values and wanted to be equal to white people. African theology, on the other hand, pursues African values.

It seems that Steve Biko incorporated aspects of both theologies. He emphasised that black people's struggle for freedom from white domination would be based on their own values (see Chapter 8). He regarded Christianity as 'a very adaptable religion', a 'universal truth', that seeks to find application in a particular situation:

> Black Theology [...] seeks to relate God and Christ once more to the black man and his daily problems. It wants to describe Christ as a fighting God, not a passive God who allows a lie to rest unchallenged. It grapples with existential problems and does not claim to be a theology of absolutes. (Biko1978:93–94)

However, these two theologies did not co-exist peacefully. Thakatso Mofokeng (*c.* 1987:52) a theologian from the (then) Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, spoke about the 'raging disagreement' between southern African black theology and African theology. He tried to reconcile them.

TS Maluleke blamed both black and African theologies for having failed to 'become a viable weapon of struggle in the hands of the exploited masses themselves', that at least some of these theologians 'fail to connect meaningfully with the struggles of the poor'. He quoted Oduyoye: 'African Christians are in the process daily of shaping a Christianity that will be at home in Africa and in which Africans will be at home' (Maluleke 1996:11, 14, 16, 17). We can fully agree with this, if it does not compromise the Christian faith. *Being at home* would not exclude constructive tension and transformation. It would be a Christianity that addresses the fundamental existential issues of the given culture and context.

The bottom-up approach of 'shaping a Christianity that will be at home in Africa and in which Africans will be at home' resonates well with the approach presented in this book, to work with local residents to shape their households and communities as a place to be at home in everyday life.

Conclusion

Christianity is in the process of defining a meaningful role in the Africa of today and of the future. In the missionary era, traditional cultures and religions were initially confined to church members' private worlds, often in secret. This led to the formation of the AICs, where Christianity was directly applied in the African spiritual world. In some cases, the African world becomes dominant while in others it is less prominent; in some cases it is combined and mixed with Christianity, and in some the African spiritual world is confronted as evil. Today the relationship between Christianity and the African world has become a central issue in the former mission churches also. It is a struggle that must be sorted out by Africans; the rest of us can only observe with interest and comment from the sidelines – a task that must not be neglected. The outcome of this struggle will play a vital role in shaping the future of Africa in one way or the other. It is at the same time of great significance for world Christianity.

Chapter 7

The resilience of the African world

In this chapter, attention is given to statements by African writers about their African identity. We trace the line of African thought in South Africa from the 19th century until the 1970s. It gained momentum in the 1940s, became very prominent in the 1970s, and has had a strong influence in all spheres of life since then.

After having traced the line of African thought up to the 1970s, we will trace it further in South African politics from 1994 until the time of writing by looking at the way in which four South African presidents have dealt with the African world, modernity and Christianity. We will then attend to the more recent resurgence of the decolonisation movement in South Africa.

The need for a place to feel at home, the alienation caused by modernity, can to a considerable degree be attributed to modernity's disregard for the African world. Anger at this disregard can be found across Africa. One example: in the 1970s, Wole Soyinka said about Negritude, a movement propagated by Leopold Senghor, that a tiger does not need to proclaim its 'tigritude'. The response to this statement angered him:

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> It has been with an increasing sense of alarm and betrayal that we have watched our position distorted and exploited to embrace a 'sophisticated' school of thought which (for ideological reasons) actually repudiates the existence of an African world! [...] we are at a definite state of African self-liberation [...] we Africans have been encountering a concerted assault, decked in ideological respectability, on every attempt to re-state the authentic world of the African peoples. (Soyinka 1976: ix, x)

The presence of the African world up to the 1960s

Xolela Mangcu (2012) locates the South African Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko within:

> … a long trajectory that goes back to the wars of resistance by the Khoi-Khoi and San people in the Northern Cape frontier in the 17th and 18th centuries [...] the resistance of the Xhosa people on the Eastern Cape frontier throughout the 18th century [...] the formation of the ANC, and later the Pan-Africanist Congress, the Unity movement and the Black Consciousness movement. (pp. 11–12)

Mangcu (2012:14, 35, 51) pays particular attention to 'two great Xhosa chiefs', Ndlambe and Ngqika, and their respective prophets, Nxele and Ntsikana, whose contrasting responses, submission and resistance, 'laid the contours for the conduct and discourse of anti-colonial resistance, while grappling with the question how to deal with European modernity'. This was in the early 19th century.

In 1882, Nehemiah Tile, a prominent minister in the Wesleyan Mission Church at the time, left the church after a missionary had criticised him because of his strong Tembu-nationalistic sympathies. He formed the 'Tembu Church' in 1884 (Sundkler 1948:38). It was not an effort to become part of nor to change the white world. Neither was it a return to the pure, traditional Tembu culture. It was a combination of old and new.

Lamola regards this and similar movements at the time as more than breaking away from white domination. These leaders were:

> … inspired by a hermeneutic that recalled prophetic verses in the Old Testament of the Bible about the future rise of Ethiopia as the symbolic territory of the people of Cush, the African race. This bound the soul of South Africans with the rest of Africa. It was a political movement. (2018:78–79)

In February 1884, Jonas Ntsiko, a blind catechist of St John's Mission, Umtata, wrote this poem:

> Some thoughts till now ne'er spoken
> Make shreds of my innermost being;
> And the cares and fortunes of my kin
> Still journey with me to the grave.

I turn my back on the many shams
That I see from day to day;
It seems we march to our very grave
Encircled by a smiling gospel.

For what is this gospel?
And what salvation?
The shade of a fabulous ghost
That we try to embrace in vain. (Gérard 1971:40–41)

A former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, traced the first origins of his vision of an African Renaissance to the first Pan-Africanist Congress that was held in London, England, in 1900, where WEB du Bois, 'the great African-American fighter for liberation' said: 'The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the colour line' (Mbeki 1998a:205).

In 1910, Thomas Mofolo wrote 'South Africa's first great black novel', *Chaka*. It was published in Sotho in 1926, in 1931 in English, and subsequently in German, French, Italian (Gérard 1971:130), and in Afrikaans in 1974. Commenting on the Christian influences in the work, Gérard writes:

> It is obvious that Mofolo had fully assimilated the Christian view of man as a free agent, totally responsible for his acts [...] Few African works exhibit such a profound integrated sense of the meaning of freedom and guilt in Christian ethics. (1971:125)

But while the central idea of *Chaka* is impressively Christian, he says, it is difficult to escape the impression that in the final stage:

> ... the Christian and the Sotho in Mofolo have made room for the African, who renounces, for a brief while, his tribal rancours and his new definitions of good and evil to ponder on the past greatness of his race and on its present subjugation, finding some undivulged hope, perhaps, in the notion that the white man's empire, too, will wane some day. (Gérard 1971:126)

The Boer War ended with an agreement between the two Boer Republics and Britain, called the Peace of Vereeniging, on 31 May 1902. Article 8 reads: 'The question of granting the Franchise to Natives will not be decided until after the introduction of Self-Government' – eventually, it came about only towards the end of the 20th century. For black leaders such as Sol Plaatje, it was a huge disappointment – after all their sacrifices and their support for the British forces during the war, they now felt betrayed (Bossenbroek 2013:562–563). As a result, the South African Native National Congress (later called the African National Congress [ANC]) was established in Bloemfontein in 1912, after 'the 1909 Act of Union had sealed into law the inferior status of Africans in the new South African state' (Gerhart 1978:12). The ANC played a central role in the struggle against apartheid, and it has been the dominant party in the South African government since 1994.

From the beginning, the liberal Christian approach determined the way in which the ANC tried to find a peaceful solution in South Africa. The ANC believed that reason and fairness would prevail. According to Gerhart (1978:32–34), European and American missionaries founded educational institutions 'for the "civilising" (and Christianising) of blacks'. The result was that a black elite class formed:

> … a natural leading sector of African society […] A belief in the superiority of European culture was basic to its world view, and its goals were unabashedly assimilationist. Having come through the experience of missionary boarding schools, it was well steeped in the liberal and Christian presumptions which prevailed in these institutions, including the optimistic liberal faith in the inevitability of progress […] a fundamental belief in a Protestant ethic of hard work and patience, and a faith in the white man's basic instinct of fair play. (p. 34)

Sol Plaatje was a member of two delegations that the ANC sent to Britain 'to turn their attention to the plight of the South African blacks' and to appeal against the *Natives Land Act 57 of 1913* that severely limited black movement and access to land (Couzens 1975:2).

In about 1917, Plaatje wrote the novel *Mhudi*. Tim Couzens comments:

> Throughout the novel, he hints at the qualities of traditional life which seem to make it more attractive than the life of its usurpers. One of these qualities is hospitality […] [*the*] idea of law or justice is a further quality […] Chief Moroka gives a judgment superior to the suggestions of the white men. (1975:6)

In 1925, Edward VIII, the Prince of Wales visited South Africa. SEK Mqhayi, who was involved in the translation of the Bible, sang a praise song to him in isiXhosa, of which the prince could not have understood much. Professor AC Jordan, a Xhosa scholar, translated it as follows (Gérard 1971):

> Ah, Britain! Great Britain!
> Great Britain of the endless sunshine!
>
> She hath conquered the oceans and laid them low;
> She hath drained the little rivers and lapped them dry;
> She hath swept the little nations and wiped them away:
> And now she is making for the open skies.
>
> She sent us the preacher; she sent us the bottle;
> She sent us the Bible, and barrels of brandy;
> She sent us the breechloader, she sent us cannon;
> Oh! Roaring Britain! Which must we embrace?
> You sent us the truth, denied us the truth;
> You sent us the life, deprived us of life;
> You sent us the light, we sit in the dark;
> Shivering, benighted in the bright noonday sun. (p. 61)

Also in the 1920s, the Zulu church leader Isaiah Shembe broke away from the missionary churches in search of his own identity. He formed the Nazarite Church, one of the largest of the African Initiated Churches (AICs) in South Africa. Shembe was born around 1870 (Mthethwa 1992:242) and worked in Natal between 1911 and 1935 (Brown 1998:120).

Mthethwa (1992) says that Shembe's hymns are 'very controversial' in terms of their content. Some were not published, presumably because the editors felt they attacked the white administrators of the country. However, states Mthethwa (1992):

> ... their credibility as Hymns should be measured against the views of the insiders, that is, African opinion. One of the functions of music according to the African conception is to lampoon one's enemies. On the whole, therefore, whether the Hymns echo the biblical text, or are downright satires, they reinforce the religious experience of the people. (pp. 254, 255)

Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites responded to some of the most pressing issues of 20th-century Zulu history, in particular, and modern South African history in general. The hymns refer to the ownership and occupation of land; economic dispossession; African nationalism and ethnicity; the ideological and educational role of the missionaries; the suppression of orality by the epistemological and cognitive authority of the Western tradition of print; and the pattern of psychological subjugation and black resistance (Brown 1998:124). All of these are interrelated.

In 1936, the Christian, liberal approach of the ANC received a shock when the Cape African voters were removed from the common voters' roll – and there was:

> ... disillusionment, discouragement and a growing scepticism about the high-sounding promises of Christianity and white trusteeship. Beneath these pessimistic sentiments, however, the currents of liberal faith still continued to run strong, producing an uncomfortable ambivalence in all African political efforts. (Gerhart 1978:34–35)

In 1940, AC Jordan's book *Ingqumbo yeminyanya* was published by Lovedale Press. It deals with the conflict between modern education and traditional faith, as well as the love between individuals that leads to Christian marriage, as opposed to traditional religion and polygamy. In 1971, the literary scholar Albert S Gérard (1971:82–88) wrote that this book was a literary high point in isiXhosa. The book was later translated into English under the title *The wrath of the ancestors*.

In the 1930s, HIE Dhlomo started to develop an African aesthetic.

Dhlomo cannot be characterised by one or two words:

> Dhlomo was not a simple figure. In his angrier moments, he favoured a black nationalism (sometimes even there were hints of Zulu nationalism). In his more

> benign moods, he advocated a non-racial South African nationalism, a unity, founded in nature, which would [...] replace the 'shattered Eden'. (Couzens 1985: 356)

In 1936, Dhlomo wrote:

> Action! Rhythm! Emotion! Gesture! Imitation! Desires! [...] Action, rhythm and the other histrionic qualities are not foreign to the African – neither is drama. The origin of African drama was a combination of religious or magical ritual, rhythmic dances and the song. These ceremonies were based on what anthropologists call Sympathetic Magic. The dances were rhythmic and expressive; the songs emotional and devotional. (1936:232)

In another article, Dhlomo (1939:89) rejected rhyme as a 'suitable outward form' for the 'emotional content' of African poetry. He quoted Sir A Quiller-Couch, who said: 'No one can be clever and ecstatic at the same time'. Dhlomo propagated the use of rhythm as the form best suited to the African genius:

> This sense of rhythm is seen even in the movement of tribal people. The element is also well marked in African music and in tribal plastic art. The dances, too, are strongly rhythmical. In fact, one may almost say the greatest gift of Africa to the artistic world will be – and has been – Rhythm. There is no doubt that Shakespeare, the Greek dramatists and the Hebrew writers used certain ingredients to produce rhythmic beauty in their works. There is a kind of rhythmic law underlying all great literature, all beauty. We too, can use archaic tribal forms to produce a form of poetry and rhythmic effect distinctly African. Rhythm is more than a physical sensation. It is inspired uniformity in motion, giving birth to thought and emotion and visions. (1939:90)

In the 1950s, Dhlomo met Anton Lembede, who fervently advocated the idea of a unique African civilisation (in the language of McLaren in Chapter 5, he advocated a different framing story). This represented a break with earlier responses, it:

> ... was an honest attempt to confront rather than avoid some of the African's most difficult dilemmas [...] [It was] a first attempt to formulate a creed of orthodox nationalism for black South Africa [...] From his wide reading in history and philosophy, and from an observation of the strength which ideological fanaticism has lent to the Afrikaners, Lembede arrived at the conclusion quite early in his contact with the ANC that an ideology as such was essential for Africans if they were to maximize their resources in the unequal struggle against white dominance. Ideology seemed to Lembede to be the most potent medium through which African leadership could address itself to the fundamental psychological handicaps of the African masses. He was sensitive [...] to the crippling complexes of inferiority and dependence imposed on Africans [...]. (Gerhart 1978:54–55)

Lembede became a leading figure in the formation of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL), with people such as Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu; he also became the first president of the ANCYL in 1944 (Gerhart 1978:51).

Gerhart (1978:63) concluded that Lembede did not have much impact: his philosophy '… was too abstract to arouse much enthusiasm among Lembede's less mystically-inclined contemporaries'. This view finds support in the fact that the young Mandela did not remain under the influence of Lembede for a long time.

At its inception, the ANCYL was heavily influenced by the exclusive African nationalism espoused by Anton Lembede, and Mandela was initially a strong supporter of the Lembede line that the ANC should stand on its own and not accept Indians, communists or white people as members, out of fear that they would take over the organisation. However, his contact with Indian, 'coloured' and white political movements and individuals caused him to become more 'mature' in his approach (Mandela 1995:91–93, 96–98, 215).

In 1985, Tim Couzens published a book, *The new African: A study of the life and work of H.I.E. Dhlomo*, in which he, unlike Gerhart, concluded that Lembede and African nationalism did have a significant impact. 'New Africans' such as Dhlomo continued to develop a 'nationalist movement', an African aesthetic on the basis, at least partly, of 'the idea of Ubuntu or Lembede's spirit of Africa' (Couzens 1985:262–63).

In the 1950s, most African writers maintained the values of the Western middle-class as the norm. But the political scene became more fluid; the followers of Lembede broke away from the ANC in 1959–1960 to form the Pan-Africanist Congress, with Robert Sobukwe as the leader.

The PAC launched a campaign against the country's pass laws on 21 March 1960. While the response in most places was poor, a massive crowd, by some estimates as large as 25 000, gathered in the township of Sharpeville in the Gauteng province of South Africa. When a section of the wire fence around the police station collapsed, the front ranks of the crowd surged forward, somebody from the crowd fired two pistol shots into the air, and the police started shooting into the crowd. Sixty-nine corpses remained behind, most of them with bullet wounds in their backs (Steinberg 2023:150–151). A somewhat different version of events is given by Gerhart (1978:238).

Jonny Steinberg recounts the country-wide unrest that followed: Robert Sobukwe and his PAC comrades were arrested on the same day, and quickly put on trial. The PAC leaders refused to defend themselves, arguing that they had no hand in making the law and had no moral obligation to obey it:

> It was an immensely effective performance. To make apartheid's courts a theatre of sacrifice was both new and ever so old, for Sobukwe's audience was nothing if not schooled in the Gospels and had thus watched Saint Peter, and indeed had watched Jesus, become a martyr in an enemy's court. (2023:153–154)

Steinberg continues: to counter the growing popularity of the PAC, Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and a small coterie of people in the ANC decided to embark on an armed struggle. Mandela was chosen as the leader: 'If Sobukwe's stature was growing because he had become a symbol of sacrifice, Nelson would better him as a symbol of action: dramatic, violent action' (2023:155; see also pp. 160–161).

Many in the ANC were opposed to an armed struggle but agreed to it as a compromise (Steinberg 2023:165–166).

Mandela went underground but was arrested in 1963. During the famous Rivonia trial that followed, he 'had in fact snatched Robert Sobukwe's court performance from two years earlier, all of it, and made it his own. (Steinberg 2023:180–181; see also the discussion headed Nelson Mandela below).

After these events, the 1960s were unusually quiet.

■ The 1970s

The ANC's belief that reason and fairness would prevail has remained powerful, but there was 'a host of new factors in the political equation of 1976' (Gerhart 1978:2), and that made the situation complex in the way illustrated by Newton's method in Chapter 2. The affirmation of an African identity took centre stage in this decade. This affirmation contains some very constructive characteristics, such as self-respect and a refusal to be defined primarily as a victim.

In 1969, Steve Biko established the South African Students' Organisation (SASO). This can be seen as the start of the Seventies, the decade of Black Consciousness.

The Seventies was a time of protest against the culture of the township communities that shaped themselves on Western cultural patterns. One of the best descriptions of this township culture can be found in the two books of a Dutch sociologist, Mia Brandel-Syrier, who befriended a better-off township community, or elite, on the Reef in the Sixties and Seventies. The two books are: *Reeftown Elite* (1971) and *Coming through: In search of a new cultural identity*. (1978).

In Reeftown Elite, the importance of the modern house as a symbol of modernity, even of a sense of being 'human', is pointed out:

> In itself, to live in a house and not in a hut, was of the greatest social and cultural significance. It not only showed that one had 'arrived' socially and culturally, but it demonstrated for everyone to see that one had arrived among human beings. (1971:85–86)

The desire for a home symbolised arrival at the final destiny in town; it represented a new cultural identity:

> It has condensed, almost as an obsession, into the picture of a house – a house and all a house stands for – the final arrival after a trek going back many generations. (1971:88–89)

An insurance agent explained his ideal, if he had money: 'I would buy a nice house. I want us to be comfortable. That is with electricity and all the comforts' (Brandel-Syrier 1978:96).

Coming through refers to a successful entry into the modern world, or 'civilisation', as the 'Reeftown elite' called Western culture. Hardly anybody spoke of an African civilisation in this context. Western civilisation represented the identity people were striving for. 'This civilisation 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).

In 1971 (the year in which her first book was published), Brandel-Syrier had already noticed that the ideal of modernisation was not without complications: 'And so, inevitably, anticlimax had set in' (1971:54).

In the same year, 1971, Oswald Joseph Mtshali published his *Sounds of a cowhide drum.*[21] This anthology of poetry illustrates the transition from coveting the Western lifestyle to the proud assertion of African identity in the early Seventies. In one of the poems Mtshali agrees with those who idealise modernisation:

> I don't want to go to heaven when I'm dead.
> I want my heaven now, here on earth in Houghton and Parktown;
> a mansion
> two cars or more
> and smiling servants.
> Isn't that heaven? (1971:25)

But on the last page, there is suddenly a different mood, the mood of Black Consciousness:

> Boom! Boom! Boom!
> This is the sound of the cowhide drum ...
>
> I am the spirit of your ancestors,
> habitant in hallowed huts,

21. The poets that are mentioned here were discussed in my 1982 book, Dominee, are you listening to the drums?

eager to protect,
forever vigilant.

Let me tell you of your precious heritage,
of your glorious past trampled by the conqueror,
destroyed by the zeal of a missionary ...

Boom! Boom! Boom!
That is the sound of a cowhide drum –
the Voice of Mother Africa. (Mtshali 1971:68)

The Seventies had begun. Resistance against white domination became overt. Black Consciousness, with its slogan *Black is beautiful!* was popularised.

Wally Serote picks up where Mtshali ended. The first poem in 'Yakhal' Inkomo' begins:

Do not fear Baas
It's just that I appeared
And our faces met
In this black night that's like me. (1974:1)

Serote finds his identity in being black, in the night (the reference to the 'black night' possibly comes from the North American poet Langston Hughes) and in other symbols. It is no comfortable choice: the colour black has always been a symbol of suffering and death, but for Serote, life and freedom will come out of suffering and death. Serote does not ask for sympathy or help from white people. Black people will solve their own problems. He pleads with his fellow 'black brothers' in 'My brothers in the streets':

Come my black brothers in the streets
Listen,
It's black women who are crying. (1974:19)

Black people reject absorption into white culture such as white tea parties ('They do it', Serote 1974), and scorn other black people who adopt white values. In 'Ofay looks at horizon', the poet sees himself as one who lives in the shadows but rejects 'success' according to white standards:

Torn, like a dog-bitten cat,
Bleeding and licking leaking blood,
My soul
Has learned to creep;

Lie in the shadow of quiet bushes
Amid dry-dying leaves
Where my mind, like a hobo,
Sneaks, resents you, the man,
And spits at your ways,
You 'successful' Blackman. (Serote 1974:45)

Two other urban poets from Soweto have similar views. Sipho Sepamla (1975:55) describes black people who try to take over white views and win white approval as 'A relic of Africa's yesterday'. Pascal Gwala reproaches 'Black status seekers' and praises the black soil of Africa:

You all know it,
    you
blacks with so-called class
    you
you non-whites, you.
Black grownup kids munching cream crackers can't reach
    the beauty of
a Black toddler suckchewing the black soil;
You all know it.
Plastic architecture
is smothering Marabastad
Sho you all know it. (1977:33)

He ends the poem:

When you can't love Black
then you wish to be white
Non-whites! (1977:33)

In a long poem, 'Getting off the ride' (1977:60), Gwala rejects all the Western 'gadgets' and praises the power of the 'Black Ghost' and the 'Black Voice'.

For Serote (1974), the Western city brings only alienation:

Jo'burg City, Johannesburg.
Listen when I tell you
There is no fun, nothing, in it,
When you leave the women and men with such frozen expressions,
Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion,

Jo'burg City, you are dry like death (1974:4, 5)

You surprise me when you build rivers of tar in the sky
Weaving in and out
Into your palace of tombstones hovering in the sky
I wade away
Back to my trap (1974:15)

The Western desire for progress, for going upward and forward, away from the earth, evokes negative responses. In 'The signs of time' Sepamla writes:

Into the skies have gone
The Carlton Centres and the Strydom Towers
And churches that sweep from the ground like warplanes
And the Sowetos, the Tembisas, the Kwa-Mashus
Sprawl over wastelands … (1975:65)

In contrast, the poets repeatedly express their longing for harmony, such as the longing for harmony with nature and with the Africa of the past:

We are the black violators
of the machine rhythm
in plastic cities …
and plastic gardens …
… vitriolic trash
… in refuse bins
We are the rhythm of the jungle
long banked up by the ages
across the sands
of the Nile the Congo the Zambezi (Gwala 1977:27)

Such cultural protest is not confined to urban poets in South Africa. One can find it in literary works all over South Africa and Africa, as well as in other spheres of life such as politics and the churches.

There was, however, a deeper layer of protest against the Western world, in which these poets were regarded 'with hostility and mistrust' in spite of their strong support for Black Consciousness and the struggle against apartheid. Making use of the literate form itself is to compromise oneself with Western culture. The affirmation of African cultural traditions and the desire to avoid white interference and censorship led to a strategy of performance rather than publication. To return to oral forms is part of a cultural movement; it is an act of political resistance. Performance includes

'African robes, rhythmic movement, facial expression, gesture, intonation, alternating pace of delivery, pauses, and the hypnotic beating of the drums'. It involves 'a return to the ancestral source', cyclical construction, parallelism and repetition. The repetition can be seen in the following example from 1979 by Ingoapele Madingoane:

> Free my soul
> Let me decide
> Between you and me
> Let me decide
> Between evil and good
> Let me decide
> Between freedom and slavery
> Let me decide
> Whether men
> Should live in happiness or misery. (quoted by Brown 1998:182–185)

The oral texts that appeared in print are 'typographically "marked" for [their] oral ontology' (Brown 1998:192). Brown gives a good example, also by Madingoane:

> Don't crawl to your future
> You are bound to be brave
> Reach your goal blackman
> Stand up man stand up and
> Go man go
> *Blackman go.* (1998:197)

Brown quotes another literary scholar, Michael Chapman, who writes about orality in 1984:

> Underlying such an approach is the vision of an African anthropomorphic universe wherein all relationships – from God to the ancestral spirits, through man to the animals and plants – are mutually co-existent. It is a universe that evinces beauty-in-harmony; it is (to quote Senghor) 'a dictionary, a web of metaphors, a vast network of signs' and is characterised by the depth and intensity of affective life. *Thus artistic technique, in its attempts to express rhythmic essence, is at the same time felt to be an ethical principle*; the poet, by chanting his poem, gives audible substance to those life forces which, according to African ontology, are deemed to emanate from God and are Being – for Being is Force, Life is Energy. As far as the poet is concerned, therefore, the ideal (again to quote Senghor) is 'total art', in which a world of static appearances gives way to one of dynamic realities; '*imitation is superseded by participation, the master-word of Negritude*'. (Brown 1998:193–194; [*emphasis added*])

This was not only a protest against white political dominance. It often was, at the same time, a protest against Western culture as such and against the Christian worldview.

In a book with the significant title *Chasing gods not our own* (1975), Dr SME Bengu describes the growing search for cultural identity all over Black Africa. He finds different reasons for this search.

Firstly, during independence, it was believed that political independence would bring all other things (cf. Kwame Nkrumah's slogan: 'Seek ye first the political kingdom and all else will follow'). This belief led to disappointment. Economic catastrophes stimulated the search for Africa's own cultural identity:

> Poverty, external dependence and internal repression are still the same, if not worse than during the pre-independence period. There is much disillusionment with the results of present development strategies and with the benefits of international cooperation. (Bengu 1975:xviii)

African writers question not only the development strategies and the relations with both Western and Eastern countries but they also ask: what kind of society are we striving for? This search is primarily a cultural one; politics is seen as only one part and as an expression of the total culture (Bengu 1975:xviii, xix).

Secondly, it is believed that a cultural revolution will bring about development and liberation. Champions of this movement have urged all Africans to rely on their own values and traditional models of education and modes of behaviour. Foreign models for the definition of development goals will not be accepted anymore for shaping future African societies (Bengu 1975:xx–xxii).

Thirdly, Bengu stated that many Africans had developed an 'identity crisis'. They adopted elements of Western culture, but they were not able to integrate these elements with their African culture. 'This explains to some extent the schizophrenic behaviour of the elite not knowing whether they are Africans or white men.' All elements of Western culture will not be rejected – the greatest challenge facing modern Africa is rather 'to reconcile and harmonize the old and the new' – but the Western world cannot define the identity Africans will strive for anymore. Many Western cultural elements are too foreign to the African world, and many Africans are aware that the industrial world itself is straining under ecological and social pressures (Bengu 1975:xxi–xxiii).

Many writers in Africa feel:

> … that some Africans, under the spell of European heroes, have colonised themselves. In an attempt to have all the glories of Western cultures, they have made themselves more dependent on the Western states that are exporters of these artificial oases of wealth. (Bengu 1975:34)

Bengu quotes the writer Armah:

> We do not serve ourselves if we remain like insects, fascinated by the white man's power. Let us look inward. What are we? What have we? Can we work for ourselves? [...] In the end, we are our own enslavers first. Only we can free ourselves. Today, when we say it, it is a promise, not yet a fact [...] Freedom!
>
> At the time when European rule was rejected, the elite had been so much impressed and fascinated by Western culture that they had lost many African traits. They had internalized Western cultural values [...] Armah maintains that a black man who has spent his life fleeing from himself into whiteness has no power if the white man gives him none. So even though these Africans came to speak of salvation, they had whites for their masters. (1975:34)

Bengu's study shows how the search for an authentic African cultural identity has influenced the ideals concerning physical appearance and skin colour, dress, language and names, moral values, attitudes to work, sex, marriage, education, outlook on life, economics, politics, religion, etc. All of these belong together and none can be treated in isolation.

■ Four presidents' cultural identities

The previous section traced the line of African thought up to the 1970s. In the 1970s, things became more complex. African thought became a prominent force in all aspects of society. It was one of the 'host of new factors' in the political equation that Gerhart (1978:2) observed.

The ANC, which was the leader of the struggle against apartheid, is often described as a broad church, making room for a diversity of ideologies and views. The main influences are communism, with its emphasis on class conflict, with racist capitalism as the main enemy; Black Consciousness, with its emphasis on identity and self-reliance; liberalism, with its emphasis on the individual and reason; and Christianity, with its emphasis on justice and reconciliation. The way these influences have continued to combine in different ways can be seen in the varying cultural identities of four of the presidents of South Africa since 1994: Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa, who was still president at the time of writing this book. After the Polokwane ANC conference in 2007 that lead to the resignation of Thabo Mbeki as president, Mr Kgalema Motlanthe served as caretaker president until president Zuma took over the reins, but due to his short presidency, we will not discuss him here. We now take a quick look at the different combinations and configurations of the mentioned influences that can be found in each of their personalities and approaches. That serves as an illustration of the fact that neither of these forces has disappeared since the Seventies.

Nelson Mandela

A high point in the public influence of the liberal Christian view was its decisive role in the peaceful political transition of South Africa in the early 1990s. It was personified in the being and role of Nelson Mandela (see Figure 7.1), who was freed after 27 years in jail for his role in the struggle for the liberation of the vast majority of South Africans, as well as in Archbishop Desmond Tutu – both of them Nobel Prize winners.

A third Nobel Prize winner from this period, FW de Klerk, the last president of the South African apartheid government, announced the beginning of negotiations for a constitutional democracy on 2 February 1990. His brother, a theologian, claimed that this was based on De Klerk's conviction that biblical values, such as justice, had to shape all dimensions of life, including politics – a conviction found in Reformed circles (De Klerk 1991:151).

On 9 October 1963, Mandela was accused of 'sabotage, aimed at facilitating violent revolution and an armed invasion of the country'; on 12 June 1964, he was sentenced to life imprisonment, and on 11 February 1990, he was released (Mandela 1995:337–338, 361–362, 551).

I remember the day of his release very well. We stayed next to the campus of the University of the North, a centre of the struggle against apartheid, where violence and arson were common. There were now only three white families for kilometres around. We did not know what to expect. We took our children to play in the passages of the university buildings, which were deserted, but when we heard students cheering in the nearby hostels, we decided to rather return home.

To the surprise of the world, Mandela did not come out as a bitter man but as a peacemaker. That was one of the remarkable experiences of my life: to be privileged to see how the radical and suspicious mood of both black people and white people changed into openness for each other and a vision of a common, peaceful and just future. All this optimism did not last, but that does not take anything away from the exceptional success he – and others – contributed towards defusing a highly tense and polarised situation in our country.

The optimism could not last because the problem definition was flawed: both black and white, for different reasons, found it convenient to blame all our problems on apartheid. However, during my negotiations with students in the previous years, I had come to realise that there was more to it than merely that. Hopefully the Government of National Unity, that was formed in 2024, will bring about a better understanding of the multiple factors at play and contribute towards relieving the underlying tensions in all spheres

of our society. I hope that this book enables a deeper insight into these problems.

One of the reasons why Mandela was so successful as a peacemaker was his remarkable personality, his genuine interest in people – even the least significant of people – and the way he could accept suffering without retaliation. He led by example; he supported his words with his own life.

We will now discuss a few aspects of this story: Mandela was a Christian and interpreted his own suffering in light of the suffering of Jesus; he had an inclusive rather than exclusive view of the Christian faith; he was not, in principle, opposed to violence, but he eventually chose peace as being much more significant; and he held Western culture in high regard. He was positively disposed towards African cultural traditions but in a qualified way.

Mandela regarded himself as a Christian. This discussion does not present a complete overview of Mandela's faith but focuses on the way he identified with the way Jesus suffered and died.

Mandela had a Christian upbringing and attended Christian schools, and in prison, he attended all church services and 'enjoyed some of the sermons', but he felt that, from experience, it is far better 'to keep religious beliefs to yourself. You may unconsciously offend a lot of people by trying to sell them ideas they regard as unscientific and pure fiction' (Mandela 2010:235).

From a conversation with his friend Ahmed Kathrada, we get a clear indication of what his own position was:

> KATHRADA: This is the way it is worded, page 62 [of a draft of Mandela's autobiography Long Walk to Freedom]: 'He felt some pangs at abandoning his Christian beliefs which had fortified his childhood, like St Peter three times denying Christ.' Now, is it correct wording to say you 'abandoned your Christian beliefs'?
>
> MANDELA: No, never.
>
> KATHRADA: It would be wrong, isn't it?
>
> MANDELA: [...] I say it's absolutely untrue. I never abandoned my Christian beliefs. (Mandela 2010:53)

His comparison of his own trial with the trial of Christ gives an even stronger indication. On 1 January 1970, Mandela (2010:223–227) wrote a long letter to his wife Winnie about a novel written by the Afrikaans writer CJ Langenhoven. The novel is written from the point of view of Pontius Pilate, the official of the Roman Empire who was the judge in his trial. After the trial, Pilate writes to a friend in Rome about the trial. In Mandela's reflection on the novel, there are many parallels between Christ and the political prisoners:

> I read the novel in 1964 and now speak purely from memory. Yet though the incident described in the book occurred about 2000 years ago, the story contains a moral whose truth is universal and which is as fresh and meaningful today as it was at the height of the Roman Empire [...]. (p. 223)

Mandela tells the story of Christ's trial, which is also a story about himself and his fellow prisoners. Pilate has all the power of the Roman Empire behind him, but he could not fathom this man: 'It became clear that in that courtroom authority was not in me as a judge, but was down below in the dock where the prisoner was'. And although Pilate knew that the prisoner was innocent, he handed him over to the multitudes to be crucified.

Mandela saw victory in remaining faithful to what you believe in, and in this he identified with Jesus. However, he did not refer to doing God's will but to doing what your fellow men expect of you:

> Victory in a great cause is measured not only by reaching the final goal. It is also a triumph to live up to expectations in your lifetime [...] The knowledge that you did your duty, and lived up to the expectations of your fellow men is in itself a rewarding experience and magnificent achievement. (2010:243)

And:

> Those who have no soul, no sense of national pride and no ideals to win can suffer neither humiliation nor defeat; they can evolve no national heritage, are inspired by no sacred mission and can produce no martyrs or national heroes. A new world will be won not by those who stand at a distance with their arms folded, but by those who are in the arena, whose garments are torn by storms and whose bodies are maimed in the course of contest. (2010:175–176)

Even when facing a death sentence, Mandela did not waver. To expect a death sentence is a very serious experience, but the accused said to each other that they should not think just in terms of themselves:

> ... but of the struggle as a whole. We should disappear under a cloud of glory, we should fight back. This is the service we can render to our organisation and to our people. (2010:122–123)

He returns here to the tradition of Chief Albert Luthuli, who was a devout Christian and president of the ANC until his death, and, as we have seen, to the approach of the PAC leader Robert Sobukwe during his trial, an approach that Mandela had opposed before. Mandela worked with Luthuli and knew him well. Luthuli was often detained because of his resistance against apartheid, and he was Africa's first winner of the Nobel Peace Prize (Mandela 1995:425). In 1952, he issued a statement to the press 'The road to freedom is via the cross'.[22]

22. See https://luthulimuseum.org.za/project/the-road-to-freedom-is-via-the-cross/

Jonny Steinberg (2023: 15-16) refers to another possible influence on Mandela's thinking. In his last year at school Mandela read Lord Macaulay's *History of England* that was prescribed. According to Macaulay, England was a place of "magic and darkness and superstition" for countless generations. They were conquered by one power after the other. With the Norman invasion, the English waged a predatory war against their oppressors. The fighters were concealed by their people and difficult to find, so that they could keep the struggle going. Four generations later, a rift developed between the Norman throne on the continent and the Norman aristocrats who ruled England. These aristocrats and their former enemies, the English people, began to make common cause. That was the beginning of English history, of England's greatness, says Macaulay. Steinberg sees a remarkable similarity between this history and Mandela's way of thinking.

Mandela often placed his personal history and the history of the African people within the context of universal human history. He did not talk about the Christian values and even the work of Christ as something very unique in human history but as an expression of something universal. To give an example, the following can be an expression of Christian spirituality, but it is presented as a possibility for 'every soul':

> The cell is an ideal place to learn to know yourself [...] Honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, pure generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve others – qualities which are within easy reach of every soul – are the foundation of one's spiritual life [...] You may find it difficult at first to pinpoint the negative features in your life, but the 10th attempt may yield rich rewards. Never forget that a saint is a sinner who keeps on trying. (2010:211–212)

> But the habit of attending to small things and of appreciating small courtesies is one of the important marks of a good person. (2010:236)

Mandela was not so strict on using peaceful methods only, as Luthuli was. He argued that the use of violence '... is determined purely by the conditions [...] Christ used violence because in that situation it is the only language he could use' (Mandela 2010:81–82, referring to the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus). Mandela and his friend Walter Sisulu once went to Durban, where there was a meeting of the National Executive of the ANC, to argue that they must establish an armed wing. Chief Luthuli and others opposed this very strongly 'because he believed in non-violence as a principle, whereas we believed in it as a tactic' (Mandela 2010:76). But eventually, Mandela preferred peaceful means.

Mandela had a deep affinity for Western civilisation, specifically a liberal version of it, as can be seen in his respect for reason as something that one should appeal to in others, and his high regard for the individual. He wrote about Western literature:

> Those Greek plays, you know, are really worth reading. It's like the classics, you know the works of Tolstoy and so on, because after reading [...] that literature, you always come out [...] very elevated and your sensitivities to [...] fellow human beings having been deepened. It is one of the greatest experiences [...] you can have, you know, to read a Greek tragedy and Greek literature in general. (2010:113)

Elsewhere Mandela wrote:

> Now I had never seen an Eskimo and I had always thought of them as people who are catching ... polar bears and seals ... I never imagined that [they] were [at] schools ... and [that] they were just like ourselves ... I should have ... know[n] that people *anywhere*, throughout the world, changed from their less advanced positions ... the manager was a lady – Eskimo lady – but very advanced, you know, very highly cultured person. (2010:382–383)

One reads with a smile: 'You see, the question of dramatising things, even if they are not correct [...] is a typical American thing' (Mandela 2010:400).

He saw modern education as the cure for both poverty and the environment:

> The continent of Africa is well aware of the importance of the environment. But most of the problems [with the environment] are simply the product of poverty and lack of education. Africa has no resources or skills to deal with desertation [sic], deforestation, soil erosion and pollution. (2010:329)

Mandela respected African tradition, but he felt it had to be accommodated within modern Western culture. After his release from prison, he sent a number of sons and daughters of traditional leaders to universities in South Africa, as well as to the United Kingdom and the United States of America. He believed that education would help them to accept the democratic process and overcome the 'inferiority complex which makes many of them to cling desperately to feudal forms of administration' (Mandela 2010:14).

His approach was to respect his customs and traditions as long as they kept people together and did not divide them. (Mandela 2010:26)

While still imprisoned, Mandela expressed an interesting view on the Africa of three centuries ago, which he identified with on a very profound level but which he regarded as being in the Neolithic or (partly) the Stone Age. On 1 January 1971, Mandela replied to a note from Nomabutho Bhala about a dream that she had. Mandela wrote that the dream moved him 'much more than all the classics I have read'. It was a dream of personalities 'that lived some three centuries ago'. There is hardly any concrete link to them, such as photographs:

> Yet even a polished urbanite like yourself, who live in the second half of the 20th century, with all the fantastic progress and achievements that mark it, and who is cut off from the influence of tribal life, cannot wipe away from your thoughts, plans and dreams the rugged and fierce heroes of the Neolithic Age. They were unusual men – the exceptions that are found elsewhere in the world; in so far as their economy and implements were concerned they lived in the Stone Age,

> and yet they founded large and stable kingdoms by means of metal weapons [...] holding at bay for a continuous period of [one] hundred years, a community millennia in advance of themselves in economic organisation and technology, and which made full use of the scientific resources at their disposal [...] When their country was threatened they showed the highest standard of patriotism. (2010:15)

However, Mandela did not attach much value to some African traditions. When he had to wait for a comrade who first wanted to perform some traditional rituals, he expressed unusual dissatisfaction:

> Gee whiz, [that] fellow believes in witch doctors ... He was busy having his medicine, washing himself. Gee whiz! And by the time he came out he was smelling, you know, like a what-you-call, a meer, a polecat. Smelling [of] all sorts of things, herbs and so on. I was annoyed with that boy ... He kept me for thirty minutes! (2010:69)

One cannot apply the observation that Brandel-Syrier made about the urban elite in 1978, that there is no role consistency, no ego continuity, to Nelson Mandela, at least not after his 27 years in detention. But about his earlier life, Steinberg remarks:

> Nelson had developed an enormous range in the decade since his arrival in Johannesburg. And in each of the many spheres in which he moved, he was somebody else. In his capacity to embody the spirit of the world he happened to inhabit, whatever that world may be, lay the seeds of his later genius. (2023:103; Mandela came to Johannesburg in 1941, see Steinberg 2023:62.)

As a student, Mandela presented himself as an uncompromising Africanist, but that was just one of several faces that he presented. On one occasion, he hounded the leader of the Communist Party, JB Marks, off the stage, but at the same time, visited him at his home and invited him to his own. He eventually adopted a multiracial approach and made peace with communism. 'He liked this capacity to be at ease amid a plurality. It excited him greatly' (Steinberg 2023:86–88).

In 1962, after a six-month tour all over Africa, he returned as an Africanist again. 'It is hard to exaggerate the degree of agitation he caused [...] Dear old friends from other races and from the Communist Party felt betrayed – after two decades of close relationships with him, he appeared to be a nationalist' (Steinberg 2023:176). But during the trial that began as soon as the next year, he delivered his famous speech in which he declared that he was prepared to die for 'the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony and with equal opportunities' – and he took over, as we have seen, Sobukwe's response at his court case, of resistance through martyrdom, an approach he had rejected in 1961.

After Mandela was freed, he played the role of a peace-maker, willing to forgive his former enemies and embrace them. Steinberg describes this as only one of his personae. He quotes Barbara Masekela, Mandela's confidante

Source: This photograph was obtained from Wikimedia Commons, titled 'Nelson Mandela 1994 (2)', taken 23 October 1994 at the Washington DC Longworth Building, Washington DC, United States of America, © 2001 John Mathew Smith, and is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License, of which a copy is available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en. This version of the original photograph is available on Wikimedia Commons, edited by Wikimedia Commons user FMSky on 13 January 2022, viewed 10 November 2023, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nelson_Mandela_1994_(2).jpg>.

FIGURE 7.1: Photograph of Nelson Mandela

at the time, who described him as an "actor". Before meeting some delegation, she said, 'You could actually see him becoming this Nelson Mandela, the great forgiver, the Thembu princeling. We would catch him doing it, and he would laugh. He would not hide it'. But, she said, he was a 'deeply wounded man', 'one of the saddest human beings I have ever known [...] It was sadness and anger mixed together, fierce anger'. In public he presented himself as a reconciler, but it was a mask that he wore in order to play the role that he felt the country needed. 'It [the mask] sat forever on his dressing table alongside several others, always ready to wear' (2023:425, 426, 444).

To fulfil this vocation of being a peacemaker, he had to suppress his raw and deep bitterness and grievances with the men who jailed him. At this time, Winnie fell out of grace with the ANC, and she was charged, by the same system that jailed him, with kidnapping and assault with the intent to cause grievous bodily harm. The measures that Nelson took to defend her are not in line with his persona of benevolence and moderation. 'He defended his wife with cruelty, with corruption, with a taste to humiliate others. Here, and perhaps only here, was the wounded, the aggrieved, the blindly furious Nelson Mandela' (2023:423, 439).

It seems Steinberg sees this Mandela, the 'broken man... the blindly furious Nelson Mandela' as the 'real' Mandela.

It is a matter of emphasis. After reading Mandela's self-reflections in *Conversations with myself,* and all the evidence about what he did and said, seeing his impact on the country, I find it difficult to see his role as peacemaker as a mere persona that he could put back on his dressing table when he came home, something he could laugh about. Maybe the concept of a wounded healer, which is used in counselling, is more appropriate: Mandela's decisive identity was that of a healer, of a peacemaker, and he arrived at this identity because of a life-long struggle with himself, with all the powerful forces in his country that he felt raging in himself and in his life, that deeply wounded him. He had to overcome his understandable furious anger, hurt, and bitterness. That he struggled to do so is equally understandable. That he could succeed in doing so is remarkable.

Thabo Mbeki

In the life of Thabo Mbeki, who was the president of South Africa from 1999 to 2008, we find a different configuration.[23]

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). However, 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 urban cemetery in Zwide among the graves of ordinary working folk in Port Elizabeth (now Gqeberha) and not in the traditional Transkei, where his wife still resided:

> 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 amaZizi of Mpukane or the Mbeki household of Idutywa. (Gevisser 2007: 768)

Initially, Mbeki followed his father. He studied at the Lenin Institute in the Soviet Union (now known as Russia) from 1969–1971, where he accepted communism while retaining some of his liberal economic ideas that he had acquired as a student in England. In 1976, in Swaziland, he played an active role in converting student refugees from Steve Biko's Black Consciousness thinking to the ANC ideologies; he believed that:

> … the only social theory compelling enough to wean the Seventies generation off Black Consciousness was Marxism-Leninism. Every single cadre entering the movement had to undergo political education at the hands of commissars. (Gevisser 2007:314, 351)

23. Mbeki was also discussed in Van Niekerk 2014b

Source: This photograph was obtained from Wikimedia Commons, titled 'Thabo Mbeki – World Economic Forum Annual Meeting New York 2002', taken 01 February 2002 at the 32nd Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York, United States of America, photographed by Marcel Bieri, © 2002 World Economic Forum, and is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License, of which a copy is available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en. This version of the original photograph is available on Wikimedia Commons, edited by Wikimedia Commons user File Upload Bot (Magnus Manske) on 10 January 2009, viewed 10 November 2023, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thabo_Mbeki_-_World_Economic_Forum_Annual_Meeting_New_York_2002.jpg>.

FIGURE 7.2: Photograph of Thabo Mbeki.

Mbeki 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). He was an African first and then a communist (Gevisser 2007:467–468).

When Mbeki returned to South Africa from exile in 1990, he initially decided not to return 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)

His biographer Mark Gevisser 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 could be revived. Later on, after 2004, his mother hinted that it was like being 'born anew' or 'born again' (Gevisser 2007:16, 781, 784).

Mbeki's rediscovery of African identity became a political agenda. When he, as vice-president, tabled the new, very progressive South African

constitution in Parliament on 8 May 1996, he opened with a phrase that has often been repeated since: 'I am an African ...'

The organisers of a conference on the African Renaissance commented that:

> Mbeki's words declared an unambiguous identity, an African identity, a people with a particular history, a people from a particular civilisation, a people who are unique in their socialization and their way of interpreting the world; a people distinct but interdependent with other peoples; a people with originality; a people that gave birth to humanity, language, science, technology, philosophy, wisdom, and so forth. (Makgoba 1999:iv–v)

Mbeki's words 'I am an African', echoed the words with which Dr Pixley ka Isaka Seme, one of the four founders of the ANC in 1912, started a speech when he was a student at Columbia University in 1905: 'I am an African [...] and I set my pride on my race over against a hostile public opinion'. Seme's speech was repeated in full by Kwame Nkrumah in 1962 at the First International Congress of Africanists in Accra, Ghana (Magubane 1999:31–32). Mbeki's idea of the African Renaissance is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

Jacob Zuma

Unlike Mbeki, who discovered African tradition later in his life and approached it in a rather academic way, Jacob Zuma (see Figure 7.3) is a traditionalist by heart. He accommodates contradictions in himself with ease. He is a proud polygamist; he would easily blame Christianity for the breakdown of traditional communities, but like many South Africans, he balances indigenous ancestor worship with the Christian God – he was even ordained as an honorary pastor at a meeting of independent charismatic churches in 2007, and he has been linked to the influential Rhema church in Johannesburg. He once declared that the ANC 'will rule until Jesus comes' in South Africa (Smith 2011).[24]

In 2012, he 'issued a ringing endorsement of traditional courts, saying that problems should be resolved "the African way, not the white man's way"' (Laing 2012).[25] One could extend the list with similar remarks.

Zuma also lived up to the negative stereotype of African leaders, with corruption, patronage, bad service delivery and a disdain for the masses and the law.

24. See https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/21/jacob-zuma-blames-christianity

25. See https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/southafrica/9653920/Jacob-Zuma-backs-traditional-courts-instead-of-white-mans-way.html

Source: This photograph was obtained from Wikimedia Commons, titled 'Jacob G. Zuma – World Economic Forum Annual Meeting Davos 2010', taken 27 January 2010 at the Opening Media Lunch of the 2010 World Cup before the kick-off' during the Annual Meeting 2010 of the World Economic Forum at the Central Sport Hotel, Davos, Switzerland, photographed by Michael Wuertenberg, © World Economic Forum, is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License, of which a copy is available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en. This version of the original photograph is available on Wikimedia Commons, edited by Wikimedia Commons user Liban97 on 24 May 2014, viewed 10 November 2023, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jacob_G._Zuma_-_World_Economic_Forum_Annual_Meeting_Davos_2010.jpg>.

FIGURE 7.3: Photograph of Jacob Zuma

Cyril Ramaphosa

After we had arrived in Venḓa in 1978, we made friends with a group who, like us, were in their 'marriage and first baby' phase, the 20–30-somethings. They were active members of Bold Evangelical Christian Organisation (BECO), wanting to Christianise the whole of life fearlessly.

In politics, they spoke out boldly. On weekends, they would take huge marquee tents and sally forth into the territory to evangelise. Even their weddings were planned months ahead so that they could show people that Christians could enjoy themselves without alcohol more than the fiercest drinkers.

They not only sought to Christianise traditional Venḓa customs but also modern Western ones like celebrating a bachelor party before a wedding. Tshifhiwa Muofhe[26], who later died in detention and is now honoured as a struggle hero with a regularly-held memorial lecture at the University of Venḓa, invited Faure Louw and me to his party. Until late that night, there was *braaivleis* [fire-grilled meat] and cool drinks, much talk about marriage

26. Parts of this description of my experience with BECO and Tshifhiwa and his friends come from my book *One destiny* (1993:61–62).

and the problems that could be expected to crop up and what to do about them. We later heard some of the guests had been invited with the sole purpose of helping them with their marriage problems.

The marriage ceremony extended over three days, starting on Saturday with the marriage ceremony in a church, followed by a feast at a hotel, which went on until late. On Sunday, all went to church, resuming the festivities after church. On Monday, all came together again for a picnic and conversation.

Such a celebration was planned months ahead, keeping in mind the finest detail, so as to be able to say to the young and old: we are Christians, we are happy, why don't you give your heart to the Lord here and now?

And then, right in the middle of the wedding, there would be an 'altar call' and a group of converts would step forward.

Only when Cyril Ramaphosa had already become president of the country, did I learn that he and Tshifhiwa were bosom friends and that they were founding members of BECO when they were still students at Mphaphuli High School in 1971.[27]

Dean Farisani of the Lutheran Church was a leading figure in this group. He was a strong proponent of Black Consciousness and a prominent voice against apartheid at the time. During his years as a student in Venḓa, Ramaphosa was strongly influenced by Farisani.

When Ramaphosa ventured into politics, his Christian faith remained an important driving force in his life, even as he acquired other ways of thinking. In his biography on Ramaphosa, Anthony Butler (2008) provides a telling interpretation of our president that can be summarised by what, as we shall see, Kofi Awoonor regards as the African view of progress, namely to make the circle bigger, which also applies to Zuma and to Mbeki:

> Ramaphosa was always a gradualist, embracing new perspectives and ideas while never fully abandoning the old, pragmatically ignoring unwelcome tensions within his complex system of political beliefs. When he turned to worldly politics, he never rejected Christianity. When he converted to non-racialism, he did not relinquish the hold of Black Consciousness philosophy on his view of the worth of black leaders. He was soon to embrace certain communist ideas while steering around their political implications, just as he was later able to become a financier and businessman without jettisoning his avowed socialist values [...] [*his*] strength as a negotiator lay in his ability to [...] secure agreement between bewilderingly diverse antagonists, a capacity that drew on his ability at any one time to accommodate and reflect on a wide range of contrary perspectives and

27. See https://www.univen.ac.za/news/gallant-freedom-fighter-tshifhiwa-muofhe-posthumously-honoured-with-a-doctorate-degree-at-univen/

Source: This photograph was obtained from Wikimedia Commons, titled 'Prime Minister Sunak met with President Ramaphosa of South Africa in Number 10 – 2022 (cropped)' by 10 Downing Street, photographed by Simon Walker, taken and released on 23 November 2022 in London, United Kindom, and is licensed under the United Kingdom Open Government License Version 3, of which a copy is available at https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/. This version of the original photograph is available on Wikimedia Commons, edited by Wikimedia Commons user Roman Kubanskiy on 17 December 2022, viewed 10 November 2023, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prime_Minister_Sunak_met_with_President_Ramaphosa_of_South_Africa_in_Number_10_-_2022_(cropped).jpg>.

FIGURE 7.4: Photograph of Cyril Ramaphosa

> beliefs within his own mind. Confronted at any time with the question 'What does Cyril really believe?', his colleagues and comrades would offer wildly differing answers. (p. 219)

This brief overview of the cultural identities of four of democratic South Africa's presidents illustrates the complexity of identities in the population as a whole. Mandela is firstly a Christian with sound liberal values, such as a belief in reason and the value of the individual person; Mbeki is a modern African, with some inclination towards communism and a belief in an English free-market economic ideology; Zuma is a traditional Africanist but at home in any international meeting and church; Ramaphosa, like Mbeki and Zuma, makes the circle bigger but in his case, he fits into the circle being a devout Christian, plus a follower of Black Consciousness, plus asserting some communist doctrines, plus being a trade unionist, socialist and an immensely rich businessman – and a political leader.

New configurations

New patterns have evolved on the basis of the old. Wamuwi Mbao wrote an introduction to a collection of South African poems, *Years of fire and ash: South African poems of decolonisation*, which he edited and published

in 2021. The collection represents works of newer poets writing in the wake of earlier poets. The poems are arranged chronologically from the mid-20th century to the second decade of the 21st century, bringing the older protest poetry into conversation with more recent poetry post-1994. During the past decade, the term decolonisation has regained prominence in South Africa, and the themes of the anti-apartheid period, especially the 1970s, have emerged in new forms, making the poems of these two periods 'part of the same poetics of resistance' (Mbao 2021:14–15).

With the coming of the new dispensation in 1994, 'the revolutionary future seemed tantalisingly close at hand'. There was a desire that the problems of the time would be 'magically dispensed with'. But this did not take social reality into account; 'new antagonisms arise while old ones remain unresolved':

> Alongside the continuation of old crises, new or newly-manifesting issues – misogynistic and LGBTQI-targeted crime and violence, xenophobia, gentrification [...] South Africa post-1994 has seen the rise of new problems and a growing sense of disillusionment around the rise in gender-based violence, continued structural inequality, and the perceived sense that things are going backwards rather than progressing forwards [...] a constellation of new authoritarianisms, newly visible modes of social violence, and new forms of predation that conspire to reverse or throttle any collective sense of freedom. (Mbao 2021:15–17)

The Seventies were characterised by male voices whose protest was fuelled by their rediscovery of their black identity, which inspired hope and solidarity. They described the father as a weak, pathetic figure, someone whom they must avoid becoming. In the recent-poetry section in Mbao's collection, angry female voices denounce the way in which males have treated them, for example, Vangile Gantsho, 'Clots of blood' (pp. 118–119), and Sibingile Fisher, 'The ocean seeks revenge' (pp. 161–162). They are joined by male voices, for example, a poem by Lawrence Mdudzi Ndlovu (2020:43–44), 'The war is on', describes the war that is waged against women, often in their own homes and families. Gender-based violence and femicide are scourges of the present.

The poets pay attention to the effects of the 'various ways in which the democratic state has disappointed, defrauded, defunded, or despoiled its population'. Dissatisfaction is 'the shared starting point for rethinking the world'. The poems in Mbao's collection 'critically engage with the idea of a socio-political landscape devoid of alternatives' (2021:18).

That is a key difference between the 1970s and today: in those turbulent times, there were alternatives; a new future was expected. But the disillusionment with the liberation on which the hope had been pinned, the feeling that the present is 'devoid of alternatives', leads to a dissatisfaction that is more complete and to an anger that is more consuming than it was then.

The resistance of the new generation is marked by an unwillingness to wait for ‘transformation’; it rejects the modalities of the ‘negotiated settlement’. ‘In its place comes a cultural tactics of anger, impatience, disruption, refusal, and shutdown’ (Hedley Twidle, cited in Mbao 2021:11).

For Mbao, this is not only negative. In the previous dispensation, HIE Dhlomo said that the cultural struggle is as important as the political struggle. In line with that, the poems ‘capture feelings in the clasp of a destabilised historical present, the better to make alternative structures of agency and affect imaginable’ (Mbao 2021:13). The purpose of the collection is ‘to think about dissolution of the old as the foundation for new possibilities’ (Mbao 2021:19).

The poems do not present such positive new possibilities.

Conclusion

From the earliest encounters, African resistance to modernity and Christianity has accompanied their acceptance of the same. This, together with the ‘host of new factors in the political equation of 1976’ (Gerhart 1978:2) have created a complex interplay of forces.

It is noteworthy that Africanist ideologies have emerged among the African *urban intelligentsia* (Gerhart 1978:vii). The popular opinion is that urbanisation and education bring modernisation, Westernisation and a linear movement *away* from traditional values. The actual picture is rather, as stated before, a process of forming new combinations of different elements, both modern and traditional.

African thinking has taken centre stage in the 1970s, and it has remained one of the most powerful factors in the mix of forces that drives our history forward. Even more variables have emerged since then: the end of the Cold War and apartheid, the arrival of HIV and AIDS, climate change, the problem of sustainability, gender issues, globalisation, information technology, population growth and so on. Appropriate ways of thinking are needed to understand the resultant complexity.

Chapter 8

African ways of dealing with modernity

In this chapter, a variety of ways in which Africans have dealt with the impact of modernity is discussed. Like previous chapters, it is based on an effort to listen to what African writers and community members say.

There are various ways of dealing with modernity:

- Defining the problem
- Two case studies of basic differences between Africa and the West
- Two forms of protest
- Ways in which aspects of modernity are taken over by Africa
- Searching for a synthesis
- Conflict with modernity
- Focusing on land issues.[28]

Defining the problem

African writers have, first of all, dealt with modernity by *identifying* the conflict and *defining the nature of the conflic*t between Western and African cultures.

28. The section 'Land in the African tradition' represents a substantial reworking of my contribution to Van der Watt and Culpepper (2016).

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In the 1970s, several African writers referred to this conflict as the central motif in African literature, for example: 'This single theme, that of the conflict between Western and African cultures, predominates' (Okpaku 1970, p. 3).

Es'kia Mphahlele of South Africa referred to this conflict several times:

- 'Let us remind ourselves again that ideology emerges in situations of challenge. In Africa's case, the challenge arises from the invasion of our traditional values by Western ones. Modern African literature is all a product of the encounter and fusion between two sets of cultures.' (1970:13–14)
- 'It all started when Africa was shanghaied into the history of the West in the late nineteenth century […] It seems to me, a writer in an African setting […] must strive toward some workable reconciliation within himself. It is an agonising journey.' (1973:121–122)
- 'During the high days of the African assertion in Nkrumah's Ghana, there was a good deal of writing, especially verse […] A verse that addressed itself to questions such as WHO AM I? WHERE DID I COME FROM? WHAT AM I TO DO WITH THIS EUROPEAN THING?' (1974:74)

In 1976, mass protests broke out in Soweto in South Africa. It started when school children marched in protest against the policy of 'Bantu education' under the Bantu Education Act 47 of 1953 (renamed as the Black Education Act of 1953). In 1977, Sipho Sepamla, a poet living in Soweto, wrote a poem, 'Civilisation Aha', in which he states:

> I must be honest
> it wasn't only Bantu education
> it was all part of what they say is Western
> civilisation (1977:27)

Kofi Awoonor (1976a) comments on Chinua Achebe's book *Things fall apart*:

> To Achebe, the African world before the arrival of Europe was a well-integrated one, with dignity and honour […] As a story of the tragic encounter between Africa and Europe, it is an attempt to capture and restate the pristine integrity which has been so traumatically shattered by that confrontation […] Order and coherence are followed by that slow, imperceptible and disguised process of destruction and decay […] when the Christians come […] the seeds of havoc are planted. (pp. 252–254)

Soyinka (1976) claims that the difference between European and African drama is not confined to drama:

> And the difference which we are seeking to define between European and African drama […] is not simply a difference of style or form, nor is it confined to drama alone. It is representative of the essential difference between two world views […]. (p. 38)

When Soyinka refers to 'the essential difference between two world views [...]', he is not engaging in essentialism. *Essentialism* is a form of generalisation that assumes an unchanging nature unaffected by individual action, combined with an effort to exercise power over another group by defining it in a specific way (Dervin & Machart 2015:5). Soyinka's effort to understand the essential difference between the two worldviews, on the other hand, contributes to a constructive approach to finding a meaningful solution for the confusion caused by cultural clashes.

What is clear is that African people and African authors have taken Western cultures and opinions seriously and have determined, or are in the process of determining, their own position in relation to these cultures and opinions. In this respect, Western scholars in general, and specifically in South Africa, are far behind – few of them have taken African cultures seriously.

One of the most basic differences that African writers see between the African worldview and the modern Western one is that the former tends to search for continuity, community, harmony, balance, unity and synthesis, while the Western mind is much more interested in reductionist analysis, in making distinctions, in individualism and in differentiation and specialisation.

Kunene calls Europe a fragmented society organised in individualistic terms, unlike Africa:

> And indeed, I think in the nature of African society there is a sense of continuity, from the past, and the present, and the future, and this sense of continuity is, in fact, the basic philosophy of African life. (1972:88–89)

Nyuyki (2017:123, 124) sees the African primal religions, which form part and parcel of the African worldview, as preparatory grounds for the Christian missionary enterprise. He refers to Bediako's discussion of six features of these religions:

- A sense of kinship with nature, in which animals and plants no less than human beings had 'their own spiritual existence and place in the universe' as interdependent parts of a whole.
- A deep sense that humanity is finite, weak and impure or sinful and stands in need of a power not his own.
- The conviction that people are not alone in the universe, for there is a spiritual world of powers or beings more powerful and ultimate than themselves.
- The belief that people can enter into a relationship with the benevolent spirit world and can share in its powers and blessings and receive protection from evil forces by these transcendent helpers.
- The acute sense of the reality of the afterlife, a conviction which explains the importance of ancestors or the 'living dead' in many primal religions, where they are believed to remain united in affection and in mutual obligations with the 'living living'.

- The conviction that people live in a sacramental universe where there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual in that the 'physical' acts as a vehicle for the 'spiritual' power, while the physical realm is held to be patterned on the model of the spiritual world beyond.

The unity of the 'physical' and 'spiritual' powers that Nyuyki refers to is illustrated by the story of Camara Laye of French-Guinea about his father, an ironsmith whose technology was taken up in his traditional culture. There was, for example, a small black snake that lived in a hole in the wall and often came out so that the ironsmith could rub its head. This snake represented the guiding spirit of the family and helped him in his work, as his father told him:

> Everything is transmitted to me in the course of the night, together with all the work I shall have to perform, so that from the start, without having to cast about in my mind, I know how to repair whatever is brought to me; and it is these things that have established my renown as a craftsman [...] I owe it to the guiding spirit of our race. (Laye 1954:19)

This is in sharp contrast with the secular Western sense of progress based on humanity's control of the natural world, as expressed by the popular writer Ayn Rand, for example, when one of the characters in her book, *Atlas shrugged*, looks at a railroad:

> To take the pounding violence of sixteen motors, she thought, the thrust of seven thousand tons of steel and freight, to withstand it, grip it and swing it around a curve [...] what made it possible? What power? [...] The motors were a moral code cast in steel. They are alive, she thought, because they are the physical shape of the action of a living power of the mind that had been able to grasp the whole of this complexity, to set its purpose, to give it form [...] the power of a living mind – the power of thought and choice and purpose. (1992: 234–235)

In this worldview, the 'physical' serves as raw material for human consciousness that brings the material world to life.

When these two worldviews, or paradigms, meet and interact, one should not expect a linear development from one to the other.

Case studies of two basic differences between Africa and the West

We now look at case studies of two basic differences between Africa and the West: the way we get to know reality and the way we understand cause and effect. Other descriptions of such differences can be found later in this chapter, such as the concept of time in the section 'Taking over modernity on your own terms' and the issue of land in the section 'Land issues'. The relation between individual and community is discussed in Chapter 10.

Es'kia Mphahlele referred to an African way of knowing:

> It is significant that there is much more creative writing than scholarly prose by Negroes in Africa. Perhaps it is because a poem or short story or a novel is so close to individual experience, and therefore more natural modes of expression than argumentative prose; and further, because intellectual systems and the arguments involved are not natural to Africa. (1964:221, 231)

Five years earlier, Mongameli Mabona (1959:72), quoted by Wolff (2020:149), stated that 'symbolism is the natural expression of the African mind'.

Ibe Nwoga analysed it in more detail:

> My understanding of the issue is related to a distinction between modes of knowing – that whereas traditional Western man has evolved a more detached, analytical mode of understanding of his world, environment and aspects of human functioning, traditional African man retained a more holistic, instinctive mode of understanding [...] I try various expressions to describe this mode – spiritual absorption, instinctive perception of whole meaning, sensitive interaction – but these are words that have their meaning in the language of a cultural mode of perception which is particular and rationalistic. The total of these expressions, however, comes close to what I mean, for which the word rapport may be used [...] [*if*] the African should be found to have a predominating tendency towards this type of knowledge, then it should be recognised, not indeed as exclusive, but as characteristic. (1976:17, 18, 21)

Commenting on a quotation from Soyinka's 'A Dance in the Forests', Nwoga (1976) continues:

> I think what is excluded here is a specifically analytical understanding. By 'felt' here I don't think either that Soyinka is talking about emotional or sensuous responses in their Western connotation. Perhaps rapport is the word, the direct interaction between the observed art object and the as yet universalised archetypes of the subject's spirit or soul or imagination or sensitivity or totality of person. (p. 21)

And a few pages later: '... there is strong evidence to suggest that the characteristic mode of African aesthetic perception is non-analytical or non-intellectual, relying essentially on the achievement of rapport with the art object'; the moment of 'epiphanic understanding' in which 'time past, present and future are subsumed is the peak to which African poetry, traditional and modern, aims' (Nwoga 1976:26).

Nwoga quotes the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo's reply to an interviewer who asked him why his poetry was so hard to understand:

> Well, because of what we call, understanding [...] passes through a process of analysis, if you like, of the intellectual – there is an intellectual effort which one makes before one arrives at what one calls the meaning. Now I think it is possible to arrive at a response without passing through that process of intellectual analysis, and I think that if a poem can elicit a response, either in physical or emotional terms for an audience the poem has succeeded. (1976:27)

A similar statement is made about the famous poet Leopold Senghor, who was the first president of Senegal from 1960–1980: ‘Senghor himself says that the meaning is less dependent on discourse, analysis, linear thought than on breath, rhythm, sensibility’ (Dorsinville 1976:70).

The second description of African thought patterns is about understanding cause and effect. Wole Soyinka wrote in his *Myth, literature and the African World* about cause and effect in a way that reminds us of Awoonor’s concept of making the circle bigger – different, even conflicting views are effortlessly combined:

> The assimilative wisdom of African metaphysics recognises no difference in essence between the mere means of tapping the power of lightning – whether it is by ritual sacrifice, through the purgative will of the community unleashing its justice on the criminal, or through the agency of Franklin’s revolutionary gadget. (1976:49)

And the philosopher KC Anyanwu, from Ghana, maintains:

> The West seeks rational causality in all things. What happens if nature is alive, if spirit permeates the whole universe, if consciousness cannot grasp the factors of causality? Effects would then be interpreted as magical and so also the method [...] Magic raises up the question of causality [...] the whole truth about cause is magical, that is, it belongs to the non-material world. (1984:87–93)

S Maimela, a South African theologian, wrote:

> Africans have had to postulate external hostile powers and agencies more powerful than human beings, with which to account for the misfortunes that confront them [...] one is apt to look for the reason in a context outside that of physical cause and effect. Naturally, no questions are raised with regard to one’s inability to fulfill one’s ambitions, because causes are always externalised and personalised. (1985:67)

An example of a cause that is externalised and personalised is when the cause of misfortune (sickness, an accident or losing your job) is seen to be, in a mysterious way, somebody who is ill-disposed towards you. ‘“If there is trouble, there must be a cause” is the point of departure. “There is always somebody (responsible)”’. The cause cannot be detected or explained by an analysis of empirically observable or understandable cause and effect. Even more, the person who is held responsible is not always conscious of his or her illegal activity: ‘Experience shows that the revealing of the evildoer is as much an unpleasant surprise to the accused as to those related to the accused’ (Berglund 1976:318).

This pattern of thought can seriously undermine trust and security. At the University of the North, one of our students remarked in class:

> ‘If you fail, you don’t say that you were lazy or didn’t know the work. You say that somebody has caused you misfortune. It can be your enemy, or it can be your best friend.’

The group or community can also locate the source of misfortune in an individual.

In December 1976, three children died in a truck accident near Burgersfort in the Lowveld area in South Africa. The truck had capsized. The driver was drunk. The tribe to which the children belonged consulted a sangoma to find out who caused the accident. The sangoma pointed out the chief of the tribe and his wife. The chief accepted the verdict. He and his wife did not give any resistance when they were stoned to death by 300 members of the tribe and burnt on a stack. In fact, he admitted that he was responsible. Before he was killed and burnt, he only asked for a glass of water to drink (Van den Heever 1979:1, 2, 11).

Necklacing, where a car tyre is put around someone's neck, soaked with petrol and set alight so that the person is burnt alive, attracted worldwide attention during the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s, when it was seen as a weapon of the masses against the power of the state. It was seen as a way in which the masses could punish those among them who cooperated with the state, and as such, the ANC leadership, including Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela, did not condemn it outright. But, argues Butler, it was not a calculated political intervention:

> Burning was not a political intervention. The use of fire invoked symbolic purification to destroy evil. It allowed young men to assert fleeting control over their desperate lives. And it demonstrated the determination of communities to enforce their own moral codes. In fact, necklacing was part of a continuum of violence that preceded and outlived the political turmoil of the mid-1980s. Its victims were mostly not 'collaborators' at all. (2008:213–214)

In a study that Joanna Ball did of 65 burnings between 1984 and 1993, 39 followed witchcraft accusations and only 15 were 'political' killings:

> She speculates that these victims shared the same fate because they were each viewed as traitors, who corroded the cohesion and integrity of their communities. More recent studies show that necklacing and other burnings continued after 1994. (Butler 2008:214)

Today, such killings are often seen as mob justice against criminals (see Wendel 2012[29] and Flanagan 2018). The idea of burning with fire as a form of purification, as mentioned by Butler, is discussed again below under the heading 'Use and destroy quickly: Burn, Babylon, burn'; the problem of killings because of witchcraft accusations is discussed again in Chapter 9 under the heading 'Traditional African households' and in Chapter 15 under the heading 'Case 6: Molati Infield Rainwater Harvesting project', subheading 'Reflection'.

29. See https://www.reuters.com/article/us-safrica-crime/in-south-africas-slums-mob-justice-rules-idUSBRE86B0 YM20120712

These two examples of traditional African thinking, the modes of African and Western ways of understanding the world and of cause and effect, are an indication that traditional African thought patterns are not merely the same as modern Western ones, even if Westerners try to explain certain phenomena in Africa according to Western concepts.

We now look at two forms of protest, one that modern people can easily identify with and one that is hardly understood or noticed.

Two forms of protest

Two forms of protest have been prominent among Africans over the last century and more, namely, protest against political and economic oppression and protest against modern cultural patterns that are foreign to traditional African cultures and identities.

The first form, protest against injustice and oppression, can be combined with the protest against modernity as well as with the belief that modernity is a 'standard civilisation' – this can happen in various combinations, permutations and intensities.

In the 1940s, a spirit of new militance emerged among African intellectuals, but it fell short of:

> … destroying their ingrained attitude toward cultural assimilation. No matter how insistent Africans might be that civilisation was the heritage of all mankind and it had no 'colour', the assumption was still firmly lodged in their minds that progress meant the one-way absorption by Africans of modern, or Western, or 'white' patterns of culture. That integrationist goals still exercised a stronghold on Lembede's Youth League contemporaries is clear from the thinking of as radical a nationalist as A.P. Mda who in August 1944 wrote in The Bantu World […] 'The present-day standards of civilisation are the culmination of a long process of development. But that a "standard civilisation" has been attained today is an evident fact. The question, therefore, is not whether the Bantu should develop a new civilisation. The question is whether or not the Bantu are capable of assimilating Western civilisation upon the background of their historic past.' (Gerhart 1978:66)

Cultural assimilation within the 'standard civilisation' of the West remained the overarching approach among black intellectuals up to the 1960s, and even today the idea that the West has developed a 'standard civilisation' remains the (often unconscious) basic and obvious assumption of many black – and white – people (see Chapter 7). Nelson Mandela largely continued this tradition, but many regard it as part of colonialism.

Many modern people have understood the first form of protest, the protest against oppression and the search for justice, freedom, human rights and equality – and supported it. It is a struggle for fundamental values that

Western people associate with. Few have had the insight that there is a second form of protest that is not directed at oppression only but at Western civilisation as such, in pursuit of an own identity. As a result of this lack of insight, few have noticed, let alone understood this form of protest, even if it was expressed as clearly as daylight. African writers have often felt powerless to break through this barrier of not-being-heard.

It is not only a problem in South Africa. It surfaces in the most unexpected places. In 2013, I was asked by the General Synod of my church to attend a seminar in Geneva of the World Council of Churches' 'Indigenous People's Programme' that cooperates with the 'United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues'. There were indigenous people from all over the world. It was most instructive to see that the Sami delegates from Sweden seemed to be just as highly traumatised as those who had a background of centuries of very harsh colonial oppression. In the past, there were efforts to force the Sami to integrate with Swedish culture, including the church, e.g. through the education of the children. But, as I understood it, the present Sami were traumatised by the Swedish mainstream's positive, well-meant, inviting, nondiscriminatory assimilationist approaches that continue to ignore, and so despise, the claims of the Sami that they have their own identity that they want to preserve. The Sami delegates were very upset that the Swedish churches did not see that this caused trauma and that they refused to confess guilt. For a South African whitey, who is constantly reminded of our violent and racist atrocities of the past, this came as something totally unexpected. Mainstream white Sweden seemingly did the exact opposite of what the apartheid state did: there was no discrimination on the basis of colour and there was no exclusion but active inclusion, but in the process, ignoring people's identity still produced high levels of trauma.

Ignoring people's identities is a general phenomenon. Lassiter (2000:1–3) objects to the tendency among Western social scientists to regard as invalid and/or harmful any inquiry into core African cultural values and themes, African psychological characteristics and patterns of cultural adaptation – while many Africans argue that such attention is necessary for the ultimate survival of Africa and its cultures, and for national and community development.

Rasmussen says about spaceship economics that it has no place for:

> … multiple voices attuned to the complexity of things on the ground in places very different from each other […] It treats Seattle, Boston, Madras, Rio, and Kuala Lumpur as though they were very much the same, or should be. (1996:329)

Akio Morita, founder and chairman of Sony Corporation, said we have, and must have, one global culture based on the free market, in which, says David Korten: 'relationships, both individual and corporate, are defined

entirely by the market, and there are no loyalties to place and community' (Rasmussen 1996:330).

The Africanist movement refuses to give in to this trend but is largely ignored by this global culture.

Awoonor's widening the circle and the African Renaissance

Kofi Awoonor, a writer from Ghana, says that modernity can be taken over by Africa by integrating new habits and products into the traditional African pattern in such a way that the traditional pattern is preserved and restored, even strengthened.

We have earlier observed and discussed Awoonor's commentary on Chinua Achebe's book *Things fall apart* (see Chapter 8) that the traditional order, the fundamental unity of the traditional African world, fell apart because of the tragic encounter between Africa and Europe (1976:252–254). This problem definition leads to a corresponding solution: '... the widening of the circle [...] ultimately will constitute the only human progress [...] the reunification of all things in a primary universal construct' (Awoonor 1976b:167).

Wole Soyinka (1976) from neighbouring Nigeria says something similar:

> ... an attitude of philosophic accommodation is constantly demonstrated in the attributes accorded most African deities [...] Experiences which, until the event, lie outside the tribe's cognition are absorbed through the god's agency, are converted into yet another piece of the social armoury in its struggle for existence, and enter the lore of the tribe. (p. 54)

The idea is also found in South Africa. WA de Klerk (1975:322) quotes a writer of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa who held a similar view: 'Blackness means widening the circle, absorbing and integrating instead of being absorbed and integrated [...] blacks must establish moral and actual authority over the whole.'

Lovemore Mbigi (1995:93–100) did not use the term 'making the circle bigger', but his description of the goal of affirmative action in South Africa can be described with those words. According to Mbigi, affirmative action does not merely aim at a greater role for black people in Western institutions but at a restructuring of these institutions according to the values, principles and spirit(s) of Africa. The aim is not (only) to take over political power in order to have a more just and inclusive modern society but to transform it into an African identity.

Mbeki's African Renaissance is, similarly, an effort to include old and new in a bigger circle. The combination of 'African' and 'Renaissance' is a balancing act, an effort to recognise the identity and the marginalisation of Africa and at the

same time to define Africa as a strong role player, or at least a potentially strong role player, in the modern world and global economy. It recognises the need for modern development but in such a way that the powerful sentiments against modernisation are recognised and included in the vision.

The concept of an African Renaissance builds upon a diverse number of *Africanist movements*: Kwame Nkrumah's 'African Personality'; Leopold Senghor's 'Negritude'; Julius Nyerere's 'Ujamaa'; Black Consciousness and Black Power in South Africa; and the *Ubuntu* idea.

The African Renaissance does not only relate to the past. It is a response to the crises of contemporary Africa: regional wars, poverty, corruption, collapsed states and serious sicknesses. The vision is to overcome the disintegration of this wonderful continent and turn it around into 'a new civilisation' with economic progress, political stability, science, arts and culture. The African Renaissance offers a comprehensive vision for the future of the continent, building on the legacy of the past, often the distant past. It seeks to emulate the European Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries and the Meiji Restoration in Japan 130 years ago. (Mbeki 1998a:241–242, 295, 300; Ntuli 1999:184)

The African Renaissance links up with the concept of 'a modern African culture': 'Any genuine African modernity must grow out of the African tradition. A modern African culture [...] must be a continuation of the old African culture'. (Chinweizu 1975; cited in Makhene 1996:159)

The same approach, that African tradition is the framework in which modern culture is taken up, has been defended by Es'kia Mphahlele. As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, Mphahlele emphasised the differences between the African tradition and the Western tradition – but he clearly did not do so in order to say that they should not interact with and learn from each other:

> We seem to forget that our neo-African culture, by its very nature, is going to absorb much more of European techniques – a process that should not worry us, really: our writing can only be valid if it interprets contemporary society in a mode of expression that hits on the intellectual, emotional and physical planes of meaning. (1964:231)

Taking over modernity on your own terms and the problem of time

Many feel that modernity can be taken over without giving up the positive essence of Africa:

> ... for the African, modernisation does not have to be Westernisation. In fact, Africans can modernise their way of life and environment without giving up the essence of the positive aspects of their culture and their way of life [...] In this

> way, modernisation would not be a process of alienation as has been the case in many African societies. (Omotoso 1996:163)

It is an old idea, also found in the East. In 1954, *The New Burma*, a Burmese government publication, stated that they wanted to remain faithful to their heritage:

> The New Burma sees no conflict between religious values and economic progress [...] we can blend successfully the religious and spiritual values of our heritage with the benefits of modern technology. (cited in Schumacher 2011:38)

Leslie Newbigin observed in India that there was a widespread tendency to combine an emphasis on a non-Western identity with the use of modern technology:

> ... this scientific technical culture that has developed in the West is now regarded as the world civilisation of our time. It is regarded as something which is not specifically Western but universal, something in the sharing of which one shares in the civilisation of our time [...] one can take Western science and technology in the biggest available doses without the risk of damaging one's Eastern digestion. The large and able body of Asian graduates [...] are sure that they are not in any way cutting themselves off from their own religion and culture. They are sure that this world of technology, while it has originated in the West, belongs to the whole world, and that the East can take them on its own terms and use it in their own way [...]. (1961:13–14)

Newbigin (1961:18) argues that this undertaking is not that simple. The scientific world civilisation is a whole complex of knowledge that is usually called science *plus* the purposive research that produces this body of knowledge *plus* the multiplication of techniques and appliances that flow from this body of knowledge – and all of this is driven by the basic assumption that 'human life can and ought to be changed'.

We can also call it the belief in progress through control over nature, including human nature, a key concept since the Renaissance in Europe (Goudzwaard 1978:46–47).

This emphasis on the role of a specific type of consciousness in the emergence of technology in the West is in line with Harari's explanation of the reason why modern industry at the time spread rapidly in Europe and not in other parts of the world (see Chapter 4).

Newbigin argued more than sixty years ago that the idea that human life can and ought to be changed, as well as the corresponding idea of linear progress over time, are foreign to non-Western cultures. He said that Ancient Eastern religions:

> ... have interpreted events in terms of recurrent cycles [...] What was there in the beginning is there at the end [...] In the part of the world where I have been living, in the Tamil country, years are counted by means of a sixty-year cycle. Each one of the sixty years has its name, and at the end of sixty years, one returns to the beginning of the list [...] apart from other evidence there is no way of distinguishing these years from one another. (1961:18–19)

This makes it difficult to distinguish between the years 1800, 1860 and 1920 because they all have the same name. However, the modern Indian government is making five-year plans to achieve certain goals. That means that they have accepted the basic assumption that 'human life can and ought to be changed', and that means a linear process in time (Newbigin 1961):

> It is therefore natural that it has become impossible to continue to use the old calender, that it becomes necessary to use a linear calendar, and that in fact it is almost universal that the calendar which has the letters AD on it is used. (1961:19–20)

Fifty years after Newbigin, in 2012, SM Mohamed Idris wrote an article 'Our universities are the purveyors of an imperialist worldview':

> Our universities are the purveyors of the imperialist worldview and ideology. They play the role of perpetuating Western hegemony through their education models that are so destructive to our culture, language, way of life, knowledge systems and dignity [...] To achieve true liberation and recover our authentic selves, we need to purge the West that is within us [...] Even at our universities, to bring about such a change would be seen as a radical exercise. So steeped in our psyche is the Western hold that to think in any other way is unimaginable for fear that we end up in poverty and backwardness – as if there were no other civilisation before the coming of the colonialists. (2012:4–15)

Idris names Al Jazeera as an example of what should be done. This seems to indicate that for Idris, modern science and technology is still the universal civilisation of our time that can be used while the Western worldview and ideology that is 'so destructive to our culture, language, way of life, knowledge systems and dignity' is rejected. But can the one be taken over without the other?

The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama, a Protestant who retained valuable aspects of Asian cultures in his theology and wrote books such as *The Three Mile an Hour God* (1980), understood the tension between progress and tradition very well – as well as the impact of the Western concept of time on Asian cultures. He spoke of two Thailands: the one is symbolised by the leisurely pace of the water buffaloes, and the other is symbolised by the cars crowding the cities and the jets coming in from all over the world, symbols of rapid social change, urbanisation and industrialisation (Coe 1976:20).

Koyama (1976:223–226) wrote about a visit to the famous Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Rangoon, Burma. It is a Buddhist shrine (stupa), and one must approach it barefoot from the bottom of the hill. Being barefoot makes one feel exposed, and the slow and uncomfortable journey ensures that one is in a humble mood by the time you arrive at the shrine. Many shrines have long approaches. When he went there a second time, he found that there was an elevator to the top of the hill. Before he entered the elevator, he had to take off his shoes:

> But now I was neither pilgrim nor tourist! A strange sensation of temporary loss of identity swept over me [...] The traditional way of slow approach has been disturbed by the massive impact of technology. The whole of Asia is disturbed and disrupted this way today and perhaps so is the whole world. Technology is shaking our basic self-identity because it is disturbing our spiritual relationship with the holy [...] Can technology be made a creative servant of the person who lives by the grace of the searching God? (p. 226)

The problem of time has also been considered in Africa. John S Mbiti (1974:17, 27–28), who was a theologian at Makerere University, Uganda, said that the traditional African concept of time is related to events as they take place and that time is intimately bound up with the entire life of the people. He speculated that the political instability of African states could be the result of the problematic combination of the modern concept of time with traditional patterns of living.

The cyclical concept of time is a familiar theme in the work of modern writers from different parts of Africa. Wole Soyinka of Nigeria built his famous 'A dance of the forests' on Yoruba ritual and belief and a cyclical concept of time, according to which past and present, the dead and the living are part of an unbroken whole (Cartey 1969:318).

In South Africa in the 1970s, black urban poetry that was written under the oppression of the apartheid era used the cyclical concept of time to inspire them with hope: the wheel will turn. In 'Movement. Moulding. Moment', Serote placed his hope on the circular movement of time to bring the truth to light. In the silent night:

> The truth hides, only seen by the stars
> Of darkness
>
> Something is breathing,
> There is a silent life in the light walking to the horizon.
> The moon follows the sun
> Of dawn. (1972:26)

In 'I will wait', Serote tells of the hunger and tears he has so often tasted, but now and then:

> Joy, as real as paths,
> Has spread within me like pleasant scenery,
> ... And now I know:
> Having been so flooded and so dry,
> I wait. (1972:36)

In Tsetlo, he injects the concept of cyclical time into the political situation. The season goes in cycles. In 'For Don M. – banned', Serote writes:

> it is a dry white season
> dark leaves don't last, their brief lives dry out
> … indeed, it is a dry white season
> but seasons come to pass. (1974:58)

The rhythm of the machine cannot be combined with the natural rhythm of time:

> The year is divided for us only at one point: our holidays. At this time we even begin to take an interest in the weather. Here the sun and the rain do affect us […] we even participate in the rhythm of nature once again in our waking and sleeping life […] The rhythm of the machine has changed us all, not only those who work at these incessantly moving machines. We have become people whose time is chopped up and divided into ever smaller units: the day into three shifts, the shift into eight hours, the hours into minutes and seconds […] We live in moments […] We do everything in installments because we have no view of the whole. Everything has fallen apart into smaller units […] We have forgotten the past, it is gone, and we meet the future with a game. (Mataboge 1977:5–6)

There is modern technology to keep time and there is a modern concept of time. You can take over the one without the other, as you can do with other aspects of modernity, but it does not work very well:

> Africa as a whole has borrowed the wrong things from the West […] We borrowed the profit motive but not the entrepreneurial spirit. We borrowed the acquisitive appetites of capitalism but not the creative risk taking. We are at home with Western gadgets but are bewildered by Western workshops. We wear the wristwatch but refuse to watch it for the culture of punctuality. We have learned to parade in display, but not to drill in discipline. The West's consumption patterns have arrived, but not necessarily the West's technique of production. (Mazrui 1985:5)

Does the speed at which things are taken over make a difference? A previous president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, wanted to transform post-colonial Africa according to traditional African values:

> Nyerere's philosophy of Ujamaa was rooted in traditional African values and had as its core the emphasis on familyhood and communalism of traditional African societies. At the same time, it was influenced by a mix of Fabian socialism and Catholic social teachings. (Ibhawoh & Dibua 2003:62)

According to Mazrui, Nyerere realised that Western technology could not be avoided, but he felt that technological change had to be introduced gradually in order to prevent a destructive disruption of traditional patterns:

> President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania grasped fairly early that even a move from the hoe to the plough would be a major technological change […] he is against pushing technological change so fast that village life is prematurely disrupted, and dependence on outside powers increased. Rapid mechanization and industrialization increase dependence on technologically more advanced

> countries. But a slower pace of technology change could both preserve village life from premature bewilderment and contribute to genuine self-reliance. (1985:n.p.)

But still, claims Lawi (1992:54), Nyerere's policies have destroyed the traditional relationship between the people and the land, and that has led to ecological and social disintegration. Lawi argues that the settling of the population in the Ujamaa villages and the gradual modernisation of the economy, such as the introduction of a cash economy and the development of commercial farming, have created a dualism between people and nature that replaced the former unity and symbiosis that was expressed in practices that were sustainable and sound.

Introducing modernity slowly – making the circle bigger slowly – does not necessarily lead to a well-integrated culture.

Searching for a synthesis

There have been different ideas about a synthesis between Africa and the West.

Senghor on Africa's role in the world

Senghor advanced the idea of a synthesis of Africa and the West on the basis that both have an important contribution to make to an eventual world civilisation. In 1959, the South African theologian Mongameli Mabona followed Senghor's 'idea of universal human civilisations, the complementary cultural essences' (Wolff 2020:147).

In 1948, Leopold Senghor published a poem that implies that a more universal civilisation must emerge from a combination of cultures with different characteristics. The African view of life became for Senghor 'the ultimate truth which alone will save a world gone mad through the overwhelming impact of science and technology ...' (Awoonor 1976a:155). An English translation of the poem reads:

> New York! I say to New York, let black blood
> flow into your blood
> Cleaning the rust from your steel articulation
> like an oil of life
> Giving your bridges the curve of the hills, the
> liana's suppleness. (p. 157)

In Hegelian philosophy, a synthesis is the product of *conflict* between a thesis and an anti-thesis. In his introduction to an anthology of Senghor's poems in 1948, Jean-Paul Sartre argued that the 'black soul' first had to be liberated before there could be a real synthesis:

> Its *Gestalt* was an orphean descent into the tormented and wounded depths of the black soul [...] It is a journey to reclaim the Eurydice of the black soul from the destructive embrace of white Pluto. This will be achieved only through the total reversal of white values [...] it calls for the creation of a new and different order, based on the values of the essential man [...] resting within the African ontology. (Awoonor 1976a: 156)

Through the total reversal of white values, it seems, the antithesis is postulated that makes a synthesis possible.

In Awoonor's own writing, the anger at the impact of the West on Africa is clearly articulated, but it is clear that he does not see it as the final stage. He comments on the younger Senegalese poet David Diop who 'expressed the absolute anger of Negritude'. Diop rejected 'Senghor's Roman Catholic pardon for the oppressor and his ambivalent love for France', but, says Awoonor, 'Diop died too young for his poetry to mature beyond this distilled anger' (1976a:157). Awoonor's own solution has moved beyond anger and resistance only.

Steve Biko's view of a synthesis

In the 1970s, Biko spoke of a synthesis on his own terms. In an essay, 'Black Consciousness and the quest for a true humanity', he rejected the synthesis that liberal white people strove for and argued for another type of synthesis where we can hope to reach a true humanity where power politics will have no place:

> The thesis, the antithesis and the synthesis have been mentioned by some great philosophers as the cardinal points around which any social revolution revolves. For the liberals, the thesis is apartheid, the antithesis is non-racialism, but the synthesis is very feebly defined. They want to tell the blacks that they see integration as the ideal solution. Black Consciousness defines the situation differently. The thesis is in fact a strong white racism and therefore, the antithesis to this must, ipso facto, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on whom this white racism seeks to prey. Out of these two situations we can therefore hope to reach some kind of balance – a true humanity where power politics will have no place. (Biko 1978:90)

Liberal white people wanted integration on their own terms and for their own benefit, but that was unacceptable. The 'black man' will depend only on his relationship to God and his natural surroundings and define himself with his own possibilities, and make his freedom real by whatever means he deems fit. (Biko 1978:92)

As early as December 1971 (probably), Biko delivered a paper in which he spoke of a synthesis between black and white, based on a rejection of the idea that white values are necessarily the best:

> The overall analysis therefore, based on the Hegelian theory of dialectic materialism, is as follows. That since the thesis is a white racism there can only be one valid antithesis i.e. a solid black unity to counterbalance the scale. If South Africa is to be a land where black and white live together in harmony without fear of group exploitation, it is only when these two opposites have interplayed and produced a viable synthesis of ideas and a modus vivendi [...] Our adherence to values that we set for ourselves can also not be reversed because it will always be a lie to accept white values as necessarily the best. (Biko 1978:51)

It is important to note that Biko did not call for black racism to oppose white racism but for black solidarity or unity, which are more positive terms. Mangcu (2012:12) refers to Biko's 'attempt to reframe European modernity into a progressive African modernity through the philosophy of Black Consciousness, resulting in what he called a "joint culture"'.

Biko regarded Christianity as 'a very adaptable religion', a 'universal truth', that seeks to find application in a particular situation (Biko 1978): it seems that Biko regarded God to be present in the black man's fight through Christ who fights with him against the lie of white racism.

Biko died in 1977 at the hands of the apartheid forces.

Two Afrikaners' views of synthesis

The Afrikaner has sometimes been called the white tribe of Africa. Two prominent Afrikaans writers have also written about a synthesis or unification. Their views are presented in order to give a glimpse into the thinking of this group of people, who are still searching for a meaningful role in the African context.

The unification of the African and Western worlds: NP van Wyk Louw

NP van Wyk Louw is regarded as one of the greatest thinkers among Afrikaners.

In 1961, Louw (1986b) described Afrikaans, the language that is spoken by Afrikaners and many others, as:

> ... the language that combines Western Europe and Africa; it draws its strength out of these two sources; it forms a bridge between the great lucid West and magical Africa – the sometimes still so unclear Africa; they are both great powers, and whatever greatness can come out of their unification – that is perhaps what is waiting for Afrikaans to discover [...] We stand between two extremes – which are at the same time two very elementary forces. (pp. 182, 184; author's translation)

Afrikaans, said Louw, is an instrument that fits into every little nook and cranny of this land – and that makes it a language that can unite Europe

and Africa. He described the unification process as a relationship, an interaction, rather than a synthesis:

> For us, in this and every generation, there is only our daily task: to keep both our heritages – Europe and Africa – warm, blood warm, close to our heart; to be in Africa knowing that we are from the old West; being Western without ignoring one single difference from Africa. (1986b:184; author's translation)

He concludes:

> Let us mention a small global truth: There are today people in Europe, who, because they do not know Africa and only live with the principles of Europe [...] consider that it would be better if we are wiped out here with everything we have built up. And there are people in Africa with the dark 'magical' will of Africa, but without the 'heavy thinking' and equilibrium that Europe has gained over the centuries, people who would want to see the same happening [...] for their reasons [...]. (Louw 1986b:184; author's translation)

In 1936, Louw commented on Afrikaans literature:

> The Bantu and the Coloured have hardly been noticed by us; we have described them a little as enemies, then later in a sympathetic-humoristic way from the bourgeoisie point of view; but they still have to appear in our literature as people, in books that do not come with simplistic liberal little 'solutions', but with the full fate of our nation. (1986a: 9, 10; author's translation)

Not much has been realised in Afrikaans of this meeting or unification of Louw's two very elementary forces.

The synthesis of black and white: Etienne Leroux

Another Afrikaans writer, the multi-award winner Etienne Leroux, also wrote about the synthesis of black and white.

Leroux analysed the deep forces in the psyche of the modern world, the contradictions, contrasts, irony and ambivalence. He was convinced that the modern world had lost its myths and that the result would be chaos and death, and that new life depended on finding new myths or what Harari (2014:35) calls 'imagined realities', that is, 'something that everybody believes in, and as long as this communal belief persists, the imagined reality exerts force in the world'.

One would have expected Leroux to be fascinated by the meeting of the African and Western worlds. He was, after all, a farmer who had good relations with his African staff. In a biography on his life, it is mentioned that there was an outburst of joy when two of his African workers, Sanna Jongwa and Paul M'Pesi, heard of a literary prize that he had won – there is a photo of the three of them in his biography (Kannemeyer 2008:595).

Even more, he was an ardent follower of the famous psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, who believed that many of modern people's troubles came from their ruthless repression of 'a deep, warm, primitive self'. Jung's visit to Africa in 1925 gave him the

> … final confirmation of his recognition of the 'collective unconscious in man' […] His own experience had shown him how the Dark Continent and its aboriginal peoples attracted Europeans, because through its own physical character and example it provoked what was forgotten in their primitive selves […] Africans penetrated to a deeper subjective level of man […]. (Van der Post 1978:51, 53; Van der Post also was Afrikaans)

In Africa, Jung says, modern people discover the primitive self they have repressed in themselves for so long. He agreed with the statement: 'We carry with us the wonders we seek without us: there is all Africa and her prodigies in us' (Van der Post 1978:53).

In a talk, 'A synthesis of black and white?', Leroux asked: 'Is it not time for the writer to find a synthesis between two worlds of comprehension? Can the writer bring black and white together?' (Leroux 1980:87).

One may expect at this point to hear about a synthesis with Africa, however, when Leroux talked of white and black he referred to the perennial conflict of the Jungian archetypes, the White Clown who pursues a high ideal to the point of absurdity (like Hitler) and the Black Clown who rejects the ideals of the White Clown, gets drunk and makes jokes, but eventually overcomes the White Clown and then, in turn, becomes a White Clown (Leroux 1980:68).

Leroux did not engage with the African world. He rejected the views of those who required him to write about the socio-political crises in South Africa; he saw his task as exploring the myths that had motivated the West but had now died, and to discover new myths that could bring life in future (Kannemeyer 2008:243–249).

One of his books, *Seven days at the Silbersteins*, published in 1964, plays out over a week on a modern farm with all the modern technology, where everything is in place and in order. This order is threatened and eventually destroyed on the seventh day by the cumulative inner chaos; out of the destruction, there comes, unexpectedly, healing and new life. On the fifth day, the black workers revolt, but they are not, it seems, taken up in the eventual synthesis. The burning church is a terrifying symbol. On the seventh day, when the social order reaches its final stage of degeneration, the black masses wait outside to complete the destruction (Malan 1978:17, 58–59).

Towards the end of his life – he died in 1989, just before white political domination came to an end – Leroux was aware that a new era was inevitable. He said that all shared the guilt of the unholy situation in South Africa – only the victims were free of guilt. The 'white' writers did not know the world that the 'black' writers presented to them because Africa had lost its mysticism. The fantastic world of the past had been lost: contemporary black people had bread-and-butter politics. He expressed the hope that Africa would retain its dynamic and that the black continent would be reconciled to the white light (Kannemeyer 2008:625–626).

The year 1994 brought a whole new combination of things and thoughts to South Africa. The white Afrikaans-speaking community, sometimes known as the Afrikaners, had given over the political power to the democratically elected government. This group was now only about 5% of the total population. It had lost the idealism about the unification of Africa and the West that Louw spoke about. Louw's remark from 1936 that 'the Bantu and the Coloured have hardly been noticed by us' is still, to a large degree, true of the Afrikaner of today, that is, we still want to fit Africa into our own thought framework.

The problem that occupied Leroux's mind was confined to modernism. 'The clash between the great powers is within us', says one of his characters (Leroux 1966:105). This is far removed from Biko's clash between white racism and black solidarity. Few Afrikaners take the African world, as an entity in its own right, seriously. Anti-apartheid literature in Afrikaans has proliferated since the 1960s, but it was mostly inspired by the anti-apartheid movements in Europe, rather than direct engagement with Africa. More recently, the articles written and published in Afrikaans newspapers about the decolonisation riots in 2015 and 2016 did not give attention to what the students themselves said, with the exception of an article by an African writer, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016), that was translated into Afrikaans. The Afrikaans writers merely applied their own modern theories to the events (Van Niekerk 2017).

Louw and Leroux did the same: they interpreted Africa from within their own frameworks of thought. Louw spoke of the 'magical' Africa and Leroux of the 'mysticism' of Africa, and that leads again to the simplistic little 'solutions' that Louw objected against. Modernity is a powerful force in Africa, but that does not give any modern person the right to fit Africa into their own framework of thought. We must meet each other in the way that Levinas (1906–1995) wrote about, through direct and respectful contact with each other, as well as openness to the ways in which the others present themselves.

Forms of conflict with modernity

Restructuring the relationships of the West, Christianity and Africa: Anton Lembede

We have mentioned Anton Lembede's devotion to Africanism in Chapter 7. Lembede remained a Roman Catholic until his death, but he claimed that the traditional African worldview was diametrically opposed to that of the European or Western culture. He maintained that Europeans had an individualistic view of life, seeking selfishly after power, success and fame, which constantly plunged them into conflict; in contrast, the African's traditional philosophy of life regarded the universe as one composite whole, progressively driving towards more harmony and unity, in which 'individual parts' realise 'their fullest life in the corporate life' (Gerhart 1978:64, 65).

Lembede perceived and ordered the basic elements in a new way: Christianity and Western culture are not identified with each other anymore, in fact, the traditional African worldview is regarded as being closer to Christianity than the selfish and individualistic West.

While Lembede's movement emerged within the context of white dominance, it seems that in 1910–1930, in Central and West Africa, there were several strong movements that were not defined by opposition to Western missions but that wanted to take to their own people 'a de-westernized, African-appropriated Christian message' (Shank 1994:xi), in line with Setiloane's view of African theology as a spirituality that was at home in the ongoing African experience of life, 'whether the white man is present or not' (1980:49; see Chapter 6).

The underground stream

In a previous section, we took note of Etienne Leroux's opinion that Africa had lost its mysticism. Others similarly thought that the African world, however it is named, had disappeared.

Brandel-Syrier (1978:182–184) argued that, in the urban context, 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 'for 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 easy prey for anyone who wants to use them for his own ends. (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 destruction 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 the African Renaissance as a solution.

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 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. (2007:324)

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

These observations often seem to be correct. But as we have seen in Chapter 3, traditional memories can lie dormant for generations and then emerge suddenly with force. In the illustration based on Newton's method, if there is a new combination of factors, a colour that was hidden suddenly can become prominent again.

A South African theologian, Thakatso Mofokeng referred to 'black culture' as an 'underground stream':

> ... black culture is that underground stream that irrigates the tree of liberation... black people [...] retain the memory of freedom hidden in the dark corner of their subconscious [...] which will] stimulate a new cultural renaissance of a culture of struggle which will go into combat against the culture of the conqueror. (c. 1987:10)

In 2017, another theologian, Simon Munyai, described traditional Venḓa religion in much more overt terms in his PhD thesis, *The tenacity of African Traditional Religion in Venḓa Christianity: A missional investigation.* He described the Venḓa experience of the simultaneous belief in tenets of both their traditional religion (such as the belief in the ancestors) and the biblical God, either side by side or in many combinations and new forms. It can sometimes go unobserved, but he says it is always there.

Others describe or illustrate the same phenomenon. We have quoted Mphahlele:

> I could not return to ancestral worship in any overt way. But this does not invalidate my ancestors for me. Deep down there inside my agnostic self, I feel a reverence for them. (1973: 121–122)

The writer Wally Serote has lived in an urban environment for most of his life. He was born in Sophiatown, Johannesburg, in 1944. He attended school in Alexandra and Soweto, also in the Johannesburg metropole. He was the chief executive of Freedom Park in Pretoria until 2010. In 2013, when his book *Rumours* was launched, Serote described the rituals and ceremonies that were performed at Freedom Park as a symbolic cleansing of the land and people because the soil of South Africa had been soaked in blood and needed cleansing:

> He ended by saying that climate change now presented a different challenge to the land, where grasses in certain places had stopped growing and this had chased away the natural food of the predators. As a result, there have been cases of lions carrying off children from villages. Africans need to communicate with the land and live with it as one in the old way. He said that he believes that this could reverse the desertification of the land. (Amy 2013:n.p.)

This reference to lions carrying off children from villages is another example of the *underground stream*: it is not part of the lifeworld of the vast majority of Africans today. But the underground stream is there and the relationship with land remains an unsolved issue.

Going back to the past

The idea of going back to the past is another way in which the conflict with modernity manifests. In 1977, Mafika Pascal Gwala, a poet from Soweto, wrote:

> Promise you brother,
> The cattle shall have herded home
> To our ancestral kraal.
> Jol'iinkomo!
> Africa shall be one in her past.
> Jol'iinkomo!

> Africa shall have one soul.
> Jol'iinkomo! (pp. 70, 71)

In 2021, another poem named 'Jol'iinkomo' (which means: 'Bringing the cattle home to the kraal'), by present day poet David wa Maahlamela, was published that positively links up with Gwala (Mbao 2021:124–129).

Such sentiments are not confined to literature. In 2003, I had a group discussion with a number of jobless youth from a township near a large petrochemical industry, South African Synthetic Oil Limited (SASOL), that beneficiates coal and gas into many chemical products, including fuel. The group said:

> 'Sasol disturbed our ancestors by disturbing their graves, so that they are now restless; the only solution is to go back to the past. The mines must go, Sasol must go, because they occupy the land that can be used for traditional tribal farming. Mugabe is a hero, because he is restoring the past.'

Ernst Wolff quotes something similar from Mongameli Mabona's doctoral thesis of the year 2000, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593–1856):*

> Their power was based upon their dependence on the ancestors. They made the people feel that when they were going back to their ancestors they were going back to their future and when they were going forward towards their ancestors, they were going forward to their real healing past. (2020:186)

Guidance from African culture

In South Africa, the topic of decolonisation is always there as an underground stream that sometimes bursts out, as happened in 2015 and 2016 with the student protests, also called the Fallist or '#mustfall' movement (#RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, #ScienceMustFall, etc.).

The struggle for decolonisation targets Western civilisation itself. It is found in the United States of America, Canada, Latin America, Africa and in the East, the places whereto Western colonialism has taken the modern empire. It brings the cultural protest that was overlooked by many during the political struggles against injustice and oppression into the open.

The paper of Pitika P Ntuli (1999:184–185, 189), 'The missing link between culture and education: Are we still chasing gods that are not our own?' clearly links up with the book *Chasing gods not our own* by SME Bengu (1975) (see Chapter 7). Ntuli argues: 'As a people we have been interpellated into the Western ideological machinery, hence the need for decolonising our minds.' But he wants to move beyond the 'ongoing debates between Afro-centric and Eurocentric approaches. Resistance to Western hegemony and the concepts 'post-colonial' and 'post-apartheid' make these factors (the West, colonialism, apartheid) co-determinants of African identity, and that must be avoided. He pleads for:

> … a strategic retreat to pre-colonial Africa to extricate some of the knowledge systems relevant to our needs in the next millennium […] Central to the counter-hegemonic discourse is a return to first principles – to guidance from pre-colonial Africa. (Ntuli 1999:n.p.)

Other academics also plead for an approach that makes use of Africa's own resources. In 1976, Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, who later won the Nobel Prize in Literature, 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. (p. 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).

Many modern writers who want to take part in the decolonisation debate do not heed Soyinka's plea to use reference points from within African cultures themselves, they continue to present expositions of African events using only reference points from modern cultures.

For many proponents of decolonisation, modernity is inextricably part of colonialism. To quote but one example, the recent strong surge of decolonialism in South Africa:

> … is directly challenging the very foundations of Euro-North American-centric modernity and Western civilisation […] we must speak of a crisis of civilisation and modernity. This civilisational crisis was predicted in 1955 by Aimé Césaire taking the form of the incapability of a civilisation to solve 'the problems it creates' rendering it 'decadent'; turning its focus away from 'its most crucial problems' making it 'sick'; and playing 'fast and loose with its principles', opening itself to death. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016:51, 54)

#ScienceMustFall

In a chapter, *The coming of tyrants*, Meredith (2005) describes the two decades after political independence in Africa. It was an unstable period, marked by a high number of coups. The educated were often the target of violence. In Zanzibar, Abeid Karume came to power through a coup; he was distrustful of intellectuals and executed some of his advisors (2005:223). In Uganda, Idi Amin '… took sadistic pleasure in humiliating officials, usually men with wide education and experience, for whom he held an instinctive distrust' (2005:237). In Equatorial Guinea, Francisco Nguema took power. 'Given unlimited powers to arrest, torture, rape and murder, Nguema's security forces wreaked vengeance on the country's educated classes' (2005:240). In Ethiopia, under Mengistu Mariam, '… armed gangs hunted down students, teachers and intellectuals deemed to be "counter- revolutionaries"' (2005:246).

I could not find evidence that this level of violence against educated people or academics has been prominent in Africa in recent years. There are, however, political leaders who do show signs of anti-intellectualism. Recently, the political columnist Prince Mashele wrote about Jacob Zuma, then president of South Africa:

> African leaders don't like the idea of an educated populace, for clever people are difficult to govern. Mandela and Mbeki were themselves corrupted by Western education. (Admission: this columnist is also corrupted by such education.) [Mashele' s own remark] Zuma remains African. His mentality is in line with Boko Haram. He is suspicious of educated people, that he calls 'clever blacks'. Remember that Boko Haram means 'Against Western Education'. (2016:n.p.)

Linking the South African president's remarks about 'clever blacks' to Boko Haram is ominous, but Zuma's remarks as such can also be compared to the remarks of, for example, some leaders of the Republican Party in the United States of America. In an article by an experienced person in American politics, Max Boot (2016), titled 'How the "stupid party" created Donald Trump', Boot says that Republicans have often distanced themselves in their rhetoric from intellectuals in order to attract a certain section of voters: 'Rather than run away from the anti-intellectual label, Republicans embraced it for their own political purposes'. Boot quotes a certain William F Buckley Jr who said:

> I should sooner live in a society governed by the first 2 000 names in the Boston telephone directory than in a society governed by the 2 000 faculty members of Harvard University. (2016:n.p.)

In South Africa, the decolonisation of the university system was demanded forcefully in 2015 and 2016. There was a variety of activities, from the burning and vandalising of 'colonial' artworks, libraries and buildings to academic debates about the diversification of epistemology.

This movement also included the #ScienceMustFall movement. At the University of Cape Town, a student said that '… science as a whole is a product of Western modernity and the whole thing must be scratched out […] we have to restart science from the African perspective'. Many of her fellow students laughed and clapped hands. She referred to an area where people are able to use magic to send lightning to strike someone – and science cannot explain that. She stated that Western modernity is the direct antagonistic factor to decolonisation because Western knowledge is totalising. 'Western modernity is the problem that decolonisation directly deals with'. She wants:

> '… knowledge that is produced by us, that speaks to us, and is able to accommodate knowledge from our perspective […] Decolonising science would mean doing away with it entirely and starting all over again to deal with how we respond to (the environment?) and how we understand it'.[30]

30. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9SiRNibD14

The power of money

The longing for an own identity stands in an uncomfortable relationship with the power of money, one aspect of modernity that has a powerful and often destructive hold on Africa. Africa is richly endowed with natural resources, and various groups have often allocated these resources to themselves and to their own group. Meredith (2005:54–62) describes a pattern: around the mines or oil fields there is often an extremely rich group with an army that protects them against others, also with armies, who want to take this asset from them, resulting in violence and war, rape and the destruction of the ecology on a large scale. The resources are wasted in this conflict and the country remains poor. This is one reason why oil is often called a curse rather than a blessing in Africa – another is the pollution and destruction caused by the extraction of oil.

The eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is very rich in minerals. Meredith (2005:540–543) describes the consequences as follows. One of these minerals is the scarce mineral coltan, which is used in mobile phones and computers. Apart from the Congolese themselves, Uganda, Rwanda, Angola and Zimbabwe became involved in the year 2000, and later South Africa, with the UN:

> Like vultures picking over a carcass, all sides engaged in a scramble for the spoils of war [...] Petroleum [...] gold, diamonds, timber, coltan, coffee, cattle and other valuable goods. The volume of trade and loot grew in leaps and bounds, becoming the principal reason for them to continue their occupation. Each established separate spoils of war. (Meredith 2005:540)

Meredith quotes a UN panel of experts:

> Here lies the vicious circle of war. Coltan has permitted the Rwandan army to sustain its presence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The army has provided protection and security to the individuals and companies extracting the mineral. These have made money which is shared with the army, which in turn continues to provide the enabling environment to continue the exploitation. (2005:541)

This combination controls as much as 70% of all the coltan mined in the region. Western countries were also involved.

Inner conflict

The conflict between the existing cultures has become a conflict within the minds of the previously colonised people. It links up with the agonising journey towards some workable reconciliation within oneself that Es'kia Mphahlele wrote about (see Chapter 8). It has been eloquently described by Clapperton Mavhunga, in an article titled 'The colony in us, the colony as us', that he ends:

> We thought we were chasing the colony back to London, but only succeeded in chasing it deeper into ourselves, into us. It became us. How then to fight ourselves […] each confronting his own occupying colonial force, a force that is ourselves, that is the question. (2011: 380)

The conflict between the same two worlds, the 'white world' and the African world, is the theme that runs throughout Barack Obama's book *Dreams from my father*, first published in 1995. In high school, he struggled with this issue and came to the following insight:

> I had begun to see a new map of the world, one that was frightening in its simplicity, suffocating in its implications. We were always playing on the white man's court, Ray had told me, by the white man's rules. If the principal, or the coach, or a teacher, or Kurt, wanted to spit in your face, he could, because he had the power and you didn't. If he decided not to, if he treated you like a man or came to your defence, it was because the words you spoke, the clothes you wore, the books you read, your ambitions and desires, were already his […] because of that fundamental power he held over you, because it preceded and would outlast his individual motives and inclinations, any distinction between good and bad whites held negligible meaning. (Obama 2016:85).

Like Mavhunga, Obama felt he could not escape the white world. Efforts to express 'your black, unfettered self' were still trapped in the white world. If you rebelled against it or rejected the white man's rules and tried to turn into yourself, they would have a name for that too: 'Paranoid. Militant. Violent. Nigger.' (Obama 2016:85).

That is in the United States of America. Africa is not 'always playing on the white man's court': here, the 'white man' often has to play on Africa's court. The African world is a powerful presence, as is the modern world.

A 'workable reconciliation within oneself' of these two worlds may be essential for a decent and sustainable life. In a lengthy article, 'The de-Africanisation of the African National Congress, Afrophobia in South Africa and the Limpopo River Fever' Masemola John Lamola (2018) gives a passionate analysis of the various layers, tensions and gaps in African identities in South Africa. Lamola states:

> … we do not see ourselves as African, we in fact do not know who we are; it exposes the spatial self-misconception in the constitution of our consciousness. We are unconsciously confused as to who we actually are in this world. Any person with a confused self-identity of this magnitude has a deep problem; she has acute mental health issues. She suffers from either a split-personality syndrome or a confused complex that randomly sets her oscillating between feelings of superiority and inferiority in relation to others. Amidst this personality conundrum is a range of socio-psychotic acts such as the hatred of African immigrants who look like her and thus haunt her about who she really is, something which she denies. From this alienation from self you have inexplicable outbursts of rage, the raping of babies and octogenarian women, the burning of trains, and the shouting matches in Parliament. (2018:77–78)

We now look at the phenomenon where people use the fruits of modernity but at the same time destroy the entities that produce those fruits. This can happen either slowly (we take Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe as an example) or quickly (we take the burning down of buildings as an example). We will then reflect on this phenomenon.

Use and destroy slowly: Mugabe

The late former Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe remains a very popular figure in southern Africa. At the Southern African Development Community (SADC), he received standing ovations several times, for example, in 2003 and 2013.[31] In August 2014, he became chairperson of the SADC. The SADC has 15 member states in the region and is meant to promote modern development, but Mugabe severely damaged large parts of his country's modern economy. Under his leadership, 'Zimbabwe suffered the second most severe episode of hyperinflation in recorded history. Zimbabwe's annual inflation rate peaked in November 2008, reaching 89.7 sextillion (10^23) percent'. In 2017, it was down to 348 percent per annum (Hanke 2017).

Mugabe rejected 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). However, he seemingly enjoyed the best luxuries the West can offer; reports abound of Grace Mugabe, the president's wife, who routinely spent huge amounts on luxury goods in Europe and the East (£75 000 on one trip seems to be nothing unusual)[32] and of the president's luxurious houses in different parts of the world.

Use and destroy quickly: Burn, Babylon, Burn

The desire to enjoy the best that modernity can offer can also be combined with quick destruction, and none is quicker than burning down something. That has happened regularly in South Africa since 1976. At first, it was seen as part of the political struggle against apartheid and after the end of apartheid as part of the protests against poor service delivery. Amenities such as municipal buildings, delivery trucks, community libraries, churches and schools are burnt down.

A number of university properties were burnt down by, in many cases, the same students who studied in those buildings during the violent student protests in South Africa in 2015 and 2016 with the #FeesMustFall

31. See https://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/read/68474

32. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/15/grace-mugabe-the-rags-to-riches-rise-and-fall-of-gucci-grace>

movement. The protests were estimated to have cost around ZAR800 million in damages to educational infrastructure[33] – but money cannot measure the loss of invaluable books, documents and art and the damage to people and to relationships. As far as finances is concerned, it is comparable with the damage from the burning down of schools in the Vuwani district that we have discussed in Chapter 2, under the heading 'The consumer tribe'.

In the 1980s, I experienced this phenomenon at close quarters myself, as a lecturer at the (then) University of the North, which was a centre of the struggle against apartheid, where university properties were regularly burnt down.

Our telephone exchange facility was at some stage burnt down – by the same people, it seems, who needed telephones to organise their revolution in those days before cell phones.

Burning as part of protest also happens elsewhere. On 11 August 1965, a series of riots broke out in the predominantly black neighbourhood of Watts in Los Angeles. The Watts Riots lasted for six days, resulting in 34 deaths, 1 032 injuries and 4 000 arrests and ending in the destruction of 1 000 buildings.[34] Dr Martin Luther King Jnr went there. In a film about this famous leader, *King in the wilderness*,[35] made by former friends and colleagues, scenes of buildings that burn are shown. In one scene, Dr King is giving a speech to a group of people, mostly black, in the street. People were enthusiastic about his message. He said: 'All over the United States of America the Negro must take hands …' when somebody from the audience shouted '… and burn!' Dr King tried to ignore this and continued: '… and we must work …', but people were laughing and clapping hands so that he kept quiet, looking serious.

Later on, the film shows Stokeley Carmichael who said: '… the real problem with violence is that we have néver been violent. We have been tóó non-violent, tóó non-violent'. Directly after that, Dr King is shown: 'I have decided to stick with love. So I am not going to give you a motto of, preach a philosophy of burn, baby, burn! I'm gonna say: build, baby, build! Organise, baby, organise!'.

The Afro-American writer, James Baldwin (1924–1987), shocked his liberal friends once by declaring: 'Yes baby, I mean burn. We will burn your cities down'. He became increasingly alienated from America by events such as the murder of Dr King. Later in his life, he would refer to the 'Western world' as if he was not part of it and could easily escape to an 'international black identity' (Weatherby 1989, pp. 199, 393).

33. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FeesMustFall

34. See https://www.history.com/topics/1960s/watts-riots

35. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eQXD_44Kso>.

And in 1981, during the riots and burning in Birmingham, the Rastafarians in London released an album titled 'Burn, Babylon, Burn!' – London being Babylon, or Sodom and Gomorrah, destroyed by fire with a black Lot and his daughters fleeing out of the burning city.

Eddie Chambers gives this explanation of the 'burn, baby, burn' and 'burn, Babylon, burn' incidents that have a long tradition in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Fire destroys and gives light:

> Fire, that most primeval of elements, has a place of great significance in New World Africa Diaspora culture. Fire is a longstanding metaphor for light [...] but it is also a symbol of judgment, destruction and God's day of reckoning. In the words of the Negro spiritual, 'God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water, the fire next time.' (2017:163–164)

This spirit is reflected in the title of James Baldwin's book *The Fire Next Time*.

Why destroy? Reflection

How should we understand the 'burn baby, burn!' phenomenon and 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?

Gerhart refers to:

> … the most extreme type of thinking among black South Africans, in which the urge to use violence is in itself the central thrust [...] the *Fanonesque apocalypse* [...] Black South African intellectuals have by and large shunned extreme views of this kind, yet at the rank-and-file level of African political movements, under-currents of such thinking have always run strong [...] The masses, according to Fanon, have an intuition that their liberation can only be achieved by violence [...] the oppressed sense that their own emotional health can only be restored through violence. (1978:14)

Chitando et al. give this explanation:

> Mugabe has posed as the last standing advocate of black pride and economic liberation. This has seen him receiving wide acclaim as a consistent revolutionary in the Global South. Feted as an African liberation icon, Mugabe has had African crowds in raptures with his fiery rhetoric on black pride and dignity, even as his domestic record is heavily compromised by inefficiency, rampant corruption in the public sector and lack of creativity in addressing the country's multiple problems. (2014:182)

Like Gerhart's explanation, this may well be correct, but it does not explain the contradiction, it merely states it, and it does not necessarily take its reference points from African thinking. As we have seen, Mofokeng uses a reference point from within African culture:

> … black culture is that underground stream that irrigates the tree of liberation… black people […] retain the memory of freedom hidden in the dark corner of their subconscious […] which will] stimulate a new cultural renaissance of a culture of struggle which will go into combat against the culture of the conqueror. (c. 1987:10)

Also drawing on traditional thought patterns, our students often explained the destruction of university property with the slogan that life would come out of death and that no life was possible without death and destruction. This argument is clearly based on a circular concept of time.

Cyril Ramaphosa, the president of South Africa at the time of writing, is generally regarded as a moderate politician. As a devout Christian and a tough negotiator for the trade unions, he gained a great deal of prestige. In 2006, 12 years after political independence and as a wealthy businessman, he still did not feel free. He made the following remark in an interview:

> We won't live with this chain around our necks. I don't care if we have to wipe things out and start from the beginning and it takes a hundred years. We'll do it. (Butler 2008:110)

That gives us two complementary descriptions of what is in the minds of some modern African people, Clapperton Mavhunga's statement that we have seen earlier: 'we thought we were chasing the colony back to London, but only succeeded in chasing it deeper into ourselves, into us. It became us. How then to fight ourselves…' (2011:380) and Mofokeng's statement: 'black culture is that underground stream that irrigates the tree of liberation' (1987:10).

These two statements give a good description of the unsolved tension between the lure of modernity and the longing for one's own identity. This unsolved tension plays itself out in countless ways on the small scale of every day life and very visibly on a grand scale in the contradictions between the actions of someone like Mugabe: on the one hand, his angry rejection of the West and his gradual destruction of the modern economy in his country and, on the other hand, his lavish modern lifestyle.

Two multi-award winning writers, the brothers VS Naipaul and Shiva Naipaul, have observed the same unsolved tension: the externalities, the luxuries of the modern world, once acquired, all too often lead to disillusionment; people who acquire the luxuries that they longed for often feel misled. Having been cheated out of their own selves, all that remained was an emptiness, a void, and a desire to destroy, according to one brother, Shiva. (Naipaul 1984:184–185).

VS Naipaul (1981:187) refers to Pierre Mulele, a former Zairean *minister of education*, who rebelled after independence. The stories that went around

in neighbouring Uganda were that he marched into the country, his troops shooting everybody who could read or write or who was wearing a tie.

The Naipauls called it 'African nihilism': it is the urge to destroy Western culture because this culture is painfully attractive but at the same time equally painfully alienating. It is this alienation, this feeling of not being at home, to which Ngũgĩ (1981:4) responded when he said that building a communal home of which 'all the African masses can truthfully say: we have come home', is the main task ahead.

These contradictory tendencies – being attracted and then disillusioned by modernity – have not been reconciled in a stable combination. This is a central element of the problem definition that defines this book.

Land issues[36]

Reclaiming traditional land is one of the issues where resistance against modernity is expressed strongly, even if it leads to the destruction of modern food production and the loss of food security.

In the early 1990s, I attended an academic conference in Accra, Ghana. One evening, we went to an outdoor church rally in the city. The sound from the huge loudspeakers was deafening. The preacher became very agitated. He warned that people who sold their land would themselves be sold as slaves one day. The huge castles in Ghana where slaves were kept in dungeons before they were shipped out to America helped to keep the memory of that horrible trade alive in Ghana. Afterwards, one of the Ghanaians explained to me that the capital city, Accra, was built upon land that traditionally belonged to the Ga-tribe and that this tribe was now claiming back the land. They argued that the traditional system of land ownership was normative and that the modern system of ownership, on which Accra is built, is unacceptable.

Such claims are also made in the United States of America. In 2012, Tuck and Yang (2012:5, 7) argued that a key aspect of decolonisation is the repatriation of indigenous land and life. They will not be satisfied with anything less than the 'total appropriation of indigenous life and land [...] that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically'. The land problem, says Luc Kabongo (2021), has its origin in the colonial history of Africa, when colonisers displaced large numbers of native Africans to make way for European settlers and introduced a Eurocentric view of land, based on

36. This section represents a reworking of my contribution to Van der Watt and Culpepper (2016): 'The lost land and the earth mother: African mythology and the issue of land in southern Africa'. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004306677_011

private ownership through title deeds, that still applies to most of the land in many African countries:

> … while the landless (the majority of Africans) are still hoping their respective governments would redistribute equitably the land so that they could have access to their birthright inheritance from their Creator and their ancestors (Afro-centric view) […] Access to land is a major issue in many sub-Saharan African countries. (2021:1, 2)

The concept of 'the lost land' in the history of Zimbabwe

Since the last quarter of the 19th century, the history of Zimbabwe unfolded as various centres of power and other role players combined and broke up again: the white colonial power, the traditional tribal chiefs, both dead and alive, the spirit mediums, the freedom fighters and a development organisation.

The one constant factor was the motif of the land – more specifically, the lost land.

In the traditional culture of the Shona people, who form the vast majority in Zimbabwe, the land belongs to the Shona High God Mwari and, particularly, to the tribal spirits, the spirits of the founders of the lineage, clan or tribe who stay on that land. The tribal spirits are directly under Mwari, the creator. The spirit mediums are the link between the people and the tribal spirits and other lesser spirits.

The spirit mediums played a vital role in the uprisings of 1894 and 1896–1897 against the colonial occupation of the land (Huizer 1991:13, 17–21). That was the first Chimurenga [war for freedom]. After the uprisings were defeated, two spirit mediums who were leaders of the war, Nehanda and Kaguvi, were executed by the colonial forces. They became martyrs in the minds of the people and a source of inspiration during the second Chimurenga that started in the 1960s (Tendi 2010).

But before that happened, the traditional cult went into decline and lost its public power, Christianity became prominent and the white minority and the great majority of black people seemed to have made peace with each other. The white government and many traditional chiefs joined forces (Huizer 1991:22).

As the number of white settlers and their political dominance increased, resistance mounted again. The spirit mediums shifted their political allegiance from the *living* chiefs, who cooperated with the white government, to the *chiefs of the past*, *the tribal spirits* or *mhondoro* – a step that undermined the living chiefs. It was 'a veritable renaissance of traditional religion' (Daneel 1996:352).

In this way, the mediums regained their public role:

> In rural areas meetings became political gatherings [...] the past heritage was revived through prayers and traditional singing; ancestral spirits were evoked to guide and lead the new nation. Christianity and civilisation took a back seat and new forms of worship and new attitudes were thrust forward dramatically [...] the spirit pervading the meetings was African and the desire was to put the twentieth century in an African context. (Huizer 1991:25)

In an effort to counter the influence of the mediums, the Rhodesian government shot some of them, persuaded some to collaborate with the government with gifts and deference (a strategy that worked with many traditional chiefs) and 'dropped pamphlets from the air over the guerrilla-held areas, in the guise of anti-nationalist admonishments from local spirit mediums' (Huizer 1991:28). It did not work.

The support of the spirit mediums for the freedom fighters was a turning point in the war. Not only did many living chiefs lose their power, many 'traitors' and 'sell-outs' were condemned as witches. The fact that the freedom fighters claimed that they were fighting for the reclaiming of the 'lost land' from the white owners played an important role in winning the confidence of the mediums. 'From their side, the guerrillas observed the taboos and rituals prescribed by the mediums. Liberation politics and traditional religion merged' (Huizer 1991:29–30; Inus Daneel in an interview with Van der Linde 1991:14).

The first president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, was one of these freedom fighters.

After independence in 1978, the Mugabe government concentrated on modernising the farming methods of the black farmers in the so-called communal areas rather than focusing on the large-scale distribution of the land of commercial farmers. By the late 1990s, however, Mugabe's popularity dwindled because of a steep economic decline. Mugabe then turned on the white farmers and the United Kingdom and supported the invasion of commercial farms by war veterans and other landless people (Spierenburg 2009:17; Tendi 2010:81).

Mugabe gradually developed his own 'theology of land'. As the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe worsened between 2000 and 2003, the state embarked on an intense propaganda campaign with a two-pronged strategy: marketing its programmes while subjecting the opposition to violence and negative publicity. Using various media, the propagandists sought to portray the ruling party (ZANU-PF) as a sacred movement fulfilling prophetic oracles that the black majority would reclaim the lost land (Chitando 2005).

In the urban areas, Mugabe couched his rhetoric in Christian terminology. A royal mythology was built around Mugabe as 'messiah, son of God, new

Moses, supreme leader, divine king and breadwinner'. He was portrayed as an analogy of the suffering messiah and redeemer of the Bible. In rural areas, on the other hand, he would focus on the local traditional religion. Here he was portrayed as the legitimate heir of Nehanda and Kaguvi, the two spirit mediums who were executed at the end of the first Chimurenga (Machingura 2012:208, 259, 260). 'Mugabe made use of traditional Zimbabwean religion as a way of making land the central issue in the Third Chimurenga' (Tendi 2010:93).

There have been numerous reports that Mugabe's cronies, and not the poor and landless in whose name the land was taken, benefited from the land restitution programme. Agricultural production, food security and the economy as a whole declined sharply (e.g. Mutonono 2020; Compagnon 2013: Chapter 7: 'The state bourgeoisie and the plunder of the economy', pp. 191–220).

In the process, he shifted the traditional authorities, the chiefs and the spirit mediums, to the sidelines. They consequently now joined forces and again used the symbol of the lost land to gain power.

Inus Daneel became involved in this new movement. During a period of 'intensive field research in the mid-eighties', in which he was investigating the role of religion in the liberation struggle, he was in close touch with ex-combatants, chiefs, mediums and African Independent Church leaders.

'Endless discussions about the military struggle to recapture the lost land led to the consideration of land and environmental issues' (Daneel 1996:347). The chiefs and mediums were united in their frustration with the way the Mugabe government ignored them. The mediums ascribed the prevailing droughts to the failure of the government to recognise the role of the spirits in the war for liberation. The chiefs and the mediums began to see the rampant deforestation, particularly in the resettlement areas, as an opportunity to gain influence again. A new movement, the War of the Trees, emerged. It took on the character of a liberation struggle, based on 'the same religious tenets and holistic African worldview as the struggle for political independence'. The land that was reclaimed from the white settlers was now lost in ecological degradation (Daneel 1996:347).

The chiefs and mediums were both dependent on the senior regional ancestors; they upheld:

> … a holistic African world view in which the living and the living dead, the creator-divinity and all of creation are inseparably linked in a seamless totality on one continuum. […] the maintenance of the equilibrium between a healthy environment and the well-being of the humans living there is considered to be the guardian ancestors' prime concern. (Daneel 1996:348)

It was not a return to the past, but a combination of old and new.

The ex-combatants were added to the mix. They were frustrated because they did not share in the privileges of political liberation. Preserving the environment offered them a means of job creation. The ancestors symbolised:

> … much more than the localized spirit interests of the old religion. They represent a new black identity and cultural awareness in which people take pride; they represent liberation from colonial oppression, the recent birth of a nation, as well as that nation's ambition for development and progress. (Daneel 1996:354, 364)

The hope of reclaiming the lost land is well illustrated in one of the ceremonies where Chief Makumbe of the Gutu district proclaimed that once the trees were planted, 'the rains will abound, the *mhondoro* spirits will return and the *njuzu* will re-inhabit the pools'. (Daneel 1996:363). The *njuzu* spirits are benevolent spirits that provide traditional female doctors with healing powers, medicinal knowledge and herbs so that they can successfully heal their patients, particularly barren women (Daneel 1984).

As with the political struggle, where 'sell-outs' were regarded as wizards, wanton tree felling and water pollution were now stigmatised as a form of wizardry, punishable by fines or, in extreme cases, banishment from the ward or chiefdom where the offense took place (Daneel 1996:366).

In parallel with the movement based on traditional religion, Daneel initiated the Association of African Earthkeeping Churches (AAEC) in 1991, a grassroots environmental and tree-planting movement that counted, at its peak, some 180 AIC denominations (Daneel 2011).

These two movements, the AAEC and the movement based on the traditional religion, were both founded by Daneel's Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation (ZIRRCON). In the first 15 years of ZIRRCONs' existence – the period during which Daneel acted as director – an estimated 12–15 million trees were planted (Daneel 2011).

Could a similar movement be expected in South Africa? And does the *War of the Trees* in Zimbabwe provide a model that can be applied widely today? What has been the impact of the initiative in the long term?

The mythical relationship to the land in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa

In the year 2018, the hottest issue in South African politics was probably the issue of land, and it is still high on the agenda. Opposing arguments are propagated with great conviction. Some say that white people have stolen

the land, and it must be taken back. Farm murders have been a hot issue for years. Some argue that food security is highly dependent on white farmers; productive farms that were handed over to black farmers soon go bankrupt, and it would be better if the state, which owns large areas of land, gave that to emerging black farmers. In traditional tribal areas, millions of black people cannot own the land on which their houses are built. The Khoi and San communities claim that they are the original occupants of the land and that it has been taken from them by white *and* black settlers. And with a growing population, increasing water scarcity, land degradation and ecological destruction, the question of sustainable farming methods has become increasingly urgent.

Land was a prominent symbol in the Black Consciousness poetry in the South African townships of the 1970s, such as Alexandra and Soweto. This poetry has much in common with the literature from the rest of Africa. It used basic motifs from traditional African cultures, such as the cyclical concept of time and the earth, which is our mother. They applied these motifs to the political struggle: death, in this case, the deaths of political activists, became the source of life and freedom. In death, we return to the earth to be reunited with the earth, our mother, as part of the cycle of life and death; a political death would bring new political life. This theme repeatedly came up in the sermons of the black theological students at the University of the North, where I was lecturing at the time.

This thought pattern is deeply embedded in traditional African funeral rites. Death is traditionally seen as the beginning of a new stage of life, as rebirth into the world of the ancestors where you come from. The corpse was often buried in the shape of an embryo. There were symbols for the womb and for the navel. Corn seeds are thrown into the grave as a symbol of the cycle of life (Häselbarth 1972:34–35; Sundermeier 1980:253).

Even earlier than the South African poets of the Seventies, the thought pattern that death leads to life was used during the tensions and struggles in Kenya in the struggle for independence. As we have seen in Chapter 5, in *A Grain of Wheat* (1976; first published in 1967), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o referred to 1 Corinthians 15:36 where Paul speaks of the grain of wheat that must be buried in the soil before it can bear fruit.

In the years that Ngũgĩ 's book was reprinted repeatedly, the South African poet Mongane Wally Serote used several symbols to express the idea of life-through-death. The tree, for example, has a cyclical pattern: the tree grows up and the fruit falls down to become a new seed in the earth – and a new tree grows. The earth remains the basic source of life. 'I'm the seed of this earth [...] I'm the fruit of this earth [...]'. To be a seed has a political meaning. It is a black seed, looked after:

by black saints and prophets
by Sobukwe Mandela Sisulu
Fanon Malcolm X George Jackson. (Serote 1974:34)

The first three 'black saints and prophets' mentioned were South African anti-apartheid activists: Robert Sobukwe was the founder of the Pan-Africanist Congress and was under house arrest at the time; Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu were members of the ANC and were in detention on Robben Island. Frantz Fanon was a well-known revolutionary writer from Martinique. Malcolm X and George Jackson were black political activists in the United States of America – both died violently in unrelated incidents, Malcolm X in 1965 and Jackson in 1971.

The symbol of the tree and the fruit represents the cyclical continuity of rise and fall, up and down, life and death, and the powerless who will become powerful. The tree, the image and bearer of life, has a time to grow and spread its branches and a time to dry out, shed leaves and crash to the ground. Existence takes place in the shifting balance between the forces of life and the forces of death. 'The trees' understanding of seasons could caress my heart', writes Serote:

when fruits are ripe they fall to the ground
and leave a seed
ah
how can we forget
luthuli's voice [...] sobukwe (1978:23)

We have given some background information on Sobukwe after the previous poem and about Albert Luthuli in the earlier discussion on Mandela (see Chapter 7). The poet wanted to bear fruit by dying for the future ones:

oh you black mother
black woman
mama
your smile that paves through the wounds and the hurt
breaks me
like a twig loaded with green leaves and ripe fruit
mama
let me fall to the earth let me fall to this soil
let my rest be a seed
if i will take this fall
gently, gently,
with my bare feet and my naked body. (Serote 1975:42)

The symbol of mother and earth in the African world

One aspect of the African or Black culture that must be restored, according to Mofokeng, is the African community which is linked to the land – 'a community that is broad to include the dead, the living and unborn and qualitatively rich enough to have a history, a culture and a land'. (Mofokeng c. 1987:7)

The Afro-centric view is described by Mofokeng:

> As far as the Black cultural tradition is concerned, land is the mother and Black people are 'sons and daughters of the soil'. It gives Black people an identity and in turn, receives an identity from them. Land is the source of livelihood [...] It is also of religious significance as the location of sacred places where we dialogue with the founding fathers of the Black community. Tearing these people away from this land is sacrilegious. The land is also socially and psychologically significant. We always come back to our roots [...] The land is also the bedroom where we put our departed loved ones to bed. It is also the house of our ancestors. We always go back to them to have our dialogue with them, to retain and promote our sense of community. Without them, we lose our sense of continuity and history. Without them and their land we float like a ship without an anchor and compass on a stormy sea. (c. 1987:11)

Mofokeng here takes up a dominant theme in modern African literature. In 1938, Jomo Kenyatta, who later became the first president of Kenya, wrote:

> In Gikuyu life, the earth is so visibly the mother of all things animate, and the generations are so closely linked together by their common participation in the land, that agricultural ritual, and reverence for ancestral spirits, must naturally play the foremost part in religious ceremonial. [...] Communion with the ancestral spirits is perpetuated through contact with the soil in which the ancestors of the tribe lie buried [...] the earth is the most sacred thing above all that dwell in or on it [...] Ceremonies are performed to cause the rain to fall, to purify and bless the seeds, and again to purify the crops. (Kenyatta 1985: 21, 243–254, 316)

Cartey (1969) called the symbol of mother and earth, the earth of Africa, a dominant motif throughout modern African literature at the time. In Senghor's writings, it has a mystic and romantic character: 'African night, African woman, childhood, ritual, the dance and the dead ancestors, which, when fused together, bespeak the continuity and permanence of the African presence' (cited in Cartey 1969:3, 301; see also 'The symbol of mother and earth in the African world', later in this chapter).

In an anthology of African poetry, jointly edited by Leopold Senghor of Senegal and Aimé Césaire of Martinique, the 'chief celebrant is the Black Woman, the Earth Mother, the anthropomorphic symbol of primal sensuality' (Awoonor 1976a:155).

The symbol of mother and earth is not only used in the context of political activism but is also meant to define African *identity*. To put it differently, political freedom must include cultural freedom:

> … the choice to be Black, washed clean of all the contagions of civilised men […] The search for identity connotes a spiritual return to Africa, to the mythical landscape populated by the dead ancestors, the memorials of childhood, and the presence of the mother […] the hour of ultimate night, all state the magic of this black mythical moment of existence in sharp contradiction to the opaque description of the light of Europe. At this hour, at the call of the woman, the Earth Mother, the ancestors gather to talk to their children. (Awoonor 1976a:166, 168; see also Chapter 11: 'Aspects of urbanisation in Africa').

The question is to what extent this symbol can represent a constructive movement towards a better quality of life in the present era and towards solutions to the present land issues and the ecological dilemmas that threaten life all over the world. Does it lead to greater care for the earth, to sustainable practices? Can it contribute to sustainable production?

The combination of earth and mother in the African context has consequences for the way in which one regards productivity.

In modern African literature, productivity has been linked to the symbols of earth and mother:

> Here, too, is the relationship between earth and woman […] Earth as well as woman should be productive, for earth is mother; its productivity not only ensures the continuity of the clan but should be ensured by the clan. (Cartey 1969:344)

Traditionally, the clan ensured the fertility of the land through religious rituals in the belief that a good relationship with the ancestors ensured rain and good crops, while a disturbance in this relationship caused disaster and death.

Soyinka talked of the ecstasy, the frenzy of religious rites which satisfy the:

> … periodic needs of humans to swill, gorge and copulate on a scale such as Nature's on her monstrous cycle of regeneration […] Man reaffirms his indebtedness to earth, dedicates himself to the demands of continuity and invokes the energies of productivity. Reabsorbed within the communal psyche he provokes the resources of nature: he is in turn replenished for the cyclic drain in his fragile individual potency. (1973:xii)

The question is how this relates to modern science and technology and to Christianity that builds on the Old Testament where the prophets of the God of Israel rejected the fertility rites of the Canaanite Baals.

The symbol of the Earth Mother plays a role in the search for a healthy ecology in various contexts in the world today: it has been taken up in Christian theology as well as in some of the more esoteric Gaian and New Age movements, where *Mother Earth* is prominent.

An example of the way the symbols of earth, creator and ancestor are used in mainstream African theology can be found in Desmond Tutu's appreciation of Kapya John Kaoma's book *God's family, God's Earth: Christian ecological ethics*. Tutu (cited in Kaoma 2013) writes about the ecological crisis:

> We are one Earth family, God's Family. We must protect the rights and dignity of Creation without overlooking those of the poor [...] The earth is the Lord's; thus a sacrament of ecologically interconnected beings held together in Jesus Christ, who, as Kaoma argues, is the Creator, the Life and the Ecological Ancestor of all life [...] Just as we fought against colonialism, racism and apartheid, we must unite to fight this life-threatening problem. (n.p.)

Kaoma used both African and Christian traditions.

We will come back to the question about the relation between modern and African thought patterns and Christianity regarding land in Chapter 15 (see the 'Reflection' under the heading 'The story of the Molati Infield Rainwater Harvesting project').

■ Conclusion

We have seen various forms of conflict and various ways to deal with it. A particularly important form is the unsolved inner conflict that Mavhunga and Lamola described. It leads to an alienation from one's self. It can become a creative tension, and it can become destructive. It makes finding a place to feel at home all the more urgent.

We end the discussion of African ways to deal with the impact of the West, and with the resultant conflicts between the old and the new, with an example of chaos theory that is provided by the American journalist Blaine Harden (1991:307). Nigeria had repeatedly switched from military rule to a democratically elected government and back again to military rule. In 1989, Harden observed a rally in Nigeria. The *military ruler*, Babangida, had appointed *army officers* to educate people about *democracy*. The rally was organised for this purpose. Well-known pop musicians were there to draw the crowds. That succeeded, and the crowds arrived. But they were unruly and did not pay attention to the speeches of the generals. Then a *tribal chief* – who came as undemocratically to power as the officers themselves – stood up. The crowd fell silent. He took the microphone, turned to the generals and pronounced: 'your assignment (of teaching people democratic values) is too much for you'.

He returned to his seat amid deafening applause. Harden comments: 'Self-rule was taking place even as self-rule was being denounced. Nigeria, once again, was falling apart while coming together. Its future was confused and terrifying and limitless'.

It is indeed terrifying because it is chaotic. And it is the result of the meeting of two complex systems – in this case, the Western and African political and cultural systems – that both work in their own way but still have to find a stable pattern for working together. In Nigeria, the conflict between Christians and Muslims is added to the mix.

Chapter 9

The impact of the modern empire on African households

The focus will now increasingly fall on the African household, because the household is at the heart of the African world. It plays a key role as a caretaker of all those in need, and its disruption is a major cause of many of Africa's most pressing problems. It is therefore vital to understand what the impact of the modern world and Christianity has been on the household, in rural as well as in urban contexts.

Modern households

One of the ways in which the modern world has made an impact is through the mere presence of the modern household, which exerts a major 'pull factor' that has strongly influenced the way in which contemporary African households are formed.

The modern household has evolved over the centuries. Bill Bryson (2010) gives a history of modern domestic life in his book *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*. It gives an idea of 'the vast history of the domestic artefacts we take for granted'. The book covers topics of commerce, architecture, technology and geography that have shaped modern homes into what they are today. It provides 'a fascinating history of the modern home [...] most of the key discoveries for humankind can be found in the very fabric of the houses in which we live'. Modern homes and lifestyles are deeply

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woven into the network of powers that McLaren describes as the empire and as the biggest problem on earth. How do we break with the empire if we do not change our own lifestyles, our very homes?

There was a time in Western culture, says De Graaff (n.d.:439–444), that the home was a meeting place of God and people. The house stood firmly on the earth; it was formed out of the earth. The roof and the chimney brought a relationship with the sky above, the wind, rain and sun. The interior of the house had a sacral character. The back door was used for people's daily lives on the earth; the front door was used for those events in life that are related to heaven: baptism, marriage and funerals. In the house, the family gathered once or twice a day to read the Bible and pray. In the modern home, all of this has weakened and mostly disappeared. Modern technology has created the new world in which we live today. Television (TV) has replaced the Bible in many homes. It often brings people into a dream world, with stories that constitute the world in which they live, often high up in a flat, away from direct contact with the earth and the damage we do to it (see Chapter 4 of this book).

In 1958, there were half a million TVs in the Netherlands. Ten years later, there were three million, and 80% of households had one. From hundreds of photographs that Philips took of the living rooms in Dutch households, it is evident that the dinner table was the centre of family life in 1964. There was one electric light in the room and it was above the table. The telephone was in the passage, and if there was a TV, it was mostly in a corner, behind a chair. To watch TV one had to shift the furniture. By the end of the 1960s the TV had become the centre of the living area: the dinner table was sidelined and the whole interior was arranged around the TV (Mak 2009:570, 571). By 2009, family structures became looser: the habit of watching TV together as a family was disappearing, most of the youth over the age of 15 years old had their own TV in their own rooms. And about half of the children had by the age of twelve years old gone through the divorce of their parents – that was highly exceptional in the 1950s (Mak 2009:634).

As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 11, the TV has followed a similar trajectory in contemporary African households: for many, the centre of the household has shifted from the hearth, the fireplace, to the stove and then to watching TV together and now, in some cases, watching TV alone in one's room. And the cell phone and social media have brought a whole new dynamic. Television itself presents a mix of cultures: it is a highly modern communication medium, broadcasting popular programmes which, in some local instances, portray different elements of traditional African cultures, such as stories about traditional leaders and witchcraft, where *sangomas* in turn make use of modern technology.

Traditional African households

The traditional African household is becoming less visible, but it still has a strong influence on contemporary African households.

There are a number of descriptions of the unity and harmony of the traditional African household. We look at a few of these.

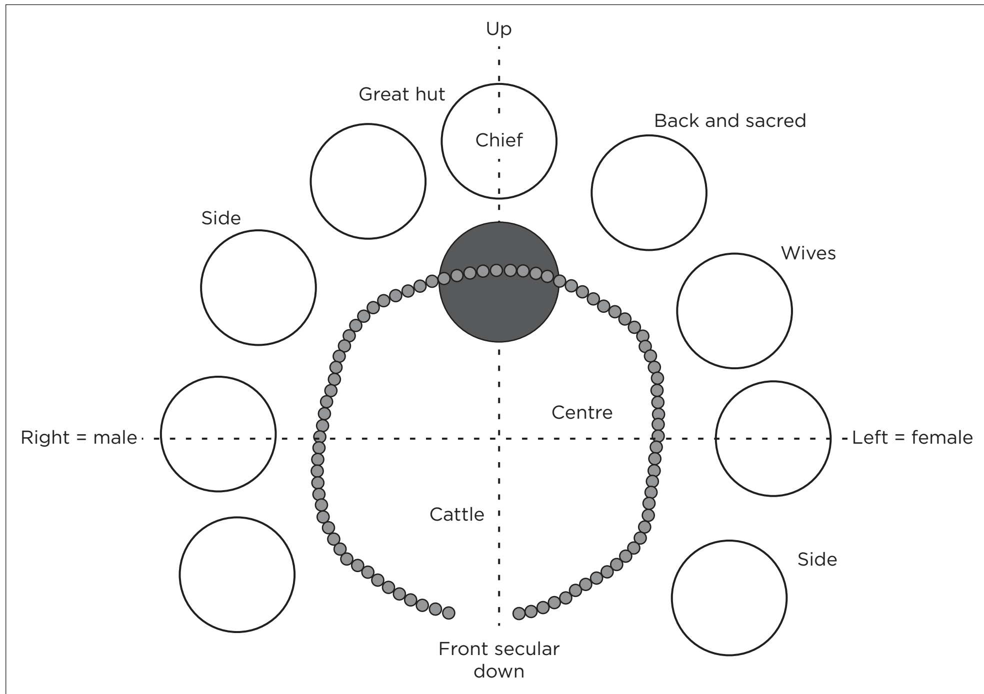
The traditional Herero household is described by a German missionary, Theo Sundermeier, using the symbol of a circle. It reminds us of Awoonor's reference to the importance of the circle in African cultures. Sundermeier reflects on the Herero household:

> The circle is the most telling symbol of the African world view. To comprehend it is to come close to the African feeling of unity and harmony. The area circumscribed by the circle is unbroken and whole. It has no top or bottom, no more or less. All the dynamics in this area combine to form a balanced harmony. Sunrise, sunset, noon and midnight are held together in the circle. It separates what is outside from what is inside. Within life is a unity, held together by a hidden centre. Should the circle be ruptured, the unity will disintegrate and life will be extinguished. Within there is shelter, outside there is defencelessness. The circle circumscribes order, anyone outside of it has no place to live.
>
> The right and left-hand sides, the side of strength and that of weakness, stand next to each other in equilibrium. Life and death balance each other; harmony of forces prevails.
>
> The African derives his confidence to face life from the unity of his world, through which he experiences what European existentialism wants to achieve, the uncleft unity of subject and object, the interchangeability of inside and outside, the relation to one's surroundings and the imbedding of the individual in the community. Thought and feeling, which exist side by side in the West, form a unity here. (1973:112,113)

This harmony is seldom seen today, even less so on macro levels. An architect from Ghana, Kwabena Amankwah-Ayeh (1995:37–47), blames the social evils of modern African cities on the loss of the traditional circular pattern of households in sub-Saharan Africa. He describes the circular pattern as the 'general structural model' of these households. The circular pattern provides community, creating a space and basic unity and security – but that has been lost in the modern square housing patterns (see Figure 9.1 and Figure 9.2). He proposes new patterns that would integrate the old and the new.

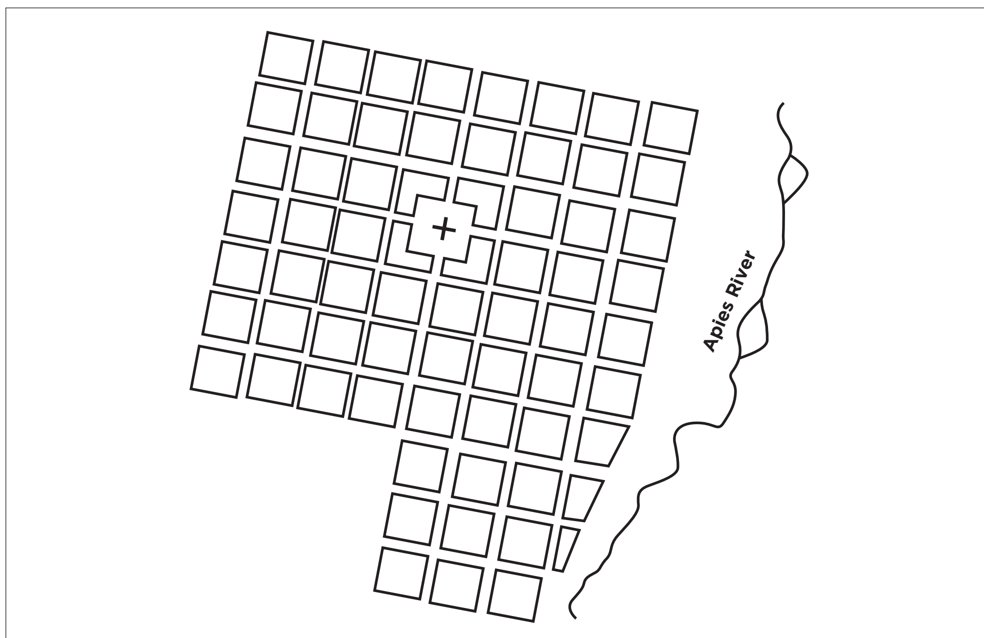
The BaPedi or Northern Sotho traditionally live in the Limpopo province of South Africa. The house [*kgoro*] has played a very important role in Pedi culture. The basic plan of a typical *kgoro* is circular:

> The family lives, patrilocally, in a dwelling unit called a *kgoro*. The Pedi society is built up round the *kgoro* system. The *kgoro* is the most important corporate unit within the tribal community, and it is no exaggeration to say that the whole



Source: Amankwah-Ayeh (1995), redrawn and published with appropriate permissions.

FIGURE 9.1: The Bantu cattle kraal pattern.



Source: Amankwah-Ayeh (1995), redrawn and published with appropriate permissions.

FIGURE 9.2: Plan of Pretoria (1863)

> tribal life hinges on the *kgoro*. The entire social, political and rural structure of the tribe is based on the *kgoro* which is, in its structure and organization, a skeleton or framework of the total tribal structure and organization. The *kgoro* performs, on a smaller scale, similar functions within its own group to those performed by the tribe for the whole community. It functions as a social group and as a political unit. It performs jural activities within the group, and guides the economic activities of the group. It also operates as a religious unit in the performance of communal rites and ceremonies. (Mönnig 1978:218)

The household is the place where the supernatural and the human worlds meet. The cattle kraal forms the centre of the *kgoro*, and the kraal is not only the place where the cattle are kept but where the dead are buried and sacrifices to the ancestors are made (Mönnig 1978:219–222). This is the basic pattern all across sub-Saharan Africa, where the cattle kraal is traditionally the centre of the household (see Figure 9.1; Amankwah-Ayeh 1995:40).

The traditional Dinka of southern Sudan have a very close relationship with their cattle:

> Dependence of traditional Dinka on cows is almost total. The diet is primarily milk, cheese, and blood (drawn from the neck of a living cow). Cattle provide dung for plastering together straw houses, for cooking fuel, for smudge fires that discourage biting insects. Dung ashes are used as tooth powder. They are smeared over the body for decoration and to ward off flies and mosquitoes. Cattle urine is used for tanning leather, curdling milk, dying hair, and bathing the hands and face. Dinka usually refrain from butchering a cow until it dies of natural causes. Then, however, they eat the meat and utilize everything from horns (for spoons and fishing harpoons) to scrota (for tobacco pouches). Over the centuries, cattle raiding has triggered countless wars between the Dinka and neighbouring pastoral tribes [...] Cows, concluded British anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard, are in themselves a cultural end, and the mere possession of, and proximity to, them gives a man his heart's desire. On them are concentrated his immediate attentions and his farthest ambitions. (Harden 1991:136–137)

Because of this intimate relationship with their lifeworld, people felt at home. It has been described with words such as community, harmony, balance, unity and synthesis, as the sense of continuity that Kunene (1972:88–89) regards as the basic philosophy of African life (see Chapter 8). Mphahlele (1972:24) describes it as 'the interconnectedness of things'.

Berglund (1976:102–111) reports on the deep significance of the pattern in which the traditional Zulu household is organised. The different places in the Zulu hut each have a significance of its own. The far back of the hut is cool and dark. That is the place where the ancestors (also called the living dead and the shades) live. Nobody enters this space other than on specific occasions. Christians and school people were criticised by Zulu spokespersons because they put windows in the wall, simply letting the light come in, in this way chasing the shades out of the house. One man said: 'Christians are always alone [...] Nobody likes them because they have no shades' (Berglund 1976:102).

The shades stay at the hearth, where they lick the pots during the night. The doorway arch is associated with the shades. The right-hand side of the hut is the allocated place of men and the left-hand side of women. The shades speak to the diviner from the right-hand side of the hut because the shades are the shades of the man's family (Berglund 1976:103–106).

The cattle enclosure again plays a very important role. The cattle belong to the head of the family and to the shades of the clan. The huts of the humans and the cattle enclosure form one homestead. The shades live in the cattle, especially in the gall of cattle – and men. The gall bladder:

> … has an entrance but no exit. That is the thing that shades like. It is like a hut to them, having a door but no exit elsewhere […] The gall is dark […] They are all alike, the gall bladder, the womb and the hut. They (the gall bladder and the womb) are the same in that they carry life. (Berglund 1976:110–111)

The shades are the opposite of the living: they lick the bitter gall because it is sweet for them. They work in darkness, not in the light.

These symbols illustrate that in traditional African society, there was no separation between religious activity and daily life.

The traditional African homestead is an expression of Mphahlele's interconnectedness of things: fertility, life and death, the symbols of light and darkness, the hut and the cattle kraal, the womb of women and the gall bladder of cattle, the ancestors who like the opposite of what people like – all combine and fit together and you experience being at home.

In more recent times, household architecture in rural areas has largely been modernised, and it is still uncertain how the process will unfold and what the impact on the well-being of the household will be. In the language of Newton's method, the descriptions of the household above refer to the context of a single colour or culture; the contemporary households have moved into the fractal boundary, where different traditions interact, clash and combine. In Chapter 11, where aspects of urbanisation in Africa is discussed, there is a heading, 'Shifting domestic energy use patterns in low-income households', where one aspect of the modernisation of the household is considered.

That does not mean that there were no tensions within the traditional household.

■ Disturbances of the African household

In line with the earlier descriptions, Van Deventer describes the traditional Venḓa household [*muta*] as the place where all things come together:

> The *muta* is […] an open system with merely a gap in one of the small walls as entrance and exit. These connecting walls are so low that one's horizontal

> perspective includes the whole panorama of people, land, crops, cattle, trees, mountains, houses, buildings, roads and vehicles, and one's vertical perspective includes the sky, sun, moon, stars, clouds, thunder and lightning. (2015:4)

But, says Van Deventer, the *muta* is also the place where things fall apart:

> Although the holistic communalism and cosmology definitely represent the basic and therefore most influential and positive value in the Vhuthu of the Venḓa population, it is precisely the dynamics of this value which constitutes serious problems due to external and internal disturbances. (2015:3)

Vhuthu is the Tshivenḓa word for *ubuntu*, a well-known concept in the African context: a person is a person with, for or through people – and through the ancestors, the land, cattle, crops and work.

TS Kgatla, likewise, mentions the tensions in the household. He refers to the Limpopo province in South Africa:

> In the years 1996–2001 more than six hundred people have lost their lives because of witchcraft-related violence [...] Most of these witchcraft accusations emanate from the 'home' and the family [...] Witchcraft accusations, therefore, underline the sad fact that jealousy, hatred and aggression exist within the intimate circle of the family, where solidarity and trust should reign supreme. The prevalence of this phenomenon puts a large degree of stress on everyone within close family circles, because the fear of being pointed out as a witch and the consequences that may follow from such an accusation keep people in a constant state of agony. Rumours, gossip and slanderous talk frustrate and leave victims utterly helpless. Under these circumstances people never know who will be the next victim of witchcraft accusations and are unsure what to do to avoid being accused. (2006:269, 270)

Another common disturbance is problems with the ancestors. Life comes from the ancestors, and when a person dies, he or she returns to the ancestors. However, when the harmonious relationship between the ancestors and their kin is disturbed, the result is tension and sorrow in life. Illness, drought, war and other threats to life appear, as well as (sometimes) mental disorders.

One of the possible forms of mental disorder is a certain form of illness called *malopo* in Sepedi [*malombo* in Tshivenḓa]. To be healed, the person must restore the relationship with his or her ancestors and for that, the person must preferably return to the homestead, the house of birth where the person's ancestors are buried. The patient must then be trained to dance *malopo*. 'The centre of the world, the home to which one returns to dance *malopo*, has become the centre of heaven and earth' (my translation). In dancing the *malopo*, the relation between the two worlds, of the ancestors and of humans, is restored. *Malopo* takes place at sunset, when light and darkness meet – light being where humans live, while the ancestors live in darkness. The patient dances until he or she falls to the ground, stiff like a corpse. It is explained by other participants: 'he has fallen, he is dead, but

he will stand up again'. In this dying, the contact is restored with the living dead. In this 'death', the patient enters the world of the ancestors and begins to speak with the voice of an ancestor (Van der Hooft 1979:99–106, 149). VhaVenḓa people told me that the person starts talking in Chikaranga, the language of the tribe that the VhaVenḓa descend from.

The result is that the mental disorder, which Van der Hooft treated with Western medicines, is healed.

The *malopo* confirms the importance of the household in traditional BaPedi cosmology as described by Mönnig: the household is not only the centre of the world but also the centre of heaven and earth.

Another 'internal disturbance' of unity at home is the relationship between father and children.

A missionary and keen observer of African daily life, John V Taylor (1958:150, 155), more than 60 years ago observed that the relationship between a father and his children was ambiguous in Ganda society. On the one hand, the children feared the harsh treatment of the father; on the other hand, they, especially those who stayed with their grandparents, look down on their father. This conflict remained unsolved. In the 'old tradition', it was thought necessary to send a child away as soon as it was weaned, on the one hand, to solve the tensions of this ambiguous relationship between children and fathers, and on the other hand to maintain the solidarity and interdependence of the larger family group. Sending children away is a 'fairly common' custom in Africa, but 'there is a definite decline of this practice among the better educated and professional families', observed Taylor.

South Africans also have the tradition of sending children away, but a common problem now is the absence of the father and, if he is present, it is his behaviour that is often the problem. In many cases, it becomes the responsibility of the mother to work in order to take care of her family.

Disruptions of the traditional African household by external factors include both the *negative* elements of Western colonialism and apartheid, such as being removed from your land, economic exploitation and wars, and *positive* elements such as modern education and technology – what many would call progress.

The contemporary African household is often a dysfunctional combination of traditional African and modern Western elements. Together with all the good things, there is a long list of negative results: the break-up of families, domestic violence, neglected children, loneliness and fear.

A report by Hall (2018:34–35) shows that the percentages of African children in South Africa living in different household types are:

- Nuclear (spouse or partner couple with their own children and no other members): 21%
- Lone parent (single parent with own children and no other members): 11%
- Extended (not nuclear or lone parent, but all members are related): 66%
- Composite (not nuclear or lone parent, and some members are not related): 2%.

In an article in the financial newspaper *Finweek*, Johan Fourie (2018), a professor in economics, considers various possible causes why 61.7% of the 989,318 babies born the previous year in South Africa had no information about their father included on their birth certificate. He concludes that none of the proposed reasons is supported by the evidence:

- Migrant labour is mentioned often, but it is exactly when the number of migrant labourers decreased because of different reasons that we see a significant rise in single motherhood.
- It is not a matter of preference: the Zulu, in particular, have very low marriage rates, as low as 30%, but a study found that more than 80% of unmarried Zulu women (and men) report that they would like to get married.
- The high cost of *ilobolo*, the traditional bride price, is often mentioned as a reason why people do not marry – they cannot afford to. That cannot be the only reason. Both the migrant labour and *lobola* systems are unique to southern Africa, but the share of single mothers has been rising almost everywhere – 62% of all births to non-college-educated mothers in the United States of America in 2014 were to unmarried women.

Another theory is that poverty prevents men from marrying, but again the evidence does not support it.

Fourie concludes: ‘Family structure is rapidly changing. More children are now growing up with only one parent. The causes remain fuzzy, but the consequences are likely to be even more uncertain.’

There are aspects of the traditional family structures that are still present, often in new forms, such as the uncertain role of the father and the role of the extended family.

■ The uncertain role of the father

Even though there were internal tensions in the ‘old tradition’, the role of the father has been severely undermined by modernisation. In Nairobi, 60% of the population was male in 1982 (Lamb 1982:19), and in 1985, Ali Mazrui of Kenya explained that it would have been better if Africans had used the

plough and not the hoe: if the women worked in the lands with the hoe, the men had no essential role to play that bound them to the household, and when the modern cities emerged, they started to drift away to the cities. If the practice was that men ploughed the fields, with an animal to pull the plough, as in some Asian cultures, the disintegrating effects of the city on rural households would have been less severe because more men would have stayed at home where they have a role to play.

All over Africa, one reads of men who stream to the cities, leaving their families behind (Lamb 1982:19, 36, 38, 40). In South Africa, the influx control measures during the apartheid years aggravated the problem by making it even more difficult for the family to accompany their husband and father. A high degree of male absenteeism – even as high as 80% and more – was found in the rural areas of the northern provinces.

What the figures do not show is how negative the image of the father is, even in nuclear families.

We first look at a portrait of the life of two workers in Nairobi and then at urban poetry from South Africa.

The dysfunctional life of two workers in Nairobi is described with dry humour in *Going down river road* by Meja Mwangi (1980). The mood of this book is well-illustrated in the following incident. One morning, Ocholla, one of the workers, is woken up by his wives and children who have come from the rural home to visit their 'prodigal father'. Ocholla is appalled to see them:

> 'Ocholla,' a man's rugged voice calls loudly from outside.
>
> Ocholla looks at Ben. He screws up his face, shrugs and turns to the door.
>
> 'Who is it?'
>
> 'It is me, Kamau,' the cheerful voice answers.
>
> 'What do you want?'
>
> 'Open up, I have friends [...] visitors for you. Open up.'
>
> The swarthy workmate pushes the creaking door open, squeezes into the hut. Then he smiles and steps aside to let Ocholla's visitors pass.
>
> 'Mother of [...].' Ocholla begins to swear and leaves the rest unsaid.
>
> His face turns a dusty grey hue, his eyes popping out. The abandoned mouth hangs loose, exposing half-chewed *sukuma wiki*. (Mwangi 1980:183)

The reason for his discomfort is that his two wives have arrived in the city with their baggage on their heads, each with a baby on her back and a baby around her chest, plus their other children:

> ... a party of little boys and girls of all sizes, ages, and all toting a little bundle of something or other. The hut gets instantly crowded. There is hardly room to breathe, let alone sit down.

> Ocholla's big nose starts working nervously. He looks from the guide to the happy visitors. The expression on his anguished face declares plainly he could murder the lot. But the party just stands there smiling broadly, glad to pay their beloved prodigal father a surprise visit. The father tries hard not to frown.
>
> 'You did not write to ask to come,' he reproaches.
>
> 'We did,' the elder wife, the spokeswoman answers.
>
> 'You did not,' he insists.
>
> 'Didn't you get the letter?'
>
> Ocholla ignores the question. He looks round at the crowd, his face gets graver still. He turns to the wives.
>
> 'Did you have to bring all the children, the whole lot?'
>
> 'They are on school holiday,' the younger woman answers. 'We have not seen you for a long time. They wanted to see you.'
>
> 'I was going to come,' Ocholla says unconvincingly. 'They should have stayed at home, worked on the field. Who the devil is minding the fields? And the cattle?'
>
> 'The cattle are all dead,' the older wife speaks up.
>
> 'Dead?' Ocholla's face twists in agony. 'Dead from what? What did you do to them?'
>
> 'Nothing [...] they just died. There was the drought, then the great diarrhoea. They all died.'
>
> 'There are the chickens to look after,' he says, 'there must be something left to mind.'
>
> 'There are no chickens anymore,' the spokeswoman informs him. 'We ate them all up. During the drought. There is nothing left to look after.' (Mwangi 1980:183–184)

To escape this invasion in their lives, Ocholla and Ben leave their visitors behind to go drinking.

We now look at the South African poetry of four black poets in Soweto and Alexandra in the 1970s.[37]

In contrast to the power of the mother figure in the poetry of the Seventies – and all over Africa – it is telling and disturbing to note the contempt all four poets express for the father figure's failure in the outside world. The fathers stand for everything the sons know they must avoid at all costs. It is the failure of the father that causes fear, agony and revolt against their fate. The fact that the father is the very opposite of the figure with whom identification is possible brings an urgency to the search for new heroes, new goals for the future and new sources of power. To be not-like-him is the driving force behind much of the mood of the 1970s.

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37. The following discussion of the poetry is from Van Niekerk (1982:76–82)

Oswald Mtshali (1972) expressed his disgust with his father's heritage in bitter, shocking imagery. His father caused his entry into the world but has deserted him and left him no resources on which to rely for the present or future. He has abandoned him in a prison:

> My father is not there
> He had left me, a child
> with his penis to eat for a boerewors
> and his testicles to slice as onion and tomato
> to gravy my dry and stale mieliepap. (Mtshali 1972:67)

Serote dedicated his first volume *Yakhal' Inkomo* to his father, his mother and his grandmother. It contains only disparaging references to the father. One poem describes the father hitting his little sister in the face because she had spilt the sugar for which he had worked so hard – acting out his powerless aggression against the little girl. The next reference describes 'frightened little fathers whose eyes never leave the ground' and who are helpless to console weeping mothers or control murdering sons.

Serote's second volume, *Tsetlo*, contains many references to the powerlessness of the father, for example:

> The gasp sounded
> bubbled through the broken mouth
> and rang like a yelp of a dog on his lips
> when his eyes shot out
> staring at the nightmare
> his wife
> having packed [...]
> and her long-hidden manhood,
> emerged [...]
> as her voice pierced him
> he bled
> fear dripping down his trousers
> and when his frail hand went up his mind fell in
> like the heap of soil on the grave. (1974:17)

In 'No baby must weep', the poet is talking to his mother:

> do you love my father
> he looks funny doesn't he
> with spectacles tight with wire and a torn overall
>   reading a

newspaper trying to catch some horses and
complaining about
the prime minister and the laws and the Nat party
fearing the police and dead scared of white people
do you love my father
ja
I love him too
I don't know why though. (Serote 1975:11)

The sense of the pathetic failure of the father predominates in image after image. In the volume, *Behold Mama, flowers*, another sentiment emerges:

yet, in the faces of our fathers we read the graffiti of defeat
and fighting
so let us say
maybe we learnt our lessons. (Serote 1978:85)

Pascal Gwala, too, in 'One small boy longs for summer' describes an ineffectual father figure. The family sits together on a cold winter's day:

Father drops the paper on the table
He comes to join us
- staring coldly round.
It's no frown really,
But, he's grinding his jaws.
Maybe it's the
July Handicap. (1977:22–23)

Sepamla draws an equally pathetic father figure in 'The blues is you in me':

the blues is my father's squeals
every Friday in a week. (1976:70)

And elsewhere:

how can I say home
where father sits with his head
dipped in despair
his vision blurred by indecision. (Sepamla 1977:15).

■ The mother as the stability of the household

The mother is portrayed as the heart of being at home, the one who keeps the disrupted family together.

The mother image, so central to the psychology of the unconscious and the archetypal pattern, is a profound source of mythical power in the modern black poetry of Africa. As we have seen, the image of *Mother Earth* is perhaps the most central symbol in African literature, as Cartey and others have pointed out. At various times in African literature, the earth or the sea have been identified with the primary image of the mother. More recently, these images are used in African ecofeminist and ecowomanist theologies to reimagine human relationships with Mother Earth; see Chisale and Robson Bosch (2021).

The role of the black mother in significant poetry of the 1970s in South Africa invites closer study.

In the poem 'Mother and child' Serote describes the close unity between mother and child that becomes a symbol that embraces the world, history, love and hatred:

> The world comes
> To the world of Mother and Child
> From history with love and hatred
> Resolved, Morena! (1972:28)

Strongly present in the work of all four poets are laments about mothers shattered by the death of their children. In Chapter 7, we referred to Serote's plea with the 'black brothers in the streets', the agents of death, to listen to the cries of their black mothers, the givers of life, and to stop their killing and to listen: 'it's black women who are crying'. In 'Man-child talking to the night' he addresses them again:

> Oh you bloody brothers.......
> Look at the weeping faces of mothers
> Who tore sons and daughters out of their flesh,
> And you tear them out of their hands
> To dust. (Serote 1972:41)

The 'brothers' are actively encouraged by the suffering mothers in their resistance against 'the system' which has brought about their suffering:

> Hilda with her urges, her intuition dipping its tongue
> Into the depths of our bitterness
> She urges us on! On! Not to fall. (Serote 1972:20)

In 'No baby must weep', the poet has already been driven to break away from his mother and go into exile:

i have a long thirst for freedom
let my hand go now my mama. (Serote 1875:48)

In archetypal contrast to the mother as a source of life, there is also, especially in Serote's poetry, the 'terrible mother' of Jung's thinking, she that 'devours and seduces, poisons' and is 'terrifying and inescapable'. She appears as the shebeen queen and the whore – 'god, the dark and the beer house where whores are made, eat people', Serote writes in the last lines of 'A glance'. In 'Murderer, his mother and life', Serote tells:

Next Sunday morning
we walked into a house
a house filled with human wrecks,
TB insanity VD
Sat on chairs drinking a yellow brew,
taking orders from a fat cold-eyed woman
Seated on an arm-chair
A throne of death
this,
a bloody Queen –
She smiled at us. (1974:44–45)

Gwala's (1977:19) shebeen queen is less symbolical but equally negative: she takes more than half of the man's wages and buys good meat, while he must eat 'fowl heads and feet'.

The response to the woman as a whore is nowhere more terrifyingly expressed than in Serote's 'No baby must weep':

i sit here
bursting words between my wringing fingers
like ripe boils
[...]
yesterday the pus spurted out and the smell clung to my nostrils
i sat back and saw the typewriter staring
and the whores were still screaming in the night. (1975:28-29)

Family problems of the 1970s re-emerge in new forms

In the years that I was a minister in a Venḓa congregation, in our research among low-income households while I was at the University of the North and in Nova's work with households, we have often found patterns

similar to those described in the African literature of the 1970s. The mother continues to play a key role in the household and the father is often absent.

Laetitia Simorangkir, a student from the Netherlands who did several bouts of fieldwork in black communities north of Pretoria, wrote in her master's dissertation in 2016 that the common discourse she found in her fieldwork is that almost everybody expects mothers to be the primary caregivers and maybe even the sole caregivers. Young girls tend to grow up with the idea that they will have to cope on their own one day:

> Because many women have experiences (or have heard of other women's experiences) with men 'misbehaving' and/or walking out on them, they start to re-arrange their lives so they will be prepared when this happens. They found a job, got a house and built a life for themselves. In case they get pregnant, they have made sure they are able to raise their children on their own [...] Their reaction, the 'evoked new behaviour', does not only scare (adult) men away – or at least makes them wonder whether they are still necessary or wanted – it also conveys a message to young children and adolescent men: if their mother could raise them without their father, then will their future girlfriend or wife not be able to raise their children without them? (Simorangkir 2016:43–44)

As we have seen in Chapter 7, in the recent poetry in Mbao's collection *Years of fire and ash*, angry female voices denounce the way in which men have treated them. Gender-based violence and femicide are part of the general disintegration of the traditional family.

In 'clots of blood', Vangile Gantsho (cited in Mbao 2021:118–119) writes about the women in her family, her mother and her mother's younger sisters, who were all 'touched' by some or other male family member. Her mother never left her alone with any of her sisters' husbands. They were all afraid 'of God, men, and the dark'.

The homeless mind

For Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1981:xix, 4), writing from Kenya, Africa after colonialism, has one common problem: how best to build a communal home for all Africans, so that '... all the black people, all the African masses can truthfully say: we have come home'.

This statement implies that the core impact of colonialism was that the people of Africa do not feel at home in the world anymore.

To feel at home is to feel secure, to belong, to be yourself and to have peace with yourself, your fellow residents (if any), your neighbours, with the conditions, the noise, the air you breathe and with the space in which

you move and rest. Home is a place where you can come to rest and find meaning in life.

The opposite pole of being at home is when you do not have a place to live, like a fugitive on the road or people who sleep somewhere on the pavement, exposed to numerous hazards. In 2014, it was estimated that there were 5 000 homeless street people in Pretoria, the city where I live, of which a large number were undocumented immigrants and refugees. This number is constantly increasing. Poor and unemployed people come to the city from the rural areas of South Africa and other African countries in the hope of securing employment (Phiri 2016). Cities all over the world experience an influx of people, including political, economic and ecological refugees.

Between feeling at home and being an illegal homeless refugee sleeping in a foreign city's streets, there is a wide spectrum of homelessness: a shelter for the homeless may be better than street homelessness, but it is only one step away. A shack, constructed of sheet metal, plastic and cardboard, on an illegal site, is very cold in winter, very hot in summer, wet inside when it rains, full of dust, with no privacy and no protection against crime. It burns easily. A house for all seasons, as one resident remarked. An anti-house. And so the feeling of 'being at home' usually increases as the physical structure improves, but only up to a point. Some expensive houses are so big and so luxurious that no one can feel at home there, and again you feel lost, far removed from other residents. Traditional African households, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, provide better community-creating spaces than many modern cities in Africa.

Mataboge highlights another form of homelessness. The rhythm of the machine has replaced the rhythm of nature: 'Everything has fallen apart into smaller units [...] We have forgotten the past, it is gone, and we meet the future with a game' (Mataboge 1977:5–6; see Chapter 8).

In 'fatigue of revolution' Masai Sepuru revolts against the 'machine':

> I am tired of this old machine that runs on coal, blood,
> And steam
> My knuckles are bloody from banging against its steel. (Mbao 2021:163–166)

This machine clearly refers to the modern empire, the economic system. It has just kept on running as before, after the end of apartheid and the peaceful settlement and into the democratic dispensation, but the revolution has to go on.

This is not street homelessness, but it is nevertheless a form of homelessness and alienation.

An example of homelessness: The case of Mrs M[38]

A feeling of homelessness can be seen in the case of Mrs M, whom we met during fieldwork in a rural area near the (then) University of the North, in 1990. She was divorced, with two sons. She claimed to be a traditional healer and promptly offered to restore the sight of one of our research team, who was born almost blind. He politely declined. She also told us about all the threats to her life that she had to cope with.

Mrs M and her sons had recently moved from another place of residence. When the family departed from the previous place, taking along the corrugated galvanised steel roofing sheets [‘zinks’] from the old home, she stayed behind in the thatched part of the house, where the ancestral spirits reside, with the intention:

> ‘… to talk to the ancestors before I go, [or else] I am afraid they will punish me. I do not want to make them angry with me. They can either neck me or make that we stay without peace, because they will be looking for me at this place I am now leaving’.

Disobeying the ancestors can be fatal. Mrs M once ignored their instructions and promptly fell ill: ‘She became too critical’, her son explained. She said that she was healed by taking herbs as instructed by the ancestors while sleeping:

> ‘They [*the ancestors*] come to a person in different ways. You can be ill, not only ill but seriously ill. You may take the illness to your (Western) specialist and you will never get healed. You then come to an African herbalist. There you will be told to join the malopo dance or they tell you to put a Thitikwane [*Hypoxis villosa*; *bushman poison bulb*] for such and such a person. Without any medication, by doing that you will be healed. At times you find that they want you to become an herbalist. In this case, the African herbalists will teach you and tell you what to do.’

The fear of ancestors is found elsewhere in Africa too, as explained by John S Mbiti (1974):

> When the living dead return and appear to their relatives, this experience is not received with great enthusiasm. The food and libation given to the living dead are paradoxically acts of hospitality and welcome, and yet of informing the living dead to move away. The living dead is wanted and not wanted. If they have been improperly buried or were offended before they died, it is feared by the relatives of the offenders that the living dead would take revenge. This would be in the form of misfortune, especially illness. (p. 84)

Mrs M’s matter-of-fact style is followed by a description of earlier times in terms that remind one of Paradise. Paradise was lost because of the

38. The story of Mrs M is based on an article that I published previously, titled ‘The broken circle: The prevalence of fear in low-cost housing in South Africa’ (Van Niekerk 2011

intrusion of the analytic, positivist, scientific and rational light of Western culture, or, in her own words:

> ‘The coming of the Whites in our places spoiled all these things. That is why in these days we do not experience good rainfall as we used to have in the past. They disturb our ancestors. Look, these people at a [*sacred*] cave were singing, dancing and enjoying their own selves, giving out some pots and mats. But the Whites entered this cave in order to see what was happening inside there. They wished to see these people and it is impossible, they cannot see them.’

In addition to the ever-present threat of the ancestors and the disruption of life by the white people, the household has to cope with threats from fellow people. One reason for leaving their previous settlement was that Mrs M’s enemies had sent snakes to kill her, her ex-husband being one of the enemies. She suffered numerous snake bites. Her son explained:

> ‘When my mother felt some pains she once said people sent some snakes to kill her. These people are all her enemies. They didn’t want us to stay. They wanted to kill her so that we must move.’

The fact that the physician on our research team could find no snakebite lesions only served to substantiate Mrs M’s firm conviction that Western medicine is helpless and ineffectual in such cases. To her, these threats are more real than the realities that modern science can perceive. The whole family is convinced of being the victim of the evil intentions of other people, sufficiently convinced to pull up their roots and move house.

On arrival in the new settlement, she is still afraid. This time she fears that the new community will blame her for everything that goes wrong, in the same way that she blames her enemies: ‘Whatever wrong is done, people will say it is my children because I am very poor. I think I am going to lead a very bad life at this place’.

Not only the spirits and the people are a threat, but the house itself, the one place where one expects to find shelter and feel safe and at home, is itself a threat. Mrs M explained that an herbalist should have a very humble home. In order to avoid jealousy, an herbalist should not show overt signs of opulence, irrespective of his or her actual financial standing. The corrugated iron sheets that were put on the roof at the old place were used again here. No nail was used. They were kept in place by sizeable stones that were packed on them, a common practice. However, these heavy stones could become an instrument of other people’s evil intentions and kill her by falling on her. Even the walls could collapse on her:

> ‘They were a threat to me. The walls become heavy with water and can kill a person. The stones can become too heavy for the corrugated iron roof and they may also kill a person.’

Mrs M’s fears took on cosmic proportions. Her house was built under a beautiful, big tree that provided much-needed shade during hot

summer days. But one day we found that the tree was cut down. Mrs M explained that the new shanty would not offer enough protection against the heavy rainstorms that were attracted by the tree. She was convinced that the tree attracted huge snakes that, she claimed, lived in the sea and flew around high up in the sky and wanted to come to rest in her tree. These snakes were surrounded by rainstorms, with lightning and thunder. The tree had to be felled, leaving her corrugated iron shack roof exposed to the merciless African sun. But the fear remained, because she told us that the snakes may now see the roof glitter in the sun and, thinking that it is water, come down to land in it (not an uncommon belief in South Africa).

There is no place to hide, no home where she and her sons can find rest. Moving to a new house did not help, because she did not build the walls herself and could not perform the necessary rituals.

> 'Yes, even the [*new*] house itself was frightening me because I found the walls erected already. I was risking the life of my children together with my own life. I was not proud of the house. I was feeling uncomfortable and unsettled.'

■ The case of the flying witches

In another part of the same province, I did contract research for the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR; Van Niekerk 1995, 2011). The aim was to investigate energy patterns in remote rural areas. For this purpose, the Blouberg area, about 130 km northwest of (then) Pietersburg, was identified by the CSIR for investigation.

During the fieldwork, several people complained that they could not sleep well at night because of the heat. They close all the windows of their low-cost modern homes out of fear of snakes, insects, thieves and witches. They also sweep the area around the house clean so that they can see in the morning if there are tracks of wild animals, snakes or 'witch doctors'. It was described by one respondent as 'a cultural problem'. The result of closing all windows is that the modern house of bricks and cement, with a corrugated iron roof, built without following any energy efficiency guidelines, was baked hot during the day and could not cool off much during the night in an area that gets hot in summer.

In this research, I first encountered the idea of 'flying witches'. Flying witches, people said, can be heard on the roof, especially on a corrugated iron roof. They are mostly harmless, but one should not try to use force when meeting one of them, one should rather just slip away quietly. Apparently, they can also disguise themselves temporarily so that one might find out after a time that you have married a witch.

A few years later, when we had to do a survey on housing in urban areas, we decided to include a question about this, in order to find out whether

people in urban areas also had this fear of flying witches at night. Closing windows would have an obvious negative effect on the cooling-off of the structure and on healthy ventilation at night. As part of the investigation, 528 respondents took part in a questionnaire survey on housing, thermal comfort and energy efficiency in low-income housing. The survey used a randomly selected sample consisting of an equal number of informal houses and Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses (low-cost government subsidy houses) at eMbalenhle, Secunda (219 respondents) and at Zamdela, Sasolburg (309 respondents).

To our surprise, the fear of flying witches had a strong influence on behaviour (Murray et al. 2001):

> People's use of doors, windows and curtains shows very little variation. During the day doors, windows and curtains are open. All of these are closed at night. The reasons why people close windows on summer nights are fear of crime (98%), witchcraft (84%) or to keep cool air out (28%). (p. 89)

This is an indication that the belief in witchcraft as a present reality is not limited to old people in rural areas but is also common in urban and peri-urban areas with a younger age profile. This study confirms that traditional beliefs may still impact present urban behaviour and that modern housing, as such, may not provide a place to feel completely at home.

Conclusion

The traditional African household embodies the basic philosophy of African life, the sense of continuity and the interconnectedness of things and thoughts. The cyclical pattern provides community-creating spaces. The basic tensions of life, the dark and the light sides, life and death, and good and bad are all balanced in the circle and in the natural cycles of time. The internal disturbances could to some extent be contained on a small scale; on a larger scale, there was often violent conflict.

The traditional household has its own internal disturbances and tensions. Modernity has made some things better but has disturbed the traditional small-scale unity, and the meeting of cultures has, on the whole, not yet provided a household that answers Ngũgĩ's wish that 'the African masses can truthfully say: we have come home'.

Some of the implications of the disruption of the family will become visible in Chapters 10 and 11.

Chapter 10

The impact of modernity on traditional personhood and community

The relation between the individual person and the community is constructed in different ways in different cultures and different periods of time.

While the individual is a basic element of modern culture, traditional African cultures have given priority to the family and the community. In this chapter, we look at a few things that have happened to people and to communities during the process of modernisation and especially during urbanisation.

The question that we try to answer in this chapter is: What are the present patterns in which the relation between the individual person and the community are constructed in South African communities? That is, where must the road towards sustainable well-being begin?

We take a few townships as case studies.

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Individual and community in traditional African cultures

Individualism is often seen as contrary to African traditions.[39]

In his book *Facing Mount Kenya*, which was first published in 1938, Jomo Kenyatta, who was a leader in 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 real 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. (Kenyatta 1985:119)

Steve Biko was one of the heroes and martyrs of the struggle against apartheid and is still today a strong influence in the search for an authentic African identity. Biko maintained that African society has always been a 'man-centred society'. 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'. Closeness 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 light of the research results that will be discussed: '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).

Other authors agree. Gideon-Cyrus 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. (1974: 83)

From Botswana, Gabriël M Setiloane (1986:48) questions the idea of individualism: 'The primary centre of being is the community […] Africans have tremendous difficulty with the concept individual. Does such a thing exist?'

In his thorough discussion of African conceptions of personhood and community, Ikuenobe (2006:54) writes that '… it is clear that there is a difference between the Western rational, liberal and individualistic view of

39. The following quotations from Kenyatta, Biko, Setiloane, Mutiso, Ikuenobe and Hallen were also used in Van Niekerk (2014a)

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 in African cultures refers to a thoroughly fused collective "we"' (Ikuenobe 2006:56). 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 2006:58).

This sense of community is still regarded widely as part of the contemporary African philosophy of life (Hallen 2009:137, 138, referring to well-known writers such as Ramose, Wiredu and Gyekye). Simon Munyai (2017) writes:

> Within the traditional worldview, man is viewed in terms of the total whole of his community. This explains why priority is given to communalism or interpersonal relations within the culture of the VhaVenḓa people. (p. 19)

And Peter Nyuyki (2017) from Cameroon writes:

> In some parts of Nso', land was never sold. It was given out. Today, the market economy seems to be overtaking the generosity of the Nso' people in this domain. Yet they remain relatively steadfast in communal life […] Africans in particular have never learned to live in isolation. They are a communal people. (pp. 181, 230)

In his *A short history of African philosophy*, Barry Hallen (2009:135–137) argues that one reason for the unmeant negative impact of Western efforts to improve the quality of life in Africa is that the conceptual frameworks that are used to 'understand' African society have their origin in Western culture. This applies to concepts such as community, family and gender. For example, female scholars in Africa such as Oyewumi, Amadiume and Nzegwu:

> … at various points and in the strongest terms reject 'feminism' as a Western-based and Western-oriented movement that has yet to demonstrate that it is prepared to reject the misrepresentations of African societies by Western scholarship and is prepared to learn from rather than dictate to the non-Western world. (Hallen 2009:137)

Hallen continues: Western feminists strengthen the gendering of society in individualistic terms, while traditional African cultures put the community first and give male and female members equal and interdependent roles in the community, which makes it possible not to gender society. Amadiume (cited in Hallen 2009:136), for example, blames Western feminists that their imposed systems erode all positive aspects of historical gains, '… leaving us impoverished, naked to abuse, and objects of pity to Western aid rescue missions'. This reminds us of Soyinka's plea for an African academic approach whose reference points are taken from within the culture itself (see Chapter 8).

To sum up, from the literature, we can draw the following picture: traditionally, people delighted in their 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 or her community and became a (valuable) person through serving the community. This does not mean that there was no conflict within groups and between groups; remember Beti's description of a certain community in Africa that was locked in 'internal feuds and vendettas [...] with almost superhuman bloody-mindedness'. (1977:7; see Chapter 1)

■ The impact of modernity on the individual

Firstly, we compare the individual in Africa to the individual in the West.

The philosopher KC Anyanwu (see also Van Peursen 1978:41–42) maintains that, in the African world:

> The unity of the self and the world, mind and matter, is something magical because it defies any rational understanding. We can only say that the self and the world interpenetrate each other in such a way that we do not know where the self begins and ends for the world to begin. (1984:92)

In Western culture, on the other hand, the individual has increasingly been defined separately from the world around him or her, and more and more elements that were previously seen as external have been located within the individual over time. Eventually, even God has been located in the human psyche. Jung maintained that there are certain universal symbols or archetypes that occur in all cultures on the subconscious level, such as the mother, the child-hero and God. The process of individuation is to become an *individual*, a separate indivisible and unique whole; this process includes bringing these archetypes into the individual consciousness. Being reconciled to God, in this view, is to be reconciled to yourself, to a hitherto subconscious part of yourself.

In Africa, the person is constructed in a different way. John V Taylor (1963) describes the structure of the self that he observed in East Africa in two chapters with the significant titles 'Turning inside out' and 'The scattered self'. He says that many things, such as memories of past experiences, individual characteristics of a person, strong emotions such as anger or guilt and the contents of the mind such as dreams, which Westerners place inside the mind of a person, are seen by many Africans as having an independent existence outside the person, influencing and even threatening a person from outside. The West has an 'image of man whose complex

identity is encased within the shell of his physical being', while the African view is that of:

> A centrifugal selfhood, equally complex, interpermeating other selves in a relationship in which subject and object are no longer distinguishable. 'I think, therefore I am' is replaced by 'I participate, therefore I am'. (Taylor 1963:49–50)

The difference in the way that 'inside' and 'outside' are constructed is now illustrated with a few examples: conscience, the trauma of war and dreams.

Western cultures see conscience as being somewhere inside the person. (the inner voice). In African cultures, it is often located outside the person. I have heard the following explanation of the concept of conscience in African traditions: if two people are stealing fruit, and one is inside someone's property and one is outside, and the one who is outside warns the one who is inside that the owner is approaching, the one who is outside is the conscience of the one who is inside. The manager of the students' hostel at Stofberg told me that he regularly took a walk through the passages so that the students could see him: 'It is their conscience that is passing by'.

Alcinda Honwana (1999:31–35) researched the way in which the *war trauma* of soldiers, often children, who returned from wars in Angola and Mozambique in the 1990s, was approached. Their approach is contrasted with the approach followed in the West to heal war-related post-traumatic stress disorder. In the West, the individual who returns from the war is engaged in private sessions aimed at 'talking out' and externalising feelings and afflictions. The problem is inside: it must come out; it must be talked out. In contrast with this approach, a common practice in these two African countries was to perform rituals as soon as a soldier returned home, to appease the angered spirits of the people killed during the war. The reason was that these people may not have received a proper burial and their spirits may be wandering around, so the rituals were performed to bring them home in their proper position in the world of the ancestors. If these spirits are not put to rest, they can drive the killer, who has now come back to his family, insane. The cleansing rituals are meant as protection for the whole clan against all these threats. Clothes and other objects related to the past are burnt or washed away in the river. It is a communal affair, and afterwards the returning soldier *may never talk about what happened*. 'Recounting and remembering the traumatic experience would be like opening a door for the harmful spirits to penetrate the communities' (Honwana 1999:31–35).

It is the exact opposite of the Western approach of getting the individual to talk it out. In Taylor's terminology, traumatic war memories 'that Westerners place inside the mind of a person, are seen by many Africans as

having an independent existence outside the person, influencing and even threatening a person from outside'.

In a similar way, Western cultures see *dreams* as something that is generated from within oneself. In African tradition, dreams are often seen as something which is initiated from outside yourself. In a study, *Dreams in the African church*, Hayashida (1999) shows that dreams and visions are not only found among African Independent Churches (see Chapter 6) but are part of life in mainline churches too. Some students, for example, decided to become pastors because they claimed that a grandparent had visited them in a dream and told them to do so. That is an African tradition. Traditional healers receive their calling from their ancestors in a similar fashion.

Modernity has an impact on the traditional construct of the individual and community. Traditionally, each person has his or her identity within the wider family, in relation to the other persons in the group. You have your name, but you are often called mother-of-someone or child-of-someone. This is not a random identity; you belong to that group, and your place in that group is clear. In this context, it is not possible for you to say that you want to 'be yourself' or that you want to 'discover yourself' or 'make something of yourself'. You belong to the group and that determines who you are.

However, traditional culture has been eroded by modernisation. Lassiter (2000) quotes Kimani, who wrote in 1998:

> Individualism in society is increasing. Even families in rural areas like to operate in isolation, and those who offer any help are keen to help their immediate families only. The (conjugal) family is becoming more independent. The loss of community networks and the development of individualism have resulted in (increased occurrences of) suicide, loneliness, drug abuse and mental illness. The communal system is breaking down. The extended family had certain functions to perform, for instance, to reconcile couples at loggerheads with each other, but this is no longer the case. It is no one (else's) business to know what's happening in one's marriage today. (p. 9)

If the traditional group breaks up, there is no stable system of relations to keep the 'scattered self' together and your personal identity also disintegrates. What emerges is not a modern individual but another form of a 'scattered self'. Some talk of a 'contextualised self', that is, the 'self' is situated in each specific context at a particular time and thus has to be continuously negotiated according to the constantly changing contexts in which the person finds him- or herself.

This is closer to the postmodern individual than to the modern individual. Some postmodernists have, in a different way, broken with the idea of an individual identity and ego-consistency. Speaking from Europe, Ijsseling (1998) argues:

> We live a plural or fragmented life: as human beings we exist simultaneously in completely different worlds. In each world you are somebody else. The call that is sometimes made to be yourself makes little sense because we are irrevocably and fundamentally fragmented. You derive your identity from the situation in which you are [...] We continuously do all sorts of things that have no unity, and we simultaneously hold different convictions that are not mutually reconcilable. The postmodern human being is not merely accustomed to a double truth but to a multiple truth. (p. 53; author's translation)

Some postmodern writers underestimate the implications of relationships that are structured in such ways: it does not make for a relaxed, happy-go-lucky carnival but brings about deep uncertainty, mistrust, loneliness and fear. Relationships become chaotic and unstructured. It would be difficult to have a sustainable community with such citizens because no agreement would have any value – it would be broken as soon as the situation changes.

At the University of the North, one of our students took a very strong stand on a certain matter. I asked him how I should understand that, because just the day before he had signed a strongly worded petition that demanded exactly the opposite. He answered that he had signed the petition the previous day as a student of the University, but now he was talking as a student of the Theological School. Another student blamed me, after I had proposed something to the student body. I reminded him that it had originally been *his* idea that he had asked me to propose. He replied that it was true, but I could have refused to entertain it.

Those students who did act with ego-consistency played a constructive role. The lack of ego-consistency is problematic. However, that does not mean that the isolated modern individual is an attractive alternative.

In 1913, the psychologist Freud stated that the individual remains alone in the world, unable to enter into the type of contact that takes you out of yourself or adds anything to your inner world: what you experience as enrichment from outside is nothing more than what you had previously brought out. Nothing happens, or whatever happens only happens within yourself. Freud compared the human person to an amoeba that comes into contact with other objects and withdraws again into itself without moving out of itself to meet the other. The person remains encapsulated within him- or herself (Van den Berg 1963:27).

Van Niftrik (1971:73) says that the modern individual has become autonomous without God, a lonely king in a silent universe.

In the Netherlands, says Rob Wijnberg (2011:157–159), people traditionally saw themselves as citizens of the Dutch nation, and they saw it as their duty to serve their country. Over the last decades, this has largely been

replaced by the ideal to 'be yourself' in an individualistic way. The values that bound people together have lost their power, and without values that give direction, the individual feels homeless in the bewildering wide world. The economy now provides a new framework. The citizen has become a consumer.

The same happened in the United States of America. In 1958, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith predicted in his book *The Affluent Society* that the American society was heading for an imbalance between private affluence and public poverty. He foresaw a situation where shops would overflow with luxury goods for private use while attention to the public domain was neglected. To illustrate this, he described a scenario where an American family goes on a picnic with their expensive car. They travel over a road full of potholes, past heaps of rubbish and buildings that fall apart; with their luxurious camping equipment, they camp next to a polluted and stinking river. This prediction has come true to a large extent. Geert Mak describes the dire consequences of the withdrawal of the individual from public responsibility. Until the middle of the 20th century, Americans had collective dreams. They dreamt of the well-being and great calling of their nation. Their high ideals for America motivated them to pay high taxes, which enabled the government to undertake huge national projects. In the time of Eisenhower, the very rich paid 90% tax at the top scale. But then the collective dreams were exchanged for individual dreams. Americans started to withdraw into themselves and dream of their own private well-being. Taxes have become very unpopular. People are unwilling to give money to the state. To be elected, a politician has to cut taxes. To make up for the loss in income, the government borrows money. In the 1960s, state debt was around US$270m; in 1980 it was around US$1tn; by 2011 more than US$16tn; and it continues to increase. In 2024, it was put at US$ $35.30tn.[40] And the infrastructure in the United States of America is crumbling. The road network is only the 23rd best in the world. The water networks are old and break down frequently because of neglect for decades; one out of nine bridges are structurally unsuitable; staff of the fire department of Los Angeles collect money on the street in order to continue their work (Mak 2012:169–171, 331–334).

Barna and Hatch (2001) describe the 'moral anarchy' in the personal lives of Americans. One of the main reasons is a worldview that 'elevates self to the exclusion and detriment of the existence and rights of others' (Barna & Hatch 2001:110).

Something similar is happening in South Africa. In the suburb where I stay, many residents have lived in their homes for 20 years or longer without any

40. See https://fiscaldata.treasury.gov/americas-finance-guide/national-debt/

idea who their neighbours are. In the days of the struggle, there were collective dreams, although these dreams were in violent opposition to each other. On both sides, people were prepared to offer their lives for these collective dreams. Many young men died in the border war to defend the country, specifically the white minority government, from 'the enemy': communism, the ANC, and so on. The struggle for liberation from apartheid has also been described in strong terminology, for example: 'utopian vision', 'redemption' and 'the salvation of his people'; the struggle exacted huge sacrifices: of family life, freedom, childhood, innocence, often life itself (Gevisser 2007:xxix–xxx). Nelson Mandela personified the ethos of the struggle against apartheid: sacrificing yourself not only for liberation and a better life for your own people but for your enemy too. This inspired very high expectations and dreams on all sides and contributed a great deal towards the peaceful transfer from the apartheid state to a democratic dispensation.

These dreams have now been largely replaced by the private dreams of the consumer culture on all sides, where consumption becomes a goal in itself and corruption is endemic.

Former president Thabo 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, he warned, by 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 advise 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 has observed (see Chapter 8).

Mbeki (1998a) observed a loss of values and tried, unsuccessfully, to fill this void with the notion of the African Renaissance. A culture of greed, both in the state and in the private sector, among both black and white, even in churches, as can be seen in the prosperity cult, has become a very destructive power in South Africa. In the chapter on theological guidelines, we will discuss the possible answer that Christianity might give to such powers.

The loneliness that Mbeki (1998a) has observed, the breakdown of relationships, manifests in different degrees in different communities, as is illustrated in two surveys that Nova did in different townships in South Africa: in 2013 in four townships in the Highveld and in 2016 in the township Zamdela.

Relationships in four townships on the Highveld

In 2013, Nova did research 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 baseline for future projects to improve ambient air pollution and other aspects of community life.

Nova presented a report of this survey, *Quality of life and offset baseline study in selected communities surrounding Sasol Secunda*, to Sasol in November 2013 (hereafter called the 2013 survey).

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 formed part of the town area of the Govan Mbeki local municipality. In a survey in 2023, Nova estimated the population to be approximately 175,000 residents. The most notable change in the area is the increase in the number of informal houses in this period. The first town area of this municipality, Secunda, was proclaimed in 1976. It was a completely new town that was built with the purpose of housing white workers of the second extraction refinery producing oil from coal, after Sasolburg. eMbalenhle was built with the purpose of housing black workers. All of this were built where there had been only farms before.

Our research made use of a combination of research methodologies. Nova has developed the 'Quality of Life Assessment Instrument' by applying the needs theory of Manfred Max-Neef to 25 elements of a household, as defined by Nova, making it possible to measure the quality of life in a very comprehensive way. A general household survey was conducted with the primary caregiver, or the person as close to the primary caregiver as possible, in 1149 households (Mbalenhle 559; Lebohang 198; eMzinoni 185; and KwaDela 207). These respondents were selected on a random basis from the whole population of the four townships.

From this group, 47 were selected, also on a random basis, for in-depth interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to hear residents' views on a variety of aspects of everyday life as they experience it. Some insights based on their interviews are shared below.

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 lies around in the streets and 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.

We now give attention to a significantly large group – about half of the respondents – who exhibit a lack of good relations and agency. Of the rest, only a few exhibit strong positive views.

Respondents' relations to the community

There are the usual problems one can expect, with neighbours who are noisy, their goats that are a nuisance, the nappies in the streets. And there is a high level of loneliness.

Some relate to their neighbours at a polite distance.

Many say that they keep to themselves: 'There is nothing I can tell you about my neighbours. I stay in my house and they stay in theirs', or: 'I have no problem with my neighbours. When I greet them they greet me back'.

Gossiping was mentioned several times: '… my neighbours are the ones that gossip a lot […] they do gossip and […] the whole town has got criminals'.

When asked about the people they trust, many answered in the negative:

> '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, being questioned, had the following response (A) to the interviewer's questions (Q):

> A: 'A person I trust? I do not trust anyone.'
>
> Q: 'You do not trust anyone at all?'
>
> A (*laughing*): 'Yes, I don't.'
>
> Q (*also laughing*): 'How is that so?'
>
> A: 'I rather trust my shoe.'
>
> Q: 'Your shoe? Rather than trusting another person?'
>
> A: 'Yes, a person is not to be trusted.'

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:

> '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.'
>
> 'Alright, is there something else that you normally do?' 'No.'

Another respondent said: 'I 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; then I will see the sun set again.'

As we shall see, in predominantly white suburbs there is a similar process, where residents withdraw into their own homes (see Chapter 15, under the heading 'Case study 6: My own neighbourhood).

Reflection: What have we observed?

What would be the best way to describe what we have seen?

Mbeki and Brandel-Syrier's conclusion (see Chapter 8) about black urbanised South Africans, that there is nothing left to give them guidance, finds some support here. These communities are not characterised by the tradition described by Ikuenobe (2006:54, 56, 58; see the beginning of this chapter) that somebody becomes a person by fulfilling his or her duties to the community. Neither is there much visible of 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' (Ikuenobe 2006:54, 56, 58). Many respondents rather describe a daily routine that involves little more than doing the daily chores in and around the house, sitting around, sleeping and watching TV and avoiding contact with neighbours. There is a certain emptiness, a lack of vision for the future. There is little of the delight of talking to others, little of merely enjoying their communication for its own sake, no evidence of any intimacy of the whole group of residents in the street, doing house visitation just to see each other out of the deep concern for each other that Biko (1978:41–42) observed in traditional culture.

There was no sign that property is held communally. Neither did we see any sign of corporate effort, corporate responsibility or corporate work as described earlier in this chapter (Kenyatta [1985]:119; Mutiso [1974]:83).

At the beginning of this chapter we referred to African writers who insist that individualism is foreign to African culture. This could be the reason why, when the community is left behind if a person goes to the city, what emerges is not the modern individual that has developed over centuries in

Western culture, where the individual has a strong sense of their own identity, a strong will and a sense of being the master of his or her own fate.

The lack of personal agency can be an important coping mechanism. In 2016/17, in the Gert Sibande district, in which the 2013 survey was conducted, 25% of females between the ages of 15 and 24 were HIV positive, and 23.6% of those between 25 and 64 years old[41] – but during the interviews and group discussions, nobody mentioned HIV or AIDS. Respondents seem to cope better with it if they do not talk about something against which they may feel powerless.

In spite of the emptiness we have observed, it is not correct to say that there is nothing left in the townships we have surveyed. The picture we have seen in these townships is not as severe as the picture of life in a trailer park in the United States of America, as described by Geert Mak. 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 TVs in these households says that every day, he finds 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).

The group of township residents we met in this study are not dirty; many bathe three times a day. They cook food and they send their children to school with clean clothes. Some family relations, especially the relationship between mother and child, still serve as an important inspiration to maintain a dignified, albeit rather passive, life.

Christianity plays an important role in the lives of quite a large number of residents and cannot just be written off, as argued by Brandel-Syrier (1978:182) and Mbeki (Gevisser 2007:324). There are respondents who find the strength to survive in the Bible and/or family and friends. Churches in townships are often full, and there one finds the communal dances and worship that Mutiso (1974:83) talked about (see Chapter 10).

It is also possible that stronger community ties will develop as time goes on, as we will see in the next case study.

Relationships in the township of Zamdela

In July 2016, Sasol requested Nova to do a similar study of the perceived quality of life of the residents of another township, Zamdela, which forms

41. See https://www.hst.org.za/publications/District%20Health%20Barometers/21%20(Section%20B)%20Mpumalanga%20Province.pdf

part of Sasolburg in the Metsimaholo local municipality in the Fezile Dabi district of the Free State province in South Africa. This area is to the south of Johannesburg, while Secunda is in the Mpumalanga province east of Johannesburg.

The survey was in preparation for a planned comprehensive air quality offset programme in this town. Nova was requested to use the same instruments and indicators that were used in the 2013 survey to assess the quality of life in Zamdela.

This discussion is based on a report of this study, titled *Quality of life and offset baseline study in the Zamdela community in the close proximity of the Sasol Sasolburg complex*. Nova presented the report to Sasol in August 2017.

In Zamdela, we found a situation that is notably different from what we found in the 2013 survey. Sasolburg was laid out in 1950 in what was still 'featureless veld' and was proclaimed in 1955 to serve the planned Sasol industry there. In 1970, the total population (including Zamdela) was 29,354 (black African: 12,453; mixed-race: 71; white: 16,130; SESA 1973:494). In October 2016, Zamdela had an estimated population of 98,902 people (30 284 households) and a population density of 4 626 persons per km[2].

The core finding of our study is that although the majority of Zamdela residents are living in severe poverty and hunger, which are more pronounced than we found in the other four townships in the 2013 survey, we also found a much more positive attitude towards life and healthier relations between household members as well as with neighbours, compared with the 2013 survey. Faith in God and church activities are much more pronounced and integrated with daily life.

Twenty-four households were each visited twice for a narrative discussion of 25 household domains.

Living in Zamdela

Services, infrastructure and economic growth are not keeping pace with demographic growth in Zamdela. There are many complaints about services, such as blocked and overflowing sanitation systems with baby nappies and smelly sewage in the streets; frequently cut-off water supply; the electricity supply is cut off for days causing the food in refrigerators to rot; while the roads, schools, clinics, and all other services are in a poor state. Even more, polluted water contributes to bad smells and illnesses such as tuberculosis (TB) and asthma, as well as air pollution that is caused by various sources, such as Sasol, a close-by pig farm, trash, ash from the

coal mine, ‘companies bringing ammonia’, chemicals, heat and dust, all in different combinations.

Housing is a big problem. Some stay in a ‘shack’, an informal structure made of materials such as plastic, zinc (corrugated iron) and/or carboard. Some stay in a so-called RDP house that is provided free to some low-income households; RDPs are not fitted with a ceiling, and they are thermally inefficient structures, requiring, similar to the shacks, expensive indoor heating measures during the cold South African Highveld winters, mostly using dirty fuels like wood and coal that cause air pollution.

Crime is another problem. A 20-year-old young man said: ‘I feel happy because I never thought that I would get to this age because most of our mates don’t even get to 20 because of crime’.

And what does a young lady in the quotation below express? Uncertainty? Vulnerability? A sense of accomplishment?

> ‘I am pleased with my age; I am 20 years old. I am very pleased with it because even my condition shows that I am 20 years old [...] I am also happy that I reached 20 years without having a baby.’

People are struggling with basic necessities such as food and clothing. This is strongly associated with unemployment.

In the narrative interviews, a significant number of people (at least 12) said that they often have to go without food, some for periods of up to two days, for example:

> ‘I don’t have food, my child. [*both laugh*] I don’t have food; I can sometimes sleep for two days having no food in the house, having no food and not knowing what I will eat [...] My maize meal bucket is clean; I don’t have any maize meal. I picked some morogo [*wild-growing indigenous plants whose leaves are traditionally eaten as vegetables*], but I don’t have salt. I am just like this – there is no electricity; I only have 2 units just for lighting; what will I cook with? Eish, we are struggling; I don’t feel good. Lacking food does not make me feel good at all [...] I am old; I can say I will hold on, but the pills, on the other hand, when I am supposed to take them, they require food.’

Interestingly enough, both hunger and being overweight were mentioned repeatedly, sometimes by the same respondent.

This apparent paradox of being overweight and hungry is explained in an article, ‘South Africa: A fat, hungry nation’ (Stassen 2015). Stassen draws a picture that sounds very similar to what one finds in these interviews: poverty, hunger, overweight, joblessness and government grants all go together. Malnutrition in children is especially of concern because it can cause suboptimal intellectual development.

Stassen (2015) states:

> Food is a big issue in South Africa – we're the fattest country in sub-Saharan Africa and one of the 20 fattest countries in the world. At the same time, one in every four South Africans regularly go hungry. [...] half of us have access to so little food that we are at risk of hunger [...] many South Africans then are both fat and hungry. About 40 per cent of South Africans eat the number of calories recommended daily but eat food with so little nutrition that they are actually malnourished, according to the South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey [...] It seems that being overweight often goes together with hunger: people eat too much food that does not contain the necessary nutrients. (n.p.)

The Oxfam document *Hidden hunger in South Africa* (2014:7) agrees: malnutrition can lead to people being underweight, but it can also lead to them being overweight or obese – 70% of adult women in South Africa are overweight.

In the interviews, a lack of food was associated with the fear that one might not be able to survive. The problem that was associated with the lack of clothes, on the other hand, had to do with one's identity.

A touching statement about the lack of clothing:

> 'I am a lady that is steadfast about the church. When I am inside the church, I feel at home. Shoes that I don't have, I am not exposed because when we get to church, we walk bare feet.'

In spite of serious complaints about these conditions, respondents seem to be happy, to have a sense of belonging and loyalty to their particular community, generally agreeing with the statements*: I want to stay in the area where I currently live* and *The place where I live feels like my home*. The paradox between the general conditions and the subjective happiness of people needs an explanation.

What keeps many people going in this dire situation is their faith in God, their involvement in the church and their personal and family relationships. The importance of such relationships, even in extreme conditions, is highlighted by several people who say that they feel happy, even when they do not have food to eat, because of such relations.

This is in contrast with the 2013 report, where we found frequent references to inactivity, social isolation, withdrawal, loneliness, distrust and distance from neighbours, although people do not seem to struggle with basic necessities and services to the same extent as in Zamdela.

In Zamdela, only a very few examples were found of a behaviour pattern of passive withdrawal, where a person would clean the house and then sit alone in front of the TV, or just sit or sleep the whole day. Most unemployed people keep themselves busy; after cleaning the house they visit friends,

make a vegetable garden, read the Bible, give extra classes to children or look for employment.

It is understandable that joblessness puts a marriage relationship under pressure, but several marriages are strong enough to withstand that:

> 'And what I like about her is that even though I am not working, life goes on normally like before. I feel so happy that I found someone like her.'

A husband says about his wife:

> 'Even when there is no food, just as long as I see her next to me [*exclaims*] – it is as though I have everything. Even when I am hungry, I get filled. The joy that I have when I see her, when I am with her!'

On the other hand, the people who are close to you can also make your life unbearable:

> 'I had a heart condition in 1982 when I was pregnant with my son; now it seems to be worse, because now it is caused by the problems of these kids who smoke Nyaope – they steal and do other things, so you always have pain in your heart. Sometimes they will take your important belongings; he sold many of my pots, this boy, many of them. All these things cause me pain, because you see that he is taking me back in life; he is working against my progress. I am no longer working; where will I get those things? The blankets that he has been stealing, the shoes, where will I get them? At that time, there weren't these things of having sex, that of rape, they were not there.'

Faith in Zamdela

In Chapter 5, we have seen that a central problem of Christianity worldwide is that in recent centuries faith has, for many believers, become a private, inner experience that becomes separated from daily life. Reference was made to former president Thabo Mbeki and a Dutch sociologist, Mia Brandel-Syrier, who observed something similar in South Africa, that Christianity is merely a Sunday religion with no relevance during the week (see Chapter 8).

The Zamdela respondents, however, can hardly be described with the terms used by Mbeki and Brandel-Syrier, such as dislocation, amorality, extreme individualism, uncultured individuals or people who are available for anyone who wants to use them for their own ends.

Robert Coles, who was called 'the most influential living psychiatrist in the US' by *Time* magazine in 1972, found the opposite among the poor. He did extensive research among the poor, also in South Africa, and found that religion was often a source of strength for them. His work was praised and quoted, but people consistently ignored the one area – religion – that seemed to Coles to be the most important to the poor

themselves (Yancey 2001:100). Religion could be a way of escaping the pressures of life, but many find consolation in their faith and strength to survive, or even inspiration to overcome their problems.

In the 2013 survey, we found that some people were encouraged and comforted by what they heard in the church, but in Zamdela, this trend is very prominent. Many respondents are active in church and, at the same time, have active and positive relations with people around them. These respondents have broken out of the confines of privatised religion.

A few people were negative about the church – and gave good reasons for that – but were still believers.

All 24 respondents (100%) agreed with the statement that prayer can change things for the better – five agreed and 19 agreed strongly. Similarly, all respondents agreed with the statement: *I receive my strength to go on from God*.

The presence of God is mentioned in different contexts of life and is not limited to the church; for example, when asked about the air she breathes, one resident replied: 'God [...] shows us through this oxygen that he is alive, inside of us, inside of our community'.

The case of a woman who goes to church and who has good relations with the people around her, where they take care of each other, is representative of a general mood in the interviews. Her faith is seen in words and deeds. She also works in the garden:

> 'When things go well for you, it is God. It is God that lifts you up. He lifts up his hand upon your family as well; those are the works of God. I want to thank God: as the sun keeps shining, I am still okay; I am still living well with my children; I still see them, that they are eating and going to school [...] you see, even that one, he is an orphan; his mother passed away. They are the kids that I want to teach; their mothers and fathers passed away; they must learn. I also encourage them and tell them that school comes first – learn, so that tomorrow when I am dead, you should not turn into worthless people, finding yourselves drunk on the streets, going up and down without having your own [...] [*exclaims*] I thank God. Strength comes from God – it doesn't come from me – and wisdom and firmness; I am given those things by God [...] My community and I get along, we live well together. Like in the morning when we wake up, we greet each other, and when we have cooked, we are able to sit down here and eat, or I will go eat there or I would go eat there. We get along. My feeling is that I am satisfied that God put me close to the neighbours that I get along with, because many people don't get along with their neighbours, so with me, God is still gracious to me because my neighbours and I get along. I have travelled sometimes; you find a person having built a huge wall: they don't want to see their neighbours on the other side; even when there is something at their neighbour's, they don't want to see it. So we don't have those things; we live well together [...] I am thankful.'

The problem of joblessness

In the interviews, a majority of adults in Zamdela disagreed with the statement: *The income of my household is sufficient to supply us with the basic necessities to survive*, and 50% of respondents who disagreed with this statement disagreed strongly. Only 42% of respondents agreed with the statement: *I do not receive help from people outside of my household for my daily subsistence*.

It seems that people who cannot survive on their own income do not only receive help but also help others.

Most residents attribute their plight to being jobless, and their solution for joblessness is to go back to school to get better certificates. Education is seen as the means to get work. They want (better) work, mostly in order to be able to care for their families but also to reach their own ideals in life. A typical statement is *The important thing in life, as you know, is that you have to work*, and:

> 'There is no person who doesn't wish to go back to school. Even if you dropped out of school, you still wish to go back so that you can also get those certificates, do that matric, go to college, like that.'

Some respondents had to discontinue their studies because their parents could not afford it or both had died; some had a baby; others discontinued because of illness or because they saw friends who were labourers and they thought it would be nice to have money; one woman's parents did not find it necessary for a girl to be educated. Many of those who want to study again do not have the money or the time because they have to care for their children.

Work is the way in which you can become what you want to be. A young man says that he feels bad not having a job because he is growing old without having reached his goals in life.

Some people in Zamdela are grateful for the government grants they receive because they would not be able to survive without them; others find that it is not enough. But it is also painful for many that they cannot care for themselves and contribute to the economy. Debt postpones the difficulties and makes them worse. It is a dilemma:

> 'Young children nowadays, you will find that on the first day of the month, you will find a child carrying two babies that have mucus on their noses, they are standing in the grant queues – that is not a good life. The government has made things a little better because – do you remember in the past, how kids were throwing away babies in dumping sites? Right now, ever since the government made it possible for the children to get a grant, babies are no longer found in dumping sites.'

This resident saw an improvement, but newborn babies are unfortunately still found sporadically in pit toilets, rubbish bins or somewhere along the road in our country.

Agency

Agency refers to people as agents who have the power to voice their own wishes and views and who take the initiative to do something to reach their own goals. Agency is the opposite of passive withdrawal and the often-repeated phrase, *there is nothing that I (or we) can do*.

There are good examples of agency in relation to work in Zamdela: one woman started a business by transporting school children, and a man who is in a wheelchair is making some income from selling things. He is also an avid Bible reader.

Agency can also be destructive:

> 'Those on the other side, they sell Nyaope, I think you understand, but he is my neighbour, I won't reject him because he sells this thing that he sells. He is just making money, even though he is killing the nation, but there is nothing that we can do.'

There are a few examples in Zamdela of an approach that we can call reciprocity. It is the opposite of agency and it is the Golden Rule in reverse. It says 'I do what a person does to me':

> 'When a person treats me well, I also treat them well, when they treat me badly, I also treat them badly. I do what a person does to me [...] As I said, if a person loves me, I love them more; if a person doesn't want me, I don't want them even more than the way they don't want me; when you pretend, I also pretend. I am that kind of person.'

It is interesting that more than one person said this approach made them feel bad.

A lack of agency may be related to an unclear concept of 'self'. The concept 'self' was not always well understood, as can be seen in this interesting exchange about 'self':

> Q: 'Sister L, could you please tell us more about yourself?'
>
> A: 'Like how?'
>
> Q: 'About yourself. English says "about yourself"; you know Sesotho doesn't sometimes put things as English. I don't know how to put it; I also don't understand.'
>
> A: 'I am L.D.; I am just the way you see me. L.D. is married to the D's. Just like that.'

'Self' is here described in terms of your name, what other people see and the family you belong to. She ends with: 'Just like that'. She does not describe herself in terms of what she has (which is not much), what she has achieved or in a manner of 'self-reflection', what she thinks about herself,

or in terms of her convictions, but in terms of her relations with her family-in-law, her name and her physical presence.

Some people's experience of 'self' has to do with their experience of their bodies, for example, being overweight or feeling hungry. Many people are unhappy with their bodies. Many have sugar diabetes and 'high blood' (pressure); some are sick but have too much work to be able to rest; and some are under stress. One man feels that his body is too small (thin), and it hurts him when people say he has HIV; one respondent blamed 'the way we get air' for his many illnesses, but it seems they may be caused by HIV. The topic of HIV was not mentioned in the 2013 survey, but it was mentioned a few times in this study.

Fatherhood and motherhood

The negative picture of fathers that was found in other studies did not emerge in Zamdela. Both fathers and mothers feel responsible for caring for their children.

A father says:

> 'When I am gone, I don't feel good, but I got used to it – it is work. I am going to make money so that we can live. I call every day, in the morning I call, I call my wife and the kids before they go to school, late, before I sleep, you see? To show that I love my family and I miss them […], I just tell myself that it is the life that God has given me, that I have to live since I am not alone, where I am, we are together, comforting each other. [*Laughing*] […] I like being a father; I am proud of being a father; I am proud of what I am […] Eish, sometimes I wish I was not a man, because being a man is difficult […] you are always filled with sorrow; when the electricity starts running low, you start to regret. You have to make a plan. That is when I dislike being a man. Because I must always make a plan.'

A mother, on the other hand, says:

> 'Being a woman, you know, being a woman has many tasks, because you have to see to it that each and every thing is good, especially in your house. It is said that a woman holds a knife where it is sharp. So being a woman has many problems. A lot of the things are your responsibility; even when a child needs something, he comes to me to say, "Mommy, I need this or that," you know. So being a woman is a big deal. In the evening when it's time to eat, that is upon you as a mother to see what you can put together, so that there can be a meal in the house. Even when you don't know what you are going to do, but because you are a woman, you wouldn't ask the man what's for supper – he will ask you. You should make sure that your child and your husband go to bed having eaten something.'

Many are positive about being a woman:

> 'I am satisfied to be a woman; I am satisfied a lot. Because what God has made me to be, I never thought that he made a mistake; that is why he made me a woman, or if he should have made me a man, I am satisfied – the way that God made me, I am satisfied.'

Politics

There was hardly any sign that people sought a political solution to their problems. One said:

> 'We have people who say they are representing us, but there is nothing that they are doing. Their only focus is on mismanaging money, but they always have meetings; they say this and this shall be done, but they use favouritism; it is bribery at work and things like that. There is bribery there, you see, things like that.'

White people are not seen as the cause of the problem, but several mentioned white people as part of the solution. One complained about the poor clinics:

> 'I am not at all happy. I wish that they could build other clinics that are good, and I prefer that there should be some white people there because where it is just black people, there is no progress.'

Another said: 'At least if you make a CV that goes with a matric certificate, at least there is a white person that can think that at least this one has matric', and another: 'I am all right because I am able to speak English; I can do anything that is supposed to be done by people. I can hear even if a white person speaks' (there were no white people present during these interviews).

That does not mean that there is apathy about politics. There are many complaints about service delivery, and the high incidence of mass protests nationwide over the last few years is an indication of widespread frustration with poor service delivery and corruption. This also happened in Zamdela in January 2013, when the local government was blamed.[42]

Gregory Mthembu-Salter (2013) sees these riots as the result of a mix that includes:

> … excessive expectations, wild promises, dashed hopes, corruption, corruption-busting, cynicism, faith in a better future, despair that the future will be any better than the present and violence have all been and will continue to be part of the mix. (n.p.)

However, the riots show that citizens still passionately believe that the councillors they voted for can and must do a better job. 'This belief is precious. In some parts of Africa people suffer in silence. They do not protest anymore because they have lost hope' (Mthembu-Salter 2013).

Quiet hostility can at any time suddenly erupt into outright protest again.

42. See https://mg.co.za/article/2013-01-25-00-zamdela-riots-force-states-hand-ndash-for-now and http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Hundreds-protest-against-Sasolburg-mayor-20130410

Reflection: Zamdela

There is a whole spectrum of emotions in Zamdela, from one who complains 'It was not my wish that at this age I would be living the life that I am living', to another who says:

> 'I am a 41-year-old lady that is happy; I am a 41-year-old woman; I am a happy woman. I am satisfied with my life; I am satisfied with everything that I am; everything makes me happy that I have in the age that I am in. I am happy.'

In Zamdela, we found more happiness than one would expect in those conditions. One possible reason for this happiness can be found in the Harvard Study of Adult Development (see Lewis 2015) which followed two cohorts of white men for 75 years, starting in 1938: 268 Harvard sophomores and 456 twelve- to sixteen-year-old boys who grew up in inner-city Boston. Every two years, the researchers conducted a survey and interviewed the men about their lives (including the quality of their marriages, job satisfaction and social activities), and they monitored their physical health every five years. They came away with one major finding: Good relationships keep us happier and healthier (also: McGilChrist 2019: 435, 436).

Happiness in Zamdela, even under extreme circumstances such as not having any food to eat, could be ascribed to good relationships – that is, at least as far as *subjective happiness* is concerned. This subjective happiness is very important, but more than subjective happiness is needed to arrive at a decent and humane quality of life.

One thing that is needed would be another type of education. The hope that is placed on a better formal education that would lead to a better job, as pragmatic as it is, is mostly in vain. Most will not be able to get that education. And the number of available posts is not nearly enough for the number of people who need income. To get work is often merely to keep someone else who also competed for that job out of work – it is not the same as creating a new job or developing new resources. Even good qualifications do not guarantee work – one of the interviewees cannot find work even with his good education and interest in the subjects:

> 'I did technical science, technical maths and technical electrician. Those are the ones I loved the most because I was able to understand the things that were happening, the calculations that I was doing in maths [...] I understood it. I was satisfied, because I was able to cope with the things that I was doing at school. I felt very proud of it, when it is all combined.'

He even completed the National Accredited Technical Education Diploma, which has six levels, up to Level 4 in Electrical Engineering, but is now transporting children to school to make a living.

Only a few individuals spoke of their own business. It seems that we can learn from a country such as Ghana in this respect.

In 2020, Nova took part in structured phone surveys, undertaken by the ETH university in Zurich, to determine the impact that COVID-19 and the measures to curb the spread of the virus had on people living in poor urban areas in the greater Johannesburg (South Africa) and Accra (Ghana). Eventually, 409 surveys were completed in Johannesburg and 1 034 in Accra. There is a huge contrast between the two: in Accra, the majority (58%) of respondents had their own business and only 5% depended on grants, and in Johannesburg, the majority (64%) depended on grants and only 5% had their own business; 57% of respondents in Johannesburg indicated that they were unemployed and only 4% in Accra (Durizzo et al. 2020).

The grants make it physically possible to survive, but they do not prevent hunger. And the grants may be unsustainable, as COVID-19 has increased the number of people relying on grants and has decreased the number of taxpayers.

Individuals and communities in the modern context

There is a wide variety of responses to and consequences of the impact of modernity: in the four townships of the 2013 survey, we saw the passivity of those residents who mistrust everyone, shun contact with neighbours and sleep to make time go by; and on the other hand, in Zamdela we saw healthy family, street and church relations and the hope that is pinned on modernity – dreams of a better life by getting an education and a job.

In 2020 and 2021, I participated in nine focus group sessions with residents of mining areas northwest of Pretoria. Participants did not blame modernity for the situation in which they found themselves. The air pollution, the dust from the roads, the waste (including nappies) strewn everywhere, the poor service delivery, the poor sanitation, bad roads, lack of housing and houses that cracked, crime (even the fear of child trafficking), the poor health care – all these were blamed on corrupt leaders and the spirit of destructive selfish individual behaviour that happens under the guise of freedom and human rights.

A sense of community does flare up during frequent protest actions, called mass protests, against poor service delivery, which are common all over the country. The anonymous mass is not the traditional community where one becomes a person through one's relationship with others in the group. But even in that anonymous mass, the person is still there under the surface.

The student mass at the university was interpreted as a 'community' in which there was little room for individual freedom. Students who excelled were often harassed. And it was unacceptable that some fail: 'Pass one,

pass all!'. An official at the university, who often negotiated with the students, told me that, among other languages, different dialects of Sepedi were spoken by the students. When a student walked into his office, the official said, they came in as a nonperson, one of the student mass. The official would pick up the home language of that student, and if it was Sepedi, he picked up which dialect and spoke to them in that language or dialect, asking where they came from, who their family was and where their home was. In this way, he said, he called up the *person*, the *human being*, out of the anonymous mass. You can talk to this person, you can relate to him or her as a human being, but the mass has no reason, no identity and no responsibility. The loss of identity and responsibility when one becomes part of the mass can be found in other contexts and cultures too.

Kwame Gyekye does not simplify the journey of modern progress. He abhors the fact that the ancestors continue to be of paramount importance in modern and traditional Africa. Gyekye recommends that for Africa to progress scientifically and technologically, 'science should be rescued from the morass of (traditional) African religious and mystical beliefs'.

At the same time Gyekye (cited in Lassiter 2000) insists there are many:

> … cultural values and practices of traditional Africa [*that*] can be considered positive features of the culture and can be accommodated in the scheme of African modernity, even if they must undergo some refinement and pruning to become fully harmonious with the spirit of modern culture and to function […] satisfactorily within that culture. (p. 10)

He discusses these traditional African values at length under the following headings: humanity and brotherhood, communalism and individualism, morality, the family, economic system, chiefship and politics, human rights, knowledge and wisdom and aesthetics.

■ Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, we asked the question: what are the present patterns in which the relation between the individual person and the community are constructed in South African communities, where the road towards sustainable well-being must begin?

In the townships that we took as case studies, we have found some confirmation for statements by Mia Brandel-Syrier and Thabo Mbeki regarding black South Africans, who argued that there is nothing left of the traditional cultures and that Christianity has not filled the vacuum, so there are no values to guide them. This can be seen in the breakdown of relations that we observed, especially in the 2013 survey, for example, statements such as that one would rather trust one's own shoe than another person.

But we also saw evidence of moral strengths such as strong personal relationships, happiness and a positive outlook that help respondents to survive and cope with their conditions. To a significant degree, faith in God permeates daily life and gives strength and hope in places such as Zamdela. People have a remarkable ability to survive and maintain a good spirit and good relations during hardship, even hardship to the extent of physical hunger.

These moral strengths, faith and good relations are good building blocks for a sustainable community, but they are not enough to enable the residents to overcome hunger and grinding poverty.

The sustainable well-being of a community cannot be built on the traditional scattered self if the traditional community that contained it has fallen away; neither can we build it on the postmodern fragmented self, nor on the isolated, self-sufficient individual of modernity, nor on a culture of passive dependence or of arrogant entitlement and greed.

This insight brings us closer to understanding the moral strengths that are needed to make progress on the road to the sustainable well-being of communities, such as a stronger sense of personal responsibility, initiative and agency; more trust and trustworthiness; restoring the role of the father; solidarity between rich and poor, a sense of our common destiny; clarity on what makes life meaningful; planning for the future and caring for the earth.

Chapter 11

Aspects of urbanisation in Africa

In our effort to understand the problems on the pathways to a sustainable future, we have to understand the process of urbanisation in Africa. Urbanisation is more than a spatial movement; it is firstly a cultural movement, and it takes place in rural areas too. It is, at present, a worldwide trend.

In this chapter, we look at a few images of the city in African fiction over the past century. Because urbanisation and modernisation are aspects of one process, and the individual and the family are so intimately intertwined, this chapter must be read together with the previous two that look at the impact of modernisation on the family and the individual. Each chapter looks at the same process from a slightly different angle.

To make it more concrete, we look at the shifting domestic energy use patterns as an aspect of urbanisation that provides good insight into the way that modernity, African traditions and Christianity engage each other as well as the ecology.

All over Africa, people flood to cities, towns and huge industries and mines in search of work and end up in sprawling informal settlements, or as they are popularly called 'squatter camps'. There is not enough work, housing or services for all who come.

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Africa's urban population doubled between 1995 and 2015 and will double again by 2035 reaching 966 million. It is likely to triple by 2050. Urbanisation usually leads to economic growth, especially if these cities provide well-functioning institutions, infrastructure and spatial layout. The high rate of urbanisation in Africa makes it difficult to optimise planning and to keep up with the demand for services, so that the links between urbanisation and industrialisation have generally been weak or absent in Africa and economic growth often depends on job-poor sectors (IDEP 2021, n.p.).

Images of the city in African fiction

In 2017, Oyeniyi Okunoye presented a paper, 'Heaven, Hell or Somewhere in-between: The Changing Image of Lagos in Nigerian Short Fiction', in which he:

> … seeks to investigate how Lagos as a social, cultural and economic space has evolved in the imagination of Nigerian short story writers from a romanticized and desirable environment to a demonised destination. (n.p.)

Elsewhere, Okunoye et al. (2001) and Okunoye (2010) describe how the focus has shifted from the encounter between European and African values to the broad post-colonial discourse, the search for a post-colonial identity and resistance to political corruption and social injustice in Africa, after independence from colonial rule (which, in my view, is a new combination of the same basic elements).

In South Africa, too, the dream of a better life for all, that marked the first years after 1994, when a democratically elected government took over from the previous white minority rule, has turned sour for many.

We first take a quick look at the past.

African writers sometimes describe the urban context in shocking terms.

Modikwe Dikobe's (1973) *The Marabi Dance* was only published in the early Seventies but deals with Johannesburg's old Doornfontein of the 1930s. It gives a rather crude description of a preacher [a *mfundisi* or minister]:

> 'Mfundisi, I am going to send you to take all this money to the post office', said MaNdlovu. 'When you have finished with that you must go and look for Alberto at the mine compound.'
>
> 'Give me a half-jack of brandy first so that I can have no fear against anybody,' the Mfundisi asked.
>
> She handed him a bottle and he drank half of it without stopping. He coughed a bit and then put the bottle down and held his hands on his abdomen.

> 'Now give me a bottle of chechisa[43] to help the brandy down'
>
> He drank without stopping, shaking his head all the time as though he were removing the dust from it.
>
> 'Now kiss me to drive the evils away.'
>
> She held him by the neck and pushed her tongue through his mouth. He pressed her close towards him and they twisted their tongues together like a cow and its calf.
>
> 'Go, Umfundisi. The post office will close at four o'clock ....'
>
> The reverend staggered to the door, supported himself by it, shook his head to come to his senses, and stepped into the street … I am drunk now, he thought. 'I must go to the prophet and get some of his water which will make me vomit. His water is magical. It leaves one without any of the effects of vomiting, I shall be all right very soon …' (pp. 15–16)

The devil is driven out, in vain, in the name of the 'God of Israel, God of Moses, God of Chaka, God of Moshesh, God of Senzangakona, God of Nkukunyana' (Dikobe 1973:16). It is a picture of 'total corruption'. The minister steals, he lies, he commits adultery, he preaches a confused message, he is hopelessly drunk – but still, one has sympathy with him in his desire that he 'shall be all right very soon […]'.

It reminds one of *The power and the glory* by Graham Greene, which was first published in 1940. It tells the story of the so-called whisky priest who was often found in remote and poor villages of South America – 'this priest had a mistress, another was constantly drunk' – but Greene also spoke with respect for the poor man. In spite of his corruption, he kept on. He was '… the drunken priest who continued to pass life on'. Greene said that the book gave him more satisfaction than any other he had written and that Pope Paul VI even expressed his appreciation for it, in spite of a letter of condemnation written by a certain cardinal (Greene 1981:66–67).

Poetry from Soweto and Alexandra in the 1970s

We now give attention to what the urban Black Consciousness poets of the 1970s said about the city itself, as described in my book *Dominee, are you listening to the drums?* (Van Niekerk 1982), a shortened version of my thesis on four poets from Soweto and Alexandra during the 1970s. These poets form part of the Black Consciousness movement that rejected the tendency to make modern Western culture the ideal.

43. Also colloquially known as 'hurry-up', a strong brew made from sugar-cane, yeast, cooked potatoes and brandy

In 1976, mass resistance against white domination broke out in Soweto, the huge township near Johannesburg. Soweto 1976 marked the beginning of the final and decisive phase in the struggle against apartheid.

An important image in Wally Serote's poetry is the City, merging as it does with images of motherhood, earth and Africa. It constitutes one of the major sources of suffering and power. The City is a place of violence, loneliness, destruction and competition, where people long for unity and peace, but it is also a mother that he loves.

There is a distinct contrast between the black city or township and the white city. This basic contrast is related to the contrast between black and white, earth and sky, darkness and light and suffering and oppression.

The unity with the earth, in this case, the polluted urban earth, in the darkness of night is expressed in a striking poem by Serote, 'Alexandra' (1972:22–23). There is intense longing as well as a profound fear of the township Alexandra, Johannesburg. The interplay between love and fear has an element of the experience of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. In the circle of life and death, birth becomes a form of death, of exile from the world of the ancestors, and death is a homecoming that brings new life. At first fear for and alienation from Alexandra are predominant, but there is a deeper connection (Serote 1972):

> … we have only one mother, none can replace,
> Just as we have no choice to be born,
> We can't choose mothers;
> We fall out of them like we fall out of life to death. (p. 22)

The township has scared him, humiliated him and been cruel to him, but still (Serote 1972):

> I have gone from you, many times,
> I come back.
> Alexandra, I love you;
> I know
> When all these worlds became funny to me,
> I silently waded back to you
> And amid the rubble I lay,
> Simple and black (pp. 22–23)

In 'City Johannesburg', on the other hand, Serote (1974) begins with reference to apartheid laws (now in the past) where black people in 'white' areas could go to prison if they did not have their pass with them:

> This way I salute you:
> My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket

Or into my inner jacket pocket
For my pass, my life,
Jo'burg City. (p. 4)

Politics is not the only problem – Johannesburg is a mechanical monster:

I travel on your black and white and roboted roads,
Through your thick iron breath that you inhale,
At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.
....
When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness
On your cement trees. (Serote 1974:4)

Johannesburg is an insatiable, dehumanising power:

I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness
In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,
And everything about you says it,
That, that is all you need of me. (Serote 1974:4)

Johannesburg leaves people:

... with such frozen expressions,
Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion,
Jo'burg City, you are dry like death. (Serote 1974:4–5)

Where he comes from, says Serote, implying the black township, life and death are different to anywhere else – but it is a place he loves. In the morning, he leaves behind him:

... my love
My comic houses and people, my dongas and my ever whirling dust,
My death,
That's so related to me as a wink to the eye. (Serote 1974:4)

In the evening, he returns:

... to my love,
My dongas, my dust, my people, my death,
Where death lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh. (Serote 1974:4)

Death is no stranger here but is always a present reality. Death is as much part of life as the people and the houses and the dongas and the dust. Life and death become one in the immediacy of their relation to the earth.

In Sipho Sepamla's poetry, the black township is a place where loneliness reigns ('The loneliness beyond' 1975:39), from which people go to work, children go to school, where in the morning overworked housewives clear up 'the night's bloodstains and curses', where mere children give birth ('The start of a removal' 1975:40). Life in the township is uncertain: any morning

may bring the bulldozers. The existence of township society is continually threatened with extinction by an unnamed outside power, embodied in the bulldozers. The black township is a place to live in – but the 'loneliness beyond' remains. It is a place to sleep – but for Sepamla, it is no *home*, a place of security, for renewal of body and soul.

Sepamla (1976) gives an indication of where the solution should be sought to the problems of the dead, dehumanised white city – not in leaving for the country or in escaping, if possible, into the past. The answer is to inject the past into the present:

> O spirits of my father rejoice
> For the wisdom of your words has lingered
> In the air beyond our day
> We've seen the wars of the day
> Demand briefcases and cotton ties. (p. 23)

He asks the spirits of his ancestors to come to his rescue in this war of today:

> O spirits of my ancestors awake
> I hear the whiz of bullet words
> And am felled as many times as I listen
> Give me the silence of your graves
>
> O spirits of the departed prophets
> Let me meet you instead at street-corners
> And from the brow of your unwrinkled face
> I'll learn the secrets of this life. (Sepamla 1976:23)

This poetry signals the search for an African identity within the alienation of modern city life under white political rule. The harmony and integration of the traditional household, the well-integrated system is gone, but the poets find direction in traditional symbols: the mother, the earth, the ancestors, the darkness and even in death which is part of the circle of life.

More than 40 years later, a sense of desperation comes in:

> We are not getting better
> For we moved from land
> to tin homes
> The thought of what comes
> After shacks
> Is – perhaps – the scariest. (Ndlovu 2020:55)

We now look at a concrete aspect of daily life.

Shifting domestic energy use patterns in low-income households

In this discussion, we describe the unsolved relationship between traditional African and modern Western cultural patterns as it manifests in the domestic energy use of low-income households.

From the open fire to the coal stove to the TV

Traditional African housing is energy-efficient. Houses are cool in summer, warm in winter and dry when it rains. Wood and dung provide energy for cooking and, if necessary, space heating. Traditional energy practices were fully integrated with the ecology so that the available resources sustained the given number of people. That was the case when there were only about five million people in South Africa a little more than a century ago, but there is more than twelve times that number now, so that the former sustainable co-existence of people and the ecology has become impossible and new solutions are required.

Sitting around an open fire is an ancient African tradition, and many are still doing that. The fire would be outside, sometimes in the open and sometimes in an outside kitchen. Life happens around the fire. During the day, the women go out in small groups to fetch wood in the veld. They go together for the sake of safety and to socialise. You can hear them talking and laughing when collecting wood and walking back home one after the other on a narrow footpath through the veld. At home, they would be busy around the fire, cooking, doing washing, sweeping the yard and other household chores while the children would be playing around them – the smaller ones closer to them, the bigger ones roaming further away. In the evening, the whole family would gather around the fire, the place of light and food and companionship. There they would relate what happened during the day and they would tell stories. Among the BaPedi in the northern part of South Africa, 'my children' are called '*bana beso*' – children of my fireplace (Mönnig 1978:237).

The preparation of food was at the same time a religious ritual. A Zulu diviner explains to Berglund (1976:103, 104, 214): 'The shades warm themselves at the hearth. When they are warm they become hungry and eat that which is left in the vessels'. To step over the hearth is not allowed because 'one does not step over a shade'.

Lastly, the shades are closely associated with sexual relations and procreation because they assure the continuation of the life of the clan (Berglund 1976:117). Fire is the same as beer, says a Zulu man. Beer 'boils'

when it ferments and, therefore, it is ‘warm’, and fire and sexual intercourse are also associated with heat:

> So the heat in the fire-sticks is just the same as the heat in the male and female [...] When a man sits by the fire warming himself he must think of women. He cannot leave women out. He must think of them [...] [*fire*] comes from the work of one stick in the other. So when he knows this, how can he escape thinking of himself doing this thing, when he has done it before with his wife? He knows it and the desire is there in him. This is how we Zulu think of these things. (pp. 226–227)

With modernisation, these associations could weaken, but the man assured Berglund that it still exists even if the fire was made with matches. He added, ‘So you see how you are killing us when you say to us, “Do not drink beer. Just drink sour milk and water”?’ (Berglund 1976:226, 232; also Mönnig 1978:117).

The fire enables people to socialise, sustain themselves, relate to the spiritual world, affirm life and the continuation of life and experience what Mphahlele (1972:24) called ‘the interconnectedness of things’.

African writers provide an even wider interpretation of the gathering around the fire. Leopold Senghor makes a sharp distinction between the light of Europe, the world of the day and the world of the night, the darkness, where Africa regains its identity: ‘Night, death, childhood are unified [...] and share the essence of Africa, the dead, the mother, the dance, the drum, and the blood of life’ (Awoonor 1976a:169). Leopold Senghor’s poetry, says Awoonor, departs from:

> ... a painful quest for self-identity and for redemption from the strangulating embrace of French assimilation [...] The search for identity connotes a spiritual return to Africa, to the mythical landscape populated by the dead ancestors, the memorials of childhood, and the presence of the mother [...] the poet invokes the Black woman, the maternal principle, who is at the center of the return to the African world [...] The song of the beating dark blood, the recounting of the tales at evening, the children asleep on their mother’s backs, and the weaving feet of dancers invoking the hour of ultimate night, all state the magic of this black mythical moment of existence in sharp contradiction to the opaque description of the light of Europe. At this hour, at the call of the woman, the Earth Mother, the ancestors gather to talk to their children. The unity between the living and the dead enforces the eternal links [...] It is this same woman, naked, clothed in black sin, who expresses the principle of beauty [...] the firm-fleshed ripe fruit (image of her breasts), the raptures of black wine, the rhythmic beat of the tom- tom, and the solemn contralto of the spiritual song. (1976a:165–166)

The poet describes here a strong contrast between two great traditions, that of Europe and that of Africa. The African night stands in opposition to the light of Europe, and ‘the maternal principle [...] is at the centre of the return to the African world’.

Things have changed. As the population has increased, the present levels of firewood usage have become unsustainable. Electricity now provides light in most houses, and TV adds entertainment. In some areas, children and adults have migrated from the fire to the TV. Some continue to cook on fire merely because electricity is too expensive. For many, the domestic practice of life around the fire, with its rich symbolic meaning and social functions, has disappeared. What has remained is a practice without the rich meaning it had before. The mother makes fire and cooks the food on her own while the rest of the family gathers around the TV.

In a discussion with a group of rural mothers about a more energy- effective wood stove, they too talked about the children who prefer the TV above the fire. The mother now sits alone at the fire or at the woodstove.

I asked if we should not try to find something to replace the fire so that the mother can cook where her children are – a practice that does not take the mother away from her family.

They replied that they still needed the fire. Sometimes the mother joins the children to watch TV so that she can be with them because the TV is taking them in another direction; it teaches them new values that nudge them away from their parents.

This process of alienation continues when the children grow older and when they go to school. One mother remarked:

> 'These teachers! At school they say at Grade 12 we need to buy mattresses for our kids because sometimes they sleep at school so that they can study for the exams. But when the exams are over, the baby is already inside.'

The mothers see their children slipping away. But they fear that if they let go of the fire, their ability to win their children back is weakened. Their daughters in turn become mothers and often leave their small children with them, their grandmothers. And when their daughters come home to see their children, they have to cook and so they use fire. And that fire has significance. It brings the grownup children back to their traditions. It helps them to find their way again.

The call of the Earth Mother to return to the African world (to paraphrase Awoonor) stands here against the lure of the bright lights of the city and the influence of TV. This tension has been carried over to the city.

In 1993 and 1994, urban residents indicated to us that they still needed the coal stove. During a group discussion in Kagiso in 1993 (in a Nova investigation for Sasol), one of the oldest residents said that they had rejected electricity before because they feared that electricity would chase the spirits of their ancestors away. When that happens, people have no roots and life disintegrates. Now they have found ways to have

electricity *and* maintain contact with their ancestors. So now, she said, 'we desperately need electricity'.

Originally, the coal stove played a central role. A mother in Kagiso explained to us: 'If there is fire in the house, there is life. Even if there is no food, but there is fire, I am happy, because the stove brings the family together.' Another researcher reports that a mother said: 'My coal stove is my life' (Hoets 1995).

In the city, there are many things that cause the family to fall apart, but in the evening, in the warm kitchen, where the mother provides food and a warm heart, they can gather around the stove and recover from the stresses of the day and find each other again.

We became aware that the stove and the mother belong together. Some people call the heavy, black cast iron stove 'my big Mama'. It is solid. It gives a sense of security, of warmth. For some, fire is still associated with fertility. The mother, similarly, is the source of life, comfort, stability and care. In the urban context, the stove takes the traditional central position of the fireplace. The stove and the mother feed her family and keep the family together. The mother has mythic overtones and relates to the symbols of Mother Earth and Mother Africa.

In 1997, we participated in the Department of Minerals and Energy Affairs' (DMEA) Macro-Scale Experiment in Qalabotjha, a township at Villiers in the Free State Province. The aim of the experiment was to evaluate the performance of different low-smoke fuels in actual domestic conditions. The DMEA evaluated a number of low-smoke fuels as part of their Low-Smoke Fuels Programme.

Nova could include a number of questions for a survey among a representative sample of 500 households. The late Reverend Lehasa Mokoena formulated the questions. Some of the results are shown in Table 11.1.

The results indicate that there were different combinations of traditional African values and modern Western (and, most likely, Christian) values. In all cases, there was some combination of the two but with a stronger emphasis on one or the other.

The importance of keeping the family together can be seen in that 80.4% fully agreed with the statement: *A fire or coal stove in the home brings and keeps my family together.*

That was in 1997. But domestic energy use patterns have shifted. Twenty years later, we were involved in experiments to find ways to exclude coal use completely. The need for modern entertainment (TV, hi-fi, Wi-Fi) and other comforts of modernity drives the demand for electricity. We found two

TABLE 11.1: Questions and answers from Qalabotjha, northern Free State province, South Africa, in 1997

Question	Do not know (%)	Not at all (%)	Agree a little (%)	Agree a great deal (%)
A fire or coal stove in the home brings and keeps my family together	1.6	7.4	10.6	80.4
It is better to live in a zinc house or shack than a traditional hut	5.4	43.0	14.6	37.0
In our household, we depend on our ancestors for our good fortune	6.0	27.6	16.6	49.8
Fire brings us in contact with our ancestors	23.4	24.2	20.0	32.4
Fire increases fertility	33.4	23.8	15.3	26.8
Fire is necessary to cleanse society of evil and of evil people	28.4	26.2	21.0	24.0
Fire causes smoke that makes us sick	3.4	4.2	8.8	83.6
Electricity increases the danger of lightning striking the house	26.8	26.2	11.0	36.0

Source: Hoets (1997), see Diagram 3.

patterns: there were grandmothers who were looking after their grandchildren during the day, who had a coal stove and prepared 'slow food' on it – traditional types of food that need hours to cook. And there were families who lived a fast-paced, modern type of life: in the morning, they need a quick cup of coffee or tea before rushing off to work, and in the evening they do not have much time to prepare food before going to bed. A coal stove does not fit into this pattern, except maybe on weekends.

In a Nova survey in 2017, residents were asked: 'Do you think you need the coal stove for your family to be together in the same place?' A typical answer: 'It is TV and a heater when it is cold and food and laughing. We do not need a coal stove [...] If it is very cold we take blankets and sit here. Everyone takes a blanket and sits here, we watch TV.' Another: 'Television. We all sit together in one room. And when it is cold, there is a heater and we all sit together and watch television. We sit around the heater and watch television.'

Hardly anyone indicated a need for a coal stove; however, a year later we found that about 25% of the households did build a shack (using corrugated iron plates) and put a coal stove in it – for different reasons.

And in 2021, during a survey of wood use northwest of Pretoria, we found that the tradition of sitting around the fire was still prominent in significant sections of the communities, and the TV was still very much in the background (see Chapter 9).

People are pragmatic and flexible about these things. In 2023, I had two focus group discussions in two townships that were included in the 2013 survey for Sasol. It was, again, about energy use. Wood and coal had

become scarce; people burnt carboard and plastic, even old furniture. Almost all had shifted to LPG, paraffin and electricity. I asked about the relation between the fire and the ancestors. A few still maintained that fire brings them into contact with the ancestors, but most said that fire was not needed for that: you can make contact with the ancestors in many ways, like burning African herbs in your room. No one said that such contact was not necessary. It was the fire that was not necessary. An old belief is expressed in new ways.

The National Electrification Drive

Shortly after 1990, when the decision was taken by the white minority government to negotiate for a fully democratic government in South Africa, a team from big businesses and academia proposed a change-of-gears or kick-start approach to introduce massive structural changes, especially through massive schemes to provide housing, electrification, education, health care (especially for HIV) and job creation to those who did not have it, in order to transform the whole country in one forceful push towards modernisation, development, productivity and social stability (Tucker & Scott 1992:134–141). The motive for this initiative was the assumption that without quick and tangible improvements in the daily lives of the masses, the political efforts to become a democracy would fail.

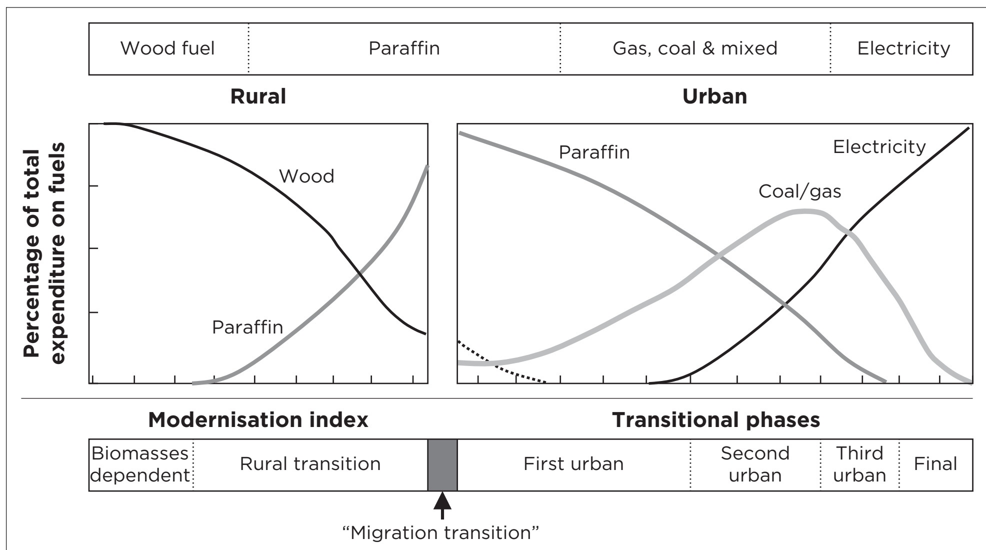
This approach was similar to that of the Urban Foundation, a former initiative of white big business leaders that was formed after mass violence broke out in Soweto in 1976. It was an effort for constructive engagement. The Urban Foundation did effect a few important structural changes, but they wanted to do it in such a way that the reforms would be convenient and fit into the prevailing economic system. They represented capitalism and they could not find agreement with the government, which represented Afrikaner nationalism. The current president of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, then 35 years old, was invited to join the regional board in what one of the leading figures of the Urban Foundation called a 'charitable gesture'. However, on one occasion, Ramaphosa 'sharply interrogated the assumptions of fellow board members about the character of Soweto community life' and soon discontinued attending the meetings (Butler 2008:102–103). He turned towards the trade union movement 'in search of new instruments for political opposition to the apartheid regime' (Butler 2008:127).

Both the Urban Foundation and the change-of-gears initiative did connect with the African search for modernity but did not take notice of the simultaneous but conflicting discomfort with modernity and the search for a place to feel at home that we have noted in Chapter 8, under the heading 'Inner conflict'.

The assumption that modernisation was necessary to give tangible content to the political transformation may have been a bit optimistic. Modernisation does not always promote social stability but often promotes dissatisfaction and revolutionary consciousness by raising expectations way above the ability to meet them – or by calling forth cultural resistance.

One of the partners in the change-of-gears initiative was Eskom, the giant national electricity utility, which announced the National Electrification Drive (NED) to provide electricity on a massive scale to low-income households in the same period.

The National Electrification Drive shared the assumption of the change- of-gears initiative that modernity was the final cultural destination of the whole South African population and that electricity would be the energy carrier of modernity. Electricity was therefore expected to replace all other energy carriers, as can be seen in Figure 11.1.



Source: Viljoen (1989).

FIGURE 11.1: The National Electrification Drive's view of the domestic energy transition process in South African black households.

The NED fell into the trap of many development projects earlier, as had been described by the prominent American economist JK Galbraith. Galbraith attributed the failure of Western initiatives in Africa and Asia to the tendency of Westerners to prescribe the solutions that they understand and have available without seeking to understand the actual problems first (see also Chapter. 4):

> … to an astonishing degree, the causes [*of mass poverty*] are simply assumed […] [*they*] are selected not for their validity but for their convenience […] We

> suppose that on social questions we proceed from diagnosis to action. But if action is imperative, we make the cause fit the action. (1980:14, 36, 37)

This is precisely what the NED did. They felt that action was imperative to ensure the success of the political transformation. The problem is that they prescribed the measures that were convenient without understanding the character of black community life, as Ramaphosa had pointed out. Neither the Urban Foundation, the change-of-gears initiative nor the NED gave proper attention to the way that their measures would be perceived or would function within the low-income households and communities.

The NED brought many improvements to the lives of millions. And it ran into serious problems in terms of financial sustainability. The average consumption in the year 2000 was 132 kWh/month per household, while the NED expected that income would be forthcoming for a consumption level nearly three times higher, estimated at 350 kWh. Electricity consumption was so low that revenues in many areas did not cover operation costs (Borchers et al. 2001:17).

People who were connected to the electricity grid expressed a sense of belonging, of being connected to the rest of the people of this country. That was the initial, positive and direct result. A secondary negative result often occurred later. Having electricity makes one consume more. It leads to increased expenditure when people buy electric appliances, and they stay up later at night, using more electricity. Increased expenditure leads to financial constraints and an inability to pay for electricity. This results in electricity cuts, which creates a feeling of alienation, of not belonging and therefore of not having to obey the rules of the unjust and unkind 'system'. Conflict is generated on various levels, between Eskom and municipalities, between municipalities and residents and within families and in the minds of individuals.

David A McDonald reported that in post-apartheid South Africa:

> … service cut-offs for nonpayment have reached crisis proportions […] the actual number of people affected by water cut-offs is just under 10 million, with the same number being affected by electricity cut-offs (with about 7.5 million people having experienced both) […] about over two million people have been evicted from their homes for failure to pay their water and/or electricity bills and a further 1.5 million people have had property seized […] the heartless, and perhaps unconstitutional, practices of household evictions and water and electricity cut-offs are simply unsustainable – socially, morally and economically. (2002:162)

On the other hand, households are powerful as a collective. Eskom struggles to survive because of corruption and mismanagement and also because many households do not pay for their electricity, *inter alia*, making use of illegal connections. Eskom seems to be powerless to put an end to this practice (Figure 11.2).

Source: Ntuli (2020), published with appropriate permissions.

FIGURE 11.2: Photograph of hazardous illegal electricity supply connections.

Many municipalities have been under severe stress resulting from the nonpayment for electricity and illegal connections that overload the system.

On Friday, 11 June 2021, Eskom wrote in a statement: 'Eskom has noted with great concern the increase in electricity theft, especially in high-density areas, which leads to the failure of our equipment'.[44]

And on 22 July 2022, the State President, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, in an address to the South African people, said: 'What is happening at Tutuka and other power stations is deliberate sabotage by well-organised criminal syndicates that are destroying the utility and damaging our economy'.[45]

The modern mirage

I sometimes understand the feeling that the modern world is unreal. In the years when we stayed in Venḓa, near a small rural town, it happened that

44. See Eskom, 2021 'Eskom is experiencing an increase in electricity theft and distribution infrastructure failure due to illegal connections', media release, 11 June, viewed on 10 March 2023. <https://www.eskom.co.za/eskom-is-experiencing-an-increase-in-electricity-theft-and-distribution-infrastructure-failure-due-to- illegal-connections/>

45. See <https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/speeches/address-president-cyril-ramaphosa-actions-address-electricity-crisis%2C-union-buildings%2C-tshwane>

I had not been to a bigger town or to the city for months. When I then travelled to the city, I remember that I looked at the commercial farms along the way and at all the comings and goings in the city, and the thought sometimes came into my mind that this modern world is not as solid and permanent as the people living in it may think. In the vast African world of the centuries, this modern world sometimes feels like a fleeting phenomenon.

After we had left Venḓa, I found a description of a somewhat similar feeling, but much more pronounced. VS Naipaul, later Nobel Prize winner, spoke to a resident about Abidjan, the capital of the Ivory Coast, also called 'little Paris'. Naipaul asked Mr Niangoran-Bouah, an academic of the Ivory Coast:

> 'Is it real for Africans, the European world? This city they have built here in Abidjan – do Africans consider it real?' [...] 'The world of white men is real. But, but. We black Africans have all that they have' – and Mr Niangoran-Bouah meant aeroplanes, cars, lasers, satellites – 'we have all of that in the world of the night, the world of darkness.' [...] And in some ways Africans had exceeded Europeans, Mr Niangoran-Bouah said. Europeans could achieve only limited speeds, even with their rockets. Africans existed that could turn themselves into pure energy. Such an African might say, 'Let me be for a while.' And when after a second or so of concentration he came to again, he might give you news of Paris. Because in that time he had been to Paris and come back; and he had talked to people in Paris [...] 'When does the world of the night begin?' Mr Niangoran-Bouah said slowly and seriously, 'As soon as the sun sets.' (Naipaul 1985:147–149)

Arlette came from West India and was a friend of Mr Niangoran-Bouah; she was married to an Ivory Coast man and talked of her 'African learning' that was needed to make a success of her marriage:

> She spoke of the two worlds, the world of the day and the world of the night, the two ideas of reality that made Africans so apparently indifferent to their material circumstances. I had seen it in the Ivory Coast, she said. Men of wealth and position could return easily to their villages at the weekend, could easily resume the hut life, could welcome that life. She had asked people in Ghana, now in chaos: 'You were rich the other day. Now you are poor and your country is in a mess. Doesn't this worry you?' And they had said, 'Yesterday we were all right. Today we are poor. That's the way it is [...]' That was the way it was in the upper world. The inner world, the other world, continued whole. And that was what mattered. I said, 'So it wouldn't matter to you if by some accident this city of Abidjan fell into ruins?' Arlette said, 'No. It wouldn't matter. Men would continue to live in their own way.' (Naipaul 1985:158)

Conclusion

In Africa, the city has been romanticised as a dream destination, demonised as a nightmare and experienced as a mirage. It is a loving and terrible mother.

One of the places where the cultural process of urbanisation and modernisation can be observed is the ways in which household members use energy at home.

The shift from the open fire to the TV as the thing that brings the family together is similar to the shift from the dining table to the TV in Dutch households. And there is a trend away from 'bringing the family together' to each one watching or using a cell phone on their own. These changes in family life take place in different ways: the combination of things and thoughts in most black South African households is different from the combination of things and thoughts in most Dutch households.

It is all part of the diverse transformations of family structures in different parts of the world, in which it is not clear what is cause, what is effect and what the outcomes will be. The implications that this shift has for the social processes that take place, such as family discussions and value transfer to children, should be researched. Around the fire and the coal stove, people usually talk about the events of the day and older people often tell stories, but it is not clear what discussions and value transfers take place in front of the TV.

The search for a house where one can feel at home and where the house is at the same time at home within the ecology is more urgent than ever before.

Chapter 12

Is a different world possible?

In this chapter, we look at some impediments on the road to the sustainable well-being of communities, such as the inertia of modern institutions, high population growth in Africa and high inequality.

At the beginning of this book, we quoted something written on a wall: 'Better questions – better answers – better world'. We must, first of all, ask good questions.

A really good question can be found in a document on climate change of the South African Council of Churches:

> It is a matter of moral vision. We need to envisage alternatives to the current global economic order that has caused climate change – alternatives that will be able to *generate* sufficient wealth, *distribute* such wealth more equitably and help to *redefine* our very understanding of what wealth entails. Such a vision needs to be attractive enough to motivate millions of people, to energise and mobilise action. Or to put it in other terms: The question is whether 'a different world is indeed possible' – as the World Social Forum professes. (2009:40)

Various voices maintain that it is indeed possible, but there are impediments.

Positive efforts and their impediments

A recent global success story, it seems, is the progress with the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that the United Nations Member States set at the beginning of the new millennium to shape a broad vision

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to fight poverty and combat numerous issues hampering development and progress. The MDGs included goals such as eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership for development by the year 2015.

At the end of this period, Ban Ki-moon (2015:3), the secretary-general of the United Nations at the time, claimed that this initiative was the most successful anti-poverty movement in history.

The eight MDGs were followed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that was adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. Its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a common framework that is meant to facilitate communication, joint initiatives and synergy between all role players. The 17 SDGs are described in a United Nations document as:

> … the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, and peace and justice. The goals interconnect and in order to leave no one behind, it is important that we achieve each Goal and target by 2030. (n.d. n.p.)[46]

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change. It was established in 1988 to provide policymakers with regular scientific assessments on the current state of knowledge about climate change. To give one example, for the Sixth Assessment Report, 782 scientists (and hundreds more contributing authors) analyzed more than 66,000 peer-reviewed studies[47].

One of the IPCC reports presents numerous pathways towards sustainable well-being. They conclude, with "high confidence", that in the large majority of cases, development and ecological sustainability depend on each other:

> Adaptation options that reduce the vulnerability of human and natural systems have many synergies with sustainable development, if well managed […] The large majority of modelling studies could not construct pathways characterised by lack of international cooperation, inequality and poverty that were able to limit global warming to 1.5 °C (high confidence). (IPCC 2018:19, 22)

What we have here is the argument that a combination of good things is not only possible, but essential. There is synergy between the reduction of poverty, sustainable development and maintaining ecosystems. This may indeed be true if all factors are considered and the model is implemented

46. https://www.gpma.co.za/un-sustainable-development-goals/#:~:text=The%20Sustainable%20Development%20Goals%20are,prosperity%2C%20and%20peace%20and%20justice.

47. https://www.nrdc.org/stories/ipcc-climate-change-reports-why-they-matter-everyone-planet#sec-whatis

and executed well. But it is exactly the opposite of what the economist JK Galbraith (1980:43–54) called the equilibrium of poverty. Galbraith argued that, in the context of mass poverty, if income increases for some or other reason, such as development policies, forces will normally be set in motion that restore previous or some other stable level of deprivation. ‘The increase will, in effect, consume itself.’ (see also the discussion of the dilemma faced by Dr A van Pelt that was discussed in Chapter 4 under the heading ‘The 20th century development industry’.)

The forces that are set in motion could be population growth, corruption, actions by competitors, depletion of resources and so on. In this scenario, poverty itself, when firmly established, develops an inertia of its own.

It is not that one of the two – Galbraith or the IPCC – is right and the other one is wrong. It comes down to a meaningful combination of things and thoughts in each particular case. The IPCC models themselves recognise certain impediments; they are based on certain assumptions and conditions, including that the projects must be managed well.

Galbraith’s statement isn’t backed by lots of evidence, while the IPCC’s statements are based on a flood of scientific publications. And yet, Galbraith should not be dismissed. As another IPCC document admits, there is limited evidence that explicitly examines the real-world processes related to climate change: “Few projections are available for households, livelihoods, and communities”. Literature on the impacts of climate change regarding the combination of things and thoughts in a specific context is scarce, or to put it in their own, more scientific language: ‘And literature on differential localized impacts and their cross-sector interacting and cascading effects with multidimensional patterns of societal vulnerability, poverty and inequalities remains scarce’ (Roy et al. 2018:476).

Another IPCC report (*Mitigation Pathways Compatible with 1.5 °C in the Context of Sustainable Development*) recognises certain impediments on the pathway to a world that is less than 1.5 °C warmer, such as lack of global cooperation, high inequality, high population growth, and rapidly growing resource-intensive consumption. (Rogelj et al. 2018:110)

It all depends on how a specific model is implemented in practice:

> … Real-world experiences at the project level show that the actual integration between adaptation, mitigation and sustainable development is challenging as it requires reconciling trade-offs across sectors and spatial scales. (Roy et al. 2018:448)

A second impediment that could frustrate the 17 SDGs, after bad or inadequate management on a local level, is the temptation to achieve these goals the easy way. For the SDGs, the task is much more difficult than for the MDGs, because the MDGs did not take the idea of being sustainable up

in its name itself. If the MDGs were achieved by unsustainable methods, it is not as positive as Moon stated. In a report, *Poverty Trends in South Africa*, StatsSA makes the following statement:

> The number of people living below the food poverty line increased to 15,8 million in 2009 from 12,6 million in 2006, before dropping to 10,2 million people in 2011. Despite this adverse impact of the financial crisis, poverty levels did noticeably improve according to 2011 estimates. This was driven by a combination of factors ranging from a growing social safety net, income growth, above inflation wage increases, decelerating inflationary pressure and an expansion of credit. (2014:12)

It is concerning that the expansion of credit is one of the factors that led to poverty reduction. The same report (StatsSA 2014) warns:

> Even though households see their incomes growing, many households in South Africa are also becoming increasingly dependent on debt to increase their spending power [...] It is important to note that while household spending was boosted by this credit extension (resulting in lower poverty levels), it does also pose a risk for many households should they default on their loans. Households which have graduated out of poverty by 2011 could easily slip back below the poverty line if their debt situation becomes unsustainable. (p. 21)

According to the Minister of Social Development Lindiwe Zulu, the number of South Africans who rely on grants given by the government grew from 3,018,909 in 1996–1997 to 18,290,592 in 2019–2020. National Treasury expects the number of grant beneficiaries to be 18.8 million in 2023/24, 9.2 million people receive the Social Relief of Distress grant, that was initiated to soften the blow of the COVID 19 pandemic.[48] There are 7.1 million tax payers in the country.

Many lost their jobs in 2020 because of the stringent COVID-19 lockdown. At what stage will the decrease in the number of taxpayers and the increase in people dependent on grants make the system unsustainable? And even if the country could afford it, are grants the best way to end poverty and hunger?

Giving grants on this scale is often the easy way out for both government and the receivers of the grants: it replaces the much more demanding and complex task of creating sustainable jobs and doing these jobs successfully.

■ Modern institutions

The inertia of modern institutions is an impediment to a sustainable future.

48. https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/social-grants-increase-2024 and: https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/754083/28-million-people-on-grants-in-south-africa-but-only-7-million-taxpayers/

Woodhill (2010:51) has pointed out that 'modern institutions have evolved to enable economic growth, technological progress and individual liberty. They were never designed to cope with an unsustainable relationship between humankind and the natural environment'.

Today, argues the Oxford economist Kate Raworth (2020), we still follow the models and policies of the 20th century that were not developed to take on the crises of the 21st century. She argues that we have to:

> … renew our societies and lifeworld through transforming our economies. And that begins by transforming the economic mindset that has guided us from the past. Because we've inherited a reductionist economic mindset that told us that the economy is primarily the market and that price should be the measure of value […] and that the goal of our economy should be endless gross domestic product (GDP) growth, no matter how rich our cities or nations already are, because our economic systems are currently structurally dependent on endless expansion […] This reductionist focus […] has led to some of the crises that we now face […] the financial meltdown in 2008 […] climate breakdown […] we need a new vision of progress and human prosperity that is fit for the reality of our time. (n.p.)

Raworth assists a number of cities in developing a circular economy, as opposed to the traditional linear economy, where we take stuff from nature, use it and throw it away as waste. She is, in other words, working on ways in which the transformed mindset can be expressed in policies and practices.

Coming closer to the specifically African context, the Oxfam (2017) report of 2 May 2017, *Starting with people: A human economy approach to inclusive growth in Africa*, also argues for a transformed mindset and economy:

> Oxfam has argued for the evolution of economic thinking away from an all-consuming faith in markets and growth measured through GDP. A more human economy would recognize that, *if the well-being of everyone and the survival of the planet are to be the primary aims of the economy rather than a hoped-for by-product of free markets, then we need to explicitly design economies to achieve these things*. (n.p.; [*author's added emphasis*])

The modern economy produces industries that are knowledge-, capital- and resource-intensive. These industries cannot provide for most of the large numbers of jobless people who flock to them in search of a job, who end up in sprawling 'squatter camps' around the cities and towns, except to generate funds that pay for grants. And the impact of Artificial Intelligence and the Fourth Industrial Revolution still has to unfold.

How could modern institutions and the modern economy be transformed to achieve planetary well-being, that is, the well-being of everyone, as well as the well-being of the planet?

Modern institutions have a certain inertia. It is not unusual for entities such as businesses and churches to embark on a journey to transform themselves according to some high ideal – such as the UNESCO's 17 SDGs. The transformation strategy often progresses through different phases: clarifying the vision, plotting the processes to put the vision into practice and eventually planning the concrete steps that must be taken – and as the planning proceeds through these phases, the discourse gradually shifts from the one end of the continuum, the enthusiasm for the vision, to the other end, the entity as it is at the moment, the status quo. In the end, the concrete steps that are decided on are often shaped by the status quo of the entity much more than by the vision. In such cases, the vision effectively evaporates, even if the language of the vision is still bandied around.

I have seen this trajectory happen with congregations that decided to transform themselves. It seems that the same happened with the Santam document discussed in Chapter 13. The inertia of established entities is not only detrimental; without it, they would be tossed around by every passing wind of change, but it could eventually drown the vision of the 17 SDGs.

High population growth

An Oxfam report (2017) provides evidence for why high population growth can be seen as an impediment to achieving the SDGs, even when GDP was rising to impressive levels:

> Despite decades of unprecedented [*economic*] growth, the proportion of populations living in poverty declined more slowly in Africa than in any other region. A growing population meant that there were 50 million more people living in extreme poverty in sub-Saharan Africa in 2012 than there were in 1990. (p.2)

Population growth presents a good case study of the way different things and thoughts combine: health care, hunger, views of manhood and femininity, HIV, ideology, dignity issues, religion, perceptions, financial and social security, education, cultures and traditions.

We have come across the question about the combination of health care and population growth in Chapter 4, and now it is time to discuss it in more detail: does good health care lead to population growth, or can it help to reduce population growth, and if so, under which conditions? The answer to this question is that it depends on the specific combination of things.

Anna Church (2023:1–16) and her team provide an overview of over 258 research articles on this topic over the last 30 years, and conclude that 'fertility desires are shaped by a myriad of factors, with results for any factor varying according to the methodological approach and the country/population under examination.' (p11). It is a typical complex process, with

no linear cause and effect. What the combination of factors in a given context is, can only be comprehended by interacting with the people in that situation.

We only look at a few examples of such combinations.

We can assume that if health care is improved in a context where people feel insecure, they may continue to have many children; as one mother once told us: 'I must have as many children as possible, so that perhaps one of them will live to grow up and have a kind heart and take care of me when I am old'.

Similarly, a combination between good health care and a consciousness or mindset that regards many children as a proof of your virility and/or some other motive may also lead to population growth. And during the struggle against apartheid, one sometimes heard black people talk of *more sons for guns*, while a minister of the white government once asked (white) couples to have baby, as a gift to the Republic of South Africa.

In another context, where having children is not so strongly connected to future security or some religious or nationalistic meaning, where people already feel secure, where they have confidence that a good education and good care for a few children would be the best way to secure a good quality of life for themselves and for their children and where they have control over their reproduction, good health care may convince parents that they do not have to have many children. They can expect the few they have to survive and prosper.

There have been many efforts to reduce population growth, with different results. As in the economy, *mindset* plays a role in high population growth. What happened in the People's Republic of China is unlikely to happen in Africa.

In the early 1960s, the Chinese birth rate was well above six children per woman.[49] In the late 1970s, China introduced the 'one-child' policy that restricts each family to one child. About 35 years later, there are growing concerns that the low number of young people would not be able to support the huge ageing population.

The Chinese government has recognised this worrisome demographic trend and, in 2013, began easing enforcement of the 'one-child' policy in certain circumstances. In 2016, it raised the limit to two children for all families, hoping to encourage a baby boom. It did not work: 'After a brief uptick that year, the birth rate fell again in 2017, with 17.2 million babies born compared to 17.9 in 2016'. Although the number of families having a

49. See https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/01/17/world/asia/china-population-crisis.html

second child rose, the overall number of births continued to drop[50]. The National Bureau of Statistics reports just 9.02 million births in 2023 – just over half as many as in 2017.[51]

One writer tells the story of a father who sold his flock of sheep – his life savings – to help pay for his son's so-called 'wife-attracting house'. The house had smooth concrete floors, an indoor bathroom and electrical outlets, very different from the dirt-floor home the man shared with his wife. A matchmaker had introduced them to a few women from other villages, but none worked out. The son lost hope and left to join some of his army buddies working in the oil fields. He left the new house empty and abandoned (Larmer 2015):

> It stands as a symbol of two implacable legacies of the one-child policy: a 'bare branch' unable to find a wife and an ageing father unable to keep his only son close to take care of him and his wife in their old age [...] Chinese officials still seem impervious to the needless human suffering the policy has inflicted: the forced abortions and sterilizations, the undocumented children born and raised in the shadows, the persecution and even imprisonment of those (like the blind lawyer Chen Guancheng) who tried to expose its abuses [...]. With an estimated 30 million to 35 million unmarried men by 2020 – a huge mass of unchanneled testosterone – critics worry that China could face rising crime rates, social protests or a larger, more aggressive military. (n.p.)

While high population growth is an impediment to reaching sustainable well-being, curbing such growth in the way China has done it is also an impediment, destabilising family and community life.

If China represents one extreme of population growth policy, several countries in Africa represent the other extreme. Irrespective of the merits and demerits of China's policy, it is unlikely that it will be repeated in Africa. John Magufuli, the president of Tanzania, for example, has strong views about birth control. *The Economist* reported in 2018:

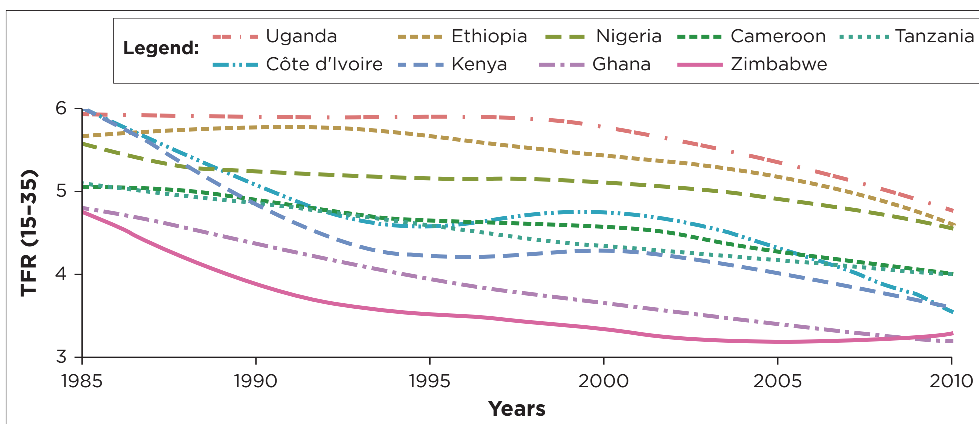
> He does not see the point. In 2016 he announced that state schools would be free, and, as a result, women could throw away their contraceptives. On September 9th this year he told a rally that birth control was a sign of parental laziness. Tanzania must not follow Europe, he went on, where one 'side effect' of widespread contraception is a shrinking labour force.
>
> There seems little danger of that. Tanzania's fertility rate is estimated to be 4.9, implying that the average woman will have that many children. Europe's rate is 1.6. Tanzania is helping drive a continental baby boom. In 1950 sub-Saharan Africa had just 180 m people – a third of Europe's population. By 2050 it will

50. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/01/17/world/asia/china-population-crisis.html

51. See https://fortune.com/asia/2024/01/17/china-population-record-plunge-2023-covid-deaths-low-birth-rate

have 2.2 billion – three times as many as Europe. If UN forecasts are right, sub-Saharan Africa will have 4 billion people in 2100. (n.p.)

Birth rates were declining in Africa (see Figure 12.1), but in several countries, the decline stalled around 2000. This could be the result of the disruption of female education (Kebede et al. 2019; the article argues that fertility rates are strongly connected to female education rates).



Source: Kebede, Goujon and Lutz (2019), redrawn and published with appropriate permissions.

FIGURE 12.1: Total fertility rates of females between the ages of 15–35 years old over the period 1985–2010.

In 2017, C. Hall and others used a modelling framework termed FEEDME (food estimation and export for diet and malnutrition evaluation) to model the impacts of future climate changes on food availability and subsequent undernourishment prevalence in 44 African countries (Hall et al. 2017):

> Our results indicate that projected rapid population growth will be the leading cause of food insecurity and widespread undernourishment across Africa. Very little to no difference in undernourishment projections were found when we examined future scenarios with and without the effects of climate change. (p. 124)

We can add: the concern should not only be about the impact of a growing population but also about the impact of growing excessive or unsustainable consumption by a given number of people.

HIV and AIDS, pandemics and population growth

Twenty years ago, there was a general expectation that AIDS would halt population growth in Africa. In 1998, for example, the United Nations Population Division Department of Economic and Social Affairs (*c.* 1998) published *The Demographic Impact of HIV/AIDS*, which stated:

> The average life expectancy at birth in the nine countries with an adult HIV prevalence of 10 per cent or more is projected to reach 48 years in 1995–2000 whereas it would have reached 58 years in the absence of AIDS [...] By 2005–2010 life expectancy at birth in South Africa is expected to drop to 45 years. Population growth, while remaining positive, is also expected to decrease to 0.3 per cent. (n.p.)

In former president Thabo Mbeki's biography, there is an interesting story that seems to indicate that he may have *wanted* HIV to reduce population growth. Mbeki questioned the causal relationship between HIV and AIDS and resisted or delayed the prescription of antiretroviral medicines – an action that cost the lives of many people.

What was his motive? One possibility is found in an event in 1969 when he was a student in Russia. During this period, he read a Soviet critic's view of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and responded with enthusiasm. The Soviet critic rejected the general interpretation that this play exposes the dangers of tyranny, where the hero tragically is flawed by his own pride and driven by hubris to war against his own people. Mbeki, following this critic, saw the general's contempt for the 'rabble' and his willingness to destroy it, along with Rome, as part of his heroism: 'He is the scourge of the rabble, the unthinking mob, with its cowardice, its lying, its ordinary-people-ness, and inspirer of the thinking masses, who are purposeful, kindly, etc.' (Gevisser 2007:283, 284).

Gevisser quotes a journalist who saw in Mbeki's passion for *Coriolanus* an indication of why Mbeki refused to follow orthodox science with respect to HIV.

This can be the result of the modern belief that one could create the ideal state, that society is makable. Stalin believed that the criminal could be re-educated to become a good citizen and the backward Russian masses could be recreated as the building blocks of an ideal society. Mass murder was, for him, not an aim in itself but a revolutionary means to build the ideal Soviet state (Mak 2004:437).

It seems that there was also a dignity issue involved for Mbeki: in a five-page letter to Bill Clinton in 2003, it was obvious that the scientific criticism of his policy for HIV and AIDS was an emotional issue (Mochechane & Morri 2012):

> If there was going to be a solution for HIV/AIDS with regard to Africa, then it would come from the African soil. He asserted South Africa's right to consult with 'dissident' scientists on the question of HIV/AIDS. He deplored the campaign of intellectual intimidation and terrorism waged by others, and compared it to 'the racist apartheid tyranny we opposed.' (p. 17)

It seems that HIV and AIDS have a significant impact on South Africa's population growth. According to StatsSA's mid-year population estimates

of 2018, the estimated overall growth rate increased from approximately 1,04% for the period 2002–2003 to 1,55% for the period 2017–2018 (A 1.55% increase in population p.a. implies that the population will double in 45 years.) This increase is attributed to a large extent to the expansion of health care programmes preventing the transmission of HIV from mother to child, as well as access to antiretroviral treatment. For adults aged between 15–49 years old, an estimated 19.0% of the population is HIV positive (StatsSA 2018:1, 5, 9).

Population growth and traditional African religions

A neglected factor in the discourse on fertility in Africa is the central role of traditional African religions as driver of fertility.

In an overview of over 258 articles about research on reasons why the desired number of children is markedly higher in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) than in other major regions, Anna Church (2023:1–16) and her team found that religion is mentioned prominently, but the specific *role* of traditional African religions hardly receives any attention. Church (p. 12) concludes that 'traditional and historical supports for high fertility continue to influence fertility desires in SSA up to the present', and emphasises the need for more qualitative research 'that centers the experiences and desires of SSA men and women without implying Western ideals or understandings of fertility and its benefits and consequences' - an appeal that resonates with Soyinka's plea (1976:viii) for 'the apprehension of a culture whose reference points are taken from within the culture itself', that we have quoted before.

Nürnberger (2007) writes about the community in traditional African spirituality:

> … the greatest danger lies in the possibility of extinction. The protection and enhancement of life is a communal task. The 'life force' of the clan encompasses fertility, biological vitality […] Childlessness is not only a personal tragedy but a communal catastrophe. (p. 23)

In the cosmic battle between life and death, the birth of a child is a wonderful victory of life over non-existence. That makes sense in a context where human life is in constant physical danger, but it becomes counterproductive in a context where scarcity of resources is the main threat.

In traditional African religions, one finds the belief that one joins the ancestors when you die and that you, or some of your characteristics, may return in the birth of one of your descendants. You are connected to the land of the living as long as your offspring remember you, but if nobody remembers you any more, you are finally dead (Mbiti 1974:84–85). Having many children can be

seen as the ticket to life after death. In the Venḓa tradition, adults are addressed as *Vho-* or *vha-* (e.g. *Vho-John, vho vuwa hani)* [John, did you sleep well?/Did you get up well?]). Children are addressed as *iwe* (e.g. *Iwe u pfi u nyi?* [What is your name?]). But very old people, the ancestors and even God are not grouped with adults – they are addressed as *Iwe* and not, as one would expect, as *Vho-* or *Vha-*. The explanation that was given to me is that the children are still close to the spiritual world where they come from, and very old people are coming close again to the spiritual world to which they return when they die, the world of the ancestors, of the gods and of God. *Iwe* expresses respect. Birth and death are taken up in the eternal cycle of life. You come from the ancestors and you go back to the ancestors – you are 'going home', but you can return in your offspring. As one remarked: 'In this way we provided eternal life for ourselves'.

Traditional perceptions change, but we can expect traditional views on fertility to be one of the factors that continue to influence population growth.

Population growth and child grants

We have seen in Chapter 10 that there are more people in South Africa who receive social grants than people who pay income tax.

Public opinion often sees child grants as a cause of teenage pregnancies. Over the years, a general comment of black students who had to analyse their own context was that their community is poor and there are no jobs available. One after the other they state that the only option left for young men is crime, and prostitution for young women – or having a baby in order to secure a child grant.

Similarly, one often hears from adult black people that young girls have babies in order to secure a child grant, so one tends to think that is indeed the case.

It seems, however, that there is more to it than getting a baby in order to secure a grant. In 2016, in the Zamdela interviews with 30 respondents, different views on the grants were expressed. Some people are grateful for the grants they receive because they would not be able to survive without them; others find that they have prevented terrible events: 'Right now, ever since the government made it possible for the children to get a grant, babies are no longer found in dumping sites' (see Chapter 10).

An IOL (2011) news report on research in some northern regions of South Africa, 'Teens are having babies for grants', has a misleading title because the report found that 15.5% of participants in the survey fell pregnant to access child support grants, which is a rather small percentage. It also found that a growing trend 'was families forcing their school-going children

to fall pregnant, a problem facing educators as teen pregnancies had increased' (IOL 2011).

StatsSA found that the increase in child grants over the last years did not cause an increase in teenage pregnancies. StatsSA's *South African Demographic and Health Survey 2016* (2017:12–13) found: 'Overall, the percentage of women aged 15–19 who have begun childbearing is unchanged relative to 1998 (16% in both 1998 and 2016)'. The South African child support grant was first introduced in 1998.

According to a news report (Maromo 2017), Statistician-General Pali Lehohla said at the release of the *South African Demographic and Health Survey 2016*:

> … teenage pregnancy in South Africa is not rising but has remained stable. In fact, among the 19-year-olds, it has declined from 35 per cent to 28 per cent. Teenage pregnancy is not increasing and therefore nothing can be attributed to the grants […] We want to dismiss that myth, however passionately it might be driven on fake facts. It doesn't exist. (n.p.)

The same news article reports that Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi agreed: 'It was found that more than 80 per cent of the teenagers who fall pregnant only claim child support after two years' (cited in Maromo 2017:n.p.).

Motsoaledi further stated that teenage pregnancies in fellow African countries where there are no social grant facilities are similar to South Africa (cited in Maromo 2017):

> At one point a minister from another African country told me that in their country one in every three school girls falls pregnant but there is no child support grant in that country. (n.p.)

In a letter to the *Sowetan*, 'Teen mothers are taking social grants for themselves', Winny Shokane (2018) of Diepsloot50 wrote:

> Today we live in the era where many young mothers receive social grant money on behalf of their children but use it for their personal needs to buy weaves and beauty products […] The grant is supposed to help impoverished families to buy other necessities such as school uniforms, clothes and books for their children […] In fact, social grants encourage laziness and dependency on the government. It also motivates teenage pregnancy where many teen mothers drop out of school and use grant money on alcohol and parties. (n.p.)[52]

Scientific studies found no association between grants and teenage fertility, but they consistently found a correlation between social grants and positive childhood development (Richter 2009). The following can be concluded:

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52. [n.a.], 2018 'Teen mothers are taking social grants for themselves', reader's letter (anonymous), 29 March, *Sowetan Live*, viewed on 29 June 2023, <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/opinion/letters/2018-03- 29-teen-mothers--are-taking-social-grants--for-themselves/>

- Grants are not the main driver of teenage pregnancies and irresponsible behaviour of young mothers, as the popular opinion has it.
- There are obviously many factors that combine to make the number of teenage pregnancies what it is: social, economic and political factors, as well as (possibly) traditions and beliefs about fertility and procreation in African cultures.
- Grants may be good for survival and positive childhood development, but they may lead to dependency and may inhibit agency.

Be that as it may, teenage pregnancies in South Africa are escalating. From 2017 to 2021 the number of births to teenagers aged 10-14 years increased by 48.7%, from a baseline of 2 726. In adolescent girls aged 15-19, the number of births increased by 17.9% (Barron et al. 2022:1). The Minister of the Department Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, said the teenage pregnancies have devastating social and economic costs. She said the country continues to show the highest rate of teenage pregnancy globally, with nearly one in four girls falling pregnant before the age of 20 years.[53]

In the coming chapters, we will reflect further on the question of how things and thoughts should combine to find a meaningful solution for a concrete problem.

High inequality

High inequality has been identified by the IPCC as one of the impediments to sustainable development.

Raworth (2020) argues:

> We now have economies that are deeply divisive, driving the returns of economic activity into a few hands. And they are degenerative, running down the sources of the living planet through our industrial activity. (n.p.)

There have been various efforts to build more equal societies in Africa. President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania implemented his policy of *Ujamaa*, based on the traditional communality of the village. This led to the 'villagization of production, which essentially collectivised all forms of local productive capacity' – although there were plots for each individual family. This policy decreased production, casting serious doubt on the project's ability to enable economic growth.[54]

During a visit to Tanzania, the writer Shiva Naipaul (1980) talked to people about the *Ujamaa* villages. He found little enthusiasm for the ideal. One

53. sanews.gov.za/south-africa/department-weighs-consequences-teenage-pregnancy

54. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ujamaa

official, who had just been re-elected as leader of his 10-house cell, despondently told him that it was a very difficult task to make this policy work (Naipaul 1980):

> 'I try to be an idealist. Mwalimu wants us all to be idealists.'
>
> 'But not many are ...'
>
> 'That is the trouble,' Abdallah said. 'Human nature – it is a terrible thing.' (p. 273)

No solution will work if it does not solve the problem of human nature or, in other words, if the people who must make the structure work do not have the mindset for that specific solution.

In South Africa, where the ANC came into government in 1994, there were high ideals about a more fair and equal country – but here also, human nature has emerged.

The ANC government promised a better life for the black population. Nationalisation had been one of the themes of the ANC movement before they took office, but although hotly contested within the governing alliance itself, they started off *with no idea how they were going to do it*:

> The exile liberation movement [...] was unable to resolve upon a coherent policy for black economic re-empowerment. [*Some*] had passed enough time in the Eastern bloc to be sceptical about the sustainability of actual existing socialism [...] There remained a formal commitment to nationalisation [...] This aspiration to public ownership was almost entirely underdeveloped in policy terms [...] ANC nationalisation was more or less entirely a matter of rhetoric. (Butler, 2008:353)

I remember how disappointed I was, after all the criticism levelled against the apartheid government and racist capitalism, that the ANC government had no idea, no alternative, for providing better houses, better ways of job creation and so on.

The communists in the alliance were presciently preoccupied with the danger of parasitic nationalist elites. In 1997, Nelson Mandela promised that South Africa would never again see 'the formation of predatory elites that thrive on the basis of looting of national wealth and the entrenchment of corruption'. A decade later, this is exactly what happened when resistance to such a predatory state almost completely disappeared and state capture and state looting took place on a scale that became fully visible only afterwards.

Economist Stephen Gelb spoke of an "implicit bargain" between the ANC and big business, which immediately preceded the political transition (Butler 2008:354). The new political power and the established economic powers decided to work together.

A former South African president, Thabo Mbeki, understood the danger of the modern economy and the 'demons' that urge people to get rich (see

Chapter 10). In contrast to this, our current president, Cyril Ramaphosa, had a very successful career in the world of big business. While many others have struggled to come to terms with the extreme affluence of some of the new black elite, Ramaphosa did not have qualms with getting extremely rich during his years as a businessman outside politics: 'Ramaphosa sees no contradiction between the struggle for justice and the enjoyment of luxury [...] even as a student, he revelled in "bourgeois pleasures"' (Butler 2008:387–388). When questioned about the contrast between the lavish inauguration of Nelson Mandela and the wider poverty of the society, Ramaphosa responded: 'In the end, I think life has to be good for all people'. His biographer concludes: 'Ramaphosa's version of socialism seemingly demands that equality must be achieved by raising up and not by levelling down' (Butler 2008:387–388).

The problem is that only a few have risen up, and that has often happened at the expense of the poor majority. The despondency that we have seen in recent black poetry (see Chapter 7) and the anger with local conditions and service delivery that we saw during our Nova projects (see Chapter 10) are reflected in the sharp downward trends in the turnout of voters at national and municipal elections.

The mindset that is formed by Mbeki's 'demons' that urge us to get rich drives some to get very rich through dubious means (see Chapter 13, 'The functional concept of sin'). On the other hand, many are prevented from improving their situation because of another mindset that wants to enforce equality, namely the fear of becoming a victim of witchcraft accusations if you stand out from the group (see Chapter 9). Equality can become a destructive ideal.

A destructive search for equality is not only an African phenomenon. The English philosopher John Stuart Mill's book *On Liberty* was published in 1859. Mill criticised the tendency to make all people equal, which he saw as the dominant trend of his time. He realised the value of the small number of gifted and dedicated individuals for the state as a whole. The Dutch writer JH van den Berg (1984) quotes from Mill's book:

> A state which dwarfs its men, in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands even for beneficial purposes, will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished. (pp.119-120)

T Sono (1994) has argued in a similar vein in his *Dilemmas of African intellectuals in South Africa: Political and cultural constraints*.

The question is how one could uplift the poor, not by bringing gifted individuals down but by utilising their gifts – and the gifts of the poor.

Conclusion: Is a different world possible?

The modern mind, which believes in a makeable world and that the world is on its way to a better future through human agency, would say that a different world is possible. And given all our technical capacity and brilliance, as well as the rich resources that nature provides, it is understandable that one can be optimistic about a better world in the future.

However, the modern belief in progress has been severely shaken. And the impediments must be faced. The IPCC documents try to strike a balance between synergies and trade-offs, but they recognise that there is a lack of information on real-world events and how things play out on a local level. What happens on a local level forms part of the problem that we will attend to in the coming chapters.

At the beginning of this chapter, we took note of the SACC's question about the possibility of a different world. As we have seen, to achieve that, there are certain impediments in the way that have to be faced. One of the prerequisites for making progress on the way towards such a different world is getting more clarity on the ultimate ends of the economy.

Intermezzo
What is the problem? And how should we respond?

We began this book with two questions: Why does, as Lloyd Timberlake has observed, the African poverty trap treat competing doctrinaire ideologies with much the same contempt? And when you have answered that question, whatever your answer is, what can you do about it?

We must now continue to formulate answers to these two questions.

In Chapters 4–12, we have focused on understanding the prevailing structures and formulating a valid problem definition. What is the outcome of this process?

As we have seen, McLaren regards the modern empire, with its centre in the United States of America (USA), as the biggest problem in the world: diverse powers combine to form a global suicide machine. This suicide takes place by way of the destruction of the ecology that sustains life and the destruction of human life and cultures, as a largely unintended consequence of the fantastic, brave new world that this empire is building. It is a global process with unique local expressions because of different things and thoughts that combine in each context.

Christianity is too often part of the problem because it has all too often stayed aloof from the fundamental problems of our times. The modern world has allocated religion to individual private life as the place where it, with all other private idiosyncrasies, can be lived out freely, and many churches have often complied wholeheartedly – even more, as McLaren complained, the churches have often endorsed the modern power structures, instead of providing an alternative and a way out. Western churches deal with the conflict between their faith and the modern world in various ways, with various degrees of success and failure.

The modern world has infiltrated the African world of things and thoughts, causing, as Clapperton Mavhunga has pointed out, an unsolved inner conflict between the traditional identity and the acquired modern identity. Together with this, a similar inner conflict manifests itself in the African churches between traditional religions and Christianity. The conflict of

worlds is dealt with in various ways, with various degrees of success and failure.

To sum up our problem definition: the three powers of Africa, modernity and Christianity engage each other in the African landscapes and are often unable to form sustainable, humane and fair combinations of things and thoughts on various levels. Mindset – thoughts – is one key issue that will ask our attention in the rest of this book; others are how to put good ideas into practice and how to make things happen on a local level.

The second question is how to respond.

The process is not only chaotic and dangerous but also exciting and full of positive potential, if a relevant response can be given. We have noted the view of C.A. van Peursen (1978:202–203): an action is relevant if it originates in an ethical awareness of one's responsibility and a good understanding of the existing structures.

Having focused on *understanding the existing structures*, we now focus on formulating our ethical responsibility.

Firstly, we will look for an ethical insight in the Bible and the Christian tradition in Chapter 13. We hope this will help to define a faithful and relevant contribution by Christianity in our context and will help to avoid the aforementioned problems with Christianity.

Bringing the focus closer to practical implementation, we will discuss a strategy for sustainable well-being in Chapter 14.

Finally, in Chapter 15, attention is given to a number of projects in which I was involved in some way or another, where we tried to find meaningful solutions to concrete problems with local households and communities. What can we learn from our successes and failures?

Chapter 13

Theological guidelines

The ethical insight on which we base our strategy is the biblical message of the coming of the kingdom of God, of the fullness of life, in Jesus Christ. In this kingdom, all relationships are restored. The kingdom works like salt and yeast in the world – a small but vital ingredient within a given context.

This chapter reflects on how the cross of Jesus is the beginning of a revolution and ways in which Christian faith can play a role in that revolution as history unfolds.

There is much that is wrong in the world, but there is a process of healing taking place. The kingdom is realised where relations are restored and a certain ethical quality of life is lived. This life is essentially a good life, a joyful life. Its ethics are often in conflict with current values and practices, and its lifestyle is often seen as a threat to the powers that be. Jesus did not live according to the powers that be and was crucified. However, his resurrection shows that he was in the right and the powers that destroy the world will not have the last say. His kingdom is already present in world history but not yet in its fullness.

We have seen in Chapter 5 that Christianity has often made itself irrelevant by withdrawing from the events of daily life. In this chapter, we will look at efforts to recover its role in relation to society and the ecology.

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The Name of God gives us a perspective on history

Christianity has a long history of experimenting with and reflecting on the way we understand life (world-view) and how to live life (values, wisdom) in countless contexts over two millennia, building on the Bible, which adds another two millennia of continuous reflection on experience.

The philosopher CA van Peursen (n.d.:14–31) provides a relational understanding of the Name of God. We do not 'have' God; whenever we want to claim God, he withdraws from our efforts. However, he gave his Name to us so that we can know him and address him in prayer. His Name brings us in contact with him. Through his Name, he is present with us. The Bible tells of people who became aware, in the diverse dilemmas and dead-ends in which they found themselves, of an active presence that helped them to see things in a new light; it helped them to understand their reality in a new way and to find a way out – and they recognised in this active presence the same God who had saved their forefathers before in the diverse dilemmas and dead-ends in which they found themselves at that time. Over the centuries, they became convinced that the Name of God provides the best understanding or clarification [Dutch: 'duiding'] of the meaning of reality and how to live in it. This understanding often was very different from what their neighbours thought about life.

It can happen again with us in the relational way described by Van Peursen: we also can become aware that there is more to life than what is at hand, that there is an active presence that helps us to see things in our context in a new light, namely that we have landed ourselves in global dilemmas and local dead-ends that we, like the poor, cannot solve on our own; the awareness that we can call on God to guide, inspire, strengthen and keep us – and recognise in this active presence the same God who saved others in the dilemmas and dead-ends in which they found themselves. That gives direction and meaning to what we do and helps us to persevere even against all odds. That makes us responsible to the highest Authority, who puts before us the choice between life and death, as he has done over the centuries.

NT Wright (2016:157) gives a similar interpretation of the cross of Jesus: it gives us a new perspective on history.

The talk-show host Larry King understood that the message of Jesus implies a new perspective on the world, on life, on history, as can be seen in the answer he gave to a particular question: 'If you could select any one person across all of history to interview, who would it be?' Ravi Zacharias (1998) writes:

> Mr. King's answer was that he would like to interview Jesus Christ. When the questioner followed with, 'And what would you like to ask him?' King replied,

> 'I would like to ask him if he was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me.' (n.p.)

The question is: in which way will that define history and life as a whole, given the problems we have discussed? We will come back to this question at the end of the chapter.

The nature of the Christian faith

The Christian faith itself has been expressed in many forms. Bevans and Schroeder (2009, pp. 35–37) distinguish between three types of theology that Christianity has presented over the centuries in a wide variety of contexts and cultures. Each type is related to a prominent church father in the first centuries:

- **Type A theology (Roman context):** The emphasis is on the law: we have transgressed the law of God; we are guilty and must be punished, but Jesus took our punishment on him – what is important is the saving of souls and extending the church (Tertullian was the strongest early proponent of this theology).
- **Type B theology (Greek context):** The Christian faith is not so much about guilt but about knowledge and truth: mission helps people to discover the ultimate truth in Christ (Origen was the strongest early proponent of this theology).
- **Type C theology (Hebrew or Old Testament context):** The Christian message focuses on the liberating and transforming presence of God within world history and in one's personal life. Mission is to invite people to take part in this liberating and transforming history (Irenaeus was the strongest early proponent of this theology).

Some theologians make a choice for one type, and some maintain that all these approaches are important and that none can be dismissed.

Two theologians, both with the surname Wright, namely Christopher JH Wright, an evangelical Old Testament scholar from the United States of America, and NT Wright, a New Testament scholar and bishop of the Anglican Church in Scotland, have recently, in different ways, criticised Type A theology as a fatal reduction of the Christian faith and, without totally abandoning it, took it up as only one element in their different versions of Type C theology.

Christopher JH Wright emphasises that the Bible is all about God's history with the whole of creation, from the beginning to the end. Christianity often reduces the gospel to personal salvation but:

> ... the Bible itself will correct our tendency to reduce the gospel to a solution to our individual sin problem and a swipe card for heaven's door, and replace that reductionist impression with a message that has to do with the cosmic reign of

> God in Christ that will ultimately eradicate all evil from God's universe (and solve our individual sin problem too, of course). (Wright 2010:31; also quoted in Van Niekerk 2014b)

The theology of both Wrights will be discussed in more detail. These developments indicate that a huge effort is being made to overcome the problem of Christianity that we have discussed in Chapter 5, namely the prominence of the reductionist message of Type A theology in daily church life over the last centuries, where the salvation of the individual soul for heaven has been presented as the core of the Christian faith.

Type B theology, where the question about truth is central, is often found in academic theological institutions at universities, where the question about the relation between faith and science is an issue. It is often a world apart from daily church life. Even more: Andrew Kirk (1997:7) observed a fundamental difference between theology in the Global North (Europe, the United States of America, Canada) and theology in the Global South (Latin America, Asia and Africa). In the Global North, Type B theology is central: the validity of theology depends on the answer to the question, does it comply with the requirements of science? In the Global South, Type C is central: the focus is on 'its ability to inspire people to be agents and embodiments of the life of God's new creation in Jesus Christ'. It is all about the daily life of the church members and therefore relevant to the search for the sustainable well-being of communities.

Anthony Balcomb also commented on the difference between theology in the North and in the South:

> The South [...] was simply not asking the same questions about God that the North was asking. Questions concerning the intellectual possibility, or otherwise, of God, or scientific accuracy, or otherwise, of the word of God, are not asked by the majority of people in the South. God is simply a given, and the word of God is a given. What is asked is who this God is, how this God shapes the cultures and identities of people, and how this God and Christ fit into the panoply of powers in the universe [...] Theology in such a world is light years away from theology in the disenchanted universe of the North [...] One would imagine that the march of modernity would inevitably affect the worldview of Africans and consequently change the way they do their theology. However, thus far this appears only marginally to be the case. In fact, modernity more frequently impacts the lives of Africans in a way that makes them even more vulnerable than they normally are and therefore more likely to explain their vulnerability in terms that reinforce the idea of a spiritual universe. (2010:422)

This is an important comment: if we want to help improve the quality of low-income African households, we must understand the respective roles of both traditional African religions and Christianity in everyday life. And the type of Christianity that will guide us in this book is best characterised

as Type C theology – the search for the way out of our dilemmas, that the God of the Bible provides us with.

TS Maluleke (2021:301) mentions another difference: on the whole, Northern theologies are '... too nice and too neat for the dirty, smelly, messy, chaotic contexts of Africa'. African, black and feminist theologies deal with the African context. They continue to reflect theologically on the implications and the legacies of slavery, colonialism and apartheid. These theologies walk alongside:

> ... people who live in never-ending war situations, in states that are so weak they do not deserve the name; in situations where nothing works, from the water tap to the local police station, so that the people suffer repeated and multiple losses – loss of future, loss of community, loss of humanity, and loss of God [...] With them and on their behalf, African theologies must 'wrestle with God'. (Maluleke 2021:306, 308)

In these contexts, 'there is no public/private binary to speak about' (Maluleke 2021:307).

How the Christian faith works

Can the Christian message add something meaningful to the present problematic mix of things and thoughts in Africa? What input that is true to the nature of Christianity can make a significant and positive difference?

One of the themes in this book is the insight that a small action can make a big difference in a given context (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 5). This insight resonates with two biblical images used to describe the kingdom of God, namely yeast and salt.

In Luke 13:20–21, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to yeast that is mixed into a large amount of flour until it has worked through the dough.

Elsewhere (Mt 5:13), Jesus compares the kingdom of God to salt, a small quantity of which, like yeast, must be mixed in as one of the ingredients of food in order to be able to do its invisible but important work, such as giving taste and preventing corruption.

Yeast and salt only work if they are part of a mix, one small but vital element in a combination of things. This kingdom is not a separate country somewhere; it must be mixed into the existing combination of things and thoughts that form each particular situation. If that is done in the right way, it adds a new dimension to what existed before. In order to be able to discuss what the Christian faith can add to the mix, we must understand the existing mix, the prevailing structures, which we have tried to do, and we must reflect on the nature of the Christian faith, which we are doing now.

■ The Kingdom of God, the fullness of life and an ethical quality of life

The Bible brings us the message of the kingdom of God, a message of hope, peace, life and joy amid chaos and destruction. This kingdom was announced and established by Jesus, and since then it has been spreading in the world. It is expected to reach its fulfilment and perfection in the second coming of Christ, when God will be all in all, or as the Good News Bible translates it: 'God will rule completely over all' (1 Cor 15:28).

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (also called the synoptic gospels because of the many similarities between them), the *kingdom of God* is the central message. The gospel of John does not refer to the kingdom of God but prefers to talk about *life*. According to John 10:10, Jesus said: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' He said this during a heated argument with the Pharisees and others, in which he said to them: 'You belong to your father, the devil [...] he was a murderer from the beginning [...]' (Jn 8:44). Jesus brings fullness of life amidst many destructive forces. And it does not happen in a meek and mild context but rather in a context of violence and murder.

'Abundant life', just like 'the kingdom of God' can be understood as a life in which all relations are sound, honest and just. In fact, a number of important biblical terms such as fullness of life, peace or *shalom*, justice, reconciliation, salvation and the new heaven and the new earth all describe a situation where all relations have been restored – between God and people, between people and people, as well as between people and all of creation.

This statement finds support in the description of *life* and *eternal life* in the writings of John, provided by the New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd. These two terms mean the same thing. Both life and eternal life are sometimes described as a present reality and sometimes as a future reality, including the future after death. In summary, John's view of eternal life is that God so loved the world that he sent Jesus to give life or eternal life to those who believe in him, his followers. This life or eternal life is the fullness of life that Israel at the time expected in the age to come, that Jesus brought into this present age. It is a *different quality of life* in the present, in which all relationships are being restored already now – and God, who is above death, keeps this relationship intact even in death so that it continues beyond and is fully restored after death. Being *eternal* is one characteristic of this new quality of life because it is a life in relationship with God, who is eternal. Those who follow Jesus must by necessity live this new quality of life and impart this life to each other and within their own context. Life or eternal life is essentially the same as the kingdom of God that is announced

in the synoptic gospels, the future that invades the present age and begins to play a transforming role in this age (Ladd 1975:257–281)[55].

Eternal life is, in other words, an ethical quality of life, a life of restored relationships imparted by Jesus to his followers, that does not end even when we die – because God maintains his relationship with us.

This theme, the theme of life in its fullness, of 'life-affirming' and 'life- giving' practices and ministries, has been a central theme in the circles of the World Council of Churches during the past number of years. The World Council of Churches document *Together towards life: Mission and evangelism in changing landscapes,* for example, states:

> Health is more than physical and/or mental well-being, and healing is not primarily medical. This understanding of health coheres with the biblical-theological tradition of the church, which sees a human being as a multidimensional unity, and the body, soul and mind as interrelated and interdependent. It thus affirms the social, political and ecological dimensions of personhood and wholeness. Health, in the sense of wholeness, is a condition related to God's promise for the end of time, as well as a real possibility in the present. Wholeness is not a static balance of harmony but rather involves living-in-community with God, people and creation. Individualism and injustice are barriers to community building, and therefore to wholeness. (Keum 2013:62) [56]

Miroslav Volf described it as *flourishing*, which refers to 'the good life' or 'the life worth living'. 'It stands for the life that is lived well, the life that goes well and the life that feels good' (cited in Strydom 2018:7).

However, the fullness of life is something more than a good quality of life as generally understood. The theologian Christopher Wright (2010:93–94) adds the ethical aspect, specifically the Christian ethical aspect. He talks of *an ethical quality of life*. This addition changes the meaning of the term. Quality of life is not measured only in terms of human needs anymore, even if these needs remain very important. Quality of life is now measured in terms of certain values that cannot be derived only from what we need or want but from what is expected from us – most of all, from what God expects from us.

That was the way in which God intended to reach the nations in the Old Testament, namely for Israel to be a community where all affairs are marked by righteousness and justice in a world of oppression and injustice – and so attract the nations to God. This now applies to the church as the people of God. Wright emphasises:

> … *the ethical quality of life of the people of God is the vital link between their calling and their mission*. God's intention to bless the nations is inseparable from

55. See also Van Niekerk 2014c

56. See also Van Niekerk 2014c

> God's ethical demand on the people he has created to be the agent of that blessing. *There is no biblical mission without biblical ethics*. (2010:94)

The way Christians live now is central to their calling in the world. An ethical quality of life can demand sacrifices that can harm your quality of life. Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years because he fought for a free and just society. He sacrificed his quality of life for a higher ideal. Eventually, it turned out to be not only an ethical quality of life, but a very meaningful life, a good life, a life worth living, a beautiful life, but not an easy-going life centred around your own needs. It was also not a life without any blemish.

This emphasis on the ethical aspect of the wholeness of life is also found in recent World Council of Churches documents, for example, in *The church – towards a common vision*:

> The ethics of Christians as disciples are rooted in God, the creator and revealer, and take shape as the community seeks to understand God's will within the various circumstances of time and place. The Church does not stand in isolation from the moral struggles of humankind as a whole. Together with the adherents of other religions as well as with all persons of goodwill, Christians must promote not only those individual moral values which are essential to the authentic realization of the human person but also the social values of justice, peace and the protection of the environment, since the message of the gospel extends to both the personal and the communal aspects of human existence. (World Council of Churches 2013:40)

This restored life, the life of the kingdom, is only possible if the destruction brought about by sin is healed.

A functional concept of sin

The Bible and the Christian tradition use the word 'sin' to refer to what is wrong with the world.

In the Afrikaans culture in which I have grown up, the concept *sin* has lost most of its gravity and is often understood in a superficial, moralistic way. A popular joke is about a mother who asks her child who comes home after attending church what the reverend preached about. The child obviously has no idea and answers: 'About sin.' The mother tries again: 'And what did he say about sin?' The child replies: 'I think he is against it.'

In Sunday services, every week, our congregation dutifully confesses our sins. I always wonder what the church members think about when we solemnly confess our guilt. Do we have more clarity on what sin is than the child who came home from church?

Sin is seen as outmoded, as irrelevant and moralistic. But if it is seen in functional terms as the inadequate ways we manage all the relations we are involved in, also in the community and with the ecology, as the undermining

of the relationships that are vital for life, it recovers its original gravity. Paul talks of the 'law of sin and death'. How does that work?

There is a difference between a moralistic view of sin and a functional or relational view. A moralistic view says that something is wrong because it is wrong. NT Wright (2016) argues that the biblical message of sin is not moralistic. The Bible teaches that sin leads to death. Sin is wrong because it destroys good relations and life itself. He does not pose an arbitrary connection between sin and death but an intrinsic one:

> ... like the distinction between the ticket that you will get if you are caught driving too fast and the crash that will happen if you drive too fast around a sharp bend on a wet road. The ticket is arbitrary, an imposition with no organic link to the offense. The crash is intrinsic, the direct consequence of the behaviour. In the same way, death is the *intrinsic result* of sin, not simply an arbitrary punishment. (2016: 86)

Berkhof (1973) argued in a similar vein:

> The Christian doctrine of sin is extremely hard and radical, but nothing contributes more to the humanisation of man than to appeal strongly to his responsibility towards God and his neighbour. (p. 222; author's translation)

Over the last century, a broad consensus has developed in Western theology and philosophy that human personhood is fundamentally constituted by its relationships (Jenson 2006:1–2). It is a functional view of personhood.

Sin should also be understood in terms of relationships rather than in moralistic terms. The story that the Bible tells us about sin in Genesis 2 and 3, how it originated and what the results were, centres around the break-up of the relations that together shape our lives. God put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it. God called them when they hid from him: 'Where are you?' (Gn 3:8, 9). And God asked their son Cain after Cain had murdered his brother Abel: 'Where is your brother Abel?' (Gn 4:8).

The two questions, 'Where are you?' (Gn 3:9) and 'Where is your brother?' (Gn 4:8), are related to each other. Once the relationship with God breaks down, the relationships between people also break down.

And to both Adam and Cain, God said that their relationship with the earth was compromised. To Adam, he said (Gn 3):

> Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you would eat of it all the days of your life.
> It will produce thorns and thistles for you
> and you will eat the plants of the field. (vv. 17, 18)

To Cain, he said (Gn 4):

> Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground [...] When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its fruits for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth. (vv. 11, 12)

The result of Adam's breaking his relationship with God was that all relations broke down, first with God and then, as a result, with our fellow human beings and with the earth, with creation.

In our work with communities, we find that the concept 'relationships' is useful for social analysis, e.g. its strong connection with happiness (Chapter 10). It also provides a useful bridge between social analysis and theological reflection.

Corbett and Fikkert quote Bryant Myers' definition of poverty:

> Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings. (2012:59)

And Matt Jenson (2006) provides an understanding of sin in relational terms, by a study of the image of being 'curved in on oneself', a well-established description of sin.

Jenson argues that sin is not merely a moral issue, something irrelevant that the preacher is against, but an issue of life and death, of promoting or undermining life in its wider meaning. His book is titled *The gravity of sin*. The value of a functional or relational concept of sin can be seen in the way we understand greed:

> … one cannot speak of greed without attending to a network of relations of power and possession in which the very category of 'greed' finds it meaning. And yet, defining greed as 'wanting more for me' would seem to serve as a suitable definition for many. Such a definition is woefully inadequate for Christian theology, abstracting as it does from the far more important questions of those from whom we want more in our greed. (2006:3)

For example, Mpumelelo Mkhabela, a political analyst with the Department of Political Sciences at the University of South Africa, referred to Mbeki's speech of 2010 in which he warned against the 'demons' that urge us to get rich (see Chapter 10). He referred to two banks, the African Bank and the Venḓa Building Society (VBS) that had collapsed after the top management had stolen large amounts of money from them, and the poorest of the poor who had saved their money in these banks had been waiting in long lines in an effort to get something back – an illustration of the gravity of the sin of greed:

> It is depressing to see desperate VBS depositors braving the cold winter nights on the pavements of the bank's offices in the hope that they will secure their deposits from the collapsed bank.
>
> It is nauseating when one juxtaposes the images of the poor depositors with the opulence of the former directors of the bank and their associates. Their love for finer things has been described in news reports and displayed on social networks.

> What are we to make of this scandal? Is this a case of ‘F*#% the poor!’, as one intoxicated director of African Bank Thami Sokutu once remarked while his bank was collapsing under the weight of governance failures and reckless lending to the poor?
>
> In the case of VBS it seems to be a case of ‘F*#% the poor’ multiplied. That is, if you consider the fact that more than R1.5bn of taxpayers’ money from 14 municipalities who struggle to deliver services to the poor was deposited with VBS ....
>
> The poor residents of those municipalities will be told that they are not getting services because of apartheid. They won’t be told that there is a new apartheid in town, a black on black one whose main aim is to frustrate efforts to undo the terrible legacy of old apartheid. The slogan of the new order is: ‘F*#% the poor!’ (Mkhabela 2018:n.p.)

Such greed *should* make one angry. But greed is often expressed in rather soft and seemingly acceptable ways, because the impact is less visible than in the case of the VBS depositors on the sidewalks of the bank on a winter night. In a time of drought, for example, church members who refuse to take note of what is going on and continue to water their gardens until the water runs down the street should realise that the way they (do not) relate to the drought has an impact on the ecology and on others who are more vulnerable and who depend on that water. The same goes for the footprints of all the things that we use: the Christian community could become a community that does not go through the world oblivious of what is going on, but one where all relationships become important for our faith, where there is a reflection on and a search to transform destructive impacts into healthy relations, even if they are far away and out of our sight.

This view of sin could be very helpful for a congregation that dutifully confesses their sin week by week, without any indication that they relate this confession to their lifestyle. It could help us to analyse our lifestyle within our particular context.[57]

The church father St Augustine described the City of God and the city of humanity in relational terms: ‘... the earthly city glories in itself, the Heavenly City glories in the Lord. The former looks for glory from men, the latter finds its highest glory in God’. The characters of the two cities are different: ‘Is it a harmonious, peaceful, worshipful society of persons united in relationship to God and one another, or is it a society of discord, war, private affections and broken relations?’ The reason for the exaltation of the self is pride. It is pride that makes us turn from God to ourselves. Augustine speaks of the ‘self-worship of pride’ (Jenson 2006:6, 7, 9, 27).

57. The discussion of St Augustine and Barth that follows here is partly based on my article ‘A centre for community life in its fullness’ (Van Niekerk 2015a)

This description of the two contrasting cities may sound utopian, but the seasoned journalist Henry Jeffreys (2014) once compared the styles of former president Nelson Mandela and the (then) president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, in similar terms. He argued that Mandela's philosophy of life was simple: integrity, tolerance, decency, caring for your fellow humans, especially the most vulnerable ones, and reconciliation, even with your greatest enemy. But under Zuma, there was an abundance of self-interest, obsession with power, greed and a hunger for corruption.[58] This spirit is very destructive and its consequences have been vividly described by Mpumelelo Mkhabela earlier.

Karl Barth also used the concept *incurvatus in se* to describe the core meaning of sin, but he broadened the metaphor. His anthropology is thoroughly relational: 'This is a relational ontology which defines humanity primarily in terms of its relationships rather than appealing to substance, qualities, capacities or states'. We exist, first of all, in relation to Jesus Christ (Jenson 2006:134)

Barth recognised three primary forms of sin: pride, falsehood and sloth. All three '... are characterised first and foremost by broken relationships in which people live for themselves rather than for God and others'. They are concretions of our counter-movement, our rejection of the incarnation, which is God's movement to us (Jenson 2006:131, 156).

Like Augustine, Barth describes sin as *pride*. It can be seen in humanity's self-deification (the incident of the golden calf of Ex 32), his self-exaltation (the kingship of Saul), his desire to judge himself rather than to be judged by God, his desire to take care of himself rather than be cared for by God.

Sin as *falsehood* is our counter-movement against Christ's prophetic office. We do not accept the truth of Christ but want to present our own truth. And it often ignores context and relationships. The friends of Job did not say anything wrong: they presented good general doctrine, but out of context. They were false because they wanted to speak for God, on behalf of God, and they spoke in 'unhistorical' terms. While Job was in a despairing struggle for the knowledge of God, they presented timeless truths (Jenson 2006:165). On another occasion, Barth said that a theologian's position is not to be a 'lonely bird on the rooftop' who surveys

58. *Om in Madiba se spore te trap: Mandela se lewensfilosofie was nie geniaal nie. Dit was eintlik baie eenvoudig. Dit het op bepaalde fondamente gerus: Integriteit, verdraagsaamheid, ordentlikheid, omgee vir jou medemens (veral die mees kwesbares), en versoening (selfs met jou grootste vyand).*
Hoe moeilik is dít om na te volg? Wel, as ons dinge soos eiebelang, magsbeheptheid, gierigheid en 'n aptyt vir korrupte optrede ook in jou arsenaal is, is dit seker baie moeilik. En dít is waar ons grootste probleem lê met die navolging en uitleef van Mandela se erflating: Ons arsenaal is oorvloedig aan dié soort euwels. (Beeld 12.12.2014)

its world and its agony from some detached position – the theologian must be someone who is involved with people in their daily affairs (see Chapter 13). This resonates with the images of salt and yeast that we have seen earlier in this chapter.

Sin as *sloth* is our counter-movement to God's gift in Jesus Christ to elevate humanity. Sloth shows how 'trivial and mediocre' sin can be: '... a lazy-bones, a sluggard, a good-for-nothing, a slow coach and a loafer ...' (Jenson 2006:173). We refuse to live for God and others. The slothful man turns his back on God, rolling himself into a ball like a hedgehog with prickly spikes. He does not respond to a crisis going on outside his house because he wants to be left alone.

Some examples of sloth as the refusal to live for God and others are the philanthropist who commits himself to an abstract cause and so escapes from being with his neighbour; the downtrodden man who escapes conflict and allows his boss to abuse him in the name of service; the mother who serves her family in a way that denies mutuality and their responsibility – she serves them, and she becomes something of a martyr while they do nothing. A life of dissipation is also sloth. David did not go to war, as all the kings did – he stayed home and destroyed the life and family of Bathsheba. The vagabond wants simply to live according to his own rules, in a life of self-forgiveness rather than real conversion (Jenson 2006:174–176).

The functional or relational concept of sin helps us to understand the way that sin undermines a sustainable and healthy community.

The involvement of the early church in the community provides a good example of the relevance of the functional concept of sin. One of the most vital issues in early Christianity was the concern for the poor, together with the strong criticism of those who were rich but did not care for or relate to the poor. Prominent church leaders such as Clement, Basil, Chrysostom and Augustine engaged in tireless efforts for the poor, in search of a community where no one has too much or too little. Property was seen as a means toward self-sufficiency, but to hold possessions as a goal in itself was seen as an act of foolishness because it would degenerate into a lifestyle of luxury that would be lived at the expense of the poor and would render the possessor worse off (Smith 2011:35, 147).

The best virtues were seen as those that benefited not just the person practising them but also other people – a guideline based on the importance of relationships. Chrysostom even went so far as to shock the virgins of his community by telling them that it would be better for them to desire a man than not to give alms (Smith 2011:59).

Chrysostom's view on sin had the love of money at its apex. Unlike the sins of drunkenness, fornication or theft, the accumulation of possessions was a sin that took a long time to come to fruition (Smith 2011):

> Chrysostom was well aware of the time and energy that becoming or staying wealthy required – nobody could claim that their corrupt business practices had been an accident on one drunken night. Also, attachment to wealth worked against the highest virtue, almsgiving, while illicit sex only violated the lesser virtue of celibacy [...] Chrysostom judged style and fashion according to a principle of functionality. Jewellery and other flamboyant accessories were condemned because they fell in the category of the superfluous and the money could have been given to the poor. (p. 59)

This order has been reversed in many modern churches. Materialism is no problem, and concern for the poor is often absent, but sexual matters such as homosexuality lead to bitter conflicts.

To conclude, our understanding of human identity defines personhood primarily in terms of its relationships rather than appealing to 'substance, qualities, capacities or states' (Jenson 2006:134). And as we shall see, both money and sex can become powers that destroy relationships and life itself.

This view of the human identity provides us with a framework, a language, in which communication between diverse fields of meaning becomes possible: happiness studies have found that it is good relations that make us happy; theology understands sin in terms of deficient relations and the kingdom of God as the restoration of all relationships; poverty can be defined as the result of relations that do not work; sustainability depends on healthy relationships.

This ethical insight is relevant to our strategy: it is not our achievements that make us human, as many people in our competitive society seem to think, and happiness does not depend on how much we buy, consume and use up, as our consumer culture wants us to believe. This last issue is especially important for building a sustainable community. If *consumption* as such – always more and better clothes, houses, holidays, etc. – is the goal we strive for, we will increasingly use up more resources than the finite planet has available. The search for the sustainable wellbeing of a community must begin with the individual, with each of us, who examines his or her consumption patterns, and how they prevent us from engaging with those in need, and how they bring us into a relationship with a vast network of workers and natural resources that produce and provide the things we consume. To refrain from such an engagement can be seen as a sin that must be replaced by constructive involvement and working for wholesome relationships and networks.

The cultural construction of guilt

Sin and guilt are usually associated with each other. It is uncomfortable to be confronted by our guilt, so we make all sorts of plans to deal with it.

An emphasis on guilt often meets with resistance in both the Western world and in Africa, but both cultural worlds still struggle to find an adequate solution to it.

Many psychologists and theologians in the West warn against a spirituality built around guilt, where preachers convince people about their guilt, creating fear of punishment, just to announce that the problem is solved and their sins are forgiven. It can obviously become a way to get power over people.

A typical example of a pragmatic and sensible view of guilt can be found in the popular journal *Psychology Today*. A psychologist, Leon F Seltzer (2015), writes:

> As a psychological phenomenon, guilt can be frustratingly thorny. For if you're afflicted with a tyrannical superego – one that feels compelled to come after you for the slightest perceived infraction – you'll be haunted by such feelings even when you haven't done anything that would generally be regarded as culpable [...] Writers on this subject have talked about the importance of distinguishing between rational, or 'productive', guilt and a guilt that's inordinately self-critical – and largely gratuitous. Such *unjustified* guilt has been linked to needless emotional suffering and self-loathing [...] such feelings don't really serve anyone, least of all you. (n.p.)

In an article, *The Decline of Guilt*, Herbert Morris (1988) describes the way in which a sense of personal guilt has declined in the West. He refers to 'the slow transformation of law into administration' (Morris 1988:73) – the way society is administered is seen as the problem rather than the decision and action of the person itself.

However, while the sense of *personal* guilt is declining in contemporary Western culture, a sense of *collective* guilt has been growing. In 1977, the Dutch scholar JH van den Berg published his book *Gedane Zaken* [a saying that means that once certain things have been done, they cannot be made undone] in which he described how the loss of self-confidence and power and the growth of a sense of corporate guilt had started to develop in the West over a long period (1977:178, 186).

Martin Bosma (2015:454), a Dutch politician, used the concept of *unjustified guilt* to describe developments in the Western world since the 1960s. Bosma argues that, in the 1960s, the dominant mood in the West shifted

from pride in what the West had achieved, to a deep sense of guilt, based on the feeling that all that the West has, all its possessions, are the fruits of colonialism, slavery and the exploitation of the developing world.

Both writers refer to the *negative results* of what they regard as the pervasive feelings of corporate guilt in the West.

Several African theologians and writers have also objected against the strong emphasis on guilt in Western theology.

Simon Maimela, a Lutheran theologian and professor in dogmatics at the University of South Africa at the time, blamed a negative view of human nature for a great deal of the racial tensions in South Africa. Maimela said that white theologians come from a tradition where human beings are seen as full of hate, each person being a wolf for his or her neighbour. The result of this tradition, says Maimela, was that white people feared black people. They assumed black people would hate them, be a danger to them and maybe even kill them. This fear led to white people oppressing black people and keeping themselves apart from them. Maimela says that this tradition comes not only from Western culture (he refers to the philosopher Hobbes) but even from the Bible. White people:

> … fell back upon the tradition they knew – that of Paul, Augustine, Luther and Calvin. Unfortunately, this tradition had the effect of distorting rather than clarifying white perceptions of what is truly human […] [*It is*] notoriously pessimistic. It believes that through the Fall 'man' is a totally deprived being. (Maimela 1981:71)

Maimela argues that a positive view of human nature would lead to a positive approach to each other and cooperation, peace and reconciliation (Maimela 1981:67–69, 71).

Another theologian, Gabriël Setiloane (1986:46), rejects 'a religion that sees elements in nature and creation and even in mankind as "debased," "profane" and "fallen"'.

Es'kia Mphahlele, a well-known writer and not a theologian, is quoted in the *Lebowa Times* of 9 March 1990: 'The myth that we are born sinners was going to haunt us forever, and forever we were going to depend on the European's God and Christ for our salvation'.

Not all agree with the idea of human goodness. The renowned African writer Wole Soyinka (in Duerden & Pieterse 1972) rejects the idea that African people possess, in contrast to other peoples in the world, profound generosity in very large measures:

> I think that one of the most humbling discoveries any African can make is just the fact that he can actually interpret the greed and, you know, the general evil of what you call the European world in the faces of his own personal and intimate companions […] and it's a terrible knowledge – that given the chance and the circumstance your best friends are capable of … (p. 174)

He does not complete his sentence.

The Christian message is that our guilt, our broken relations, do not have the last word. We believe that God does not let us fall out of our relationship with him and that he is reconciling all things in heaven and on earth to himself through Christ. That gives us hope. (Col 1:20; Jenson 2006:191). Love is a more meaningful, a more constructive and more lasting motive for what we do than guilt.

Christian faith and the secular world

One of the perspectives on the world that the Christian message gives us is to realise the central importance of the secular world in Christian life. The life and death of Jesus is an event in world history and in the secular world.

Newbigin (1961) refers to:

> … the whole idea of a secular, religiously neutral order of being. This idea is itself a product of the New Testament. It could not have arisen, for instance, within the world of Indian religious thought. In that world, visible and tangible things are understood as the veil which covers the inner reality, the veil which the enlightened learns to see through […] The idea of a secular order, of an order of reality, of a system of thought and practice which lies, so to say, outside of the direct responsibility of religion, but in which the will of God is to be done, is a Christian idea. This in turn rests upon the biblical doctrine of creation which sees the sensible world as an order of being which is real, and yet has provisional independence over against the God who created it […] The ultimate foundation of it [*the idea of the secular order*] is to be found in the New Testament proclamation that a new saeculum […] a new age, a new world has dawned in Jesus Christ […] the scene within which the powers of the new age may work. (pp. 21, 22)

The 'new age' that Newbigin spoke about is completely different from the New Age Movement of the 1970s and 1980s. The New Age Movement was esoteric, searching for the acquisition of the mystical, while Newbigin spoke of a new order of the secular world, an order of justice and peace and common sense, through the concrete life and work of Jesus.

Newbigin (1969) regards the gospel in its original form as an announcement about human history as a whole and not as a religious message. He argues that it is inherent in the nature of the gospel to be concerned about the secular issues of the world:

> The gospel in its original form is the announcement of an event which is decisive for all men [*sic*] and the whole of their life. It is an event that is described in universal, cosmic terms. The announcement implies that in this event all God's purpose for the world is brought to its fulfillment. We are not dealing here with a religious message which brings to completion and perfection the religious teaching of all the ages; we are dealing with an announcement that concerns the end of the world […] It is neither simply the announcement of a new religious doctrine, nor the launching of a new secular programme […] It is the

> announcement of the decisive encounter of God with men – not just with men as individual 'souls' detachable from their place in human history, but with mankind as a whole, with human history as a whole, indeed with the whole creation. It concerns the consummation of all things. (pp. 48–49)

NT Wright (2016:181) agrees that Jesus was not offering a new theory for people to get their heads around, but he announced, lived and died a decisive event in Israel's history and in God's purpose for the world through Israel. He announced a revolution: the coming of God's kingdom and freedom through non-violence, through suffering. 'Where people have tried to turn Jesus's one-off kingdom movement into a "religion" […] it has almost nothing to do with a one-off new Passover, a unique Exodus moment' (Wright 2016:181).

Theologians such as Bonhoeffer and Barth tried to interpret the Christian faith within the modern context without compromising the faith, *inter alia*, by interpreting the biblical revelation in a non-religious way. That refers to being fully involved in the matters of everyday life in a way and style that are shaped by the values of the Kingdom of God. NT Wright, writing from a highly secularised Europe, does just that when he interprets the powers that were overcome by Jesus as *secular powers,* such as money, violence and sex, powers that have a huge destructive impact on our world.

Christopher Wright emphasises the all-encompassing nature of God's mission and of the mission of God's people. The whole Bible is the basic document on which mission is based:

> … all the great sections of the canon of scripture, all the great episodes of the Bible story, all the great doctrines of the biblical faith, cohere around the Bible's central character – the living God and his grand plan and purpose for the whole of creation. The mission of God is what unifies the Bible from creation to new creation […] God's mission is for the sake of the whole world – indeed his whole creation. (Wright 2010:17, 26)[59]

Seeing the secular order in this light provides a broader context for the calling of Christianity than merely the planting of the church: the planting of churches and the conversion of people are only part of the bigger message of Christ's kingship over the whole of life. The appeal of Christ addresses people in their total context, including in their secular context.

Barth likewise regarded both the Christian community (that is, the church that forms a community of people by reason of their knowledge of and belief in Jesus Christ) and the civil community (the commonality of people in a certain place) as part of the kingdom of God, even if those in the civil community do not believe in that kingdom. The people in the civil community have shared interests but no shared creed or conviction.

59. See also Van Niekerk 2014b

The members of the church are also members of the civil community. The church forms the inner circle, with Christ in the centre and the civil community in the outer circle around the church (Barth 1960:150, 156).

Barth's positive view of the civil community is in line with Newbigin's view of the secular order. The conviction that secular life is *important* makes the Christian more radical in her or his expectations of the state and other entities and more consistent because his or her motivation comes from a source that is not shaken by daily events (Herberg 1960:64).

On the other hand, the church's *final loyalty* is to the city built by God (Heb 11:10); consequently, no present ideology or civil community can be given absolute loyalty. This protects the Christian against fanaticism in politics. The Christian community joins the civil community in a pragmatic but dedicated search for the best form and most fitting system for each context (Barth 1960:160–161).

Barth points out that:

> The object of the promise and the hope in which the Christian community has its eternal goal consists [...] not in an eternal Church, but in the *polis* built by God and coming down from heaven to earth, and the nations shall walk in the light of it. (1960:154)

The involvement and activities of the church in the matters of the community include the search for ways that will help us to move in the direction of the new heaven and earth that Christianity expects, where justice will reign.

We cannot build the New Jerusalem; it is built by God and comes down from heaven to earth – but the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it (Rv 21:24). This city will not endure on the ruins of the annihilated glory of the peoples and kings of this earth, but the whole of their earthly glory will be brought into it, as a supplementary tribute (Barth 1960:124).

Christopher Wright (2010) says the same:

> The 'splendor', 'glory' and 'honor' of kings and nations are the combined product of generations of human beings whose lives and efforts will have generated the vast store of human cultures and civilisations. In other words, what will be brought into the great city of God in the new creation will be the vast accumulated output of human work through the ages. All this will be purged, redeemed and laid at the feet of Christ, for the enhancement of the life of eternity in the new creation. Does that not transform our perspective on Monday morning? (pp. 227–228)

The calling of the Christian is based on the calling of all people to take responsibility for all living creatures and the world as a whole. The biblical message is that humans were made in the image of God (Gn 1:27), and they were given the task of ruling over creation and care for it, following God's way of ruling: with justice, kindness and wisdom. It is a calling focused on

the natural or secular world. Science and technology can be a way of obeying this call.

Liberation theology, which originated in Latin America in the 1970s, states that at least since the time of Constantine, knowledge was seen as the mind's conformity to a given object, something that is fixed and can be obtained by studying the already acquired knowledge. Liberation theologians saw knowledge as dialectic: the mind's immersion in the process of transforming and constructing a world that is still an unfinished project. In this approach, the theologian can no longer, as Barth said in 1933, be a 'lonely bird on the rooftop' who surveys its world and its agony from some detached position – the theologian must be involved *with* people in their daily affairs. At the same time, the main source of theology, apart from scripture and tradition, was not philosophy anymore but the social sciences, and its main interlocutor not the educated non-believer, but the poor and the culturally marginalised (Bosch 1994:423–424).

Liberation theologians started to make use of the social sciences, but working with them alone can lead to an approach that is basically anthropocentric or human-centred. If we deem *all of creation* to be important in the kingdom of God, even as the measure of all things, Christian theology must find a way to engage with this totality. This requires theology to work with all the sciences that can have a contribution to make, including philosophy and the social sciences, and disciplines such as ecological sciences, agriculture, botany, engineering, architecture, landscape architecture, health sciences – and its main interlocutor are all members of a particular community and all those in its external networks – a theology in which all relations are important.

It is not so much dialogue in search of truth but the dialogue of life, and practical research and experimentation in search for ways to promote the common good and ways to be a coworker of God in his creation.

The common good

In a given community, people of all backgrounds and religions have certain common concerns, and in crucial respects, we share a common destiny. We are all affected by issues such as crime, pollution, climate change, war, pandemics, service delivery, driving behaviour, noise, etc. We depend on each other to deal effectively with these issues. That is what we have in common and not our deepest convictions or values.

In communities and workplaces where people of different backgrounds are present, co-existence requires some level of interaction between individuals from different groups. Bevans and Schroeder (2009:353, 383) give useful guidelines for Christians' conduct in such contexts: 'First of all, and perhaps

most basic, witness is about individuals of faith living their lives in the light of that faith'. And where that includes being involved in your local community and meeting people of other faiths in the process, one could think of the 'dialogue of life' as a fundamental kind of dialogue.

Common solutions must be discovered and developed pragmatically in a given context, case by case, where we work together to solve a given common problem or learn to live with it. In such a context, the Christian believer can find a meaningful role as a member of society with the other community members.

In the missionary era, the church did pure church work: it sent missionaries to preach the gospel, win souls and plant churches. The emphasis was mostly on a Type A theology: believe so that your soul will be saved for heaven. In the present *missional* era, the approach is that the local church itself is sent, not primarily to go somewhere else, but to its own community, its own context and networks to work for the reconciliation and reparation of all relationships in and around the local context. It is Type C theology where the message of the kingdom of Christ must, like salt and yeast, become an active ingredient in the specific combination of things and thoughts that make each context what it is.

The Christians cannot work for the renewal of all relations on their own; it is not pure church work in the same way in which the preaching of the gospel is pure church work. When working for the renewal of all relations, the Christian must work with nonchurch and non-Christian people and institutions to engage with the fundamental issues of a given context. We will need insights, resources and skills that are not available in the church. We often have to work with people who have different values and aims.

We must learn to do so in a way that is effective and true to our own identity and calling as a church. Working with people of other orientations makes things more complicated, but on the other hand, it gives us an opportunity to bridge the gap between faith and life. It enables us to meet people who do not know or understand Christianity or the message of the church and provide them with the opportunity to gain such understanding within a relationship of trust, by demonstrating our ethical quality of life – in which we often fail, as Israel did and Christianity has done repeatedly.

An interesting feature of our present context is that it is not only Christianity that is changing its understanding of the way it should function in the broader social context. The same is happening in many businesses and industries.

To give one example of an approach where Christianity may find significant common ground with a large business: around 2013, the South African insurance giant Santam Group, with partners such as the World Wildlife

Fund, proposed a way to deal with the unprecedented and dramatic increases in global environmental risk ‘caused by the interaction of a number of systemic factors, including climate change which was identified as the top risk by likelihood and impact combined’ (Santam n.d.:5).[60]

The Eden (now called the Garden Route) District Municipality in the Southern Cape was taken as a case study. It was found that the number of extreme events such as wildfires and flooding had increased in recent years, possibly caused by higher winter and spring temperatures in this area. This led to huge costs for residents and the insurance industry. The second major finding was that local human-induced changes, such as the density of invasive alien trees and ‘changes to land cover and the buffering capacity of ecosystems were of equal or greater importance in driving increasing risks, when compared to climate change’ (Santam n.d.:5).

The *assessment of future risk* has been the industry’s main way of managing risk, but that becomes more and more impossible to do because of the instability of the global system, including the impact of climate change. The study concludes that the insurance industry should complement its assessment of future risk with effective *proactive risk management*, targeted at the drivers of risk. In order to do proactive risk management effectively, the industry would have to convince the authorities, businesses and civil society to acknowledge the existence of a shared risk and to move towards a shared response or towards creating ‘shared value’ (Santam n.d.:12). Reducing risk would benefit all parties involved, be it clients, communities, the insurance industry or governments.

This policy document has not been implemented so far, but in June 2017, bushfires destroyed huge areas of land and large parts of the scenic town of Knysna, one of the towns in the municipal area that the Santam document dealt with; 600 families lost their homes, seven people were killed. Some 28 fires were reported in the area on 8 June alone. One resident remarked that it was like a war zone: ‘There was no life left here. Just death. No butterflies, no birds, no nothing.’ The fire took many people’s livelihoods away – people who were once employed by the big hotels in the area that had burnt down. Such events have become more frequent in this part of the world.[61]

It would be instructive to make a calculation of what the implementation of the Santam policy would have cost and what all stakeholders could have saved if the fires in this area could have been prevented.

60. Also discussed in Van Niekerk 2014b

61. See https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/knysna-fires-there-was-no-life-left-here-just-death- no-butterflies-no-birds-no-nothing-20180607

The concept of 'shared value' that was used in the Santam report is close to the concept of 'common good'.

In the encyclical letter *Caritas in veritate* (2009), Pope Benedict XVI wrote about the *common good*:

> To love someone is to desire that person's good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of 'all of us', made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society [...] The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practice this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the polis. This is the institutional path – we might also call it the political path – of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly. (n.p.)

Taking part in partnerships with a business such as Santam, if they should implement the guidelines in their document, to promote the common good or shared value can be a way in which the church can execute its missional calling. And it will make our involvement much more effective than trying to achieve something on our own, with our limited capacity.

Such initiatives may provide churches with opportunities to take part in the transformation of society, to fill the void in values that Mbeki saw in decultured South African society, to ensure that the Christian faith is more than going to church on Sunday, and to break out of our privatised way of being church, in which the church makes peace with its irrelevance with regard to the pressing questions of people's lives[62]. To apply Christian principles in ordinary life can be complicated, as we will see in the next section.

The reconciliation of individuals and the reconciliation of structures

After South Africa's first national democratic election, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was appointed under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu to give perpetrators on all sides of the struggle for and against apartheid the opportunity to meet the victims of their deeds and confess their crimes, to be forgiven and, ideally, to be reconciled with their victims. It was also hoped that the victims would get closure for their grief if they could hear what had happened with their loved ones from those who were directly responsible for it. It was a huge undertaking. The Commission received 20,000 statements from victims, 2 000 of these in

62. See also Van Niekerk 2014b:5–6

public hearings and nearly 8 000 applications for amnesty from perpetrators (Krog 2002:vii). The Christian practice of confessing sin that leads to forgiveness of sin was here applied in a context where some of the role players were not Christians. It was, in a way, a Christian practice without Christ.

In spite of the statements in the report that there can be 'no reconciliation without liberation or justice', reparation for the trauma of the victims has – by its own admission – been the TRC's biggest failure'. Charity Kondile, whose son Sizwe was shot and his body burnt by apartheid troops, declared:

> It is easy for Mandela and Tutu to forgive … they lead vindicated lives. In my life nothing, not a single thing, has changed since my son was burnt by barbarians … nothing. Therefore, I cannot forgive. (Krog 2002:109)

Piet Meiring, a theologian who was a member of the TRC, described reconciliation in the words of the Afrikaans writer Elsa Joubert as *the journey from one human being to another, via the heart* ('*die trek van mens na mens, via die hart*'; Meiring 1999:389). A common practice in some circles was to take people for a period out of their daily context to 'safe spaces' where they could listen to each other's stories and open up their hearts for each other. Reconciliation, in this view, takes place when these individuals discover each other as human beings during such encounters, and it is sometimes celebrated with various symbols and rituals such as hugging each other and, in the case of Christians, celebrating Holy Communion.

The focus on individuals that are taken out of their context in order to meet each other and so become reconciled, from heart to heart, reminds us of Newbigin's criticism of a type of conversion that is separated from the social context in which it takes place (see under 'A spiritual basis, an inner change of heart?').

Separating one's relationships from one's possessions is alien to African tradition. In several of the languages in South Africa, there is a proverb that says that the children of the household divide the head of a grasshopper – they share even the little that they have. Vilakazi (1962) says of the Zulu tradition:

> Property is always viewed from the sociological angle, for it is considered right and proper that besides providing provender for the inmates of the house, it must always be used for the entertainment of visitors and the feeding of strangers […] These things give as much prestige to the Zulu as a favourable bank balance does to a European […] There are not many things that can be treated on a purely personal basis […]. (pp. 113, 114)

An Oromo proverb from Tanzania gives a similar message: 'The food of a good person is shared with others' (Healey & Sybertz 2000:192).

If this idea of sharing intensifies, it becomes a cause of poverty because it inhibits individual initiative; Mbigi (1995:58) talks of the 'dark side of Ubuntu': the solidarity principle of Ubuntu allows, in its extreme form, no room for the individual to the extent that the group can mete out 'harsh primitive measures to dissenting individuals [...] even "Dunlop treatment" or "necklacing", burning of houses and assassination'.

Even in less extreme forms, the concept of sharing can still be difficult to implement. During the tensions in the 1980s at the Theological School where I was teaching, the management of the school, the staff and the students once went to a camping terrain – a place of safety, away from our daily contexts – to sort out conflicts. It was during the struggle against apartheid and radical students rejected the authority of the management and staff. There were long discussions and, eventually, the students indicated that they were satisfied and that we could go back to our work. The next day a student asked me if he could borrow my car for the weekend to visit his parents deep in the rural area. Knowing the road and having previous experience with such requests, I did not see my way clear to do so: I could not afford to buy another car.

In other words, I could not comply with the student's view of reconciliation that 'children of the household divide the head of a grasshopper'. Reconciliation in a safe place was one thing, but within the contexts in which we found ourselves, it was difficult.

In spite of all difficulties, reconciliation cannot be separated from our daily context, even from our possessions. A constructive combination must be found between sharing with each other and taking responsibility for ourselves, because both are essential for a decent life and a sustainable community. The one without the other becomes destructive.

Large parts of our lives are tied up in structures: we have contracts, obligations, loans to pay off, responsibilities and children to care for. We can free ourselves from some parts of our contexts but not from other parts. To go away to a safe space, away from our daily contexts, is to go away from a part of ourselves – the part of ourselves that will remain unreconciled when we come back from the safe space where we were reconciled with other individuals who had also left parts of themselves behind. To be fully reconciled, we will have to find ways to reconcile these *structures*. That will take more than a weekend in a safe space.

The idea of 'co-existence' is a pragmatic solution for this problem. It is based on the minimalistic and pragmatic requirement that all role players and each person have the right to be, to exist and to form relationships of choice. Such an approach does not aim high, at 'reconciliation, amity, true

peace, and cooperation' but at a minimalist co-existence 'where antagonists "simply" allow others [...] to live'. This may be a prelude to deeper reconciliation, and it is more realistic and has a better chance of succeeding than aiming high (Weiner 1998:15).

But even this minimalistic aim requires hard work. Weiner wrote these views on co-existence in *The handbook for interethnic co-existence* of which he was the editor – a densely written book of 653 pages.

Co-existence of diverse people on a local level is one of the prerequisites for the sustainable well-being of local communities and households.

In the last chapters, we will reflect further on the question of how the structures in which we exist can be transformed from the bottom up, starting in the household and the local community.

■ The importance of local communities

In the search for the sustainable well-being of their community, Christians should engage, as far as possible, all members of that particular community in the dialogue about the life of that community.

Community is important from a Christian perspective because Christ preached loving one's neighbour – and a community implies having and being neighbours. It implies relationships.

In modern societies, however, people tend to 'be yourself' in an individualistic way rather than seeing themselves as belonging to some or other group. The same happens in South African suburbs and townships, as we have seen in the case of the four townships on the highveld (see Chapter 10). One of the Nova staff members who resides in a township told us that people who stay in single rooms in a backyard, where there may be a number of adjacent rooms, often do not know the people next door – and as we shall see, in my own neighbourhood there are people who do not know their neighbours.

In May 2014, police raided a house where the father and mother of a fairly high-income white family in a South African suburb were arrested for keeping their five children captive at home for years. The father mistreated them all violently. There were tenants on the premises and at times rooms in the house were rented out. Neighbours and family members were aware that the father mistreated his children but the abuse continued for 16 years. (Cilliers 2019)

In the modern world, different networks emerge that are not bound to geographic space: you have your friends in social media, and people travel to visit their friends rather than to engage with their neighbours. There is a

tendency in our neighbourhoods for people who are active in the church to see their congregation as the community they relate to, to the extent that they withdraw from the geographical community in which they live.

As a result of this tendency to withdraw from your neighbours, many people deny that communities exist. The concept *community* implies that people in a given *geographic space* have relationships and a certain feeling of commonality with each other, and this has evaporated in many places.

In response to this trend, many churches in the West have actively tried to revive the importance of the local 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).

Rasmussen (1996:329, 330) argues that relations are necessarily developed locally and not globally, which makes local communities important. Being a global citizen or living in different networks – work, sport, hobbies, friends, etc. – without even knowing your neighbours means that those aspects of the common good that can only be realised on the local level are neglected.

The tendency to build gated golf estates, isolated behind high walls, could be driven by a desire to fence yourself off from the complications of the wider world, to live in a 'bubble'. This can lead to the so-called 'hamlet' or 'small town' trend where people elect to live in smaller 'towns' for lifestyle reasons and, with new technology, are able to work from home. Such a community can be tempted to turn into itself and withdraw from responsibility, from relations with others, which is the essence of sin as argued by Matt Jenson. A city provides a wider perspective than just the local neighbourhood.

Bart Somers, who received the 'World Mayor Prize 2016' as the best mayor in the world in that year, initiated a successful programme of building relationships between the traditional residents of the city Mechelen in Belgium and the refugees who had recently settled there. This prevented the radicalisation of the different groups. In a certain period, about a hundred citizens of Antwerpen joined the radical Islamic State movement, as did about two hundred from Brussels, but not even one from Mechelen. Somers agrees with the American political scientist Benjamin Barber that the local and urban levels are much more suitable for dealing with the problems of today than the national level – although all levels must work together. In Somers' experience, political discussions on the national level get stuck in ideas on policies, while on an urban level, action is required for practical issues (Mak 2019:481–482).

And Oxford University economist Kate Raworth (2020) has worked with the cities of Philadelphia, Portland and Amsterdam to develop a circular economy for their cities. In a video dated July 2020, she argues that the

previous economic theories, which regarded endless growth as the goal of the economy, have caused many of the problems and challenges our generation is faced with (Raworth 2020):

> Last century's economic theories and government policy makers and business leaders didn't face this challenge. Their models and policies were not developed to take it on [...] and I believe this is a place and time that cities can pioneer in leading this transformation. (n.p.)

The focus must not be on the individual as a consumer and on endless growth:

> We need instead to embrace a very 21st century approach to economics that recognises that our economies are embedded in the lifeworld, that recognises the value of the market and the state and the household and the commons and the synergy that comes when they work together [...] cities are a leading pioneer in making this practice happen. (Raworth 2020:n.p.)

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened up opportunities and a sense of solidarity and community for transforming previously fixed systems, says Raworth (2020). The household cannot be seen apart from the local neighbourhood, and the neighbourhood cannot be seen apart from the city, so we have expanding levels up to the global context. The principle of subsidiarity deals with the relation between these levels.

The principle of subsidiarity

Schumacher's (2011) book *Small is beautiful* states that the question of scale is very important and must be sorted out:

> For his different purposes man needs many different structures, both small and large ones, some exclusive and some comprehensive [...] For every activity, there is a certain appropriate scale, and the more active and intimate the activity, the smaller the number of people that can take part. (pp. 49, 50)

This statement affirms the age-old Roman Catholic principle of subsidiarity.

Subsidiarity means that one should not transfer the responsibility from individuals to the community for things that the individuals can accomplish through their own enterprise and industry, or from the community to the next level. This principle leads to an emphasis on grassroots community projects where community members are involved in matters that affect them (cf. Rasmussen 1996:336). At the same time, those functions that cannot be executed on a local level must be escalated to higher levels: '... subsidiarity asks not for the most local but for the most appropriate level of organization and response' (Rasmussen 1996:339).

Corbett and Fikkert (2012) have made clear how relevant this approach is in development projects in their book *When helping hurts: How to alleviate*

poverty without hurting the poor ... and yourself. One should not do things for people that they can do for themselves.

In the church itself, some tasks can be performed by the local congregation much better than by any other part of the church, like engaging with the local community. But other tasks can most likely not be performed by a single congregation, such as high-quality transdisciplinary research or approaching the government.

Some Christians would argue that we have, so far, missed the core of the matter: change must begin on the deepest level, that of the human heart that must be transformed by being converted to Christ. They would argue that the problems of the world are the result of human hearts that are not spiritually healthy.

A spiritual basis, an inner change of heart?

McLaren (2007) blamed Christianity for supporting the framing story of the modern empire. He sees changing that framing story as the most important thing that we can do.

In Chapter 12, we gave attention to a statement in a publication on climate change of the South African Council of Churches (SACC, 2009:40), in which the possibility of a different world is seen as being dependent on a *moral vision*: 'It is a matter of moral vision. We need to envisage alternatives to the current global economic order that has caused climate change [...]'.

The SACC quotes Patriarch Bartholomew I and Pope John Paul II, who declared on 10 June 2002:

> What is required is an act of repentance on our part and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another, and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation. The problem is not simply economic and technological; it is moral and spiritual. A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act. (2009:6, 7)

Is this formulated correctly? Has enough been said? It all depends on what is understood under *a genuine conversion in Christ.* Many Christians combine a spiritual conversion quite comfortably with other value systems such as the prevailing consumerism or the culture of poverty in their communities, separating the language of faith and the way of living. As we have seen in Chapter 5, this also happens with those of us who are convinced that we need a sustainable lifestyle: we still live, often quite comfortably,

in the prevailing economy and technology, even if these structures do not express our moral vision and the way we think things should be.

Newbigin (1969:94–95) objects to the popular notion that conversion to Christ, as a purely religious phenomenon separated from its sociological context, will more or less by itself find expression in an ethical quality of life. It is supposed to happen almost automatically, as argued even by the wise theologian Van Niftrik (1971:118).

Newbigin (1969:94–95) describes it as '… the wrong conception of conversion as a purely religious phenomenon separated from its sociological context'. Many churches have preached such a conversion for many decades, and the resultant ethical quality of life is often limited to a few personal issues and often not even convincingly, if compared with the culture of the wider communities in which they live. As we have seen in Chapter 5, that is a key reason why present Christianity is part of the problem. Newbigin refers to the message of Moses and Aaron to the people of Israel in the house of bondage. Moses and Aaron told the elders of Israel that God had seen their plight and was ready to lead them out of the house of slavery '… and the people believed […] and bowed their heads and worshipped' (Ex 4:30–31). From that time onwards, the people were facing the other way; turning towards God is in itself turning away from slavery and preparing to take the journey towards freedom. They could not believe Moses and at the same time stay in Egypt, or in a separate act decide to leave Egypt. They believed a message that was about certain drastic activities in that context.

Where faith is separated from its context, conversion becomes an inner, privatised matter that all too often does not change the person's relation to the context: life goes on pretty much as before in the major areas of the person's life. What is needed is a conversion that is inseparable from its sociological context, a dedication to search for a different world.

Barth said something similar: he did not find conversion stories in the New Testament but stories of people who were called to service in the world (Jonker 2008:59).

The core of the matter is what the content of the 'moral vision' and the 'genuine conversion' is. What exactly is the task that we are called for?

Maybe we could expand the SACC publication on the possibility of an alternative world to include the parts in italics: it is a matter of a moral vision *of the restoration of all relationships, backed up by an honest effort to put something of this vision into practic*e. In order to develop a vision that is attractive enough to motivate millions of people, to energise and mobilise action, *we have to illustrate it in practice*. The question is therefore whether *we can demonstrate that* a different world is indeed possible *by*

presenting something of our view of the kingdom of God, of life, of an ethical quality of life, in visible form, in alternative economies, lifestyles, practices, habits and technologies.

This question will be taken up in the last chapter: how do we do all of this in practice? But first, we have to consider one more vital theological guideline.

■ How did the cross begin a revolution?

The cross is often portrayed as the way in which God has dealt with sin. NT Wright painstakingly investigates the New Testament and shows that the cross must be seen as more than just a payment for our moral guilt of transgressing the law – it is the beginning of a revolution. It is Type C theology, not Type A (see the beginning of this chapter).

Jesus fulfilled God's covenant with Abraham, the covenant in which God promised that Abraham and his descendants would be the means of blessing the world, of putting things right again. The purpose of the covenant was that Israel would provide a demonstration of the type of public life that is shaped by serving God – an alternative way of living that all nations would see is indeed a *better* way of living, so that they would be attracted to serve God and pursue this way of living. However, the opposite happened: Israel pursued the gods and lifestyles of the nations. It failed in its mission and did not present an alternative example of what life should be to the nations. Israel became like the nations, instead of the other way around. The core of Israel's sin is that it followed other gods, just like humanity as a whole followed other gods and failed in its calling to live an ethical quality of life.

The New Testament speaks of the *powers*. The powers, in theological language, are not God but they are more than, stronger than an individual human being. They form a third category. They are powerful because humans give their allegiance to them: ideologies, beliefs, money and pleasure. They determine the shape and direction of a society. The Christians, like anyone else, have to understand their influence and develop a fitting response.

Jesus fulfilled this calling of Israel on their behalf, refusing to follow any other power than God, his Father, the God of the covenant. By submitting to God and refusing to follow the powers of this world, he was able to demonstrate in his own life the radical alternative way of living of the kingdom of God. He continued this refusal to bow before other powers until his death on the cross. Without the resurrection, this would have meant failure, but the resurrection gives a completely new perspective on things: Jesus was in the right and had defeated the powers of the world.

His kingdom is one in which the powers of the world are made powerless, not only by telling a different story but by living it too (Wright 2016:351).

In this way, Jesus broke the power of the 'present evil age' once and for all. Our sin is that we have given our loyalty to these powers and so have given them power over us while they lead the world to destruction. But following Jesus opens up a new possibility. We are called to follow Jesus in giving all our loyalty to God and not to the powers. That is revolutionary.

Writing from Scotland, Wright (2016:393–397) talks of three false deities that have wreaked havoc in the world in which we live, because people have given them power by submitting to them: sex, money and power, or Aphrodite, Mammon and Mars. These things are good, as long as they function in the proper way. But they can become destructive if they take over. People gave Aphrodite power by believing that our desires must be lived out freely, with the result that many lives and relationships have been destroyed by infidelity and other types of destructive behaviour. It has destroyed the lives of vulnerable people, including children, who are sexually exploited, even by some among the clergy. Human trafficking is a vast industry and is driven, amongst others, by the growing demand for pornography. Obscenity laws, MacKinnon (2005:993) argues, focus on the morality of what is said and shown and not on the injuries inflicted on real people to make these materials. People gave Mammon power by regarding it as an ultimate good that should be pursued as a goal on its own, with the result that a small number of people have become extremely rich while a large number of people have become extremely poor. People have given Mars, the god of war, power by believing that violence can solve our problems and building up massive military capacities. Shakespeare's warning, '"Cry Havoc" and let slip the dogs of war' comes true again and again, as long as societies put so much trust in military means for solving human problems, resulting in millions of refugees and orphans and numerous ruined cities and lives.

Ideologies, extreme nationalism or individualism, cultures and traditions can also become powers that dictate our lives.

In Chapter 5 we saw McLaren's view on the most radical thing that we can do, namely to exchange the framing story of the empire with the story of Jesus, which will have the result, he claims, that 'we will be independent of the system, so our energies can no longer be co-opted by the system' (2007:271). The question was: how do we become free and independent of the system? With Wright's view, that we must give our allegiance to Christ so as to deny the destructive forces that power, we are confronted by the same question: how are the powers robbed of their power *in practice* while large parts of our lives are determined by the modern empire or by African traditions?

It is now time to present an answer to the question of how to stop giving our loyalty to the powers and so giving them power over us.

The answer that we give in this book revolves around three ideas. Firstly, we do need a new framing story, an ethical awareness of our responsibility (Van Peursen), or as Raworth (2020) has stated, a new mindset (see Chapter 12). In this chapter, we are trying to say something about such a mindset from a Christian perspective. We first must become aware of the powers that are shaping the context in which we are. We must take the decision not to live by these powers but to follow Jesus and give ourselves to God. Referring to Newbigin's example of Israel, we must hear God's call, change direction, and undertake the journey to leave the land of slavery and go to the promised land.

Together with that, we must understand how these powers, or in Van Peursen's terms, the prevailing structures, function in a given context. This was the focus of Chapters 4–12. We need to think strategically, to understand the rules and dynamics of our own context, and to work creatively with what is at hand. Van Peursen (1978) helps us with that – the subtitle of his book is *Strategie van de kultuur* [*Strategy of culture*]. The trigger mechanism is a good example: if one understands the rules of the game and the dynamics of the given context very well, a small action may have a huge effect. The rules of the game are a given, but creative and strategic action within the prevailing structures can open them up and transcend the given situation (Van Peursen 1978:201). Van Peursen makes another point that is relevant for us: he shows that the rules of the game change from one culture and context to another.

Thirdly, we have, among other things, to work on *practices* that will enable us to live according to our ethical awareness and our understanding of the prevailing structures of our context. That is what we will consider in the next two chapters.

A note on suffering

Wright emphasises our calling and that it will bring suffering. He describes suffering as 'when the problem ceases to be merely theoretical and becomes urgent and personal' (Wright 2016:373); the connection between *being concerned and suffering* is corroborated by a study of the brain: 'The more we are aware of and empathically connected to whatever it is that exists apart from us, the more likely we are to suffer' (McGilchrist 2019:85). As Christians, we cannot curve into ourselves. Even more, it means that we must get involved 'with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength and all our mind' (Lk 10:27). We take it seriously because we are called by God, but we

are safeguarded from fanaticism as long as we remember that the end does not depend on us but on God.

When sharing in the suffering of Jesus, we become part of something much bigger: God's involvement with the suffering of creation and his work of saving his creation:

> This leads to the ultimate new creation, when the present creation, groaning in travail, will be set free from the slavery of corruption and decay 'to enjoy the freedom that comes when God's children are glorified' (Rm 8:23). That is the ultimate 'glory', the 'royal' role for which humans were made and for which [...] they are redeemed. They are 'justified' in order to be 'justice bringers.' This is the result of the revolution accomplished on the cross. The work of the cross is not designed to rescue humans from creation but to rescue them for creation. (Wright 2016:290)

The 'children of God' are glorified when they rule justly over creation and when they bring justice to the world (Gen 1:27), in other words, if our actions and relations are such that they promote a better quality of life for people and planet. Justice, like other biblical words such as peace, (eternal) life and the Kingdom of God, refers to a situation where all relations are good and life thrives.

In fact, creation is 'eagerly waiting' for that. Creation is presently subjected to 'pointless futility' and 'slavery to decay'; the entire creation is groaning together like a pregnant woman about to give birth, and we, too, 'are groaning within ourselves, as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our body'. The Spirit helps us to pray, and it 'pleads on our behalf, with groanings too deep for words'. All of this suffering is connected with Jesus' cry on the cross, 'My God, My God, why did you abandon me?'. Wright comments:

> Here we have the Holy Spirit, who in Romans 8 is clearly the powerful presence of Israels' God himself, groaning inarticulately from the heart of creation. And the Father – the Searcher of hearts – is listening. This is the extraordinary 'conversation' in which the suffering church is caught up. And because it was always the will of the Creator to work in his world *through* human beings, this human role of intercession [...] becomes one of the focal points in the divine plan [...] to rescue the whole creation from its slavery to corruption, to bring about the new creation at last. (2016:370–372)

The Bible does not give us a quick fix for the world's problems.

This insight into the central position of the suffering of creation in the book of Romans is part of a wider awareness in church circles that we have been too anthropocentric or human-centred in the past. Our calling as humans is to rule over creation with great care and wisdom.

In 2017, the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann spoke about the theology of the future and emphasised one thing: the theology of the future will be

a theology of the ecology. And Bevans and Schroeder make the astounding statement that salvation has always been understood in terms of anthropology, with the human person in the centre:

> But again, the ecological revolution has 'de-centred' the human person in philosophical, political and theological thought [...] God's entire creation, not the human person, is the measure of all things (2009:378).

Conclusion

We started this chapter with a subchapter titled *The Name of God gives us a perspective on history*. The question now is: in which way will the Name of God define history and life as a whole, given the problems we have discussed?

We have seen that, for an action to be relevant, it must come from an ethical awareness of one's responsibility, and we have considered some theological guidelines in search of better insight into our responsibility.

There is no blueprint of what an *ethical quality of life of the people of God* looks like, which can merely be multiplied indefinitely. It must be discovered within each given local context and on all levels by getting involved.

Together with an ethical awareness of our responsibility, a particular mindset, we need a good understanding of the role of the powers in each given context, or as Van Peursen called them, the prevailing structures. That brings us to the place where the relevant issues become urgent and personal, which, according to Wright (2016:373), is what suffering means. This is how we can take up our cross and follow Jesus.

This cannot happen separately from our context and from a search for practices and habits that make something of our beliefs a reality in our own lives and in the contexts and communities in which we live and work. It entails searching for meaningful ways or strategies to promote the common good and to care for the creation of God.

Larry King said that the answer to the question of whether Jesus was indeed virgin-born would define history for him. Similarly, to know the Name of God is to know that God is present in world history. The biblical events reveal to us how God is present: not in the way that the powers are present, but in a healing way that is eventually more powerful than all the destructive forces.

Chapter 14

A strategy for the sustainable well-being of communities

A strategy is based on a certain philosophy and certain values and formulates specific ways in which one hopes to achieve a specific goal that is pursued.

In this chapter, we consider ways to promote sustainable and flourishing communities. We see, *inter alia*, that no strategy can provide a blueprint of what must be done, because each community is different – but there are at the same time many similar patterns and trends in many communities so that practices and models can be developed with one community and taken to scale in similar ones.

We see the importance of local contexts: quick fixes and ready-made solutions usually do more harm than good; there is a need for a sufficient period to co-develop with (not for) members of the targeted community a sensible solution to a given problem, and that requires long-term financial and other support from donors.

Working with communities in a sensible way makes it possible that a suitable technical solution can be identified and integrated into the dynamics and practices of a given community.

We are on our way to the last chapter, where we want to reflect on *how* to transform our lifestyles in order to advance towards the sustainable well-being of our communities.

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In Chapter 3, we saw that the interaction between the modern world and the African world produces new combinations of things and thoughts, new realities, all the time. We asked if we could play a role in the formation or construction of wholesome combinations. It is now time to return to that question.

The approach of finding meaningful combinations between things and thoughts from different cultures is different from an approach where we see modern ways of doing as a given that must merely be taken over by Africa. It is also different from the approach of many white people, including academics and scholars, who persist in ignoring our black compatriots, their cultures, philosophies, religions and ways of life. Such withdrawal cannot last, not even when emigrating. The meeting of cultures is a global process, albeit in different ways and different contexts. It is a global question, with a different answer in each local context: what is a meaningful combination of things and thoughts from diverse origins?

Innovation and creativity are needed, rather than one-way education. The philosopher CA van Peursen (1978:145–149, 157–159, 202) gives a perspective on creativity in complicated and complex contexts. He described creativity as seeing or finding new combinations between existing things or systems. A new system or era usually takes up elements of the previous era; for example, in Christianity, the New Testament is something new, but it is at the same time the fulfilment of the Old Testament – it is not seen as something completely discontinuous; the new re-interprets the old.

Moving beyond a given system, finding new possibilities and new combinations within existing systems and things, contains an element of creativity and even transcendence.

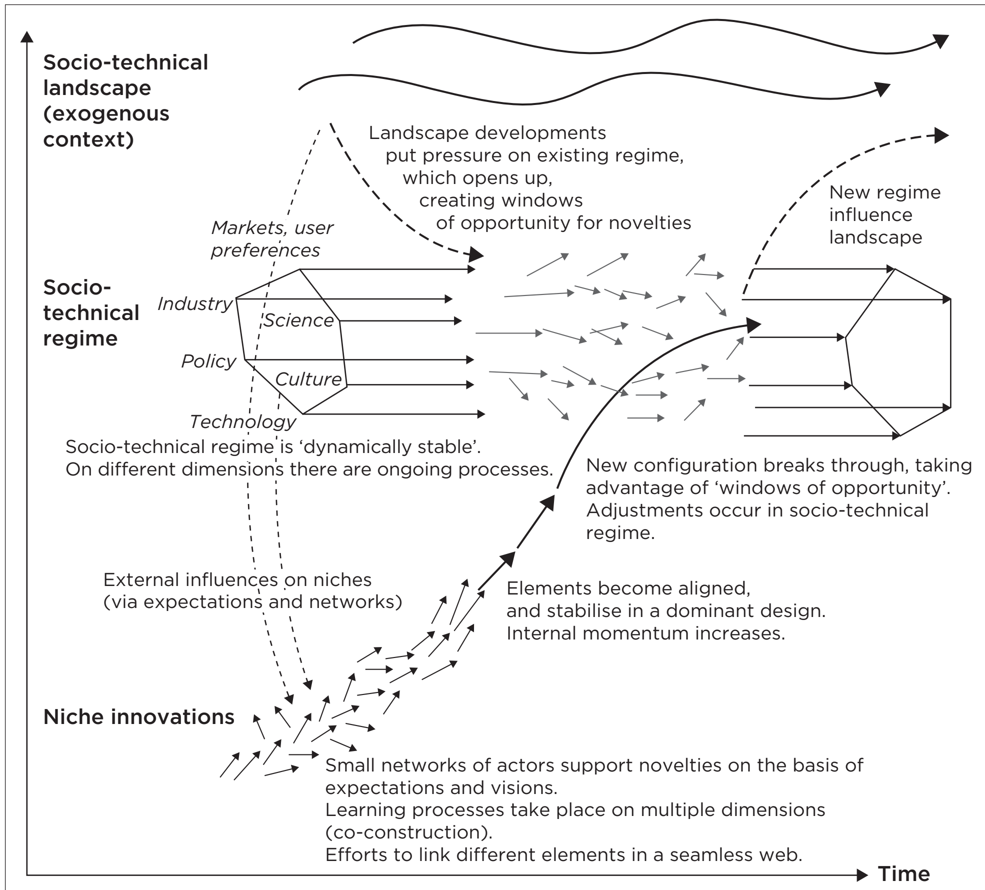
■ Change from above and below

Firstly, we look at the strategy of 'change from below', focused specifically on the household, and then we look at ways in which we can work with households. The approach of 'working with' would usually apply on higher levels too.

In 2002, FW Geels introduced a multi-level perspective on technological transitions, in which he distinguishes three levels: the macro level of the socio-technical landscape, the meso level of socio-technical regimes and the micro level of niches (see Figure 14.1; Hennekens 2012:16).

It is a mistake to neglect or over-emphasise any of the two approaches: change from above and from below are both important (see also Swart 2019:92).

The way in which change from below takes place in this diagram (Figure 14.1) is by way of *niche innovations* that combine to form bigger networks.



Source: Hennekens (2012:16), published with appropriate permissions.

FIGURE 14.1: Multi-level perspective on transitions.

A strategy with niche innovations is more than a strategy to influence the government. Many believe that it is the responsibility of the government to solve problems such as poverty, to clean up waste that the public throws around and to provide houses for the poor. Together with that, the view is that the authorities are persuaded by public opinion, which in turn is the end result of the public discourse that takes place everywhere: the daily conversations of individuals in coffee shops and at home, the stream of newspapers and other media, lectures, sermons, speeches, mass demonstrations and so on. The main task of community organisations, churches, media, academics and each individual in this approach is to take part in this discourse, that is, to question and talk always and everywhere. In that way, they help to form the public discourse and public opinion on

which the actions of government are based. Then it is over to the government to take action. We saw this approach in Chapter 5, where we discussed McLaren's idea of changing the framing story.

Many South African churches and universities have the same view of their role. I know it from experience. When there is a strong awareness that something must be done about a specific problem, the default response is to arrange a conference that will issue a declaration if they feel strongly about something, or publish an article or a book. There is nothing wrong in doing that, but if that is all that is done, one should ask if that is enough in a context where authorities are highly dysfunctional and where state capture has weakened state structures so that a relatively small group has a free hand to divert funds away from services for the poor to the state capturers.

In such conditions, a good policy often remains just that: a good policy on paper. South Africa has many policies that are well-researched, that are sensible and responsible and carefully formulated and that are not implemented effectively, if at all.

In her 2022-2023 Report on Local Government Audit Outcomes the Auditor-General, Tsakani Maluleke, reported that only 34 (13%) of municipalities obtained clean audits[63]. In 2020 the then Auditor-General, Kimi Makwetu (2020), began the Executive Summary of the annual report on local government in South Africa with a stern conclusion: 'The safe and clean hands that can be relied upon to look after the public's finances in local government are few and far between'.[64] In such a context, it is not enough to talk about what must be done or to try to convince the authorities what the right thing would be to do. Often one must do it oneself or form a bigger network with whom to do it.

In such a context, change from below becomes even more indispensable: horizontal relations must move in where vertical relations fail. Such initiatives must make the general population stronger, to do things for themselves but at the same time to get rid of those who are corrupt.

Christians should play an active role in this. Christianity would add a great deal of credibility to her message if it were accompanied and supported by appropriate action by the church and the Christians themselves, by leading from the front and not only talking from the pulpit or through social media.

The church is in a good position to work with households and local communities.

63. https://mfma-2023.agsareports.co.za/report/mfma_report_2022_23_final.pdf

64. See https://www.agsa.co.za/Portals/0/Reports/MFMA/201819/Media%20Release/2020%20MFMA%20Media%20Release%20Final.pdf

■ The importance of the household in Africa

In his book *Dispatches from a foreign continent*, Blaine Harden (1991) wrote about the importance of households, given the lack of services in Ghana:

> The failure of the state left a void, and the extended family filled it. The most dramatic filling of the void occurred in 1983, when neighbouring Nigeria, in a fit of xenophobia, ordered the expulsion of 1.3 million Ghanaian workers. The mass deportation could not have come at a worse time. Unemployment was at a record high, most crops had failed, and a worst-of-the-century drought had triggered bush fires that burnt out of control across much of the country. Hunger and malnutrition were widespread [...] Anticipating social upheaval and fearing mass starvation, Western relief agencies drew up emergency plans to erect feeding camps. Foreign journalists descended en masse to chronicle the expected suffering. Within two weeks, however, the deportees disappeared, absorbed back into their extended families like spilled milk in a sponge. What was potentially the greatest single disaster in Ghana's history was defused before foreign donors could figure out what to do about it. (p. 66)

That is how it goes. A key tenet of Nova's way of thinking is the insight that the institution in Africa that does the most to care and provide for vulnerable members of society such as orphans, jobless individuals, sick people, the elderly and all those in need is neither the state, nor the church, nor nongovernmental organisations, but the family!

On the other hand, many of Africa's most pressing problems can be traced back to processes within the household, e.g. the breakdown of traditional family mores is an important factor in the spreading of AIDS; domestic wood use for cooking leads to air pollution and health problems, as well as the depletion of trees and soil erosion – wood use for cooking was sustainable in the past, but not anymore because of population growth, and population growth is fuelled by the dynamics in the household.

Broken-down relationships in the family are the hotbed where many forms of crime have their origin. Researchers found that:

> Harsh and inconsistent parenting practices can have negative effects on children. These practices increase children's risk not only of developing emotional and behavioural problems but also of abusing substances, engaging in risky sex, developing mental and physical health problems, and becoming involved in crime later in life. Encouragingly, positive parenting, which is parenting that is warm, responsive and consistent, does the reverse and instead plays a protective role in child development [...] There is no doubt that supporting positive parenting can contribute to a safer, healthier society. (Wessels et al. 2016:1–2)

The collective power of households can damage and even destroy a country's economy. An example of such damage can be seen in the impact of households on Eskom, the national electricity provider, when too many households fall behind with payments for electricity and make illegal connections to the grid in large numbers (see Chapter 11).

The strategic importance of the household in Africa, combined with the central cultural and deeply felt meaning of the family and the household as the place where one comes *home*, makes the household a fitting entity to focus on – specifically for a small organisation such as Nova that is research-intensive and wants to work directly with people on the ground. The household is not so big that one cannot find a meaningful combination of things and thoughts if one works closely with household residents.

A household is a dynamic system. It is made up of a number of practices. To gain a better understanding of the concept of practice, we consider a gardening practice in modern suburbs.

■ An irritating garden practice

In our neighbourhood, the use of leaf blowers is a relatively new practice (see Figure 14.2). Several of our neighbours have purchased one of these machines to blow away the leaves around their homes. These blowers make a high, piercing wail that I find very irritating. Why do people use them?

Source: 'Unrecognizable man with modern gardening equipment', photographed by gpointstudio (reference no. 17295889), obtained from Freepik, reproduced for publication by the publisher under the appropriate Freepik license, viewed 06 August 2023, <https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/unrecognizable-man-with-modern-gardening-equipment_17295889. htm#query=leaf%20blower&from_query=leafblower&position=4&from_view=search>

FIGURE 14.2: A leaf blower.

I am not sure if the leaf blowers are better for the ecology than sweeping or raking the yard every day – a practice that I have seen all over South Africa and as far north as in Malawi and Ghana. Sweeping keeps the surface around the house generally clean of small forms of vegetation, and each time you sweep or rake the yard it loosens a bit of surface soil that is usually washed away or blown away so that the foundations of many houses get exposed more and more as the years go by.

Wilhelm van Deventer tells of how traditional communities in the then Venḓa and in the current North West province followed this same practice of raking their yards perfectly clean in order to ensure that snakes and other vermin do not approach their homesteads. He was told by some of the people of those communities that these creatures could sometimes be agents of disgruntled ancestors. And we have seen the curious case of the fear of flying witches that causes people to close their windows at night and sweep around the house (see Chapter 9).

I do not know how serious the wind erosion is that is caused by the leaf blowers, and maybe the leaf blowers are better for the soil than a broom, but the noise is definitely a negative factor.

In Geert Mak's book on America (2012:373–374), there is a report on leaf blowers in Orinda, an upper-class town in California, USA. Houses cost, on average, US$1.3m, in 2010. It is a quiet town, with trees and open spaces.

Then came the leaf blowers. Teams of Mexicans work in the gardens and blow the leaves away to clean the yard. Many homeowners do so themselves. The whole neighbourhood is filled with this wailing blare as the teams go from one garden to the other, tomorrow on the other side of the road, next week all over again. An action group, No Blow, was started. They wanted a law that banned the leaf blowers, like in some other Californian cities. The blower war led to some reflection on what it was to be a neighbour – and even the issue of class conflict came up: must the poor workers lose their jobs for the comfort of the rich?

I looked for more information. Orinda residents Peter and Susan Kendall spent 4 000 dollars building a 'Quiet Orinda' (n.d.) website and producing a short documentary; they started to gather signatures for their blower-ban petition. On their website, they wrote:

> Orinda's semi-rural charm and liveability have been seriously degraded by the **noise and air pollution** from the chronic use of leaf blowers. Leaf blowers pollute the air with unburnt fuel and hydrocarbons, and by boosting into the air particulate matter containing **animal fecal matter, molds, spores, fungi, diesel, soot, and many allergens.**
>
> Leaf Blowers also **pollute our soundscape** by broadcasting a loud and annoying siren-pitch noise that blankets entire neighbourhoods, forcing people indoors or away from their homes in order to escape the noisy intrusion.

> Quiet Orinda advocates the replacement of leaf blowers with **rakes and brooms**. Orinda can join other enlightened, environmentally-conscious California cities like **Berkeley, Piedmont, Mill Valley, Carmel, Santa Monica, Malibu and others** who ban or severely restrict the use of these machines.[65]

This issue has led to a dispute on social media, which touched on a diversity of aspects:

- **Class conflict:** (also mentioned by Mak 2012:374): 'And you know what was weird in the article? That all the references to "gardeners" refer to hired laborers, not to homeowners. Not to *us*' (Garden Rant n.d.:n.p.).
- **Psychology:** 'Gardeners almost never need all that horsepower, but the noise has come to symbolize their, well, masculinity' (Garden Rant n.d.:n.p.).
- **Experiments:** 'But the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power showed that a "grandmother using a rake and broom took only 20% longer to clean a test plot than a gardener with a blower"' (Garden Rant n.d.:n.p.).
- **Ecology:** 'The Quiet Orinda folks are also gathering signatures and provide a link to a new report by Clean Air California that describes the air and noise pollution consequences of having 3 million leaf blowers in the state: "The majority are gasoline-powered leaf blowers. If growth trends continue, soon there will be more than 6 million leaf blowers in California, at which time air pollution, water pollution, blown dust and noise will be twice as bad as today"' (Ross 2010).
- **Health:** 'Dr. David Lighthall, a health-science adviser to an air quality group in California's Central Valley, declared, "The latest research shows that the respirable road dust that the blowers kick up into the air – where it can remain for days – is a toxic mix of endotoxins, mold and organic carbon compounds"' (Friend 2010:n.p.).
- **Sociology:** 'Somehow the blower issue became a referendum on what it means to be a neighbour: whether neighbours constitute a community, or are just nuisances and Nosey Parkers' (Friend 2010:n.p.).

Yes, it is funny in a way, but on the other hand, it did make me think: why do we live the way we do? What does it mean to be a neighbour and to love your neighbour? Are we a community or just isolated individuals? And the way we abuse nature?

The issue also involves relationships between communities. Middle-class communities must consider that our way of life is often attractive for those who are poor, who may see it as an ideal to strive for. We have often seen how low-income families, who are literally hungry, follow the example of middle-class suburbs and fill up their gardens with exotic plants that need

65. https://www.thepetitionsite.com/1/quiet-orinda-ban-the-use-of-leaf-blowers/

a great deal of water rather than to plant the beautiful indigenous plants that are available – or vegetables, as many in Africa do (see Chapter 15).

What does the use of leaf blowers say about our relationship with land in the suburb in Pretoria where I stay? It is a traditional suburb, not one of the sprawling informal settlements, nor is it one of the numerous luxurious golf estates or gated communities that have sprung up everywhere since apartheid was replaced by a democratic political system. We have comfortable middle-class houses with a site that is big enough for a small lawn, some trees and flowers and, if you wish, some vegetables. My wife Carol keeps four chickens that provide us with eggs and, apart from wrecking our garden, create a relaxing atmosphere with their prattle. We have piped water and sanitation, but we installed a water tank to harvest rainwater and we are considering switching to non-severed sanitation that can convert human waste into fertiliser for our emerging perma-culture garden; we have a solar system, so that we hardly use electricity from the grid.

When going to the office of South Africa's National Parks in Pretoria, I am always pleasantly surprised that they could create a wild park atmosphere here in the middle of the city by preserving the indigenous trees and natural materials like stones within the layout of the parking area. Why do we travel for hours to experience the African bush in a wild park if we could have the atmosphere – the trees, the birds, small animals like bush babies – where we live? Why do we want to live in exotic gardens?

Our gardens are small urban parks, but they could have been small wild parks or small farms. Why do we choose to relax by walking up and down with a noisy lawnmower and leaf blower when we could have planted a garden where we could sit in the shade and meditate and read instead like a monk? Is it because the white Afrikaner retains some memory of the farm where, after the first rains, the roaring tractors are out to plough the fields? Why do we not, as Africans, have maize and pumpkins in our gardens? When we were children, most households had a vegetable garden and chickens. Why do most people, even farmers and the poor, not produce, at least, our own fresh vegetables and eggs anymore, but rather buy them in a supermarket? Is our lifestyle good for us, and is it sustainable? For how long can we afford to use so much water for our gardens in this dry country? And introduce exotic plants that land in the river beds, destroying the ecosystems and using up our water?

Harari (2016:67–74) gives a short history of lawns to illustrate that we study history in order to be able to liberate ourselves from the past. Lawns have developed over centuries for different reasons, and they have certain symbolic meanings. A better understanding of this history can help us to understand that a lawn is not a given fact of life, and it is something that

we can decide to replace with something else if we so wish. The idea of lawns emerged among British and French aristocrats in the late Middle Ages. It proclaimed to every passerby: ‘I am so rich and powerful, and I have so many acres and serfs, that I can afford this green extravaganza’. The symbolic meaning of something that has no use is emphasised in cases where lawns have signs to warn people to keep off the grass. People began to identify lawns with political power, social status and economic wealth. The Industrial Revolution, which made lawnmowers and automatic sprinklers possible, made it possible for the middle-class to have a lawn around their homes. Your wealth and status became related to the size and quality of your lawn. Grass is now the most widespread crop after maize and wheat in the USA, and the lawn industry (plants, manure, sprinklers, mowers, gardeners) accounts for billions of dollars every year. Lawns are set to conquer even the heart of the Muslim world. When Qatar’s Museum of Islamic Art was built, it was flanked by magnificent lawns of 100,000 square metres, designed and constructed by an American company. In the heart of the Arabian desert, these lawns require a stupendous amount of fresh water every day to stay green. No wonder we find websites such as Growfoodnotlawns.[66]

That would be especially relevant in South Africa, which has been described as a fat, hungry nation because of a lack of sufficient nutrients and food, to develop a general culture of food production at home.

Developing a new sustainable garden culture could happen in different ways. If climate change leads to a lack of food, it could happen that the transfer from gardens-as-parks to gardens-as-farms runs parallel to the tempo in which the scarcity of food overtakes us – following the example of the way in which Cuba quickly developed a culture of vegetable production in their gardens when food security was under pressure (see Chapter 15).

But it could also develop if people take a free decision to do things differently.

Modern garden practices have developed over many years of dedicated hard work by people of diverse backgrounds. There are technical, financial, psychological, social, botanical and other factors that combine to produce the practices we have now, and new practices would require a similar combination of diverse factors. But one single person could make a difference by starting to do things differently.

66. See https://www.facebook.com/GrowFoodNotLawns/

Practices

According to Ingram (2009:29), the German philosopher Martin Heidegger shows in *Being and Time* (German: *Sein und Zeit*, published in 1927), through a phenomenological analysis of the concept 'practice', that 'human being' is essentially 'productive being'. We produce by way of practices. A practice is a complex phenomenon that is constituted by the unity of the resources and tools used to perform the practice (e.g. a leaf blower), the labour of performing the practice, the 'product' of the practice (a clean yard) and the 'for-the- sake-of' of the practice (Status? Cleanliness? A place to relax? Symbolising masculinity?). The 'for-the-sake-of' determines the meaning of the practice as a whole. In a practice, the aspects *resource*, *tool*, *labour* and *human being* belong together in such a way that none can be without the others.

A domestic practice combines diverse elements in a set but more or less flexible pattern in which different household members play different roles, using resources and tools, for whatever purpose they have, such as to satisfy a fundamental need or needs.

A simple family meal is a practice: there are tools that are used, such as a stove and pots to prepare the meal. There are resources: vegetables and, perhaps, maize meal or potatoes and, for some, meat. There are social roles: who prepares what and who sets the table. The meal is enjoyed in a certain space, and it is structured according to social roles and habits. Fundamental needs are actualised, such as the need to sustain your body, the need to relax and the need to communicate and evaluate or understand events.

Transferring a practice on the household level to other cultures is similar to Harari's (2016:67–74) insight that countries like China and India could not take over British industrialisation quickly because they did not have '... the values, myths, judicial apparatus and socio-political structures that took centuries to form and mature in the West and could not be copied and internalised rapidly'.

Wholesome and destructive practices

How we evaluate a given practice depends on the way we evaluate the different aspects that constitute the practice on their own and, even more importantly, on the way they combine and fit together and what impact they have.

The traditional African practice of life around the fire could be an example of a practice that once facilitated good relations between family members but has now lost a great deal of its meaning. New practices should be

found that could help to heal the family in the new context in which we find ourselves, but that is no easy task.

In *The joy of cooking*, Joseph Campisi (2013) links up with the philosopher Albert Borgmann and provides an excellent description of the way in which modern technical devices liberate us from 'some of the most oppressive hardships, the mind-numbing drudgery and back-breaking labor that was once required to produce certain goods', while the same devices often have the effect that:

> … we become estranged both from our natural surroundings and from others. We experience a certain diminishment in our own selves. And, finally, we become alienated from the very ends or commodities they procure for us. (pp. 210–213)

Campisi discusses practices that promote intimacy and well-being as a way of overcoming a life where we only use the products of technical devices without relating to others, to our own work and to the ecology in a meaningful way.

It is a prerequisite for sustainable well-being: we as individuals must develop practices that will provide contentment in simplicity rather than opulence and luxury; in good relations rather than mere consumption; in serving the common good rather than merely realising our private dreams; in significance and meaning rather than mere individual success.

What we need are sustainable and effective domestic practices and not merely technical solutions.

In the next chapter we will come back to the question of if, and how, such packages and practices could perhaps be developed intentionally.

■ Models and taking solutions to scale

A small entity, even an individual, can make a big difference by developing wholesome practices or niche innovations that can be taken to scale. The ideal, which is difficult to reach, is that something good spreads by itself so that it becomes a trend. Thanks to books such as Malcolm Gladwell's *The tipping point*, we have some idea of the factors that play a role when something becomes a trend, but there are still many aspects that we do not understand, that we can only try to grasp intuitively.

A *model* is a wholesome practice that works in at least one local context and can be implemented on a wider scale in similar contexts. To be wholesome, it should comply with core criteria such as being sustainable, effective, affordable, desirable and beneficial; that is, it should not cause one problem while solving another.

The better it is integrated into the larger patterns and dynamics of, firstly, at least one household and then in one community, the more potential it has to be implemented elsewhere in similar households and communities.

For example, a given industry makes funds available to improve the housing of a neighbouring informal settlement. It can be an excellent solution and practice, but if other communities do not have the same level of subsidy available, the practice cannot be transferred to those communities and it is therefore not a model. It would have been better for the common good if that effort and funding were devoted to developing an improved housing plan that could be widely implemented in the countless communities where such subsidies are not available.

What is needed globally, is a collective effort to develop such models, an effort as huge as the industry that develops new medicines and vaccines. Such a movement can learn from previous practices that have spread by themselves, and those that failed, and over time become proficient in the art.

A good example of something that spread by itself all over the African continent is the various practices concerning maize. The following two quotations sum it up well:

> Maize, which was domesticated in central Mexico around 1500 BC, was brought to Africa around AD 1500. Having spread to all corners of the continent within the relatively short period of 500 years, it is now Africa's most important cereal crop. (McCann 2005:n.p.)

And:

> Until well within the present century, it was neither a major export nor a mainstay of the diet in most of eastern and central tropical Africa, the bulk of the areas where it is now of major importance. (Miracle 1965:39)

Why did maize farming and consumption and many other things, such as the AICs and liquor stores) spread and others not? The answer is that they match the required combination of things and thoughts to make them fit into and function well within the given contexts, and they satisfy existing needs even if they may have negative impacts too, such as lacking certain nutrients and having a negative impact on the ecology.

■ The required combination of things and thoughts for a given context

Our reflection so far has shown that there are a number of things and thoughts that combine in each household and community in a different way. That makes contemporary communities complex; no strategy can provide a blueprint of what must be done because each community is

different, but there are, at the same time, many similar patterns in certain communities. Rather than a blueprint, skill is needed, like a skipper preparing to navigate a boat in a stormy sea: the skipper must have a compass; he or she must know where they are, where they want to go and where the rocks are under the water; they must understand the sea and the currents and the wind; they must know their boat and its load; they must know themselves and their crew; they must be able to navigate their boat and work their instruments – they must know how all of these interact with each other and be able to account for each factor in such a way that they can direct their course through it all.

Households and communities are like these ships: they consist of and exist within a web of relations between diverse factors and institutions. And just like a ship that must be constructed and equipped carefully, households and communities cannot be constructed by combining these factors in any arbitrary way that someone may wish for or think about – if you want the combination to work. Each household and each community is a different combination of factors.

Adverse conditions in Africa – poverty, illnesses, violence, addictions, ecological degradation – can be attributed to the existing dysfunctional interactions and destructive combinations of diverse elements, which can potentially be replaced by alternative combinations that promote healthy living.

For example:

> Every day, Côte d'Ivoire's economic capital Abidjan produces 288 tonnes of plastic waste, most of which ends up in landfills in low-income communities like Gonzagueville, polluting the air, land, sea and children's playgrounds [...] Improper waste management is responsible for 60% of malaria, diarrhoea, and pneumonia cases in children – diseases that are among the leading causes of death for children in Côte d'Ivoire and many other countries around the world. Air pollution caused by plastic incineration leads to respiratory infections. The plastic stored in homes is often not sanitized, making it easier for diseases to spread. The pollution of groundwater exacerbates existing hygiene and sanitation challenges. And plastic waste blocks drainage systems, creating a breeding ground for mosquitoes. (Fersko 2018:n.p.)

This is an example of a destructive combination of things – but beneficial combinations of the same elements are also possible. For example, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has embarked on a programme to transform plastic waste into building materials for classrooms:

> Conceptos Plasticos, a Colombian social enterprise, has developed a technique to make bricks out of non-PVC plastics that are cheaper, lighter and more durable than conventional bricks. Africa's first recycled plastic classroom was built earlier this year in Gonzagueville, and classes will start this month. It was built in just five days – a stark contrast to the nine months and extensive training

> it takes to build a classroom using traditional construction methods [...] It also cost 40% less than traditional classrooms. (Fersko 2018:n.p.)

This is a technology-driven solution that enables a much better combination of things than the present situation: turning destructive waste into useful materials, closer to the existing skills and financial resources of this community, and providing for the children's need for education. The aim to expand the project depends on 'whether UNICEF's team in Côte d'Ivoire can raise the funds to build a factory there to localize production of the bricks' (Fersko 2018:n.p.).

That gives an indication of another relation that contributes to poverty: the relationship of the rich with their money. There are cultures, and there was a time in the West when affluent individuals were willing to share with others. In the time of Eisenhower, the very rich in the USA were willing to pay up to 90% tax at the top scale because they believed in the collective dreams of America. Since those days, many people have exchanged their collective dreams for individual dreams, with the result that tax has become very unpopular and people would rather spend money on more luxuries than pay taxes (see Chapter 10). We need new collective dreams, which would inspire the rich to support initiatives such as the one in Côte d'Ivoire, where people can build classrooms from destructive plastic waste if they have the necessary funds.

Wonderful technologies and solutions are there – they exist. The money is also there, but it is blocked from where it is needed by our addiction to the consumer culture. That is one reason why the consumer culture is a destructive power in today's world.

A technical solution must be integrated into a functional practice before it will be widely used. Turning plastic waste into schools in Africa needs several practices: the practices of collecting the plastic, producing the plastic bricks, distributing the bricks, building the schools and using the schools. For each practice there must be a good combination of resources and tools, labour, 'product' and the 'for-the-sake-of' of the practice. And these practices must combine and interact smoothly within each local context.

A key factor that development entities from outside the continent often do not understand is how the poor experience the way that a proposed solution relates to their needs. It is vital to understand that, because one's emotions, views and perceptions play a key role in determining the 'for-the-sake-of' of a practice. It can cause people not to use it or to use it for all sorts of unexpected and unintended purposes.

Two economists, Abhijit V Banerjee and Esther Duflo, researched this question over a period of 15 years and wrote a book about it:

Poor economics. They wanted to understand things that observers from outside find strange, for example, that there are so many TV dishes on the roofs of informal houses, where people are reported to lack food. They found that the poor worldwide tend to spend on things that make their lives more pleasant and less boring rather than buying better or even more food, especially if they do not expect that things will become better in the future (Banerjee & Duflo 2012:36–38).

The traditional African understanding of production illustrates the role that the meaning of labour plays. People always have ownership of what they produce. Only slaves are seen as people who do not have ownership of what they produce. Because Africans traditionally have ownership and responsibility with regard to what they produce, they are free to decide when to work, how long to work, how hard to work and what they produce. African labourers often react negatively and defiantly when they are forced into working situations (Ugwuegbu 2001:35, cited in Ingram 2009). *Ubuntu* means that a human being is a human being, *inter alia*, through the work you do. Change agents should not expect that people in this tradition, who are put in the position of passive receivers of some intervention or artefact, will take ownership of something they did not produce or work for, even if they need it. Chances are that they will not feel any responsibility to use or maintain it.

The implication of Heidegger's view of a practice and Ugwuegbu's description of labour in Africa is that the transfer of domestic technology must take place by giving people the opportunity to take the initiative. They can be enabled to do so, but there must be a free decision from their side that they want something. A change agent from the outside cannot achieve anything without the people who must use what she presents.

In this book, we focus on the domestic practices of households in Africa.

■ Making suitable technology part of a domestic practice

A basic theme of this book is that the key to the sustainable well-being of communities is to find meaningful combinations of things and thoughts in a given context. The search for such a combination must begin, not necessarily by introducing completely new things but by beginning with the elements that are already there in and around the community – both negative and positive. Why are things the way they are? Only when that is well understood can resources from outside be introduced – science, technology, networks, funding – in a sensible manner.

Developing a new practice will require experimentation, *with* residents, in order to find out what can work for them. It requires a transdisciplinary approach, as defined by Klein (2001): 'The core idea of transdisciplinarity is

different academic disciplines working jointly with practitioners to solve a real-world problem'.

The technology must be designed to fit into the prevailing patterns and consciousness of a given context.

All of this sounds simple and obvious enough, but the development industry – recently rallying around the 17 SDGs – seldom follows Einstein's advice that we must first gain a better understanding of the problem. In one case after the other people see the problem and then, without much effort to understand it within the dynamics of the local context, they can present a technical solution or a policy that they think will solve things – all too often without success.

The observation that JK Galbraith made in 1980 (see Chapter 4), nearly 40 years ago, is still valid. The development industry still tends to implement the 'solutions' that are available, based on their own experience and convenience and not on a thorough understanding of the given context. It is a global problem.

The fall-back solution is education. If a plan does not work, the developers often conclude that the intended users must be educated. This indicates that there is an awareness that the technology requires a certain consciousness to work properly – which the developer thinks must be established through education, instead of adjusting the technology to fit the prevailing consciousness.

Education as a strategy to change consciousness seldom works as expected. Consciousness often has a certain unexpected and underestimated resilience and tenacity. The education that is supposed to change people's consciousness is itself interpreted according to their existing thought patterns, and the things they are taught about are used within their existing patterns of life. The result is often not the intended linear consequence of what was taught.

In certain cases, it is better to adjust the solution that is presented to fit the people than to try to change people's consciousness and behaviour to fit the solution. Technology is designed by humans, and it is often more effective to redesign the technology or the proposed solution than to change people.

To summarise, domestic practices that are effective and are used by households on a large scale must mostly be developed by people from outside and people inside the household working together. The aim is to design, manufacture or promote domestic practices and not merely domestic products or technical solutions.

In Chapter 15, the question of how this can be done will be discussed.

Domestic practices within wider patterns

The anthropologist Ruth Benedict's book *Patterns of culture* was published in 1934. In this book, Benedict pointed out that cultures are structured, and that they function according to characteristic patterns. She stated: 'No individual can arrive even at the threshold of his potentialities without a culture in which he participates' (cited in Van den Berg 1973:68).

The practices of our lives are small building blocks that form the patterns of our culture; they are in turn formed by these bigger patterns. The practices and patterns shape and are shaped by our culture.

The practice of using a family car, for example, is embedded in a huge global transport system that produces roads, cars, fuel, etc.

We use cars for transport because the motor industry makes them available to us and helps us to maintain them. The cars fit into the prevailing road networks, the financial systems and the legal systems. They form an important part of our symbolic identity: an expensive car is a symbol of success and status, an identity that the owner communicates and maybe intends to communicate to themselves or others. They form part of our social life: they make it possible and convenient to attend social events like funerals or family gatherings, even far away.

The only problem is: they do not fit into the ecological systems. They contribute to climate change. They pollute the air. To make fuel available huge ecosystems are destroyed, and often local cultures as well. The same happens with the production of biofuels. For this reason, many of us do not want to use cars, but the existing structures do not make it easy for us to change our transport practices.

Some changes are not very easy to make; for example, it would be difficult for a country to start driving on the other side of the road.

Changes can have unintended consequences, both negative and positive. Cars in the USA have traditionally been heavy on fuel. When people in the USA switched to smaller cars, the local automobile industry that continued to produce big cars lost an immense portion of its market share, with a severe impact on cities like Detroit. But not changing our practices would require much bigger adjustments eventually.

It is often more achievable to change a part of a bigger system than to change the whole system – for example, a shift to cars that use less fuel and require fewer resources to produce can still be an achievable option that does contribute to becoming more sustainable although it is not yet an ideal solution. But many other changes in our car-use practices, apart from technological changes, are possible. In Heidegger's terms, we can change the *tool* – but we can also change the *meaning*: the symbolic

identity of cars can change so that driving a highly efficient hybrid car or using public transport have more status than a big fuel-consuming SUV or luxurious car. In the Netherlands, the prime minister often goes to his office on a bicycle. Our consumer culture, which requires from us that we take long road trips to faraway exotic places, can change; we can rationalise office hours or work from home – as many have discovered during the COVID-19 pandemic – and so on.

That brings us to the question of ethical practices.

Searching for ethical practices

To say that a given practice must be ethical is all fine and well, but how do we relate the concept *ethical* to any given *practice*? What procedure can we follow?

An important step towards finding sustainable practices that enable well-being would be to 'redefine our very understanding of what wealth entails' (SACC). The different worlds in which we find ourselves have different definitions of wealth and different ultimate ends of the economy – the issue that is, according to Kerschner (2003), pushed aside by modern economists.

A distinction can be made between needs and desires. A need is something that can be satisfied: if you are hungry, you can eat until you are not hungry anymore; that is, you are satisfied, but a desire for food causes you to eat compulsively, never being satisfied. A desire for money beyond what you need can have the result that the more money you have, the more you want. The same can happen with power. The consumer culture stimulates desires rather than satisfies needs: some people desire more expensive clothes, more exotic holidays, more expensive cars – there seems to be no stage where they can say enough is enough. Such things may be pseudo-satisfiers or destructive satisfiers. In this definition, needs promote a good life while desires inhibit and even destroy life.

Secondly, our view on the hierarchy of needs is relevant to what we do. In the work that Nova does, we have found that a superficial understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs is generally known in South Africa. There once was a series of advertisements for a popular beer. One of them had a caption: *Beethoven's Fifth* – with a picture of the composer holding a beer in his hand; another had a small pyramid of beer cans, five at the bottom, then four, then three, then two and then one, with the caption: *Maslow's hierarchy of needs*. The advertisers assumed that Maslow was generally known in their target population.

The prevalent understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs is that people have basic physiological needs such as air to breathe, water to drink,

something to eat and a place of safety. Higher-order needs are more psychological, such as the need for freedom, for being with family and friends, to express yourself and be yourself and to have an identity.

We often meet officials, both in government and in business, who refer to Maslow's theory of needs. In this understanding, the government, and to some extent also business, should meet the basic needs while the rest are seen as luxuries or at least optional, and, in any case, people's own responsibility. It creates a framework for developing policies where it is deemed sufficient to satisfy the basic needs of the poor: water, food and a roof over their heads. These must be provided by the government and by society. For the rest, the poor can provide for themselves if they so wish.

The result is that huge numbers of houses are provided that are designed to provide only for basic needs: a small house, a tap in the street or on-site, a toilet and a minimum of electricity. Energy efficiency, lifecycle costs, community-creating living spaces, sustainability and dignity are not considered.

One result of ignoring the energy efficiency of these houses is that they are poorly insulated and wrongly oriented, leaving them cold in winter and hot in summer. During cold winters, poor households need expensive energy and often use dirty fuels such as coal, wood and paraffin to keep the house warm. Indoor and outdoor air pollution levels are high, causing ill health, and dirty and smelly clothes. Such a poorly designed low-cost house places pressure on the budget (in other words, often, concretely, hunger and malnutrition), discomfort, and low levels of satisfaction with life. Many people have, towards the end of the month, to make a choice between buying food and buying coal or paraffin to heat the house. This promotes a culture of nonpayment and illegal connections to the electricity grid, putting pressure on the budget of the local government and the electricity utility, Eskom.

In one survey, residents of these houses said the following (Van Niekerk 2015b):

- 'Sometimes it is so cold you can't even do anything until in the evening. It is very cold. I am also sick, and if it is too cold I will die at any time.'
- 'I have a child, I would sometimes stop her from getting out of bed if I don't have enough coal, so that she can be warm. We would sleep until 9 am. When it gets warm, that is when we would get up.'
- 'In this house it is cold. Sometimes it is very cold here in this house to such an extent that when you wake up, you can't, it is too cold.' (p. 4)

Respect for the poor would lead to better attention to what is provided for them and a better theory of human needs would lead to a healthier society.

As we have seen (see Chapter 9), Amankwah-Ayeh blames the social evils of modern African cities on the loss of community-creating spaces – one of Maslow's higher-order needs that are seen as not being essential.

The needs theory that was developed in Chile by Manfred Max-Neef and Antonio Elizalde can contribute significantly to the better planning of these houses. It is based on the conceptual differentiation between need and satisfier. Max-Neef differentiates nine fundamental needs or values that all people share: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, freedom and identity. There are many possible satisfiers which vary between peoples and cultures. Satisfiers are ways of being, doing, having and interacting.

Needs can be satisfied, or to use a more active term, actualised. Satisfiers can be negative or positive and synergic. There are pseudo-satisfiers and destructive satisfiers. A synergic satisfier is one that satisfies different needs at once. A house, for example, is not merely a shelter, as it is usually seen in many housing schemes. A house should also be a home, that is, a satisfier for the needs of subsistence, protection, affection, participation, idleness, identity and creation:

> In order for a house to be a home, it needs to satisfy elements of all or most of the above-mentioned needs all at once. In the long and varied tradition of human habitation this has been the case. Even the caves of primal humans were decorated with symbols of identity and meaning that made that shelter into a home. (Murray et al. 2001:24–25)

Practices similarly can be seen as satisfiers. We can evaluate domestic practices in terms of the needs they satisfy. Because these needs are also values, they provide us with ethical guidelines. Where possible, the need must be actualised, that is, satisfied through one's own agency and not as a passive receiver. One problem with an approach based on human needs is that it is too anthropocentric: it does not evaluate the impact of humans on the ecology.

Another way to go about finding the connection between the concepts *ethical* and *practice* is to think in terms of *relationships*, a concept that, as we have seen (see Chapter 13), has been used to describe the essence of poverty, of personhood, of happiness and, in a way, of sin.

Relations provide a way to interpret a given practical situation. Practices that express or cause 'relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable' (Myers, cited in Corbett & Fikkert 2012:59) can be regarded as ethically unsuitable.

Many of our daily practices bring us in some or other relationship with many things and people we are not aware of. The food we eat was produced, transported, packed, stored, sold – there are people involved in this whole

production chain; there are machines and fuel; there are resources that are used and waste that is somewhere disposed of. We are in some way connected to all of that. We have social and ecological footprints in faraway places.

Conclusion

A strategy is a plan or way in which one tries to reach a certain goal. This chapter reflects on some strategic guidelines for developing ethical quality-of-life practices and models, which could enable households to progress towards sustainable well-being.

We select a domestic practice as the core of our strategy because of the strategic and cultural importance of the household and because we assume it is small enough that we will be able to find meaningful combinations of things and thoughts if we work closely with household residents.

In an African household, all the lines discussed, the modern empire, African traditions and (often) Christianity, come together in domestic practices, in some or other way, and each practice in turn has impacts on and footprints in a wide variety of places. A great deal is going on in and around a practice; it is not closed in on itself. A practice can be evaluated ethically, in terms of its impact on relations with humans and nature. It can be evaluated technically in terms of its efficiency. It can be evaluated in terms of its sustainability or its affordability, and it can be changed and designed, but it has a certain resilience. Practices can be destructive and constructive.

The question that will now occupy us is: *how* can healthy and sustainable communities evolve out of this mixture?

Chapter 15

How can we put the strategy into practice?

In this chapter, we discuss Nova's way of co-designing practices and what we can learn from several projects where we applied it together with local households. In these projects, we were looking for ways to solve domestic problems in energy use, air pollution and food security. One of these practices has been implemented in 80,000 households and another in 10,000 households. We have learned a great deal about ways in which potential technical solutions can become integrated into household dynamics and how solutions can be taken to scale. In the process, low-income rural households in South Africa have been linked with high-tech companies in Europe; churches have been linked with industries, while the professor at the university and the illiterate mother in the kitchen have put their heads together to understand relevant problems better and co-design workable solutions. Monitoring, finance and management all have to be in place.

In this chapter, we look at several case studies of efforts to develop domestic practices and to find the most fitting combination between things and thoughts originating from the three powerful historic traditions, namely African traditions, modernity and Christianity, within specific local contexts and ecologies.

Before we come to these domestic practices, we look at two countries that provide examples of best practices in sustainable development. *How did they achieve that?*

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Vegetable gardens in Cuba

Cuba presents a case where *politics* was a driving force behind the emergence of a certain national culture. Cuban communities took steps towards becoming more sustainable under pressures from outside.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Soviet aid and trade were drastically curtailed, and that had a huge impact on Cuba:

> During the period from 1989 to 1992 average daily per capita calorie consumption of Cubans dropped by an estimated 20 per cent, and average daily per capita protein consumption dropped 27 per cent. Conditions were further exacerbated by a severe storm which destroyed much of the country's sugar crop in 1993, and by a tightening of the US blockade in the early 1990s [...] The food gardens in the study were organic, both as a response to the lack of chemical inputs and to the emphasis placed on organic cultivation methods by those offering technical assistance. Chemical inputs are not sold on the open market in Cuba. (Moskow 1999:127, 132)

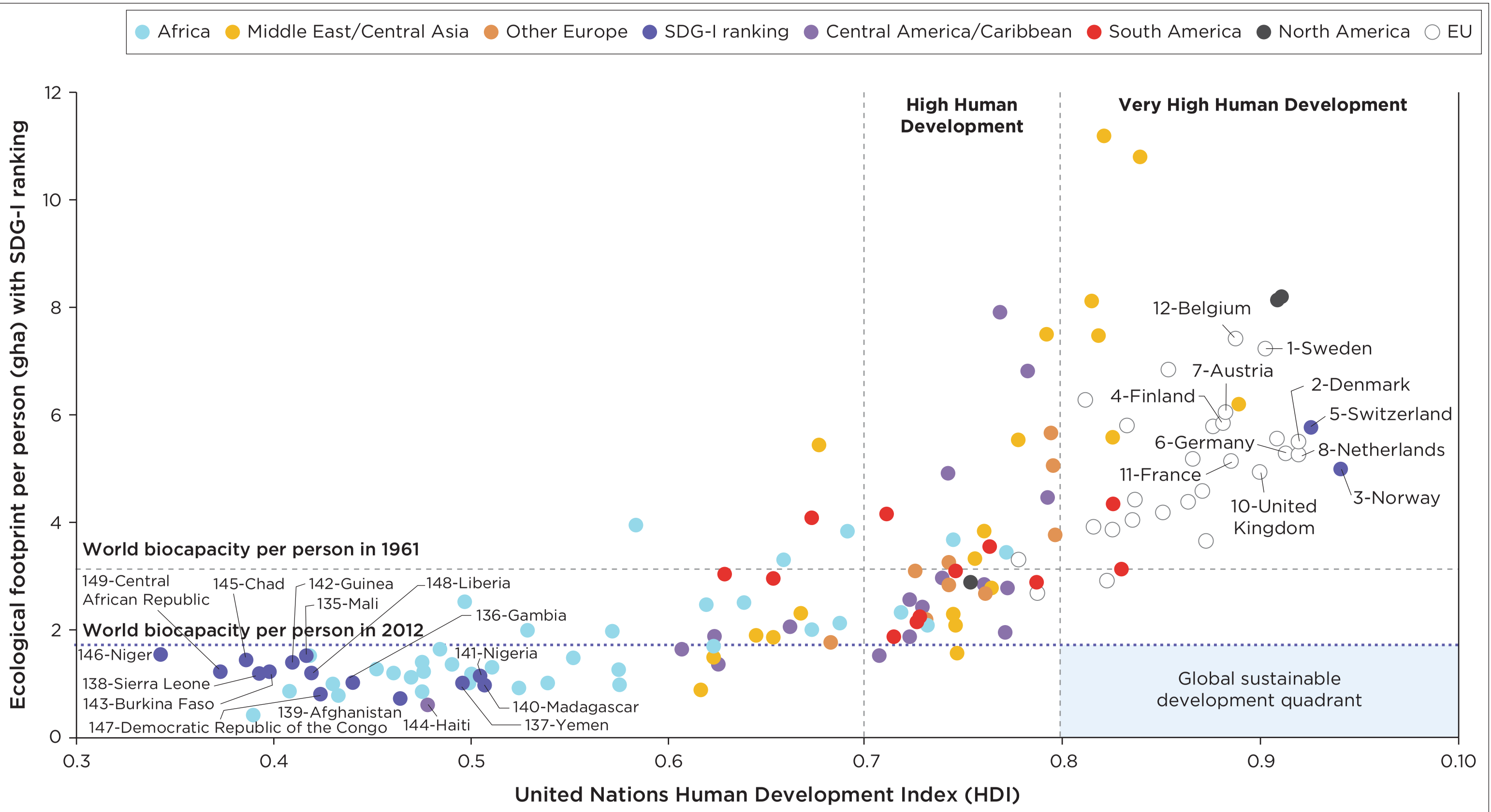
There were other similar steps. *The result?* A diagram was published that compared the ecological sustainability of the way of living of a given country with its compliance with the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index that considers GDP, life expectancy, literacy and education. In 2003 only Cuba satisfied all: if all countries in the world would live like Cuba did, the world would not exceed the biosphere's average capacity per person and, at the same time, would comply with the minimum standards presented by the UN Human Development Index (for an example of such an index, see Figure 15.1). In later indexes, no country could achieve that feat, although some did comply with slightly lower standards.

The question is to what extent the *consciousness* of the people of Cuba supports this system. *Would they, if given the opportunity, rather prefer to be like the United States of America?*

If we lived like Cuba, would we be happy? The UN Human Development Index does not measure happiness.

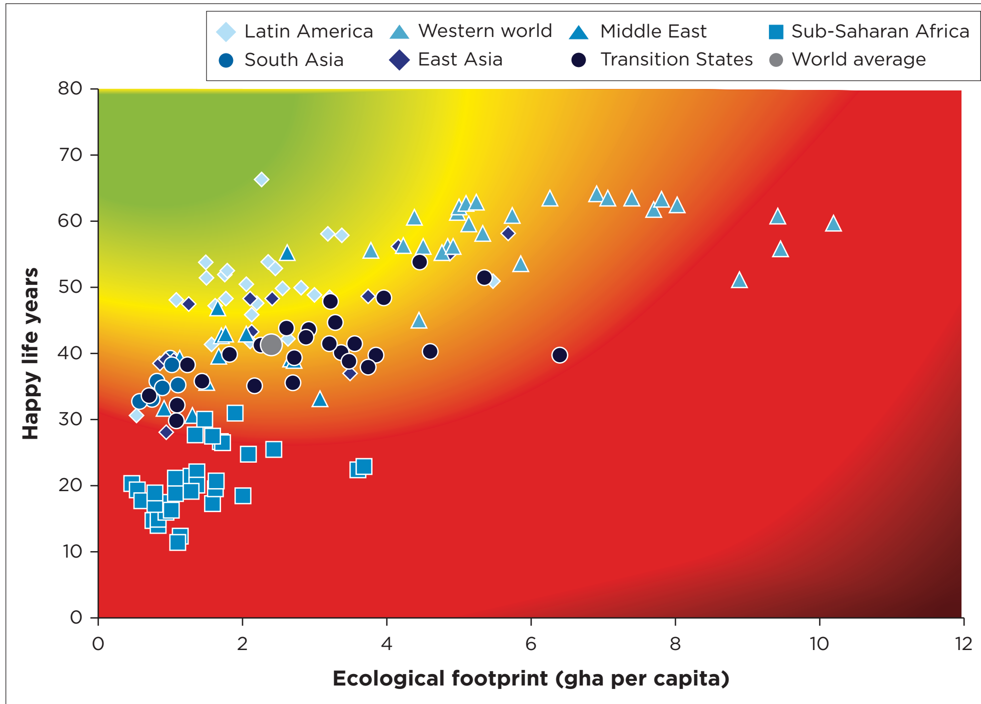
Costa Rica and the Happy Planet Index

An instructive answer to the question if happiness can be combined with a low ecological footprint is provided by Costa Rica. In a comparison of the happy life years and the ecological footprint of 143 countries, Latin American countries as a group, and especially Costa Rica, stand out by the way that they succeed in combining these two – much better than Western countries do (see Figure 15.2). The *Happy Planet Index* 'measures what



Source: Wackernagel, Hanscom and Lin (2017), redrawn and, published with appropriate permissions.

FIGURE 15.1: An example of the UN's Index for Ecological Footprint per person and UN's Human Development Index of Countries.



Source: Abdallah et al. (2009), redrawn and published with appropriate permissions.

FIGURE 15.2: The green target: Happy life years and ecological footprint for 143 countries and world average.

matters: sustainable well-being for all. It tells us how well nations are doing at achieving long, happy, sustainable lives.'[67] Costa Rica came out on top of 140 countries in 2009, 2012 and 2018. The country abolished its army in 1949 and has reallocated army funds to be spent on education, health care and pensions. The Costa Rican government uses taxes collected on the sale of fossil fuels to pay for the protection of forests. In 2015, the country was able to produce 99% of its electricity from renewable sources, and the government continued to invest in renewable energy generation in an effort to meet its goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2021.[68]

Why does this country do so well? The answer is in the combination of particular factors.

The ecology plays a role in Costa Rica. The country covers only 0.03% of the surface of the earth but has almost 5% of the world's biodiversity,

67. See https://happyplanetindex.org/wp-content/themes/hpi/public/downloads/happy-planet-index-briefing- paper.pdf

68. See http://happyplanetindex.org/countries/costa-rica

12 different climatic zones, more species of butterflies than the entire continent of Africa and over 850 bird species, more than in all of North America.[69]

However, the main driver here seems to be a specific *culture*. The tropical ecology does not seem to be the decisive contributor, given that the country that has been placed second on the Happy Planet Index, Mexico, has some tropical areas but also areas with dry conditions.

Although commonly used socio-political and economic indicators in these areas are not favourable, and many Latin American countries have weak political institutions, high corruption, violence, crime and poverty rates and very unequal distributions of income, their way of living is associated with high levels of happiness, argues Mariano Rojas (2018). This is attributed to cultural features that were formed by the blending of the European civilisations – mostly Spaniards and Portuguese – with the large indigenous civilisations which existed in the region – the Aztecs, the Incas and the Mayans. One of these cultural features is that, traditionally, co- existence with – rather than dominance of – nature was a central value of many indigenous groups, that is, living within and enjoying life *within* the existing conditions rather than changing nature; this leads to a slower pace of living and a relative disregard for materialistic values. People cherish extended family and communitarian values in which the purpose of the relationship is the relationship itself. Rojas (2018:n.p.) concludes: 'These cultural features play a central role in explaining happiness in Latin America'.

The Happy Planet Index quotes Rojas[70], who attributes Costa Ricans' 'high sense of well-being to a culture of forming solid social networks of friends, families and neighbourhoods'.

That reminds us of the strong link between good relations and happiness that was found in the Harvard Study of Adult Development and in Zamdela (see Chapter 10).

Most Western cultures that have had a strong impact on Africa (English, French and German) were perhaps more focused on dominating nature and on materialistic values than the Spaniards and Portuguese in Latin American countries.

We have, in other words, different combinations of factors in South Africa, and in Africa, than what they have in Latin America. We will now consider ways in which we can engage with households in the African context, in search of the sustainable well-being of communities.

69. See http://www.therealcostarica.com/travel_costa_rica/ecology_conservation_costa_rica.html

70. See http://www.therealcostarica.com/travel_costa_rica/ecology_conservation_costa_rica.html

Bridging the gap between the household and the wider world

In order to work with households, one must find ways to bridge the gap between the household and your own world.

Co-creating beneficial domestic practices

The potential contribution that science can make to improve the quality of life of the poor is often lost because countless good insights in the academic world do not get implemented. In the libraries of the Departments of Architecture at many South African universities, there are lots of books and journals on low-cost housing, and there are valuable energy-efficient low-cost building principles and guidelines, ideas about the best use of space to ensure an elegant combination of private spaces, community-creating spaces, functional spaces and how to assist low-income families in providing houses for themselves. Hardly any of these valuable ideas have found their way into the millions of low-cost houses that the South African government has provided free to low-income families, burdening them with houses that need expensive space heating in winter, that become unbearably hot in summer and do not provide a 'place to feel at home'.

And when academic insights are implemented, it is often done in a destructive way because the views of the end-users are not considered – their views of what is important, of social relations, of how the world works, of sickness and health and cause and effect, of the economy and of life as a whole, of what constitutes a good quality of life and of what one must do in each context and why.

Bridging the gap between the academic world and the African household requires a number of steps.

Step 1 is to gain insight into how the flow of information in the household is different from the flow of information in the academic world, which is often structured in similar ways as the departments of government and many businesses: around specialist topics such as health and education.

The academic world is structured by way of faculties, disciplines and subdisciplines, nicely illustrated by the *tree of knowledge*. It leads to specialisation; as time goes on, an academic tends to know more and more about less and less. The academic world tends to be centrifugal: a specialist field often becomes an isolated world that moves away from other specialist fields. Government departments and modern society in general tend to follow a similar pattern: these structures tend to focus on different aspects of life separately. There are efforts to gain a view of the whole and cross-fertilisation, but the basic structure remains intact.

The 'tree of knowledge' (Figure 15.3) is an old concept but it still attracts attention quite often, for example, Jacob Lechman's (2015) *How universities evolved tree-like structures*.

Source: 'Wilted tree during daytime', photographed by Adarsh Kummur, obtained from Unsplash, reproduced for publication by the publisher under the appropriate Unsplash license <https://unsplash.com/license>, viewed 07 August 2023, <https://unsplash.com/photos/zThTy8rPPsY>.

FIGURE 15.3: A tree to represent the tree of knowledge.

The flow of information in the household has a different structure. Here, many of the fields that are studied and managed in specialist fields come together (Figure 15.4):

- Many factors that are studied in diverse academic disciplines have an impact on the household (arrows moving inwards, centripetal).
- In the household, they meet, interact and combine to form the household as it is (dotted lines going sideways).
- The household, in turn, has an impact on the world around it (arrows moving outwards, centrifugal).

Step 2 is to bring the structure of the flow of information in your research team, consisting of specialists who previously may have worked in isolation, in line with that of the household. Select representatives of relevant

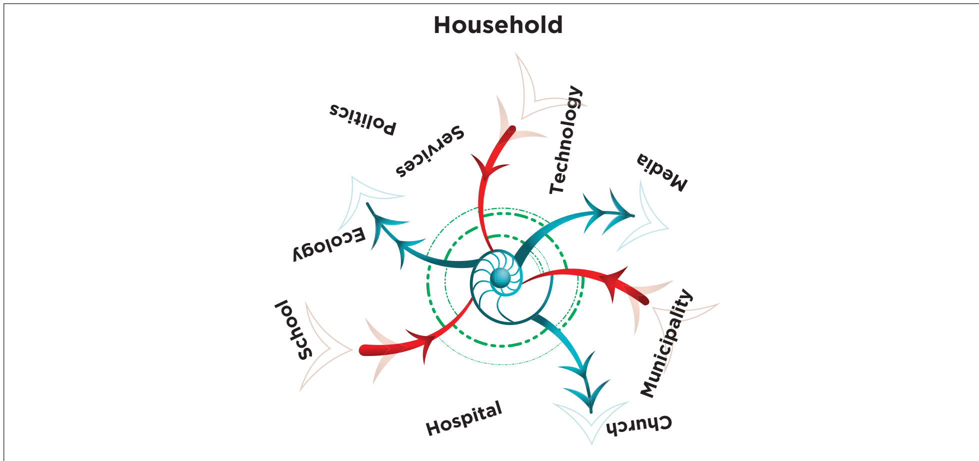


FIGURE 15.4: The flow of information in the household.

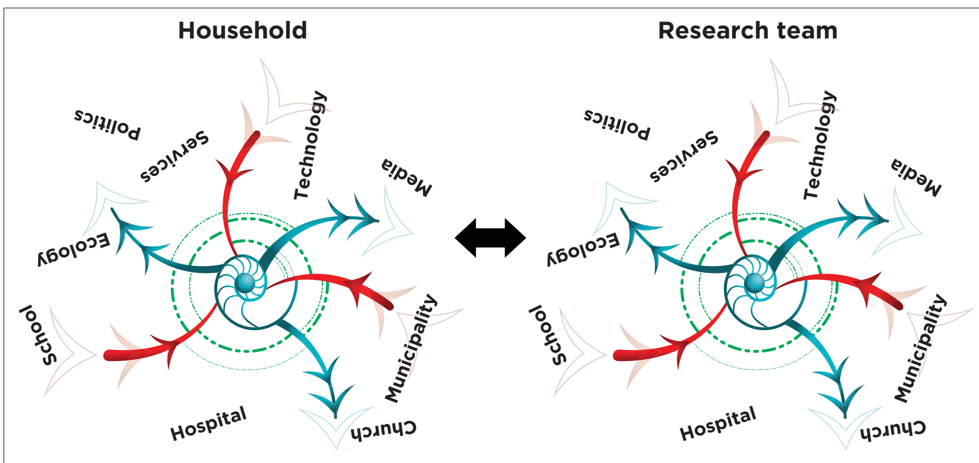


FIGURE 15.5: The flow of information in the research team has to have the same structure as in the household.

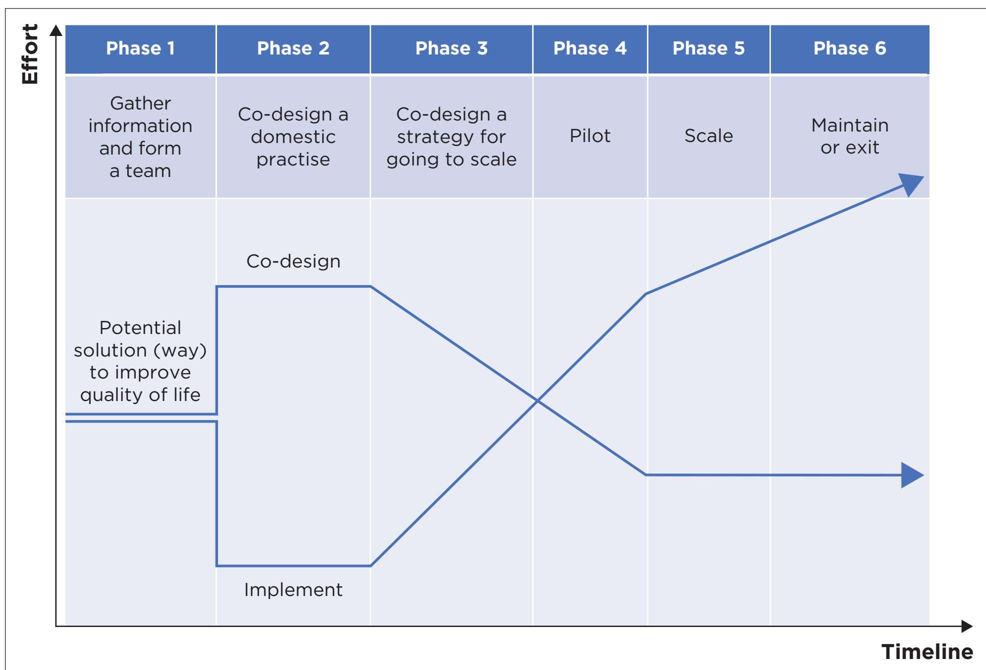
specialist disciplines that have the ability (insight, personality, interest, capability, etc.) to interact with each other and with household members (Figure 15.5).

This thought structure facilitates a better understanding of the functioning and dynamics of a household than the usual academic structure. It facilitates better communication with households. The scientific method often does not recognise the importance of relationships (among the team members, the team and the household, the household and all other stakeholders etc.), while in finding solutions to complex problems, relationships stand at the

very centre of the whole approach. A reductionist approach, where aspects of a complex system are isolated and treated on their own, is replaced with an approach where the interactions between these aspects and the functioning of the whole system are at the centre of attention.

You are now ready to find solutions for specific everyday problems. That is done in a number of phases.

Nova's phased approach provides a route to develop products and services by taking them through phases from a 'bright idea' to a full-fledged large-scale programme. In Figure 15.6, the phases of the development of solutions are depicted.



Source: Author's own work.

FIGURE 15.6: Nova phased approach: co-design and implementation.

The two lines represent the co-design activities that must strive for the best possible solutions, and the implementation activities that must see to it that a solution that complies with the criteria is taken to scale.

The phases begin small and grow gradually as long as the project seems viable:

- Gather information and form a team
- Co-design a domestic practice

- Co-design a strategy for going to scale
- Pilot
- Scale
- Exit

Gather information and forming a team

A bright idea is evaluated by a desktop study and possibly visits and interviews (e.g. *in situ* rapid assessment) to find out what information is readily available and if there are best practices that we can learn from.

The team is expanded to bring all the stakeholders and role players together. Depending on the project and the context, the team can consist of a representative number of household members, maybe 8-10, from a particular community, experts in relevant fields at universities and knowledge institutions, NGOs, the authorities, the funders, the churches and businesses and industries participating in the project.

The team must reach a consensus on the aims and procedures to be followed. Those who will implement the solution in later phases must make an input from the beginning in order to ensure that the result of the design process can indeed be implemented on scale.

The *output* is a proposal for the next phase. If the idea seems viable and gets the necessary support, the project proceeds to Phase 2.

Co-designing a domestic practice

To find a solution, one must find the most elegant combination of things and thoughts through a free and continuous exchange of ideas between all role players, in which the end-users in the team must see the possibility of a practice that can become part of their normal way of doing things, a solution that is a possibility for themselves.

Co-design means: the experts from outside the community have something to contribute, and so do the insiders, the people in the situation – they understand from daily experience how things work in their context or lifeworld. Multiple insights from different viewpoints must be integrated into a functional design by the insiders and outsiders putting their heads together in co-designing a solution and where the end-users must gradually or eventually take initiative and ownership of the process.

Experience has shown that, in transboundary research partnerships with developing countries, experts from outside the community can easily dominate the process, and that inhibits a free flow of information.

A free flow of information depends on equal power relations. It must be remembered that 'information is power, and sharing information or opening information channels might very well lead to tangible losses' (Swiss Commission, n.d., p7). Such losses occur if community members feel that the experts have more knowledge than they have, and they feel they must accept the information that the experts share with them. The question is then how information can be shared in a way that will facilitate synergy. Our approach, as role-players from outside the given communities, would be, after having agreed on a shared vision (e.g. to co-develop non-sewered sanitation practices with low-income residents), to introduce a diversity of technical solutions with which that vision can potentially be realised. That puts the residents in a position to evaluate the different options, to compare them, and to judge which ones would fit better into their context than others – or even more, to judge which aspects of different options are better.

Nova's experience is that when a diversity of possibilities is introduced, end-users often develop their own idea of what would be a possibility for themselves without merely accepting any of the solutions that had been presented. (See Case Study 4 and Case Study 5 below).

If that happens, the experts from outside can begin to engage in the discussion again in a careful manner, and the process of co-creation can begin. In this way, the relationship is protected from domination by any party.

The idea is implemented in a few households, evaluated, improved, and the whole process is iterated until all are satisfied.

The first milestone is that a domestic practice emerges that is formed by a really excellent and elegant combination of things in at least one household, that could spread fairly spontaneously to many other similar households, as maize did in Africa. If that happens, the strategy of focusing intently on a very small and specific local context would produce an impact that can go much wider, as Schumacher's book *Small is beautiful* suggests. This ideal is usually achieved to some degree only, but that is still better than nothing. In fact, even if the group does not produce a successful solution, the process could still have value if the interaction has prevented a bigger mess-up.

In the case of an energy-efficient wood stove, for example, the professor at the university and the illiterate mother in the kitchen must agree that the stove that has emerged out of the interactions complies with all the requirements before it is implemented on scale. The mother is the one that must use it. If she has a problem with the stove, chances are that the target group will not use it and the project can rather be terminated.

There are reasons why this phase is often not part of development projects, or it is done incompletely. Firstly, sufficient time is needed for this phase, usually several years. Funders are mostly keen on benefiting large numbers of people, while this phase is a slow process that is done with a few individuals before it can be taken to scale. There is also the problem that experts have their own ideas of success in mind and tend to pursue a pre-determined outcome.

The co-design phase should be understood as a seed that germinates. For a period of time it may seem as if nothing is happening, and the first growth can happen painfully slowly, but eventually a plant emerges. We do not have control over which plant will actually emerge, but from healthy relationships we can expect a satisfying outcome.

The *output* is a demonstrable real-life solution (e.g. a domestic practice) and a report that describes the solution and how it was developed, plus the first draft of a business case and a proposal and guidelines for the next phase.

Co-designing a strategy for going to scale

The way in which the solution must be taken to scale must be co-developed, again with all the role players. A draft strategy for how it can be taken to scale is formulated together, implemented on a small scale, maybe in one community, evaluated and iterated until it complies with the criteria. This can also take time.

The question is how a domestic practice that works in at least one household can be taken to thousands of similar households. A strategy to achieve that would typically combine a number of factors: the target communities; the route to be followed (e.g. taking it from one community to another; bottom-up and top-down approaches; incorporating it into another project, etc.); the partners that will be involved (e.g. the authorities, other NGO's, churches, industries, entrepreneurs); the financial and other resources that are available; marketing; management; maintenance; etc. The phase where a domestic practice is co-designed will already include steps to ensure that the eventual solutions have the best possible potential for being implemented by a large number of end-users.

The *output* is an implementation plan for the Pilot phase.

Pilot

The Pillot phase is a test run for the strategy for going to scale.

The *output* is an implementation plan, including a procedure for implementation, a business plan, a marketing plan, a management plan and a monitoring and evaluation plan.

Scale

The solution is implemented in the target communities supported by ongoing research and continuous monitoring of the way things develop, and improving the practice and the way it is taken to scale. This can be done by the team or through networks. The *output* is a large number of solutions in operation.

Exit

There must be arrangements to ensure that the programme as a whole, or the involvement of one or more of the partners, comes to an end in an orderly manner. The *output* is all the necessary agreements and documentation and a smooth exit. The aim is to ensure that the solution is sustainable.

We will now describe and reflect on a few projects on domestic energy use and food security where Nova has tried to develop sustainable practices with low-income households. It is followed by a community practice in a middle-class suburb. These projects do not provide perfect examples of what must be done, the question is what we can learn from both our mistakes and successes.

Case study 1: The role of the powers – Basa Magogo

It is still a familiar scene, although not as acute as a decade or two ago. On a winter afternoon in the cold Highveld of South Africa, where coal is cheap, where the poorest of the poor have come in large numbers in search of work in the mines and industries – many thousands more than the available jobs – where many live in makeshift informal structures or in poorly designed small dwellings built by the government in mass housing schemes, one would see lazy smoke rising from the chimneys all over the townships, first a few here and there, then more and more. It contrasts nicely with the clean, crisp air. People told us that they love the smoke. The fire cooks their food and gives them heat and warm water. If you see smoke coming from the chimney, you know there is life. You get used to the smoke. But it comes at a price. By sunset, a thick blanket of dirty smoke covers the houses. It has a sharpness in it, it stings your eyes and burns your throat, and it stinks. It is difficult to understand how people can stand it at all. Cars appear like ghosts in the streets. Parents keep their children indoors, not because the air is necessarily better there, but because they are afraid of the traffic and the bad visibility. The nights are usually windless, the blanket of smoke remains over the township until the

morning when a light wind blows it away, and the air is clear again – until, in the mid-afternoon, the lazy smoke begins to rise from the chimneys again.

The coal stove has multiple uses: cooking food, heating water to wash and bathe and space heating in winter. And it has deep social and cultural meaning, one of which is to keep the family together in the city. One mother made the memorable statement that has been quoted earlier: 'If there is fire in the house, there is life. Even if there is no food, but there is fire, I am happy, because the stove brings the family together'. The role of the stove in the household was discussed in Chapter 11.

However, the smoke is dirty, unhealthy and unpleasant:

> Approximately 1 million households consume just over 1 million tonnes of coal per annum in South Africa, most of which is burnt during winter. This combustion accounts for [...] up to 65% of the health impact of air pollution in the Vaal Triangle. Domestic coal burning results in excessive concentrations of air pollutants that have a measurable negative impact on health, and result in increased morbidity and mortality. Despite electrification initiatives, coal remains the fuel of preference for cooking and space heating in most low-income households in the central highveld region. (Wagner et al. 2005n.p.)

A well-researched report of a number of areas in South Africa where dirty fuels were used was prepared for the *Trade and Industry Chamber* by Bentley West and Airshed Planning Professionals. This report stated that, in a number of South African conurbations (cities and towns that have merged in an extended area), air pollution from all sources resulted in an estimated 67.2 restricted activity days p.a. per economically active person:

> Domestic fuel burning was estimated to result in the greatest non-carcinogenic health risks across all conurbations. This source accounted for ~70% of all respiratory hospital admissions and ~75% of all premature mortalities predicted. (Bentley West et al. 2004:64–67)

The potential for improving health and productivity in the area was huge.

There is no quick fix for this problem, as can be seen from the fact that different serious attempts had been undertaken since the 1960s to solve it, but with little success, according to officials of the Department of Mineral and Energy Affairs, who initiated the Low-Smoke Fuel Programme during the early 1990s:

> During the 1960s, low-smoke fuel (devolatilised coal) was investigated but without much success. The 1970s brought the low-smoke stove, but in spite of good sales, this initiative was largely unsuccessful because users modified the combustion chamber thereby negating the smoke suppression features. Electrification was introduced during the 1980s, but yet again this was unsuccessful at decreasing the concentrations of air pollution. Now, during the 1990s, the low-smoke (fuel) solution is being revisited. (Asamoah et al. 1995:1)

During our fieldwork, we found that it was not that the users modified the combustion chamber of the low-smoke stove, but that it cracked after a time, changing the design that caused it to emit low levels of smoke. Another problem was that the cast iron stoves were expensive, so that many users acquired badly designed locally made stoves.

In any case, the search for low-smoke fuels was just beginning when Nova was established.

The search for low-smoke fuels

A huge petrochemical industry, Sasol, once produced candles from a firmer type of wax that lasted longer than those generally used, and marketed it to low-income households. However, interest in their product was low in spite of the fact that it gave better value for money than the available candles. The reason, they found out too late, was that the low-income households used bottles for candle holders. When they carried a candle around in a bottle, the wax, which had a higher melting point than the available candles, dripped down and burnt their hands. The money spent on the facility to produce the candles was wasted.

In 1993, Sasol, being aware that low-smoke fuel was being considered by the government, decided to produce and market low-smoke coal to mitigate domestic air pollution. The Sasol officials remembered their experience with the candles and did not want to stumble over a similar obstacle again. The way that the coal would be used by household residents had to be tested properly *before* mass production started. The task was given to the still emerging Nova Institute and we started out on our first assignment.

Sasol did not ask us to identify possible solutions and present the best one for further investigation. They did not ask for an intensive process to develop a sustainable domestic practice with low-income households to mitigate air pollution. That would have been ideal for us, but our task was only to evaluate four types of devolatilised (low-smoke) coal together with a small group of households. We had to draw up a list of product specifications that would ensure that the coal would work for these households and that it would be desirable to them and meet criteria such as sustainability and affordability. We executed the project, but it was discontinued because Sasol concluded that the production process would be too expensive to make a profit. At least that brought us into the homes of a whole number of coal users.

Also in 1993, the Department of Minerals and Energy Affairs initiated the Low-Smoke Fuels Programme to find a fuel that worked and could be subsidised. A number of low-smoke fuels were tested in a township, Qalabotjha, at Villiers in the Free State province in 1997, in which Nova took part. None of the available low-smoke fuels complied with all the set criteria.

How Basa Magogo emerged

In 1997, Sasol revisited the low-smoke coal plans and commissioned Nova to draw up a strategy to deliver low-smoke coal to a nearby township. Sasol was not motivated by profit but by the need to come to an agreement with the government about a permit for one of their plants.

In our report, we argued that delivering low-smoke coal was expensive and ineffective. It would be much more cost-effective to develop an alternative solution for the problem of air pollution caused by the domestic use of coal, and Sasol commissioned us to do that. We came closer to the type of study we wanted to do!

In the winter of 1998, we evaluated five possible technical solutions for domestic air pollution in eMbalenhle: new 'smokeless' stoves; insulation; low-smoke fuels; liquid petroleum gas (LPG); repairing the stove and chimney – plus two combinations of some of these. We also had a control group.

That gave us eight groups of five households each that were monitored; seven groups used the technology that we had installed. We evaluated the results together with the residents and also measured the coal use and levels of pollution. None of them complied with all the criteria, but we were convinced that insulation had good potential if certain problems could be sorted out, such as the cost of the insulation material.

We were, however, under pressure to illustrate a concrete positive result within a short space of time. There was no time or funding for any further investigation.

We were aware that several government departments (Minerals and Energy, Health and Environmental Affairs) were promoting the so-called Scottish method, or top-down ignition method, over the media and popular TV programmes. This method was developed before 1955 by Dr Petrick of the then Fuel Research Council. We did not find anybody who used it – the mass marketing campaign seemingly had no impact at all.

The technique was demonstrated to three of our field workers. It is quite simple: instead of starting the fire with paper and wood at the bottom of the *imbaula* (an old 20-litre paint tin with holes in the sides that is used as a stove) and then adding coal on top, the paper and wood are placed on top of the coal, and the fire burns from the top downwards.

The three fieldworkers illustrated the technique to nine families in their homes. They all used it, but they were not impressed. The main complaint was that the coal did not ignite properly; they did not have enough paper and wood to enable the coal to ignite. One fieldworker, however, remarked

that a certain grandmother said that it did work for her. Investigating further, we found that she added a few handfuls of coal on top of the wood. After she had demonstrated it to us, the fieldworkers were convinced that it could work. The Basa Magogo method was named after this lady, Granny Nebelungu Mashinini; *Basa Magogo* means 'light up, grandmother!'.

We reported to the MD of Sasol that we had something that might work, but we asked him for funding to prove the effectiveness of the technique with scientific measurements. We showed him the photo in Figure 15.7, with an *imbawula* that was ignited in the traditional way on the left and one that was ignited with the top-down technique on the right. He was immediately convinced and said no further tests were necessary. We had to take it to scale in eMbalenhle.

This photo opened many doors for Nova.

In this way, Basa Magogo emerged after two years of experiments together with community members.

It was then implemented in eMbalenhle, a township on the highveld near Sasol's plant at Secunda – with excellent results. The aim was to reduce air pollution, measured by the levels of particulates, specifically of $PM_{2.5}$ or

Source: Photograph taken by Pierre Schoonraad of Nova, at eMbalenhle, in 1998, published with permission from Pierre Schoonraad.

FIGURE 15.7: The first photograph of Basa Magogo, an *imbawula* that was ignited in the traditional way on the left and one that was ignited with the top-down technique on the right.

PM_{10}[71], in the ambient air (the immediate surrounding air). We aimed for a 50% reduction, based on the assumption that 60% of coal-using households would take up the Basa Magogo technique and that the technique would cause an 80% reduction of pollution per household using it.

A Sasol official, NJ Wagner et al. (2005) measured in eMbalenhle:

> … an overall decrease of 51% in $PM_{2.5}$ concentration between 1999 and 2003 at the control site (Ext. 20), and 55% between 2000 and 2003 at the 1st location of implementation (Ext. 21) [..] The average temperature for the year 2000 was ± 2 ºC higher than the average temperatures measured during the year 2001, for the same time period. Thus, in general, the particulate matter concentrations measured in 2001 could not have decreased due to an increase in temperature. (pp. 8, 10–11)

A reduction in particulate concentrations results in a proportional reduction in health care costs, which had a huge impact on the households, as well as less absenteeism and an increase in productivity because of the better health of the employees of the industry.

The Minister of the Department of Minerals and Energy announced Basa as their flagship project at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002.

In 2005, the Department of Minerals and Energy established a governance system to coordinate a national roll-out of Basa in those areas that burn coal (Surridge, Kgobane & Chauke 2005).

Comparing Basa with low-smoke fuels

The low-smoke fuels were a purely technical solution that – and that was a step in the right direction compared with previous efforts – was tested for acceptability with the intended end-users.

Basa was the end result of several years of close interaction between the researchers and the residents in the community. A beter understanding of the role of the coal stove in the lifeworld of the residents and experimenting together with different potential technical solutions until one was adapted by a resident, produced a viable solution. Not only did it burn much cleaner, which has health benefits, but less coal was needed and that meant households saved money and less greenhouse gases were released into the atmosphere.

71. PM refers to particular matter in the smoke. PM_{10} is particulate matter 10 micrometers or less in diameter, $PM_{2.5}$ is particulate matter 2.5 micrometers or less in diameter, https://www.google.com/search?q=pm10+meaning&rlz=1C1RLNS_enZA779ZA779&oq=PM10&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUqBwgBEAAYgAQyBwgAEAAYgAQyBwgBEAAYgAQyBwgCEAAYgAQyBwgDEAAYgAQyBwgEEAAYgAQyBwgFEAAYgAQyBwgGEAAYgAQyBwgHEAAYgAQyBwgIEAAYgAQyCggJEC4YgAQY5QTSAQkzNjY2ajBqMTWoAgCwAgA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8.

It is interesting to compare the results of these two approaches, namely testing a technical solution for acceptability and working with households to co-design a solution.

Firstly, ease of implementation. The Basa photo was shown to the Department's officials in 1998, and they responded as enthusiastically as Sasol's MD, but did not scrap the search for low-smoke fuels immediately. In a report to the Department in 2001, there was a detailed analysis of the costs and logistics of providing low-smoke fuel. It would have to be manufactured, transported, stored, packaged, marketed and sold. At that stage, there had not been a demonstration of a satisfactory fuel prepared by coal devolatilisation in South Africa, that is, a fuel that lights easily, stays alight and gives as much heat as is needed, but the authors of the report felt that these problems could be solved, and the report stated: '... there is no doubt that coal devolatilisation is the correct route to prepare a low-smoke fuel, but the results need proving in practice' (Qase, Lloyd & Van Zyl 2001:39).

Basa, on the other hand, is comparatively easy to implement: residents only had to change their way of lighting the fire. As the project proceeded, we learned more about the difficulties involved with effecting such a change in behaviour, but that will be discussed later.

Basa also came out favourably in terms of cost. Compared to the estimated ZAR50m one-off to implement Basa in all coal-using communities in the country, the cost of providing low-smoke fuels was calculated to be ZAR416m each year (Scorgie, Burger & Sowden 2001:6–10).

The cost-benefit ratio (the cost of implementation compared to the monetary benefit because of savings in anticipated health care costs as a result of reduced air pollution levels attributable to effective implementation) was estimated to be 0.4 for low-smoke fuel compared to 177 for Basa. (Bentley West 2004:92).

Implementing Basa made sense. It would cost eight times less, one-off, than providing low-smoke fuels for only one year – a cost that would have to be paid every year. Its cost-benefit or return on investment ratio was 442 times better (177 to 0.4), it did not require extended logistics and it had been proven to work well.

Glowing reports were written by industry officials.

But nothing came of all these reports and plans. Possible reasons for that are discussed under the heading 'Reflection'.

When we had exhausted all options, we realised that the government and industries were not going to fund the project, and we started to investigate the possibility of generating carbon credits from the Basa project in 2005.

In 2006, we sold 220 credits to the mayor of London, who wanted to offset the carbon footprint of the mayor's annual street parade on the second Saturday in November.

The Basa project was saved by ICCO/Kerk in Actie, an office of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, who began to support the project.

The Danish Embassy and Sasol also made some *ad hoc* contributions. Nova developed a Gold Standard methodology to generate Gold Standard carbon credits by implementing this technique on scale. The type of carbon credit we generated was Verified Emission Reductions (VERs). A VER is a verified emission reduction of greenhouse gas equivalent to 1 tonne of CO2. ICCO's office for climate change, the Fair Climate Fund, gave a loan to Nova to implement Basa and so to generate Gold Standard VERs. Nova paid back the loan by delivering VERs to ICCO/Kerk in Actie, who sold them to get back their funds. This arrangement enabled Nova to implement Basa in 14 coal-using townships in more than 80,000 households. From these projects, we generated more than 200,000 Gold Standard VERs between 2009 and 2018. After implementing Basa in several communities, we measured the following:

- Average Retention Year 1 to Year 2 – 83%
- Average Retention Year 2 to Year 3 – 69%.

In some areas there were still sufficient reductions to sell credits six years after implementation, but this may have been assisted somewhat by some efforts from our side to maintain the use of Basa.

Nova was the first entity in South Africa to produce Gold Standard VERs.

To our surprise, we found that almost no transfer of this technique took place from Basa users to neighbours or friends. We could not find out what the reason was.

Reflection

What have we achieved? And what have we learned?

About 80,000 households were enabled to save millions of Rands on the cost of coal; they, as well as their neighbours who did not use it, could breathe cleaner air, enjoy better health and save on health care.

Developing Basa with households proved that Nova's approach of developing solutions through close interaction between researchers and residents for a sufficient period of time, experimenting with different potential technical solutions, could produce innovative solutions that are by far more cost-effective than a purely technical approach to problem-solving.

What prevented Basa from being a bigger success?

We can think of the following reasons:

- We developed the technique of top-down lighting with households but not, initially, the procedure to take Basa to scale. The implementation team improved the procedure as they proceeded, but with hindsight and more experience, we realised that we could have done more extensive co-designing with household members of a domestic practice that was fully integrated within the dynamics of the household. We did not, for example, give enough attention to whose role it was to make the fire and how the practice would be transferred to another household member who may have to take over the task at some stage.
- We repeatedly observed enthusiastic responses when Basa was introduced or demonstrated because it was so simple and effective, and it worked although it was counter-intuitive to ignite a fire from above, but we could not convince South African entities on a large front – the households themselves, churches, local organisations, big industries and government – to take Basa further, in spite of overwhelming evidence that it was a good investment, and in spite of the support of influential people such as a cabinet minister, the MD of Sasol and the rector of a local university, and dedicated efforts of government and business officials.

The lack of interest in taking it further was seen on different levels:

- On the local community level, we found that some residents used it in a careless way, reducing its effectiveness. Even more, the method was not spread to neighbours and others by those who used it.
- Some fieldworkers did not demonstrate it correctly and had to be monitored.
- With institutions that had the necessary financial means to support the programme, we found that the officials we worked with were very enthusiastic, especially if they had seen a demonstration of Basa, but they usually failed to get their superiors to finance the project; this happened both in industries and in government departments.
- There was a lack of a sense of common destiny in a local area, for example, between industries and nearby communities, both richer and poorer.
- There was a lack of a sense of common destiny on the international level: after the signing of the Kyoto Protocol, there was a global sense of common destiny that drove carbon credit prices, but that sense seemingly lost momentum later on.

Another complication: to what extent do the leaders of technology value science? Well-researched evidence found that the workers in this area had

in the order of 67.2 days of restricted activity days per year because of air pollution, of which 70% came from the domestic use of coal, and here was a solution at hand that could reduce that problem significantly, effectively, quickly and affordably. *Why not implement it?* Most managers lived in the suburbs and not in the townships where the smoke was generated, but residents of the suburbs often complained that the smoke that spread over the whole area severely affected them and their families too – the managers *themselves*, and their families, also breathed the polluted air and they also became sick as a result.

Is there a preference for expensive technical solutions? While we were negotiating with a certain industry in the Vaal Triangle for ZAR2m to implement Basa in surrounding townships, there was a newspaper report that the same industry was going to spend ZAR500m on cleaning the air in one of their stacks. This would have only a small impact on ambient air pollution in the area, because the stack releases smoke high up in the air. We eventually did not get the funds to implement Basa from this industry – the board that had to decide on the proposal said they are a steel industry, so they must solve the problem by producing a low-smoke stove from steel – which also did not happen.

Officials of industries and consultants (Wagner et al. 2005) remarked about Basa: 'The affordability and desirability of this solution, determined in cooperation with the community, as much as its technical simplicity, [led] to this high success rate'. The question is, if it was a big and expensive technical solution, would it not have been much more successful in attracting the necessary funding?

Several years later, the problem was tackled with enormously expensive projects to eradicate coal use completely by insulating low-income households and replacing the coal stoves with LPG stoves. Because of time pressure, there was no time to spend years developing domestic practices together with household members. However, Nova was contracted to develop the programme and to involve households optimally within the time available.

And last but not least, why did those who are poor, who are more directly exposed to the pollution than people in the suburbs and who have been introduced to an easy way to reduce the pollution and save money – why did they not show it to their neighbours, who continued with the old technique of igniting their fires? Why did households complain about the pollution from their neighbours without taking any steps to take this simple solution to them?

On the other hand, why would a church from the Netherlands and an embassy from Denmark, who are far away from this problem, be willing to

pay to decrease heavy air pollution if those who are affected directly by it and can solve the problem do not do it?

These are questions that we do not have answers for. We can only formulate a few hypotheses. In our reflection on each of these hypotheses, the question will be considered: *how did the three worlds, the modern world, African tradition and Christianity come together here?*

☐ *Hypothesis 1: We know better*

We often find, if we talk to business officials or academics and try to get them interested in the idea of working with households to uplift poverty, that they would tell us what the causes of poverty are and how to solve it, while we try to explain that no outsider can know the solution if you do not know what is going on in that community.

Among leaders of industry, is there a tendency to think that they know better what people need than the people themselves and that a solution that they present must be better than a solution developed from the bottom up?

In this hypothesis, the modern world – with the power of technology, money, bureaucracy and formal education – dominates the African world and Christianity to the extent that these two worlds are almost invisible.

We can repeat the warning of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in his book *The irony of American history* in 1952, that Americans (read: the modern world) should not think that they are a special nation. This belief leads to arrogance, Niebuhr warned, to a belief in quick fixes, an unfounded belief in your own power and, as Mak (2012:474) pointed out, to disregard for the views of other nations and the dynamics and complexities in other parts of the world.

As Herman Melville (n.d.) said: ‘Of all the preposterous assumptions of humanity over humanity, nothing exceeds most of the criticisms made of the habits of the poor by the well-housed, well-warmed and well-fed’.

Africa has suffered as a result of this attitude. The modern world did bring many good things to Africa, but when the modern world thinks, as it often does, that it *is* the solution for Africa, it becomes destructive.

In the terms used in the theological guidelines presented, such arrogance is sin because it leads one not to enter into a relationship with the poor but rather to turn into yourself, taking significant decisions based on your own ideas and not on an understanding of the context in which those decisions have an effect. It also leads to poverty by constituting a relationship that does not work.

☐ *Hypothesis 2: Power struggles*

In 2002, the Department of Minerals and Energy started planning to implement the Basa technique in all coal-using communities. At some stage, an official of the department asked me to accompany him to a meeting with representatives of the major coal-using industries. At the meeting, he informed them of the Department's plans with Basa and told them that the Department wanted them to help cover the cost of the implementation because they were all stakeholders in the issue. The industry representatives told him that that was, in effect, an additional form of tax and that they were not prepared to take responsibility for what was the government's task. They then left the meeting.

This power struggle has continued to play a role in industry's support for air pollution projects in the community. The government occasionally succeeded in forcing or nudging industry to get involved, for example, by making such involvement conditional for certain concessions that government made to industry about pollution from their own plants. Whenever that happened, money suddenly became available for community projects – something that was scarce when the only motive was the best interest of those who use coal and have to suffer the direct consequences.

Another example of power play: having experienced that officials struggled to convince the managers higher up to implement Basa, we went to the MD of Sasol and asked for his support to take Basa to scale. He was positive and asked the Sasol plant in the Vaal Triangle to support the implementation of Basa in the whole area, which was heavily polluted, and where there were a number of coal-using industries and a huge number of people who used coal at home. The management of the local plant agreed to do so, on the condition that the other industries in the area share the cost. Sasol took the trouble to get the other industries on board. The then rector of the Vaal Triangle campus of the North-West University was regarded as an influential and well-connected person in the area, who had good relations with all these industries. We (Sasol and Nova) approached him to assist us in mobilising the other industries, and he did so with enthusiasm. However, the other industries, giving different reasons, were reluctant to take part, each one seemingly feeling that the others should do more.

This can most probably be interpreted as a power struggle between the industries. It was not a financial issue. The financial cost of the programme would have been trivial in comparison to what they routinely spent on other things.

In this hypothesis, the industries became involved in a power struggle with each other and with the government. And they all had good arguments.

The government expects the industries to take some responsibility for the communities that form around them. And there are good practical reasons why an industry would prefer a mutually beneficial relationship with the communities around them. Social unrest, mass action, crime and pollution – there are many problems that are detrimental to both industry and community. An industry that does not enter into a mutually beneficial relationship with those around them, but extracts a great deal of wealth that benefits other stakeholders only, may run into all sorts of difficulties.

On the other hand, entering into a relationship can also be difficult. There can be competition in the community to benefit from whatever the industry has to offer, drawing the industry into conflicts between factions in the community. Doing something can lead to higher expectations and further demands.

In the previous hypothesis, the industries represent the modern world.

The government, by and large, represents the African world.

The reluctance of the industries to do something that they regarded as the responsibility of the government is understandable. Industry often suffers because of the authorities' lack of service delivery that leads to mass actions and strikes and demands from communities that industry must step in to solve the problem, even by providing services where local authorities fail.

The power struggle between the industries and the government is part of the overall, complex power struggles in this country. Almost all ideologies of the world are here engaged in a grim struggle: liberalism, with its emphasis on reason and individual freedom; a Stalinist desire in many state circles to control everything and everyone; the different cultures and worldviews; capitalism and socialism, to name a few, in different forms and combinations, plus corruption, greed and personal ambition.

There is hardly any part or aspect of this country, including the air, the land, the rivers and the sea that does not suffer the consequences. Basa is but one of the small victims of this power struggle.

It is difficult to determine the role of Christianity as power in these events, because it did not play a prominent role.

☐ *Hypothesis 3: Hopelessness*

Why do the households, who live in this terrible smoke everyday, not rush to learn the technique, in order to save money, to have better health, to breathe cleaner air? Why does a family who uses it not show it to their neighbours, who produce the smoke that they still have to breathe? Why

this lack of agency regarding something that benefits you in many ways, that is simple and effective, and costs nothing, but saves you money?

There are many theories about what motivates human behaviour, such as the will to power of Friedrich Nietzsche and the will to meaning of Victor Frankl. We are motivated by inclinations we hardly know or understand. But do we have a theory that explains a lack of an impulse to do something in the African context? Maybe one that is not imposed from another cultural context?

There are a few indications from within the communities themselves.

In a group discussion with residents, we asked why people did not take up Basa en masse, in order to improve their quality of life. One of the women said: ‘That is what we do, in many ways: we destroy ourselves’. What should we make of a remark like that?

As we have seen in Chapter 12, death has a positive meaning in African tradition, in spite of all the sorrow that goes with it. We have discussed the clear element of joy at many African funerals, which has been explained by the belief that death is homecoming: you are going home to your ancestors; we have noted the fatalism about driving behaviour at the funeral of a black colleague. It reminded me of the title of a book by the South African writer of short stories, Can Temba: *The will to die*.

The positive meaning that is given to death and destruction could perhaps be explained by the circular concept of time that we have seen: because death and life are both taken up in the circle, just like good times and bad times, death becomes the cause of life and life the cause of death; progress will cause distress, and hardship will cause happiness.

During a severe drought in Venḓa, a church member said to me: ‘This drought and heat are good things, they bring us rain’. I replied that I think the rain will end the drought, but not that the drought causes the rain to fall. He responded: ‘Just wait, you will see, it will rain.’

Another one said to Wilhelm van Deventer: ‘Bad is good, worse is better, worst is the best. Trouble constitutes the dynamics of life’. This attitude was combined quite nicely with the Marxist notion that resistance drives history: the antithesis that challenges the thesis, the revolution that challenges the status quo, brings renewal and progress – resistance, rejection of what is, brings new life, a new synthesis. This has led to destruction on a large scale and, yes, to liberation. But eventually, you need to build, not break down, and that is the problem with an approach that only has resistance to offer. Steve Biko knew what synthesis he had in mind with his resistance, namely, eventually, a peaceful and respectful relationship between black and white, and that makes his approach so constructive.

Jesus' death is central to the Christian message, but as we have seen, not all deaths lead to life. His resistance to the powers took place with an excellent understanding of the existing structures and formed part of a much bigger plan, the coming of a new dispensation in world history.

Hypothesis 4: Powerlessness

Lack of agency could also be caused by the phenomenon of *accommodation* to poverty, as described by John Kenneth Galbraith (1980). 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 civilised, 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. (Galbraith 1980:56)

It reminded me of a teacher in Malawi who said that people are not concerned about HIV because they say: 'Why do I want to live 10 years longer? There is nothing that keeps me here'.

In July 2003, a group of 12 theological students of the University of Pretoria, together with three Nova researchers and seven Nova fieldworkers, did fieldwork in eMbalenhle, for six days. The aim was for the students (10 were black, two were white) to get a better understanding of everyday life in a township. A number of households were visited on a daily basis and some group discussions were held.

The students – specifically the black students – were shocked by what they saw; they hardly noticed the positive side of things. Words that denote dysfunctionality abound in their reports on the fieldwork, such as: inability to pay for funerals; child-headed households; broken dreams; loss of hope; conflict; fear for criminals; bribery; corrupt policemen; air pollution; injuries and disabilities (e.g. a worker having lost all his fingers in an accident); leaking houses; cutting of services because of nonpayment (followed by illegal connections to the electricity grid); HIV and AIDS; repeated removals of residents; stealing; high rates of unemployment; drugs and alcohol abuse; divorce; rape; child molesting; pregnant girls deserted by their boyfriends; vandalism – and, again, self-destruction and self-hate.

The story of a family that one student wrote in his report provides some insight into the problems that many dysfunctional and poverty-stricken families struggle with every day:

> 'This is the family of XY. The parents died about three and two years ago, respectively. The husband died whilst he was ploughing on a farm. He fell off the tractor and the tractor ran over him, breaking his skull. For the funeral the

> farm owner only paid for the coffin, without any additional support whatsoever in spite of the fact that the man was the breadwinner of the house. A year later the wife also passed away due to diabetics, leaving all the children to their grandmother (mother to the wife) who is a pensioner; her pension is the only source of income of the ten people who constitute this family. They stay in a shack with four rooms. The family is in a desperate state: the older children have dropped out of school; the sixth one is still attending school and is in Grade 7. She is often drowsy in the class because of hunger. She is more than two years behind with school fees; she cannot afford school uniforms, books, etc. She is also about to drop out of school.
>
> 'There isn't enough money to buy coal and food every day. They also do not pay for services and fear eviction by the local council. They survive in various ways: by way of an illegal connection to the electricity grid and by searching through ash dumps for pieces of unburnt coal – i.e. by using what was thrown away by people who are also very poor.
>
> 'They see themselves as the rejects of society: rejected by the farmer, the local council, industry and the community who is looking down on them because of their poverty. They only depend on one another and on their ancestors.'

This family was destroyed when the father died in an accident while working. The farmer and the local council, who here represent the modern world and the African world, respectively, did not take care of them. They have become the rejects of the modern world and of their own community. What remains is the traditional small-scale world: the extended family that cares for them, and their ancestors. They are at least six children, which is possibly the result of the traditional African view that life depends on having many offspring – in this case, it puts an unbearable burden on the available resources.

Feeling powerless is understandable in this context.

Christianity is not visible anywhere in this story. The message that Jesus got involved with those who were powerless in his context is relevant here too.

☐ *Hypothesis 5: Religious thought patterns*

How must human agency be understood in a world where stories like the following one, which was reported by a student, are nothing strange?

> We visited one of the traditional healers in the community. She is a single mother of six children. We asked her how did she come to be a traditional healer, and how does she work as a traditional healer and how does she heal people?
>
> She started to experience the calling in 1955, when she was a young girl. She had a headache and began to dream some funny dreams, like seeing

> people. She told her parents and they couldn't cure her. The mediums were consulted but they couldn't help her either. She began to be worse and her body couldn't function, she was crawling. In 1955, 17 June in the midnight she heard a voice calling her and she was told in the dream to go to the Ligwa river in Transkei, in Mount Fletcher. She went there in the midnight. She was swallowed by a snake. He took her underwater until she reached another country. This country is like the world in which we are living. She stayed there for four months.
>
> She met people who taught her traditional healing. She said she was healed by the ancestors. The time she was under the water, her parents reported to the chief and to the police that she was lost. Nobody knew where she was. She came in September from the water having herbs for healing and dressed in beads, in the traditional way. She told her parents to slaughter an ox for her and she had a traditional healer who was guiding her as far as tradition is concerned. She was under the ancestors' guidance.
>
> The first person she healed was her grandmother. She used goat fat. She was told to do so by the ancestors. She began to heal many people in the community and in various areas. She heals cancer, TB and AIDS if it is not yet full-blown. She is also a seer. She strengthens homes and protects people before they get into danger. She travels from province to province to help people.
>
> The ancestors told her to not marry. She must have children of one man. 'She believes in God as she believes in ancestors. She goes to 12 Apostle Church but some Sundays she is too busy to go. She declares that God is omnipotent. She doesn't give people herbs for killing. She doesn't associate herself with today's traditional healers. She claims that they are not really called by the ancestors due to their behaviour.'

The modern world does not play a role in this story, and it is only in the last paragraph that the Christian faith comes into the picture. It is clearly a case of making the circle bigger, in Kofi Awoonor's terminology. The Christian faith is taken up in the African circle among all the other spiritual powers and does not play a role of its own.

What would happen if this faith would, like a bit of yeast, begin to work through the way this traditional healer thinks? One would expect a strong experience of personal freedom, of accepting the existence of a secular world, as Newbigin, writing from India, argued: a natural world, free from all sorts of spirits and supernatural powers, where you can serve God in freedom – that is, if you do not enslave yourself again to other powers, such as the powers of the modern world. One would also expect the emergence of an element of personal responsibility and agency, of caring for yourself, your neighbour and the creation of God in a rational, natural way.

Remarks and observations

At some stage, we considered getting the churches in the area together to discuss the possibility that they could help to implement Basa in the community. We thought of providing a liturgy and a sermon about our responsibility to care for ourselves, our neighbour and the creation of God. The pastor could then at the end of the service say to the congregation: we will now demonstrate to you a practical way in which you can do the things I preached about. Outside the church building, Basa would be demonstrated to the congregation; when that was over, the congregation would discuss what they had seen and heard and what they would do about it.

We never arranged such an event. Should we have done it? Should one associate the Christian faith so directly with a specific practice that may later be regarded in a negative way?

On the other hand, how would the Christian faith become part of daily life if we do not make such associations?

In the whole Basa episode, how else could we have resisted the intangible powers in a practical and meaningful way?

Case study 2: Urban farming

In 1999, Nova was commissioned by the Willem Nicol Trust to work with a church in Soshanguve, a township about 30 km north of Pretoria, to give literacy classes to people who could not read or write.

We recommended that we rather develop an *urban farming* programme. At the time we defined the basic problem according to the insights we had then:

- There are not enough jobs in the formal economy to provide employment for all people in the country, including those who are illiterate or semi-literate.
- The percentage of jobless people among school dropouts was higher than among illiterate people, which made us think that people need more than the ability to read and that literacy classes should include an element of skills training.
- An urban farming practice would require the functional integration of technical, economical, socio-cultural and ecological factors.

Technically, we calculated, the size of the sites or plots in this township was big enough for a household to produce enough vegetables in their garden to earn an income that is at least equal to the salary of a domestic worker, with the added benefit that the mother would not have to travel for hours between her home and her workplace every day.

The results of the project were not encouraging: the production levels were mostly low. In those cases where people did produce a substantial quantity and quality of vegetables, they would rather let it go to waste than try to sell it. In the end, a number of families produced enough to improve the diet of their families and a few made some income, perhaps enough to buy bread and milk.

We tried to find out what the problem was. Personality seemed to be an obvious factor. A good farmer may not be a good salesperson and vice versa. We did not consider the whole value chain from production to distribution.

An important issue was that of identity. People felt that they did not, in an urban area, want to plant vegetables in the front of their gardens, as they did in the rural areas. It did not suit their new urban identity (Ingram 2006).

In 2002, Nova was invited to take part in a project to produce food at home, in a rural area. We then decided to terminate the urban agriculture project and, as far as the urban areas are concerned, to concentrate on other ways of generating income from home, such as the production of dishwashing soap.

The question lingered in our minds: if home-based food production did not fit into the way residents experienced their identity in an urban context, what was their relationship to the space around their homes?

In 2024 our daughter Betsie le Roux and I visited a resident of Hammanskraal, a township in the same conurbation as Soshanguve, who does earn an income that compares very well with the salary of a domestic worker, without having to travel for hours every day to the city where the work is. Several others are following his example.

In 2008 Betsie, who was a student in plant science at the University of Pretoria at the time, did a study in a nearby township, titled *The vegetation and land use of a South African township, Hammanskraal, Gauteng* (Van Niekerk 2008). During the fieldwork, attention was given to the use of land and water in the space around residents' homes. The following discussion is based on this study.

Observing the visible land use in the township revealed:

- Most household sites had an area of empty unproductive soil, which residents swept clean every day.
- Almost all natural vegetation was cleared from the yards, except for a few indigenous trees here and there.
- In about a quarter of the households one could see that the soil was actively tilled and watered for food production.

- About a third of the households had a flower garden or lawn; lawns were very small, even as small as two square metres, with no apparent use or function.
- Fruit trees seemed to be more popular than vegetables.
- Sometimes, if vegetables were planted in front, they were hidden between the flowers.
- Many exotic ornamental trees were planted instead of indigenous plants.

Interviews were done with ten households to determine the underlying meaning that influenced their current land use. The aim was to form a better understanding or insight, as argued by JH van den Berg (see Chapter 3), into why certain land uses occur.

There were many illegal connections to the municipality's water system, with the result that some of the further removed sections did not have water for long periods. And yet, some households in these sections still had a leafy garden, which is an indication of abundant water. At about 02:00 in the night, water would usually be available in these areas, and these families woke up at this time to fetch water at the communal tap to store it in containers to water their gardens.

Three photos of different houses were shown during the interviews. The first photo was of a traditional hut, in harmony with the natural environment, with some food crops planted next to the house. The second photo, which was taken in the research area, had a garden with ornamental plants such as flowers. In the third photo, which was also taken in the research area, the soil was bare and swept clean and there were very few plants. The people were asked to choose the most desirable house and to explain why they chose it. Their answers were compared to their current land use.

Regarding the preferred land use, almost all households preferred the flower garden above the traditional hut or the garden with clean-swept soil – nobody liked the latter, although all ten households had areas of thoroughly clean-swept soil.

Interesting remarks were made during the conversations. There were remarks that express fear:

- People planted vegetables behind the house or between other plants to hide it, because of fear that it will be stolen and because they wanted their front yard to be nice. In traditional villages, they said, people planted food in the front yard because it was not stolen there.
- People cleared the natural vegetation around the house to get rid of snakes.

Remarks on the aesthetic and status value of a garden:

- The flower garden is nice; she wants the yard to be nice.
- People with no gardens are regarded as being poor or lazy.

Remarks related to traditional African religions:

- You may not work in the garden on a Saturday, because people are being buried on a Saturday and you must have respect for the soil if people are being buried.
- Trees are cut down because snakes travel through the air and come to live in the trees. When lightning strikes, you can hear the snakes when they come to your trees.
- Ancestors are not bound to the soil where they are buried, if she moves she just tells her ancestors and they will move with her.
- The whole stand is related to the ancestors, they protect her. She also believes in God.

Remarks that distinguish between indigenous and exotic trees:

- She has many trees, but she only likes some of them.
- She could not afford indigenous trees.
- They believe in something that can benefit them, and indigenous trees have no benefit.
- They plant exotic trees because they copied from one another.
- People like modern trees more than African trees; people live in two different worlds.

One of the conclusions was that the current use of space limits the production of crops and that more productive crops, such as fruit trees, could be introduced if they complied with some of the requirements mentioned in the interviews.

Reflection

We can describe the problem with urban farming that we encountered as an inadequate combination of things and thoughts.

The aim of moving to the city, the ideal of *coming through* described by Brandel-Syrier (1978:8, 13;) was to enter the modern world by successfully coming through these three processes: Christianisation, education and urbanisation (see Chapter 7 under the heading ‘The 1970s’). Something of that ideal still resonates in this township.

The ancient tradition of domestic food production, which could have softened the blow of joblessness, was left behind as not fitting into the modern identity. Using indigenous plants, which could have provided a beautiful garden that did not need irrigation, also did not fit into the modern self-image.

The exotic plants and small lawns in the gardens symbolised a new ideal identity. The purpose of such a garden is purely aesthetic and hardly any food is produced. It requires high inputs of energy and resources (see also Harari's account of the history of lawns in Chapter 14).

The different value systems – the traditional concept of *Ubuntu* and the Christian value of loving your neighbour – did not lead to a community where the limited water resources are shared. Some illegally acquired an abundance of water, while others suffered deprivation of water as a result.

The sites available to these families could make a significant contribution if the right combination of things and thoughts could be found. This is even more relevant after many have lost their income because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Case study 3: Molati Infield Rainwater Harvesting project

In 2002, Nova was invited by the (black) congregation of the Uniting Reformed Church in Molati, in the Limpopo province of South Africa, and the neighbouring (white) congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church of Letsitele to assist them in searching for solutions for some of the problems that low-income communities in the area struggled with. This was done on the initiative of the late Mrs Maria Nyathi, the wife of the local pastor, because she believed in Nova's approach of developing, with the people who are to use them, practices that fit into the context of their households and community.

This is how we became involved in the village of Molati and surrounding villages.

The congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church Letsitele primarily serves the Afrikaner community of the Letsitele area, and the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa congregation serves the black, mostly Tsonga-speaking communities.

Letsitele is a small town with several shops, and Molati is a village in the area. Both are in the Greater Tzaneen local municipality within the Mopani district of the Limpopo province, South Africa.

According to the 2011 National Census, the population of the Greater Tzaneen municipality was 390,095, of which 2.96% were white and 2.59% were Afrikaans-speaking. Letsitele had 406 residents (Frith 2011). One can assume that most of them were white.

There are high levels of poverty. The poverty can be expressed in numbers, as can be seen in the municipal report *Greater Tzaneen municipality*

(Council of Tzaneen 2019) that was adopted by the municipality on 30 May 2019. The vast majority, 80% of the municipality's population, live in approximately 125 rural villages. Unemployment is high: 36.9% of the population and 48.5% of the youth, and that was before COVID-19. The level of modern education is low: 9.9% completed secondary school and 1.2% higher education (Council of Tzaneen 2019:144–145).

The national government's policy is to provide free basic services to those who cannot afford to pay, but the backlog makes the policy meaningless: the number of households with access to free basic water in this municipality is 1 295 and the number of backlogs 85,475, while the number of households with access to free basic sanitation is 1 360 and the number of backlogs 86,388. Even more: the backlog of services is growing: 'There are a growing number of households with low income in the municipal area which result in poor payment for services' (Council of Tzaneen 2019:359). The existing infrastructure, such as the wastewater works, is not big enough to cater for the existing population, even less so with the increase of households who need to be connected.

This is typical of many South African municipalities. As we have seen before (see Chapter 14), only a few of South Africa's municipalities were in full compliance with the relevant legal and financial requirements in 2022-23. The municipal report does not contain information on nutrition, but one can assume that the situation is not much better than in South Africa as a whole. In 2013, a survey indicated that only 45.6% of the national population were food secure while 28.3% were at risk of hunger, and 26.0% did experience hunger. In the Limpopo province, of which this area forms a part, more than 30% of the population experienced hunger, which is more than the national average. Of all age groups, the youngest boys and girls (zero to three years old) had the highest prevalence of stunting in the country (26.9% and 25.9%, respectively. Human Sciences Research Council 2013:8, 18, 145–146)

The South Africa Early Childhood Review 2024 reports that in 2019, before the COVID lockdown, 34% of young children in South Africa were living in households with income below the food poverty line, despite the wide reach of the Child Support Grants[72].

In 2020, more than 60% of the children aged 0–17 were multidimensionally poor; that is, they were living in households where they suffered at least three out of seven dimensions of poverty (health, housing, nutrition, protection, education, information, water and sanitation). In 2024, in the Limpopo Province, it is 82,8%.[73]

72. https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/SA-early-childhood-review-2024-FINAL.pdf

73. See http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=13422

The irony is that this very poor area is also a fertile area – mango trees, for example, grow on their own from mango pips that are thrown away. The Letsitele area has ample natural resources, although water has to be managed carefully. We can say that this fertile area has the potential to help solve the problem of malnutrition and the problem of unemployment if the available agricultural production methods and other methods are used. The technology that is necessary to solve all of these problems exists.

It is not so easy to solve the problem. The Oxfam report *Hidden Hunger in South Africa* has a chapter *Previous policies have not worked* (2014:30–31). It provides 'a limited summary' of some government policies that have focused on food and hunger. These policies did not work, because of 'severe gaps with piecemeal implementation and lack of coordination at local level'. The report shortly discusses the following policies: the *Integrated Food Security Strategy* of 2002, with the goal of eradicating hunger by 2015; the *Integrated Food Security and Nutrition Programme* of 2006; *The National Development Plan*; the *Zero Hunger Programme* of 2012; the *Food Security and Nutrition Policy* of 2013, to ensure 'the availability, accessibility and affordability of safe and nutritious food at national and household levels'; and the *Fetsa Tlala* [End Hunger] of 2013 that aimed to 'support subsistence and smallholder farmers to put 1 million hectares of land under production by 2018/19'.

Maria said that many people were hungry and that they wanted assistance to produce their own food for their households. She believed that the tradition of producing your own food, combined with modern science and technology, could help those who were hungry to obtain food, with the possibility of earning cash if enough is produced to sell some of it. Land was available.

A project to assist people in producing food for themselves made perfect sense.

Commercial farms

In this area, there are a number of large commercial farmers, mostly white, who produce food for the market and for export. On the commercial farms, there are huge citrus orchards, cattle farming and, more recently, wildlife for hunting. Huge trucks with agricultural products frequent the roads. The farms provide jobs, often seasonal, to local communities, while the communities provide labour and, mostly indirectly in the centralised cash economy, a market for the products.

The commercial farmers and all the activities around agriculture, together with government grants and money sent home from workers at the mines

and at other entities outside the area, form the centre of the formal economy of the area. The farms are in private possession, while the adjacent black villages and smallholder farmers are on tribal land that belongs to the traditional leaders and not to the households or farmers who occupy it.

When apartheid South Africa became democratic South Africa in the early 1990s, land reform became a key issue in restoring the injustices of the past. People could claim back land in private possession that was traditionally theirs, but from an agricultural point of view it was not a success:

> In restitution projects, the maintenance of production has been highly problematic. Loss of production means there is very little or no livelihoods impacts from restitution. The beneficiaries of restitution projects usually have neither farming experience nor capital to continue or restart the farm operations. As a result, most restitution projects are either non-functional or are functioning at a meager fraction of previous levels. (Makombe 2018:1401)

The cash economy and ways of food production

In 1978–1983, when we were in the congregation in Venda, we experienced the desire in the black community to switch over from the traditional practice of producing your own food to a cash economy. We stayed next to a care centre for healed leprosy patients. Church members often asked us to put their names on a waiting list for scrub ladies at this care centre. We told them that there was a very long list already, that they would wait many years to get work there, that we could rather look at ways to generate income from home and that there are definite possibilities to do so. Only a few showed any interest in going that route. Most said that they would wait until they get a job that paid cash.

Since then, the shift from the traditional practice of producing your own food towards a cash economy has continued, as can be seen in the growing number of shops and modern houses in the Letsitele area that implies that some households, at least, have cash available. Most people, including the commercial farmers and the poor, *buy* food from the shops – food that has mostly been produced by commercial farmers. Many of the poor remain hungry if they do not have the money to buy food – or they eat unhealthy food, to make South Africa a fat, hungry nation (Stassen 2015).[74] According to the Oxfam (2014:12) report, *Hidden hunger in South Africa*, most people in rural areas of South Africa buy their food from shops. Rural poverty is replicating urban poverty because of the dependence on a cash economy.

74. See https://www.health-e.org.za/2015/04/07/south-africa-a-fat-hungry-nation/

The project in Molati

Against this background, it was a positive indicator to us that, in 2002, the initiative for a project to facilitate food production in Molati came from the residents themselves.

Experiments were conducted with residents to evaluate various innovative production methods such as minimum tillage techniques and drip irrigation. Each of these experiments were partially successful in providing a solution to the problem of crop production in the villages, but no breakthrough was made.

In 2004, we tested the Infield Rainwater Harvesting (IRWH) method with residents of the village of Molati. The IRWH method had been developed by the Agricultural Research Council's Institute for Soil, Climate and Water over a number of years, in close cooperation with smallholder farmers. It is closer to the traditional way of farming than the prevailing pattern of using tractors, because after the basic structure has been established, no further tillage is required in the following years. This method makes it possible to reap a good crop even during dry years.

The first training of about ten community members was well received, but most of them planted other crops on the run-off strip and so neutralised the water harvesting effect. One participant did implement the method correctly, and the results were clearly visible to all (Figure 15.8). This convinced other members of the group to try the method too.

During the season of 2005/6, about ten people in Molati implemented the method according to specifications and achieved outstanding results. More people started to use it, and other villages asked them to teach them to use it too.

The project seemed to be a clear success and we went on to work on other issues. However, the technique did not spread by itself all over the area. It did not develop into a full-scale habit or practice in these areas. Ten years later, few of those who had used it before continued to do so. Participants are fully dependent on the cash economy again.

A few years ago, the residents asked us to engage with them again in a food production project, and when this request was repeated several times, we started to search for funding to do so.

Reflection

Looking back, we will now reflect on what happened in order to formulate better questions regarding the problems that should be addressed in the following project. We can ask the following questions:

- What is the problem?
- How should we respond to it?

Source: Photograph taken by Christiaan Pauw of Nova, at Molati, in 2006, published with permission from Christiaan Pauw and the photographed individuals.

FIGURE 15.8: 2005–2006 harvest of maize in Molati, with Mrs Maria Nyathi on the right.

What was the problem that needed to be solved with this project in Molati?

Traditionally, the women worked in the lands, using a hoe. They would prepare the soil and plant the seeds. But these days, when the first rains have fallen, the tendency is that a tractor is hired to plough the small field. That requires cash and it causes delays because the tractor has to plough a number of small fields and you must wait until it is your turn. The harvest is usually very poor, because all the other practices of modern farming are not followed. The old is abandoned and the new is not acquired fully. The dysfunctional combination of traditional and modern farming methods translates into an inability to produce one's own food.

However, people in the community could have a completely different understanding of the problem than I, as an outsider, have.

I remember that I visited an elderly lady, a member of our church, in the early 1980s. It was during a drought. We sat in front of her hut. She pointed at the tar road that we could see far below us in the valley. She said that, in the old days, the men were strong, the women were strong, the cattle were

fat and plentiful, the maize grew high and produced abundantly and it rained a lot. Today they are sickly, they die young, it is bad, it is dry. And it all began with that tar road.

We can say that the tar road represented, for this old lady, the modern world.

Her interpretation boils down to the same thing: the problem is a dysfunctional combination of old and new, although she interpreted it in a different way than I did.

But the question remains: how do we explain why the successful IRWH practice was not sustained?

Two basic hypotheses can be formulated:

- The problem is that the IRWH consisted of a *disjointed combination of things and thoughts*.
- The problem is *a struggle between powers*.

We will now shortly consider these two basic hypotheses.

□ First main hypothesis: A disjointed combination of things and thoughts

Our first hypothesis is that the IRWH-methodology did not integrate the key things and thoughts that play a role in this farming practice sufficiently, so it suffered from some form of disjointedness.

We can formulate some sub-hypotheses regarding possible types of disjointedness within the IRWH practice:

- The IRWH-methodology may not have given sufficient attention to the role of religion and the mythical relationship to the land.
- The IRWH method could have interfered with the gender power balance in the household.
- Traditional African cultures are often suspicious of individual progress.

□ *Sub-hypothesis 1: The IRWH-methodology may not have given sufficient attention to the role of religion and the mythical relationship to the land*

Modern agricultural methods are effective, but they require a modern consciousness to function properly, and we can assume that many people in the Letsitele area do not have a strong or aggressive modern consciousness, given the fact that they have lived in this area for generations and have, as we have seen in the municipal report, a low exposure to modern education.

In traditional African cultures, food production is regarded as being closely related to the fertility of people and of the land. In this tradition, fertility is essentially a religious concept. Fertility is a manifestation of a mysterious life force. It depends on the relation with the ancestors and ultimately (and more remotely) on God. It requires harmony between forces and not control over nature in search of progress and a better future – which is the modern approach.

Mother Earth is a dominant motif throughout modern African literature, as we have seen. It is also a dominant motif in local cultures, specifically in agriculture.

Rain is regarded in Zulu tradition as fertilisation of the earth by the sky, as a husband fertilises his wife. The earth cannot bear fruit if the rain does not work on it with water (Berglund 1976:62).

Berglund (1976:357–359) describes a ritual in Zulu culture to make the field fertile. The ritual contains many male and female symbols to ensure fertility. When Berglund asked a diviner about it, the diviner said that the field is 'the mother from whom we eat'. The ritual could not be performed by a male, because 'men do not sow. They slaughter the animals when there is to be meat. But they do not sow' (Berglund 1976:357–359; this last remark will be discussed under the next sub-hypothesis).

Did people perhaps discontinue using the IRWH method because it did not take the traditional religious relationship with the land into account?

Did we neglect what the Nigerian bishop and International Chairman of the Organization of African Instituted Churches, Daniel Okoh, said to Philipp Öhlmann et al. (2020):

> People from sub-Saharan Africa [...] are highly religious [...] So, for Africa, because of the religious nature, you'll always find a way of using it to get the [...] commitment of the people to the project, whatever it is. If it is water, it must be explained spiritually. If it is [an] agricultural project, it must be explained spiritually [...] Honestly, if you don't do that, you will lose it. (pp. 12–13)

Did this farming method become stuck because we did not give much attention to the role of religion? Or perhaps because of a mismatch between two views as explained by Setiloane (1976:227), namely that the West has misunderstood the words of Genesis 1:28 '... as to make man the unconditioned lord of nature', which clashes with the African concept of God who is 'behind and before both nature and man, permeating everything'?

We did not give much attention to the way that those who took part in the project experienced their daily relationship with nature in their immediate context. We do not know what role ritual could have played. We did not find out how they saw the presence of God and how that would have influenced their use of the IRWH-technique.

We can conclude that the way in which food is acquired has been modernised, for example in the cash economy, but the relationship of the people with the land has not been modernised to the same extent. Using tractors does not mean that all the modern domestic food production methods have been adopted. It is uncertain what has remained of the traditional relationship with the land. It is a significant question.

The third factor that we consider is Christianity. It was not absent: meetings were opened with prayer. Maria, the project leader, was a devout Christian. But if the sub-hypothesis we consider now is correct, it did not work through sufficiently to enable participants to produce their own food.

The Christian faith could have been incorporated in the project in different ways: we could, together with the participants, have designed appropriate rituals and formulated an appropriate moral order, based on the Christian tradition, to facilitate a responsible use of and a good relationship with nature. It could have helped to establish the idea of a secular world free of spirits and mystic powers, where one can serve God in freedom. That is the approach presented, *inter alia*, by the Protestant tradition, usually in a rather calm and reasoned manner. The Pentecostal and African churches tend to present a different solution: it out-powers the traditional religion, it presents the power of God, through the working of the Holy Spirit, as more powerful than any other power, secular or spiritual. This message is typically delivered in a powerful manner: the preacher shouts, his voice gets hoarse, he wipes off sweat and he emphasises his message with his whole body in ecstatic movements. It is something that I can only observe with great interest, not emulate.

☐ *Sub-hypothesis 2: The IRWH method could have interfered with the gender power relation in the household*

The Zulu spokesperson said to Berglund: ‘Men do not sow. They slaughter the animals when there is to be meat. But they do not sow’. Traditionally, working in the fields is the work of women. The Tsonga people of the Letsitele area have the same tradition: the woman is ‘the plougher, the tiller and the harvester’ (Junod 1938:87).

The absence of men is still a fairly general problem in this area. It is still mostly the mother and the grandmother who provide care for the children; see also the remark of Ali Mazrui (1985) of Kenya, on the impact of this tradition on male absenteeism, in Chapter 9.

Efforts to change traditional farming practices present an example of the unintended consequences of development efforts. In Africa, according to Linda Cornwell (2000), 80% of food was traditionally produced by *women*. When commercial agriculture was introduced by governments and

development agents, they mostly involved *men*. The women, who had farmed on high-potential land, were pushed to marginal land and the high-potential land was used by the men to produce cash crops:

> Men are more inclined to spend extra income on luxury items, such as alcohol, gambling, prostitution, another wife, whereas income under a woman's control is spent on children and domestic needs ....

The (unintended) results include 'a massive impact on the micro-economy', a decline in domestic food security and an increase in soil erosion on the marginal lands.

How did the IRWH method influence gender relations in the household? We have not yet investigated this. But it seems important to do so, keeping in mind the way that the use of electricity disrupted the social networks and gender relations in households in Duncan Village, a township near East London in South Africa, as described by Bank, Mlomo and Lujabe (1996). The study provides a fascinating insight into the way in which the borrowing of paraffin facilitates social support systems as well as control of the domestic budget for women in this community (Bank, Mlomo & Lujabe 1996):

> A fire breaks out, on average, once every ten days in Duncan Village and over the past ten years fires have destroyed local peoples' homes at a rate of approximately one a day. These shocking statistics point to the gravity of fire as a social problem and begin to explain why the saying 'siyatsha yile paraffini sihala' ('we live in paraffin and burn in it') has become a motto of despair for those who live here. For the residents of Duncan Village, the fear of fire is a central motif of township life. Fire is the only experience that everyone shares, either through their experience as victims or through the loss of neighbours, kin or friends. It is, in many ways, the most powerful and significant social force in the township. (p. 46)

But nevertheless, many houses that were electrified reverted to paraffin: 'Our case studies revealed that many electrified households continually back-switched to paraffin for cooking and heating, but did not do so for lighting' (Bank, Mlomo & Lujabe 1996:41).

One of the most important reasons for this was that women have a whole network of people who owe them paraffin, while, on the other hand, they owe paraffin to other people (Bank, Mlomo & Lujabe 1996):

> Although women felt that paraffin sapped their energy, stole their time, and restricted their mobility, they were well aware of the power of paraffin as a social lubricant that facilitated and maintained their social support systems at the domestic and neighbourhood levels. For women, paraffin seemed by its nature to encourage solidarity, sharing and mutual support. The social control that women exercised over paraffin could also be translated into tighter control over household income. Paraffin could be used to keep men out of 'women's business' and could be manipulated to mystify household budgeting and resource allocation. (pp. 137–138)

Did the IRWH project disrupt gender relations at home?

Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997), in *Invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses* warns against applying hidden assumptions of Western tradition on African cultures and argues for 'a cultural, context-dependent interpretation of social reality.'[75] More attention should be given to this in a coming project.

That brings us to the third sub-hypothesis: relations with people outside one's own household could also have played a role.

☐ *Sub-hypothesis 3: Traditional African cultures are often suspicious of individual progress*

The prevalence of the community over the individual in African traditions has been discussed by many authors. It often leads to the suppression of individual initiative. Mbigi referred to 'the dark side of *Ubuntu*', the harsh measures that can be taken against dissenting members (see Chapter 13).

As we have seen, TS Kgatla referred to the more than 600 people who have lost their lives because of witchcraft accusations in the Limpopo province in 1996–2001 (see Chapter 9). This happened in the same province in which this project was. Most of these witchcraft accusations emanate from the home and the family, but it is a powerful force in the workplace too. The mere potential of witchcraft accusations stifles development 'as victims are often found among those who initiate development projects'. The potential of being accused causes constant fear of what may happen to you if you stand out, and restricts the economically able and socially active from developing their potential to the full (Kgatla 2006:269–270).

Jealousy may be one thing that holds development back. Power may be another. Stubbs (2019) reports about a development project in Bushbuckridge, which is, like Letsitele, in the Lowveld of South Africa:

> The municipality observed the members of African Honey Bee gaining their independence, by realising that they did not have to rely on social grants for a living. In response, the municipality laid stumbling blocks before the project by overlooking the blatant theft of equipment, death threats to staff and members and the spreading of false rumours about the project. (p. 445)

If the participants did stop their farming practices because it made them stand out in the community, and they felt threatened as a result, there again is no quick fix available. New cultural patterns and relations will only evolve over time. How should that happen?

Kgatla (2006:274–275) points out that 'most black South Africans, although many are well educated in Western culture and science, still believe in, and

75. See https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27704

fear, witchcraft forces'. It is a false assumption that education would make people sceptical of witchcraft. 'These beliefs continue to control their lives in spite of the formal education they received.' The problem lies elsewhere, in 'waning relationships'. Kgatla's diagnosis of the problem links up with our emphasis on the importance of relationships. He argues for an educational model that does not only impart knowledge but builds healthy relationships. Kgatla (2006) also refers to the role of the church:

> Its role in transformational development is that of a servant and a source of encouragement. As a servant of the Lord, the Church is able to make the hostile world of the victims of any sort of social violence, including witchcraft accusations, more habitable. The Church can demonstrate the formation of positive values in the community. (p. 284)

Christianity presents a clear alternative to the traditional pattern of the 'scattered self' (Taylor) and the 'thoroughly fused "we"' (Ikuenobe). These cultural patterns prevent the development of individual freedom and responsibility. Christianity also presents a clear alternative to the modern pattern of the autonomous individual and the disintegrated postmodern individual (see Chapter 10). The theologian Niebuhr (1999) presents the concept of a 'responsible self', the self who is in relation with others, with creation and with God.

We now consider our second main hypothesis.

Second main hypothesis: A struggle between powers

The hypothesis is that the process in Molati, the meeting of the traditional African world and the world of the modern empire, is not merely a peaceful process in which a number of loose fragments move into some or other position to form an innocent pattern. It is a power struggle in which a number of entities, or powers, are struggling to determine the final outcome.

Christianity is involved, not as a culture on its own, but working more like yeast in the existing cultures.

We will now look at three viewpoints, one each from the three powers we consider in this book, on the human relation to land: a short description of the human relation to nature in the African world and a rejection of outside powers who try to save Africa; an example of the huge advantages that modernity brings, as well as the risks involved; and two responses by Christian farmers.

Firstly, the human-nature relationship in the African world

In an essay, 'Drama and the African world view', the famous Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka (1976), describes the African consciousness of the world as

one in which human beings live in an immediate and intense relationship with the surrounding natural forces. This microcosm fits into the larger circles of a cosmic order. This order is, however, threatened. Natural catastrophes like storms can occur at any time:

> … the hovering claims of this natural cycle dominate the natives' daily awareness, giving to rituals of appeasement an integrated essentiality for every event. Thus the death of an individual is not seen as an isolated event in the life of one man. Nor is individual fertility separable from the regenerative promise of earth and sea. The sickness of one individual is a sign of, or may portend the sickness of, the world around him. Something has occurred to disrupt the natural rhythms and the cosmic balances of the total community. (Soyinka 1976:50–51)

Maintaining and restoring the all-inclusive order is not only a matter of ritual – the moral order is also a vital element. The moral order encompasses not only humans but nature too, and a breakdown can occur in any of its parts:

> Where society lives in a close inter-relation with Nature, regulates its existence by natural phenomena within the observable processes of continuity – ebb and tide, waxing and waning of the moon, rain and drought, planting and harvest – the highest moral order is seen as that which guarantees a parallel continuity of the species. (Soyinka 1975:52)

Soyinka (1976:61–96, 97–139) criticises the idea that Christianity or Islam must save Africa, as well as the secular ideal of modernity that invades Africa. By so doing, he gives content to his statement (Soyinka 1976:viii) about true self-apprehension as '… the apprehension of a culture whose reference points are taken from within the culture itself' rather than from 'the reference points of colonial cultures'.

Today, the modern world more and more realises that we as humans are indeed deeply dependent on nature, that there are indeed global and local natural rhythms and balances that we have to fit into if we want to avoid runaway climate change, the destruction of biodiversity and eventually our own destruction. In the Anthropocene, human activity has become a dominant force that threatens the global natural order. To live in a way that guarantees a parallel continuity of the species would indeed require a much higher moral order than what humanity lives by at present.

The question is, however, if the moral order that Africa, and modernity, can generate from within ourselves would be sufficient to heal the sicknesses of today's world: climate change, mass hunger, corruption, greed, domestic violence, war and destructive powers such as the consumer culture and religious fanaticism.

☐ *Secondly, the huge advantages and risks of modernity*

The average person in Australia consumes 4 500 litres of water per day, of which 4 000 litres is for the production of food (Stirzaker 2010:8).

To supply water, dams are built that have a huge negative ecological impact. My use of water makes me a part of a whole system of dams and pipes that has many negative impacts. Stormwater run-off from cities is more than it was before there was a city because of all the impenetrable surfaces like roofs and roads, and the extra run-off contributes to the degradation of streams and rivers. The water carries with it invasive species that escape from our gardens to river catchment areas where they flourish, replace indigenous plants, destroy biodiversity and reduce water supply.

To produce food, we need to use nitrogen. Nitrogen is an essential part of proteins. Although nitrogen is the most abundant gas in the atmosphere, it first has to be turned into nitrates for plants to be able to use it. The available quantity of nutrients such as nitrates puts a limitation on food production. Early in the 20th century, two German scientists worked out how to convert nitrogen gases in the atmosphere to ammonia and from there into nitrogen fertiliser on an industrial scale, for which they received a Nobel Prize in Scientific Fields. This discovery enabled the global population to double between 1960 and 2000, while the use of nitrogen fertiliser increased eight times during the same period (Stirzaker 2010:42–43).

Phosphate, another important ingredient in fertilisers, is a nonrenewable resource and supply is running low. And the production and use of fertilisers have negative environmental impacts. The production of ammonia from atmospheric nitrogen gases is done under very high temperatures and pressure, which requires large amounts of fossil fuels, a process that worsens climate change. It does not stop there. The additional nitrates and phosphate molecules enter ecological systems in various ways, polluting waterways and escaping into the air, so contributing again to climate change (Stirzaker 2010:43).

The current population is therefore far above the natural carrying capacity of the earth; it cannot be sustained without the use of fertilisers, but their present use is unsustainable.

Shakespeare’s instruments of darkness again, who attract us but betray us in the end?

In response to such problems associated with modern commercial farming, there are farmers who move towards closer cooperation with nature and sustainability, such as organic farming, zero tillage and conservation agriculture, but we still have a great deal to learn (Le Roux and Howard 2021:79-80).

☐ *Two responses by Christian farmers*

The first response of a farmer that we now look at is a good example of Christian resistance to the violent power of an African state.

The story is told by Ben Freeth (2011) in his book *Mugabe and the white African*. Freeth and his family were intimidated and chased off their farm in Zimbabwe. In his foreword, Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes the struggle of Freeth as similar to his own struggle against apartheid; both are part of the bigger struggle for reconciliation in this subcontinent. Tutu refers to evil spirits set loose by the Zimbabwean government – not in some esoteric sense but in the real everyday sense of the word that describes people's behaviour in a way that can be observed by everyone.

The levels of violence in the Letsitele area are not as high as during the land grabs in Zimbabwe, but South African lives are still shaped by the same powers, including the modern relationship with land and the traditional African relationship to land.

South African farmers have to cope with droughts and floods and the impacts of climate change, with little support from government. Commercial farmers are exposed to high levels of farm murders in the country and to land claims. These claims relate to complex political conflicts about the ownership of land, hotly debated policies for land restitution and government committees to investigate the possibilities of taking land without compensation. Smallholder and emerging black farmers do not have it any easier. They lack all sorts of support systems and infrastructure (Khapayi & Celliers 2016). And yet, on the whole, the farming community has become one of the leading national initiatives to find constructive solutions to national problems. The government's efforts to establish black farmers on previously white-owned farms have largely failed, but many individual white farmers have partnered successfully with black farmers through local relationships of trust.

It is worth quoting a *Daily Maverick* article by Marianne Thamm (2019): 'Farmers are doing it for themselves – finding common ground in contested terrain'. The fact that the *Daily Maverick* has a well-earned reputation for deconstructing and debunking ideologies makes this positive article even more remarkable and worth quoting at length:

> Farmers from across SA gathered recently near Ceres to showcase successful partnerships between commercial and emerging black farmers. In light of the failure of land reform, identified in the 2017 Motlanthe report, farmers have collectively sought innovative solutions on their own.
>
> For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face-to- face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor 13)
>
> Fourth-generation Kouebokkeveld farmer WP van der Merwe, opening the Landbouweekblad/Witzenberg Partners in Agri Land Solutions (Pals) symposium, 'Land Reform in Practice – Practical Solutions', which took place near Ceres between 14 and 15 November, quoted the above verses from Corinthians.

> It is significant to mention, as the presence of the two Gs – God and Government – were a constant during the day's well-attended proceedings – which were translated into three languages: Xhosa, Afrikaans and English.
>
> But, unlike in the past where white farmers, who viewed themselves as 'a chosen people' might have prayed to a god who would favour and protect them, in 21st century South Africa farmers have harnessed a loving, universal god to acknowledge the sins of the past, ask forgiveness and help chart a new course in highly contested territory – land.
>
> Call it enlightened self-interest, call it what you will, the survival of South Africa's commercial agricultural sector which puts food on our tables, exports tonnes of produce worth billions across the globe, as well as providing employment to thousands, is critical to the country's economic survival and stability.
>
> Nursing a cold and seated quietly among the 450 delegates listening throughout was Minister of Agriculture Thoko Didiza, or MamThoko as many of the farmers affectionately referred to her.
>
> The Ceres symposium, attended by farmers from across South Africa, followed the October 2018 Landbouweekblad/Agri land summit which took place in Bela Bela, an event Nick Serfontein, chair of the Sernick Group, later described as 'the equivalent of a small earthquake'.
>
> 'The earthquake sparked a tsunami that has washed over our country, creating new hope. The summit will rightly be remembered as one of the most important landmarks in the history of agriculture in South Africa,' Serfontein later wrote.
>
> Serfontein in 2018 said that consensus had been reached about land redistribution and restitution in South Africa, as 'it is morally correct because it gives back to those who had their land taken against their will; it is socially acceptable because it creates self-confidence and dignity that goes along with owning land and the right to land; and it is economically correct because it creates opportunities for better lives'. (Thamm 2019:n.p.)

A last remark: the reporter uses the phrase: 'the *farmers have harnessed a loving, universal god*' (Thamm 2019:n.p.).

There are theologians who may describe it in similar terms. When listening to some theologians, one sometimes gets the impression that they feel that they are constructing the character and the work of God and not merely their own understanding of God. Some go as far as saying it directly: reality is a social construct and God is a text (e.g. Dill 1996:252).

This type of language reminds us of the remark by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), who described the modern mind as an ego for which nothing is too huge to fathom (Peperzak 2007:100). Even God is not too huge for such a mind.

This mindset is not common among believers and also not among most theologians. I guess that the type of faith that has brought the farmers to take the actions described can be described better by another theologian, Eberhard Jüngel (1995) – in a learned discussion of theological language as metaphorical language:

> Faith listens to God himself: not to some human idea of God, not to a representation which (naturally) believers, like others, make of God, but to God himself. For faith is the bold certainty that one has come to know God himself, the God who has come to the world, became human, and comes to speech. Engulfed by the Holy Spirit – even if it is only by a spark of the latter – the believer also becomes fire and flame for the perceived truth. (p. 6)

That seems to be the inspiration behind the initiative of these farmers, even though the verse that was quoted from Corinthians acknowledges that faith includes an element of uncertainty: *For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face*.

The farmers' efforts come from the belief that a different world is indeed possible, and they help us to believe that too.

■ Case 4: The story of the biogas digester

In 2009, ICCO/Kerk in Actie commissioned Nova to design a domestic biogas digester for low-income households in the South African context. We assigned Riaan Ingram, who had studied theology but was doing his PhD in Philosophy at the time, to tackle this task.

Riaan first did an exploratory investigation of the topic: he often visited the community in a nearby township, he studied biogas technology, he visited biogas projects in the region (South Africa and Namibia) and he studied large biogas digester projects for households in countries such as Nepal and China.

He found that most of these projects had made the choice to develop the market for the existing biogas technology rather than to adjust the biogas technology to fit the existing market conditions. The investment costs of a biogas plant were taken more or less for granted and the biogas technology was taken as a given. To make it cheaper would compromise its quality. The problem that had to be solved was how to make it *affordable*. Different types of funding schemes were initiated.

Riaan concluded that we would have to develop a programme from within our context. It would not work to merely introduce a programme that was conceptualised and initiated by an outside entity if local residents did not take full ownership of it. Even more: no African government supports biogas significantly. In this context, the investment costs of a biogas plant cannot be taken as a given, the conditions in the community must be taken as a given and the technology must be designed to fit into these conditions. What is needed is a domestic practice of using biogas that is co-designed by the residents who are to use it, one that can be built and maintained with the materials, skills and funds available in a poor community. It is not a financial and managerial problem as much as a design problem.

Riaan's conclusion implied that building the digester in the usual way in a factory with expensive materials, and then constructing a funding scheme to implement it, would not be sustainable without external support. In the absence of such financial support, the household members must see the digester as a possibility for themselves, as something that they want to use and can build and maintain with the knowledge, materials and funds available in their daily context (Ingram 2009):

> The real question is not how we can introduce biogas digesters to households, but what a household-with-a-biogas-digester will be in our context: the new household may be different from the present household; existing practices will be replaced by new ones ... The biogas digester is an artefact. Its proper functioning depends on the practices that will be associated with it, and this may include sanitation, food production or gardening, selling fertilizer, and energy use. (p. 4)

The question was now: could we, by working together with a few households, co-create such a new type of domestic biogas digester that could become part of the daily practices of African households?

We first formed a rather loose transdisciplinary team where we brought together two engineers, as well as myself and Riaan. The idea was that the two engineers would provide the technical know-how, and Riaan and myself would explain the cultural background and the needs and requirements of the households to them – after consulting with households. The social scientists would help the technical scientists to understand the residents and their needs better, and the design would take place in the minds of the technical scientists. They would be the main role players. The views of the residents are taken seriously, but they would mainly give their opinion when consulted. In this way, a process of ongoing interaction between role players who continuously form different configurations would take place – sometimes a technical expert may sit with a resident in her house, sometimes the whole group may meet and so on. It is similar to the approach called *design thinking*[76].

However, something vital was still missing. The experts from outside the context for which the eventual design is meant can only promote the idea up to a certain stage: we can, from our limited knowledge of things within the context, select certain technical solutions that we think are a possibility for this context; we can perhaps make some adjustments to make it more fitting, but that is how far we can go. The next milestone is that at least one person from within the context must see it as a possibility for themselves. The question is how that can be brought about.

76. See, for example, https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/what-is-design-thinking-and-why-is-it-so-popular

Using insights from the German philosopher Heidegger's *Being and doing*, Riaan said that the biogas digester could be seen as a phenomenon in a Platonic sense: it was still only an idea. It was a concept that we could theorise about.

For the idea to become a useful tool there must first be an *Ereignis,* that is, an *event* where people living in a specific context 'see' this idea as a possibility for themselves. To be able to 'see' that, these people must have enough information about the technical possibilities, costs, materials and so on. All these must come together and combine in the mind of at least one individual.

What needed to be 'seen' was a workable combination of things and thoughts, a practice as discussed in Chapter 14. A given technology or idea can only work to the extent that it has become part of a practice in households and communities. Technology can only function within a social system.

No *researcher* can see the final practice*: the people who live in that context every day must see it as a possibility for themselves*. The decisive *Ereignis* is when it appears to them, it is disclosed to them, when they make it their own.

The researcher or development agent still has an important role to play, namely to bring the idea to the people. Before the *people* in the context can 'see' it, someone must introduce it to them in such a way that they can get the idea.

Before this project, we formulated the process of co-designing a solution as 'the experts from outside and the residents in the community putting their heads together to find a solution for a given problem'.

We still follow this guideline, but Riaan has changed the pattern of interaction between the role players.

Based on the statements of Heidegger that we have mentioned above, that *human being* is essentially *productive being*, and of Ugwuegbu that, in African tradition, people have ownership and responsibility with regard to what they produce, Riaan understood the way in which the experts from outside and the residents inside the community must come to an agreement in a new way: the expert from outside could introduce a new idea, and communicate it with discussions and illustrations, but nothing would come of it unless the residents saw that idea as a possibility for themselves and in some way took ownership of it – in this case by designing the technology and the practice in which it would be embedded by themselves.

What happened then? As he gained more and more information, Riaan began to understand or 'see' the idea of a biogas digester as a possibility

for the context where the people for whom the digester is meant to live every day.

It came together *in his mind*. At that stage, it was still a theory, but it began to be, in the language of Heidegger, *vorhanden* [present-at-hand], something that could be discussed and thought about as a practical possibility.

Riaan then called a group of about five jobless people from the nearby township together. He told them about the concept. He contracted them to help him to build a digester, making use of the materials, knowledge and money they have available in their own context. For over a year they met on a daily basis, experimenting with various ideas. He worked with them but he took the lead. He consulted them and used their ideas.

One day he phoned me, he was excited. The group from the community had taken the lead. They now saw this idea of a biogas digester as *a possibility for themselves* in their context and were motivated to make it a reality. They started to build a digester with the knowledge they had of the materials that were available in their own context and that they could afford, such as clay, cow dung, cement, salt, wire and candle wax. From time to time, they consulted Riaan, and he assisted when asked for inputs. But he did not consult them anymore, they consulted him.

In the end, they built a working digester. It was a big step forward. The digester was indigenised in the context of the township: the cost, materials and techniques to build and maintain it. They saw it as a possibility to dig the hole for the digester, to build the digester and maintain it. For them, building the digester was now *ready-at-hand*, something that they could do without any hindrance or delay.

Before the digester could become part of a domestic practice, it had to be connected to appliances in the house that could operate with the gas; the way these appliances would be used from day-to-day in the household had to be sorted out and a practice had to be developed for using the effluent, which was an excellent fertiliser. The collection and regular flow of feedstock for the digester also had to be sorted out. The practices that would be associated with it, regarding sanitation, food production or gardening, selling fertiliser and energy use, all still needed to be developed.

To get enough feedstock from one household was a definite problem. However, Riaan visited a man in another province who lived in an area where there was no sanitation. He had a conventional biogas digester with a toilet on top, that he maintained and kept clean. He invited all the people living nearby to use the toilet, and that provided enough feedstock for him to supply free energy for his own household. Because this practice had made the technology *griffbereit*, *zuhanden* [ready-at-hand] on the *street*

level in that context, we would have liked to investigate the possibility further, but we had no more funding to do so. Other projects became a priority and the biogas project became dormant until (one hopes) the right time comes to revive it. It remains an idea to be considered.

We have recently embarked on a project to develop, with two groups of smallholder farmers and some researchers, decentralised sanitation systems that are integrated with the agricultural practices of the farmers.

Reflection

There are cases where the technology is presented as a finished product, such as a laptop computer. But even in this case, if a government department or a school wants to use this product for long-distance education, a practice in which this product is used must develop and that can only happen if those who will use the computer see such a practice as a possibility for themselves. They must say how it would work best, while the experts from outside can give ideas for the end-users to consider and help to select the most fitting product.

In the biogas project, we can see the experts from outside as representatives of the modern world, and the residents as representatives of contemporary Africa. They worked together well and could co-design something with the knowledge, materials and capacity of the given context.

There are many diverse views on the 'for-the-sake-of' of human practices. In modern cultures, it is strongly associated with progress: we progress towards a better world by our control over nature through labour, science and technology. In African traditions, the emphasis would rather be on labour to sustain human life and community.

The relationship that Riaan developed with the residents recognised their freedom and their identity as *productive beings.* It provided room for both sides to express their views. That made the relationship between the cultures and the people involved free and open, which is healthy.

From a *Christian* point of view, Christians could agree with the idea that human being is essentially *productive* being, because God made us in his image, and God is productive – he has created the heavens and the earth and maintains it. He told the man and woman in Genesis 1 and 2 to subdue the earth and to rule over all the living creatures, to work and to care for the Garden of Eden. The South African theologian Johan Heyns maintains that labour is in principle service to God, service to each other and having a creative and caring relationship with nature. He regards labour as the discovery or disclosure of what God has embedded in creation. If labour is done out of respect for God, it becomes a form of worshipping God (Heyns 1974:114, 119).

This implies that the design of a practice must respect the inherent qualities of the relevant people, the things that are used in the practice and the context in which theywill be used. It is a normative process: the nature of the things that are used must not be violated.

This biogas project did not produce a domestic practice, but the insights we gained shaped the method we used in the design of the Brickstar stove, and this time it did progress to implementation on scale.

We gained a better insight into the key role of a domestic practice and the way in which multiple things and thoughts must combine to form a practice in which the technical solution functions smoothly.

Secondly, we came to understand better *how* a practice has to be designed. A tailor-made solution would only emerge if we, as people from outside the community, worked with the households in such a way that they began to see the idea as a possibility for themselves and if they started to design the domestic practice in which the technical solution must be integrated. If adjustments to the technical solution were needed, an expert must be available to be consulted.

The initial idea can be communicated in various ways: talking about it, showing pictures, showing and, if possible at all, testing different artefacts in practice. Presenting a variety of artefacts helps to avoid the impression that we want to promote a given product or design.

■ Case 5: Brickstar

The Brickstar project is a good example of Nova's idea of working *with* households in a transdisciplinary approach.

When the Basa Magogo project was well-established, we realised that domestic wood use for cooking is a far bigger problem than domestic coal use. We then requested ICCO/Kerk in Actie of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, who had supported us with Basa Magogo and the biogas project, to help us to apply our experience with these two projects to this problem.

It is a global problem. At the time, a report (Differ 2012) stated that the clean cookstove industry's target market accounts for more than 35% of the world's population. This industry started more than 50 years ago with massive support from governments and the UN through grants, subsidies and financial mechanisms. It aims to increase the deployment of clean cookstoves globally, but has had limited success, for various reasons.

These potential customers are located at the 'bottom of the pyramid', making them relatively unattractive for private companies. There is no lack of technical research: more than 400 various stove designs from all continents and for all types of biomass fuels have been listed. The report states:

> One of the main problems faced during the first 'wave' of clean cookstoves, was that the cookstove innovators had over-emphasised the technical aspects, and cookstoves had been developed without input on end-user preferences. Consequently, the cookstoves distributed by aid projects were quickly abandoned, due to the large lifestyle changes required to use them. (Differ 2012:4)

Field reports about projects that have repeated the same mistake, and achieved the same results, continue to appear.[77] This was the problem we wanted to address.

In 2013, KJ Wessels and a group of researchers reported that over 80% of households across sub-Saharan Africa rely on biomass as their primary energy source. They calculated that at current levels of fuelwood consumption, biomass in the region where Molati is would be exhausted within 13 years. It further showed that it would require a 15% annual reduction in consumption for eight years to a level of 20% of households using fuelwood before the use of biomass would reach sustainable levels. They concluded that the severity of dwindling fuelwood reserves in African savannahs underscored the importance of providing affordable energy for rural communities (Wessels et al. 2013:1).

On the other hand, some experts think that the increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as a result of climate change as well as the cutting of trees stimulate plant growth, perhaps of other species, and bush densification, so that the real problem could be, not that supply gets exhausted but that biodiversity is threatened, which is still a problem.

ICCO/Kerk in Actie has funded this programme since 2010 until 2024. And very importantly, they allowed us enough time to do the development of the solution properly.

The project started in 2010 with a desktop study of a large number of stoves that were produced and sold worldwide. We selected and purchased six stoves that were representative of the most important available models. We asked Maria Nyathi at Molati, who had been an excellent coordinator of the IRWH project, to form a group of about 20 residents who were

77. http://www.globalhearthworks.org/our-blog/lesson-learned-the-lusaka-project; https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/post/what-cook-stoves-tell-us-about-the-limits-of-technology/2012/05/08/gIQApp8YAU_blog.html and https://books.google.co.za/books?id=i97eDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA11&lpg=PA11&dq=solutions+for+replacing+wood+for+cooking&source=bl&ots=Ei8PzTbyXr&sig=ACfU3U37SiaxUxfsK2gPkQbgj2s-YMQvjA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiQg4TrxqjyAhXNDewKHSrPAnUQ6AF6BAgfEAM#v=onepage&q=solutions%20for%20replacing%20wood%20for%20cooking&f=false.

interested in the project and to explain the project that we had in mind and the idea we had to them. They were eager to take part, and we gave the six different stoves that we had selected to them and asked them to use and evaluate the stoves. They did that, and it appeared after a few weeks that none of the stoves complied with their requirements.

Somewhere during Nova and the group's discussions of the pros and cons of each stove, the group formulated what the stove that they wanted would look like. And then the idea started to emerge in the group that they could build such a stove for themselves, according to their own requirements, using materials that were locally available (e.g. cow dung, clay and water) and skills that people used regularly to make bricks and build their own homes. That is the *Ereignis*, the event in co-creating a solution that we had hoped for: that the residents would spontaneously 'see' the idea of an improved cook stove as a possibility for themselves (Heidegger). This unleashed new energy. The group began to design ways in which this idea could work in their context. When that happened, we knew that the project was on the right track.

We provided technical guidance from our side. Initially, five different prototypes of the locally built stove were designed together and implemented in different households and were discussed by the residents, and tested for technical efficiency by us, until a final prototype that formed part of a domestic practice emerged. This milepost was achieved after two years, towards the end of 2011.

However, most people in this group (which had now grown to 40 households) again fell back on using an open fire. Further investigation by the researcher showed that many people began to miss the three-legged cast iron pot, which could not be used on the stove. After the stove was modified so that the three-legged cast iron pot could be placed on it, the frequency of use improved again and the open fire was almost completely phased out among people who used the Brickstar stove, as it was now called. Improvements and adjustments were continuously made.

It seemed that we had reached the first goal: a solution to the problem of unsustainable wood use was taken up by a small group of residents, and they were excited about it. The stove had become part of their daily way of living.

The question now was how to take this practice to thousands of households.

From 2012 to 2014, we focused on developing a business plan for large-scale implementation: how will we get people interested in the stove? How would labour and cost be structured? What about quality control?

Nova improved the process as we progressed with implementation over the years.

To finance a programme for taking the solution to scale, we planned to generate Gold Standard carbon credits. Fortunately, the Gold Standard office already had a methodology for monitoring the continued use of a stove over a number of years, which included ways to measure the savings in wood and the reduction of the emission of greenhouse gases in each specific year. We performed various tests such as a water boiling test and a kitchen performance test to determine how much wood was saved and registered the Brickstar project with the Gold Standard for the SDGs. The core of this standard is still to measure the emission of greenhouse gases, but it has been expanded to allow the project owner to indicate where the project has contributed to some of the other SDGs of the United Nations.

By early 2021, the stove has been taken to more than 7 000 households, and we have sold 2 000 GS carbon credits. We are taking the stoves to scale, not by selling them as products, but through community projects where people are assisted to build their own stoves and then to use and maintain them on their own.

Reflection

How does one evaluate the success of a project? Nova's vision is a healthy household culture, and we believe that such a culture is promoted by working *with* people. We are opposed to approaches that encourage development at people and not with people, the development of objects and not of agents. Over time, this can fuel a damaging culture of low expectations and even promote mediocrity. Livelihoods are not only about making a living but about making a life imbued with meaning (Jade Jacobsohn 2020, in a Nova document). Something of Nova's vision is achieved if a resident says about Brickstar: 'It feels good when Nova comes to visit us. I am happy to show them what my hands have done'.

Because many people cannot pay for a stove, the Brickstar strategy is that households do not pay any cash for Brickstar; they only have to make clay bricks in the traditional way. They contribute with labour and with time and they invest something of themselves. We finance our role in the project with outside resources such as carbon credits. There are manufactured stoves that are technically more effective than our Brickstar stove. If finance becomes available to supply such stoves to households for free, should we do that - as our competitors are now doing in the same area? Would it contribute to a life imbued with meaning? How do we measure and compare the impact of different stoves on the respective households?

Presently, we measure and quantify the reduction in wood use because we need that to calculate the number of carbon credits that we sell to help finance taking Brickstar to scale. If funding is linked only to technical

impacts like the reduction in air pollution, it promotes the implementation of the most effective technical measures, often by doing things for people. This can inhibit progress towards a healthy household culture, towards a greater sense of agency, better relationships and meaning. The result is that people sink deeper into a culture of poverty, dependence and passive entitlement as a result of our involvement in their lives.

To develop a practice with households, where technical efficiency is integrated with other considerations such as residents' agency, their taking ownership and the meaning that the practice has for them, takes time. Financial support for a sufficient period of time to co-develop a tailor-made solution to a given problem, such as the support from ICCO/ Kerk in Actie, is scarce, but very important. Sufficient timing is needed to prevent the large-scale implementation of badly designed solutions with destructive unintended consequences, as happens over and over again in Africa.

Brickstar is not a finished product. It must be seen within the context of the discussion *From the open fire to the coal stove to the TV*, one of the subheadings in Chapter 11. The rich significance that sitting and living around the fire has for traditional values and identity shows how domestic energy use is or was integrated into household practices. If the fire that brings the traditional family together is replaced by the TV, new practices are needed to ensure a healthy transfer of values, healthy relationships, and identity.

Grants are needed for helping to develop such practices. The present price of carbon credits is not sufficient to finance the co-development of such practices, or for taking Brickstar to scale.

So far, Christianity has been absent in this story. It may just be that Newbigin was right when he said that Christianity has largely failed to come to terms with the scientific and technological child that it has brought to birth, that Western culture itself has disintegrated and is now disintegrating the ancient cultures with which it has come into contact (1961:14–15; see Chapter 4). Something of this can be seen in the mothers' wish to retain the fire or the stove because they hope that it will help their daughters to rediscover their identity after the disintegrating impact of the TV, the school and the city.

Be that as it may, most people in these communities are church members. In this context too, Christianity has to come to terms with the modern world and with its disintegrating impact on the African world. It cannot do so in an abstract manner. The Brickstar stove project provides a concrete opportunity, a platform upon which the breakdown and building of relations in the house can be discussed: how did household members relate to each other previously around the fire and when having a meal? How did that

shape relationships? How do they relate now around the TV and the stove? What is the meaning of the changes that have taken place? How should the process develop into the future? By taking part in and stimulating reflection and action on such practices together with household members and other stakeholders, by thinking what we are doing (Arendt 1958 [1998]), what we should be doing and how we can do it, Christians can take part in the search for ways to heal family relations and imbue life with meaning.

Case 6: My own neighbourhood

Since 1994, we have been staying in Garsfontein, a traditionally white suburb in eastern Pretoria. That was also the year in which South Africa changed from the minority apartheid government into a democracy for all.

There was a great deal of crime. A survey for the period 1990–2000, compiled by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, ranked South Africa second for assault and murder (by all means) per capita and first for rape (sexual assault) per capita out of 60 countries.[78] Our police precinct in Garsfontein was among the 20 precincts with the highest crime rate in the country. Reactive 'armed response' security companies flourished, there were many of those in our area.

Today, some of the residents who stayed here at the time tell us how they sat with a gun on their lap when watching TV and how they had their gun next to their bed at night. Garden walls became higher and some put up electric fences. One family packed their TV and all valuables in the parents' room when going to bed, and they all slept in the same room, with all internal doors, including their bedroom door, locked. But sometimes criminals came in through the roof.

My wife Carol became an elder of the ward, which consisted of the members of our church denomination in the street in which we live. At one stage, the church had a house-to-house drive, and she visited all 36 houses in our street. She then started a monthly Bible study for all street residents who wanted to attend, of all denominations. The street became a small community, with a weekly prayer meeting of the domestic workers in our house and a monthly tea for the women living in the street in one of the houses – they called themselves the street women. We did not choose each other, we found each other here as people who lived in the same street and we had to learn to get along.

78. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime_in_South_Africa

Then our church decided to replace the geographically based wards with cell groups that were formed by members who chose each other. These groups met for Bible study and fellowship on a weekly basis. We decided to stay a ward because the street community can do things that can only be done on a local level, things that the network communities cannot do – such as working together for safety, responding when a water pipe bursts, dealing with excessive noise, caring for neighbours in need and attending to each other's homes during holidays. And we did not want to limit our social network to like-minded people.

One evening, after a serious armed robbery in our neighbour's home, a police officer of the investigating unit told us that the only effective strategy against crime is regular proactive patrols. In a neighbourhood near us, he told us, a young girl had been raped 14 times by a gang of robbers. The community was shocked and the pensioners started to patrol the area during the night, taking shifts. The crime rate dropped. Gradually, people became more relaxed again and the patrolling phased out. The crime rate returned to what it had been before, but they could not get community patrols going again.

The officer said short-term insurance, which is taken out by almost all households in our neighbourhood, only repays the financial damage *after* the crime had been committed. An armed response service, to which about half of the residents in the area subscribed, has no effect at all because when they arrive, the criminals had already left. We had a whole number of reactive patrols in the area and it did nothing to bring the crime rate down. Withdrawing into your house provides criminals with free space between houses, to move around in the neighbourhood; high walls do not inhibit criminals, they scale them easily even with an electric fence, and once they are inside the premises they are invisible from the outside, which makes it worse for the residents. To close yourself in as a household is mostly counterproductive. Closing off a community prevents some petty crimes, but serious crimes like rape and murder still take place if residents have withdrawn into their homes, which is a tendency in closed-off areas. Criminals often buy a house in a closed-off area and operate from there.

Regular patrols and the involvement of residents with each other are very effective, the policeman said. These activities inhibit an essential part of criminal activity: studying the area and planning the crime. Residents must occupy the spaces between their homes by being aware of each other. Without such awareness, people do not notice if something strange is going on, and if they do, they do not give it a second thought – only to hear afterwards that what they saw was a robbery taking place.

Based on this talk, Carol called the residents of our street together and then the residents of a few blocks around our house and arranged with a

small security company to provide a permanent proactive patrol in the area. In 1998, a non-profit community organisation, GarsCom (Garsfontein+community) was formed, with the vision of becoming an open, safe, friendly and involved community. GarsCom now includes the area bordered by the luxury gated Woodhill Golf Estate and the major roads Solomon Mahlangu Drive, Atterbury Road and Garsfontein Road, with an estimated 2 600 residences. It is an organisation that emanates from, and represents, the community in which it exists, which is a relatively well- off middle-class suburb.

As she became more involved in the community, she was often told by residents that they had stayed there for 20 or 30 years without any idea who their neighbours were. People in need and lonely people often related how 'invisible' they felt since the local sense of community was replaced by households' self-isolation, and the wards were replaced by cell groups. Many residents are still not interested in what happens around them. And yet those who do get involved in community activities often discover a new sense of belonging, as if it satisfies a need that they were not aware of.

Gradually GarsCom learned the difference between a *reactive model*, where a whole number of security companies have clients in a given neighbourhood and provide an 'armed response' – and a *proactive model*, where a given community, working together with one security company, has one or two dedicated patrol cars in the area, with full-time visible patrolling, in cooperation with the police.

It was – and still is – highly effective. Some of the other communities in the police precinct implemented some or other similar form of proactive patrolling. In 2015 and 2018, Garsfontein police station was officially evaluated as being the best in crime prevention in the country.

Those areas that persist with the model of many security companies providing a reactive service still experience high levels of crime, while in the country as a whole, violent crime rates have been increasing for years, with continued high levels of homicide, rape and armed robberies. GarsCom remains an open area, and it often has less crime than gated communities nearby. And it is not so close-knit as to become stifling.

In order to sustain the voluntary patrols, a sense of community is needed. Or the other way round: to start the journey towards becoming a sustainable community in this area, jointly working to protect the area against crime was a good place to begin. In any case, a large number of activities have been undertaken in the area with greater or lesser success, such as an annual fun day, annual recognition evening, monthly market day in the park, Christmas lights competition and garden competition, an ecology and garden group, WhatsApp street groups, GarsCom Facebook, weekly newsletters and so on.

Reflection

We will now look at the role that the three powers that have our attention in this book play in GarsCom.

GarsCom as part of the modern empire

We have referred to the tendency in the Western world that individual dreams and ambitions have often replaced the dreams and ambitions of nations – as described by Mak and Galbraith in the United States of America and Wijnberg in the Netherlands (see Chapter 10). In Africa too, individualism is increasing and there is a loss of community networks, as described by Lassiter and Kimani (see Chapter 10). The same has happened in South Africa: for many, Afrikaner nationalism was replaced by individualism and by families withdrawing into their homes; many black South Africans who were prepared to sacrifice everything in the struggle against apartheid now pursue personal wealth.

To withdraw into your home, closed off behind high walls, characterises our neighbourhood. Many spend huge amounts on interior decorations, on their gardens, on luxury cars, on clothes, on pets, on dream holidays, on entertainment and functions such as expensive wedding ceremonies. A term that has become popular lately is the 'bubble': you may be here in South Africa, but you can create your own bubble and live in it. But withdrawing into yourself may not be a good thing. In Chapter 13, we have seen how, for example, Bart Somers, as mayor of the city Mechelen in Belgium, initiated a successful programme of building relationships between the traditional residents of the city and the refugees who had recently settled there. This prevented the radicalisation of the different groups. In a certain period of time about a hundred citizens of Antwerpen joined the radical Islamic State movement, and about two hundred from Brussels, but not even one from Mechelen.

As far as nature is concerned, our record is not as good as it is with safety. There are bird-watchers. One of them has photographed more than 140 species of birds in the area. There are residents with water-friendly gardens, and there is an urban farming group that is passionate about permaculture. Many use solar energy – often because the grid is unreliable. But we are part of the modern global world, and modern institutions have not been designed to be sustainable, as Woodhill (2010) has pointed out. The modern world does not believe that we have to live with natural systems, that we have to fit in, that many things are beyond our control and that unlimited growth is impossible.

Concern for the environment is low. At one stage a private recycling company collected plastics, glass, paper and metal free of charge every week.

We just had to put all the materials together in a plastic bag and put it outside the gate. We did not even have to sort it, and the company supplied the plastic bags for free. The number of households who took part was below 5%. The company, later on, had to charge a small fee, and the number of households who take part decreased even further. This service is still continuing at the time of writing.

GarsCom cooperates with neighbouring communities as far as crime prevention is concerned. But crime prevention on its own tends to be a way to turn into yourself: you may only be caring about your own safety and that of your own group. It is still a long way to go for GarsCom to re-invent itself as a sustainable community.

GarsCom and the African world

In GarsCom, the African world remains mostly on the periphery.

GarsCom is now multi-racial, with the majority of residents still being white. The racial integration of the neighbourhood is going smoothly if often superficially; the black residents largely conform to the prevailing tendency to withdraw into your home, although some are involved in the community. Some find it too quiet and move back to the townships, where more and more big and even luxurious houses can be seen.

During funerals, the African world manifests strongly. The event usually lasts a week, with many visitors at home every afternoon for a prayer meeting, many cars that park on the sidewalks of neighbours and visitors standing around, talking. White residents are not used to that, some respond negatively. On several occasions, an ox, goat or sheep was slaughtered in the yard, an old tradition, and that elicited strong responses. This practice was stopped by the municipality. And then, after the funeral, there is a huge party at the home of the deceased. People stand around, sometimes with beer in the hand, there is noise and music. But the tensions around such events have decreased over time as both groups have learned to adapt.

At 06:00 in the morning, when it is still dark in winter, black domestic workers are already entering the neigbourhood in large numbers. Some have been on taxis and buses and trains for hours. And some will return home only when it is already dark – but since COVID-19, this has decreased a great deal. We are now even more isolated from each other than before.

There are domestic workers who stay in the backyards in GarsCom itself. On Thursday evenings, some of them had a prayer meeting in our house. This lasted more than 20 years, but came to an end during COVID-19. There we heard more about the way they experience things, how relations in

some households are very warm, while in others they are treated badly. In some cases, things take place as if there is no one observing it all. These workers know the so-called white world very well, while few in the white world know anything about their world.

And then there are the waste pickers with their trolleys, who begin to work the streets while it is still dark on those mornings that the municipal truck comes to empty the dustbins. They collect recyclable materials from the dustbins and sell it for an income. On the waste dump there are others who further recycle some of the waste. This informal system is the main reason why recycling in South Africa is at a comparatively high level.

Some residents fear the African world. Most criminals are black, which is understandable because more than 80% of the population is African.

It should be noted that in townships, the human relationships are mostly different from our rather quiet suburb.

In the townships, there are many people on the streets, and if they see a crime, they respond in different ways: some ignore it, out of fear that the criminals may target them, or because of a general culture of uninvolvement with each other in a specific neighbourhood. In such areas, the crime rate is usually high.

In other areas, the community takes things in their own hands. We have seen (see Chapter 8) that there are sometimes vigilante actions against people suspected of crime.

Rudolph Zinn (2011) found some townships where community safety networks are tailored to fit their financial capacity. For example:

> Members of Mahube Crime Prevention in Mamelodi use ordinary whistles at R20.00 a piece issued to households, thus enabling residents to warn one another or to summon help in case of an emergency. Preferably everyone should use the same type of whistle so that the sound would be similar and easily recognizable as a warning signal throughout the neighbourhood. (pp. 32, 33)

☐ Efforts to bring the modern and African worlds closer

We made one effort to include Woodhill, Mamelodi and GarsCom into one project.

In 2009, Nova and Share People, an office of ICCO/Kerk in Actie, invited the Dutch industry Imtech to send a team of experts to investigate technical ways to reduce electricity use in three communities: Mamelodi, GarsCom and Woodhill, a gated golf estate next to GarsCom. Imtech made eight staff members available for one month, and they found significant potential for reducing the use of electricity in all three neighbourhoods.

Source: Photographs taken during a Nova project, October 2009, published with permission from Nova.
FIGURE 15.9: Photographs of (a) the informal settlement next to Solomon Mahlangu Drive in Mamelodi and (b) Woodhill taken in 2009 during the project with Imtech.

In 2011, three Dutch Reformed congregations in Pretoria started projects to investigate the feasibility of implementing the methodologies developed in this project with their church members. It could lead to substantial savings for low-income households in Mamelodi. But we could not find ways to finance it, and the initiative gradually lost steam and phased out. Mathilda du Preez (2015) took part in this project and then continued to do a doctoral thesis in psychology on aspects of energy efficiency strategies employed in 41 households in Mamelodi, Woodhill, Garsfontein and nearby Menlopark.

It was a very interesting project for us, but it did not bring about any interaction between residents of the different neighbourhoods.

Our neigbourhoods, both rich and poor, still have to come home in our context. We still have to develop good relations with nature and with each other.

There have been notable efforts to do so.

An initiative of the famous South African painter JH Pierneef (1886–1957) included both the natural world and African cultures. Pierneef wanted to develop a South African art tradition that could be internationally respected. He built a home from local materials, using African symbols and structures (Nel 1990). This impulse has been swept away by internationalism. We have golf estates that are cynically called 'eco villages', often with American names; so-called Tuscan architecture can be seen everywhere.

A successful example of integrating important aspects of the household with nature is set by Professor Dieter Holm, one of the founding members of the Nova Institute, who designed and built his own household in such a way that the family house, staff accommodation, a blacksmith workshop, a cottage and the lodge of Dieter and Gesine's son Henning and his wife

Thea all run on solar power and only rainwater is used. They have toilets that use the minimum water and a greywater recycling system in a wetland which enables them to water their edible garden.[79]

In this household, there is again a close relationship with the earth, the sun, the rain and family members and staff – it is a combination of scientific thinking, responsibility for the environment, artful design and use of modern technology.

If the technology is available, what is needed is the mindset to make use of it. And most GarsCom residents do not have that mindset yet.

The role of Christianity

It is most interesting that good relationships – a central feature of the Christian faith – is a key factor in crime prevention on the local level. This 'soft' answer is effective to curb a violent threat such as crime. The patrol officers are still armed, but they hardly ever need their weapons.

Withdrawing into yourself that, as we have seen, is regarded as a definition of sin, provides opportunities for crime to come into the community, while getting involved with each other helps to prevent crime in a non-violent way.

We have seen that the church has often withdrawn from public life and has curved into the world of private inner experience and its own company (see Chapter 5). Our congregation did the same: they moved away from the ward system, where church members had to learn to get along with people they did not choose, to cell groups where members could choose each other. And it has an effect in GarsCom: there are Christians who are active in church and in their community, but there are those who are completely absent in community affairs and do not relate to their neighbours, who seem to regard the church as their community. In general, these Christians do not demonstrate markedly different values and ways of doing from the rest of the community.

The gated golf estate Woodhill, the suburb of GarsCom and the township Mamelodi – we all are highly dependent on water, energy, food and other services that must be provided from elsewhere. And eventually, we are dependent on each other.

How will each one be impacted by the huge contemporary developments such as climate change, which is expected to have an impact on southern Africa that is twice the world average, the destruction of the ecology, the

79. See https://getithartbeespoort.co.za/2019/10/02/living-by-nature/

high population growth in Africa, global political instability and the effects of black swans like COVID-19?

These trends could mean that water becomes scarce and food becomes expensive. However, the technology is available to address many of these potential threats in our local context: technically, we can have dry composting toilets that make a cyclical process possible; a household can produce its own fish and vegetables in a circular hydroponic system; we can be self-sufficient with solar energy, even to power our transport; and we can harvest some of the water we need from the rain. We need to find practices to use the available technology, but to do so requires the combination of a certain mindset and redesigning the technology to fit into the prevailing structures.

The rural town Wildpoldsried in Germany is said to produce 500% more energy than it needs from renewable sources. It sells the surplus energy by feeding it back into the network. GarsCom cannot do that, but we can do a great deal if we make fundamental changes in our way of thinking and doing. In this, the Christians are called to set an example by developing new relations with others and with the natural world.

Epilogue

Which way from here towards the sustainable well-being of communities?

We have repeatedly come back to the importance of one's insight and of asking better questions in order to get better answers.

We began with two questions: firstly, *why does, as Lloyd Timberlake has observed, the African poverty trap treat competing doctrinaire ideologies with much the same contempt?* And secondly, *when you have answered that question, whatever your answer is, how do you respond?*

Our answer to the *first question* is that none of the competing doctrinaire ideologies could bring about a satisfactory combination of things and thoughts emanating from the three powers: traditional Africa, Christianity and the modern empire, in close interaction with local landscapes and ecologies.

But the struggle between the powers is still going on.

Anyone of them could become dominant and assemble the loose fragments into its own pattern, as iron filings on a paper are moved into a pattern by a magnet below the paper – or some external order can be enforced by a power from outside, such as China.

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It may happen that the traditional African world re-establishes itself by incorporating a number of elements from the modern world while maintaining the all-inclusive traditional circle, shaped by basic traditional values, more or less intact.

It may also happen that the modern empire gradually wins the battle for the hearts and minds of the people and that the traditional African world crumbles and loses its power, in which case remnants of the traditional culture may remain, but without any substantial influence.

It may even happen that new configurations emerge that combine things and thoughts from the three powers – and others – in new configurations that transcend the given structures, that utilise the benefits of modern culture, that are in a good relationship with nature, a new culture where all of us in Africa can feel at home, where the overt conflicts, as well as the inner tensions described by Clapperton Mavhunga (see Chapter 8), have been taken up and reconciled in a bigger whole.

The outcome of the power struggle is still uncertain, it cannot be avoided but it can often be made more creative and constructive.

Our answer to the *second question* is that the logical response would be that everybody, wherever we find ourselves, avoids curving into ourselves as individuals and as groups and search for better combinations of the prevailing things and thoughts in our context.

And where ideologies and powers tend to force things and thoughts according to their own ideas and their own purposes, our response can be that we resist them by working creatively from within the given structures.

We have tried to say something about the given structures in Africa, focusing on these three: (1) the modern empire, (2) Africa and (3) Christianity. We now consider each one again.

■ The modern empire

The global scene is dominated by the modern empire, which consists of characteristic combinations of things and thoughts. The modern empire has evolved in Europe over the last 500 years through the formation of a specific military–industrial–scientific complex, combined with a certain consciousness or mindset and social structures such as legal systems. At first, it flourished only in Europe, but then has spread all over the world, bringing many good things but also massive damage – McLaren has called it the world's biggest problem, a global suicide machine.

Modern consciousness believes in a makeable world, in progress through human domination, that eventually we as humans will solve all problems,

that we will find the lost paradise through our own efforts. This belief has roots in the Christian faith but the modern world has to a large extent discarded this faith. That leaves a huge gap between its technical power and its inner strength to use that power in constructive and sustainable ways, or in Harari's words, 'Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who do not know what they want?' (2014:466).

Now that the modern belief in progress is shaken, it is uncertain what will come in its place – or will the disintegrating impact of modernity on other cultures and on the ecology merely continue?

Africa

In Africa, the modern empire is locked in a struggle for power with traditional African cultures, who have, among other responses, tried to fit the modern into the circle of the traditional, in many ways and with varying degrees of success. In the process, modernity maintains its stranglehold, so that many Africans feel as if they have colonised themselves, leading to inner conflict.

We noted the tenacity of the 'African world', of traditional African cultures and religions. The general perception that Africa is on a linear trajectory from its African past to a future simply styled on Western modernity does not recognise the complex interactions between many variables. Newton's method describes this complexity better than a spectrum.

African traditional cultures were integrated within themselves and with the ecology, but things started to fall apart with the coming of the modern empire – traders, schools, slave masters, soldiers and politicians – as well as the missionaries. Africa is searching for ways to find peace with herself again, to come home again. One of the pressures Africa is experiencing is the pressure of the growing populations on the ecology and the inability to provide for the fundamental needs of large parts of the population.

Christianity

In modern Christianity, the link between serving God in the church on Sunday and serving God in the events of daily life has largely been lost, creating a dualism between faith and life. Christianity has often turned inward, it became a private affair and we gave other forces or powers control over the affairs of daily life; classic economic theories, as part of the same larger process, have similarly relegated the question of ethics and of the ultimate ends that we pursue to the personal sphere, allowing economies to pursue destructive ends.

African Christianity has often taken over the modern dualism between faith and life, but more importantly, there is a huge and diverse variety of ways in which the encounter between Christianity and traditional African religions and cultures plays out.

The encounter between *Christ and the powers* is central to our understanding of Christianity. There are political, economic, cultural, religious and social ideologies and powers – but the Christian message is that they do not have the last word and that we should not be enslaved by them. Shakespeare had the insight that the instruments of darkness, that we call powers, promise good things but are destructive eventually.

Jesus did not live according to the powers of his day and was crucified as a result, but his resurrection proves that he was in the right. That, according to NT Wright and others, is the main message of the Bible – not a new religion, not views and theories, but news about a turning point in world history.

Relations are another key concept: good relations bring happiness; poverty is the result of relationships that do not work; sin has been defined as refusing to relate in a proper way to God, to others and to creation, and, lastly, it is practical and helpful to interpret our own lives and even national and international affairs in terms of relations.

There is a certain beauty in sacrificing your quality of life in order to live an ethical quality of life like Nelson Mandela did. It can be a case of taking up your cross and following Jesus – which needs to be done in a relevant way, according to Van Peursen's statement that an action is relevant if it originates from an ethical awareness of one's responsibility and a good understanding of the existing structures (Van Peursen 1978:202, 203), as we saw in our discussion of an effective death in Chapter 5.

■ In closing

We close with reference to events that took place nearly 100 years ago that can help us with an ethical awareness of our responsibility in our diverse contexts.

Hitler was inspired by the philosopher Nietzsche's idea of an *Übermensch*, the 'ideal superior man of the future who could rise above conventional Christian morality to create and impose his own values', the idea of the greatness of humanity.[80]

80. See https://drtism.wordpress.com/2015/07/02/nietzsches-ubermensch-and-gur-tuh-goethe/ and https://bigthink.com/scotty-hendricks/how-the-nazis-hijacked-nietzsche-and-how-it-can-happen-to-anybody

Where Hitler was inspired by the idea of the greatness of humanity, Karl Barth emphasised the greatness of God, who is completely different from what we as humans can achieve.

In the early 1930s, Barth, at the time professor in theology in Bonn, Germany, was discharged from his position and forced to leave the country. This happened because he was one of a small group of Christians who formed the Confessional Church, a group who resisted the upcoming National Socialism of Hitler, unlike the mainline churches and the 'other theological schools and tendencies in Germany – Liberal, Pietist, Confessional, Biblicist – who [...] in part openly affirmed that heresy and in part took up a strangely neutral and tolerant attitude towards it' (Barth 1966:45).

Reflecting on these events, Barth argued that he had always emphasised that besides God, we can have no other gods, but what was previously seen as an 'academic theory' or a 'religious decision' became a 'political decision' when maintained in a context where people, including Christians, followed other ideologies and powers. Barth warned that the rest of the church, and most of the Germans, and indeed the rest of Europe 'does not understand the danger in which it stands. Why not? Because it does not understand the first commandment' (Barth 1966:46–47; written in 1938, *before* the Second World War). The first commandment reads: You shall have no other gods before me.

In other words, the churches and people Barth referred to did not understand the meaning of the first commandment *in their context*. They did not realise that an 'unconditional oath to the Führer', that Barth refused to take, would mean, as Wright later formulated it, giving power to the powers of death by bowing to them: to Nazism, to Stalin's communism and to whatever drove the Allied forces. They only understood the danger in which they stood afterwards, after massive destruction had taken place. Geert Mak (2019:33–34) compares the nearly 3 000 people who died in the attack on the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 with the nearly 17,000 who died *each day* for nearly six years in the Second World War.

Today, an unknown number of people die each day of hunger, violence and neglect, as a result of the authority we have given to money, ideologies, religions and cultures to determine our lives for us – including to the modern empire and to the traditions and cultures of Africa.

And that is where the different worlds described in this book come together in an effective way: when we understand the first commandment in our different contexts, when we gain insight in the 'principalities and powers' that get their power from our support but are destroying our world, and

when we break out of our ‘strangely neutral and tolerant attitude’ amid all that is going on, when the matters are not theoretical anymore but become practical and urgent, and we develop appropriate practices based on our ethical awareness of our responsibility and a good understanding of the existing structures.

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The research in this book is based on the work of the Nova Institute. This non-profit company aims to contribute to the development of low-income households within the context of sustainability, and its strategies focus on solving energy use, pollution and food security problems. The traditional African household has been disrupted by alienation from the land, economic exploitation and wars because of Western involvement in southern Africa. African people also find it challenging to reconcile Western values with traditional ones. This book attempts to understand how African thought patterns, the church and theology interact. Additionally, it seeks meaningful solutions to problems faced by Africans to build sustainable communities. It argues that as long as the church focuses exclusively on the salvation of the individual soul, without considering the existential problems faced by vulnerable African people, it will never be effective and relevant in reaching them. The descriptive analysis of the complex southern African situation within the book, marked by extreme social and economic inequality and its prescriptive analysis of possible solutions, which serve as elements of a strategy to build sustainable communities based on traditional African values, makes it a timely contribution to the possible involvement of the church in southern Africa's most pressing challenges.

Prof. Marius Nel, Faculty of Theology, Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

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This book engages constructively and in a transdisciplinary way with the southern African context. It disseminates original research regarding three important powers and how they relate to each other: traditional Africa, Christianity, and the modern global empire, in close relationship with the African landscape and ecology. The book shows how households and communities as we know them today are the product of interactions between these robust systems embedded within the landscape of a locality and how we can engage with them if we want to create sustainable communities as part of local ecology. It focuses on deep-seated cultural and religious traditions, and rather than following a top-down approach, it focuses on much-needed household and community agency. It strives to find meaningful, contextualised and indigenous solutions for everyday problems, focusing on the broader picture and considering unintended consequences as far as possible. This work is a perfectly developed and deep theoretical reflection based on extensive personal (and practical) experience. Although it is written with a focus on the southern part of Africa, it will also be relevant for researchers around the globe with an interest in Africa as a whole. It is meant for all those who dream of and work for a dignified, liveable, and sustainable Africa. The volume creates a platform for future discourse and research on important but sometimes overlooked issues.

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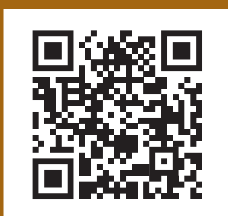

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