African Markets and the Utu-Ubuntu Business Model. A perspective on economic informality in Nairobi

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In developing the analytical framework used in this book, I explored several perspectives on the cultural evolution of cities. In Europe and North America, research highlighting the central role of culture in urban regeneration is becoming increasingly important (see, for example, Santatagata 2002; Stern and Seifert 2010). In those contexts, the term ‘cultural district’ is used to describe territorial complexes that cluster around certain characteristic features. These can vary widely, encompassing features as divergent as technology, finance, law, culture and history. Cultural districts can be defined as agglomerations of local economies in which residents and businesses have a tradition of collaborating with each other for survival and growth. This banding together creates a basis for synergy that stimulates regional growth that is often supported by strong creative and cultural practices linked to music, theatre, galleries and museums. People live, work and spend their leisure time in these cultural districts, and they are seen as holding great potential help to revitalise inner-city areas.

In a similar way, I use the term ‘cultural village’ to encapsulate the potential of the utu-ubuntu business model to impact positively on the emergent African metropolis. I use the concept as an analytical category that includes the transactional and cultural practices of traders and artisans, as well as those who benefit from
the markets they establish. What I am suggesting is that the cultural and business practices that make traditional African markets into effective and vibrant urban growth points deserve both recognition and further research within the field of global urban practice. In this chapter, I suggest possible strategies for blending African logic, norms and values into global urban theory on cultural districts, and I outline how urban planners and policy-makers can use the notion of cultural villages to enhance inclusivity and sustainability in urban planning. The concept of the cultural village offers a useful frame through which the institutional meanings, logics, strategies, norms and values of traders and artisans can be viewed as they make a living and imprint themselves on the city. This frame also ensures that those who live and work on (what are typically seen as) the margins of urban space are acknowledged as intentional agents who are aware of their inextricable links with one another and who are negotiating their livelihoods both as individuals and as part of a community.

**Planning for inclusivity**

Khayesi, Monheim and Nebe (2010) have done important work on outlining the potentials that lie in transport policies and practices that aim to create ‘streets for all’ – catering for pedestrians, cyclists, street vendors and so on, as well as public and private motor vehicles. In my view, this vision needs to be extended to urban planning as a whole, based on the realisation that people come to the city with different worldviews. Of course, city authorities have to try to balance these worldviews and ensure social justice in terms of how socio-economic organisation manifests spatially. However, for one worldview to dominate planning, as the Western model currently does, at the expense of others, is simply wrong. The informal sector, which largely reflects the mindset of the majority of Nairobi’s citizens, must be brought back into city planning.

The construction of residential settlements without considering where their inhabitants will work, worship, park, shop or spend their leisure time is common in African cities. Despite this, as
shown in Plates 7–15, traders and artisans make inroads in these spaces, squeezing their stalls between buildings and occupying any free space they can find. They do this in an attempt to sustain their own livelihoods as well as supply goods and services to residents of these areas. This occurs as a result of the short-sightedness of the architects, planners and property developers who have failed over and over again to cater for the needs of residents, as well as for the traders and artisans who step in to supply them with necessary goods and services. Too many urban planners and developers seem to be utterly unaware of the need for such businesses, and even more so of the values and norms according to which these businesses operate and which should be considered in planning.

Why is it necessary to point out to planners that people in poorer residential areas also need access to food, utensils, toiletries, snacks and clothes (sometimes in very small quantities, depending on their disposable incomes)? Surely it is time for planners, architects and property developers to think creatively about how and where traders and artisans can be accommodated and included. The fact that this is still not happening indicates the urgent need for dialogue between traders, artisans, policy-makers, planners and investors about urban planning and infrastructure development.

City planners must recognise that traders, artisans and peasants are as human as the middle class. They deserve to be accommodated in the built environment like anyone else. For example, at Dagoretti Corner, a cluster of furniture makers occupy the right side of the verge. On the left verge are plant sellers. Together, they create congestion and delay both vehicles and pedestrians. This is typical of many areas in Nairobi. To create a built environment that is efficient, safe and comfortable for traders, artisans and peasants, as well as for pedestrians and shoppers, schoolchildren and factory workers, planners and property developers need to start co-conceptualising the built environment with all of its users and inhabitants.

Open and ongoing dialogue between all these groups has the potential to ensure the creation of spaces and buildings that respond to everyone’s needs as opposed to excluding the needs of the poorer members of the community, thereby forcing them into peripheral
spaces such as the roadsides at key intersections. Admittedly, some property developers are attempting to accommodate traders and artisans on the ground floors of their buildings but this is not systematic and it is not happening enough.

**Learning from the utu-ubuntu model**

If Tutu (1999) is correct that the philosophy of utu-ubuntu has the potential to serve as Africa’s contribution to global sustainable development, city planners and administrators should look to this for *practical strategies* related to inclusive and sustainable development. As shown in previous chapters, the utu-ubuntu model invites and accommodates the sharing of space and resources in ways that facilitate individual and business resilience.

Because the utu-ubuntu business model involves sharing, generosity, community, accommodation and inclusiveness, its propagation could help reduce greed and cut-throat competition as well as the inequalities that this creates. Were it to cross-fertilise into global business culture, the utu-ubuntu model could transform the nature of urbanisation, prioritising the values of shared humanity, solidarity and compassion. By advocating a sharing of space and resources, and prioritising community relations and conviviality, the model undermines the modernist worldview of the survival of the fittest, thereby potentially reducing conflict over scarce resources.

Traders and artisans can also offer practical lessons on how self-regulating autonomous communities can work. Given the polarisation and sectarianism evident in contemporary cities and states, we have much to learn from the traders’ and artisans’ practical skills in community building. The Kamukunji electoral process and the Camera system used in Gikomba described in earlier chapters are examples of processes that include all stakeholders, balance individual and group interests and reduce the potential for conflict based on ethnic identity. These strategies for negotiating leadership positions in diverse communities, and for working in ways that facilitate fair exchange, help to keep community relations harmonious and ensure that no single group dominates at the expense of others.
Collaborative planning arises from a recognition of the fact that everyone has a right to the city. The cultural village concept builds on this by recognising that everyone belongs to a community. Inclusive cities require rule setting that regulates individuals and groups while also harmonising their different interests. For example, if Nairobi were to adopt this approach, traders’ and artisans’ associations would be represented on management committees and stakeholder bodies citywide. Rather than allowing two economic systems to operate in parallel, the city authorities would endeavour to learn about traders’ and artisans’ models of communality and to understand what it means for a business to be embedded in the realms of the individual, the community and the divine. Similarly, traders and artisans would need to be more open to incorporation into the city’s administrative systems. Both sides would have to accept that they cannot always have things their way.

So far, traders and artisans have actively built up some of the self-developed spaces such as Mwiki, Githurai and Kahawa Jua Kali, and must acknowledge that they need support and expert advice in relation to property development. However, outside experts will have to try to understand the traders’ value systems and respect the limitations they set. In the past, traders and artisans have been expected to ‘catch up’ and conform with urban planning models that suit the needs of the elite and middle classes in so-called world-class cities. Instead, Kenya’s planners, architects and financiers should try to develop plans and sites based on traders’ and artisans’ needs, aesthetics and resources, acknowledging, for example, that traders and artisans tend to fear debt and prefer to build in phases as they accumulate the necessary savings. Workable standards and innovative inclusive and enabling practices will be required.

Creating a sense of belonging

What I am calling cultural villages would be agglomerations of local economic and community practices, and would include providers of educational and health services. I call these villages, rather than districts, because they are based on the logic of a group of people who obtain land on which they build their own houses and some
of their own infrastructure. Property rights would range from no titles (for land in slums) to individual property rights in the self-developed urban fringes and family or individual rights in the urbanised villages. Residents of these villages would undertake to respect, ‘re-member’ and restore African traditions rather than, as tends to be the case in the cultural districts of Europe and North America, waiting for city authorities or private developers to initiate development.

The process of creating the cultural villages would have to be led by individuals, social or family groups. Their economic base would derive from activities spearheaded by local traders and artisans. Space would be allocated for cultural and leisure activities, including reading, art and worship. School and literacy programmes would be designed to advance cultural knowledge and to equip residents to find technical or social solutions to any problems that arise in the community. Village schools would also bind communities by providing lifelong education. Clinics and community programmes would cater for the community’s well-being.

This cultural village concept has the potential to create a sense of belonging among residents as well as giving individuals and communities a sense of identity. If they feel they belong, residents are far more likely to deploy their resources and energies on social and civic activities that might benefit the village. These activities might be anything from keeping areas clean and beautiful to supporting each other in times of stress.

Cultural villages differ from the upgrading programmes that city authorities tend to implement in slums and other low-income settlements in that they can be driven by associations of plot owners, residents, traders, or by property investors and others. They should not be imposed on communities as if they are helpless or superfluous but rather driven by communities that want to participate in improving their neighbourhoods.

Three Gikuyu proverbs are apposite here: *thina nduri miri* (poverty has no roots and is not permanent), *kamuingi koyaga ndiri* (a group can lift a heavy pestle, i.e. unity is strength) and *gweterera ti kuinaina* (patience is not cowardice). They express the importance
Cultural villages: Broadening the model

of continuing to hope for change, and of showing solidarity and patience in difficult circumstances, be they personal or shared. They illustrate the principle behind cultural villages – that anyone can lift themselves out of poverty if they act in solidarity with others. And they suggest that even if cultural villages take time to evolve, they will eventually take shape and the waiting will be worthwhile. Patience is particularly relevant to the process of funding the necessary infrastructural projects. However, if established using the principles of utu-ubuntu, family, neighbourhood or social groups are likely to develop innovative social and self-financing mechanisms such as those used by the traders and artisans described in this book.

Imprinting African logic, norms and values

In colonial times, Christians and other Westerners denounced African education, art, clothing, cuisine, dance and culture, declaring it devilish and primitive. Africans who aspired to join the surge towards modernity were encouraged to discard and deny their culture and heritage. A reclaiming and deepening of this culture could take place through the establishment of small private family- and community-based museums, theatres and community halls. Undoubtedly, the restoring, curating and preserving of what existed before would deepen communities sense of their own worth; it could also help to document the process of transformation and resistance expressed in the persistence of the utu-ubuntu philosophy.

Towns and cities with long-held traditions related to architecture, the arts, food and sport are favourite tourist destinations worldwide. Similarly, every community should be encouraged to bring their own creative energies and unique cultural practices into the African metropolis. Individuals moving into Nairobi’s self-developed urban fringes and urbanised villages should be encouraged to bring their diverse cultural experiences with them, thereby shaping the built environment and enriching the city’s culture. Equally, cultural villages could provide space for communities to narrate their histories and address the critical issues that will help them map out their futures. Essentially, communities should help to confer identities on their cities and vice versa. Cultural villages could help
to foster and expand utu-ubuntu-based relations not only between traders and artisans but between all residents of the city.

The further development of cultural villages would involve designing spaces and built environments that are illuminated by sharing, collaboration, inclusivity and community. Policy-makers, planners and investors could enhance the sustainability of African cities by helping to transform them into a collection of cultural villages in which people can live, work and advance their culture. Land-use models could be informed by existing imaginaries of built environments. These include thatched roofs, communal workshops, communal orchards and vegetable beds, and shared animal and poultry sheds. This would not only provide living and working spaces that enhance food security but also help to preserve traditional farming practices and add green spaces to the city. To include such imaginaries in urban planning, architects, planners and city managers will need to work with residents to agree on regulations regarding cleanliness, noise, pollution and the general look of the built environment. It will also involve determining the optimal size for such areas and zoning parts of the city accordingly.

Cultural villages could also document and curate their own transformation. This would include noting changes in house shapes and sizes, building materials, lighting, energy, water resources, furniture, cooking technologies and eating utensils. The evolution of infrastructure and means of transport from walking paths to cycle paths to roads could also be documented. Other interesting shifts worth documenting include attitudes to, and use of, indigenous vegetables as well as systems of measures and weights used in markets.

**Entrenching local economies**

Another goal of developing cultural villages is to strengthen local economies. Creative activities that involve production and exchange invariably attract tourists and other local citizens who have leisure time and surplus income to spend. At the same time, the creation of cultural villages deepens communities’ social and cultural capital as they participate in the exchange, production and consumption of
knowledge and technology. Table 10 provides an indication of the kinds of economic activities envisaged.

**TABLE 10 Possible activities and products of African cultural villages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Products</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Museums and archives</td>
<td>Storage, preservation and curation of African cultural practices and artefacts</td>
<td>Individuals, families or social and professional groups</td>
<td>Art, musical instruments, tools, clothing, cuisine, performance, photographs, letters, newsletters, other documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theatres, choirs and cultural groups</td>
<td>Performances, workshops for performers, scriptwriters, composers, etc.</td>
<td>Individuals, families, clubs, schools, foundations</td>
<td>Plays, films, books, musical events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft and processing workshops</td>
<td>Designing, cutting, dyeing, sewing, welding, firing, repurposing fermenting, brewing, cooking, recycling,</td>
<td>Artisans and traders</td>
<td>Clothing, bags, beadwork, shoes, furniture, skins and hides, woodwork, metalwork, tools, ceramics, milk products, cooked food and preserves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trading and retailing</td>
<td>Sourcing, stockholding, display and sales</td>
<td>Artisans and traders</td>
<td>Household goods, fresh food and vegetables, garments, shoes, secondhand goods, hardware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small-scale farming/kitchen gardening</td>
<td>Composting, sowing, planting, propagating, fertilising, weeding, pruning, harvesting</td>
<td>Farmers, families or co-operatives</td>
<td>Live chickens, goats and cattle, meat products, fruit, vegetables, herbs and spices; enhanced food security</td>
</tr>
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Traditional foods, including *rukuri* (dried meat with honey), *ngarango* (deep fried lard) and *mitura* (roasted intestines), as prepared by the Agikuyu, and *mursik* (sour milk), favoured by the Kalenjin, would feature. Similarly, the fermenting, boiling and roasting of sweet potatoes, arrowroot and yams could replace the snacks sold by multinational companies. Traditional breakfasts and baby foods made from bananas, cassava, sweet potatoes and yams are often popular, as are jams, sauces, dried fruit, and fruit purees made from indigenous fruits.
Artisan craft manufacturers could work with local abattoirs and make use of skins, hides, bones, etc. in the production of garments, shoes, sandals, ornaments, book covers, mats, bags, and so on. In areas where clay is abundant, pottery studios could be developed. Traditional *atutu* (blacksmithing) sites, such as the one near Precious Blood Girls’ School in Dagoretti, could be preserved as centres for metalwork and woodwork and also function as a tourist attraction.

Cultural villages lend themselves to the organising of food and harvest festivals, fashion shows, sports events, cultural festivals, and citizen days. Traditional shrines, such as the fig tree in Uthiru, could become valued focal points in a cultural village. Traces of colonial occupation such as Fort Smith, the trading post where the British soldiers were first stationed, could be turned into museums or educational centres.

Art and culture would be enhanced by the revival of traditional dance and the promotion of community theatres similar to the Kamiriithu Community Theatre established by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Such theatres could narrate and dramatise the everyday struggles and experiences of people as they hustle to earn a living. Some self-developed urban fringes, such as Kahawa Sukari on the outskirts of Nairobi, are already being used as film sets for dramas featured on Kenya’s Citizen TV channel, namely *Mother in Law* and *Machachari*. *Mother in Law* shows the intergenerational struggle of a family to maintain solidarity and identity in the context of modernity and diversity. *Machachari* demonstrates community bonding as various characters try to climb the socio-economic ladder.

The urbanised villages of Dagoretti are the setting for another Citizen TV drama, *Papa Shirandula*, which recounts the lives of security guards, gardeners, secretaries, messengers and landladies as they struggle to maintain their sense of identity while modernity makes inroads into their workplaces and homes. Similarly, Kenya Television Network is trying to bring the experiences of life in Kawangware to the fore through its show, *House Helps of Kawangware*. Traders and artisans could join these creative industries as set designers, beauticians, writers, photographers, studio crew, garment makers and set builders.
At a slightly different level, the changing nature of leisure activities should also be curated and documented so that communities can reflect on their experiences. For example, the commodification of meat as seen in the shift from the slaughtering of animals at home to the purchasing of meat in shops and the selling of traditional *nyama choma* (roast meat) by city hotels and restaurants is worthy of study. Similarly, the shift from household brewing and drinking, with the use of *ruhia* (horns) and *mbakuri* (bowls), to the rise of bars and pubs is worth unpacking. This move has largely excluded women from a key aspect of household recreation and leisure. Women’s responses to this, and the overall impact on family life, have been considerable.

*The professionalisation of training and mentoring*

In line with the search for sustainability, the learning and training that takes place in the African markets could also usefully be linked to curriculums at school and at tertiary level. The traders’ and artisans’ associations could also help to develop standards for the certification and registration of skills. Schools of fashion design or engineering, for example, could then send students to complete internships at the markets where they could gain some practical experience in the design, manufacturing and selling of goods. Metalworking artisans could train mechanical engineering students in the application of structural designs, while engineering students could reciprocate by training artisans in the use of digitised technologies and operating systems. Where relevant, designs, structures and processes could be documented and even patented in partnership with the universities.

Similarly, Kenya’s National Youth Service could be linked to traders’ and artisans’ learning and mentoring programmes, with the state paying for access to traders’ skills and crafts. This would benefit both the state and the traders while nurturing a sense of partnership between them. Traders and artisans could offer their practical and hard-earned experience in trading and crafting while schools and the National Youth Service could back this up with training in aspects such as costing and the use of digital technologies. These kinds of collaborations would further entrench the inclusion and legitimacy
of traders and artisans in the urban and national economy.

To sum up, the development of cultural villages will require the participation of a range of experts including planners, architects, surveyors, builders, economists and lawyers. Land owners’ associations, residents’ associations, tenants’ associations, as well as property investors, traders, artisans and peasants will all have to be involved. Ideally, experts should make suggestions on technical matters such as street layout and building quality and should strive to enhance the involvement of traders and artisans when it comes to the use of local resources and adopting the culture of utu-ubuntu in relation to the sharing of designs, technology, innovations, managerial skills and knowledge.

Cultural villages could be financed by individuals, families, social groups and cooperatives that choose to pool their resources for the benefit of their group. This includes accumulating savings over time and making specific investments in communal infrastructure, such as securing water resources, paving roads or adding street lights. Already, such groups have drilled boreholes in Kinoo and provided security in Kahawa Sukari. Individual, family and group funds can be supported by foundations and low-interest loans to avoid long-term indebtedness. In these ways, cultural villages offer great potential to be self-financing and form a solid base for economic activity while affirming cultural identity, documenting community history and creatively building solidarity in terms of governance and inclusivity.

In essence, my findings show that traders and artisans have played, and continue to play, a key role in concentrating labour and capital in Nairobi’s marketplaces. In both the colonial and postcolonial states, traders and artisans positioned themselves to resist the capture and colonisation of their spheres of influence using models and traditions handed on to them from previous generations. The weak infrastructure and poor surroundings in which they live do not make them live lesser lives. Like everyone else, they have aspirations and make plans to achieve their goals. With very few resources, they harness their own creativity to devise
social innovations that help them face the spatial and personal challenges that every human being faces every day.

The challenge for Kenya, as for many African countries, is to embrace an economic system that reflects the knowledge, needs and economic ethics and experiences of a large majority of citizens. In line with classical urban theory, I have argued that African markets are an agglomeration of labour and capital and should therefore be integral to urban planning and national policy-making. The utu-ubuntu model offers urban planners and policy-makers a framework for urbanisation processes that respect and promote indigenous values of inclusivity and dignity.

In conclusion, I can only echo the hope expressed in my introductory chapter that the light shed here on the ethics and values that underpin the work of traders and artisans in Nairobi, as well as their resilience and positive impact on urbanisation, will inform future discourse on urban economics and planning in African cities. The persistence of indigenous African markets into the 21st century in the context of the hostile or neglectful business and policy environment that they encounter every day makes them worthy of further analysis. An investigation of Afrocentric business ethics is long overdue. Attempting to understand the actions and efforts of traders and artisans from their own points of view, and analysing how they organise and get by, might allow for viable methods to be identified of enhancing their integration into global urban models and cultures.