Sustainable culture

The medium
and the message

BY TRACEY NAUGHTON

Sustainability is often thought to have three dimensions – economic, social and environmental. A growing body of thought acknowledges a fourth – that of cultural sustainability. I would go further and assert that sustainable development and a flourishing culture are interdependent. But culture, like development and sustainability, is one of those hard-to-pin-down terms often narrowly defined to mean either 'the arts' or 'traditional' practices.

A cursory glance at Southern African newspapers at best affirms the above interpretation and at worst has a cultural framework at the bottom of the analytical ladder, swamped by the prevalence of economic analysis. It is a regional tension in journalism that for a journalist to be able to view a story through a variety of lenses, a broad liberal arts education is needed. Yet many practising journalists are not qualified at all. Given the role of the journalist as a reflection of society and the importance of this role in democratic development, this locates the need for on the job training.

More broadly interpreted, culture is an agreed set of values held by a society. The value system that we hear most about in the media is the one that single-mindedly promotes consumption. Is this a reflection of the society that we live in or is it a reflection of the views of a financially powerful minority? Yet in day to day interaction, especially among the least powerful members of our society there is a palpable interplay of another set of values, not reflected in the mainstream media, that focuses on good, not goods.

Consider the dichotomy of the village based rural woman who's values are reflected in her nurturing the three children of her brother and his wife who died of Aids, watching a soap opera where a sister kills a brother in a bid to take control of the Haute Couture Fashion House inherited from their father. What is offered by this content to the rural woman? A sense of aspiration? More likely a sense of disempowerment when she compares her life, the one not on television, to the life that is on television.

I used the dichotomy of the villager and the soap opera because it is important for intellectuals to register how general issues take shape in ordinary people's lives. The subordination of the majority, of the information poor, of the rural illiterate, of women are very material realities perpetuated by a global broadcast environment dominated by mature broadcasters.

The word culture is one of the most complex and contested words in the English language. So much so, that revisiting its meaning usually causes more debates than illumination. Without delving too deeply

into the mass of scholarly literature that has developed around the world, two inter-related definitions stand out. They are:

The social production and transmission of identities, meanings, knowledge, beliefs, values, aspirations, memories, purposes, attitudes and understanding;

The 'way of life' of a particular set of human beings: customs, faiths and conventions; codes of manners, dress, cuisine, language, arts, science, technology, religion and rituals; norms and regulations of behaviour, traditions and institutions.

So, culture is both the medium and the message – the inherent values and the means and the results of social expression. Culture enfolds every aspect of human intercourse: the family, the education, legal, political and transport systems, the mass media, work practices, welfare programs, leisure pursuits, religion, the built environment.

It may appear that this culture is such an all-embracing concept that it can have little practical use in the reality of life in Africa. Looking at the above, the question is no longer "What is culture?" but "what isn't?". It covers both the values upon which a society is based and the embodiments and expressions of these values in the day-to-day world of that society.

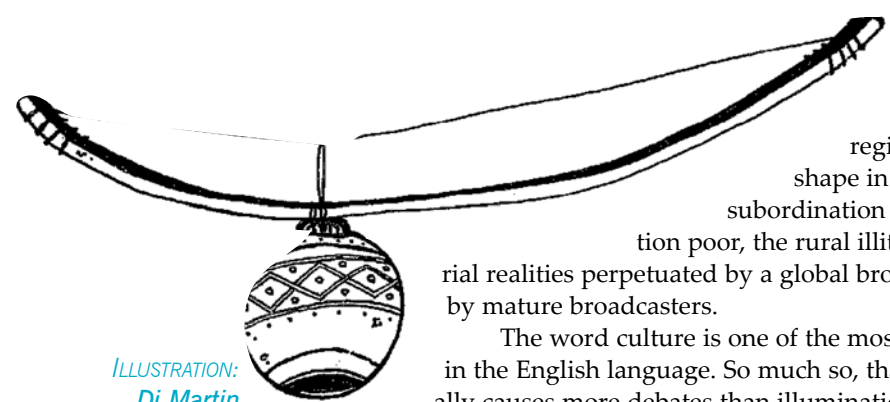In this framework, the media is the medium and the message and both these dimensions are a reflection of the culture of the society in which they are located. I am confident that a consistent application of this view of culture offers new pathways to achieving many of the aims expressed in current governance and democratisation debates in the context of our nascent democracies. In Africa we are subjected daily to the cultu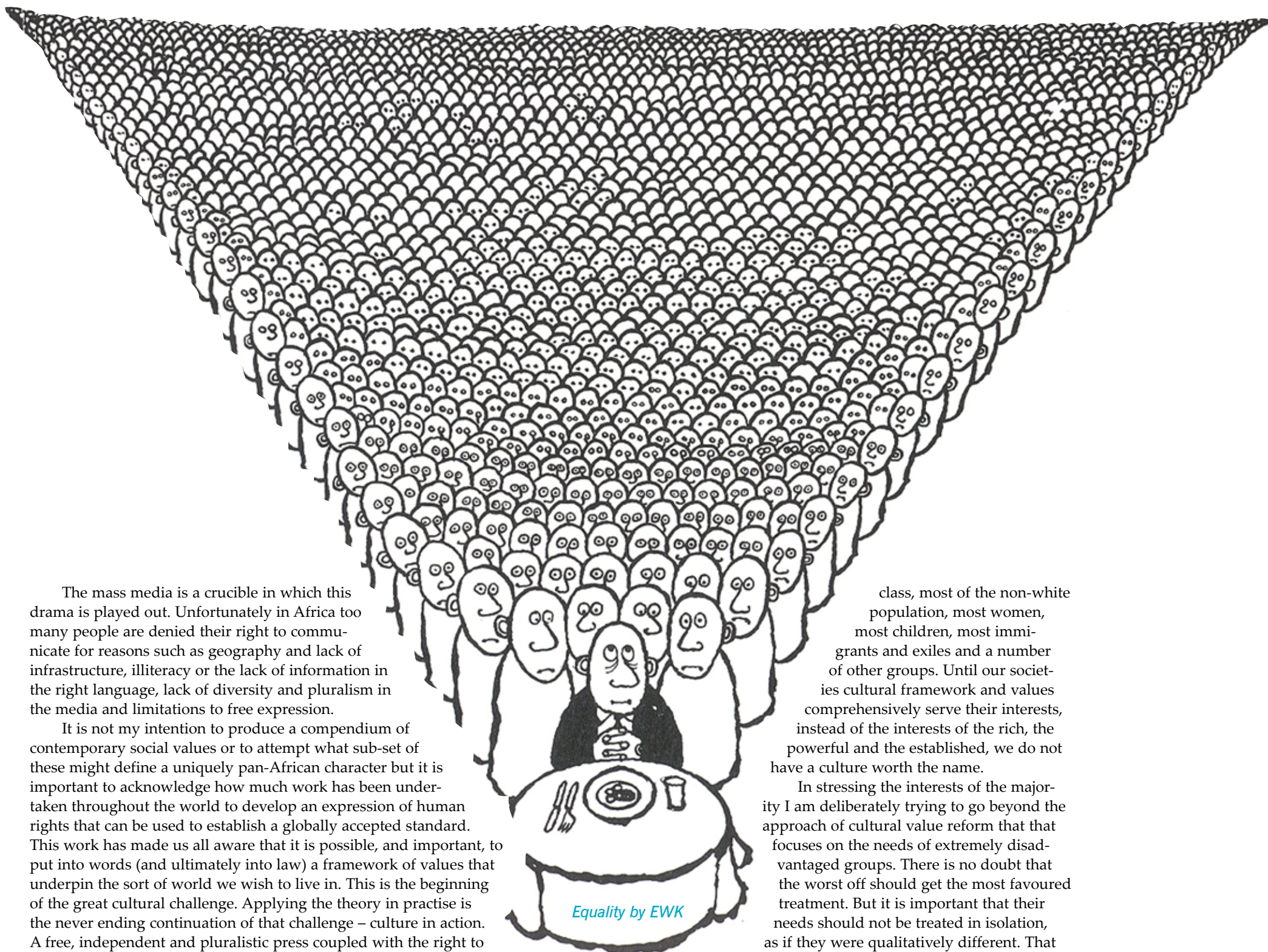ral values of external societies, we, the 'under-developed' have insufficient information with which to see the values practised in the lives of the desperate as having value to the kind of society we would like to be part of.

Culture is not the decoration added after a society has dealt with its basic needs. Culture is the basic need – it is the bedrock of society. The media is centre stage in daily reflection of a society's culture. Its very production and transmission is an act of public intervention. All acts of public intervention are informed by sets of values. Sometimes these values are formally expressed, more often, they are simply assumed. Sometimes it is even denied that they exist at all. (This last position is not one I intend to debate. To me it is self evident that the 'market' is not a 'natural' phenomenon. It is an artifice constructed by humans, and as such, embodies the values of its creators in exactly the same way any other construct does.)

I take it as self evident that humans feel it necessary to make sense of their lives and to conduct themselves on the basis of that sense. This process and its results manifest themselves as a value system – a culture. One of the biggest issues that any society has to face is the role of the state in the shaping of the values that inform the government, and more fundamentally the values of the entire society.

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Equality by EWK

The mass media is a crucible in which this drama is played out. Unfortunately in Africa too many people are denied their right to communicate for reasons such as geography and lack of infrastructure, illiteracy or the lack of information in the right language, lack of diversity and pluralism in the media and limitations to free expression.

It is not my intention to produce a compendium of contemporary social values or to attempt what sub-set of these might define a uniquely pan-African character but it is important to acknowledge how much work has been undertaken throughout the world to develop an expression of human rights that can be used to establish a globally accepted standard. This work has made us all aware that it is possible, and important, to put into words (and ultimately into law) a framework of values that underpin the sort of world we wish to live in. This is the beginning of the great cultural challenge. Applying the theory in practise is the never ending continuation of that challenge – culture in action. A free, independent and pluralistic press coupled with the right to communicate – to both receive and impart information, is a lubricant of societies values.

If journalists do not have an analysis that locates their work in a cultural framework they run the very real risk of being a mouthpiece for the elite strata of society that own much of the media. There is no privileged source, no well spring, no primary-producers of our culture. Cultural production goes on all the time, everywhere. The shape that it takes – what activities are honoured, funded, institutionalised; what is stressed in the education system and media and what is not; what symbols become dominant and which ones don't – is profoundly affected by the general structure of power and inequality in society.

The impact of class is the most familiar example of this general principle, but as contemporary feminism has shown, it is not the only one. If you look back at the names of the cultural heroes in Africa, you will notice that all of them are men. The storehouse of our intellectual wisdom is a men's house. Women are admitted only to the less sacred parts, or in rigidly limited roles. The cultural forms that have largely been created or sustained by women – and there are a good many of them, ranging from clothmaking, sewing and embroidery, pottery, a variety of design and decorative arts, and cookery in a hundred forms, to oral arts such as songs, storytelling and so on – are heavily discounted by the values of a male dominated society. The collective power of men does not obliterate women's creativity, but it does profoundly affect the value that is placed on it, the attention it is given by our media, cultural and educational institutions and the difficulties women face in gaining audiences, influence and income.

For most issues of public policy we use the criterion of the interests of the majority. That is the standard that we should also use for judging issues of culture. The majority in Africa, in most ways are not powerful, are not privileged, are not cushioned by property, qualifications, connections or institutional arrangements. This includes most of the working class, most of the non-white population, most women, most children, most immigrants and exiles and a number of other groups. Until our societies cultural framework and values comprehensively serve their interests, instead of the interests of the rich, the powerful and the established, we do not have a culture worth the name.

In stressing the interests of the majority I am deliberately trying to go beyond the approach of cultural value reform that that focuses on the needs of extremely disadvantaged groups. There is no doubt that the worst off should get the most favoured treatment. But it is important that their needs should not be treated in isolation, as if they were qualitatively different. That is a short route to being patronising. We must bear in mind that the systems of class, gender and ethnic inequality 'disadvantage' the majority of people.

Only policies that address the needs of the mass of the people are likely to win and keep widespread political support. This is not to imply that the majority is a homogenous group rather that civil society is a coalition of groups and forces that can rally in support of policies that reflect the values of the majority of people.

Just as biodiversity is an essential component of ecological sustainability, so is cultural diversity essential to social sustainability. Diverse values should not be respected just because we want to define ourselves as tolerant, but because we must have a pool of diverse perspectives in order to survive, to adapt to changing conditions, to embrace the future.

And it is not simply the discourse between diverse values that will stimulate our communities to discover new visions. The diversity of mediums of expression and of cultural manifestations are both essential parts of life's rich tapestry and invaluable tools with which to engage with the challenges that will inevitably confront us.

It may require emphasising that cultural diversity is a fact of life; the challenge for the state, and for citizens, is to ensure that this diversity is expressed, reflected, acknowledged, indeed valorised in the mainstream of African life. For this to occur, significant changes to the power relations within our society will have to occur – cultural democracy involves the exercise of rights, not simply the availability of opportunity. There are many sectors of our society, and many perspectives within these, that do not enjoy an airing in the public arena; addressing this inequality will need strategies that are courageous, inclusive and culturally aware.

In this argument, the media is a cornerstone to cultural and social sustainability and one of the greatest challenges of our transitional time, is to ensure that media personnel have the tools to bring a cultural analysis to bear one the production of information.