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## AFRICAN BUSINESS MODELS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE ROLE OF CULTURE AND FAMILY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper is an exploration of successful entrepreneurship and business skills in African extended families with a focus on Zimbabwe. Oral tradition has it that, wealth in an African set up does not exceed three generations. The thrust on social entrepreneurship is important for African business development, it pushes families and communities for the adoption of a mind-set for self-drive and creativity through the transfer of knowledge and skills. In Africa, Social Work profession, must focus on community capacity building and resilience to sustain families and communities. It plays a role in the drive for creativity and African cultural and business management systems. This study therefore examines the Shona view of entrepreneurship, discusses this in the context of major themes emanating from entrepreneurship views from other parts of the world and proposes African house of entrepreneurship model.*

**KEY TERMS:** Entrepreneurship, family, culture, community social enterprises, self-reliance, Zimbabwe, Africa

### KEY DATES

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This article appeared in a special issue of the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW) titled *Ubuntu Social Work*. The special issue focused on short articles that advanced the theory and practice of ubuntu in social work. In the special issue, these definitions were used:

- Ubuntu refers to a collection of values and practices that black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world.
- Ubuntu social work refers to social work that is theoretically, pedagogically and practically grounded in ubuntu.
- The term ubuntu is expressed differently in several African communities and languages but all referring to the same thing. In Angola, it is known as *gimuntu*, Botswana (*muthu*), Burkina Faso (*maaya*), Burundi (*ubuntu*), Cameroon (*bato*), Congo (*bantu*), Congo Democratic Republic (*bomoto/bantu*), Cote d'Ivoire (*maaya*), Equatorial Guinea (*maaya*), Guinea (*maaya*), Gambia (*maaya*), Ghana (*biako ye*), Kenya (*utu/munto/mondo*), Liberia (*maaya*), Malawi (*umunthu*), Mali (*maaya/hadama de ya*), Mozambique (*vumuntu*), Namibia (*omundu*), Nigeria (*mutunchi/iwa/agwa*), Rwanda (*bantu*), Sierra Leone (*maaya*), South Africa (*ubuntu/botho*), Tanzania (*utu/obuntu/bumuntu*), Uganda (*obuntu*), Zambia (*umunthu/ubuntu*) and Zimbabwe (*hunhu/unhu/botho/ubuntu*). It is also found in other Bantu countries not mentioned here.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe the starting point for entrepreneurial studies should be the realisation that Zimbabwean people and most of Africa went through a traumatic colonial experience where they were dispossessed of their land and their identity as well as their dignity as a people. The issue of African cultural identity is supported by Odora (2002:4), who observes that, President Mbeki's philosophy of African Renaissance aimed at building a deeper understanding of Africa, its languages and its methods of development and business management. There is a real need for contextualisation of entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe so that it is inspired by the host local Zimbabwean culture. This study therefore examines the Shona view of entrepreneurship, discusses this in the context of major themes emanating from entrepreneurship views from other parts of the world and proposes African house of entrepreneurship model.

## THE SHONA VIEW OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Shona tribal culture in Masvingo holds entrepreneurship in high esteem and regards it as a hunter spirit and its symbol is the cheetah skin (*retso*) (Mbigi, 2000). This is because the cheetah is the fastest animal on earth whose speed exceeds 120km per hour and the cheetah symbolism is very attractive to entrepreneurs in traditional Masvingo. The symbol means that entrepreneurs must act decisively, with speed and on gut-feel even with incomplete information. The community and tribal element of entrepreneurship is imbedded in sharing obligations with community and building an identity through traditional thanks-giving ceremonies called in local terms *dendo* or *bira*, which allows poor members of the community to share and enjoy the benefits of local successful individual entrepreneurs. Other communal rituals include *nhimbe* (work party) where the entrepreneur prepares food, beer, meat and/or organises a work party on their agricultural piece of land with lots of singing, praise and laughter. These community activities support the local entrepreneurs to build a solid identity that creates confidence within themselves.

In line with the same argument, Rukuni (2007, p175) observes that unless we rediscover ourselves, our roots, and heritage and embrace everything that made our ancestors survive, thrive and succeed in creating a dynamic society in the past, we today cannot create a new modern African society. The *machobane* principle by Rukuni (2007, p175), applies logic, that *Africans* should try to work for themselves rather than being employed. The best qualities of a growing economy are found in independent thinking entrepreneurs. Rural communities and entrepreneurs have to build their own water wells, small dams, roads and plant trees as physical and biological capital. Finally, we need to improve biological assets through planting trees, herbs and improving the genetic quality of natural resources.

In this article, my definition of entrepreneurship is influenced by my personal views and belief that *in an African village entrepreneurship reality is not absolute, but is a result of the socialisation process that takes place in the family unit and influenced by the community. Entrepreneurs therefore are people who receive socialisation within the family system which helps them to shape the horizon of their entrepreneurial limits. They facilitate the processes that leads to the resolution of family business or social capital concerns, hence entrepreneurs come to the rescue of the traditional family because culture has to do with the way family issues (social or business) can be resolved.*

Therefore, my definition of entrepreneurship is:  
*capacity to bring family members together to perform family collective action like traditional rituals to resolve family problems together. Entrepreneurship has to do with driving the family enterprises together for the creation of social capital and wealth. Entrepreneurship is that facilitation of the family business unit, through empowering families and communities for the adoption of a mind-set for self-drive through the transfer of knowledge and skills.*

## MAJOR THEMES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

According to Bohwasi (2015), in any society, competent successful entrepreneurship and leadership is vital for successful renewal and continuity of each system to enhance successful economic reforms. The analysis and comparison of the four cultural paradigms (Asian, African and Western Europe and North American) significantly point towards a collusion and a merger. The Asian Kaizen paradigm of continuous improvement has cast its net across and courted the western corporate paradigm that has turned family enterprises like the Bill Gates, Thomas Meikles, and Ford Motors into world class corporate entities. Culture is very important and central to entrepreneurship development but gets limited on its own to advance entrepreneurship into world class

business in Africa, hence the need of a fourth model and paradigm. Mbigi (2000), and (1997), Mbigi et al (1995) wrote eloquently about the need to harness the African culture for development. There is need to harness this invaluable social experience and innovation of the African people and align them with successful management techniques from both the west and the east. The Japanese harnessed their cultural background to spearhead Japanese industrialization after a thorough defeat in 1945 only to emerge as a major economic powerhouse within a short space of time, (Hiroshi Tanaka (1988) and Whitehill (1991). Mazrui (2000) defines the role of culture to development as it influences the cosmology of a people, as a motivational and control factor, as a standard of judgment of what is acceptable in the community, as a means of communication and as a basis of identity. Likewise, the African culture must be used and revolutionised to transform and spearhead economic development in Africa. Seven (7) themes were discerned from an analysis of literature on culture and entrepreneurship. These are:

- Theme 1: Culture is central to successful entrepreneurship designs
- Theme 2: Social networks as the glue that holds society and entrepreneurs together.
- Theme 3: Social capital is the human factor and anchor of rural business success
- Theme 4: Creative thinking is the ART for building successful enterprises from blind ideas
- Theme 5: Building on innovation and creativity to sustain the house of rural entrepreneurship
- Theme 6: Incredible advances in Information communication technology (ICT) as an entrepreneurial mover
- Theme 7: Meeting and mating of ideas and cultures causes entrepreneurial progress

What is clear from the analysis above is that culture can be an enabler to entrepreneurship and business growth in the sense that it moderates the environment within which social interactions take place, including business transactions. There is a need to develop a business culture relevant to the community. Mbigi, (2005) cites several examples of countries that have developed critical innovation strategies for the poor. Countries like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan have developed new models of entrepreneurship and leadership cultures that are centred on the values of social work profession.

Social networks are seen as the glue that holds society together and the wealth of a community, measured not in economic but human terms and capital. McPherson (1996) in their study of social capital and small enterprises in Nairobi concluded by saying that there is a need to explore more on the social side of the enterprises and the whole array of inter-firm linkages and social networks which they discovered to be having some effect on the success of the firms.

Social capital is a relational artefact that plays an important role in facilitating interaction by creating conducive social ties, social context, trusting relationships and value systems that govern the interactions of an individual in his or her social context (Anderson and Jack (2001). Muzvidziwa (1999) calls it the human factor, which is a cultural resource that enables any given individual, community or society to survive and cope with the demands of social life. De Soto (2003) concurs with the idea of being socially embedded, when he postulates that the major stumbling block hindering rural poor and small entrepreneurs from growth is their exclusion from capital relationships.

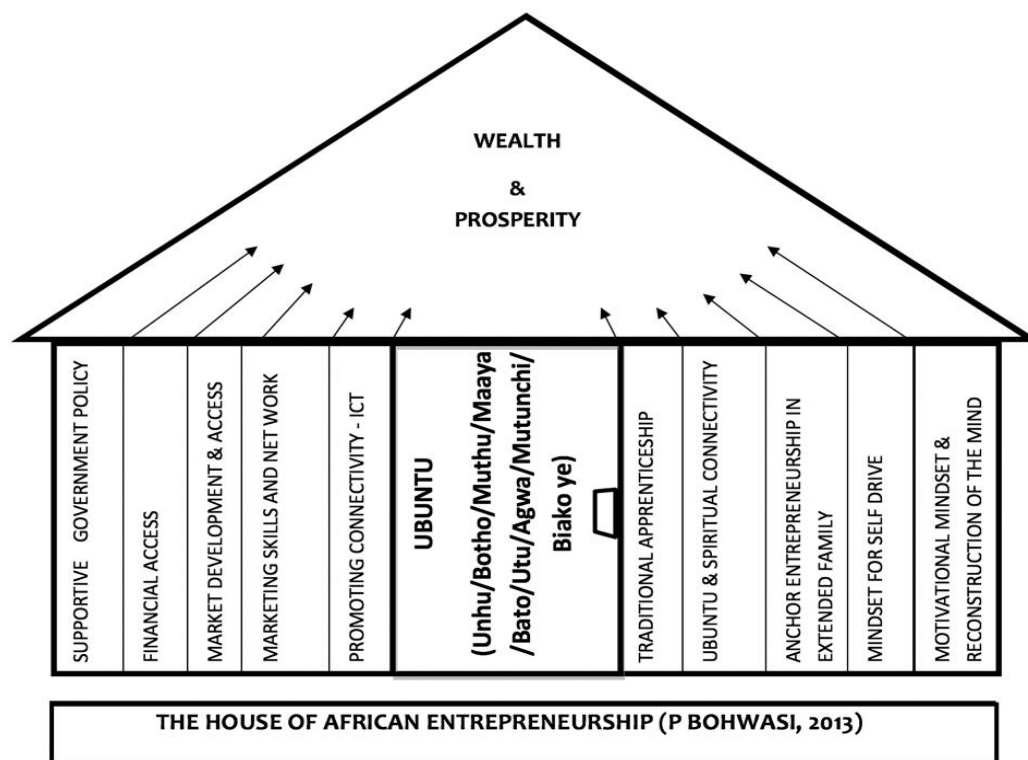
An important aspect of cracking creativity thinking is that you need some means of producing variations in all ideas, and for the variation to be effective, it must be 'blind'. Blind variation implies a departure from reproductive, same old ideas and knowledge. Without a constant flow of ideas, a business is condemned to obsolescence.

Every community has its own legends, entrepreneurs and geniuses. The genius of African (South) leadership tradition continues to be based on Ubuntu – a cultural reflection of the goodness of the African people. The paper by Bohwasi (2015) touched largely on critical questions on who are the entrepreneurs in any community, and what are the traits and characteristics in the growth of businesses looking at four cultural model levels.

## AFRICAN HOUSE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP MODEL

The model is based on an African house with 8 pillars as shown in Figure 1.

*Figure 1: African house of entrepreneurship model*



Two important aspects arising from this model will be elaborated.

**Best thinking entrepreneurs and innovative ideas come from the original environment and communities – relevance of culture.** The best thinking entrepreneurs and creative people come from the original communities where people exercise free-reign of expression and innovation within the context of their culture using their local language. The best innovative ideas come from people who are rooted within their own community, culture and working for themselves to improve their business. According to Professor Rukuni (2007: 208), they have to show innovation through designing their own community infrastructure and assets, such as digging their own water wells, open their own community roads, as they contribute towards the building of community assets and infrastructure.

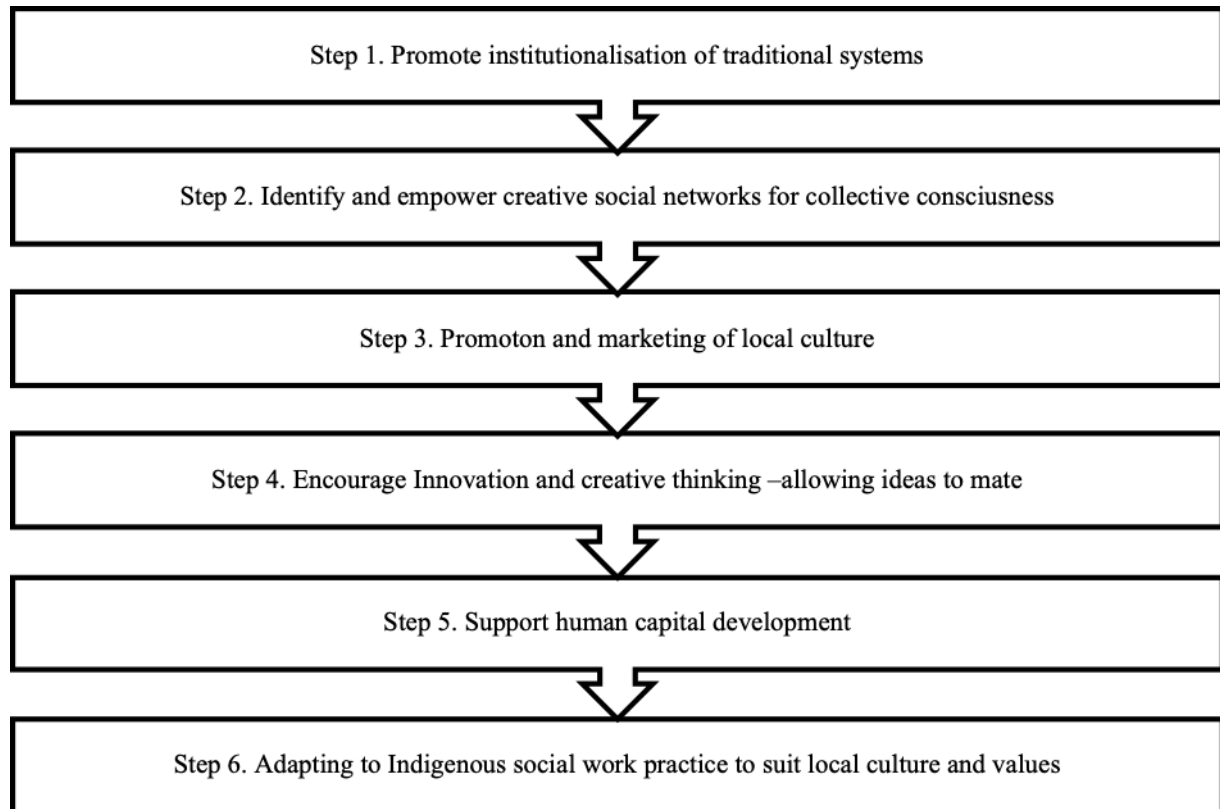
**There is fusion and agreement between all the paradigms (West American, European, Asian and African), that successful community businesses are extended family based and all begin with high levels of self-interest.** In the West the most successful community entrepreneurship is practiced by the Jewish families. Their most successful enterprises such as Ford Motors are all family-based entities. In Asia, they have converted their extended polygamous units into competitive companies such as Toyota all started as family based quanxi and bamboo networks of family businesses. In Africa, the challenge is that African extended families need to retain their economic role and dimension as a productive unit and still harness the social capital of trust embedded in the extended family and convert this into financial capital to be invested into successful family businesses. There is no dispute that entrepreneurship and business models are family based.

#### **How can social workers promote entrepreneurship skills for individuals, families and communities?**

For this to happen, social workers must utilize their skills to support human wellbeing, guided by the popular three levels of intervention (micro, mezzo and macro). Of critical importance is that social workers must introduce indigenous practice that places social work within the values and culture of the community. In fact, social work must be tuned to weave its focus towards ability to work within the values and culture of a community. For them to promote leadership development and expert skills. They must embed themselves as part of the community leadership, they must have a sense of connection with both the past and the future of the communities to be able to promote entrepreneurship skills at this level. In contemporary African worldview, leaders are the custodians of culture and a particular civilization that seeks to promote entrepreneurship in the community, Mbigi, (1997). Leadership therefore must have a high sense of personal destiny (*dzinza*) and

develop a high sense of self-awareness too. To be effective social workers must support a leadership that is knowledgeable of their role. Leaders must be ceased and possessed with the spirit of self-awareness to be able to know who they are and where they want to go in the community. To continue to promote personal leadership, entrepreneurship skills at the level of individuals, family and communities, social workers should attempt the steps in Figure 2.

*Figure 2: Step by step guidelines for promotion of entrepreneurship for individuals, families and communities*



#### **Step 1. Institutionalization of traditional systems**

Building strong family and community institutions that are suitable to support on-going traditional social transformation. These include traditional leadership systems of good governance and using the methods of community social work to empower and drive the transformation of local institutions of power to sustain and strengthen local decision-making processes for social change.

#### **Step 2. Identify and empower creative social networks for collective consciousness**

Support small creative community social networks of value that address and bring the community together to perform community and traditional rituals and programs that build community assets and social capital. Using social work Group work skills to identify community social networks, the social workers helps to build cohesion and group/community syntality amongst the individual, family and community members.

#### **Step 3. Promotion and marketing of local culture**

Social work must support the promotion and the marketing of local cultural traditions and arte-facts as an Africa enterprise and commodity for wealth creation. Social workers must ride upon social development principles to enhance economic development at the community level. The world over culture has become a commodity for growth and individual entrepreneur phenomenal growth. To do that social workers must adapt and embrace cultural competency as a virtue.

#### **Step 4. Encourage innovation and creative thinking –allowing “ideas to have sex”**

Innovation and creativity play a major part in global business and entrepreneurial growth. Rural areas need the advancement of information communication technology (ICT) to drive family and community enterprises.

Social workers and social entrepreneurs must promote ideation, allow people to be creative in their projects, hence allowing “*ideas to have sex*” or “*mating of ideas*” is a process to allow for the multiplication of ideas, chances and opportunities for business growth (ideation). It is the act and process of hypothesizing, creating different and a number of conjectures to allow for the multiplication of ideas in order to develop greater chances of success.

#### **Step 5. Support human capital development**

Majority of rural entrepreneurs are not skilled, if they are, rural areas are remote with no appropriate technology (water, electricity and human capital) to facilitate business growth. Social workers must lobby for the increase in human capital development, both artisanal and entrepreneurial skills to support both technical and mind-set building to appreciate the advancement of modern family business management ethos. Growth oriented rural enterprises with potential for growth must be the focus of intervention and experimentation to support effective global entrepreneurship project.

#### **Step 6. Adapting to indigenous social work practice to suit local culture and values**

Many a time’s social workers in Africa operate outside the context and realm of the cultural norms and values of the local people. They are not privy to the local value-centered cultural solutions to local social problems. They operate outside the framework of the local cultural competence. There is need to encourage learners and practitioners in their conscious adaptation to the local values and culture to be able to generate new approaches and methodologies that are suitable. The application of western culture and values in the middle of rural Africa will not work, hence social workers need focus on the advancement of social inclusion and the empowering and investing in people to build cohesive and resilient societies that open/push and make institutions accessible and accountable to the people.

### **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Effective global and/or village/community entrepreneurship is based on a strong cultural identity. It is correct that culture affects the way in which business problems can be resolved but mating cultural ideas, local and regional policies improves business practices. Traditional social work plays a major role in the process of community and family integration, leadership and entrepreneurship, promoting the values of diversity, mating of different ideas to empower and liberate people to enhance business growth and social wellbeing. Traditional social work pushes families and communities to embrace self-help through the adoption of effective family small businesses and most important a mind-set for self-drive. The thrust in building community enterprises with the emphasis that long-term growth is a factor for advancing social entrepreneurship. The thrust in facilitation of family rituals by traditional leadership is a practice of social entrepreneurship that demands a high degree of personal consciousness and a personal spiritual journey and connectivity to the local culture. It therefore remains to conclude that effective global and African village entrepreneurship is centered in the strong African cultural tradition and social work values play a role in enhancing the formation of social experiments and community social enterprises that are both sustainable and market driven.



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