

The Tension of Two Worlds in East Africa: Synthesis or Arbitrage?

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What created the biological abundance of East Africa at the beginning of the 20th century? Why, in the place where humanity has lived since our species was born, was there still so much room for the rest of life: the large mammals, reptiles, insects, birds, trees and plants? Was this abundant landscape an accident of history? Or was it created by us as Africans? Long ago, we were forced to learn that we could not control the forces of nature, but had to live with them instead. Out of that experience, we created multiple, resilient cultures of knowledge. These survived in practices, institutions and beliefs that adapted to new circumstances and ensured both the survival of our ancestors and our own presence here today.

The legacies of our older African cultures continue to shape our behaviours and assumptions, and they are radically different from the legacies of European culture and colonisation that created the modern states we have today. That European legacy grew out of a different history, climate and geography and in response to different necessities. However, it is such a powerful legacy that it has become the model of development around the world. Still, at a time when societies everywhere are rediscovering the need to live with the forces of nature, our 'elder' African knowledge of landscapes and abundant life, our experience of resilience and survival, could help restore the biological wealth of the continent and create a new model of modernity.

The trouble is that African knowledge and institutions have since colonial times been dismissed as irrelevant to the future and to our own wellbeing. Not only did the foreigners, who rarely spoke our languages, condemn African societies as backward and primitive; we, the peoples of East Africa, tragically accepted that judgement. We continue to believe to this day that our own knowledge, languages and institutions are inhibiting progress and holding us back. We lack confidence in our own cultures and institutions, and even question our understanding of the world. We schizophrenically live parallel lives – one European and one African – rarely attempting to create a new society born of the best of both legacies and traditions. We tolerate a marginal existence, caught in the tension of two worlds.

Kenya: Tough New Rules May Drive Herbalists Out of Business

Billy Muiruri, Nairobi March 28, 2007

The work of more than 20,000 herbalists in Kenya is on the line, if a new government policy is ratified. The revised National Policy on Traditional Medicine and Medicinal Plants could drive traditional healers out of business. A World Health Organisation report shows that conventional medicine caters for only 30% of Kenya's population, leaving 70% to traditional providers. The policy seeks to recognise experts who use herbs and "swallowables" to treat patients. This automatically leaves out magicians, witchdoctors, soothsayers, charlatans and other traditional healers. The government classifies these as alternative health providers...

...Traditional healers have also been calling for abolition of the Witchcraft Act Cap 67 (1925), which they term "colonial and outdated". This law bans witchcraft or use of "witch medicine" with intent to injure.

Administrators risk five to 10 years in prison. This law prohibits deeply rooted practices like use of soil, ash, animal fat, feathers and beating of drums as a cure to what they term "cultural" illnesses.

Source: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200703271157.html> accessed on May 7, 2007

‘On the Trail of a Treatment for AIDS’

Dr Sekagya Yahaya Hills straddles two worlds of medicine — he is both a dental surgeon and a traditional healer. The soft-spoken Ugandan told delegates at the International Symposium on Biodiversity and Health about his work as president of PRO.ME.TRA-Uganda. This nongovernmental organisation is part of the international PRO.ME.TRA network that brings together African physicians and traditional healers with their colleagues in Europe and the United States to promote traditional medicine. PRO.ME.TRA conducts scientific and cultural research, and provides training to traditional practitioners of traditional medicine using a curriculum that is both scientifically based and culturally specific. It covers topics ranging from family planning and maternal and child health care to HIV/AIDS. Some 2,500 traditional healers have completed the PRO.ME.TRA training programme, Hills said.

Source: http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-55582-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html accessed on May 7, 2007

Our history, our legacies

The peoples of East Africa are the people of the Rift Valley, with its mosaic of altitudes, temperatures, slopes and soils, matched by the extraordinary variability of rainfall from year to year and place to place. Our region is also a crossroads of cultures and languages: Nilotic, Bantu, San, Cushitic, Arabic, Indian and, more recently, European. Long before Europeans arrived, different groups migrated through the region. As we moved, we created a political configuration based more on exchange, rivalry and accommodation than on conquest. We created a network of interlocking, interdependent societies. Though autonomous, together these societies created a distinctive political system where each group was held accountable by its neighbours through observation, critique and containment. A linguistic map of the region (Figure 1) shows us settling in and around each other, in groups with distinctly managed livelihoods and forms of social organisation.

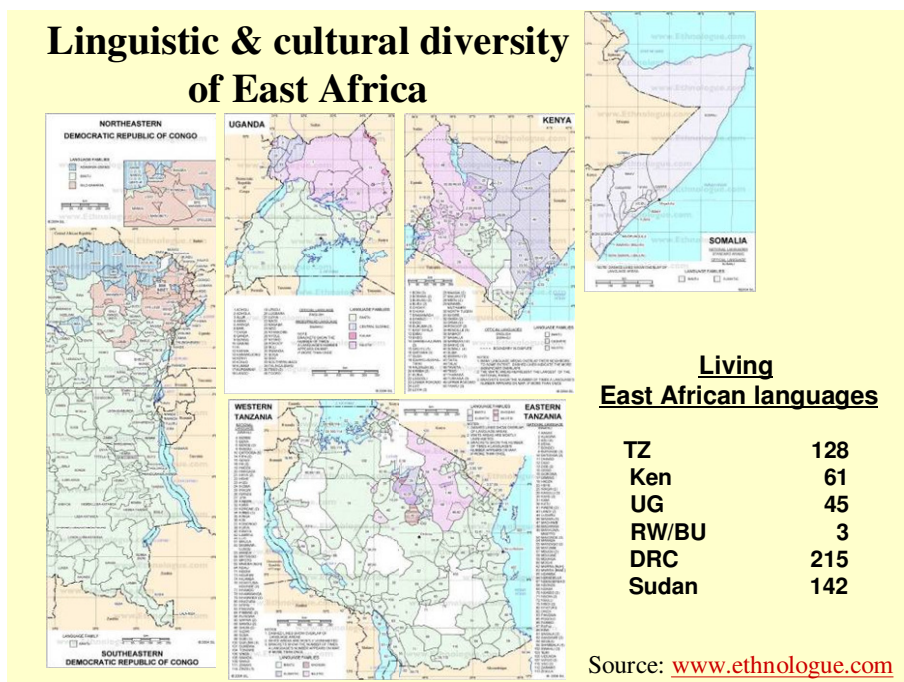


FIG 1: Linguistic and cultural diversity of East Africa

East Africa is also a religious crossroads, where major monotheisms mingle with older African religions. These older traditions are a critical part of our living legacy as East Africans. Two scholars, John Mbiti and Laurenti Magesa, have described the beliefs of African religion. According to Mbiti, African religion has an integrated concept of time. In this paradigm, the present includes all those who are alive, as well as those who are about to be born or who have recently died. It contains both the past and the future, which cannot be separated. Mbiti, using Kiswahili, talks about 'nowness' or *sasa*, which feeds into a larger dimension of deep macro time, which he calls *zamani* (the past). In this way, both the long-term and the immediate are integrated in people's minds (Figure 2).

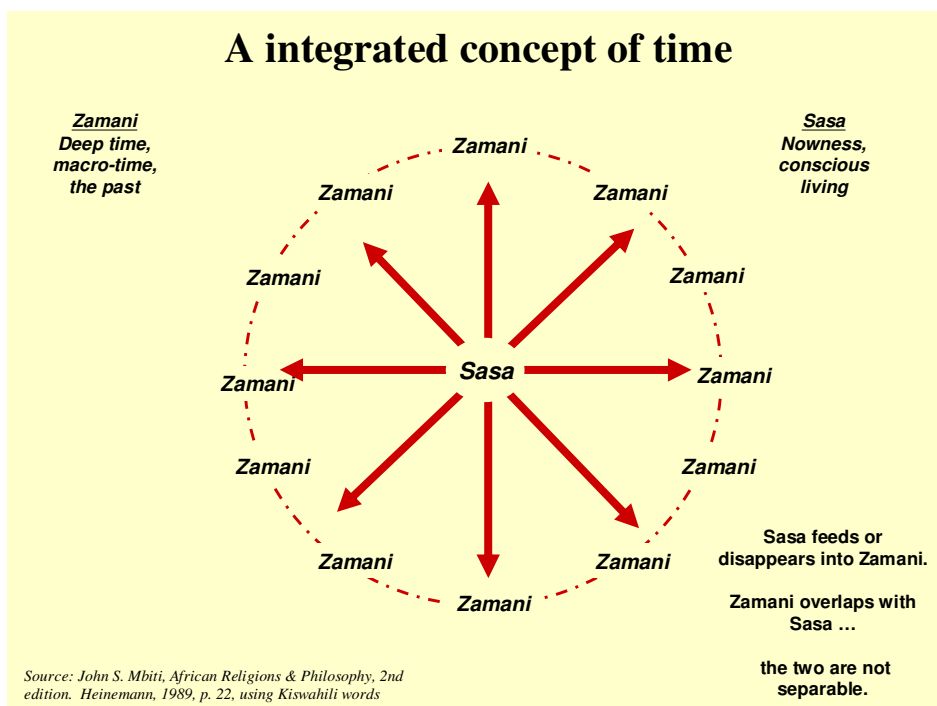
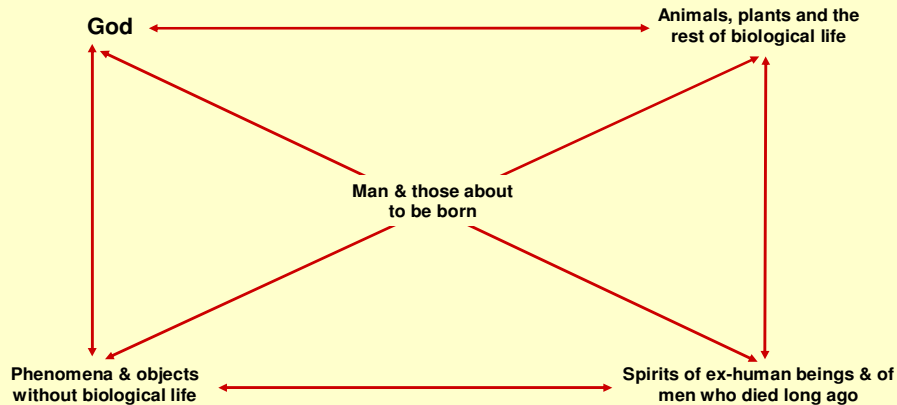


FIG 2: An integrated concept of time

Not only is there an integrated sense of time, but in African religion, man, God, the spirits and the rest of the animate and inanimate natural world are an integrated whole, a cosmos where man is responsible for managing these sacred relationships. In order to fulfil this responsibility, communication with the ancestors and the spirit world is essential. The ancestors link people to God, the spirit world and both the living and inanimate in nature: the rains, the animals, the plants, rocks and rivers. Mbiti describes these as 'sacred' relationships that nothing can destroy (Figure 3).

A spiritual acceptance of sacred relationships

"To destroy or remove one of these categories is to destroy the whole existence ..."



Source: John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 2nd edition. Heinemann, 1989, p. 16 & p. 23-4

FIG 3: A spiritual acceptance of sacred relationships

In this world of integrated relationships, the natural world enjoyed a clear political voice through the spirit advisor (the priest, the seer, the *mganga*) who advised the chief and the elders. Together, this triumvirate led society. Chiefs embodied the advice of the elders and were guided by the spirit advisor, all acting for the good of the clan as a whole (Figure 4). The people could gossip and criticize, but the real accountability of the leaders was to the ancestors and the deeper, more powerful beings of the spirit world who could inflict terrible punishments, usually through the actions of the natural world¹.

A political voice for the natural world



Based on interviews with Paul Akiba Hatia, Mtwara, Tanzania, 2001 (Makua clam)

FIG 4: A political voice for the natural world

¹ In Imperial China, these actions were known as the withdrawal of the heavenly mandate from the ruling emperor(s). See Richard Kyng's *The Rise of a Hungry Nation: China Shakes the World* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2006)

Mosaic Rights

Laurenti Magesa writes of a world where "... the universe has been lent by God to humanity through the ancestors and the living leaders ...". To misuse the universe lent by God is a terrible crime. And what constitutes misuse? Magesa puts it in one word: "Greed."

To avoid the error of greed, or at least in an attempt to manage its negative effects, our older traditions defined a system of rights "mosaic rights" to land. Every hectare of land had on it a patchwork of claims that was applied during different times and seasons by different people or communities. In this system, women might have the rights to food crops while men would have the rights to tree crops. Herders would have the right to graze their animals on fields after the crops had been gathered, while the family that dug a well would have the right to say who could draw water from it. No one had the right to own the land, because the land was not ownable, but was held in trust for all so that no one's right to feed themselves was violated. Mosaic rights gave everyone something at different times and in different ways. It was – and probably remains – a system of rights that encouraged social equity and sustained biodiversity, both of which promoted resilience in the face of uncertainty and unpredictable hardship.

An ecological society

Taken as a whole, the knowledge embedded in these older African traditions was coherent and effective. The integrated concept of time respected both the long-term and the immediate and informed the integrated relationships between people, spirits, God and the natural world. This created a world so complex it could only be effectively managed at a local level. Because localities were so important, and because population densities were kept low, the political structure was not a state but a network, a political system of neighbourly rivalry and accountability that respected social and ecological diversity. It was a political system based on mosaic rights that gave each person access to the resources of the land and society. Taken together, this living legacy of the pre-colonial world, this history, landscape and set of beliefs, are a profound part of our legacy as contemporary East Africans.

These intrinsic structures of East African society were invisible to the Europeans who ventured into the region in the late 1800s. There were few tall buildings or monuments, nor a single language or written record to study. Instead, the Europeans found an oral society with myriad languages, living and managing numerous ecologies using multiple political forms and guided by an assortment of hidden spirits. What they noted most frequently was the natural abundance that 'no one' was exploiting, not realising that this abundance was an integral part of the traditional strategy of survival. Instead, the puzzling lack of exploitation, absence of written records and permanent dwellings, led Europeans to conclude that East African society was backward and primitive.

Today, with our growing knowledge of the damage that industrialisation can and has caused at many levels, the old networked societies of East Africa could be described as a population living lightly on the land in a political system that respected both human and natural diversity. There were no great monuments because these would have been expected to crumble and return into the earth so that all life could be sustained.

Rather than written learning, it was a society where people learned by doing, living and working in an active three-dimensional relationship with each other, the earth and the rest of the natural world. Our multiple languages not only described multiple histories, but also reflected differing ecological realities that we managed using multiple political forms adapted to different environmental conditions. Taken as a whole, ours could be described as an ecological society, a society that had created the very biological abundance that the Europeans admired and coveted.

Scientists want elders to have more say on forests Malindi

Research scientists want the government to involve local elders in the management of Kaya forests to conserve endangered herbs endemic to the shrines. They said the National Museums of Kenya, which currently manages the forests, lacked the capacity to conserve the traditional herbs. The scientists also suggested that tourists visiting the shrines be made to respect traditional rituals to preserve the culture of the Mijikenda. Speaking at Gede, the director of the Kenya Forestry Research Institute, Dr. Doris Mutta, said most of the forests at the Coast were threatened by agricultural activities.

Source: Sunday Nation April 29, 2007, p. 3

'New Network to Conserve Africa's Medicinal Plant Resources'

A wealth of medicinal and aromatic plants ensures the primary healthcare and livelihoods of the poor in sub-Saharan Africa. Of the close to 6,400 plant species used in tropical Africa, for instance, more than 4,000 are used as medicinal plants. Up to 80% of the population relies on these traditional medicines. However, says the Network on Medicinal Plants and Traditional Medicine (Eastern Africa), loss of these genetic resources and their habitat is escalating. The loss of related indigenous knowledge is even greater.

Launched in September 2003, the network is supported by IDRC and co-ordinated by IDRC's François Gasengayire in Nairobi. The goal, says Gasengayire, is to help reverse this trend by promoting the conservation and sustainable, safe, and effective use of medicinal plants and herbal products. The network also seeks to integrate traditional medicine in public health services in Africa and to promote appropriate policies.

Source: http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-55582-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html accessed on May 7, 2007

Tension of Two Worlds: Development in different cosmologies

The natural abundance we created was very attractive to Europeans, whose 19th century industrialisation created an insatiable hunger for raw materials. Few realised then that fossil fuels – first coal and later petroleum – could pose such a threat to the earth's climate, or that natural systems needed time to recover. As colonialism gave way to independence in the 1960s, the development of an industrial economy became a universal ambition. However, this ambition rested on assumptions about time and the relationship between man, god and the natural world very different from those that shaped the older African legacies.

All development assumes that time is progressive: future generations will be better off than the present one, who are already living more comfortably than their ancestors. In the world of *sasa* and *zamani*, however, time is not progressive. Instead, the advice of the past is used to survive the hardships of the present so that the next generation can continue into the future.

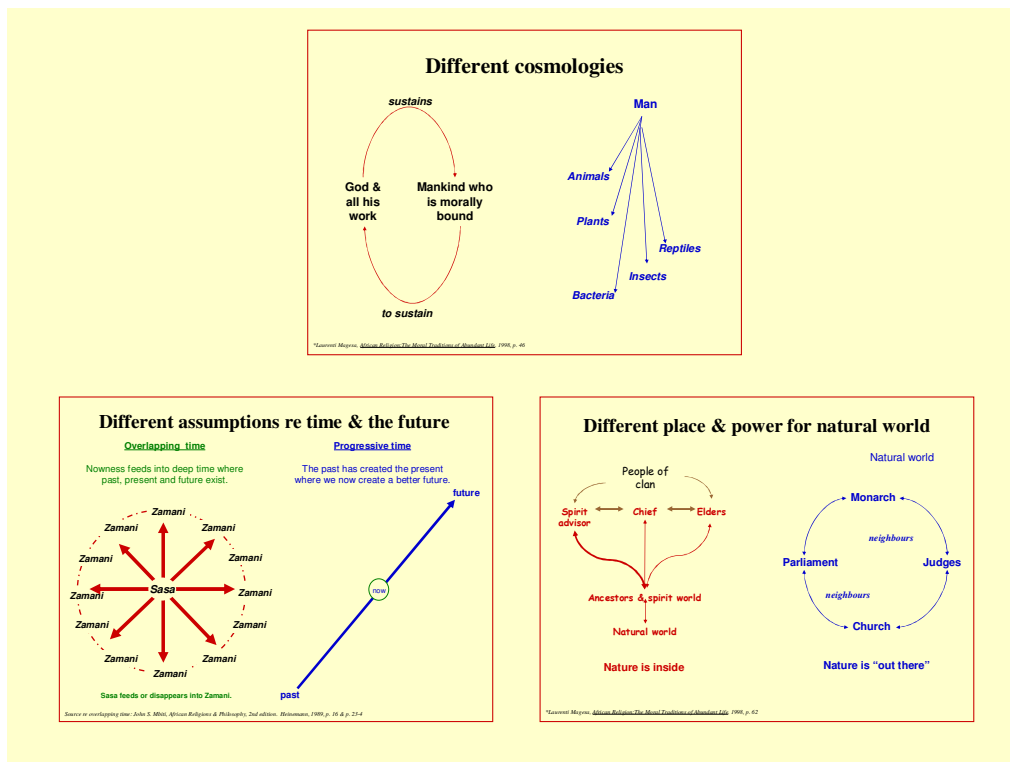


FIG 5: Different cosmologies, different assumptions, different power

Similarly, the industrial world’s cosmology highlights the passage in Genesis where God gives man mastery over the rest of life on earth: *“Let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild beasts and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth.”* African religion sees things differently. According to Laurenti Magesa, God and all his work sustain humanity, which is morally obliged to sustain God and all his work.² There is no dominion here, only interdependence. *“The world of forces is held like a spider’s web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network.”* In this world, the spirit advisor brings the natural world into human society, a powerful political figure active in all decision-making. Nature is not something to be conquered, but a troublesome partner in everyday life.

This respect for the natural world reflects the fact that our East African societies were and remain dependent on highly variable tropical rains (Figure 6). This variability has meant that the chances of a clan or village’s survival from year to year are unpredictable, which in turn has led to the creation of systems of mutual support and resilience, of exchange and redistribution. The industrial world, however, assumes that extreme events are infrequent and can be avoided with good management and ever-evolving technology. Their challenge has been to increase production to meet the rising demands of population and consumption. While western success has been measured by the accumulation of money and things, older African success, according to Magesa, was measured by the abundance of life.

² This sentence is a short-hand description of a longer argument that appears in Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The moral traditions of abundant life*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1997, p. 72-73.

Different climates → different risks

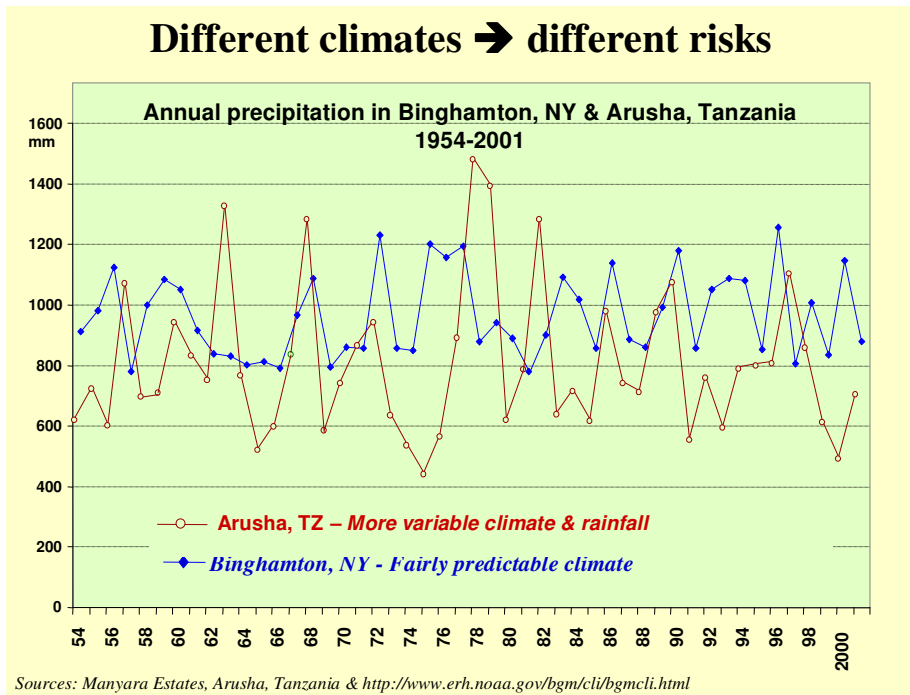


FIG 6: Different climates, different risks

These different goals have created different rights and boundaries. Industrial society increased production by privatising land, closing off property with fences, hedges and barbed wire. Within the fence, a single owner could control everything that was on the land and sell the land to whomever he or she pleased. African societies, however, believed that land could not be owned, but was a shared resource governed by mosaic rights. In a society governed by mosaic rights, the landscape is criss-crossed by footpaths that give people access to the resources they need to survive.

Footpaths and fences

Mosaic rights
*Women: food crops, Men: tree crops,
 Herders: grazing after harvest
 Gov't: mineral rights,
 Those who dug the well, own the water*

Footpaths

Fields near Mt. Elgon, Uganda

Column rights
*Minerals, land, buildings, air rights
 all owned by one*

Fences

Downtown NY, from Times Square

Different goals → different rights → different boundaries

FIG 7: Footpaths and Fences

On a larger scale, political organisation is also different. The African legacy is of a political system of peoples where routine checks and balances are provided by the crises of the natural world and the critique and opposition of neighbours. Accountability in the nation-states of industrial society, on the other hand, comes from internal checks and balances, from competing institutions, rather than competing peoples.

In contemporary East Africa, both the European and African systems of rights and political organisation are alive. It is not surprising that land tenure and property issues haunt all our societies. They are at the heart of the tension of two worlds, as two different ways of understanding the world survive in East Africa. So far, neither has completely replaced or overshadowed the other. Instead, as East Africans, we survive while trying to respect both. But how will this play out in the coming years?

Synthesis or Arbitrage

Two words, synthesis and arbitrage³, describe the two possible relationships between these two worlds. If the relationship is one of synthesis, each world learns from the other and together they create something new. If the relationship is one of arbitrage, however, the two worlds remain fairly distinct, with people playing off the differences between them to maximum personal advantage. In arbitrage, the uses of disorder multiply without reconciling the competing worldviews of the two types of society. In a healthy synthesis, the best of both worlds creates a better society than that which existed before. The late Dr. Wemba Rashid, a sociologist from Mtwara province in Tanzania, said in a 2002 interview, "We should be able to combine the best of the past and the best of the present. That may be ideal, but people become ashamed of shifting from one to the other,"⁴ so that the older African beliefs only survive underground.

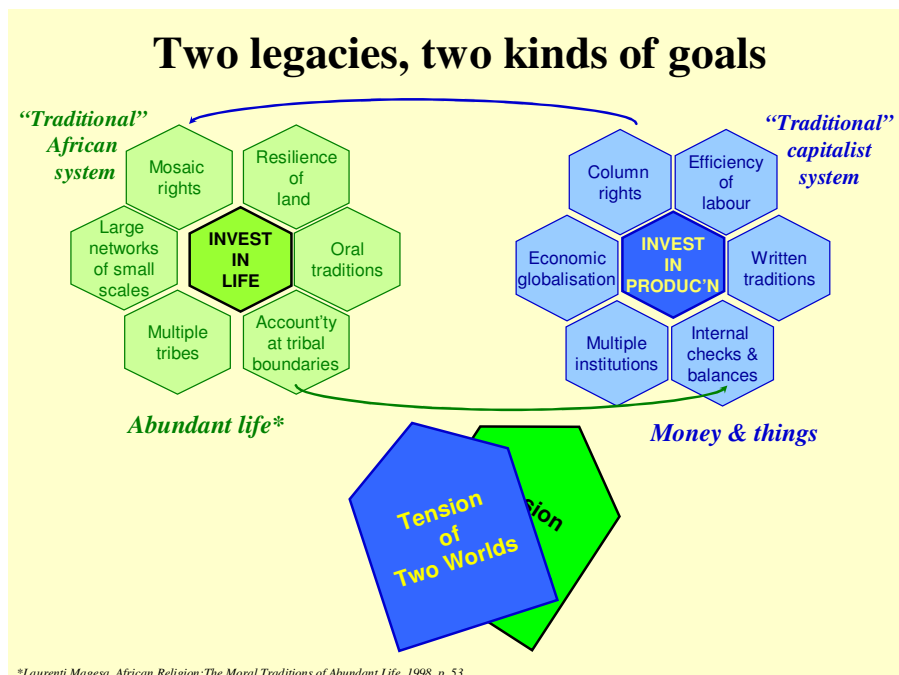


FIG 8: Tension of two worlds

³ Arbitrage is a term from the financial world. It describes the action of borrowing money where interest rates are low while lending the same money where interest rates are high. Other types of arbitrage also exist.

⁴ Private communication with Barbara Heinzen, August 2002, Mtwara, Tanzania.

Whose knowledge will shape the future of East Africa? Whose goals will define the rules of our society? Scientists, economists and ecologists are increasingly talking about the value of complex and adaptive systems. This is the next intellectual frontier and many Western intellectuals are trying to imagine what such a society would look like. Africans created a complex and adaptive society of great biological and environmental sophistication. But the values and wisdom of that society are today struggling to survive in the rush to develop into a modern industrial society.

It would be romantic to assume that East Africa can return to the past. Few people would want to do so, especially given that we are now facing the same population pressures that confronted Europe in 1750 and later. In seeking to feed more people, the attractions of industrial modernisation are extremely seductive. We need the benefits of the high production promised by industrial societies if the whole population is to be fed. Industrial societies, however, have so damaged their own environments that they now need the wisdom of our older societies who once created the biological abundance of African landscapes. As Dr Wemba Rashid put it, *"If the land is sickly, people are sickly."*⁵

Synthesis is, in fact, a necessity. Daily life, however, is a matter of arbitrage – with each culture being exploited for whatever it can contribute to ordinary survival.

⁵ "A chief was the keeper or custodian of his people, but that meant he was also the custodian of the nature around them, because land has a direct relation to peoples' lives. The land must be kept alive for people to live. If the land is sickly, people are sickly." (Dr Wemba Rashid, 3 August 2002, interview with B Heinzen)