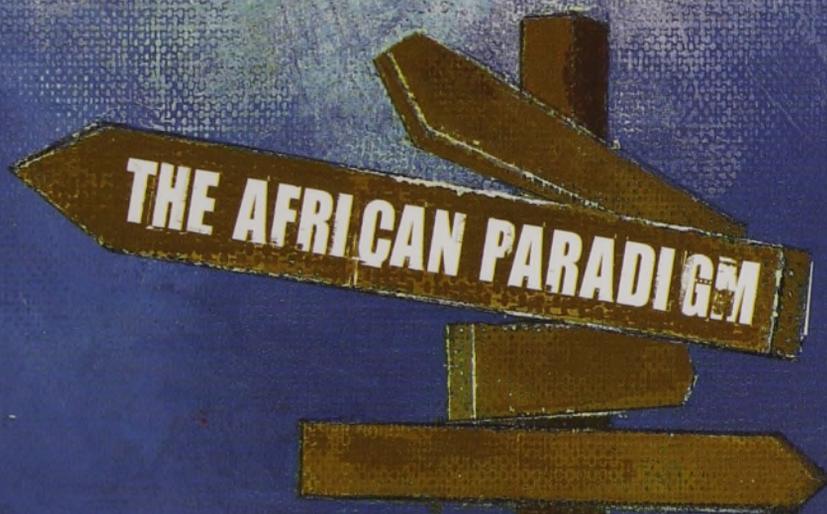




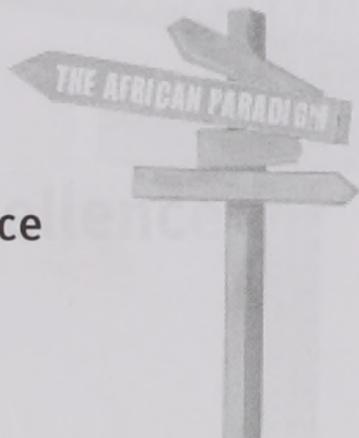
**to service  
excellence**



SHEPHERD SHONHIWA

STUDENTS

signposts  
to service excellence



SHEPHERD KHONNIMA

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA  
Pretoria

*Our destination is never a place, but rather a new way of looking at things*  
*John Pearson, British theologian.*

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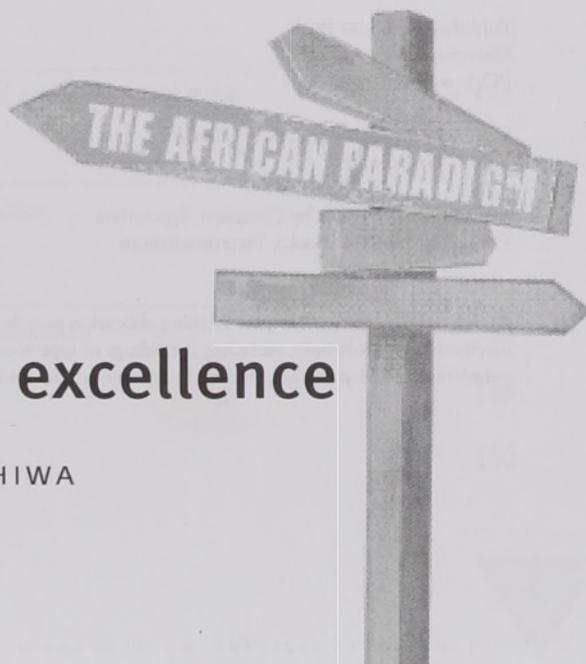
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# signposts to service excellence

SHEPHERD SHONHIWA

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# foreword

I am most heartened by the theme of this book, which tells the African story from the standpoint of an African who lived through the winds of change. It is not surprising that at first glance the reader will think that it is an abbreviated African history book with focus on the early 20th century. On deeper analysis it becomes clear that the background provides vital understanding of the unique characteristics of the African people which has tended to be overlooked in business situations.

This book so aptly draws educational parallels between the concept of customer service as a cultural phenomenon and practice in the prominent business enterprises around the world. That is a unique feature, which sets it apart from any customer service literature so far produced. Most fascinating is the story-telling style of analysing the successes and failures to uphold the concept of service excellence in the many fields of human endeavour. These include all the vital components of a modern nation such as business sector, political arena, quasi-government institutions, the public sector, the professions and the grass-roots community. The anecdotal presentation of real life situations encountered in all these areas so clearly orchestrates the importance of a positive service attitude.

Another inviting feature of this book is the lucid manner which, as far as possible, captures trends and practices around Africa as a continent. This lends weight to the uniqueness of Africanism, which a eurocentric writer may find difficult or impossible to fathom. Whilst this book is a simple easy-to-read material it has tremendous value to a wide cross-section of society. This embraces all citizens of our continent, especially Southern Africa, who will see their behavioural reflection in the book, non-Africans who will learn much about the special service orientation nature of African people, the student of management and commerce, who will gain much guidance, and the practising business person who

should use the content as a free checklist of his or her commitment to service excellence.

African Renaissance is a new manifestation of our pride and confidence in our own continent and its constituent nations. To win that global race, service excellence must be the most prevalent fundamental exhibited by all, in all walks of life. This book is a major step in showing us some of the ways we can contribute to the nurturing of the African Renaissance.

I hope you will enjoy reading the lessons in it as I did. More than anything else, this is a book on leadership and managing change.

## **Cyril Ramaphosa**

*Chairman of Johnnic Holdings Limited, South Africa*

*Chairman and Chief Executive of Reberve Limited*

*Chairman of Times Media Limited*

*Chairman of the National Empowerment Consortium, South Africa*

*Board Member of several South African Corporations*

# acknowledgements

To my wife, Francie, and children, Farai and Fungai, for sowing the seed in my mind and encouraging support through the research and writing of this book. My sincere gratitude to my personal assistant, Mutchie Dambuza, for relentless help in preparing the preliminary manuscript; my esteemed colleagues, the staff of McDonald's corporation in South Africa for initiating me to the field of service excellence and my close friend and business associate, Michael Britten, for a comfortable excursion on his luxury boat on Lake Kariba, which facilitated the tranquillity to make the final literary touches to this book.

Finally but not least, to my two parents for raising me to be a daring observer of humanity.

**Shepherd O Shonhiwa**

*January 2000  
Johannesburg*

# Chapter 1

## Traditional African cultural scenarios

I am a proud African, born and bred in southern central Africa in a typical peasant rural environment. I hailed from these humble beginnings, for my father was not a chief, or a distant member of royalty, or an established employee at some level of any trade. These were the early 1950s and the African continent was almost a homogeneous large village characterised by the following:

- *The British, French, Portuguese, Italians, Belgians and Spanish in that order had brought about wide-scale imperialism.*
- *Nearly 100% of each nation's indigenous population was either based in rural areas or highly migrant.*
- *The economies were predominantly of subsistence level interspersed with little smokestack industries based on the agricultural natural resources.*
- *The colonising powers of the West had exerted large-scale influence on the cultural, ethical and social fabric. This was manifested in areas such as religion, education, public administration, political structures, local authorities and in social demeanour.*

### TRADITIONAL POLITICAL DISPENSATION

African society had a unique political system that blended democracy with benevolent dictatorship. National identity was based on tribal groupings. For instance, the Shona tribe of Zimbabwe was the nucleus of several smaller language dialects; the Ndebele tribe was the same; the Zulu tribe in South Africa sees itself as a nation to this day, and so does the Xhosa aggregation of related tribes. The pattern is repeated throughout the continent, with some countries with large populations such as Nigeria having hundreds of tribes, such as the Ibo, Yoruba, Hausa and umpteen

others. Ghana is similar on a smaller scale; Uganda has many tribes, centred on the Baganda; Zambia the Bemba, Lozi, Tonga and others; Malawi the Nyanja and Chewa; Tanzania and Kenya the Swahili, Kikuyu and many others, including those of Arabic origins. On the other hand, smaller nations such as Swaziland, Botswana and Lesotho have one main tribe with a single dominant language.

The chief was the ascribed leader of the tribe, who looked up to him for spiritual, moral and administrative guidance. Chieftainship took a linear route through one royal family based on paternal, masculine lineage. Thus it was rare, if not impossible altogether, for a tribe to be ruled by a woman. This was no indictment on the culture as being suppressive of the female species. Women were accorded a great deal of reverence and had their secure place in the home. Of course, there has been a total revolution in this mindset in the last few decades.

The chief has been introduced as a benevolent dictator, which implies automatic acceptance by the subjects. He epitomised the pride and wellbeing of his tribe through a group of elderly councillors who were in daily contact with the rank and file. As spiritual leader, he individually inspired the nation, faced no competition or threat of coup except when the lineage of chieftaincy was challenged by another family tree. He was benevolent in that he ruled within entrenched cultural parameters. While his subjects would go and work in his fields at times, the chief supported them in times of hunger and other disasters. He never set out to exploit his subjects materially or emotionally, but instead was bound by tradition to protect them at all costs. In a way this was a form of manifestation of service excellence as the chief would 'go the extra mile' to save his subjects.

This contrasts vastly with most present-day political leaders, who are in politics for self-gratification first and their followers afterwards. African populations lend themselves well to such exploitation because they still perceive a leader in the traditional mould where he was benevolent and sacrosanct.

In almost every African language the word 'opposition' is equated with the concept of enemy. This explains the hostility with which African leaders view political opponents, to the extent that almost by reflex action they stifle opposition through every means possible, including banning, imprisonment and even murder. The paradox is that societies implicitly accept the one leader/one political party syndrome. This is not surprising because that fits in with their traditional frame of reference of one chief/one tribe. Regrettably, shrewd political leaders have upheld this because it promotes their cause, but they have discarded the selfless benevolence that compels them to be indebted to their followers, including feeding them during famine.

This dichotomy is the root cause of the political turbulence that grips the continent and is manifested by tribal wars and ethnically based political parties, with the resultant rivalry culminating in coups and perpetual sabotage. The jungle rule of survival of the fittest now pervades the political landscape, with serious implications for the economic and social wellbeing of the continent. In the new society the leaders do not view their followers as customers who need to be satisfied but rather as a means to achieving their own ends.

## MILESTONES OF THE AFRICAN WINDS OF CHANGE

There was a significant migration of black Africans from their countries of birth to Europe and North America in pursuit of higher education. Those from the first countries to become independent, such as Nigeria, Ghana and Burkina Faso in the west and Ethiopia in the east, took the lead in this sojourn. The majority returned to Africa after many years, but some established roots in the host countries. Inevitably they brought back a new eurocentric social and economic frame of reference as well as outlook to life. This is how the traditional African perception of the socio-economic environment was gradually diluted. The resultant clash of ideologies was

far-reaching both in terms of geographical coverage and endurance in timespan, which are still abundantly evident to this day.

Common examples in present-day life bear this out. Some parents charge exorbitant amounts of *lobola* (bride wealth) when their daughter gets married, although the daughter detests the practice; to some societies birth control is taboo; women's dress and social position are dictated by culture; and so forth.

The so-called generation gap has become so wide that at times parents and children are torn apart. However, it is fair to observe that some societies and individuals have managed the change better than others.

This change has given rise to double standards in that customer orientation and service excellence perceptions and relative judgements differ between the traditional African and the eurocentrically based person. Sometimes these differences are as distinct as apples and oranges. (This concept will be clarified below.)

## WHICH AFRICA?

The African continent covers the entire culture-rich sub-Saharan region from the desert down to the southern tip of Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. While religions, complexions and the physical appearance of the inhabitants of this vast area differ noticeably, there are many overriding commonalities. Similarities of Africanness can be observed across the continent:

- *First, the societies are predominantly patriarchal, with emphasis on male supremacy, relegating the female species to a seemingly subservient position.*
- *Second, there is clear evidence of an authority hierarchy in each community with entrenched respect for elders. The person in leadership is there by ascribed power and cannot be challenged. He in turn blends benevolence with unitarianism in discharging leadership duties.*
- *Third, the populations are mainly rural, battling the odds of poverty, deprivation of opportunities and social degradation.*

- *Fourth, the peoples have basic inherent love and respect for humanity with a controlled desire for materialism. They are primarily oriented towards communalism, being part of the whole community, in contrast to brazen individualism.*

Generally, across the wide continent value systems are similar, with an emphasis on helpfulness, participation, humility, love for humanity, conciliation, spiritual gratification and consensus rather than confrontation.

## THE IMPACT OF COLONISATION

The colonisation of Africa was the most important social, economic and political mega event that drastically changed the fabric of many societies on the continent.

The dominant colonial power was Britain, which had the grandiose plan of establishing the British Empire around the world. As a result it occupied the largest portion of Africa for the longest time with the resultant effect on the cultures of the inhabitants. The empire spread from Egypt, Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia and Sierra Leone in the west through East Africa to Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe in Central Africa, and Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and South Africa in Southern Africa. How did it influence the inhabitants of those countries?

The British exported a developed bureaucratic public administration system, which laid the foundation of present-day political structures. Because of this, Africa has produced some of the pre-eminent international diplomatic personalities. Among them are Boutros Boutros Ghali of Egypt, who became UN Secretary General, Kofi Anan of Ghana, who is the current UN Secretary General, Emeka Anyeuke, who is currently Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Sibusizo Dlamini, now Prime Minister of Swaziland, who became an executive of the World Bank, and Salim-Ahmed-Salim of Tanzania, who is Secretary-General of OAU.

British influence on the social fabric of the native people was far-reaching and permanent. The West African people maintained their

traditional dress of long robes or shirts, but those further south willingly adopted the British mode of dress. Education and Christianity were the most potent weapons of colonialism, which attuned the minds of the natives to accept being ruled. Money became legal tender, which radically infused the sense of relative value of commodities and services that used to be shared freely in each community. This changed the value systems of the victims of the change process. The parliamentary systems of all former British colonies and protectorates were modelled along the Westminster system of Britain from the time each one gained independence. While many have since blended these with the American republican system of government and replaced the titular with executive heads of state, British influence on the judiciary systems and executive government machinery is still visible today. A similarly indelible mark can be seen in the corporate governance models which prevail in all the former Britain-based multinational corporations whose chairpersons were mostly British knighted gentry. Probably the predominant colonial influence was in the field of education. All British colonies were given the same system, based on the British public education methodology of the 1900s. Through the decades from the early 1900s to date most, if not all, of these countries still uphold Cambridge University examinations at Ordinary and Advanced levels, whose external examiners reside in Britain. What has been the effect on service excellence of this myriad of events across Africa?

The fact that the education system was generally similar had profound influence on the academic and mental behavioural modelling of the various societies across the continent. This created a broadly similar platform for measuring standards of delivery in educational and social issues. In the 1930s and onwards social leaders such as politicians, doctors and educationalists from Southern Africa were already traversing to North Africa and the United Kingdom to seek higher education. Hence leaders like the late Kamuzu Banda learned medicine in Britain; the late Julius Nyerere also studied in Britain; and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe trained

as an educationalist in Ghana and began his political career there. These and many other historical influences created a common pan-African value system of measuring what is adequate or not and right or wrong. In so far as that represented a paradigm shift from parochial to a mega-African society, one can correctly conclude that it created a new and different value system in that vast portion of Africa.

## SMALLER COLONIAL POWERS

We have discussed the influence of Britain as the largest colonial power of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For brevity, the smaller colonial powers such as Italy, Spain, Germany, France and Portugal will be discussed simultaneously in this section. They also imposed social and political systems that influenced the social fabric of the societies they occupied. France colonised parts of North-west and Central Africa. Its influence can be seen today in the architecture of the main cities, the mode of dress, and social patterns of the people of those countries. A prominent feature is the way in which the interface of French and African cultures has produced world-class musicians such as Pepe Kale, Kanda Bongoman, Mbilia Bell, Tabu Ley and many others from Congo, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. The majority of them repatriated to French cities, where they were easily assimilated because of the influence of French culture on their societies.

In the broader scheme of the scramble for Africa, nations like Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal can be considered small colonisers. Their occupancy tenure, and consequently cultural penetration, was not as long and deep as that of Britain. Italy only had small interests in the Horn and north of Africa. Spain and Belgium shared short-term interests in Central Africa and Germany occupied South West Africa, which was later taken over by apartheid-ruled South Africa and degenerated into a battlefield in the 1970s. Portugal exerted a fair amount of influence over present-day Mozambique and Angola. The remnants of its colonisation are still evident

in the culture, work ethic, official language (Portuguese) and architecture of the cities in those countries. The Portuguese imbued the local people with the trading and artisan skills for which they are highly regarded in the region. Another area of influence was in economic life, where you find Mozambicans and Angolans have adopted the Portuguese work ethic of a long day starting early, with an extensive lunch break from 12 noon to 2 pm, and finishing late. The long lunch break was introduced by the Portuguese to allow for siesta because of the hot and humid climate to which they were subjected in their home country. Similarly, cooking and eating habits have been permanently transferred to native societies. Once again what does this hold for the service excellence theme?

The colonial influence tampered with the traditional cultures of those African societies, creating fragmented value systems against which service standards are measured. The once-homogeneous broader African traditional culture has become a heterogeneous landscape of societies whose common thread is Africanism. The need for revival of cultural similarity but accommodating modern evolutionary influences gives credence to the now-much-heralded African Renaissance. It is a bid for the restitution of service excellence for Africans to Africans by Africans.

Throughout the last century the influence of various colonial powers has crystallised into clear socio-economic manifestations across the continent. East Africa can be seen as the region of traders because of the influence of Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish sailors, who linked the east coast with Indians and Arabs. Central Africa became an agrarian society because of the emphasis of the early foreign powers, while Southern Africa became the region of miners owing to the nineteenth-century scramble for gold and diamonds in South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Angola. Agrarians are the food providers, traders are the middlemen and miners unlock the mineral wealth. This forms a complete value chain of service at the macro society level peculiar to Africa. The extent of urbanisation, social and political transformation became proportionately related to these mega trends.

To identify with the new civilisation, children were given names from the colonising Western languages and religious denominations. This was a complete departure from the generation of my parents, who had typically meaningful vernacular language names.

Thus apart from the impact of the occupation of the great continent of Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century the greatest socio-economic change occurred in the two decades of the 1950s and 1960s. These were manifested by:

- *political reclamation of national sovereignty on the lines of eurocentric democracy, ie adult suffrage voting rights*
- *emerging African professional and middle classes*
- *massive rural to urban migration in search of employment. This gave rise to a new society, which created the elite evident in every walk of life today.*

## PHENOMENON OF THE NEW AFRICAN

We have scratched only the surface of the richness of Africanism, but space prohibits a more exhaustive discourse of the subject. Let's build on the logic of the cultural, social and economic upheaval brought about by the scramble for Africa or colonisation. In a nutshell, two worlds collided and produced a certain cross-breed society in Africa. This is the society that now determines the destiny of Africa in politics, economic reform and developing a culture of service excellence. We are at a crossroads where a great deal of impetus is required to influence trends in a particular direction.

Here is a thumb-nail sketch of the new African in no order of preference on my part. When the black Africans of the fifties and sixties ventured to the West (and a few to the East), they either returned or stayed there. Those who returned either came back with mental baggage, which used the Western frame of reference as a guiding principle in life, or they married into that culture, which assured a permanent psycho-social change.

## EMERGENCE OF THE NEW AFRICAN

The emergence of the new African was more circumstantial than the result of a calculated social plan. The major driving force was the quest for political change which started around the continent in the 1940s and persisted until the mid-1990s, when South Africa became the last country on the continent to be politically liberated. The second main driving force was sheer social evolution spurred by cultural cross-fertilisation caused by colonisation, racial interface, exposure because of travel, and the force of consolidation from disparate tribes to nations.

In South Africa some legendary names spring to mind. In the early 1950s the African National Congress produced such leaders as Chief Albert Luthuli, who became a Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1961, which put him into the international limelight. The need for defiance against apartheid laws also spurred young ANC leaders like Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo to seek alliances with Indian and coloured political activists to gain critical mass. Similarly, in 1959 Robert Sobukwe became the first president of the newly formed Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) with the dream of building a new united Africa. He is famous for his proclamation that: 'World civilisation will not be complete until the African has made his full contribution.' All these people represented the emergence of a new African person destined to create and pilot change not only for him- or herself, but for the majority of society. Other new Africans came via the path of religion as trained clergymen, which made them influential community leaders. Archbishop Desmond Tutu fits well into this description as a latter key player in that sphere. There were many other South Africans who took up the role of new Africans in other areas of life such as music, the arts, journalism and the like. For example, in the early 1960s a young black journalist, Nathaniel Nakasa, left South Africa on a one-way ticket to the USA in protest against apartheid. There he joined musicians in exile such as Hugh Masekela, Mirriam Makeba and Caiphus Semenya. All these great pioneers qualify as participants in the long evolution of the new African.

In Botswana, similar torch-bearers such as Sir Seretse Khama, who married a white lady during his stay abroad, also brought new influences to their people. In Namibia such names as Toivo ya Toivo and Sam Nujoma feature prominently in that category. In Mozambique early leaders like Eduardo Modlana fit into the category of the new African, followed by protegés such as Samora Machel, who became the first president of their free country. Malawi also boasts the likes of the late Kamuzu Banda, who studied in the UK and returned home to lead his country to freedom. Congo also had leaders like Patrice Lumumba, Moïse Chombe and Ben Bella, while Ghana had Kwame Nkrumah. Nigeria had its first statesman, Sir Abubakha Tafewa Balewa, who led the change movement in the late 1950s. Tanzania had the late Julius Nyerere. Kenya had the late Mzee Jomo Kenyatta and Tom Mboya. Zimbabwe had trade unionists of the calibre of Charles Mzingeli and politicians like Hebert Chitepo, Joshua Nkomo, Ndabaningi Sithole and Robert Mugabe.

Why are all these people important and many others before them from different walks of life? They influenced their societies' way of thinking and responding to the demands of that time to enable them to cope with the stress of change. In that sense, the new African was a catalyst of change from the traditional mould to the new world. These forces continue to carve out various destinies of our societies across the whole continent. The motivation and determination of these pioneering personalities is the hallmark of service excellence in a non-commercial sense. It was at great personal risk, loss of freedom and forfeiture of the leisurely indulgences of their contemporary folks that they chose to chart out a new course of events. They put themselves last and their society first, sometimes enduring irreparable damage to their lives through imprisonment, torture, intimidation and, in many cases, their own deaths and those of their loved ones. What causes such selflessness and courage?

Irrespective of their field of endeavour, those who contributed to the emergence of the new African were social visionaries and champions who dared to dream of something different. They were foolhardy change agents

who could not be deterred by the obvious. They were trailblazers who created a new order of things and led others to follow. They created an audience of customers and dedicated themselves to serving them, almost for no direct return benefit.

## MUDDYING THE WATERS

The new African was a social accident that derailed the serenity of colonisation of Africa. In many instances, a new crossroads society was born which emulated the colonial masters' culture and social demeanour to a considerable extent but still espoused the African roots. This caused confusion and stirred the mud in already disturbed social waters. Urbanisation was the catalyst that attracted tribespeople to new centres with completely new rules of living. The newcomers dressed in the manner of the colonial masters, a white shirt, suit, tie and hat for the anglophone societies and so forth. Despite short African hair they even emulated the parted hairstyle of the white man and ladies copied the fashion of large brimmed floral sunhats. Mimicking went beyond this to include social habits such as drinking tea and clear beer, entertaining a scholarly attitude that created most of the intellectuals cited earlier, and playing Western musical instruments which spurred the burgeoning music industry.

Instead of complete absorption of the various African cultures into the colonial strongholds, a new intermediate African society was created that could challenge the dictates of the colonial cultures. They endeavoured to be as self-sufficient as possible in their demarcated social settings through arts, music, entertainment and spiritual indulgence.

## SECOND-GENERATION AFRICAN SOCIETY

As Africa became the melting pot of politics because of colonisation (also notoriously dubbed political rape) much further-reaching fundamental fusion took place at social level. Both by agreement and economic

compulsion white settlers cohabited with African natives of the opposite sex. In some cases it was the white employer who coerced his or her black employee into a sexual relationship. Yet in other cases parties from across the colour line did this by consent, a trend which continues today among couples from different racial groups. These unions produced the so-called coloured African, who is slightly lighter in skin colour than the native African. For purposes of this discussion this category will be referred to as the second-generation Africans. There are larger concentrations in those regions where there were large contingencies of settlers such as South Africa because of the gold rush and East Africa because of the influx of traders of Arabic and Portuguese origin. Consequently, this society sometimes took a middle of the road culture, borrowing from both sides of its biological extraction. In later years of political development across the continent this group was exploited by the colonial political structures since members of the group were not seen as white enough to belong to the privileged society. In deeply discriminatory societies such as pre-1994 apartheid South Africa they were mainly classified as native Africans, although sometimes accorded one step better. In places such as Zimbabwe, East and Central Africa, where racism was not as irrevocably entrenched by law, this group was clearly the halfway point between two racial poles. How did this influence this grouping?

In many ways they felt social and economic deprivation because of disenfranchisement in the same way as the natives. Consequently they struggled for survival in a similar fashion. Some are now fourth or fifth generation in Africa and can only refer to this soil as their true home. Their personality and cultural reflexes originate from the African context.

The second significant twilight society in sub-Saharan Africa is the Indian community. It is predominant in South Africa, East Africa, Central and Southern Africa, in that order. This is a society of commercial traders, who play a major role in the formal business sector, particularly the retail and wholesale sectors. They also produce fine doctors and accountants for the professional sector. Their origin in Africa dates back to the nineteenth

century, when they were conscripted to work on sugar cane fields on the east coast of South Africa or voluntarily left India to trade in Africa. The strong bond between this society and the Africans developed from the time of Mahatma Ghandi, the great passive resistance Indian leader, who began his defiance of white oppression in South Africa. His selfless sacrifice was of major inspirational value to African political leaders as well as the rank and file. In the fullness of time Indians became integrated with other African people in the region in one large heterogeneous society called the black community, which fought for the same rights and democratic status in many countries in Africa.

The invaluable contribution of Indians to the commercial sector was amplified in Uganda in the 1970s when dictator Idi Amin expelled Indians from the country. Their exodus dealt an indelible blow to the economy, from which it still has not fully recovered over 30 years later. Thus, in their own way Indian Africans are service champions of note who have played this role for several generations, and which has won them their de facto place on the continent. Because of their keenness to trade with any customer who walks into their business place, they have earned the affectionate nickname in central Africa of *Buya tikapangana* which means 'Come in, let's negotiate even if you do not have enough money.' This is surely the epitome of service excellence behaviour.

## THE UNIQUE AFRICAN SITUATION

Having described the African in the context of this book, let us see what makes this group special in any way. First, the economic history of the African continent is common. The colonisation of Africa was motivated primarily by economic imperatives and secondarily by the need for political domination. Invariably countries on the continent served as suppliers of raw materials to their Western power from agricultural, mining or marine resources. This should be viewed against the abundance of mineral wealth

of the continent, ranging from gold, nickel, platinum, chrome, asbestos, copper, tin, iron, zinc to oil and many others.

With its burgeoning population, Africa has always been a lucrative market for goods manufactured in the west and east of the globe. When I grew up in a former British colony in the 1960s, every commodity had the inscription 'Made in England', whether it was a mineral or agricultural item. In hindsight, I am almost certain these finished goods were only the end result of a beneficiation process of raw materials from Africa (probably the same country) which came back to be resold as finished goods.

## WHY ALL THIS HISTORY?

First, working definitions of the major concepts of our discussion would help. The term 'customer' is used in a broad sense to denote any person or group of people who receive, or expect to receive, or are entitled to a service, from an individual or institution. Service excellence means the dispensing of service beyond the standard or level generally expected by the recipients. Service excellence should make the recipient say: 'WOW – I did not expect it to be that good.'

Does society require or expect certain minimum levels of service from various providers such as business houses, public offices and other institutions? The answer is 'yes', otherwise the phrase 'customer service' would not be so much in vogue and litigation for non-performance of contractual obligations would not be so commonplace. Therefore, service standards are important to prevent exploitation of the ignorance of those unaware of their rights by those who know.

Perception of service is relative to the prevailing circumstances and the parties involved. Like beauty, it is in the eye of the beholder. When I grew up in the rural area where a fridge, let alone electricity, was non-existent, the village storeowner sold us fizzy drinks straight from the shelf. Every one of us enjoyed them without any gripe that they were not chilled. If the

same man did it today in the abundance of coolers, this would be labelled very poor service.

In the same vein, perceptions of service standards differ between eurocentrically and afrocentrically oriented people. The former are using a frame of reference of precision as a product of the high pressure society that demands it. They have been socialised from the cradle to observe that discipline which started with the mother using a cooking timer in the kitchen, progressed to the school bus which arrived within five minutes of the timetable, and was emphasised every day by a clock-watching society around them as adults. On the other hand, their afrocentric counterparts inculcated a socialisation process of a different nature. In the olden days the day was distinguished by four periods, namely very early in the morning, late morning, afternoon and night. If you invited someone to come to your house for a function in the morning, they could come at 6 am or just before 12 noon because it is all morning. While industrialisation and urbanisation have gone a long way towards instilling a eurocentric perception, some customs die hard. The moral of these two parallels is that different people will use different yardsticks to measure the same situation, and of necessity will obtain different answers. This vindicates the assertion that human beings are full products of their cultural and social milieux. Each person's value system determines his or her judgement of right or wrong and good or bad. Service excellence should be seen in the light that it is only as good as the value system against which it is measured. This is of far-reaching consequence in various societies since rules and regulations of service are conceived and upheld to satisfy a particular value system.

In these circumstances how do we arrive at a universally accepted yardstick of service excellence for both those from the West and from Africa? Much of the answer lies in reducing the perceptual gap and ethnocentrism between cultures through information exchange and exposure. To this end, there is merit in the view that good customer service is a team effort, irrespective of the standpoint from which you look

at it. For instance, if you went into a store with five staff and experienced pathetic service from three of them, but received marvellous treatment from the till operator and the packer at the end, did you rate that store as marvellous in customer service? In all likelihood you would rank it as low as the bad treatment given by the other three staff. This is the power of the team in upholding or destroying good service.

The complex history of contemporary African society has been outlined in order to shed light on the value systems, different cultures and economic influences which impact on customer service. It is helpful for one standing on a different side of the cultural line to understand the value system of the other in order to correctly judge the good and the bad. But each of us sees ourselves and our surroundings as the best and only mirror to model others. Therefore all forms of training and exposure to different people help tremendously in building a common frame of reference which facilitates similar evaluation of behaviour.

## SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

Theory preaches that service excellence can be learned by any willing mind. This means there are good chances of people exceeding the expectations of those receiving their service in every activity, yet this is far from the case in our everyday experiences. Is this because of some deep-seated negativism in our society or some other inexplicable cause? The latter is not the answer but a syndrome of variables embracing culture, socio-economic influences, conflict of ideologies and non-uniformity of the benchmark standard of customer service.

In the late 1960s I was a young man who loved wearing caps. I accompanied my father to Harare in Zimbabwe, some 170 km from our farm. He wanted to buy a good business suit for which he had painstakingly saved. His mental model of the city was a product of the 1920s when whites were establishing it and there was strict separate development from blacks. Blacks had to take off their hats when in the

presence of whites and they could not buy from the same stores. My father went into one of these exclusive stores because it stocked the quality of suit he wanted. As we walked into the shop my father, clearly by reflex action, took off his hat, but I kept my cap on. A white salesperson asked my father to tell me to take it off and I refused. Then he asked me directly in a half-baked language, which was only used for those ignorant of English. Little did he imagine that I was an A-grade English student in high school at the time. I answered fluently and emphatically explaining that a store was a public place and that I did not see the connection between my cap and my father's intended purchase. He turned to my father and told him he had a cheeky son.

I immediately realised that my world and my father's had collided and decided to rescue him from a predicament, like a well-mannered boy. Instead I went out of the store while he did his purchase, which he speeded up notably. On my part, I never went into that shop again for the ensuing 25 years that it existed. This shows how double standards, particularly when predicated upon racial prejudice, can completely distort the spirit of customer service.

Two friends of mine in Cape Town, South Africa, connived to undertake some investigative adventure into the customer service orientation of a leading clothing store a few years ago. One went in with unkempt hair, sandals and not so tidy clothes. He walked through the double doors where attendants wait to escort customers around and induce them to buy stacks of goods. No one paid attention to him and he wandered around the shelves alone except for one uninterested sales attendant, who kept some paces away to watch in case the prowler pilfered some items.

The second man walked in looking really high powered and well dressed. As soon as he walked in, he was mobbed by two attendants only too keen to serve him. He enjoyed the flattery for a while before it became apparent that he was not a serious buyer. The truth is the first entrant was far better endowed with money than his counterpart.

What are the lessons from this? First, there is evidence that differential treatment is accorded to customers in line with their perceived social status. Status is portrayed by your attire at that time, or the car that you parked in front of the shop, or the language you speak, or your skin colour, and so on.

In this same vein, many of my age group recall some incidents, before our African countries gained political independence from their colonial powers, when you could be stopped by a policeman if you were driving a new and expensive car, to be asked the question 'Which *baas* owns this car?' (*Baas* was the term by which every white man was called to orchestrate the master-servant relationship between the two races.)

So the second lesson to be learnt from these discourses is that the self-fulfilling prophecy phenomenon has real influence on customer service. You see what you want to see and it becomes true because your defensive ego will choose to see it like that. This therefore confirms the earlier assertion that there is no common benchmark for gauging customer service across our large and varied society in Africa. There are several nuances that come into play and distort the equilibrium of our concept of customer service.

## BACK TO BASICS

Through the breadth and width of the beautiful continent of Africa there is abundant evidence of how the culture is naturally predisposed towards giving service to other people. The humility of African culture lends itself to dispensing service. There is inherent politeness and forgiveness in their interpersonal relations. Sometimes this has erroneously been perceived as a weakness by those unfamiliar with our cultural roots. Respect is an integral part of an African from the cradle to the grave. A young person does not stand in front of elders so that he or she does not look at the top of their heads. This inborn reflex comes into play in dealings with customers in all circumstances. It is also seen as being rude or threatening to persistently look straight into the eyes of another person. On the other hand, the

eurocentric culture encourages eye contact as evidence of engaging the attention of the other person.

It is seen as a sign of mutual respect to debate and seek consensus instead of unilateral dictation. If an issue of common interest is being heard, the whole family will gather. The presenter of the matter addresses it to the youngest person, who refers it to the next in age, who does the same, until the matter reaches the oldest person in the line. The response comes through retracing the same steps. This is done to involve everyone in the deliberations regardless of age or sex. Such inclusiveness is designed to ensure that enough reflection is done by several people on the one issue. The objective is to eliminate all possibilities of reaching a wrong decision. In other words, this is teamwork in pursuit of service excellence.

The African greeting style has inherent caring in it. Most people give a three-step handshake with the right hand to show appreciation of the other person. The whole ritual of greeting is a sincere mutual exchange which is a calculated move and is not rushed as in 'Hi, how is it?' One would say 'Hallo' and pause a bit before asking 'How are you?' Sometimes the process is done through the referral process discussed earlier, if there are more than two people involved.

In most Central and Southern African Nguni-based languages, greeting emphasises acknowledgement of the worth of the other person. In Zulu one says *Sawubona* (singular) or *Sanibonani* (plural) which literally means 'I can see you are well'. This may be followed by clapping hands in unison, and invoking totem and clan names and seniority references. Almost always one would inquire about the wellbeing of the family or those left behind. In Shona (Zimbabwe language) one would ask *Mhuri dzakadiyi?* (How are the families?) This is indicative of the caring disposition of African culture.

Some societies in Africa hand a calabash cup of cold water as soon as they greet a person. The rationale is that the visitor must be thirsty, because of the high temperatures prevailing in most of Africa. Of course this practice is predominant in circumstances where the visitor would have journeyed on foot. From a customer care point of view the aim is to serve

the visitor by satisfying his or her most urgent need. I recall again as a young boy that in some of the general dealer stores that we bought from (owned by Indians and Greeks) they would keep a bucket of water and a cup for thirsty customers.

Following the same line of caring, one is not allowed in traditional African culture to ask a visitor whether he or she wants food. The host just prepares food and offers to the visitor. This is done to save a stranger from declining an offer of food because of shyness, while he or she is really hungry. Surely, this is the height of caring for others.

In fact, the ultimate in African customer care is that a visitor is given the best food in the house while hosts make do with lesser delicacies. I remember vividly several incidents when I was a young child and visitors came to our house. A chicken would be cooked but I and other children would be given the less desirable parts of the chicken while the visitor had the juicy flesh. This did not hurt because we were socialised to please the visitor. In many ways this childhood teaching grows with you to become second nature.

It is fully acceptable that a stranger on a journey in a rural area can go to a home and ask for food and overnight shelter. The host considers it an honour to have been chosen and will provide for the person without expecting remuneration. In contrast to eurocentric cultures the African man was expected to walk in front of his wife and children carrying nothing but cultural weapons to defend his family in the event of encountering dangerous animals in the forest. Even in today's less traditional dispensation, in some societies the man comes out of the house before the woman to ensure there is no danger awaiting her.

## MUTUAL CARING THROUGH COMMUNALISM

Communal living is manifested by congregations such as a village, kraal and other close-knit constellations in which African people live. It is not communism either by philosophy or practice. This aspect of life symbolises

the height of caring imbedded in the culture. Villagism is not just a loose social phenomenon but an institution of shared protection and the general burden of living. It offers social insurance and a catchnet below which none of the members is allowed to fall.

In the Shona culture of Zimbabwe there is a social gathering called *Nhimbe* which can be loosely translated as organised groupwork. It entails a family brewing some sorghum beer and calling other village members to come and spend a day working in their field or on some other big task, while drinking beer and eating. At the end of the day when the task is finished, the evening is devoted to dancing and socialising. This is a major arrangement to share the burden of enormous tasks and take care of those who are unable to cope single-handedly.

Such a residual care infrastructure permeates the fabric of the entire society with a visible positive impact on destitution. In the rural area where I grew up my father had more cattle distributed around five or six families than in his own kraal. This was because he gave away most of the bulls to neighbours and friends who had not enough cattle of their own to tame into oxen and use to plough their fields. Normally the person would take one cow as well for milk, which eventually gave birth to several progeny over a few years. The net effect was manifold, including strong bonds of relationships and a spirit of gratitude which engenders honesty. For instance, when the real owner of the cattle died, all those with his cattle and other property would declare this at his funeral for the public and family to record. Then they would voluntarily return the cattle or renegotiate with the heir for a further loan period. In this sense, communalism served as self-insurance within the community against the vagaries of the environment.

Other institutional evidence of mutual caring is found in the extended family system, which absorbs the social deprivation even of distant relatives. If one is unemployed, the others will provide for the essentials of life. The concept is also extended to the inheritance of spouses and orphaned children by surviving brothers and sisters to prevent them

becoming destitute. It was because of this cultural residual care that there were no orphanages and old-age homes in African villages.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

African people are naturally predisposed towards rendering customer service excellence both individually and collectively. This is easily evident to any visitor to Africa's abundant tourist destinations. Humility and willingness to help are the essence of African culture which can only be further perfected through training programmes to instil the eurocentric dimensions.

## CLOCK BUILDING VS TIME TELLING

So with all the glory of our culture having been sung in earlier pages, why do we not excel in service excellence?

It is because our culture was locked into a time-telling mode. It is a clever person who can tell time to the fraction of a second correctly without looking at a watch. He will help many who come across him but not those afar. The greater and more talented person is the one who can build a clock to enable many to tell the correct time for themselves. Thus he bequeaths a legacy of perfection. The transfer of history and behavioural code was through story telling by the fireside. The folly of no documentation is that perfection is diluted through generation gaps, technological change, cultural convergence, urbanisation and the deprivation of some of the subsistence village economies that prevail across the continent. African society is still in a time-telling mode. Concerted effort now needs to be put into adapting to the clock-building mindset with a framework of principles and standards engraved in documentation to stand the passage of time and change of key personalities to become a self-sustaining thrust of service excellence. This book is an attempt at preservation of the wealth of Africanism for the benefit of future posterity.

## SERVICE EXCELLENCE FROM AFRICAN CULTURE

Having painted the backdrop of traditional African culture rich with humanism, humility, altruism and industriousness, we will now look at how this is translated into various permutations of customer service. The illustration will comprise many everyday events that have been contrived over time in various African communities. In pursuit of balanced reportage in later chapters I discuss cases of corruption and bad governance in political and business spheres around Africa which will ostensibly tarnish the African people's image. The following treatise seeks to counterbalance in advance the negative impression that may be created due to generalised perceptions by various readers.

## ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

Today Africa is well endowed with world-class musicians who all came from humble beginnings and were deprived of the wherewithal to start a music career. To mention a few, South Africa has music maestros of the calibre of Miriam Makeba, Caiphus Semenya, Hugh Masekela, Ray Phiri, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Tsepho Tsola, Yvonne ChakaChaka, Brenda Fassie, the Soweto String Quartet, African Jazz Pioneers and hundreds more. These creative musicians were not motivated only by money to venture into this vital entertainment industry. More than anything else, they were propelled by love to change the lot of the masses for the better. When apartheid had made South African townships urban dormitories without the same social amenities as the white suburbs, musicians filled the void by creating their own music with hardly any musical instruments. An even more significant role of music was to build and sustain a psychological defence against the dehumanising effects of apartheid and unequal opportunities. In the same way as gospel music sustained African Americans through the ordeal of slavery, music was multifunctional as therapy, entertainment and a culture building effort in Africa.

Zimbabwe also produced equally venerated musicians such as Thomas Mapfumo, Oliver Mtukudzi, Johnna Sithole, Leonard Zhakata and Biggy Tembo in much the same circumstances as South Africa. These musicians composed and propagated songs which had a crucial motivational effect on the country's population during the *Chimurenga* war of liberation between 1972 and 1980. They mobilised the masses as much as the war doctrinaire did.

The East African region has become well known for the production of Kwasa Kwasa Rumba music, which originated from the early mining towns of the Zambian Copperbelt and the Congolese diamond mines. International singers such as Pepe Kale (nicknamed the Elephant of Africa), Kanda Bongoman, Mbilia Bell, Tabu Ley and scores of others are now beaming Rumba music from leading European cities for the entertainment of the whole of Africa and Europe. Similar trends are traceable with musicians originating from Kenya, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Ghana and Central African Republic.

What is the relationship between these developments and service excellence? The answer is simply that these African men and women were motivated by the desire to satisfy the entertainment needs of their own people, and battled against the odds to provide a service to a high standard which has made them legendary.

## SERVICE FOR SELF-SUFFICIENCY IN AFRICAN COMMUNITIES

Earlier we discussed the virtues of traditional African culture such as the extended family system, which admirably replaced Western residential institutions such as orphanages, old-age homes and other sanctuaries for the destitute. We now turn to similar efforts in modern African culture to highlight service efforts for one another within communities to upgrade their quality of life. Please be aware that these are only a representation of a myriad of service activities around Africa.

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SERVICE

In traditional African rural life to this day the construction of infrastructures such as a house is often a community effort. A round hut of poles plastered with mud will take anything between a few days and a couple of weeks to build. The villagers will gather by invitation. First the men to go into the forest to collect poles and tree bark for fibre to use in construction. They will either carry them in groups or, in a more developed setting, they will harness oxen to draw the poles to the building site. Then, in keeping with societal division of labour, the women congregate to dig up clay from molehills and carry water from the river in clay pots on their heads to make mud for flooring and plastering. They will also go into the forest to cut grass with hand tools for thatching the roof. Men will then carry it home and erect the roof truss then thatch the house. All this is done for no direct payment with the psychological promise that each person will need such help at some point and that they will obtain from the other neighbours. The entire village network has survived for centuries on this basis and will continue to do so. This is the epitome of self-service for own development among Africans. The same spirit of selflessness is extended to tilling and planting fields, herding domesticated animals and harvesting crops.

## COMMUNITY SOCIAL SERVICE

The one area where the humanity of the African really shines through is in the burial of the dead. Traditionally, it was a community effort even if the deceased was a poor and ordinary person. Every member of the community attended this very solemn and emotional occasion, and contributed to the decent burial of a fellow community member regardless of whether they liked the person or not. The same sense of responsibility has been developed into a well-organised social service to meet the challenges of modern commercial society. As towns and cities grew from former mining, trading and agricultural colonial settlements, the deprivation of Africans of social amenities became more glaring. One of

the first and now most established social services is the burial society. This is a social organisation formed and run voluntarily by members of a particular community to finance the funerals of their members. All members pay a nominal membership fee regularly and an elected committee administers the money, including investing it wisely. As the cost of living continues to rise, pushing up the cost of dying unbearably, and as people are now living further away from one another than before, this has become a vital institution. In South Africa and Zimbabwe it first blossomed among migrant workers from Malawi who had to fortify themselves against the deprivation of being a minority community in a land far from home. The Malawi burial society system was so successful that it became a model for many other communities in southern Africa. This has become a flourishing industry with millions of dollars flowing through it per annum. It is a successful example of service to the people run by the people. Coincidentally, these are the basic tenets of democracy which guided the American constitution. Many other examples may be seen in the successful savings clubs, agricultural production and marketing cooperatives that flourish in many communities across the continent.

## PROFIT-MAKING SELF-SERVICE

As the self-help initiatives such as these societies were growing, a parallel system of profit-making ventures also flourished in urban areas, boosted by the rural to urban exodus which began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in parts of Africa. This is particularly true of mining-based cities like Johannesburg in South Africa, the Copperbelt of Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo in Central Africa. This was the establishment of the 'shebeen', which is a private liquor selling outlet in a domestic house in the townships. You now find thousands of these outlets in African cities at various levels of prosperity. In many cases, as the black African elite move out of the townships in Johannesburg, Harare, Nairobi,

Durban, Lusaka and many other cities to the former white low-density suburbs, they miss the camaraderie of the shebeens and still go there for weekend gigs.

Apart from being social melting-pots where people of different walks of life met and enjoyed life, the shebeens were substitutes for the five-star hotels in the white side of the cities, fulfilling a real social need. But most of all, they yielded financial rewards which sustained whole families and put children through high school when parents were unemployed. In most cases, police would want to raid these outlets, confiscate the liquor and charge the owner as well as the patrons heavily for breaking the law on liquor control. However, there was always a common bond among residents whereby sentinels would send out word at the first sign of the police in that neighbourhood. The customer service in the shebeens is mostly very personal and friendly, including the provision of a beef braai when customers express the need and drinks on account to be paid at a future time.

Again communities identified an economic and social need and created a business infrastructure to satisfy that need while simultaneously creating wealth for the entrepreneur, who is a part of the community. The common thread still discernible here is the togetherness, caring, sharing and mutual helpfulness of the African culture.

## LABOUR MOVEMENTS AND TRANSFORMATION SERVICE

In some situations trade unions have embarked on huge projects to promote transformation in their society by taking up economic equity. This has been driven mainly through some trade unions which have raised funds for skills development of their people, formulated social plans to alleviate poverty among their members in the event of being retrenched and raised funds to buy out former colonial owners.

The leading examples can be found in South Africa where unions such as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), South African Catering,

Commercial and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU) and National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) have made substantial investments into going business enterprises. When democracy dawned on South Africa in April 1994, these unions immediately seized the opportunities that opened up for black economic empowerment. They created investment companies which operated completely separately from the trade union to avoid mixing membership security funds with those funds exposed to the vagaries of business investments. A number of them have created real wealth for their members through such investments when the stock market has risen and therefore multiplied their invested funds. Some consolidated into the National Empowerment Council (NEC) which, together with funding institutions, acquired controlling stake in Johnnies Industrial Corporation (Johnnic) from Anglo American Corporation in 1996, an enterprise with an asset value of over R3 billion at the time. By the close of the century this value had multiplied more than tenfold.

The fascinating story here is the dedication of trade union members who selflessly pursued the objective of sourcing funds from financial institutions. They avoided the temptation to use union membership funds and, sometimes against the will of some members who did not grasp the risk-reward relationship, persevered to form the NEC to facilitate one large investment instead of several small equity holdings. At the top of the dedicated leadership was Cyril Ramaphosa, former secretary general of the South African Trade Union Movement, former secretary general of the African National Congress and the principal negotiator for the ushering in of democratic rule in South Africa. He took up the helm of the NEC in 1996 and facilitated the deal with Anglo. Historical though it may be, this event is not the only example of self-service initiatives of Africans in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa. The lessons to be drawn regarding service excellence are that in their humble circumstances the African brethren enkindled trust in cooperating with one another to pursue a noble but gigantic goal for the betterment of a

multitude of disempowered members and not only themselves. This is the hallmark of service excellence in community transformation and development setting.