

How far shall we go with 'traditional' craze?

Foods and artifacts deemed original to Kenya are not specific to this country

BY TOM ODHIAMBO

One of the most abused words around town is the word "traditional." There are all manner and kinds of traditional this and that being sold everywhere. From food kiosks to major eating houses in Nairobi, something traditional is on the menu. Traditional African shirts are on offer at the Maasai Market. Of course everything that has a touch of Maasai is in itself 'traditional.' When traditional is not on the menu, his cousin tradition is readily available.

Tradition is used in more or less the same sense and even contexts. The only difference is that it has more force of authority compared to the traditional. So, people will be quite serious when they go: it is our tradition to respect elders. The same people will hardly explain what is so traditional about the tradition. But it is the first usage that has been so manipulated and abused that I believe it is time we re-engaged with its meaning and value in Kenya today.

Then why don't we just turn everything into traditional so that we buy ourselves expensive traditional wear

There are many instances of exploitative or plain use of the adjective traditional that I could refer to. However, it is when it is applied to lifestyle that it really becomes a new animal. Consider this: it is now a part of 'Nairobi' culture to have an ethnic (Luhya, Kamba, Digo or Embu) night at which some traditional Luhya dishes and brew (yes, the very same banned *busaa*) will be served; if a relative or friend visits from abroad it becomes an obligation to take them to Maasai

market to buy some traditional African art; listeners are phoning into FM stations broadcasting in local African languages asking for their traditional music etc.

But the show is stolen by the 'traditional foods' on offer in many an eating place in the city. These places are packed with young expensively

dressed men and women, old men with old money and the curious. Of course all those who visit these places are plain curious. Yes, the food eaten in these places is like those curios we buy for our relatives in America or England



Traders at Maasai Market: There is nothing so traditional about the artifacts sold in such markets because there are not only made in Kenya. JOAN PERERJAN

or China and who may have forgotten 'traditional Africa.' So, how traditional are foods such as *irio*, *mukimo*, *githeri*, among others.

All the foods named above are eaten across the different regions of this country. So what is so traditional about them? The question that nags me when I see all those 'welcome for a bite of traditional this and that' signs in Nairobi is: are all those friends and relatives spread across Kenya so traditional that they do not eat modern foods or is it me who is so modern that I need to be immersed in some traditional culinary ritual once in a while? Even eating goat meat is now traditional? Then why don't we just turn everything into traditional so that those of us who cannot afford those expensive traditional

dishes, art works and cultural evenings may also partake of in the rituals of the fraternity of the traditional?

The enveloping obsession with the traditional appears like another oppressive cultural fad that we Kenyans are, as always, happy to bear. Traditions and the invocation of the traditional have been used to oppress certain sectors of this society for many years. The British colonialists were quick to latch onto our famed traditional respect for age and the elders to impose paramount chiefs on us. Decades later we still are obsessed with grey-haired men (and women), who should have retired long ago, running the show in town. But what is the West doing: electing men who are hardly out of their middle ages as leaders.

The post-colonial government is partly to blame for the obsession with the traditional and traditions. The most spectacular act that institutionalised tradition and the traditional was the founding president's call to Kenyans to return to the land (in the countryside) in order to develop the country. This call was made at a time when the leadership should have been thinking about how to industrialise and urbanise the country so that the countryside can be used for modern farming. And here is the link between the traditional, poverty and the current hunger. Some of us are traditionally stuck to barren pieces of land hoping that somehow it shall yield a good harvest some day!

The hyena-like trait of wanting to have a share of both the modern city life and the traditional has led to a proliferation of all manners of 'traditional' things around town.

This craving for things traditional hardly masks the anxiety that lies under the skin and in the hearts of these Kenyans chasing after plain *ugali* made from sour milk and maize flour. Surely, sour milk is available in the supermarkets and so is maize flour. If you want to eat some smoked or stewed quail with *ugali* then just admit that you miss the good old days of chasing little birds.

What shall we do when the countryside really becomes 'modernised' and all the quails are gone plus all free range African chicken? Stop dying for some traditions and the traditional that is really a figment of some clever capitalist's imagination and live your life without the anxieties of some monster called cultural alienation. Africa will be 'traditional' for as long as you live for as the scholars Terrence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm advice, 'traditions are invented.' Invent yours.

It is the entrepreneur's role to prepare for risks



RICKY'S MYTHS
RICHARD GITONGA



In this impulsive business world, it is obvious that the executives of the future will be rated by their ability to anticipate problems rather than get ambushed. It is for this reason that top business executives have to be well versed with both the internal and external forces that are likely to affect their ability to deliver results. Venture Capitalists refer to this approach to business planning as portfolio risk.

The total risk of an investment portfolio may be separated into two distinct components, diversifiable and non-diversifiable risk. Diversifiable risk is also known as un-systemic risk and non-diversifiable risk is known as systemic

risk. Diversifiable risk includes uncontrollable risks specific to a company such as labour strikes, bankruptcies, death of a key employee, unexpected entrant of a competitor, and regulatory actions resulting in legal and financial consequences.

In contrast, diversifiable risk includes equally controllable, but broad reaching events such as inflation, war, tax changes, changes in oil prices, changes in monetary prices by the Central Bank, and political activities.

Prudent CEOs and risk managers always ensure that they price for risk in all their business models. In some

progressive and futuristic companies, the risk management function plays an influential role in executive management and is a core contributor to business strategy.

Leaders act as agents for various stakeholders to manage and control risks with a view to protecting the rights and well being of stakeholders' interests.

In many private enterprises that have well defined corporate governance structures, it is clear on who should take responsibility for risk, regardless of whether it is categorised as strategic or operational. The recent tragic disasters in the public domain have left many asking questions on who is responsible for risk management in the public sector.

Are there officers who are responsible for monitoring and managing non-diversifiable risk? If this is the case, such officers may have been aware of the fact that there was a possibility of a poor response to a disaster due to lack of proper preparedness.

This was the classic situation that emerged during the Hurricane Katrina disaster where various departments of the US Federal Government had no idea

what others were doing. So who should take responsibility? Is it the Ministry of Metropolitan Development? Or is it the one in-charge of internal security? Or might it be planning?

Well, the reality of the matter is that we cannot determine who is responsible until we are clear on whether the poor response to these disasters is a matter of low public awareness on safety standards; poor law enforcement; lack of proper public safety guardrails; or the absence of functional systems such as aerial fire-fighting systems.

The price of power is responsibility for the public good. As Winston Churchill once said, "The price of greatness is responsibility".

Unfortunately, no individual rain drop ever considers itself responsible for the flood. In our countries recent past, there has been excessive emphasis on a citizen's rights and inadequate stress upon one's duty and responsibilities.

Needless to say, if you load responsibility on a man unworthy of it, one will always betray him/herself.

Any business that wants to increase its chances of success must have a clear vision; mission and val-

ues, complemented by a robust plan that will enable it achieve its objectives. There may be a few obstacles along the way to our quest to achieve the Vision 2030 objectives.

However, we have to be weary of those obstructionists in our community who are not necessarily opposed to doing anything, but who will not do what they can because they cannot do what they would like to do.

Like in any prudent business that seeks continuity and protection against unforeseen events, our public sector leaders need to expedite the development of a disaster policy that encompasses all the necessary ingredients to instill the confidence of both local and foreign investors.

Intelligence is reflected in our ability to learn from past events and apply general principles to specific situations. We must think and plan how to manage general panic and confusion, reports of lawlessness, overwhelmed medical services, traffic congestion, homelessness and failed communication systems.

A good planning principle is to hope for the best, but prepare for the worst.