



Long-term Roots of Philanthropy in Africa as a New Challenge

by *Giuliana Gemelli*



Chan Luu,
Production
of beaded
bracelets.
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Horizontal philanthropy is a process in which people who are poor mobilize and share resources among themselves. Its transactions provide types of mutual support, but can also act as investment to improve conditions and future prospects. Local idioms in various parts of Africa illustrate the way this type of transaction is understood: «one hand washes the other» and «help so that you can be helped», tontines, *barambee*, merry-go-around. Alan Fowler and Susan Wilkinson-Maposa¹ who developed the issue of horizontal philanthropy in several publications, suggest that there are two forms of community philanthropy. First, philanthropy of community, that is, the ethos and practice of help that happens as part of the social life. Second, philanthropy for community or what happens to a community through external support and intervention of organized philanthropy and similar types of support. The community foundation concept is a recurrent and consolidated example. In Europe and more in general in the Western world we had traditionally the development of the second concept, but the strong impact of the financial and economic crisis is increasingly changing the landscape. Originally relayed to the poor, horizontal philanthropy is now an expanding pattern among different social groups through different frameworks: for example the extension of micro-credit to the needs generated by the strong lowering of workers' income and debts generated by increasing taxation, and, last but not least, the development of "tran-

sition towns" in which mutual aid and exchange of natural goods outside the market is crucial. In this process there is an interesting inversion of trends and of cress-fertilisation of patterns of influence from South to North and not only the opposite that was the rule in the 20th century.

The long-term historical roots of horizontal philanthropy patterns are located mostly in Africa but, to some extent, they recall very old models related to public policies in the 19th century Europe, such as the tradition of *mutualité*, social ateliers, and even centuries before, in the period, which preceded the enclosures phenomenon, the sharing of communal goods.

Let me briefly illustrate the main difference between the two approaches: vertical and horizontal.

First of all the assets involved in horizontal philanthropy, are more diverse than in the community foundation model. Both material goods (money, food and clothes have a high premium) and non-material resources (e.g. advice, access to information and contacts, ideas, prayer, moral support, accommodation, transport, time) have a strong importance. Moreover, it is the fact of helping not its amount that is crucial.

Vertical help transactions are widely understood to be informed by charity, patronage, altruism and generosity. In contrast, horizontality is premised in a common condition and mutual survival and is informed not only by compassion and pity but also by the need for reciprocity. Put another way, vertical philanthropy is largely believed to be an



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La nuova sfida della filantropia orizzontale in Africa

La filantropia di comunità si può suddividere in due categorie: la filantropia “della” comunità, cioè l’atto del dare come parte della vita sociale e la filantropia “per” la comunità, che corrisponde a un sostegno esterno. Sebbene all’inizio il primo tipo fosse categorizzato come pratica esclusiva dei poveri, in questo momento storico questo modello sta prendendo sempre più piede. Le forme più durevoli e antiche di filantropia orizzontale si ritrovano in Africa, benché se ne ritrovino tracce anche in Europa, come per esempio la tradizione della *mutualité*. La filantropia orizzontale valorizza sia le donazioni in beni materiali sia quelle in beni immateriali, dando più importanza al gesto in sé che non alla quantità della donazione.

Mentre le elargizioni nella filantropia verticale sono viste come atti di altruismo caritatevoli, in quella orizzontale esse si fondano sulla necessità di reciprocità e sul senso di mutua sopravvivenza e quindi rappresentano più un dovere sociale che un atto di generosità. In questo tipo di filantropia l’aiuto è una combinazione di prossimità e richiesta: come prossimità viene inteso sia il senso di vicinanza fisica sia quello di affinità. La filantropia orizzontale ha anch’essa delle regole, benché non scritte, su come devono avvenire le transazioni, sui criteri di eleggibilità dei donatori e sulla legittimità dei bisogni. Una volta decise le regole, chi le segue riceve una ricompensa implicita – un miglioramento della reputazione e la qualifica per essere aiutato se in situazione di bisogno – mentre chi le infrange è sottoposto a sanzioni.

Due esempi di filantropia orizzontale africana sono la pratica delle *tontine* e dell’*harambee*. La prima è una pratica gestita principalmente dalle donne della comunità che, raccogliendo denaro, creano un fondo monetario comune. Questo fondo serve a finanziare una serie di prestiti a rotazione. L’obiettivo è di sponsorizzare diversi tipi di attività ed è disciplinato da regole precise per la restituzione del prestito. L’*harambee* invece è una pratica di mutuo aiuto caratteristica del Kenya. L’origine del termine è controversa, vi sono studiosi che ritengono che sia legato al termine di lingua bantu *harambee*, “mettiamoci insieme”. Altri osteggiano questo termine perché credono che abbia un’origine induista e non cristiana. A ogni modo, esso rappresenta un sistema di messa in comune delle risorse in cui i cittadini lavorano insieme per raccogliere fondi allo scopo di sviluppare progetti utili per la comunità. Si tratta quindi sia di un’attività filantropica che di un meccanismo di redistribuzione delle risorse grazie al quale le comunità più povere riescono a ottenere servizi. Generalmente questo meccanismo inizia con l’individuazione di un bisogno e successivamente si indicano le persone che possono soddisfarlo.

act of personal choice, whereas horizontal philanthropy can also be seen as a social duty or obligation or at least as a way to respond to immediate needs of groups and communities. In vertical philanthropy, the notion of community is largely geographic. A community development approach tends to take geographic location and physical proximity as both the site and the cause of “community”. This is apparent in the Community Foundations model. Their names – such as Foundation for the Mid South, Community Foundation for Ireland, *Fondazione per il Sud*, examples among many others – illustrate the point. In combination, a geography-plus-endowment approach assumes there is sufficient stability of “community”, of the people and local institutions that comprise it, to make long-term perspectives viable.

In contrast, the nature of horizontal help suggests that community needs to be seen as a combination of proximity and demand. Proximity has two elements. One is physical closeness; the other is affinity and kinship. Horizontal philanthropy is thus not limited by physical space. Its “community” is more likely to be based on need and the ability to satisfy it.

Horizontal philanthropy also has its rules (though unwritten), which inform how a transaction is conducted – a need is shared or help is asked for – and the criteria to determine both eligibility of the actor and legitimacy of the need. When agreed rules are followed there is an implicit reward – enhanced reputation and qualification to be helped again. When the rules are broken, sanctions are applied.

The concept of horizontal philanthropy offers a different way of looking at the assumptions and concepts that underlie the general understanding of organized philanthropy. Crucially, it offers a means of understanding “community” from the perspective of horizontal help and mutual support.

An Example from the African Tradition

Less known than micro-credit, the tontines are based mainly on the activity of women who collect money and create a common fund that generates a series of loans on a mechanism of rotation in order to start different kinds of activities and economic income and with the rule of returning the loan in a due time. In some countries this practice is based on collecting and sharing labour activities instead of collecting and distributing money. This is particularly the case in the period of the harvest and during the building of houses in villages. This is a practice that is developed in other parts of the world, including the US, if one considers as an example the Mormon communities. The more diffused practice is the gathering of married women on a regular basis and the definition of an amount of giving which is not necessary money, but could be also a material good. During each meeting a president is elected – la *mère* – who is the attractor of solidarity among the other participants. She has two or three assistants who take care of the fund-raising process. No written rule is at work. Every procedure is based on traditional patterns of behaviour, on trust as well as on very well defined sanctions in case of negative issues. Once the participants have performed their giving practices, the group select a “winner” of the fund, according to traditional rules that could relate to the age of the woman or to the fact that she has to hold an imminent ceremony: this procedure allows the winner to have at her disposal an amount of money or material resources that are larger than the resources that she could get through her work or personal “wealth”, giving to the winner the opportunity to create her own busi-



ness, initiate a new trade activity or celebrate an event like a wedding, a funeral or buy some material goods of a relevant value for her house and family in particular circumstances. Instead of having a bank account which sterilizes the money, the tontines put the money in a circulation process and then produce “wealth” for the benefit of the individual as well as of the community with concrete outcomes and multiplier effects, such as the consolidation of the community, which means its empowerment.

In a period in which, in some European countries including Italy, access to credit is becoming harder and harder, not to say impossible, and the role of foundations with their large endowments, such as bank origin foundations, is declining, the role of mutual help and the expansion of social investment with a high return in social issues and a reduced financial profit, is a challenging path which involves both public and private actors and becomes a matter of rethinking welfare policies.

A Diffused Practice: the *Harambee* in Kenya and Eastern Africa

Harambee is a Kenyan indigenous strategy for self-help practices. The term will be defined on the basis of its origin and finally its contribution to development in modern times. *Harambee* in the last decade has faced many “tribulations” due to its misuse and abuse leading to a lot of criticism. The argument will be that despite the many problems that have been associated with *harambee*, it is a positive economic tool and a cultural practice that can strengthen community identities. In Kenya, after independence and until today in some regions, the demand for social services especially education and health services still exceed supply. As a result, a solution to provide these important services had and still has to be sought. The *harambee* system, a concept of pulling together resources both physical and human, represents a viable alternative. The movement encouraged citizens to work together to raise funds for all sorts of development projects both local and national. In some instances, the government provided the start up costs. Ideally a *harambee* began with a community identifying a need, and then organizing groups to meet it. These groups could have one target or a continuing program of related targets. Under this system, – which has deep historical roots in Kenya – also wealthy individuals – especially politicians and those who aspired to join politics – participated actively in the creation of funds in order to gain the legitimacy and the confidence of constituents. To some extent this system, which – as we shall see – was originally connected with communities and was at work at the level of civil society, could act also in a potential frame of corruption. In 2004 the system was regulated: the Public Officers Ethics Act² was enacted and introduced some code of ethics to curb the politicization, misuse and abuse of *harambee*.

Meaning and Origins of the Term *Harambee*

Harambee has been an integral element of Kenyan nationalism. Before independence *harambee* was a grass-root form of social exchange of labour and other forms of mutual assistance. According to Ombudo (1986), the term *harambee* originated from the word *halambee* which was used by the Bantu speaking people of the Kenyan Coast. The term literally means «Let us all pull together» and is normally pronounced *baa-raam-bay*. Ngethe (1979) says that *harambee*

is variously described a traditional habit of Kenyans³ and has been said that it was a «way of life» in Kenya (Kenya Development plan, 1979). It may range from informal affairs lasting a few hours in which invitations are spread by word of mouth, to formal, multi-day events advertised in newspapers. These events have long been important in parts of East Africa as ways to build and maintain communities. Chieni (1998) asserts that the word has also been adopted as a political slogan to symbolize unity and solidarity. In a political rally, public meeting or even mass action, a speaker will yell *baa-raam-bay!* repeatedly, while addressing the meeting to get the attention of the audience as well as to get a concurrence or an agreement on his ideas or proposed action. The audience will shout a slogan in support of the idea or action. The philosophy also aims at inspiring and encouraging the people to gear their thoughts, energies and resources together in order to achieve a certain specific goal. A controversy however arose recently about the origin of the term *harambee*. Some conservative Christians in Kenya have opposed the use of the word *harambee*, alleging that it is derived from an expression of praise to a Hindu deity *Ambee Mata*. The railway linesmen who build the Kenya-Uganda Railway, some of who were Indians carrying huge loads of iron rails and sleeper blocks would chant “*bar, bar ambee!*” (praise praise to Ambee mother) when working.⁴ Others dismiss such objections, arguing that this explanation of the word’s origin, even if true, is irrelevant to its modern usage and meaning as expressed on a Rasna Warah in a newspaper editorial.⁵

Akong’a (1989) elaborates that the term *harambee* is used in the discussion of economic and social developments in Kenya just as similar concepts are used in many other developing countries, such as *ujamaa* in Tanzania and *humanism* in Zambia.

It embodies ideas of mutual assistance, joint effort, mutual social responsibility and community self-reliance. It is therefore an informal development strategy by and for the people. All in all. It is a philanthropic activity as well as a redistributive mechanism through which poor children go to school, famine relief is mobilised, and poor communities get services.

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NOTES

1 - S. Wilkinson-Maposa, A. Fowler, *The Poor Philanthropist II: New Approaches to Sustainable Development*, UCT Graduate School of Business, University of Cape Town, 2009, see also S. Wilkinson-Maposa, A. Fowler, *Horizontal Philanthropy - A Right Angle on Community Philanthropy*, in «Alliance magazine», 1 June 2005.

2 - http://www.marsgroupkenya.org/Reports/LawsandConventions/Kenya_PublicOfficer_Ethics_Act_2003.pdf

3 - http://www.ascleiden.nl/Library/AnnualDevelopmentPlans/adp_kenya.aspx

4 - Hindu Press International, July 5th 2003 available at:

<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2003/7/5.shtml#4>

5 - Rasna Warah, *Kenya: What's in a Name? Goddesses Have Always Been Worshipped*

<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2003/7/5.shtml#4>