



Wisdom from an African hut

I'm sure many readers are familiar with the round circular shape of an African mud hut. It's kind of synonymous with a typical village scene. But is there a reason? And why should it be of interest to us living in modern cities with flats, shopping malls and skyscrapers?



I believe that there is a connection. A connection that you will find interesting and important despite living some 10.000 kilometres from the nearest South-African village. Let me explain with the following story.

Firstly, there is a sound reason why traditional African builders constructed round huts. Not only are the walls simpler to construct with natural materials (poles and mud), but the roofing support becomes easier to build from a circular foundation than say, a square shaped building. Once the roof is thatched with grass, the end result is a neat, compact and sturdy structure. Functional. With a low door which required visitors to bend over when entering, the huts had no windows, but in some cases a ventilation hole was left in the top of the roof.

To give you an idea of exactly how functional this design is what do you think would happen if a campfire was lit on the floor of such a hut? Due to the circular shape of the walls and the vortex created by the breathing hole at the top, smoke would swirl upwards and out. In a building with corners or compartments, this would not be possible. Primitive air-conditioning you could say.

And interesting that this was known to seemingly unsophisticated people, long before it was 'invented' by modern man? American Indians also used this natural design to great effect with their circular tepees which were incredibly easy to erect. Europeans on the other hand, tend to favour square or more elaborate designs, and the early settlers in Africa built like this, often using metal roofing. The end result... houses that were either very hot in summer or very cold in winter!

TAKE YOUR PROBLEM OUTSIDE

Secondly, consider the significance of a circular shape. It's magical. And not only in architectural terms. In most, if not all indigenous cultures, social gatherings and councils took place in circles around a focal point. Usually a warm fire. Dialogue and storytelling is easy in a circle as everyone is included, and the warmth and energy is shared around the group, flowing naturally. There is no-one 'at the end' or 'in the corner'. Everyone is grounded, literally. Within the hut, families would sit and eat together in the same way. And in African cultures where it is well known how powerful storytelling and conflict resolution was, and still is, this is a significant reason. This natural circular rhythm became infinitely larger within the standards of traditional culture, where food, resources, ideas, problems and solutions were shared.

I believe Westerners can learn a lot from this system, and I urge you to try it yourself. The next time you have a problem to discuss in the office or at home, take it outside and sit down in a circle on the ground. No chairs. For ambiance you can add some candles – or a campfire if possible – in the middle. Then discuss your problems like a traditional African, speaking honestly, and the humble setting will provide you with a gift: the power of listening well. You'll be amazed!





MAKE WAY FOR STILLNESS

Thirdly, the entire village is in a circle. A circle of circles. Therefore the energy emanating from each hut magnifies around the entire village and has a tremendous impact in the social function and bonding of the community. In a typical African village the elders – due to their stature in the community – are given their own huts which are normally larger, more comfortable and in the most favourable positions. It was most valuable for the community to incorporate elders' wisdom, knowledge, council and experience within the village, and not to exclude it. Another example of circular energy.

What was commonplace in some Southern African cultures was to store the grain and seeds for the following season's harvest, the staple diets of corn or maize, in the elders' hut. Special platforms were erected in the huts to keep the grain dry and safe from rodents. The responsibility of next year's survival, of the entire village, therefore lay in the care of the oldest and wisest. And furthermore, while parents were busy, the children of the village would spend their days playing and visiting the elders' huts, sitting beneath a shady tree learning about culture, traditions, medicine and survival. You could say learning of both the seen and unseen ways of the community.

Can you see how the elders were revered by the village? It was declared a privilege to nurture both kinds of seeds – seeds of the next harvest as well as the seeds of the next generation. For a moment compare the reality of Western cultures where elders may be sidelined from the pace and productivity of life. The speed in which technology has changed our world is too fast. My own father doesn't even know what a fax machine looks like, and his knowledge, sadly, has become surplus. But not his wisdom.

I believe that it would serve us well, every now and again, to slow the pace down and return to basics. In a world filled with chaos we should make way for stillness. And perhaps to reflect on the state of wisdom we are sharing with the future leaders of our villages. As a famous African proverb declares, no doubt first uttered by a wizened old man or woman, sitting on the floor of a humble hut: my humility is bound up in yours and we can only be humans together. ■

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