The Africa of 2015 will be more assertive and critical of certain orthodoxies as Africans seek to harness their distinctive creativity, adaptiveness, sociality and conviviality in relationships and encounters. This essay focuses on democracy, a domain in which, paradoxical as it may seem, Africa would have much to teach the rest of the world by 2015.

The world is currently hostage to a very uncreative idea of democracy informed by a very narrow idea of what it is to be beautiful, healthy, successful and free. Nowhere is this narrowness better exemplified than in the colossal investment that consumer capitalism has made in slimmness, the greatest icon of which is Barbie. This image is made and sold aggressively around the globe to be consumed as the ideal to which all must aspire, if they are to emerge from the vicissitudes and drawbacks to the good life. Barbie-like celebrities are recruited to endorse slimming diets, which more ordinary people are then persuaded to follow, and the results varying degrees of disappointment.

Seen in terms of democracy, Barbie (slimmness) is imbued with the mission of freeing the individual of relationships or the excess bulk (obesity) of responsibilities standing in the way of personal consumer success. Salvation is to be found in slimmness, and the slimmer an individual’s burden of relationships and responsibilities the better his/her life chances. Instead of encouraging the rich to get fat with responsibilities and relationships of support to the hungry and searching poor, consumer capitalism systematically invests in the rich to be thin and unburdened, as it fattens the poor with unfathomable responsibilities, dependencies and a pounding sense of worthlessness and self-persecution.

This Barbie model takes the form of a dictatorship that makes misery of ordinary lives, cultures, communities, solidarities and sociality across the globe. But Barbie-sation is at best a bazaar to which millions are drawn but few rewarded or given real choices. Just as obesity is considered an abnormality, so are relationships and sociality seen as dangerous if not watched at close range. A real or false sense of success means that people need not be obsessive about coping with deprivation. In the words of The Economist, ‘People are perfectly tuned to store energy in good years to see them through lean ones. But when bad times never come, they are stuck with that energy, stored around their expanding bellies.’ And persuading people to get thinner becomes an obsession to be supported with public-health warnings and media pressures.

In America for example, the risks notwithstanding, obesity-related stomach strapling operations are on the increase, as people desperately seek to lose weight. According to Dr. Trisha Macnair, the despondency of many people who are overweight ‘means that they will go to extremes to reach their goal, try wacky diets which defy common sense, pay large amounts of money for dubious “quick fix” remedies and even turn to drugs from anonymous clinics, in the hope that somewhere there is an easy answer.’ It seems so easy: if only
ordinary, overweight or overburdened consumers could follow the slimming menus prescribed by those who know best, they just might realise their dream body, beauty, health, comfort and freedom. In this way, relationships or ties with others are seen as fat that stands in the way of a perfect dream, and that must be burnt out of existence with health foods, slimming pills, fitness exercises, etc. The bulk and bulky are, at the end of the day, mostly disillusioned and disaffected, as the more they strive, the little the satisfaction that comes their way. Instead of learning meaningful lessons on how to bear the burdens of life, they are being schooled on how to shed the burdens of life.

If Barbie has been sold to the rest of the world as an American icon, to most Americans, she remains a distant dream and a constant source of embarrassment. Obesity is the messy order of the day, a big business that generates billions of dollars from fat and billions more on how to keep fat in check. According to a recent article on ‘the obesity industry’, nearly one-third of adult Americans ‘are thought to be obese’, and ‘American girls today shop for clothes that are roughly two sizes bigger than those worn by their mothers’. While ‘most Americans are well aware of the risks of obesity’ and believe themselves ‘personally accountable for their weight’, and while ‘miracle slimming drugs and the latest dieting fads become best-sellers’, ‘people are not prepared to give up taste as their solution to this problem’. They refuse to translate Barbie into reality through embracing ‘more healthy lifestyles’, even if they would rush to try out new ‘easy and tasty ways to lose weight’ proposed by those seeking ‘fat profits in fat people’. Sales of healthier foods may be booming, but few are getting thinner as a result. As The Economist observes, ‘once people get fat, it is hard for them to get thin’. The future, far from being one of slim Americans paying tribute to Barbie in their fantasies or realities, The Economist foresees ‘a growing herd of fat people’ providing ‘lots of demand for firms supplying everything from bigger towels to bigger beds and, alas, bigger coffins’ into ‘an early grave’. Everywhere, bulk seems to be winning over slimness, with global estimates rising from 200 million adults in 1995 to 300 million in 2003. Whether motivated by culture or by gene, Americans, like everyone else, are, to quote The Economist once more, ‘constantly trying to pack away a few more calories just in case of a famine around the corner.’ The same is true of communities and cultures, hence the resilience of relationships and responsibilities even amongst those individuals, communities and cultures most rigorously committed to shedding the burdens of life.

Barbie may well not be anyone’s reality after all, even as she is projected, celebrated, appropriated, and aggressively marketed as an icon by certain localities more than others. Indeed, the few that come through successfully in the pursuit of the Barbie ideal, quite paradoxically, never really come through as Barbie at the end of the day. If they don’t simply grow into a muscular Ken as global gendarme and police pregnant with imperial dogma, they are either sickly (from anorexia, for example) – because of all the sacrifices they have made, and are hardly, at a closer look, worth all the investments, torture and deprivations endured. The pursuit of Barbie is at best a mirage, at worst a consumer misadventure. If Barbie epitomises consumer capitalism, obesity is likable to the community of ties, which individuals are under sustained pressure to break in order to realise consumer success. But since individuals, even in the worst of circumstances, are social beings above all else, shedding relationships and responsibilities is seldom an easy option, and very few succeed to be happy when their ties with others are dead and buried.

Barbie Democracy in Africa

What lessons has Africa learnt from its encounters with the Barbie import labelled ‘liberal democracy’? It is commonplace to claim that liberal democracy and Africa are not good bedfellows, and how apt! Implementing liberal democracy in Africa has been like trying to force onto the body of a full-figured person, rich in all the cultural indicators of health Africans are
familiar with, a dress made to fit the slim, de-fleshed Hollywood consumer model of a Barbie doll-type entertainment icon. But instead of blaming the tiny dress or its designer, the tradition has been to fault the popular body or the popular ideal of beauty, for emphasizing too much bulk, for parading the wrong sizes, for just not being the right thing. Not often is the experience and expertise of the designer or dressmaker questioned, nor his/her audacity to assume that the parochial cultural palates that inform his/her peculiar sense of beauty should play God in the lives of regions and cultures where different criteria of beauty and the good life obtain. This insensitivity is akin to the behaviour of a Lilliputian undertaker who would rather trim a corpse than expand his/her coffin to accommodate a man-mountain, or a carpenter whose only tool is a huge hammer and to whom every problem is a nail. The history of difficulty at implementing liberal democracy in Africa attests to this clash of values and attempts to ignore African cultural realities that might well have enriched and domesticated liberal democracy towards greater relevance. This call for domestication must however not be confused with the ploy by opportunistic dictatorships that have often hidden behind nebulous claims of African specificities to orchestrate highhandedness and intolerance.

The greatest shortcoming of liberal democracy is its exaggerated focus on the autonomous individual, as if there is anywhere in the world where individuals are capable of living their lives outside of communities or in total absence of relationships with others. Losing the weight of community, solidarity and culture is not an easy feat even to the most dedicated of disciples of the Barbie model. By investing so much rhetoric on the rights of the independent, liberal democracy is left without a convincing answer pertaining to the rights of the dependent. Although in principle liberal democracy promises rights to all and sundry as individuals, not everyone who claims political rights is likely to have them, even when these are clearly articulated in constitutions and guaranteed legally. The American democratic system which champions the Barbie model, offers some interesting examples of how Americans, assumed to be autonomous individuals by law, find themselves bargaining away their political, cultural and economic freedoms in all sorts of ways under pressure from the consumer capitalist emphasis on profit over people.

Notwithstanding the Barbie rhetoric, The American Dream does not come true for everyone who embraces it. The citizenship and consumer sovereignty promised all Americans, can in reality be afforded only in degree and by those who manage to harness the limited economic, cultural and social opportunities that translate into reality, legal and political rights or abstract notions of the autonomous individual. The rest, to get by, must negotiate themselves into various levels of subjection and alienation, often with devastating costs to their humanity and that of their dependents or others. Being a rights-bearing individual ceases to be as automatic in reality as is claimed in principle, and/or for hegemonic purposes. For those who succeed after hard struggle, the tendency is to monopolise opportunities, since it is, quite paradoxically, only by curbing the rights of others that advantages are best guaranteed in effect. Like with fighting obesity, the majority are those who struggle on a daily basis to fulfil themselves, with varying degrees of failure, which, under consumer capitalism, is blamed on the individual to the extent that he or she has failed to sacrifice others through the sacrifice of history, memory, relations or community. Many do not quite make even the barest minimum, and much alienation, inequality, violence, cultural and social malaise, psychic and emotional disorders and exploitation in America today (and increasingly elsewhere) is linked to the suffocating grip by consumer capitalism on the throat of human imagination and creativity. These limitations of Barbie democracy in the American context may well appear a more palatable form of subjection to some Africans by comparison, but the need to address the rights of the casualties of independent success is no less compelling in America.

Since Barbie democracy appears uncomfortable with salient relationships, community and creative diversity, Africans who subscribe to its rhetoric as leaders find themselves
reduced to a Jekyll-and-Hyde democracy: tolerant in principle but muffling in practice. Such African leaders, whether in government, the opposition or civil society, are forced to keep up appearances with Barbie democracy in a context where people are clamouring for recognition and representation as cultural, religious and regional communities. The competing claims for their attention by internal interest groups and external forces explain the apparent contradictions, hypocrisy and double standards when their actions are appreciated exclusively from the standpoint of Barbie democracy.

Africa’s Alternative to Barbie Democracy

Despite the noted shortcomings of Barbie democracy, the quest for the missing cultural link in African democracy requires serious negotiation and flexibility, to avoid throwing the Barbie baby out with the bath water. It requires creativity and nuance that emphasise interdependence between the individual and the community, and between the state and the various cultural configurations in their flexible diversities. The vision should be a democracy that guarantees not only individual rights and freedoms, but also the interests of communal and cultural solidarities, big and small.

A compelling argument can be made to the effect that the problem in Africa has been undomesticated Barbie democracy, not democracy in all its forms, nuances and possibilities. For democracy to be meaningful to all and sundry by 2015, there is need for honesty about the limitations of the Barbie model, and for recognition of the complex realities, interconnections, diversities and negotiability that animate the lives of social actors everywhere. The direction and quality of democracy by 2015 would depend on an open marriage or conviviality between individual aspirations and community interests, since individuals continue to belong to solidarities despite attempts at conversion by Barbie. It is a fact of life that most people are committed to primary forms of belonging, to which state and country are only secondary, and promoters of Barbie democracy ought to be more honest about this, to avoid opportunism. It is in acknowledging and providing for the reality of individuals who straddle different margins of identity and belonging, and who are willing or forced to be both ‘citizens’ and ‘subjects’ that democracy stands its greatest chance anywhere. If harvesting rights and entitlements often entails denying rights and entitlements, then the only democracy that would make sense by 2015 is one that reconciles autonomy with dependency, citizenship with subjection. And as the most subjected continent where opportunism has blossomed, Africa should play a leading role in bringing about a democracy that is more in tune with the rights of dependents.

* This is an updated version of an earlier paper in Dutch published in Internationale Samenwerking (Publication of Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Development Cooperation), No.12, December 2003, pp.28-30.

i December 13, 2003, p.11

ii I would extend it beyond people to include communities and solidarities of various kinds.


iv http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/features/obesity_surgery.shtml

v The Economist, September 27, 2003, pp.68-69

vi December 13, 2003, p.11

vii The Economist, September 27, 2003, pp.68-69; December 13, 2003, p.11.

viii December 13, 2003

ix Just by way of a quick example, the UK Daily Mail of October 22, 2003, pp.24-25, carried the confessions of five women who tried celebrity diets for six weeks, and all complained about the disturbing unseen effects on their bodies. One found the diet a nightmare that didn’t seem healthy, made her feel nauseous, and gave her stomach pains all the time. To another, her diet was horrible, tiring and difficult to follow because too prohibitive. A third branded the diet an expensive hassle, and a fourth, who was ‘incredibly tired and desperately missed tasty, easy food such as pasta and rice’, wondered if ‘anyone could live like this for long’.