

The Link to Humanity: Giving as a Way of Life

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By Coumba Touré



Coumba Touré (photo by Daour Wade, courtesy of Ashoka)



Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope. Part 2 of 12

Based in Senegal and Mali, Coumba Touré is an educator, storyteller, writer and children's book publisher. Coumba's work is aimed at promoting African values, especially the idea that all humanity is linked. Coumba is also part of a women-led movement to keep alive the gift economy, a fundament of West African and other cultures where profit motives are trumped by the need to care for all, in the knowledge that the community is only as strong as its individual members.

“African values” refers to a universal positive way of life. We are African, but we share our values with all those who want to share the dignity of the human being.

A word that we use a lot in Bamana is *maaya*, or humanity. When you say that somebody has *maaya*, you mean they are human and they are connected to humanity. There is a song that says that what makes us human is a cord that we all hold. Every time someone breaks it, it is broken for all human beings. Each of us has to make sure that that cord doesn't break in our name.

To be human for us is also to be able to give. We call our gifting system *dama*. The gift economy is a way of life throughout West Africa, practiced here by very ordinary people every day. If you interviewed any number of persons and asked them how they live, what they eat, what they own, you would quickly notice that most of it has been given by someone. I have seen it most with people and places that are less in touch with the global model. I have seen people considered poor give much more than people who have much more, and do it with ease.

You don't give based on how much you have, but to maintain relations. When we say give, that means everything. We give objects, but they are only symbols to materialize the links. Like when I travel, I always get little gifts to give to people that I meet along the way, but also for people back home. You are leaving your uncle's and aunt's house and they give you a piece of material. You don't need more clothes, but you make a dress from it and wear it with pride. If someone complements you, you say, “Oh, my aunt so-and-so gave it to me.”

Really, the highest gift is recognizing people, giving consideration for who they are, and accepting to be linked to them.

The gift is always shown to others, because it is for other members of the community as well. It's as if what someone gives to me is given to everyone linked to me. Others will help me thank the giver, "This is beautiful. Thank you for what you have done."

Here we measure people's goodness by how much they give. Even if the person doesn't have many material possessions, someone will say, "That is a good person, an extraordinary person." For us, if you have a lot and you don't give it, what is it good for?

If there were not this practice of giving, I might be rich. But the only way you get to be rich is by disassociating yourself from other people, because you cannot live in community, have family in the expansive way that we understand family, and still be accumulate so much unless you have a serious source of money. There are so many children that you have to pay for schooling and medicines for. Many times, being an accumulator of wealth here means that the person has lost the value, that he or she is not giving enough to the needs around. People start wondering what's gone wrong with him or her.

Another of our beliefs is that what we do always comes back to us. Everything we do makes us who we are. For example, with anyone who comes by, my mother will solve their problems as if they were hers. It is very natural for her. But her belief in doing so is that someone else will do the same for her own children or others linked to her as they travel around. When you are in a community where everyone believes that, it really does work.

We have to find ways to maintain that thinking and that trust. It makes you very free to care for others' needs without spending as much time protecting yourself. It's become a dangerous way of living in the type of society we live in today -- in cities where we don't know each other, where people have different values systems, or where to be smart is to know how to trick and exploit others -- but it's a beautiful way of living.

Our challenge is to model those values, name what we are doing to make sure that others are conscious of it, and transmit them to the next generations. We also need to develop links with people all over the world who have similar values.

It's exciting to me that there are so many people practicing this gift economy. It's a very big source of hope and joy and of imagination.

What Africa has to give the world is a reclaiming of *maaya*, humanity. It teaches that there are other ways of living and doing and being with each other. Giving is one of them.