

is a subtle concept not easily translated that means each one's humanity is expressed through his or her relationship with others. Its spirit is captured in a Xhosa saying which goes: "Umntu ngumntu ngabantu"—"People are people through other people."

Ubuntu formed the basis of pre-colonial African social organisation which created a spirit of mutual obligation and respect among people. It is this spirit that kept people cheerful in times of adversity. In South Africa, it helped members of the Black majority to survive the ravages of apartheid.

But colonialism and Western culture have severely tested the concept. Increasingly, with the growth of capitalism, desperation, pressure on scarce resources and the creation of mega-cities like Johannesburg, the spirit of Ubuntu has been disappearing.

"According to Western culture, it is one man for himself and God for us all," says Limakhatso Namo. "People do not care about others. But here it is different. A neighbour's problem is everyone else's problem."

Namo is the administrative director of the People's Dialogue, a non-governmental organisation at the forefront of the Homeless People's Federation (HPF). The HPF is a national community-based organisation of people—including the women in Kgotsong—who build homes for themselves through the money they raise and contribute to a central fund.

Namo says this way of building houses is called 'Letsema' in SiSotho, one of the country's 11 official languages.

Traditionally, it also extended to other spheres of activity.

In the old days, members of a community would come together either to plough, harvest or undertake some other chore for one another. Songs would be composed to suit the occasion and lighten the task at hand. Beer would also be brewed and served. Once they finished it, the people would move on to help another household.

Throughout South Africa, nine million of whose 41 million inhabitants live in shacks and informal settlements, such initiatives are being promoted, the underlying idea being self-reliance.

"We do not only come together to build houses, we also come together to talk about our problems and share ideas," said Rachael Masumpa, convener of the scheme in Kgotsong. "We say we are family. If one of us suffers, then we all suffer."

The degree of trust built up among the women is such that they obtain loans from the central fund on the basis of their relationship, without collateral.

There are 100 members in Masumpa's section of the 72,000-strong settlement. Working in small groups, they have so far put up 28 houses through a saving scheme they collectively contribute to.

"If one of us is being

beaten by her husband, we come together and counsel her, talk to her about how best to deal with the situation," says Ellen Moreanyane, the owner of the house the women are currently working on.

She says it is a vital support mechanism in a cultural environment that has brought people of diverse backgrounds together in search of jobs in the urban areas.

Source: Inter Press Service Asia Pacific, 22 October 1996



ALL DOLLED UP INNOCENCE IN EVENING GOWNS

by Karen De Witt, NY Times News Service

WASHINGTON—Many Americans have been riveted by the televised images of JonBenet Ramsey, the kindergarten beauty queen who was murdered in her family's home in a wealthy neighborhood of Boulder, Colorado, the day after Christmas. A six-year-old, JonBenet was already a veteran of the children's pageant circuit, having won a half-dozen beauty crowns. Many of her photographs show her posed coquettishly in showgirl costume and lipstick, her hair a highlighted blonde.

With her death, the country has had a glimpse into this world, in which there is a pageant almost every day. Even infants can win a crown.

Child beauty pageants appear to be another example of an America wanting to have it both ways: a paean to the beautiful innocence that childhood should be, but dolled up with the aura of

adulthood.

"Beauty pageants in particular blur the lines between what is cute and what is sensual," said Laura Pappano, a visiting scholar at the Murray Research Center at Radcliff College.

Today Americans have become fixated with the safety of their children. Horrific crimes like the kidnap and murder of Polly Klaas in California by a sexual predator in 1993 and protective measures like New Jersey's "Megan's Law" which informs neighborhoods of convicted sexual offenders, increase the sense that pedophiles lurk by every schoolyard fence and under every open window.

While the threat of child abuse is consuming the national imagination, childlike models like Kate Moss reign. Last August, Calvin Klein withdrew an ad campaign that mimicked cheesy adult videos after critics, many parents among them, likened the images to child pornography.

But elsewhere in America, children in pageants are held out to be inspected, rejected and crowned.

Christine Sherman, whose eight-year-old, Chelsea, is the 1996 fall cover model of *Pageant World* magazine, said the children's pageant world "brings a lot of kids out of their shells."

"My daughter has been doing this since she was 11 months old," Sherman said. "She's a hula dancer and she sings. She holds several state and national titles. I think pageants are terrific because

kids get a positive attitude toward themselves."

VJ La Cour, publisher of *Pageant Life* magazine, said: "It's glitz and glitter, a little bit of Hollywood. That's what the little kids want."

But their wants pale beside the interests of parents and a multi-million-dollar industry of grooming and showcasing.

Like the smothering father in the film *Shine*, the child and its talent become the possessed.

"It's the big kids—the mothers—wanting the little kids to get the glory," said Ted Cohen, president of World Pageants Inc., which publishes an international directory of pageants. American pageants, Cohen said, represent a billion-dollar-a-year business.

"You get Procter & Gamble participating in pageants, you know it's big business," said Cohen, who approves of pageants for adults but is troubled by those for very young children. "Black Velvet has its own pageants. And Hawaiian Tropics, the tanning lotion, is very big, mostly children."

Some feminists say that sexism and commercialism mean that a country that searches for the bogeyman in its children's closets fails to see the real ones.

"The commodification of bodies is big business because society reinforces stereotypes of beauty to keep women in their place," said Shalene HesseBiber, associate professor of sociology at Boston University. "We're afraid of

sexuality unless you put tinsel on it and package it in a controlled environment, like these pageants, with adoring parents."

Camille Paglia, a feminist critic and professor of humanities at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, finds something amiss in the participation of children in the pageant world.

"The pageants mark a deep sexual disturbance in the society, a cannibalizing of youth by these vampiric adults," she said.

Some characterize that disturbance in terms of a national illness, others as a blend of Biblical entitlement and good old American upward mobility.

Anthony Graziano, professor of sociology and codirector of the Research Center for Children and Youth, at the State University of New York at Buffalo, said: "We want to be good parents and are quick to criticize those we see as not being good parents. But then something creeps into this. It is, at its most extreme, a sense that we own these children. They are objects to mold and do with as we like."

Source: Today, 1 January 1997

