

A Sand Dam ‘AGM’

(‘Preliminary draft’)

On March 31, 2010 Prof. Jesse Mugambi, Prof. Gideon Mutiso and I travelled to the village of Kola in Machakos District, just over a one and one-half-hour drive from Nairobi. After a rendezvous in Nairobi’s southern reaches shortly after 7:00 a. m., we headed eastward out of town on the smooth China/Israel-built highway, avoiding the city’s quickly enveloping daily traffic jam. We were responding to an invitation from the Utooni Development Organization (UDO) to witness day-long deliberations—an ‘Annual General Meeting’--on a development process which has been underway, variously, within Machakos District and beyond, for the past 30+ years.

By this time, an excursion to Kola for the three of us had become something of a ritualized routine—this being a sequel to earlier visits. According to precedent, arrival in Machakos town, home of government’s district headquarters, required a rest-stop at the bustling T-Tot Restaurant for a delicious cup of ‘chai’--brewed with fresh whole milk--and piping hot, just-out-of-the-pan ‘mandazi’--doughy pastry puffs.

This pit stop within Prof. Mutiso’s ethnic home base, triggered alertness and memory. His antenna quickly—virtually without verbal discourse—read the mood of the day. “There is plenty of food around,” he announced. Thanks to abundant, sustained rains, known in recent years

as the ‘El Nino’ rains. Driving south out of Machakos town after tea, a petrol station on the left coaxed muffled chuckles from Mutiso and myself. On a previous visit we had stopped at the petrol station for soda drinks. Having slurped intermittently, my final reach for the glass triggered a loud explosion and resulted in a thousand pieces of silicon~~silica~~ scattered across the floor. Local elders took Mutiso aside, inquiring discretely about the ‘mind-over-matter’ powers of his white friend! Apparently the cheaply-made tumbler disintegrated merely because of my body’s electro-static content. Replacement cost for the glass: 90 Kenya shillings.

Upon arrival at the UDO headquarters--at approximately 9:30 a. m.—located on the edge of Kola Village, we encountered a group of several hundred people assembled under tents erected for the occasion. Key members of the group had been in session for three days, others had arrived in the morning at 5:30 a.m. for this final day of deliberations. The assembly comprised representatives of 65 community development groups from a huge semi-arid catchment area within and beyond Machakos District. All of these groups had been ‘serviced’ or had been ‘engaged’ by/with UDO staff over past years.

UDO staff greeted us with a hearty welcome and invited the three of us on a tour of the very well organized compound, a tour punctuated at the end by the ubiquitous ritual cup of tea. Longish rectangular buildings on the UDO compound served variously as office blocks, meeting rooms and residential quarters for select staff and

interns/trainees. A neatly-manicured 'lawn' and select planted trees set the buildings apart. At the far end of the compound there is a small grove of trees, all of them identified by botanical and indigenous designations as well as dates of planting and the names of the guests who performed the 'plantings'. Serving appropriately as a centrepiece--a shrine?--is a massive concrete water storage tank into which all the rainwater from the compound's roofs is directed through a complex skeleton of gutters. Sustained rains in the current season have filled the water tank to overflowing for the first time since its construction fifteen years ago.

During the two days prior to our coming, representatives of the 65 community development groups had been fine-tuning administrative and implementation details of their respective and collective development activities. Our arrival coincided with a comparative review of the achievements realized by the groups during the past year. According to the delightfully effective moderator of the session, the UDO-related groups had fulfilled/completed an impressive 97% of the project/work schedule drawn up and agreed upon one year earlier in a similar review/evaluation/planning exercise.

Soon the meeting shifted from its focus on details of project/work to more celebratory flourishes. As expected, the three of us were invited to offer greetings and encouragement to the assembled representatives of the 65 UDO-related groups. Special mention was made and much appreciation expressed, repeatedly, for the solidarity

demonstrated by Prof. Jesse Mugambi, Prof. Gideon Mutiso, Prof. Kabiru Kinyanjui and myself during an earlier critical moment in the life of what is now known as the Utooni Development Organization.

That critical moment had come in February 2009 when pent-up tension between Excellent Development Kenya--the precursor organization to UDO--and Excellent Development UK came to a head. Simon Maddrell, founder of Excellent Development UK, a British NGO, and functioning chairman of Excellent Development Kenya, was being perceived, increasingly, by Kenyan counterparts to have become intolerably domineering in what had begun as a 'donor-partner' relationship. Over an extended period, it became clear to the Kenyan administrators of Excellent Development Kenya that the relationship had become untenable.

When Joshua Mukusya--the original instigator 30 years ago of all the work related to sand dam construction--declared that he was ready to resign from his position as CEO of Excellent Development Kenya because of his frustration with Maddrell, his friends--in particular Prof. Mugambi--took note. Joshua's threatened resignation was recognized as a distress call and an invitation to friends to rally in solidarity. So intense was the build-up of tension during this time that Joshua Mukusya had to be hospitalized to treat a bout of high blood pressure.

Meanwhile a series of solidarity actions were being undertaken by Profs. Mugambi, Mutiso, Kinyanjui and

myself. These included, initially, a field visit to Kola, meeting with Joshua Mukusya and other members of the Excellent Development Kenya board/staff in an effort to understand the contentious issues; secondly, a meeting in Nairobi between representatives of Excellent UK and Excellent Kenya hosted and chaired by Prof. Mugambi with Prof. Mutiso and myself in attendance; thirdly, a sequence of meetings with a law firm in Nairobi attended by Joshua Mukusya and senior officers of Excellent Kenya, witnessed by myself and, on occasion, attended by Prof. Mugambi.

Cumulatively, the result of all these efforts was the dis-establishment of Excellent Development Kenya and its replacement by a legally registered **Trust** entity known now as the Utooni Development Organization. Amidst much emotional bluster generated by Simon Maddrell, Excellent Development UK ‘retreated’ to its proper function as a UK-based donor organization, thus relinquishing all administrative control over/interference with what had been Excellent Development Kenya, now the Utooni Development Organization. In the course of these deliberations and investigations, it became evident that discrepancies between the original official registration of Excellent Development Kenya and copies of the registration available to Kenyan staff including Joshua Mukusya had been deliberately instigated. In retrospect, it became clear that these discrepancies had functioned, to a significant extent, as a basis for the accumulated relational tension.

By the end of March 2010, the Utooni Development Organization had been fully registered with the relevant governmental regulatory bodies and fully operational as a legitimate non-governmental organization. For all practical purposes, the people from the Kola environs of Machakos District had rebelled against a domineering British donor agency--more particularly against its domineering posture vis a vis the local counterpart--and had firmly taken charge of their future. Today, Excellent Development UK relates to Utooni Development Organization on the basis of mutually agreed/negotiated MOUs, as do other donors/supporters of UDO.

Against this rather tumultuous backdrop, the general tenor of the March 31, 2010 meeting moved toward consolidation of identity and purpose. For example; in recognition of repeated consultancy forays by senior UDO staff into other African countries over the past several years, a suggestion regarding a possible/eventual name change was mooted; perhaps the name should be changed from Utooni Development Organization to **Utooni Development Organization *International***? In the event, this suggestion served more as an ebullient expression of collective self-confidence than as an imminent practical gesture.

Adding to the diverse dynamics of the meeting was the presence of the District Commissioner (D. C.) and the Director from the Ministry of Water, representing the incumbent Minister, Hon. Charity Ngilu. The presence of these two persons was weighted with significance. For over

the years, relationships between the Utooni initiative and the Government of Kenya--both at local and national levels--have, at best, been fraught. However, in recent times the mood has become more amicable with government officials bending over backwards, as it were, to be seen as sympathetic and supportive of the Utooni initiatives. On this occasion the D. C. was effusive with praise for the achievements of UDO during the 'fiscal' year just ended—he was particularly impressed by the completion of 97% of previously projected targets. “You have earned an A++,” he declared enthusiastically. But then, alas, he proceeded with supplementary comments indicating clearly that core functions of sand dams were not apparent to him.

Similarly, the Director from the Ministry of Water lost his way while making enthusiastic but inappropriate offers of support for UDO. He offered, for example, to make government water engineers and official drawings for dam construction available to the UDO undertakings. At this point the clever chairman of the proceedings asked for UDO's 'in-house' engineers--including 'senior engineer' Joshua Mukusya--to stand for recognition and then asked rhetorically, “How many dams have been designed by these engineers and built by UDO groups?” The answer: “Seven hundred and fifty dams!” Question: “How many of these 750 dams have collapsed over the past 30 years?” Answer: “None!” It was not at all apparent that either the D. C. or the Director from the Ministry of Water fully appreciated the irony and import of that brief exchange. Altogether, the exchange functioned as a demonstration of enthusiasm for

people-instigated initiatives which have consistently out-paced government understanding.

After this exchange, the Director took his seat, but suddenly remembered his bulging breast-pocket. With permission from the moderator, he stood again, reached into his breast pocket and withdrew Kshs. 20, 000. It was, he said, some 'lunch money', given personally by the Minister of Water, the Hon. Ngilu. After just a bit of consultation with UDO officers, the moderator of the meeting announced that the Kshs. 20, 000 would be equally divided among the 4665? projects represented at the meeting. And, according to whispered consultations, UDO's accountant was preparing an official receipt for the Kshs. 20, 000. With these two gestures, UDO's leaders quickly and effectively de-fanged the political character/intent of the several gestures and comments from the government officials.

Whence comes the clarity of discernment so strongly manifested by this assembly?

One portion of the answer is readily apparent; it was written for all to see on a printed list of the assembly's accomplishments, reviewed line after line by a sensitive UDO senior staff person, at times in a liturgical call-and-response mode.

Stashed away amongst the data was this astonishing factoid:

One year after construction, the value of a sand dam [including the stored water] must be deemed to have appreciated by a factor of ten beyond the total initial investment of money and labour in its construction.

People who depend directly on land and water for their survival and livelihood, need not be persuaded by a development expert that investment in sand dam construction constitutes a prudent investment in life and community.

A second, slightly more elusive factor must be sought in the existence and ethos of the indigenous Akamba work-group known as the 'mwethya' [myethya, pl.] According to Prof. Ndeti, the myethya phenomenon is lodged sociologically and ethically in a category known as 'mbeni'. In colonial times, Mbeni came to be associated with a particular dance, but within the broader socio-political context Mbeni could be understood as a way coping with and adjusting to new exogenous influences. In anthropological terms, Mbeni as a category includes participatory adult activities mediated through music, dance or art for purposes of fulfilling ritual/cultural or economic obligations.

But the question remains: whence the sense of obligation within the Akamba community, whether that obligation be ritual, cultural, religious or economic? According to Ndeti, a person becomes participant to society at birth. Such a person is integral to a culturally phased system leading to creative participation in the charter of life. That person is

aware of social expectations and can express such awareness, if only in limited fashion. There are no qualms about fulfilling obligations to oneself and others. The position of the person within the universe is not questioned nor is the power of the cosmic mover questioned.

Akamba expressions of responsible awareness function as a re-enactment of the primordial rhythms concomitant with those of the cosmos. Dance is part of seasonal rhythm, performed by particular age groups as a renewal/affirmation of the faith of the ancestors. Within Akamba society, the system of human development functions as a re-enactment of the paradigmatic charter of the primeval order; it maintains connections with the beginning. A performed dance, for example, functions as a kind of transubstantiation; the dance re-enacts beginnings. According to Ndeti, Akamba music is not merely a temporal whim, but a reality of human life, mythically instituted and perpetuated through cosmic impulses.

Obviously, as demonstrated earlier, the mwethya ethos seems to be discontinuous with the current government ethos. Joshua Mukusya, UDO's CEO and himself the former pastor of a church, made it clear that the mwethya ethos is not coterminous with church though virtually all of the people assembled for this UDO 'AGM' are members of some church. As Joshua pointed out, words spoken within the UDO context are not like words uttered in a church; according to him, in church people feel free to shout 'hallelujah' but are not obliged to follow up with deeds. In a UDO 'AGM', by contrast, words are spoken and then

crafted, by means of discussion and exchange, into plans of action which, within one year, are fulfilled.

If mwethya provides the sociological fabric within which the sand dam enterprise is being undertaken, it does not by itself explain why the choice of sand dams as a water-resource technology was made nor the circumstance of that choice. Those bits of the story can only be understood with a brief glance back to the mid-1970s.

Several factors gave rise to the beginnings of Utooni. A severe drought was ravishing Ukambani (the region to the east of Nairobi where the Akamba people live). At the time Joshua Mukusya was employed as a staff member in the Rural Development Department of the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) where I was serving as the NCCCK's Secretary for Rural Development. In these circumstances Joshua Mukusya's father had had died unexpectedly. So he found himself, suddenly, dealing with a family tragedy as well as a community tragedy.

For purposes of engaging the family tragedy, he convened a meeting of his father's age-mates to consider how best to deal with the family farm, both immediately and in the long term. To deal with the effects of the drought in the larger community, he immersed himself as NCCCK staff member in remedial action. Working with NCCCK member churches and collaborating with the National Catholic Secretariat, famine relief committees were eventually established, respectively, in Kitui and Machakos Districts--areas most

affected by the drought—with representation from all the churches and from the relevant District government offices.

A first priority action called for famine food relief, a priority quickly fulfilled. But secondly, attention was focused on ways of mitigating the effects of future famines. To this end there was much deliberation within the respective committees, drawing on a wide range of available expertise. An expatriate officer working for the Salvation Army drew attention to an Akamba man who had learned the intricacies of building sand dams under the British colonial government.

Because of strong residual public resentment, advisories from the former colonial government or from persons trained by the former government had been resisted by the waKamba community. Such was the case with Mr. Ndunda, the man cited by the Salvation Army officer. But desperate times called for desperate measures. Ndunda's skills were soon deployed by the NCKK and sand dams quickly constructed. Shortly after the construction of the initial dam, a hefty rain shower confirmed Provident's blessing and ignited community enthusiasm. Together with other drought-mitigating measures, sand dam construction from this point forward continued apace—to this day.

WHAT SHOULD WE TAKE FROM THIS LIMITED STORY? FIRST THE TECHNOLOGY EXISTED WITHIN THE ENVIRONS BEFORE MUKUSYA. IT WAS IGNORED AFTER INDEPENDENCE. SECOND, MUKUSYA'S PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES LED HIM TO FALL BACK ON THE TRADITIONAL LEADERS. THERE WERE NOT FORMAL BUREAUCRATS TO SHOW THE WAY FORWARD. THIRD

THERE WAS SYSTEMATIC THINKING ABOUT USING THE TRADITIONS AS WELL AS MODERN PRARCTICES. FOURTH, TO FUNCTION IN THE RECENT TIMES RESOURCES-MONEY- NEEDED TO COME FROM OUTSDIDE THE COUNTRY. FIFTH, TO SEEK EXTERNAL RESOURCES DID NOT MEAN GIVING UP LOCAL LEADERSHIP ON WHAT WAS TO BE. SIXTH, EXTRA KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DEVELOPMENT WAS ALWAYS SOUGHT FROM OUTSIDE BUT INTERMEDIATED BY THE COLLECTIVE ETHOS OF MWETHYA. FINALLY, IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT THE COMMUNITY LABOUR AND OTHER RESOURCES INVESTED IN SAND DAMS AND OTHER DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES ARE MUCH MORE THAN THE MONEY SOURCED OUTSIDE.

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April 2010

Source:

Ndeti, K. Elements of Akamba Life. 1972. East African Publishing House. Nairobi, Kenya.

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April 9, 2010