REFLECTIONS ON KAWANGWARE AND IJEDE AT THE BEGINNING

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Ndwaru was the owner of the "hotel" where rooms were usually acquired on an hourly basis. Then the ICA rented the café and rooms on the second floor for the Kawangware staff residence and office in late 1975. He was a big, imposing man with a politician's smile and a businessman's demeanor. He had run for mayor of Nairobi. He lost, but "not by much" by his assessment.

He looked straight into my eyes as he sat on the couch in his office and poured more beer in our glasses from the large, warm bottle of Tusker sitting on the tiny coffee table between us. It was 10am, but I had been assigned to maintain "good relations" with our landlord, and he had asked for the meeting. "So, why are you really here?" he queried in almost a playful manner. "Why would you leave your home to come live in Kawangware? As a young man, I left my home here; but I wanted to go to the United States." I never got a chance to answer his question directly.

Ndwaru had left Kenya as a young man to avoid arrest during the Mau-mau uprising against the British in the 1950's. He decided to hitch-hike to the west coast of Africa but had no idea that it was twice the distance across the U.S. He saw the United State through the lens of political, economic, and cultural freedom. It was the same story that drove my own great-grandfather to leave Russia and end up in Kansas a century earlier.

After making it to the Central African Republic and then back to Sudan, Ndwaru decided to return to Nairobi. Kenya had become an independent country during his self-imposed exile, but Ndwaru never lost his vision of the world beyond Kenya and even beyond Africa. The ICA's arrival in Kawangware was an affirmation of that vision. Those of us on the ICA staff felt we had been welcomed into the village and into Kenya with open arms.

Specific projects written into the document that resulted from the Community Consult began. The Community Farm was launched immediately growing French green beans (exported to France, of course). Community Arts Kawangware (COMARTKA) secured an advance from Marshall Fields in Chicago for delivery of a container filled with banana-leaf and woven-reed baskets along with as many batiks as possible. Almost 100 village women gathered to celebrate the birth of Teran, Rhonda's and my first child. An increasing number of multinational and local businesses joined the list of financial and in-kind supporters for the project. Before too long, construction started on the new Kawangware Village Square. All was going well. Then the phone call came from Brussels. It was my third international call ever.

The first was the call from Kawangware to my parents in Kansas to announce the arrival of their first grandchild. The call lasted for 10 minutes. It cost $40. Our monthly stipend was $25. The second was when the Global Centrum Development Band gathered

for a phone conference. The five locations for the Global Centrum were Chicago, Brussels, Nairobi, Singapore, and Hong Kong. I was on the call as Development Centrum: Nairobi. I could not imagine what this call cost, let alone get my head around the fact that I was talking with four other people in five cities around the world in real time. It was 1976. It was done for both business and symbolic purposes. We needed to demonstrate it was possible. It was.

The third call was from Brussels Centrum about a new assignment for Rhonda and me—this time to Ijede, Nigeria. Joe Mathews, the Dean of the Institute of Cultural Affairs, said we (now three of us) were needed to launch a new Human Development Project. I was to go in two weeks. Rhonda and Teran were to follow two months later since housing for us in the village was still at the camping stage.

My flight to Lagos stopped in Kampala, Uganda, the country next to Kenya. There soldiers with machine guns patrolled around the plane while we waited for a few passengers to board. Idi Amin was military dictator at the time. We had heard horror stories from Ugandans attending our community training sessions in Nairobi about the terror of his rule. I was thankful to take off without incident.

East and West Africa were dramatically different places. Kenya was generally peaceful, rural, and safari country. There was a cultural veneer still in place from the British that made it comfortable for a European, but thin enough that the real mystery and spirit of Africa shone through. Nigeria, on the other hand, was generally urban, the most populated country in Africa, and a military dictatorship. The underlying trauma left over from the brutal Biafran Civil War a few years earlier was still fresh. Islam and Christianity were separate foreign cultural overlays upon the traditional animistic religious life that held the society in place. It was all about "juju", which was apparently morphed to "voo-doo" as slaves, who survived, made the trip to the Caribbean centuries earlier.

One of the first priorities for the Ijede HDP was the renovation of the largest building in the village, a dilapidated wooden structure euphemistically called the "community center". One morning soon after the project was launched, I was assigned to take my in-kind paint, ladder, and equipment to begin repainting the building. I estimated it to be a 7-to-10-day job.

At mid-morning, I looked up to see an older village man in a traditional full-length robe walking slowly toward me. He came close and surprised me by speaking English. With a cynical look and no smile, he asked a question made as a statement. "You are Christian?" I said "Yes, I suppose I am." He then asked assertively and accusatorially, "Have you come here to convert us all?" With confidence I responded, "No." He squinted with a disbelieving expression, and asked forcefully, "Then why are you here?" This time I answered the question quickly, "To paint this community center! And it is going to be a long, hot job alone." We stood looking at each other in a pregnant pause. Without a change in expression, he grunted and walked away. I returned to the task at hand wondering who the man was.

Early that afternoon, villagers began arriving. First there were just a couple of women, one with a baby wrapped around her back in typical fashion. With some universal hand gestures, I understood they had come to help with the painting. Shortly, four men came walking across the field. Then other women arrived. When I arrived at the building

the next day, about a dozen people were there waiting. The community center received its first coat of paint well before the end of that second day.

I learned a few days later that the man who had visited me was the Imam in the village. We also learned that a community celebration was scheduled for the upcoming weekend. I was never clear exactly what the celebration was for. Some people said it was for the beginning of the human development project. Some said it was just for the newly painted community center. Some said Oba Akilo, the king of the village, had divined that it was a good time to celebrate based on his reading of the smoke from the dry rat skull and bones heating in a bowl over the small fire at the front of his house (the palace).

Whatever the case, that party involved wild traditional Yoruba costumes and food along with masks, dancers, drummers, and community singing. At one point, in the evening I yelled in the ear of my translator, the King's "Secretary of State", "What do the words mean that they are singing over and over?" He said, "they are singing 'ko sese, were l'oba wa se'. It means 'the impossible has been made possible'." Finally, I had an answer to the question of why I was in Africa. Sometimes it was to just "do" something simple. Sometimes it was just to "be" something not so simple.