Connecting the dots...

Volume 17

22 October 2021



Philip Mataranyika
Nyaradzo Group,
Chief Executive Officer

Follow us on:

NYARADZO GROUP

www.nyaradzo.co.zw

Service • Strength • Solutions

From a boy to a man, one step at a time...

When my mother Mabel came to fetch me from Rusape, after my discharge from the District Hospital, where I had spent almost a month recovering from the life changing injury to my left leg in August 1979, the Salisbury (now Harare) that I came back to, had completely changed from the one I had left almost two years back.

Our previous time living in the city had come to an abrupt end in 1977 when Father took us back into his custody, following our poor showing in the grade seven exams, in our final year of primary education at Farai Primary School, thus condemning Johane, Thomas and I to life in the village in Chifuri where he had moved in with his new wife, Victoria Mutizamhepo.

My injury would be a blessing in disguise, as it paved the way for my return to Salisbury. I must admit though that leaving Johane and Thomas behind, was like losing a part of me, even though they had gained acceptance in their new setting and were comfortable in their surroundings. Nevertheless, there was no going back for me as I had reached a point of no return.

I was excited to be returning to our home in Chitungwiza, where I looked forward to reconnecting with my old friends. However, to my complete surprise, our trip terminated at Mbare Musika, which was ordinarily our stopover on our way from the village as it was the rank for most rural buses in Harare. Upon our arrival, we headed straight to Matererini Hostels in Mbare, which was to be our final destination. It all happened so fast that I initially did not comprehend what was going on and before I could put the pieces together, I was welcomed into a block of flats at Matererini hostels, where as I would soon find out, we were sharing space with the family of Abigail Murota.

I quickly realised, however, that this place was very different from the one we were living in when I left Chitungwiza for Chiduku. Apart from the bright lights and access to running tap water, something we didn't have back in the village, I couldn't see anything else that could make my new environment comparable to the privacy we had enjoyed in our little granary-cum bedroom in Chifuri.

On enquiring what had caused my mother to relocate from Chitungwiza, where she had a whole house to herself, I would get to know for the first time that the property which I had always thought to belong to her, house number 1693, Unit A, Seke, had in fact been a rented property from a Mr Chipunza who worked for John Sisk and Son, a company which had secured lucrative contracts to build houses in Chitungwiza.

In all the time we had been living in Chitungwiza, my mother had presumed that we knew she was renting the house. As children, it had not crossed our minds to ask her about the ownership of the house, as we did not think it was actually possible to lease a whole house, since the common practice was for tenants to occupy a single room or two, at most. All that mattered to us at the time, was the fact we had a roof over our heads and that we were under the loving care of our mother.

The change in my mother's fortunes was quite telling. She would eventually share with me that after moving from Mufakose, number 15 Nhuta Close, where she had been staying courtesy of her sister, Cinderella and her husband, Ernest Nyamayedenga Kamwara, she had worked like a horse in order to be able to afford to rent a full house, so us her children could enjoy the life they were used to before the collapse of her marriage. Even though Johane, Thomas and I were still in the care of our step-mother, Bertha, our mother had already started planning for our homecoming.

As she was going about her hustle, she would be referred to a Mr Chipunza who owned several properties in Chitungwiza. After convincing him that she would be good for her monthly rentals in full from her outside catering business, he agreed to have her as a tenant in one of his houses. True to her word, the rentals kept rolling in because the builders who worked for John Sisk and Son could not afford to miss any of her sumptuous meals, the payment for which gave her financial liquidity. With everything seemingly going according to plan, her wish to bring her sons under one roof had been granted, after we were abandoned by our step-mother Bertha, in Highfield.

However, a few months after we had left for Chiduku, Mabel's world would crumble around her, after John Sisk and Son dispensed with the services of scores of their contract workers in order to adjust to the operating environment of the time.

As the war to liberate our country intensified and the guerrilla fighters won battle after battle, Rhodesia's economy had been hurt badly. On the other hand, the United Nations approved sanctions on the government also made it difficult for the Ian Smith led regime to trade with the international community, thus putting them in a very tight corner.

While to the outside world, the life for Rhodesia's two hundred and sixty thousand whites looked like a script taken from the Rich and Famous when compared to the misery they were inflicting on the six point three million blacks, the colonists were now feeling the heat as the war effort intensified. All that was glittering from the outside had turned into nothing but a Potemkin village.

The guerrilla fighters had upped the ante by hitting where it hurts most – the economy - which had reached almost desperate levels as Ian Smith increased defence spending to take care of the financial burden of the war, which in turn, crowded out the private sector. The Rhodesian government had also gone into overdrive, increasing subsidies in transport and agriculture, as well as showering these sectors with export incentives to enable them to overcome the impact of the UN sanctions.

All this happened at a time when chrome exports from Rhodesia had been revoked, and the global slump in the steel industry dealt a body blow to the Rhodesia Iron and Steel Company, RISCO, (now the Zimbabwe Iron and Steel Company) ZISCO. To compound Smith's woes, the apartheid government in South Africa was also twisting the knife on his government, imposing surcharges on imports from Rhodesia. The economy was also feeling the strain of expensive petroleum imports, so the government introduced fuel coupons to ration and control its purchase as part of its effort to sustain the economy.

This, however, created a parallel market through the trading of coupons and fuel, not dissimilar to today's current government efforts to grapple with the same nemesis. These together with other socio-economic factors, slowed the economy down, with the resultant uncertainty discouraging even the most optimistic of companies from recapitalising their businesses. As a consequence, my mother's business was negatively impacted by the retrenchments at John Sisk and Son, as the entire construction industry had to trim down, resulting in most contract workers being sent home packing.

Originally based in Dublin, Ireland, John Sisk had established the company in 1859, with his son John Valentine joining the construction firm in 1907, paving the way for its renaming to John Sisk and Son. With the economic boom of 1957, coupled with major construction opportunities in Africa, Sisk took a gamble by entering the African market, landing profitable contracts mainly in Zimbabwe, Malawi and Nigeria.

With each new generation, John Sisk and Son would grow from strength to strength. Today, John Sisk and Son prides itself for having a broad-based ownership structure in which Muchadeyi Masunda, who is undoubtedly one of the most accomplished legal minds to emerge in Zimbabwe, is said to have a significant stake in the business.

About 30 years later, my path and Much's, as Muchadeyi Masunda is affectionately known, would cross when I became Chairman of Rufaro Marketing in 2009, and he was Mayor of the City of Harare at the time. I will come back to this later.

While the staff rationalisation plan gave companies in the construction sector a fighting chance for survival, it turned into the idiomatic final nail in the coffin for my mother's business, whose hand-to-mouth model could not be sustained without contract workers from John Sisk and Son who had hitherto kept it alive from the time she had relocated from Mufakose.

To avoid sinking into rental arrears, and oblivion, Mabel had surrendered her occupation of Number 1693, Unit A, Seke, back to her landlord. As the going got tougher, she had sought help from a childhood friend, Abigail Murota, who allowed her to share the flat she owned. So when my mother picked me up from Rusape District Hospital, it was to the Abigail Murota flat in Matererini Hostels in Mbare that she took me.

Mbare derives its name from the Mbari people who used to occupy the area before they were pushed out by the colonialists. Chief Mbari of the Makorekore tribe had his royal court at the Kopje Hills before he was driven away by vanhu vasina mabvi (people without knees), the natives' first impression of whites on account of the trousers that hid their knees from sight.

I would later come to know that when my mother came to Rusape to negotiate re-taking me into her custody, she had actually made a huge sacrifice as she would now have an extra mouth to feed over and above that of my two brothers, Donald and Garikayi, who had stayed with her after the collapse of her marriage. It was like it never rained but poured for her, as one problem piled on top of another. To make matters worse, there was very little I could do to ease her burden. Having spent a month in hospital, I was still walking with the aid of crutches. Even though the cast had been removed, I still had a lot of pain on the wound which needed to be dressed every five days. The nearby clinic in Mbare was my go to place.

As much as I was excited to be back by my mother's side, adjusting to my new environment was the hardest thing for me. Headcount of members of families housed in the Matererini housing complex far exceeded its carrying capacity, though it was not as bad as Matapi, Shawasha and Nenyere, where we would later move to.

Matererini Hostels is one of the historic buildings in Mbare high density suburb. It is part of a group of hostels constructed by the colonial government in the 1940s to provide accommodation for Africans who were pouring into Salisbury from villages to provide labour to industries that were sprouting up in industrial sites such as Graniteside, Southerton, Workington and Willowvale. All in all, Matererini has ten blocks which presently house an estimated two thousand four hundred inhabitants, although the numbers were much less back then.

The other famous flats in the capital city's oldest residential area include Matapi, which is now home to ten thousand people residing in its fifteen blocks; Nenyere Hostels with thirteen blocks now taking up to seven thousand residents; Shawasha Hostels with twelve blocks that are presently providing shelter to about seven thousand residents and Mbare Hostels which are accommodating over two thousand four hundred people in nine blocks.

Residents in these flats, including houses forming the greater Mbare did not find themselves there out of choice. The passing of the Land Husbandry Act of 1941 drove most Africans off their land. With very little to enable them to keep their bodies and souls together, able-bodied men and women flocked to the cities or farms to look for employment in order to make ends meet.

Because the colonial regime had long promulgated the Native Urban Locations Ordinate as far back as 1907, Africans could not stay in areas that were designated for the minority whites and therefore settlements had to be created for them.

Initially, the colonial local government policy established hostels such as Matapi to accommodate only male workers who worked in the industrial areas Graniteside, Workington, Willowvale and others. Each one of them was allocated a single room which they used as a bedroom and lounge with a shared kitchen and ablution facilities. It became an inescapable reality that the colonial city fathers had to create accommodation for females which saw the construction of Runyararo Hostels, which has the distinction of being the only hostel for young rural African women, established in 1946 by Barbara Tredgold.

With time and following pressure from African wives some of whose husbands were now using the restrictive colonial practices to dabble in all sorts of mischief, the local authorities had to come up with a plan to create accommodation for married couples, with Matererini being one of them. Hostels for married couples had two rooms and a toilet in each apartment.

In the mornings, those who were gainfully employed would leave early to work in industries and return to their apartments after knocking off late in the afternoon. Those on night shifts would sleep through the day to wake up just in time for their night duties. For entertainment, the city fathers built beerhalls such as Rambanayi, Vito and Mapiticoti, among others, where they provided not just refreshments but musical performances from both upcoming artists and some of the big names of that time.

As a result of the liberation struggle, Mbare had experienced an influx of refugees who were fleeing the heat of the war from the rural areas, which pushed the Red Cross Society into establishing make-shift structures close to the Mbare bus terminus. Mbare had thus become a hive of activity, day and night, from that far back, which is why the capital city became Harare - derived from the Shona Chief who lived in the area by the name NeHarawa , whose name meant “he who does not sleep.”

Whilst I was initially uncomfortable in my new environment, I would soon adjust, picking up a few more lessons from my mother who had joined a group of women vendors who were eking out a living selling cooked food to revellers in the beerhalls. The nearest beerhall to where we stayed was Rambanayi Bar, which is not very far from Mbare Musika.

Loosely translated in English, the name Rambanayi means “go ahead and get divorced” and while its naming was no call for couples to end their marriages, several nuptials were known to have collapsed after some of its patrons fell head-over-heels with ladies who patronised the pubs, never to go back to their wives and families in the village.

Such sad endings to marriages were also quite common at other pubs in Mbare and elsewhere, amongst them Mapitikoti, Marengenya, Kugedhi, Vito Red Room Tavern and Blue Bar. These beerhalls were constructed by the city fathers of the time, with the aim of keeping African men entertained, so that the idea of joining the liberation struggle would not cross their minds.

In later years, I would learn a great deal more about these beerhalls when I became Board Chairman of Rufaro Marketing in 2009, which had oversight over these bars. I was privileged to have received unwavering support from Muchadeyi Masunda, whom I alluded to earlier, as my Board tried to transform these vestiges of colonialism into productive enterprises, by leasing a good number of them out to TN Holdings, owned by another prominent lawyer-cum businessman, Tawanda Nyambirai.

In the face of fierce resistance from workers, mostly bartenders in the beerhalls, who would go on to demonstrate at my offices along Park Street in Harare, Muchadeyi Masunda, who was the Mayor of Harare at the time would throw his full weight behind my Board, which was of the view that the business model was now not sustainable in a competitive environment, given how the business had grown over the years.

As a result of poor performance over several years due to the business model, the company had failed to generate enough revenue to keep afloat and maintain their properties some of which were becoming eyesores that were being turned into havens for criminal activities in the high density suburbs.

To change the narrative, we had agreed as a board, to lease most of the properties in an effort to transform the business. We realised that there were two distinct businesses in the Rufaro Marketing Portfolio, one being Retail with the other being Real Estate. Over the years, Rufaro Marketing had built a robust property portfolio given its monopolistic operating model which had changed with the enactment of the anti-monopolies act of 1997. Because of the cost structure of Rufaro Marketing and other operating challenges, it did not make sense to continue running it in its old form as a retail business.

When I signed leases for the properties, renting most of them to TN Holdings who converted them into shopping malls and banking halls, the employees running the beerhalls were up in arms, as this would result in their unemployment. To mitigate the effects, we put together an empowerment deal, where we reserved ten percent of the properties so they could be run and managed by the retrenched workers as their businesses. To give them a leg up in business, we proposed that they take over the stock in hand and gave them a year to trade before they paid rent which they accepted. Once signed and sealed, I was happy to have facilitated a significant empowerment deal, immediately transforming those we signed the deal with from being workers to owners of their business. A good number of them did well for some time.

I am proud to have had the privilege to serve Rufaro Marketing in the hope of burying its colonial past by transforming the business into a real estate enterprise, which it is, given the size of its property portfolio built over years. My only regret is that the model did not gain wide acceptance at the time otherwise, Rufaro Marketing would have turned the corner and would have managed not only to survive, but to thrive through rental income. Before long, our model would be adopted by the city fathers of most councils in Zimbabwe and is currently the modus operandi in most cities.

In hindsight, providing catering services in places such as Rambanayi, must have pained Mabel, witnessing how some of her male customers were spending their salaries on booze, food and women, which could have reminded her, of the demise of her own marriage, after our father, Steven, got hitched to a younger competitor, who had stolen his heart during one of his many trips to Chipinge.

She, however, had to mind her own business in order to fend for her children. On her menu, she would sell chicken offal (matumbu ehuku), chicken drumsticks, thighs, wings and legs, beef stew and trotters. For starch, she served cornmeal (Sadza) and Rice.

Mabel and her colleagues would take turns to prepare their delicious meals from a common kitchen that was tucked away in one of the buildings at Mbare Musika. To assist her with the workload, she had sought assistance from her maternal relatives, among them an uncle, Sekuru Isaac Mhowa, who did most of the heavy lifting. She had a few other hands to help her meet the demands of her market.

In the month or so that followed my arrival in Mbare, I was of little use to her, as I needed help myself due to the injury I was still recovering from. I would stay with my mother for a few more months, sharing the small room allocated to us by her benefactor, Abigail, whilst searching for a breakthrough. It was not long before that opportunity came my way.

One of my mother's two brothers, Samson Musasa, who had previously relocated to Nyatsanga in Mhondoro – along with his brother, Jivas – after their family, was displaced from Bvumbe Village in Rusape following the construction of Rusape Dam and Tsanzaguru Township, would be my refuge.

I moved in with Sekuru Samson who lived with his son, Edward, in a makeshift cabin he had constructed on the outskirts of Mbare Musika in 1978 after his fortunes in Nyatsanga, Mhondoro, where he was operating grocery stores, took a downward turn. The liberation war in the Mhondoro district, where Sekuru Samson had settled, had been vicious, especially in the Nyatsanga and Bhonda areas, where there were reports of massive casualties on either side.

The word Mhondoro means "lion" in Shona; bearing testimony to the leonine ferociousness of the tribes that lived in the area. Because of the never-say-die fighting spirit that existed in its people, Mhondoro had been one of the areas that experienced the brute force of the colonialists from as early as the first Chimurenga between 1896 and 1900.

It is, however, unfortunate that not much is said about Chief Chinengundu Mashayamombe, who is undoubtedly one of the iconic figures to emerge from that area due to the outstanding role he played in the Mashona Rebellion, partly as a result of the strategic alliance that existed between himself and Gumboreshumba Kaguvi who provided spiritual encouragement to him and other chiefs to maintain their resistance, amongst them Chikwakwa, Seki, Kunzwi and Mangwendi.

After the first killings of traders of Asian origin took place near the south bank of the Mupfure River near his kraal in June 1896, Chief Mashayamombe became a marked man. The chief and his battle-hardened men would win a few encounters with the colonists but would eventually lose the war after his stronghold was completely burnt out by forces led by the British South Africa Police. After putting up fierce opposition, the chief and his men retreated into a large cave and would subsequently yield and surrender the following day. There are different narratives as to how Chief Chinengundu Mashayamombe died, but his head is said to be among those that were shipped to London as trophies.

Fast forward to the second Chimurenga war, it became very difficult for business people operating in war-torn rural areas to stay afloat because the level of philanthropy expected from them simply made their businesses unviable. As part of their contribution to the war effort, many rural business people supplied the liberation war fighters with provisions, most of which were not paid for. To not provide the comrades with provisions when a store was well-stocked, was considered an offence, punishable by death in some cases, especially when one was labelled as a sell-out.

Sekuru Samson had allowed for the limitless supply of provisions to the guerrilla fighters or vana Mukoma (big brothers) as we used to call them. As a result, he ran out of working capital to restock his stores, resulting in him having to close his two retail outlets in 1976. He remained rooted in Mhondoro, and started a new venture in welding and general repairs, after investing in an arc welding machine which he bought from the little savings he had held onto. He had been enterprising throughout his life; learning a lot of crafts, including fixing cars and excelling as a welder.

Arc welding is a type of welding process that uses an electric arc to create heat to melt and join metals. He leased two gas welding bottles from Oxyco (Private) Limited, which would supply him with oxygen and acetylene,) which when mixed in the correct proportions with oxygen is a potent force in cutting and welding.

Formed in 1929, the company was called Oxygen Industries (Private) Limited, before it was rebranded as Oxyco. It was famed for being one of the major sponsors of the Scrap Iron Exhibition (at one point renamed WeldArt), which dominated the events calendar for welders. It is now part of the BOC Group PLC, which, as at September 2002, had several subsidiaries or associated undertakings in Zimbabwe namely BOC Zimbabwe, Handigas, Industrial Gases, Oxyco Utilities, Oxygen Industries, Weldex, and Zimbabwe Oxygen.

With his arc welding machine and skills, Sekuru Samson became renowned for building scotch carts from scratch. He was also good at repairing exhaust pipes for vehicles as well as leaking pots and pans. There was, however, not much business at Mubaira Growth Point in Mhondoro from where he operated.

To refill his gas bottles, he travelled to the capital city of Salisbury. On one of his trips, he would meet up with one Mr Banda who invited him to come and stay with him, in what was pretty much a shack built out of plastic, in a corner of Mbare Musika, predicting that he would make a lot of money as there were many customers for his services.

After giving it some thought, Sekuru Samson accepted the invitation as he connected with the thought that there would be a bigger market for clients, from all parts of the country, wanting to buy scotch carts after good harvests as well as motorists whose exhaust pipes were damaged and needed repair. Even though he knew that the living conditions at Mbare Musika were not favourable, he needed to start all over again and make up for what he had lost in the short-lived retail business in Mhondoro. Little did he know that his relocation to Mbare would provide a foothold for me in my struggle to transition from a boy to being a man.

To this day, Sekuru Samson is probably one of the smartest people I knew and it must have been from him that I got the inspiration to want to become a motor mechanic. It was from him also that I learnt to use my hands to earn an honest living. When I moved in with him, his son, Edward and I, used a ramshackle Volkswagen (VW) Microbus that had been stripped of every little useful part, before being abandoned just outside of Mbare Musika, as our bedroom.

This disused shell was, as far as we were concerned, a five star hotel, considering other makeshift dwellers who ran the risk of having their shacks washed away by the rains in the hot and wet summers. The location could not have been better, as there were public ablution facilities nearby where we filled buckets with water, which we kept inside our "new home", so we could have a bath early each morning.

In time, Sekuru Samson was patient enough to teach me how to operate the arc welding machine, which I quickly mastered. He also taught me to weld using gas. At first, Edward and I would do all the welding, building scotch carts and repairing broken exhaust pipes while he was out drinking with his friends at Rambanayi Beerhall.

On his return, we would surrender all the day's takings to him, however, we soon realised that once we had handed over all the monies, Sekuru was not thoughtful enough to give us anything as a token of appreciation, to enable us to buy things like underpants, toothbrushes and other such basic items that were of necessity for boys of our age.

This would push Sekuru Edward and I into having our own small talk to discuss the way forward, coming up with a resolution that we kept a closely guarded secret. In short, we resolved to surrender only the takings from big projects such as the sale of a scotch cart. Payments for small jobs, such as repairs of pots and pans as well as minor jobs to do with fixing exhaust pipes of those whom we knew were not known to Sekuru Samson, we kept and shared between the two of us. I was slowly transitioning from being a small boy to a thoughtful and structured man.