Connecting the dots...

Volume 19

05 November 2021



Philip Mataranyika
Nyaradzo Group,
Chief Executive Officer

Follow us on:

NYARADZO GROUP

www.nyaradzo.co.zw

Service • Strength • Solutions

Only a fool can curse the environment within which they grow.

Mbare Musika is the last place where one would imagine raising law abiding citizens, more so, people who could go on to build successful businesses that become not only national but global brands, and yet, this is the path I have travelled, with not one iota of regret or misgivings. I know several prominent people who grew up in Mbare, among them my very good friend and businessman Doctor Charles Muronda and soccer players including Stanford Stix Mutizwa, Antony Kambani, Edward Madhobha Katsvere, Shaw Handriyade and my good friend Japhet Mparutsa, to name just a few.

Unlike most of these people who had a home address to which a postman could deliver letters, I did not have one. I lived in a disused and abandoned VW van that I called home. Prominent scientist, Doctor Shopera, another product of Mbare Hostels, also had an address, I did not. To compound the situation, this was at a time when I was transitioning from a boy to a man, I could have totally lost it and did do so for a while, after the influence of Bob Nesta Marley, following his massive show at Rufaro Stadium. I had to pick myself up and change course quickly, thanks to the influence I got from the environment and from those around me. One of the people who had a huge influence on my entrepreneurial journey was my nephew Leonard Basiyawo whom I met at Mbare Musika in a twist of fate. This is how it happened!

Edward and I would one day accompany my uncle (Sekuru) Samson Musasa to source and buy vegetables for the meal of the day from the vegetable retail side of Mbare Musika which was not very far from where we stayed. We stopped by one of the several market stalls to make enquiries, not knowing that this would be an encounter that would rekindle a relationship which had long been lost and forgotten.

We struck up a conversation with a male vendor who was behind the stall and Sekuru Samson could not hide his excitement upon realising that the trader we were chatting with was one Leonard Basiyawo his nephew; exclaiming, “Zvauri muzukuru wangu chaiye!”, meaning, “You actually happen to be my nephew!” Sekuru Samson explained the nature of our relationship with Leonard adding that he was the spitting image of his father, Tuwadya Basiyawo, who married into my maternal side of the family.

Mwazvionei, one of my grandfather Samuel Chati Musasa's sisters, had a daughter, Marita (Martha), who gave birth to eight children – four boys named Kennedy, Sylvester, Lovemore and Leonard and four daughters, Paskaria aka Constance, Winnie, Rita and Emilia. Marita would be charmed by Tuwadya Basiyawo – a farm worker who was originally from Mozambique – although the name is also familiar in a few other Southern African countries, amongst them Malawi and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The lovebirds would take their affair to its logical conclusion by getting married. The nature of Tuwadya Basiyawo's job was such that the couple would move from one farm to another within the Odzi area in Manicaland in search of greener pastures. The heavens would bless them with eight children, split in equal numbers between boys and girls.

As their family drifted to farms further away, the couple lost contact with the rest of the extended family of their matriarch, Mwazvionei, resulting in an invidious situation whereby Leonard and his siblings grew up without contact with relatives on both their maternal and paternal sides.

Having grown up toiling on farms, Leonard, their youngest son would develop a keen interest for vending agricultural produce, a day job that would land him at the epicentre of the populous Mbare high-density suburb in the 1970s. Out of the blue and from that chance meeting with Leonard, we became one big happy family and from that day we developed a closely-knit relationship that would give me another member of the tribe to look up to.

As Leonard became comfortable with his new found relatives he warmed up to us, resulting in him deciding to move in with Edward and I from his makeshift shack which was not very far from our disused Volkswagen Van. The three of us would put up together every night and wake up early the next day, rushing off in different directions in pursuit of our respective hustles.

In the days that followed and as we got to know him better, Leonard's get-up-and-go entrepreneurial spirit had Edward and I eating out of his hands and we became the wiser for it. Apart from having an eye for opportunity, Leonard knew Mbare Musika like the back of his hand and could recount its history with the memory of an elephant.

Mbare Musika, was a hive of activity back then, where goods worth more than US$3 million changed hands daily among an estimated 17,000 sellers and buyers that thronged the market and could well make any first time visitor nervous - but not for Leonard. On the contrary, it was the kick he needed to make it in life.

Like most urban centres in Salisbury, Mbare Musika since its development way back in 1907, would be teeming with buyers and sellers from all walks of life. Its establishment was on account of the phenomenal industrial boom of the 1930s to 1960s that saw Africans being driven off their land into reserves, also called Tribal Trust Lands, coupled with the cattle tax, forcing desperate young men and women to desert their villages to try their luck in the city.

The rural to urban migration worsened at the height of our liberation war when rural homes were abandoned as families sought sanctuary in the city, most of them as economic refugees. Due to the racially segregated nature of colonial urban planning, the allure of the bright lights in Salisbury and elsewhere would turn into a mirage for many, as they would find themselves living under squalid conditions in shacks or crammed in high-density areas where they could not even begin to dream of life in the leafy suburbs.

Inadvertently, the roaring industrial activities spiked the demand for food for the natives who were low income earners, motivating the colonial city fathers to create Mbare Musika, which became a lucrative market for farmers in areas surrounding Salisbury, going as far afield as Shamva, Goromonzi Domboshava, Murewa and Mutoko. Occasionally, the white farmers would also descend on Mbare Musika to sell their produce.

Even though Mbare Musika had the capacity to supply all the immigrants, the area could not absorb all the refugees who were trooping into the city. The Red Cross Society which at the time operated as a branch of the British Red Cross had gone out of its way to put up temporary structures a few metres from Mbare Musika, but still could not cope with the flood of refugees who were crammed into shacks like sardines.

To the South South Eastern side of the capital city, was the sprawling, Zengeza, Seki and St Mary's, some of the areas that were growing rapidly due to the deluge of refugees who were spilling from Mbare Musika, with a good number of them putting up structures near Chikwanha shopping centre in an area that became known as Chirambahuyo.

As the population of immigrants swelled in these areas, in 1978, the colonial authorities amalgamated Seki, St Mary's and Zengeza into what is now known as Chitungwiza.

Chitungwiza derives its name from Dungwiza (the territory of long grass), the village of the legendary spiritual leader, Chaminuka, who had predicted the arrival of the white men many years before they appeared. During the period prior to our independence in 1980, it is this Chitungwiza that would become a sea of shacks made of corrugated steel and plastics, pretty much like, if not worse than Nyanga in Cape Town South Africa, where black migrant labourers were forced to settle as another shack settlement, Langa had become too small.

Refugees who could not put up with the conditions in Mbare or Chirambahuyo in Chitungwiza, had to troop to Epworth, an area South-East of the Capital.

To put into perspective the population explosion that confronted the Rhodesian Authorities at the time, picture this: whereas Salisbury had a population of 280 000 Africans – according to the 1969 census – the inhabitants had swelled to 430 000 by December 1975. The growth that followed thereafter was more astounding, clearly overwhelming the authorities who had budgeted for the provision of shelter at a rate of 5 000 units per annum.

Before its flooding by all-and-sundry, including Sekuru Samson and his acolytes (Edward and myself), Mbare Musika had already earned the reputation of being loved and loathed in equal measure. Disliked, because most of its inhabitants lived in the squalid conditions of slums, but loved for the opportunities it created for enterprising young men and women who had left their villages in search of better opportunities.

Mbare Musika had many distinctions that made it a sweet spot for dreamers. It was the main rank for urban to rural transport operators as well as the connecting point for intra-city routes such as Rugare, Mufakose, Highfield, Mabvuku and Glen Norah, amongst others. Matambanadzo, Mucheche, Maziveyi, Morden Express, Nyamweda, Kubvoruno, Mhunga, Chiveero, Mushandira Pamwe and many other rural bus operators ruled the roost along the rural routes.

At the time, the transport business was one of the few sectors where blacks could break into without much scrutiny from whites who were wary of anything that could upset the status-quo. The collapse of farming activities in rural areas after the land apportionment act where most blacks had been driven off fertile soils had thus led African men to try out other means to eke out a living.

While some chose to work in factories, farms and households, those who fancied their chances of making it big, took the risk by going into business, with transport being one of them. Unlike it is now, the intra-city routes were a preserve for state monopolies, with Salisbury United Omnibus Company taking care of the capital city, before it was rebranded to Harare United Omnibus Company at independence and later to the Zimbabwe United Passenger Company, which is trying to regain its footing after the liberalisation of the mass public transportation system in Harare drove the parastatal towards the precipice.

Back then, Rhodesia had thriving metered taxi services used mainly by those with the means and preferred the convenience of taxis to the intra-city public transportation system. With a carrying capacity of four, these taxis used to operate within a forty kilometre radius of their designated post offices. The largest of them was probably Sharaude Taxi Services (Private) Limited, owned by prominent insurance sales person, Paul Mkondo, who sadly passed in May 2013.

There were several other taxi brands, amongst them Minicabs (Rixi taxis); Minitaxis (Creamline); A1 Taxis; Pfumo Mini Cabs; Avondale Minifare Taxis; Dreamline and Streamline, most of them run by blacks as cooperatives. The largest however, was Rixi Taxi, which was owned by Ron Hastings who established the company in the 1950s. After independence, Ron franchised the business, resulting in several indigenous taxi owners joining the Rixi Taxis brand.

There were other ventures in the high density suburbs where whites felt they had very little chance to succeed and did not bother risking it, and these were open to blacks, amongst them retail and construction. There were a few exceptions though, with Bata Shoe Company and Enbee Stores flourishing in black settlements, including at Mbare Musika where travellers did their last minute shopping for merchandise such as school shoes, uniforms and trunks.

Founded in August 1894 by the Bata family in the Czech Republic, Bata Shoe Company opened its first store in Rhodesia towards the end of the 1930s. About three decades after Bata made its incursion into Rhodesia, Indian businessman Natu Patel, took the school-wear market by storm, founding his Enbee Stores as a small shop at number 64 Moffat Street (now Leopold Takawira Street) in 1959.

Despite these few exceptions, townships were more of a preserve for black businessmen whose familiar trademarks were their potbellies due to their more successful lifestyles. A number of black businessmen had already made it big when I moved in to stay with Sekuru Samson at Mbare Musika, with Leonard joining us as explained earlier.

For both urban and rural travellers and locals living in Mbare National, refreshments were available at kiosks such as Madya Snack Bar and others. The Chiweshe brothers had put up a complex of retail shops that served the purpose of last minute retail shopping for those travelling to the rural areas and provided convenient shopping for locals living in Mbare National and in the Hostels.

For the Chiweshe brothers, entrepreneurship runs in the family. Their forebears were pioneers in their own areas, trading as far back as the 1920's, excelling in enterprises such as farming, abattoirs and wagon transport. That was one of the many sides of Mbare Musika.

On the other side of Mbare Musika, were markets for seasonal and perishable goods such as tomatoes, mangos, potatoes and cabbages, etcetera. The fresh produce market had different areas, namely the farmers market, the wholesale and retail sections.

Also known as Kumakoronyera (crooks), the wholesale area is where farmers needed to sharpen their negotiating skills because the bulk produce purchasers operating in this part of Mbare Musika had strong bargaining powers, dictating at what price they would buy the produce, without regard for the cost of production borne by the producers or farmers.

After buying all that the farmers had to offer, the Makoronyeras would then split up the produce for resale to retailers from all over the city, made up mainly of women from Mabvuka, Tafara, Highfield, Glen View, Glen Norah and others who would have left their homes in the wee hours of morning to be early birds that caught the proverbial worm, in bargaining for better prices before the market got busy and flooded.

At best, the Makoronyeras operated like a cartel, at worst, they were like a pack of hyenas. Once they were set on a price, they would not budge, in spite of the pleas from farmers or producers whose shrill cries would fall on deaf ears. All year-round, farmers would suffer the same fate. Because they didn't have anywhere else to turn to, they would end up taking a haircut in order to offload their produce in one go, most of which were perishables and once ripe, would have to be sold and consumed within days otherwise it would go bad with the farmers risking losing everything.

Farmers from as far afield as Mutoko and Murewa would come to the wholesale area of Mbare Musika in the early hours of morning so they could sell their produce in one transaction, catching the mid-morning buses back to the village. In a few cases, it was disheartening to hear stories of those who squandered their bonanza on the world's oldest profession and booze, while their wives and children waited for them to come home with either hard cash or at least a scotch cart.

The many vendors who came from different parts of the city didn't have a lot of money themselves, buying only that which they could afford and for which they had a market. Their lack of financial muscle made it impossible for them to cut off these middlemen, the Makoronyeras. The Makoronyeras playing the role of wholesalers, would put margins on the produce bought from the farmers and by eight or nine in the morning, most of the transactions would be done and this happened seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year.

It helped that Mbare Musika was a confluence for all, as it was conveniently located within a ten kilometre radius of most high-density suburbs accommodating families of the black labour. It was also within a five kilometre radius of industries and was the hub of transport networks linking up the market with residential suburbs to the east, south and western sides of the city.

Its strategic location made sense for long distance travellers, residents and those working in the nearby industries to buy their day's requirements on their way home from work which made the retail section bustle with activity.

On the other side of Mbare Musika, the business of selling dry produce such as grains, beans, nuts and fish was thriving. To this day, I have not come across anyone who understood the ecosystem at Mbare Musika better than my nephew, Leonard Basiyawo, who started off as a vendor, selling tomatoes, onions and other farm produce, not very far from where we camped before he eventually moved in with Edward and I.

As his skills of vegetable marketing grew, Leonard would join the big boys on the wholesale side of Mbare Musika, out-smarting the Makoronyeras at their own game. Unlike your typical Makoronyeras who waited for the farmer to bring their produce to Mbare Musika on hired trucks early every morning, my nephew made it his business to negotiate with farmers at source. He would structure a deal where he bought the produce off them on the field so that none of the Makoronyeras would have access to the farm produce.

Once the deal was done, Leonard would hire trucks to ferry the produce to the market. This arrangement enabled him to make big bucks. By doing an on-field purchase deal, buying all the target farmer's produce, he was able to ward off competition.

Once the deal was done, he didn't need to get his entire product to the market, especially potatoes, which take weeks or months before they go bad. This gave him the flexibility to come to the market in boom times and withhold supplies when the market turned bearish. Leonard would become incredibly successful at this game and we envied him.

The environment of Mbare which I got to know very well with time, had a huge influence on me as we took time to walk or drive around in either the Taunus or the Fiat.

On days we were not so busy, especially on weekends, the three of us would go watch soccer at the multipurpose Rufaro Stadium, where the iconic Bob Marley gave one of his memorable performances and had me briefly converting to Rastafarianism. For the longest time, I couldn't get enough of this majestic structure, which first opened its gates to the public in 1972, and provided fans with an opportunity to be dazzled by the artistry of some of the country's iconic footballers such as George Shaya, Shackman Tauro, Stanley Ndunduma, David Mandigora, Japhet Mparutsa, Kuda Muchemeyi and Stix Mutizwa, among others.

The giant forty five thousand seater facility also played host to Zexie Manatsa of the Green Arrows Band's white wedding to his wife, Stella, in 1979. Forty two years after their lavish wedding, I would have the honour and privilege to do a double celebration at our Events branch along Simon Mazorodze Road where we wished their son, Tendai Manatsa, a happy fourteenth anniversary following his marriage to the late Oliver Mtukudzi's (aka Samanyanga) daughter, Selmor.

Mbare is not short of history marking features. A stone's throw from Rufaro Stadium is the Pioneer Cemetery, another enduring symbol in Mbare, famed for its World War dead graves. The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, St Paul's United Methodist Church, Stoddart Hall – Mbare's largest community centre –popular with those seeking entertainment, and the Kauffman Centre, named after the Jewish patriarch of the Kauffman family, Oscar. I will touch more on Oscar Kauffman in later editions.

Because Stoddart Hall was the venue where nationalists clandestinely conducted some of their meetings, it would in later years, become a well-known stop-over for national heroes on their way to their final resting place at the National Heroes Acre.

It would be remiss on my part if I didn't mention the two home industries near Mbare Musika that employ scores of men and women, especially the youths, who are engaged in various activities such as welding and carpentry, both of which I did growing up. Loosely translated to mean "tins", Magaba offers similar products and services as Siyaso, which means "it's none of your business/leave as is", a declaratory message to those who may want to pry into the intricate details of its web of affairs. It is often said in jest that spares that may be scarce in industrialised countries such as Japan can be found at Magaba and Siyaso and, if you're lucky, you could even chance upon the engine of an aircraft!

For those who love arts and craft, Chinembiri Craft Centre is the place to meet artists who produce different kinds of crafts, whilst Mupedzanhamo or "the finisher of your troubles," is available with cheap clothes which ensure that you don't walk poorly clothed on account of poverty, as prices for clothing items in this part of the world are next to nothing.

Living at Mbare Musika, even in a disused and abandoned VW Van, without a postal address, was the tonic I needed on my transformational journey from a boy to a man. Leonard Basiyawo was a true legend on that journey and remains so, years after his passing. We meet and face so many situations growing up. Instead of looking back at the environments within which we grow with hate and regret, we must draw lessons from them and use them to launch and thrust ourselves forward. The deeper our foundation, the taller we can go up building. For only a fool can curse the environment within which they grow.