Connecting the dots...

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From Vegetable Vendor to Timber Merchant...
...the story of Leonard Basiyawo

During my time at Mbare Musika, Sekuru Samson was the one person I looked up to until the hardworking and multi-talented Leonard Basiyawo, my nephew, came into the picture. Thereafter, Edward (Sekuru Samson's son) and I became close to him as he grew in wisdom and stature, becoming the real deal in Mbare and beyond, and ultimately one of my role models.

It helped that Leonard was a few years older than us and the three of us would talk well into the wee hours of morning about anything and everything that came to mind, laughing like idiots, at times. The fact that we were all related and would share the food we ate and the place we slept, in our makeshift home, the Volkswagen Van, made our triumvirate, birds of a feather. As his star was rising, we celebrated his achievements, cheering him on and ultimately bolstering his confidence, thereby adding to the momentum of his success.

Whenever we were around him, we would bask in the glory of his triumphs, which were a product of his hard work, and we would receive some freebies and handouts for it. After Leonard broke into the wholesale side of Mbare Musika – getting ahead of his competition by cutting deals with agricultural producers at source – his new-found venture would keep him away from home most of the time.

On the occasions he went out looking for produce for his wholesale market business, Sekuru Edward and I would stay behind, doing chores assigned to us by Sekuru Samson. We continued our craft of building scotch carts, fixing cars and repairing pots and pans at Sekuru Samson's makeshift workshop. Due to the synergies that existed between his wholesale and retail businesses, Leonard did not immediately let go of his retail market stall at Mbare Musika, the venue of our chance meeting, once he ventured out as a timber merchant, the details of which are the subject of this instalment.

Because Sekuru Edward and I were already committed working for Sekuru Samson at his workshop, Leonard hired another of our relatives, Karakadzai Musasa, to keep his retail market stall running in his absence. His roaring success would set tongues wagging even within family circles, eliciting all manner of sobriquets.

One of the monikers that did not sit well with me was Mupambepfumi (plunderer of wealth), a label that commonly referred to white colonialists. I found it despicable to call a man as hard working as Leonard by any other name, other than that which he was given at birth, because I had witnessed him build his fortune from scratch with my own eyes and without resorting to shortcuts. The irony of it was that, it was mainly those who expected freebies from him who, when they didn't get as much as they expected, chose to call him names. A good number of family members expected him to share his new found wealth and success with them simply because they were his relatives. I had seen Leonard with nothing to his name and I also saw him build his business and wealth from the ground up, and not one day did I ever begrudge him for his success. Whatever he gave me back then, he did out of his own volition and for this, I remain truly grateful. But more so, for me, it was his spirit of hard work and the 'can do' attitude which he had in abundance that inspired me to want to one day become my own boss. As I watched him transform from a person asking for accommodation in our VW home to becoming the owner of a very beautiful house in Sentosa, it dawned on me that if I worked hard, I too, could one day follow in his footsteps and also become successful.

When Leonard had worked his way up to become one of the most successful Koronyeras on the wholesale side of Mbare Musika, I thought I had seen success, not knowing that more was still to come. Before the word Koronyera found its way into the Shona word stock where it refers to a crooked character, it was a bastardization of the word Colonials.

The word Koronyera became a derogatory term given to traders on the wholesale side of Mbare Musika, so named because they behaved like the white colonials who gained infamy for exploiting natives by dictating terms and conditions in about every sphere of their lives. Makoronyeras were not open to price negotiations, once they had set a price for a farmer's produce, there was no going back, which made them unpopular with farmers, the very producers of the goods they bought for resale.

Just as well Leonard would outgrow being a Koronyera after he came across a gilt-edged opportunity through the wife of his cousin Peter Marwenze from Mutare. This is how it happened. Leonard's grandmother, Mwazvionei, had a sister by the name Mwadini, who had one child, a son, Peter Marwenze. Mwazvionei and Mwadini were sisters to my grandfather, Samuel Chati.

For all his working life, Peter Marwenze worked for the Bulawayo-headquartered Rhodesia Railways (RR), a state-owned enterprise whose foundation was laid when Bechuanaland Railway Company (BRC) was created in May 1893 and renamed Rhodesia Railways, (RR) in July 1899.

After many years of distinguished service to the rail operator, Peter retired from what was now National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ), investing his hard-earned pension in a plot just outside the mountainous city of Mutare, near the scenic Christmas Pass, at a place called Toronto.

Peter's wife, Mai Marwenze, had started a small timber merchant business, buying and selling wood products from Imbeza Forestry in Penhalonga, which was not very far from their plot. Having been brought up in a village near Imbeza Forestry, Mai Marwenze was well-versed with the timber industry and was therefore, able to use her knowledge to supplement their family income buying and selling timber.

In order to grow her timber business, she knew she needed a bigger market, with Harare being her holy grail. She sought advice from Leonard, who at the time, was flying high at the country's busiest market – buying and selling farm produce from most agricultural areas of the country. The Marwenzes would form a partnership with Leonard in an effort to grow their footprint beyond Mutare and this initially worked well for both parties.

However, after closing a few deals, Leonard quickly realised how profitable the business was and chose to opt out of the partnership branching out on his own, and would go on to become incredibly successful, surpassing his earlier achievements as a trader of farm produce. Leonard would eventually abandon his farm produce business to concentrate solely on his new venture, that of being a Timber Merchant.

He negotiated to rent a sizable piece of land from a Jewish entrepreneur, Oscar Kaufman, which he developed into a massive timber yard making significant improvements within a short space of time, much to the delight of Kaufman. He erected state-of-the-art ablution facilities and an elongated roofed structure to protect the timber from going out of shape as a result of getting wet when it rained.

At the time, Kaufman was a household name in Mbare, owning a huge real estate portfolio. Spelt differently according to sound, and depending on one's locality, there are several variations of the same family name on letters, deeds, wills, old bibles, church records, and other documents, amongst them Khoufmann, Kaufmann, Koufman, Kowfman, Cofman, Caughman, Koughman, Cuffman, and Kaffman.

The English would favour Coffman while the Germans preferred Kaufman, which became popular in Rhodesia before it became Zimbabwe. Oscar, the patriarch of the Kaufman family, was part of the Jewish community that were attracted to Rhodesia by its immense business and marketing opportunities, either through word of mouth or through reading the Rhodesian Recorder.

Amongst other prominent Jewish names to immigrate to Rhodesia during that period were the Margolius, Gollan, Nurick, Davis, Simmons, Shapiro, Rubenstein, Nathanson, Boyer, Cohen, Susman, Gordon, Landau, Rappaport, Pichanick, Hochschild and Goldbergs. Oscar Kaufman had been the earliest from his family tree to immigrate to Rhodesia in the nineteenth century in order to engage in national pioneering activities such as transportation systems, mining, hotel corporations and general trading.

At some point Kaufman was enlisted, along with thirty nine others of Jewish descent, into the Colony forces, as Rhodesian Reserve Volunteers during the Second World War, where he served as a Private. In business, Kaufman had started off operating a wholesale and trading business, which he then merged with that of a Romanian immigrant, Charleik Salomon, renaming their merged company to C. Salomon and Kaufman (Private) Limited.

After a serious disagreement, Charleik's son, Jack Salomon, sold out to Oscar Kaufman. Apparently, Jack liquidated all of his assets in Rhodesia and sent the proceeds out of the country. Oscar Kaufman would subsequently rename his business, Kaufman Sons and Co. (Ltd).

Leonard and the Kaufman family built a strong, long standing relationship. How he managed to curry favour with the Kaufman family, in whose name the Kaufman Centre in Magaba derives its name, remains a mystery, more so considering the differences in religion and cultures between the Jews and the natives.

To Leonard's advantage, the piece of land he rented from Kaufman was directly opposite Jarzin Supermarket and next to Mbare Hostels, and was always bustling with activity. Along with Amato Supermarket, Jarzin had gained popularity with African communities, bringing its competitively priced products closer to their doorstep.

To further popularise their brand, Jarzin Supermarket captured the nation's imagination with their early morning radio programme, the Jarzin Man, famed for giving-away shopping vouchers and hampers to lucky early shoppers who correctly answered questions posed by the show's host. The programme became an instant hit with shoppers who would stampede its outlets to stand a chance of walking away with a prize. Some of the finest Disk Jockeys to emerge in Zimbabwe during that time, amongst them Wellington Mbofana, Forbes Kahari, Admire Taderera, and Lazarus Tembo, earned their stripes as hosts of the Jarzin Man show.

As the Jarzin Supermarket prospered, so did my nephew Leonard's new business venture on the opposite side. With the attainment of independence in 1980, which sparked a boom in construction activities, timber merchants hit a purple patch.

In order to improve the standards of living, the black majority government moved quickly to change city by-laws, removing restrictions that had prevented those with core houses in high-density suburbs such as Highfield, Mufakose, Mabvuku, Tafara and others from extending their houses.

Most of the families in these suburbs would find prices in traditional shops such as Johnson and Fletcher (J&F), DS Timbers and PG Industries (PGI) way beyond their reach, thereby creating a huge market for upcoming businesses like Leonard's, which he named LB Timbers (Pvt) Ltd.

Harold Clarkson Fletcher and George Johnson founded J&F in 1897 by opening a consulting and general engineering business under the name Johnson & Fletcher, with branches in Bulawayo, Salisbury and Beira. After independence, J&F, along with DS Timbers, would become subsidiaries of PGI, which started off in the City of Kings (Bulawayo) as a glass company way back in 1949, which is where the merged entity got its name Plate Glass (PG).

It was against such giants, that small time timber merchants like Leonard, were competing. Luckily for him and others like him, instead of patronising the big names in the industry, families in high density suburbs chose to buy their roofing timber from non-traditional merchants that were springing up all over the place like mushrooms. Leonard's timber business became hugely successful, riding on volumes from the lower-end of the market. It helped that most of those on the lower end of the market could not afford to buy ready-made roofing timber, from established players, choosing instead to buy it in pieces that would be put together on site by carpenters, thus helping them to cut costs.

Once his relationship with the Marwenzes went South for whatever reason, Leonard would opt out and cut a deal with Rukotso Timbers (Private) Limited, who had a logging contract with the owners of timber plantations in the Eastern Highlands. This gave him access to an unlimited supply of timber that ensured a constant supply to his growing market.

The industry's value chain is built around timber plantations and is dominated by players such as the Forestry Commission, Allied Timbers (Private) Limited, Border Timbers Limited (BTL), the Wattle Company Limited and Hunyani Forests. The Forestry Commission which is by far the dominant player in the industry started off in 1923 as the Forest Division of the Department of Agriculture. Since then, it has remained a significant player in timber plantations, sawmilling, manufacturing, and marketing.

It was, however, not until 2002 that Allied Timbers (AT) was born out of the commercial division of the Forestry Commission, becoming a standalone enterprise in October 2007. AT focuses on the export and domestic markets, where it offers roof trusses, doors, treated poles, boards and other timber products.

The Wattle Company Limited is the oldest private player in the industry with its roots stretching as far back as 1945 when it was founded as the Rhodesian Wattle Co Ltd, with the primary objective of developing a wattle extract industry in Rhodesia. Once a subsidiary of the London and Rhodesian Mining and Land Company, otherwise known as Lonrho – at one time led by maverick tycoon Tiny Rowland – the Wattle Company Limited has since been overtaken by BTL, in terms of market share.

Today, BTL is ranked the largest private forestry company in Zimbabwe. The former subsidiary of Anglo American Corporation, was incorporated in 1979 through the amalgamation of three companies, namely Border Eastern Forest Estates, Renfee Timbers (Private) Limited and the Forestry Management Services.

While these and other big players dominated the markets in the 1970s and 1980s, they allowed small players to take care of the lower-end of the market. As a result, small mills such as Rukotso Timbers dutifully filled the niche left by some of the large companies that were aiming for big orders, especially that of exports.

Named after the spectacular Mt Rukotso, one of the northern most peaks of the Nyanga mountain range, punching the sky at 2405 metres and overlooking communal lands in the Eastern Highlands, Rukotso Timbers would become Leonard's primary source for timber. Because of its favourable climatic conditions for growing timber, the Eastern Highlands is resident to the majority of the timber plantations for softwoods (mainly pines) and hardwoods (mainly eucalyptus) providing Leonard with a constant supply.

The timber industry can be traced as far back as 1908. As the colonists drove native communities off their lands onto unproductive lands that were characteristically rocky, sandy and dry – parcelling amongst themselves the choicest farms – the timber and furniture industry became one of the earliest sectors to emerge. Having assumed ownership of the forests that had for years sustained the indigenous populations, they started off by exploiting indigenous hardwoods in western Matabeleland.

The increasing demand for timber, for construction, furniture and mining industries and railway sleepers for the expanding Rhodesian Railways network, soon outweighed the supply, as indigenous hardwoods were slow growing. This resulted in the colonists introducing fast-growing exotic trees from Australia, giving birth to timber plantations in areas such as Lupane, Binga, Nkayi and Tsholotsho. Unlike your indigenous hardwoods which take up to 150 years to reach maturity, the exotic eucalyptus, pines and wattle trees mature early, enabling the forests to meet the growing demand for timber. By 1920, an estimated 1,200 hectares of timber had been planted.

In 1923, the Forest Division of the Department of Agriculture (now Forestry Commission) established plantings at Mtao Forest, near Mvuma. More plantations were subsequently established between Fort Victoria (now Masvingo) and Salisbury (now Harare) and near Gwelo (now Gweru).

Large scale pine tree plantings were pioneered by the Forestry Commission at Stapleford Forest in 1926. This positive afforestation trend continued in the 1930s and 1940s, with wattle being introduced in the eastern districts during this period. By 1950, about 25,000 hectares had been planted by the Forestry Commission and other private players, with the decade 1950 to 1960 witnessing major expansion for Rhodesian tree plantations which totalled 83,000 hectares by 1960, split as: 37,000 hectares of pines, 28,000 hectares of wattle and 18,000 hectares of gum trees.

Since then, the industry has never looked back. An estimated forty percent or about 15,624,000 hectares of Zimbabwe is forested. Of this, 5.1 percent is classified as primary forest and is the most biodiverse and carbon dense form of forest. The country has 108,000 hectares of planted or exotic forests.

At one point, the timber and furniture companies accounted for three percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product and it employed over fifty thousand workers around the country before the industry was disrupted by the indiscriminate cutting down of trees that followed the land reforms in 2000 which saw huge tracts of the plantations being destroyed. By 2002, over 7,800 hectares had been lost to emerging settlements, causing the rest of the industry to catch a cold.

As Leonard became an expert in the timber trade, he was able to improve efficiencies in his processes, landing his product at Mbare Musika at competitive prices and within reach of his targeted market, which comprised mainly of African men with big dreams of developing their retirement homes back in the villages. There was also a thriving market of men and women who wanted to extend their core houses in the ghetto in order to reflect their changed economic circumstances and their status in society.

Once he had fixed his supply chain, the sky was the limit for Leonard who built up a solid business, opening branches in suburbs such as Glen View and Budiriro. The location of his timber yard in Mbare made it easily accessible as it was within shouting distance of Mbare Musika Bus Terminus, for those travelling to both their urban and rural homes.

Sekuru Samson would also find Leonard's timber yard a strategic exhibition park for his scotch carts as he predicted that people wanting to buy timber for the rural homes they were building were also likely to need a scotch cart. Consequently, we made more scotch carts and sold them through Leonard's timber yard over and above our market stall at Mbare Musika.

As the years went by, Leonard would raise his stock from a boy growing up on farms in Odzi to a serious entrepreneur, culminating in him getting married to beautiful Sybil, young sister to Godfrey Mubaiwa, my primary schoolmate. This added excitement to our relationship, making us one big family with the Mubaiwas.

It was, therefore, unfortunate that Leonard would untimely be called for his higher rewards, taking with him all his knowledge and business acumen. I will forever remain grateful, for the wealth of knowledge I gained from my close proximity with this consummate entrepreneur. It was from Leonard, that I learned the efficacy of eliminating the middlemen, just as he did when he sourced his timber direct from Rukotso Timbers.

The over-riding key to the success of Leonard's businesses, was his innate understanding of providing convenience to the customer and enabling them to get the best that money could buy; a philosophy that cuts across everything that we do at Nyaradzo today– steeped in our belief that success is about delivering superior quality in your niche. This only became possible because I was amenable to learning at the feet of Leonard, the doyen of hustling.

Acknowledgements:

https://www.zimbabweforestrymagazine.com/article/zimbabwe-forestry-industry-the-past-present-and-future

http://www.rhodesianstudycircle.org.uk