Connecting the dots...

Volume 34

18 February 2022



Philip Mataranyika
Nyaradzo Group, CEO

Follow us on:

NYARADZO GROUP

www.nyaradzo.co.zw

Service • Strength • Solutions

Putting family interests ahead of my own...

As I progressed with studies for my "O" Levels at Rukweza Secondary School, I was kept up-to-date on the goings-on in Harare through my associates and from reading newspapers that I would buy from Mukada Service Station in Nyazura, a good number of them at a discounted price.

With my finger on the pulse of what was happening in the big city, I would get to know that all was not well with Mother, who, along with three of my siblings – Thomas, Donald and Garikayi – had stayed put in their lodgings at Magaba, despite being down and out. Apart from Mother and my younger brothers, no less than six other relatives shared this accommodation with them. It was one big room during the day, but when nightfall came, it would be divided by a curtain to create two rooms, giving a modicum of privacy. The women would sleep on one side of the divide while the men and my little brothers slept on the other.

Mother had valued the importance of the extended family system from an early age, which she had learnt from her father. When they were growing up in Bvumbe, he had accommodated a good number of their relatives from Mutambara where her grandfather Chati, had run away from, fearing for his life during the selection process of a new chief.

Back then, the selection of a chief was a dog eat dog affair, with those in line accusing each other of witchcraft, resulting in scuffles that sometimes led to serious injury or even death. It was during such a time that Chati, father to my grandfather, Samuel, whom we would be told was in line to ascend to the throne, decided to run away after a tip-off that he would be assassinated.

Chati would raise his children in Makoni as a vassal of the chief, even when he was royalty back in his village in Mutambara. His son Samuel would become very successful in a foreign land, attracting the attention of those who had stayed back home in Mutambara. Once Samuel had achieved some success, relatives from Mutambara would come visiting, with some of them choosing to stay with them at their home in Bvumbe.

Later on, Mother would do the same without much to her name, giving sanctuary to both her paternal and maternal relatives, rolling out the red carpet for any of them whenever they came calling. On her maternal side, the Mhowas whose village in Seke Communal Lands, is less than sixty kilometres from Harare, found it easy to hop on and off the Modern Express buses that serviced their village. Because Magaba is a walking distance to Mbare Musika from which they boarded buses and alighted when they came to Harare, they would put up for the night at their niece's place. Others chose to stay, enjoying her hospitality.

Mother lived the axiom that says a good turn deserves another, apart from her good heart. When her marriage collapsed in the seventies, after a much younger competitor stole Father's heart, family and friends alike all came out in solidarity with her.

Her elder sister, Cinderella, together with her husband – Ernest Nyamayedenga Kamwara – deserve special mention for being among the do-gooders that came to her rescue when she needed a roof over her head as she began picking up the broken pieces and charting a new course. The Kamwaras' had offered Mother a place to stay at their home, Number 15, Nhuta Close, Mufakose, in her time of need. When she was back on her feet, she had moved out to stay on her own in Chitungwiza.

Thereafter, I don't recall Mother ever staying alone with her children. If she was not housing relatives from her maternal side, it would be her kith and kin on the paternal side or both. Even after her catering business hit a rough patch in Chitungwiza after John Sisk and Son offloaded hordes of workers whose patronage sustained her work, Mother would still find joy in opening her doors to the needy, sharing the little that she had.

Regardless of the dip in her fortunes that led her to relocate from Chitungwiza to Harare's oldest suburb of Mbare, where she would stay with her childhood friend, Abigail Muropa at her flat in Matererini Hostels, Mother had continued to be welcoming, especially to her brothers' and sisters' children whom she would look after as if they were her own. For her, it was never about the size of the home, but how warm and welcoming it was to all its occupants, which made all the difference.

From her mother, Jessica Mhowa's side, she had been re-joined by Uncle Isaac Mhowa with whom we had stayed when she was running her catering business in Chitungwiza. After Mother's business hit it's rocky patch, Sekuru Isaac had gone back to their village in Seke.

That it was Sekuru Isaac's second coming – this time to conditions that were far worse than before his retreat to Seke communal lands – showed how desperate his situation was. He was, however, not the only one who needed a foothold on which to climb out of poverty.

Tete Sarah Kamwara also stayed with Mother; she was sister to Ernest Nyamayedenga Kamwara, husband to Mother's elder sister – Cinderella – who had sadly passed away in June 1976 after battling asthma.

Having reached a dead-end, working for his father at Mubaira Growth Point, Sekuru Samson Musasa's son, Edward, with whom we had stayed at Mbare Musika as the clock was ticking towards Zimbabwe's self-rule in 1980, had also retraced his footsteps back to the bright lights of Harare and moved in with his aunt at Magaba.

Packed like sardines, they would happily cook, eat and spend time together before retreating to bed in that one big room with a curtain playing room divider, separating men from women. The ablution facilities were two big rooms at the far end of the hostel that served as toilets and showers, one for males and one for females. Each of the rooms had toilets down one side and showers along the other.

While exceeding the room's carrying capacity would have been considered a ticking time bomb, health-wise, all the extra hands helped Mother with her hustles, even though the business was heading southwards. For her upkeep and that of all those she looked after, Mother had secured a vending stall in Nenyere Beerhall where she served standard dishes, mainly rice, Sadza or potatoes, served with chicken, beef or pork, with an option of chicken offal.

Unfortunately for her, as the country's economy began to feel the heat, so did her business. What used to be a thriving hustle had started to lose its shine as thousands of people were moving into the informal sector to eke out an honest living after job opportunities in industry became few and far between.

Not many had seen it coming! When the former British colony attained its independence in 1980, there was a very small informal economy to talk about due to stringent colonial laws that were in place, before Ian Smith and his regime were shown the door. Also, the rural-to-urban migration was tightly controlled such that for the most part one would only be allowed to move from the rural to urban areas after they could prove that they had secured a job.

In addition, the formal economy employed predominantly men; hence the few women who followed their husbands to the cities were the ones who were involved in the informal sector, mainly selling basic wares and food. Back then, the informal economy accounted for less than ten percent of the labour force, unlike today where it makes up to eighty-five percent of the country's total number of workers.

The state-of-affairs at the time allowed Mother and other women made of sterner stuff to get their hands dirty and keep the lights on. Because the unemployment rate in urban areas was fairly low, these women had a huge market for their products.

The advent of majority rule would see the removal of travel restrictions, resulting in most unemployed in rural areas pouring into urban centres in search of greener pastures. From thirteen percent in the 1960s, the urban population grew to twenty-three percent by 1982, before stretching to thirty percent by 1990.

It also didn't help that the country's economy had started bearing the brunt of expansionary policies introduced in the early 1980s. The policies had been introduced to help multitudes of black people acquire free education and gain access to healthcare facilities without having to dip their fingers into their pockets.

As the economy stuttered, it threw scores of workers onto the streets at a time when those who were emerging from the education system were increasingly finding it difficult to get jobs. With the number of employable people growing at a much faster pace than the availability of jobs, the informal sector became the only source of refuge for them, worsening competition for my mother, who started living from hand to mouth.

It never stopped raining for Mother! After Father's passing in August 1982, any hopes she may have had of reconciling with him were now dead and buried, literally! Father's passing had also meant that there was no more sharing of legal guardianship of us children. The buck now stopped with Mother and her alone!

The only other person whom she could have looked up to was Johane, my elder brother, who was not having it any easier himself. After the termination of my contract at John Sisk and Son in 1982, Johane had survived the chop, albeit by the skin of his teeth. But once they had put the final touches to the Maths and Computer Department at the University of Zimbabwe and completed the project, this would mark the end of the road for him.

Having lost his job at John Sisk and Son, Johane was back to job hunting while staying at Uncle Tongai Mataranyika's house at Number 2195, Egypt, Highfield. It could not get any worse.

Against such a background, I had long made up my mind that even if I were to pass my "O" Level examinations with flying colours, it would have been selfish of me to proceed to "A" Levels for several reasons.

First, there were not many schools that went beyond "O" Level that time. The few that offered "A" Level classes were mostly mission schools, that apart from being far from Rukweza, were only open to those whose parents had deep enough pockets to afford the boarding fees and school uniforms.

While the number of secondary schools had increased by more than five-hundred percent by 1985, most rural secondary schools found themselves unable to offer "A" Level classes due to inadequate resources and lack of qualified teachers to run the programmes.

Upon reaching "O" Level, it was the end of the road for most of us – no matter how good we were in class. In 1985, of the almost 497,000 pupils enrolled in high school, only around 3,200 proceeded to Lower Six.

Contributing to my decision not to proceed to "A" Level was also the need to earn a living and be able to assist Mother who was finding it difficult to afford a square meal a day, let alone raising school fees for my brothers.

I also didn't want to overburden Uncle Tongai whose plate was already full with other responsibilities that were taking a toll on his business at Mawoneesa Shopping Centre.

For the sake of Mother and my siblings, I resolved to look for a job immediately after writing my exams so I could earn an income. So when the third term came, I had no shadow of doubt in my mind that I had to put the interests of the family ahead of my own.

Exam time came, and after writing all the papers, I felt that they had been fair, giving me a hunch that I had made it past that hurdle. The Sunday after our exams, I went to church to officially inform them that I was leaving Rukweza to return to the city.

I also used it as an opportunity to thank our lay-leader and other church elders for the support and guidance they had given me as president of the Youth Fellowship and a member of the church.

Although I was eligible to run for another term, my future was elsewhere, besides, it was time to be with my siblings and at the same time helping Mother raise them to be responsible men. I also had no regrets leaving the fellowship, having seen the talent and depth we had developed within, which I had no doubt would take the organ to another level.

As per the Youth Fellowship's tradition, its leadership is still chosen in more or less the same fashion adopted by the founding fathers many years ago. Ideally, a member who is active in the Youth Fellowship has to be nominated as a candidate for a committee position by a member of the organ, citing reasons why they think they are suitable for the role.

Elections by secret ballot or raising of hands are then conducted and a majority vote secures a seat in the committee. For local church and circuit/charge levels, elections are held annually, while they are held after two years for district and conference levels. The same candidates can be re-elected for unlimited office terms even in the same position. Pastors at different levels preside over election sessions.

Whilst it was certainly not easy to say goodbye to the Church's leadership and my colleagues, it was time to move on. I also quite honestly, missed being in Harare, having spent almost two years without setting foot there as I was entirely focused on my studies. Besides, I didn't have the money to be globetrotting for no reason, even if I wanted to.

Come Monday, I boarded a Mushandirapamwe bus – owned by George Tawengwa Chirume (now late) – which was to to take me back to the capital to start over on a new page. I planned to start job hunting while staying at Number 2195, Egypt, Highfield. While there, I reconnected with some of my old friends.

I also touched base with Elijah Mberi, son of my aunt, Calista, on Father's side. Calista, who was married to Ephrage Mberi, was Father's younger sister, whose marriage to Ephrage was blessed with seven sons, namely Jonah, Elijah, Cephas, and Patrick Chamu, Tongai and Shingi. A self-made man who came from a poor family, Elijah had found a job as a general worker. Once he had gained employment, Elijah had embarked on a self-improvement journey, reading for a course in sales and marketing. By the time I finished my "O" levels, Elijah had risen within the ranks at National Foods and was now working as a salesman.

Elijah was renowned for his persuasive techniques, immense talent and a dynamic personality. For his tenacity and hard work, his job came with a company car, a rare privilege back in the day. Named after the Biblical prophet, Elijah was another of my childhood heroes. I idolised him due to his work ethic and never say die spirit. From him, I learnt the principle of hard-work, commitment and determination to get to the top.

In record-breaking time, Elijah had risen against all odds and succeeded in his line of work. I stood amazed at his tenacity and vowed that as I embarked onto my journey of independence and sacrifice for the betterment of my family, I would follow in Elijah's footsteps and face all the challenges that came my way with determination, courage and grace.