

THE KOCHIA CHRONICLES

*Systemic Challenges and the
Foundations of Social Innovation*

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#9

Mzungu Memories: A Conversation over Busaa

“This is one of our most unique cultural contributions to the entire world,” Odhiambo pulled out the reed straw from his mouth and proclaimed. “Where else can you find a food that is also a drink? It fills your stomach, gives you energy and makes you feel very happy!”

“No! No! No! Odhiambo,” Reverend Ndiege scolded, “Busaa is surely a unique drink, but don't confuse the stimulation you get from it with real happiness. There is only one path to true happiness and that is through Jesus Christ.”

“Come on Mzee,” Odhiambo challenged the man of God. “Tell me, don't you feel good when you drink soda? You are on your third big bottle and I can see the fourth one has its cap removed and is patiently waiting for you.”

“I love soda.” The Reverend smiled. “But it does not have alcohol in it. Your drink, on the other hand, contains alcohol and is known to transform saintly men into sinners.”

“Let me tell you Reverend,” Odhiambo drawled, “when we were teenagers, we would drink milk with a special vegetation, three four, five, big glasses and then we would have so much fun. Please don't tell me that milk and grass are also alcoholic substances!”

“I am not arguing with you, at least not when you are in an inebriated state,” the Reverend nodded his head and shrugged in mock anger.

The entire group chuckled as Odhiambo continued his stories about getting high and doing silly things when he was younger.

Phillip's friends and neighbors had gathered at the Lake View Hotel in Homa Bay to celebrate the success of his brown sugar and fertilizer businesses and his engagement to Wambui. The attendees were very happy to have him back in their midst in Homa Bay. Phillip's brothers, Paul and Peter, had sponsored the party. The Lake View Hotel stood right on the shore of Lake Victoria, a short walk from the Homa Bay market and matatu stage. The owner, John Ouma, was from Kochia and very supportive of activities that would benefit his home area. While the cost of tea was 60 Shillings for everyone else, Empower Kochia Group members enjoyed a discounted rate of 30 Shillings. More importantly, unlike other restaurants, bars, and cafés, John would let them sit in his restaurant and discuss their business for as long as they wanted. Over time, Lake View had become the default meeting place for the group members, whether it was to discuss projects or just socialize with their friends. John Ouma had closed his shutters to the general public for the day so as to devote his full attention to the party.

Paul and Peter had earlier considered hosting a traditional party at Peter's homestead. Okello had agreed to provide his music system and the big loudspeakers. The plan was to slaughter two goats and arrange soda, beer, and chang'aa for the guests. Chang'aa is a popular spirit made by distilling corn or bananas. It was banned by the government for a long time because of the frequent deaths and blindness it caused due to methanol poisoning. Such accidents had increased in frequency because unscrupulous bootleggers adulterated it by adding stolen jet fuel, embalming fluid, or even battery acid. The reason for increasing its potency was to meet the market demand for low-cost drinks that provide a good 'kick'. The Kenyan government legalized chang'aa in 2010 in a mostly unsuccessful effort to take business away from such bootleggers and attract formal companies with better quality control to explore the market. The big companies could not compete with the informal players in providing a potent drink at a very low price. Women in various parts of the country held demonstrations against the legalization and wide availability of chang'aa claiming that their husbands, brothers and sons were addicted to the vicious drink. While most of the chang'aa addicts were men, there was a gradual increase in the number of women too. The protestors pointed out the subsidiary impact of the drink, in terms of lost livelihoods, frayed relationships, and risky sexual activities that exacerbated the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Sister Phoebe had led several such demonstrations in Kochia. Eventually, she realized that most of the chang'aa producers were poor women trying to eke out a living. Making the spirit illegal would just drive



The Lake View Hotel

the production and sale underground and actually make it more dangerous. The consumers, mostly men, would take more money from their wives or mothers to buy the illegal brew. At the same time, the police and local mafia would end up with a substantial portion of the chang'aa producer's meager earnings. While Sister Phoebe abandoned her campaign to shut down chang'aa dens, she maintained her tough stance against such places operating near schools. After just three weeks of protests and meetings, chang'aa dens near schools were shut down, or rather, moved to farther locations. Sister Phoebe expected her friends to set a good example for the relatively uneducated citizens of Kochia, Ngegu and nearby areas. When she heard about Peter's plans of serving chang'aa at the party, she immediately marched to his place and scolded him until he backed down from the plan.

Once the chang'aa was off the menu, the loud music seemed rather pointless to Peter. Also, Phillip liked fish much more so than goat. Thus the goat, chang'aa and loud music plans were cancelled in favor of a more sophisticated get-together at the Lake View Hotel. John Ouma took it upon himself to source the freshest Tilapia fish and cook it into a stew as well as fry it. It would be served with salad, potato fries, and sukumawiki. While chang'aa was struck off the menu, the attendees could still enjoy soda, beer and the traditional alcoholic drink, busaa. While negotiating with Sister Phoebe, Peter had struck a compromise by replacing chang'aa with this milder, safer, and more nutritious drink. Busaa is a fermented porridge made from sorghum, maize, or millet flour. It is as much of a nutritious food as an alcoholic drink and is served during social and religious ceremonies. Busaa is heated in an earthen pot over a small fire. The drinkers dip their reed straws into this common pot. Typically, a group would consume a few of these pots during a drinking and chatting session. Peter's aunt was specially invited from Siaya to prepare the busaa and Obongo's deceased father's ancient brewing pot was used to grace the occasion. Paul, Peter, Odhiambo, Phillip, Obongo, Okello, Reverend Ndiege, Chief Achieng, the fisheries officer, Benson and a few others pulled up chairs outside the hotel to sip their busaa and exchange stories.

"I like beer and I love whisky, but nothing beats the taste of busaa," the fisheries officer remarked. "Especially when you are sitting with friends and talking about life – the good times and the bad times."

"You are absolutely right," Chief Achieng from the SUV Foundation nodded in agreement. "Whisky and vodka is served in all our parties and we have beer for every official dinner. While I don't mind partaking in some of it, busaa is the best drink. Busaa makes me feel very relaxed. I feel at home."



A Conversation over Busaa

“You have beer with every dinner!” Peter exclaimed. “That is a lot of beer and a lot of money!”

“No. Not every dinner,” Chief Achieng clarified. “We have very many meetings, seminars and training events that culminate in a group dinner. It is customary to serve beer during these events. Besides, I don't have to pay for them, the foundation pays for it.”

“Isn't that a waste of money? Shouldn't the foundation money be spent on projects that help the people instead?” Obongo asked pointedly.

“Yes, that is a valid argument,” Chief Achieng beamed. “But you see, if we invite people to training events, we have to feed them and keep them happy. Moreover, the cost of soda, tea, and beer is about the same at the hotels where we host these events.”

“Why do you host your training workshops at such expensive places then?” Obongo argued.

“I don't make those decisions. My boss's boss decides that,” Chief Achieng explained. “These mzungus have their own way of doing things. After having worked with the foundation for over ten years, I can follow their thinking most of the times. But sometimes, hey, they do things that leave me completely confused.”

“There is a reason they are called mzungus,” Odhiambo quipped. “They just go round and round in circles. Nothing has changed since our forefathers' times – they were mzungus then and are mzungus now – confused people wandering aimlessly.”

“Is that true?” Peter asked, “I never realized that the word ‘mzungu’ is derived from ‘zungu!’”

“Yes,” Obongo said, “the first mzungus were actually explorers and they went round and round trying to find and climb tall mountains and locate the sources of our rivers. Our ancestors never quite understood the purpose of all these harsh journeys and called them mzungus, or the confused people who wander aimlessly.”

“Our foundation is working on many projects related to renewable energy, water purification and other things,” Chief Achieng continued. “The mzungus all have their heart in the right place. They want to reduce poverty and improve the life of our people. But...but, I don't understand some of the funding decisions they make. For example, three years back, we received a proposal for a solar power project in Kericho. This community was very well-organized. Twenty of them pooled their money together, rented some land, grew tomatoes and other vegetables and sold them in the local market. In two years, they had saved enough money to purchase large solar panels for domestic lighting. Through some contacts, they found a reliable agency in Nairobi to come to Kericho and install

the solar panels. They used their own money to buy the solar lanterns. However, these people did not know that they also needed a charge controller and batteries. Now, they were short of KSh. 40,000 and came to us for assistance. I was very impressed with all the work they had done. I made the mistake of assuring them that the foundation will help them bridge the gap.

“So, I went to my boss and he made me write a ten-page proposal. I prepared it by the next day and expected the KSh. 40,000 check to be written in a day more. My boss forwarded the proposal to our head office in Washington. They were very impressed and dispatched two people from Washington to Kericho to visit the community and study the project. Three weeks later, I escorted two mzungu ladies to Kericho. They stayed there for five days and interviewed all the group members. They went on a two-day safari and even learned how to make ugali. They were very excited about the group's leadership and congratulated them many times. Every day, some group members were invited to have dinner with us. Surely, I thought, on the last day they would provide the funding to the group and inaugurate the project. Then, on the last day, they told the community members that they will report back to their boss on how pro-active and advanced this group was. They expressed their confidence that the project would certainly get funded, and maybe they would initiate more projects with the group. The group members were not sure whether to be happy or sad. They looked at me and I just looked at the heavens above. All the group members brought some gifts – packets of local tea or coffee or maize flour for the visitors. They were hoping that the funds will soon be released and they will have light at home.

“I got a missed call from the group members every day but did not hear from the headquarters for two full months. Finally, they sent me a 264-page report about the Kericho project. It took me a week to read it. The report again congratulated the group and recognized it as an exemplar of grassroots activism, entrepreneurial passion and excellent organization. The report concluded that the unique work and needs of the Kericho group called for a special grant category. They further recommended that this new funding vehicle must be designed and implemented within one year and the Kericho group must be invited to apply for it soon thereafter. I was very upset when I read this report. I did not know what to tell my friends in Kericho. My credibility was at stake here and so was the foundation's – if only the mzungus would realize that!

“The next morning, there was great jubilation in the office. Apparently, the two mzungu ladies had indicated to their boss that our

furniture was a little shabby and computers were getting old. The head office had released KSh. 2 million to purchase new furniture and computers for our eight-person staff. A second email informed us that the two of them were returning to Kenya in a week's time to interact more with the Kericho community and develop the new grant program. Surely, I thought, if the mzungu ladies and I go back to Kericho, we will all get lynched – if not physically, definitely in spirit. I ran to my boss and explained the whole situation. He insisted that he had no discretionary funds whatsoever. As per the new rules, every single expense had to be approved by Washington. He assured me that providing KSh. 40,000 to the Kericho group would never get approved since it was in the pipeline already. I argued with him for an hour. I requested him to discuss this problem with headquarters but he refused. I lost my appetite and my sleep over this issue. The Kericho group had now moved on from missed calls to phone calls on a daily basis. I kept falsely assuring them that the funds would be released soon.

“Then on the fourth day, as I was slouched in my chair pondering my upcoming trip to Kericho, I got an idea. I ran to my boss and requested KSh. 42,000 from him for a therapeutic rattan cane chair with a straight back. I insisted that my doctor had advised me to use only this particular chair that applies pressure at certain points and dissuades people from slouching. My boss was a little shocked by the extremely high cost. He pointed out that my colleagues had selected trendy leather-backed and well-cushioned chairs from Nakumatt at lower costs. I stood firm on my demand and rationalized that a traditional bonesetter designed these exclusive chairs with precise pressure points, and hence they were very expensive. Finally, he relented and agreed to release the funds. It took three more days to get the advance in hand. I took the next matatu to Kericho and went straight to the group leader's home. I handed him KSh 40,000 and made him promise me that this must be kept a secret. I said, ‘This is a special kind of grant. Just say that the group came up with the funds to complete the project. Once the foundation is convinced that you are independent problem-solvers, they will initiate a much bigger project here in Kericho. Then we will benefit much more. If they find out that I gave you the money, the project is over.’ The group leader promised to do as I said.

“Then I took the overnight bus back home from Kericho. As soon as the market opened, I purchased a cane chair and tied three small cane baskets to its back to make it look authentic and therapeutic. I paid KSh. 1,500 for the chair and the three little baskets and an additional KSh. 500 to the amused man to make a receipt for KSh 42,000. My colleagues

hooted when I carried the chair to my office. They joked about it for the next few months. It was actually a very uncomfortable experience sitting on that chair for eight to ten hours every day. While I was able to remove those silly baskets after two weeks by claiming that those pressure points had been fixed, I had to use the chair itself for two years more. However, I would rather sit on an uncomfortable chair for ten years than lose my honor and credibility amongst my people! After that experience, I swore not to make any promises or even give the faintest assurances or hope to any community groups. Till this day, I have not understood why the mzungus spent KSh. 4 million to gather data and 2 million more to buy new furniture and computers but refused to release a paltry sum of KSh. 40,000 for the Kericho group. Were my actions justifiable? I have thought about it many times and concluded that I did the right thing for the Kericho group, the foundation, the mzungus, and for me.”

“Achieng, you came up with a very practical solution for the problem,” Reverend Ndiege said. “Alas, I was not as successful as you. I ran into a similar situation before I came to Kochia. I was first on attachment, and then the assistant Pastor, at a church in Kericho. Most of the congregation was involved in tea and coffee farming. Every summer, we had a group of 18-20 people come visit us from the state of Minnesota in the US. They had been coming for many years, even before I was affiliated with the church. They preached the Bible, taught at our primary school, and built one or two homes. Some years, they came with doctors and conducted medical or dental camps. They were very good people and our community looked forward to receiving them every year. Two months before they would arrive, everyone in the community would start asking me when the mzungus were coming. The children would be talking about eating chocolates and playing all day. All of us liked it so much.

“One year, I took some of them on a morning walk through the tea and coffee plantations. One excited coffee farmer gave them a big bag of coffee beans. We came back to the guesthouse and the mzungus informed the rest of their friends about the fresh coffee beans. Now they insisted on roasting the beans and making coffee! I explained that while we grow so much coffee, we don't actually drink it. We are a tea-drinking country. Sometimes, we drink Nescafé or Africafe or just go to the restaurant and drink whatever they serve us. But, they were very determined about making fresh coffee, the right way. So, I brought a big pan from the church kitchen and we roasted the beans, one batch after another, on a small fire. The next task of crushing the coffee beans was more challenging. While I went home to home inquiring about a pestle

and mortar, the mzungus put the roasted beans in the pan and started crushing them with a hammer. The rest of them completed whatever they were doing and now the entire group of twenty mzungus was working on the coffee project. By the time they completed grinding the coffee two hours later, a big group had gathered to witness the coffee hammering ceremony.

“Even the head pastor came out to see what the commotion was about. I tried to hide in the crowd because I was afraid he was going to berate me for the unfortunate fate of the pan. It was very severely dented after all that hammering. But the pastor was so pleased at the sight of over a hundred people carefully observing the mzungus prepare coffee that he extemporaneously started preaching on the importance of dedication, perseverance, and teamwork. The mzungus considered it most appropriate to serve coffee to the crowd. Consequently, another small fire had been started and the pastor himself fetched the biggest pot in the church kitchen and placed it on the fire. The mzungus emptied their bottled water into this great pot and when it started boiling they added all the ground coffee. Some mzungus had scurried off to purchase sugar from the market while the dentist ran back to his room and emerged with stacks of little paper cups. Finally, we tasted the fruits of their hard work. While our pastor always preached about sweet fruits that follow hard work, these fruits were very very bitter. Apparently, the beans had been roasted more than necessary. No matter how much sugar one added, it did not seem to help.

“A few people tasted the coffee and ran into the bushes to spit it out. As word about the bitterness of the coffee got around, the crowd quickly dispersed. A young man confided to me a few days later that they were as scared of refusing the coffee as they were of consuming it. The children started crying after tasting the coffee and quieted down only when the mzungus retreated to their rooms and came back with chocolates for each one of them. The mzungus were naturally disheartened by this turn of events but consumed the coffee stoically. They put out the fire under the giant cauldron, had their dinner, and went to sleep. The next day, we toiled until noon to dispose off the coffee in the field, clean up the giant pot and pan, and find the little paper cups that were strewn all over the place during our people's desperate flight the previous evening. I had to rest for two full days to regain my health. After this misadventure, I was convinced that the mzungus would not mention coffee again. I was completely wrong.

“Next year, they came back with a new group of 20 people. The coffee leader from the previous year was back and on the first day itself



Children Gather Around the Mzungu

he informed me that the coffee from our area was the best there could be. He had taken some home and succeeded in having the coffee roasted, ground and prepared by a professional. He had specifically come back to take enough coffee home because everyone in their church wanted to buy it. He had even contacted other churches in the region and they had all agreed to purchase our coffee. He insisted that this would be better for our farmers because they would earn more money than selling it to the local agents. I was very hesitant in getting involved in this business – my duties were religious in nature after all and I did not want to get stuck in any business. I eventually agreed to arrange a meeting with the coffee cooperative for the following week.

“The mzungus offered to buy 1,000 kgs of coffee immediately and then import 5,000 kgs every harvest. They offered the coffee farmers three times as much as the local agents on the condition that they would grow a specific kind of Arabica coffee. The coffee farmers were still hesitant but when the mzungus put the hard cash on the table, some of the farmers picked it up. Now, you see, the coffee farmers have their own network of middlemen and agents that they sell to. It is actually a very complex business but they have been doing this for very many years. While the coffee farmers might not get the best rate from these middlemen, they are assured that the coffee will be purchased and they will earn at least some money. As promised, the mzungus took the 1,000 kgs of coffee and split it into 20 bags – one for each of them, and carried it home. They also arranged for a man in Nairobi who picked up the coffee and shipped it to them after every harvest. This system worked very well for two years. The farmers were happy and so were the mzungus. With every coffee payment, there was also a small allowance for the church. So we were also very happy. The mzungus actually increased the quantity to be shipped to them by about 1,000 kgs every harvest cycle. Several farmers now grew the specific coffee and sold it exclusively to the mzungus.

“The mzungus requested me every few months to coordinate with the farmers and communicate to them the amount for the next harvest season. Then one day, I was informed that the coffee leader had passed away and there was no one to coordinate the coffee distribution on their side. Thus, the coffee imports would be stopped with immediate effect. As soon as I received the message, I ran over to the cooperative office. The head of the cooperative advised me to be very careful how the news were shared with the farmers. We called a meeting with the farmers and explained the situation. They were very angry because now they did not have a market for their coffee beans. They expressed that they should

have been given atleast six months notice to make alternate arrangements for their harvest. Now, I said, surely the mzee was not aware of his impending death. They started questioning me. 'Why can't the mzungus find someone else to take over the coordination? Last year, when we shipped 100 kgs less, they were unhappy and told us how we need to improve our organization. This year, they are completely ending our deal. Where do we take our coffee now? Who will buy it? How do we feed our families?' These were all valid questions but I had no answer for them. I called the head of the American church but I was told by his assistant that he is a man of God and does not concern himself with such business endeavors.

"I tried the same defense with the coffee farmers but it did not work. The farmers insisted that I was to blame since I was the one who introduced the mzungus to them and served as the liaison thereafter. The meeting got louder and angrier. A few well-wishers informed me that I was needed outside the room. When I stepped out they caught my hand and made me run across the mountain. I was in hiding for two days while the elders reasoned with the farmers. After that day, things were never the same for me. Whenever I was in the community, everyone stopped talking or whatever they were doing and stared at me. I was constantly living in fear. Finally, on the pastor's advice, I transferred to another branch of the church in Busia. I swore to never ever get involved in any business transaction, whether it was with our people or with the mzungus. I never quite understood why the farmers were so upset about the issue. Surely they could sell the coffee to someone else.

"A few months later, I ran into the pastor of the Kericho church at a seminar and we started talking. He informed me that the incident had very grave consequences for the farmers. The farmers who sold part of their crop to the local agents survived because they were paid for some of their coffee. But the others were forced to sell their specific type of coffee to agents at throwaway rates. First, the agents refused to buy the coffee altogether as retribution for not selling to them for all these years. After a lot of pleading and intervention from the cooperative leaders and the pastor himself, they agreed to purchase it at a throwaway rate. The agents insisted that there was no market for it and they were just doing the famers a favor. The farmers went from making three times as much money to making a quarter of the regular coffee price. Some had to pull their children out of school and others had to migrate to the city and work as laborers to save enough money to engage in coffee farming again. I don't necessarily blame the mzungus but I felt very bad for the farmers. The mzungus lost their morning coffee while the farmers had

their lives disarranged.

“Now I understand.” Sister Phoebe joined the conversation. “Why we don’t see you with mzungu groups like some of the other churches that seem to be hosting mzungus year-round.”

“Please join us Sister.” The Reverend moved aside to make space for her. “Actually, I like having mzungus at the church and they have been very supportive in building the church and the congregation. But I am always nervous about digressing from our religious mission into any kind of business activities. I welcome mzungus to the church and host them in our humble guesthouse. As a matter of principle, I never step out of the church premises with them.”

“I see your point,” Sister Phoebe said. “I have had some mzungus volunteer at my home for HIV patients too and they have been very helpful. However, none of them have expressed interest in doing any business.”

“What I don't understand,” Peter said, “is that what happened with the Kericho farmers could happen anywhere. Instead of the mzungus, it could have been a Kenyan company that cancelled the contract.”

“Yes, but if it was a Kenyan company, there would be a formal contract with six months notice. If the company broke the contract and refused to buy the coffee, the farmers could take them to court and seek damages.”

“What you also need to remember,” the Reverend added, “is that many such contracts are not committed to written documents. They are done on a trust basis and there is a social contract that either parties will look out for the other side and not imperil their business and personal lives. In this case, the mzungus were expected to honor the unwritten contract and purchase the upcoming coffee harvest. That would give the farmers a fair opportunity to realign their market linkages for the next harvest and beyond.”

“Why did the agents refuse to buy the coffee?” Phillip wondered.

“Many reasons,” the Reverend explained. “First of all, it was a different kind of coffee and the agents did not have a buyer ready for it. It was very last-minute and so the agents did not have time to find buyers in their network. The bigger issue here was that the agents were known to the farmers for many years and there was a trusted relationship. When the coffee farmers started selling their coffee to the mzungus, that trust was betrayed a little bit. While the agents empathized with the farmers’ self-interest in making a little more money, they wanted to punish the farmers for not selling to them. In many ways it is good, and in some ways bad, but the truth is that all our interactions with others are based

on trust.”

“Very well-said Reverend,” Sister Phoebe remarked. “I have found that people from other places often don't appreciate the importance of trust in our culture. Let me tell you about one unusual and uncomfortable situation I had with mzungus. I have not been able to decide whether it actually helped us or hurt us. You can tell me what you think.”

“Sure Sister,” Peter said, “but give me two minutes...” He ran off, only to return with a bottle of soda for Sister Phoebe and a fresh pot of busaa for the rest of the group.

“So, I was saying...” Sister Phoebe started her story. “Every year, we have a few mzungu volunteers from Germany come to our home for HIV patients. They talk to the residents and help them with their daily activities, work in the shambaa¹, and help in any other way they can. All our residents are terminally-ill. They are very lonely and many are in pain. They enjoy having someone to communicate with. It is very refreshing to see how well they communicate with mzungus although they don't even speak the same language. Our people keep talking in Luo or Kiswahili and the mzungus speak in their language. But, I can see that they are enjoying each other's company – just holding hands and talking away for hours.

“Most of our volunteers are middle-aged women, and a few men from time to time. Last year, we hosted these two young people from Germany. One of them was the son of a mama who visits every July. The other young man was his friend. They were barely 20 years old. The mama had suggested that they should come to our home and help us since she, herself, could not travel that year. Unfortunately, these young people could not relate to our home and the residents, most of whom were one or two generations older than them. They came to me and asked me why we were not taking more residents even though there were many more HIV patients in the communities around us. I told them that we did not have the resources, in terms of staff, food, and space, to take more residents. They immediately started interviewing everyone they could find – the residents, their relatives, our staff, all the idlers around our shambaa, people in the communities, ministry officials. They somehow found out who was donating money to our home and started talking to them as well. It was very peculiar. Every day, a few people would come and ask me who these boys were, and I had to explain. It started taking up a lot of my time but I kept encouraging and supporting

¹ Shambaa = farm (Kiswahili)

them. I thought their report might be beneficial and they would learn something valuable during their time in Kenya.

“Then, one morning, I was woken up by a phone call from the German mama. She demanded an explanation for misappropriation of funds and poor facilities at our home. I was completely taken by surprise and in my sleep I gave her some incoherent answer. I think she was crying and shouting at me but she was speaking so fast that I could not understand everything she said. I tried to sleep after that but I could not. An hour later, I went down to the residents’ ward. Then the phone calls started, one after another, from our donors, the health ministry officials, even the district commissioner. Yaai Yai Yaai! They had received a report from the German boys the previous evening alleging corruption and misappropriation of funds. The report claimed that the staff was not being paid their salary as promised and the residents did not have proper beds or sanitation facilities. I was so saddened and upset about the report. All of Kochia knows that the accounts and operations of our home are completely transparent. We have a big notice board where I put up the detailed budget and expenses every three months.

“I was on the phone non-stop until noon, and then received many more phone calls until sunset. I denied the allegations as being completely untrue and invited everyone to come to our home and talk to me and review our account books. That day was the worst day of my life. I tried calling the mzungu boys but they had turned off their cellphone. Finally, in the evening, I was able to reach them. They agreed that they had written a report and sent it to everyone by email. I told them that their allegations were completely untrue and I wanted to read the report myself. They told me that they were in Homa Bay lodging official complaints with the District Commissioner and the police. When I heard the word 'police,' my body just froze and mind went numb. I thought, after spending all these years serving the people, I was being called a criminal. I just disconnected the phone and ran to my room.

“I remember crying uncontrollably on my bed. The next morning, the matron came to my room to wake me up. It was past 10 AM. The matron suggested that I get ready and have breakfast soon because the District Commissioner had called and indicated that he was going to stop by. I asked her if he had mentioned anything about the police or arresting me. She insisted that the DC was in his usual serious mood. He asked how many residents we had, said that he will visit us later in the morning, and hung up. Sometimes, even if you have done everything right and there is nothing to fear, so many bad thoughts run through your mind. I started praying incessantly. I quickly got ready and even put on my

sweater just in case I have to spend the night in prison. I started gathering my medicines and some clothes to take with me to the prison. The matron was quite amused with my behavior. By the time she prepared tea for me, the DC was knocking on the door. The two German boys were behind him. I welcomed them inside and offered them tea. There were no policemen with them – my prayers had already been answered. I felt more confident now.

“The DC had a big box covered with newspapers. He put it aside and got straight to the point. He confirmed that the young men had filed a police complaint about corruption at our home. He had come to meet me and discuss the allegations. The DC handed me a copy of the spiral-bound forty-page report. I told them that I was very surprised and disappointed that such serious allegations had been made without even asking for clarifications. The DC agreed with me and said that he had already spoken to the mzungus about it. While the DC enjoyed his tea and the mzungus played with their phones and spoke to each other in German, I read the report from end to end. It took me barely 15 minutes to read it. There was at least one photo on every page. It was like one of those children's books. The childishness of the report was reflected in the obvious observations and absurd allegations. Everything that we did at our center was deemed corrupt and inappropriate! When I finally looked up with a puzzled look, the DC gave me a very uncharacteristic smile that melted my worries away.

“So, there are two issues we need to talk about,’ the DC said very seriously. ‘First, we have these allegations that need to be addressed. And secondly, there is the damage control that needs to be done as soon as possible.’ Apparently, the mzungus had sent the report to everyone that had interacted with our center in some way over the last seven years. They said that over 200 people had received the report and meetings had been held with over ten different offices around Kochia and Homa Bay. They expressed that they did not want to risk having the allegations swept under the carpet because it was a serious matter and people's lives were at stake. I was completely shocked at the damage that had been done to my reputation and the future of our home. ‘Sister Phoebe,’ the DC said, ‘now that you have read the report, can you provide an explanation.’ It took me a few minutes to gather the strength to speak. I told them that, ‘The first 20 pages of photos showing the poor facilities are very real. The first allegation about poor facilities is very true. Some chairs and beds are broken, the bed sheets have holes in them, the pit latrine door does not lock very well, and two rooms don't have lights. Everything is true – but what can we do if we don't have the money to

fix it?’

“The second allegation is that we received a grant from an NGO to upgrade the facilities but the money has been misappropriated by me. This allegation is completely false because while we have been told that we have been awarded a grant, we have not actually received the funds. You can call the NGO and confirm it with them. When we receive the funds, we will immediately commence the repairs. The third allegation is that many of our staff members have not been paid their salary. I was amused that the report also has photos of our staff members. We have only four staff members here and, as has been determined in the report, they have all been paid on time. The eleven other people mentioned, or rather shown in your report are not our staff members. They are idlers that just wait around the main gate and waste their time talking with friends, reading the newspaper, and looking for small jobs. They are all poor people and since we have had enough to eat for the past two years, we make some more food and offer it to them.’

“The mzungu disagreed with me. The idlers told them that they open the main gate when a vehicle comes or leaves, or they help in the farm, or carry potatoes to the market. They complained that while they are given some food and potatoes, they have not received a salary from us while the rest of the staff is paid every month. The DC started laughing when he heard this. He saved me the trouble of explaining that if the idlers come and sit around our premises, it does not mean that they should be paid for it. I said, ‘If we start paying idlers, there will be five million people waiting outside to collect their salary.’ And that was it! This was the basis of their allegations and such a long report. I was not sure whether I should laugh or cry – whether I should be happy that this issue was resolved so quickly or sad about the damage done. I was not sure whether the report actually helped draw attention to our problems or gave a false impression of corruption. A person who understands how things work in Kenya will realize the silliness of the report, but will our mzungu donors understand?

“The DC looked at the mzungu and scolded them for the next ten minutes for not seeking clarifications from me and sending the inaccurate report to so many people. He threatened to prosecute them for tarnishing my reputation and hurting the home. After some more discussion and clarifications, the mzungu finally saw their mistake and apologized. The DC is a man of action. He ordered the mzungu to immediately send for his review another report providing detailed clarifications and evidence that the allegations were untrue. After his and my approval, the report was to be sent out to everyone that received the

previous report. Right then, the DC called the non-profit and requested them to expedite the grant money. He recommended that I ask the idlers to leave immediately and stop giving them food. ‘Since you like writing reports so much,’ he told the mzungu, ‘why don't you supervise all the repairs and write a detailed report about it.’

“As he got up to leave, he pointed to the newspaper-covered box and said that it was a gift of cornmeal and sugar for our residents. ‘But don't feed it to the idlers,’ he warned me. He finally looked at the mzungu, smiled and said, ‘Make sure that there are more photos in your report on the repairs than the number of photos in the silly report you sent me yesterday. Also, now that the idlers are gone, why don't you spend some time in the shambaa learning how to grow potatoes?’ Then he rushed out of the room leaving me face-to-face with the mzungu boys. We just sat down in silence.

“So,” Sister Phoebe concluded, “I am not sure whether this incident helped us or hurt us. We actually got the grant funds in the following week and the repairs were carried out as planned. Some of the donors stopped sending money while the report prompted some others to contribute funds and food supplies.”

“What about the idlers? Did they leave?” Okello asked.

“We were afraid that they would create a scene but I told them that we could not feed them anymore. They left without causing any problems,” Sister Phoebe said.

“What about the mzungus? Did they also leave?”

“When the DC walked out, they could have left with him or stayed with me,” Sister Phoebe replied. “They chose to stay. They apologized to me many times about the whole issue. They supervised the repairs so thoroughly that even the fundis complained to me that the mzungu made them work twice-as-hard. They did some fundraising and installed additional lights and painted our entire home. Six weeks later, we all went to meet the DC to brief him on the completion of the repairs. The DC was pleased with their colorful report and was very surprised to receive a bag of potatoes that they had harvested from the farm.”

“So, did you finally forgive the boys?” Obongo asked.

“I forgave them as soon as I read the report because I realized that they were not acting with malice. They were trying to do what they considered was in the best interest of our residents. The deep concern for the residents’ needs, and the desire to make their flailing lives better, was something we shared very deeply. I was upset that they approached their concerns very recklessly and irresponsibly. But they were young people and this is how young people everywhere learn their lessons. I

forgave them immediately and when I saw them work very hard over the next six weeks, I developed a deep respect for them. Instead of calling me sister like the rest of the Kochia, they started calling me mama. I like that.”

“Sister Phoebe, the German boys call you mama,” Okello laughed, “and those mzungu girls are soon going to call Odhiambo, baba.” Everyone burst out laughing as Odhiambo blushed and warned everyone not to joke about the mzungu girls.

“Odhiambo, didn't you say that they are coming back soon?” Obongo asked.

“Actually, they are already in Nairobi and will be coming here next week.” Odhiambo smiled and looked at Okello. “But, I have instructed them that they need to seek approval from you for every thing they want to do at our toilets. Everything, besides using the toilet itself!”

“I remember those girls.” Obongo nodded his head. “or I must say, everyone in Kochia remembers them. But Odhiambo, did you finally understand what they were trying to do?”

“Thanks to Okello, towards the end of their trip, we completely understood their project. But, by then, the damage had been done. It ended up costing me 5,000 Shillings that my wife still nags me about. I have not informed her yet that they are coming back next week.”

“So what was their project?” Obongo asked, “and why did you end up spending so much money?”

Odhiambo hesitated a bit, took a big gulp of the busaa, gave an ear-to-ear grin and started the story in his inimitable style. “One afternoon, three mzungu girls and one mzee knocked on my door. They had found out about MoneyMaker Toilets and wanted to talk to me about it. I advised them that the MoneyMaker toilet was on the main road but if it was urgent, they could use my toilet. I took their silence for shyness and walked them to the toilet. They just stood there. I opened the door for them but they signaled to me that I should enter first. I refused. This was quite peculiar. Once again, I inquired how I could help them. They said they wanted to talk to me. At that point, I was very confused. Surely, I thought, the four mzungus, three of them girls, did not want to talk to me in the toilet. There is no way we would all fit. Then, I realized that since the toilet was on the backside of my home, and was not an independent structure, they thought that the door to the toilet was actually the door to my home. I quickly walked across to the other side, opened the door, and invited them into the main room. This tactic seemed to work – they followed me, entered the room and assumed seats on the sofa.

“The mzee was a professor and the three girls were his students. They came from an American university and had developed some technology that was related to toilets. I was very proud to have women engineers in my home. I called my wife and eldest daughter to greet them and listen to what they had to say. I want my children to become scientists and engineers. I thought my daughter would learn something from them. The mzee asked me very many questions about our toilets, their locations, costs, how the toilets worked, if there was a sewage system, if we did any waste management. He kept asking me questions for the next hour while the girls kept writing in their books. These mzungus really like to ask questions and write everything down. I think I answered most of the questions. They congratulated me many times about my business. I must admit that I was very pleased. Then they explained their project to me. They talked about generating gas. I found the conversation very uncomfortable, especially in front of all the women – my wife, daughter and the mzungu girls. I did not quite understand why one might want to generate more gas but I was not comfortable asking. The mzungu girls were very serious but my daughter could not stop giggling. I sent her inside but she came back again. The mzee talked a lot and he spoke so fast that I did not understand most of what he said.

“Then the professor asked me if it was okay for his students to stay here for two weeks. I agreed. He said the girls would stay at a hotel in Homa Bay. Every day, they would come to the toilets on the main road to do their project. My daughter was very amused that engineers do their projects inside toilets. I intervened to explain that engineers build very many things and toilets are just one example. This was my chance to outperform the professor and I did so by giving examples of very many technologies. The mzungus seemed impressed with my knowledge of engineering. I appreciated their kind words but little did I know that my explanation was going to cost me dearly. Once again, the professor talked a lot and asked me if I agreed. At this point, I just wanted to end his talk so I kept on saying that it is okay and there is no problem to all his questions. After all, who was I to disagree with the professor? Then they departed. While I did not hear from them for four more days, I was informed by the toilet attendant that the girls spent most of their day over there. My daughter joined them on several occasions and I liked that very much.

“Then next morning, as I was having tea and getting ready to visit Obongo, the toilet assistant called me. He sounded very nervous and extremely agitated. I was told that the girls had come with two well-built Kenyan men from Homa Bay. They had metal rods and picks and spades

and were getting ready to tear down the toilet block. My heart just stopped. I didn't even bother to put on my shoes. I ran to the toilets as fast as I could. When I reached the toilets, the attendant was laughing and chatting with these two fundis and the mzungus. The first thing I did was slap the toilet assistant across his face. How dare he lie to me! I almost died during that ten-minute run and he was here, laughing! While I caught my breath and the man vigorously rubbed his face, the mzungu girls and fundis had retreated a few steps to get away from me. A few onlookers must have heard the slap for they came around to find out if another one was forthcoming. The toilet structure seemed intact and so I asked the man why he lied to me. When he recovered from his daze, he explained that when the fundis arrived with their tools and drove the metal rod into the ground next to the toilet, he assumed that they were here to take down the toilet. When they started talking, they discovered that they were in fact cousins. And just then, I ran towards them in my panicked state. The rest was history.

“I apologized to him for the violence and turned to the mzungus and fundis. The fundis retreated a few more steps while one of the mzungu girl started explaining that they were not going to harm the toilet structure. She indicated that they were digging a hole a little further from the toilet and it would not impact the structure or my business in any way. After a few minutes of her talking and assurances that they will not touch the toilets, I went back home to fetch my shoes and proceed to visit Obongo. I had not even reached Obongo's place when the toilet assistant called me again. He insisted that a very big problem was in the making and urged me to come back as soon as possible. He suggested that I call the police as well. Once again, I ran to the toilet trying my best to imagine what could have happened. Fortunately, I did not call the police. Over a hundred people had gathered around the toilet building. I had to push my way through them to reach the front. Let me tell you, it was not easy. The people were just not ready to move.

"The three mzungu girls seemed to be digging a hole in the ground behind the toilets. They were wearing short pants that failed to reach the ends of their backsides and their tiny blouses left little to the imagination. They were oblivious to the crowd that had gathered around them. They just kept digging and digging and digging. The toilet attendant ran up to me, his palms pressed against his cheeks. ‘Did you see how many people have gathered here,’ he said. I am afraid they might hurt our guests. It was surely an act of God that I did not slap him for the second time that day for I was very greatly angered. I said to him, ‘Why did you not advise them to dress properly and ask our people to leave?’ The man insisted

that he was afraid that the people would lynch him for stopping the show. I ran over to the girls and asked them to stop digging and put on clothes immediately. They hesitated a little bit but when they realized how many people had gathered, they picked up their shirts from a heap and put them on. They pulled down the legs of their shorts but that did not seem to help much. Most of the spectators were just curious youth from the high school and local farmers. Within fifteen minutes, I succeeded in dispersing the crowd and averting any untoward incident.

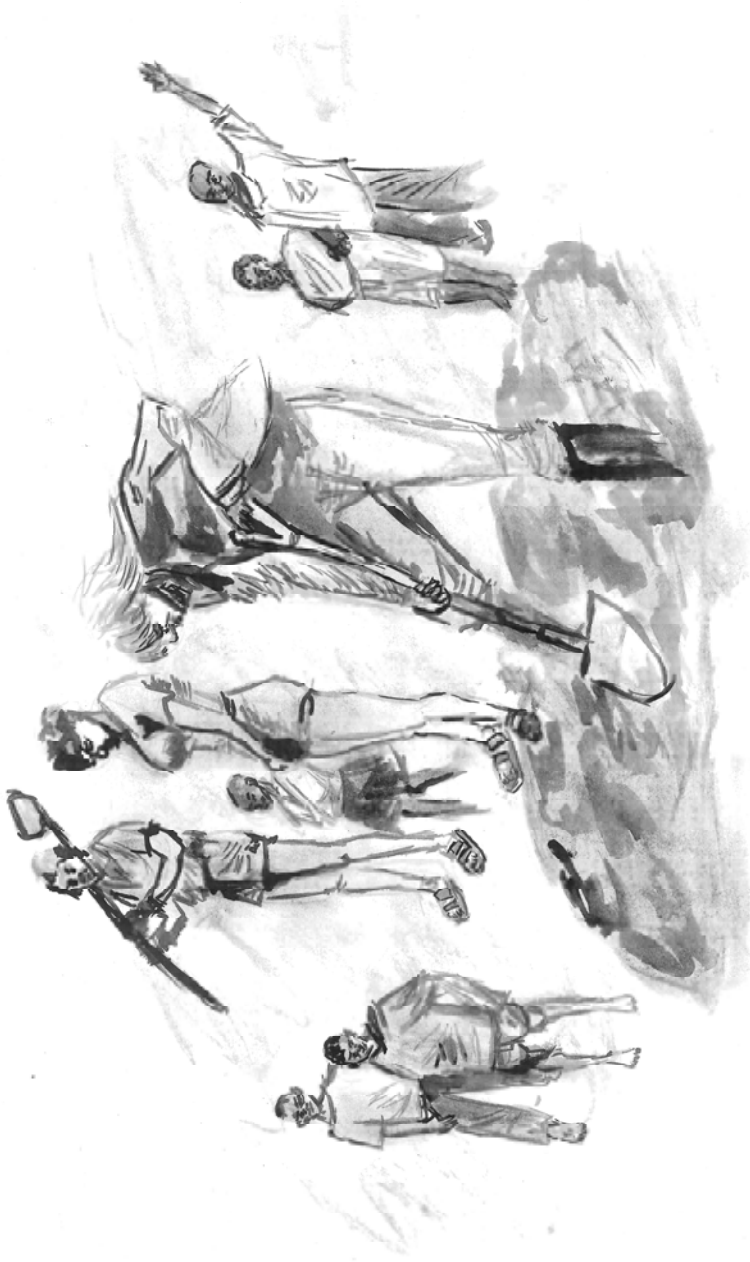
“I took the girls home with me. My wife and I tried to explain to them the inappropriateness of their dress and how they had placed themselves in a very risky situation. Finally, they apologized and agreed to dress properly from the next day. They were just about the leave when I remembered to ask them the most basic question: why were they digging a hole and what became of the fundis? I was told that the hole was vital to their project and the fundis were sent home because they wanted too much money. So the mzungus started digging the hole themselves. They had rented the equipment for five days. I offered them help with digging but they turned it down saying that the toilet attendant had agreed to help them going forward. I didn't like the idea very much but I was too tired to object. It had been a very hectic day and I did not even meet Obongo. That night, I forbade my daughter from meeting the mzungu girls again. It is not safe, I told her. We will see their project after it is complete and then you can learn all about engineering. My only consolation for the day was an excited phone call from the toilet attendant to inform me that business had tripled for the day. My joy was tarnished when he inquired if the mzungus will be back the next day and if so, what will they be wearing. I warned him that if any people gathered at the toilet, he would lose his job. He insisted that I didn't know how to run a business and disconnected the line.

“The following day went smoothly. I was told that the girls' clothes got longer and the hole in the ground got bigger. I was really curious about this project but pressing issues at a new Moneymaker toilet location kept me from visiting the project site. When I finally went there two days later, the girls welcomed me and proudly led me to an enormous hole in the ground. It was at least eight feet in diameter and six feet deep. A few people could live in it. I stared at it for a few minutes and congratulated them on successfully digging such a big hole. Then, I insisted that I wanted to know right then and there exactly what would happen next inside this big hole. I was expecting them to put some kind of toilet there – maybe an advanced American pit latrine. Instead, I was told that they were going to put a big tank with its top cut off and then

put another inverted tank inside this tank. There would be a big pipe at the bottom and another one on top. I was completely confused. I don't know how long she talked before I cut her off. Just tell me how does one use this toilet, I asked the girls. My imagination was failing me. Even the toilet attendant was getting curious to learn the answer.

“The quieter girl now spoke up. ‘Mr. Odhiambo, didn't our professor explain to you the first time we met! This is not a toilet. We will take the waste from all your toilets and put it inside the tank. Then after a few weeks, it will start giving methane gas that you can use for cooking food.’ I could not believe my ears. I made her explain it to me two more times. Finally, when I was convinced that I was hearing it right, I asked her, ‘Who was going to take the waste and put it in the tank?’ I must commend the toilet assistant's sixth sense. Even before she started talking, this man started nodding his head. ‘Don't worry,’ she told me, ‘we will do it for now and then the toilet attendant can take over. It is a very easy job.’ By now, the toilet assistant was wildly oscillating his head from side-to-side and gesticulating with his hands. ‘I will leave my job immediately if you ask me to do such dirty things,’ he declared. The mzungu looked at him in utter disbelief as if he had refused to baptize his children. The panicked toilet attendant went on a tirade announcing what his job responsibilities were and were not. I finally calmed him down by assuring him that I would not expect any such things from him. I gave him fifty bob and suggested that he should go and have a soda. He took the money but refused to move.

“Then I asked the girls, ‘Let us assume that we solve this difficult problem of getting the human waste in the big tank. Who is going to use this gas and what will they do with it?’ ‘Anyone can use this gas and the simplest way to use it is for cooking,’ they said very casually. ‘Even your wife can use it to make ugali or sukumawiki or anything else.’ Now, it was the toilet attendant's turn to watch me nod my head in disgust. He laughed hysterically but was wise enough to quiet down when I scowled at him. I said, ‘Don't even think of saying such a thing to my wife, or anyone else for the matter. If people find out that you are proposing taking human waste and converting it into gas and then using it for cooking food, they will be shocked. It might work in your country, but I don't think it will fit into our culture.’ The girls were a little distraught about my lack of enthusiasm about their project. They started arguing with me but I refused to entertain further discussion. As we know, encouragement is very important for students. So, I told them, let us meet tomorrow morning to talk to our engineer, Okello, and see what he has to say.



Mzungus Digging a Big Hole

“Okello knew everything about their technology and how it was supposed to work. He explained to me that the anaerobic digester that they were trying to build was the same as the biogas technology that we learned about in school long time back. Now, I understood everything. I asked them, ‘Why not use cow manure instead of taking this radical step of using human waste?’ The mzungus explained that we did not have enough cows in this area. They had come looking for me because a lot of organic waste would be generated at a commercial toilet. This constant supply of waste would keep producing methane gas. When I had intervened and talked about various technologies, they assumed that I knew a lot about technology and hence did not get into specific details.

“Okello said that the project would work if two problems were solved. First, the waste matter must automatically feed into the machine and not require a person to do it manually. More importantly, we need to find an application for the gas, other than cooking our daily meals. Okello suggested that we could convert the gas into electricity and use it to charge phones or use the gas to heat water, which can then be used for bathing. I liked the phone charging idea much more than hot water idea.

“I felt much better with Okello's support and advice on this project. I tried my best to build the girls' confidence and encourage them to complete the project. I was afraid that they would leave with this enormous hole in the ground. Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened. The big tank they needed was not available in Homa Bay and had to be ordered from Kisumu. We were told that it would take ten days to arrive. The mzungus had only three days left before the professor would come back to pick them up. So, they decided to perfect the hole and come back during their next vacation to build the digester. I knew exactly what was going to happen next. There is only one way to perfect a hole – and that is to make it wider and deeper. The mzungus spent the next three days digging further so that it was ten feet across and ten feet deep. They also dug a series of steps to go down to the bottom of this hole. I was informed that it would be helpful for maintenance purposes.

“When the professor returned, he was very pleased with the hole and congratulated all of us. He raised his hands in joy and shook my hands vigorously. We were all invited to have dinner with him. I invited Okello to the dinner meeting. The mzungus and Okello came up with a plan for the next year. I also made sure my daughter was present for this conversation so that she would not think that engineers just dig holes.

“Finally, the mzungus returned home leaving the hole behind for me. Okello insisted that it would be very valuable when it was completed. He insisted that I must respect it by calling it a project rather than a hole. I

readily agreed. The project boosted our business a little because people would come by to see it, and then use our toilets. I asked my doctor if seeing a big hole encourages one to go to the toilet but he did not think so. Though I cannot claim to be particularly pleased with the project, it did not bother me either. It was one of these things that just happen. However, once it started raining and the project filled up with water, my opinion changed. People started falling into it and kids came around just to use it like a swimming pool. I was afraid that if someone drowned in it, there would be a police case and I would be in real trouble.

“Finally, one fine day, the project had filled up with rainwater and a cow decided to swim in it. Since there was no easy exit, she did not know how to come out of the pool. Fortunately, for the cow, some passersby alerted others and a small crowd gathered. They used bamboos to keep the cow afloat while, as the owner of the project, I was summoned to find a solution. I was forced to pay 500 Shillings to three men who literally pulled the cow out of the project. Next week, I paid 3,500 Shillings to a fundi to put three planks of wood on the project and seal it. I also made him build a fence around it for additional security until the rightful champions of the project would come back and complete it.”

“Odhiambo,” Okello assured his friend, “let me tell you. You are going to be so proud of that project once it is working. Then you can build these biogas plants with all your toilets and make much more money on the side. Just think of your 5,000 Shillings as an investment.”

“The mzungus are doing the research for you and also building the first one for free,” Obongo added. “That is very good for you.”

“As long as they don't come back and leave me with a few more enormous holes, I mean projects, that attract incompetent cows, I don't have a problem,” Odhiambo said. “Besides, as you know, I like those girls. They became good friends with my daughter and after they complete the project, they will also become good role models.”

“I remember how much they cried on the last day they were here,” Okello said. “They did not want to leave. All our children were crying – even some of the women. Our friend here wiped off some tears too.”

“I was not crying,” Odhiambo clarified, “but I admit that I was sad. In just two weeks they had formed such deep relationships with us. When they called me from Nairobi last week, I told them that, “This is your house and your project. Everyone here is eagerly waiting for you. You are just like our children. Come home soon.””

“Sometimes, I think that these mzungus are not able to find enough love where they live,” Reverend Ndiege remarked. “So, when they find love and affection here, they get addicted. While they have their families

at home, we become their extended families.”

“There is no such thing as enough love,” Okello said. “We, humans, are greedy. No matter how much love we get, we always want more.”

“I completely agree,” Sister Phoebe said. “The German mama told me a similar story. She said that she works every day from early morning to night. Her son is in college and busy with his own life. Her husband left her many years back. Now, she has no one to talk to. When she comes here, she says that she comes back home to her own family and so many people to talk to. One day, she said something that really moved me. She said that when she is here in Kenya, she feels human again.”

“And at the same time,” the Reverend added, “what I learned from my experience with the mzungus and the coffee farmers was that they did not understand the importance of relationships in all our personal and professional matters. I concluded that these mzungus keep their personal and professional circles separate. Whereas, for us, all our professional relationships are fundamentally personal in nature.”

“All our relationships are based on trust and respect,” Chief Achieng chimed in, “and that trust is more important than money or time...or any written document. These mzungus, on the other hand, love their written documents. If there is a problem, instead of meeting and talking about it for an hour to resolve it, they will spend sixty hours writing a report.”

“I can speak about relationships from a different angle,” Peter offered. “As you know, I work as a driver for a travel company in Nairobi. I take tourists and businessmen around Nairobi and Mombasa and Kisumu and Nyeri and wherever else they want to go. A few of my regular customers come to Kenya just to have physical relationships. Most of them are older mzungu men looking for young Kenyan women. Some prefer to find new women every day or every week while others have been visiting the same lady for many years. Sometimes they ask me where they can find women and I take them to the tourist bars and other places. It is not my job to preach or question them. If both sides are happy with the arrangement, who am I to intervene?”

“There is one particular mzee I have been driving for many years now. We eat together and talk about everything. He tells me about his family and his children and grandchildren. So one time, I asked him why he had to come all the way to Kenya to find women. He told me that his wife passed away many years back and he was too old to find willing ladies in his own country. He was too old to chase younger women and the older ones were not interested in him. But in Kenya, no one cared. He had a Kenyan girlfriend and he paid some other women for sleeping with him. He was proud that he was not lying or cheating or making false

promises to anyone for getting the intimacy he wanted.

“This mzee is almost 70 years old. Once I was very curious and so when I was driving his young girlfriend to his place, I asked her about their relationship. She said that the old man just wants someone to talk to and spend time with. Sometimes they sleep together but that is not why he keeps coming back to Kenya. She said that she was very happy with the relationship. She liked him very much. He insisted on paying her college fees and her sister's school fees. There are very many mzungus that come here just to get some love and sex. You might be surprised to know that there are also many women who come for the same reasons. I once drove an elderly mzungu woman around the coast for a week. Her boyfriend was 30 years younger than her but they got along very well. Once I took them to a club in Mombasa and, let me tell you, there were atleast 25 mzungu mamas and twice as many of our young men there. They were there to form short-term alliances just like what the men were seeking from the women. The young man said that in some cases, money and material benefits were changing hands, but other times, they were not. I consider these young people as social workers. I respect them just as much as I respect my parents and my pastor.

“Some of my customers say they are here to work on development projects and improve our people's lives and make our companies more efficient. But then, I see these mzees and mamas having to travel all the way here, thousands of miles away, to get physical and emotional intimacy. It leaves me very confused. When these people are not happy and satisfied with their own lives, I don't understand how they can improve our people's lives. How is their way of living more efficient if they have to spend so much money and travel so far for some company? I don't have much money, but I am satisfied with my life. I am not that young anymore. But wherever I go, I never have a problem finding women who love life as much as I do and want to share it with me.”

“We all know about the legendary charming nature of Luos,” Obongo intervened. “But please spare us the details, especially, in front of the Reverend and Sister Phoebe.”

Everyone's gaze moved back and forth between the Reverend and Sister Phoebe, waiting to see who would speak up and scold Peter for his lifestyle and supporting extra-marital sexual relations. The Reverend just nodded in disapproval and gulped down the rest of his soda.

“You want me to scold Peter, but I will not,” Sister Phoebe finally said. “My religious training does not conflict with my pragmatic thinking over such personal issues. Who am I to judge the mzungus, the young people, or Peter? I will just say – think carefully about your choices and

be safe so you can live long and happy lives.”

“I wish all our wives would take some lessons from Sister Phoebe and stop judging us,” the fisheries officer laughed.

“However,” Sister Phoebe continued, “I want to respond to Odhiambo. He suggested that busaa is a unique contribution from our culture to the world. I think that, it is not the busaa, but this spirit of togetherness and deep respect for each other that we can share with everyone. Whoever comes to visit us, we accept them with open arms. We make them part of our lives and share what little God has given us. Most of our visitors come to help us. By mistake, some of them might end up hurting our people and our communities. But that is okay. We just accept it as a part of the parcel.”

“Amen, Sister. I wonder if they will accept us in their communities just like we accept them in ours?” Obongo mused.

“There are so many mzungus and muhindis¹ that have lived around here for many years,” Okello said. “If you remove their skin color, they are just like us. When I lived on the coast, I had mzungu and Asian and Arab friends and once we started talking and working together, we built such deep relationships. At some point, you just stop thinking about tribe and religion and skin color. You don't see it. It becomes invisible and what remains is this fundamental human connection.”

“I agree with you on all that,” Obongo argued, “but that is in our country. The question is – will the mzungus welcome us with open arms if we go to their country?”

“I am sure they will,” Sister Phoebe assured, “but we must not think too much about such things. We must do the very best we can to make our community and culture more welcoming. We must share our knowledge so we can all benefit.”

“Someday, I want to go to their country and dig big holes,” Odhiambo proclaimed, and then he turned to Peter and winked. “But for my other ambition, it might be more efficient just to go to Mombasa.”

“Aye,” Peter raised his chin and grinned. “We will all go together. I will arrange for transport.”

“Yaa! Yai Yaa!” the Reverend sighed, “I warned you that the busaa transforms decent people into sinners. My friends, there are many types of Kenyans and many more types of mzungus. We must not generalize. Let us put our busaa aside and join the celebration with Phillip and Wambui. I can see that lunch is ready. Trust me, the fried Tilapia tastes best with warm soda.”

¹ Muhindis = People from the Indian subcontinent (Kiswahili)