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On to Africa ... and back to India

It was a strange looking humanoid object carved from dark wood, with stretched neck and bulging eyes: E.T. for the classroom! I never quite worked out its purpose (past or present), but the kids adored it. This was a mysterious item from faraway Africa, unlike anything they had ever seen before. Was it a centuries old voodoo doll? We will never know. But it did lay unused in my attic for several years, presiding over family strife and financial disasters.

Edwina, as we named our E.T lookalike, was star of the show: on parade along with a range of other items that were there to help a class of eight-year-olds in England, understand a distant and very different way of life, in Africa. At times, a very real Edwin was also present: a Kenyan youth studying at a local college, who would join me on our joint mission, to introduce African culture to British children. He also captivated the kids: tall and slim, with jet-black skin, typical of the Luo Tribe from the shores of Lake Victoria.

This was a method I had begun to use a decade before, to help Australian pupils empathise with counterparts in India. The same thing happened in reverse, when I was visiting schools in India or Kenya, where I would carry a range of items and photos from the culture of the so-called *First World*. At the time it seemed to work well (the children being especially attracted to video footage made by their equals from other lands). But looking back, I might have been criticized for emphasizing the differences, rather than levelling the playing field. In essence: Voodoo Dolls from *The South* versus Barbie Dolls from *The North*. Criticism justified. Though it was generally much better than that.

The target group in the early days was the seven to eleven age: those most formative years for the future. It was the focus age for the *Kids Contact* magazine, which I was editing and producing for Australian primary schools, and thus logically, the age of children I should be working with in the classroom. When I started out in Australian and Indian classrooms there was no computer backup; no PowerPoint, or anything very much that resembles the classroom aids we have today; often no electricity either. So, for portability and ease of working, I started out with a clutch of A3 photos and a posse of supporting objects from the counterpart culture. *Keep it simple stupid*, is a phrase which resonated, and in this case it worked.

Supported by colleagues in India and Kenya, the methods and aids that we used evolved as time moved forward. Whiteboards and computer-sourced projection replaced blackboards and overhead transparencies. India did its best to keep up with the West, though schools in rural areas lagged far behind. Kenya was slower, but even there, the available technologies began to improve and progress. In later years, when I became more involved at the university-based teacher training level, the technologies available in each of the participating countries were pretty much on a par.

From those early days in the Australian and Indian school sectors, through to the tri-country connections - including India, Kenya and the UK - and after that solely Kenyan-based initiatives, my involvement spanned thirty years. Across this period I worked with colleagues from the four countries to develop methodologies that could be replicated

and used by educators at all levels, from class teachers through to high-level trainers. The different techniques could often work independently, but they also fitted together like pieces of a jigsaw, to form one coherent whole.

One of the techniques was a simplified method for mapping the community that I began to use in Kenya. At that time, we were working in conjunction with a Kenyan group, whose main purpose in life was to map indigenous communities in extraordinary detail, with the aim of finding what was lacking and what needed to be improved. Their intricate procedures spanned a couple of weeks during which they would actually form up a massive, 3D table-top map of the location, including hills and valleys, roads and rivers, right down to detail, such as beehives and bore holes. This was a fascinating method to watch evolve and I remember quite vividly, sitting with members of an indigenous group known as *Yakku* (a small branch of the Maasai), at their ceremony to commemorate completion of the model. It was captivating, to say the least!

What I did was to take this and use it in a much simpler form in the classroom, so that children would draw their route from home to school, showing all the places they passed on the way. This enabled an enlightened discussion of what it meant to live in that place. The maps and thoughts could then be used to discuss ways to improve the status quo and could also be passed on to people in another culture, as a learning tool to encourage the understanding of alternative perspectives.

Much later, when the work was focused more towards tackling climate change, we developed this technique into a finer art. A group of five or six children would begin by drawing a detailed map of their location, with the school at the epicentre. They would then discuss and label places on their map with green, amber and red dots, signifying positive, negative or somewhere-in-between gradings. This became what we termed the *Traffic Light* method, showing places where good things had happened, or were currently happening, as opposed to items of extreme danger. Examples might be a health clinic (good - green) opposed to pollution from a factory (bad - red). Between the two extremes there were many amber or fair ratings, which warranted attention. This

turned out to be a simple, but tremendous learning tool, which formed the core for all our later education work. I was exciting to watch as the children discovered their own community ... and what they could do to make it better!

The early forays into Western Kenya were not without incident, and in fact kept on being *not-without-incident* for more than a decade. Usually it was money at the root of the problem. At the start – and even though I had considerable grounding in India – I was naïve and not up to speed, when it came to wheeling and dealing with Africa. I remember a meeting early on when four of us sat at a square table: two Kenyans and two *mzungus* (the Kiswahili term for Whites-from-the-West). The Kenyans in attendance were firstly my in-country colleague, and secondly the local head of the British Council; the *mzungus* being myself and a British volunteer who was on secondment to the local Technical College. I had accused my Kenyan colleague of embezzling funds received from the UK. The meeting, with my volunteer friend there as an observer and the British Council man appearing to act as adjudicator, became seriously heated. In the end nothing was decided, and the money was never returned. I was sure of my facts, but the Kenyans knew that a cover up of illicit dealings was par for the course and there was little anyone could do about it. A taste of my first African stalemate!

A year or so later, Kevin, the British volunteer at that stormy meeting – whose expertise was in the I.T. field - agreed to help with installation of computers and training of participants for a new three-country, university-based programme, which I was managing. At one stage, I invited him to assist in choosing students for visits to India and Britain. The overall group had been identified, but at this final selection meeting we could not understand why the Kenyan project manager seemed intent on pushing for certain people to join the UK-bound group. Later, over a beer, daylight dawned: she had been intent on securing places for students from her own tribe, as part of the (much preferred) delegation to visit Britain. Another lesson in the politics of Africa ... and a particularly Kenyan example in this case. Colonialism might have been bad, but connections with Britain today are highly valued

Not too long after our enlightenment, with regard to tribal interplay, Kevin approached me one day and said:

“Look George, it’s a great project, but I’m sorry I cannot work anymore with the lady in charge here. It’s a nightmare.”

I could certainly empathise, the person in question was notoriously late for classes, decidedly biased when it came to tribal affiliations (as already described) and quite unreliable in terms of money matters. At one stage we had to suspend funding because the financial accounting from Kenya was so unreliable. But though Kevin was in a position to leave, I definitely could not. I had to hang in there ...and learn to deal with it! The frustrating part of all this was that the lady in question was extraordinarily personable and oozed charisma. She was a tremendous asset when it came to large gatherings but let herself and everyone else down regarding the detail.

The university-based project operated in Kenya, as well as India and the UK. And apart from small glitches - like the Kenyan accounting - it was a huge success: as good in many ways as anything we were to do after that. It ran for three years, with the highlight each year being an international conference, which included delegations from the other two countries. Kenya was the first host nation and showed the Kenyan manager at her best, both behind the podium and at the front of the tour bus, as we visited treasures of the region, including national parks and tea plantations, volcanic craters and hot springs.

The second-year conference in the UK was also a big success, though with some issues around accommodation, as it turned out, when I arranged (for budget reasons) that staff would have rooms in the same area as students, and would use common bathrooms.

“But what if I meet the VC coming out of the shower, dressed in a towel?” One student from Kenya asked, with a quaking voice.

“Well, at least that’s better than meeting him without a towel,” I replied, a little too frivolously and perhaps without enough due respect for African protocol.

But the highlight of the three flagship events was quite definitely the final conference, which was held at an exclusive hotel, outside Mumbai, in the Western Ghats of Maharashtra. It was remarkable for a start because though it was a 5-star place, we seemed to get the whole deal at 2-star rates. This was largely due to the contacts and negotiating skills of the people who were managing the Indian arm of the project, and I well recall sitting alongside one of them as she negotiated prices with one of the hotel heads. As the prices went down and down, I wasn't game to say a word in fear that I might somehow put my foot in it and the prices would shoot back to what they were supposed to be. India and Indians can be amazing too!

The Indian conference was held in early January 2004, delegations having flown in from Kenya and the UK about a week before. In Mumbai I had found a reasonably priced hotel near the beach, which became our base for the first week and from whence there came a raft of problems that were mine to try and solve. Some of the UK party were unhappy with the accommodation, others were homesick, and most of them were uptight about the frequent delays and changes to schedule. In the end we arranged a rooftop meeting to thrash this out and try to explain that things in India were different to the UK, and even to Kenya (though the Kenyans insisted they could keep to time much better than the Indians, which of course was wishful thinking and utter rubbish!).

For the second week, we moved inland to Pune, before coming halfway back to Mumbai for the conference. Amongst all that came New Year's Eve, and one of the most amazing house parties I have ever had the pleasure of attending. It rolled on until the daylight hours and though those still standing - or awake at least - numbered people from the three countries, I have to admit that I was a bit let down by my UK compatriots; the prize for most left standing being definitely contested by India and Kenya.

Kenya grew on me, I guess; or perhaps I grew to understand Kenya more, as time went by. So much so, that after about ten years of getting to know the place, I decided to live there, beginning in Nakuru - a provincial town in the Rift Valley - but after a few months moving to Nairobi, the traffic-jammed capital.

Nakuru's claim to fame – or infamy in this case – is that it became known as the epicentre of the post-election violence period, which occurred after the presidential election in December 2007. For Kenya, it was an extremely turbulent period, with more than 1500 dead and half a million displaced. And of course, it happened to coincide with me assuming residence there and to make matters worse, based in Nakuru of all places! In some ways it resembled the *bandh* I had experienced in Mumbai, in the early 90s, though this seemed much worse, perhaps because I was now a semi-permanent resident, rather than an itinerant worker.

Nakuru was the hot spot because it was peopled, in the main, by two of the warring tribes: Kalinjen and Kikuyu. Both were known to be ruthless and could kill if pushed; particularly a very fundamental and violent wing of the Kikuyu tribe: the Mungiki. The nights were bad with dusk to dawn curfew, violent police action and fires blazing all around, while daytime held different threats such as women being stripped, or worse, raped, by Mungiki members, for showing bare skin, or wearing western-style jeans.

I was booked to fly to London on New Year's Eve, just as the whole confrontation was exploding out of control, returning about three weeks later. Getting to Nairobi was the first hurdle, so with no public transport working, I managed to secure a taxi-ride all the way there, accompanied by my Kikuyu partner. Her tribe controlled the main Nakuru-Nairobi highway, a decided advantage. If she had been from another tribe it would have been too risky. We holed up in Nairobi for a couple of nights, then made a dash for the airport, on the evening of the 31st. That was perhaps even more scary than the journey from Nakuru because we were fearful that our taxi driver may have been bribed to fake an ambush. But all went well, and I left Kenya a few minutes prior to the end of the year.

The return journey, three weeks later, was somewhat surreal; one of just 35 passengers tramping around a large plane, watching BBC news footage beaming forth, with the ominous title: NAKURU GOES UP IN FLAMES! There was a noticeable comradery amongst those aboard, as if we were all flying into a war zone, which of course we were! *"I must be mad," I said to myself, "To be flying back into that mess!"*

Thanks to the late Koffi Annan, the warring parties negotiated some sort of power sharing arrangement a month or so after I returned. The rightful winner of the election had it stolen from him by the incumbent Kikuyu leader; those displaced lived in UN tented camps, some for years after; six people were sent to trial at the International Criminal Court in The Hague (including the future president and vice-president); and the grieving buried their dead. No serious trial or enquiry; things just went back to a kind of post-war norm. This again was Africa. But I always felt that Kenya never fully appreciated what Koffi Annan did for them, as the UN special envoy. Without him it could have been civil war: a total and very bloody bloodbath!

Soon after that I moved both home and work to Nairobi; it was a big reasonably cosmopolitan city and a safer place to live, should there happen to be any recurrence of the 2007-8 violence. We built on the experiences from the three-way university programme - including another ground-breaking, triangular venture with the UK's Eden Project as partner – all the time developing our knowledge base of how to deliver meaningful learning, in each of the three countries, for the target group: youth.

2007 saw a huge step forward when my colleague, John Davidson, negotiated funding from Barclays, to support a programme which focused on climate change. I had helped devise and develop the main proposal and supervise a case study in Kenya: a big plus in helping to secure the funding. This initiative motivated me enormously and instigated a semi-permanent move to Kenya, to manage the African sector of the initiative. I teamed up with a local Non-Government Organisation (NGO) and built a team to roll out the programme, from West to East across the southern part of the country.

The NGO sector loves acronyms and our group was no different, though *ICC*, the contraction chosen for this initiative, was a little unfortunate. Were we the *International Cricket Council*, or the *International Criminal Court*? No, we were the *International Climate Challenge*. However, what we delivered – unlike the moniker – was quite unique and based around the concept of motivating youth to ask questions about their local environment and then devise ways to solve, or at least ameliorate, some of the problems

related to climate change. This is where the *Traffic Light* (mentioned above) came into being. That and many other inventive methods were employed to stimulate youthful ideas and practical solutions. Brooms from discarded plastic bottles, lampshades from clapped-out umbrellas, cheap biogas for school kitchens and fuel made from seaweed, were just a few of the many inspirational notions that came from *our ICC*.

In this programme, perhaps more than others that pre-dated it, we strove to motivate young people by bringing them together to showcase what they had done and to exchange different perspectives. In the first year of *ICC* in Kenya, we had three mammoth, tented gatherings, with 500 secondary students from an array of nearby schools attending each, along with their teachers. These what we called *Showcase Events*, involved high-profile guest speakers and even staged drama from a Nairobi-based theatre ensemble.

By this stage I had had quite a bit of experience in managing such large gatherings and so when confronted with what I thought was a bit of a shambles, at the first gathering, I voiced my opinion loudly and clearly, for all to hear. This was well-remembered and often thrown back at me, in jocular fashion by staff, from that day forward.

“What is this mess.” I remember saying to the staff gathered around me. *“If this was a competition, I would give you 3 out of 10!”*

In fact, it wasn't all that bad and ended up a successful day. But these events did get better as we move forward and became more professional.

ICC had its highs and its lows, as do nearly all NGO programmes. One of the lows took me back to difficulties a decade before with a self-centred man who headed up the charitable organization we worked with in England. This time it was almost a mirror image, but in Kenya. The head of the local organization we aligned with looked fine at first, but turned into a monster as time went by. He would literally scream non-stop at me over the phone, for five to ten minutes, and one particular face-to-face meeting I recall, went on for hours and ended up with him in tears, berating the fact that he was only creaming off the maximum 8% from UK Government funding, rather than the 10% he was after. He too,

like his UK clone, ruled *his* organization as chair, secretary and treasurer rolled into one, an overseeing a puppet committee, which succumbed to all his wishes.

I used to wonder whether I was at fault or were these guys the villains I thought they were, and it was just bad luck to become a part of their world. What I came to understand, is that they are a well-known, quite ubiquitous breed, that stalk the NGO fraternity.

But returning to more positive aspects – and of course they by far outweighed the negatives - *ICC* also enabled me to retain connections with India. Those young teachers I met on early forays into what was then Bombay, were now well-respected teacher-trainers who continued to coordinate our programmes for the Indian sector. The tri-country links ceased at the end of *ICC*, and from there on each of the countries continued with single country programmes. For me it was disheartening to see the end of the three-way interchanges, but I continued to maintain ties with India at a personal level, travelling (at times with my daughters) to various parts, always via Mumbai and forever in touch with those amazing friends I first met, through work, in the 1980s.

In Kenya, the local work evolved, to encompass another trail blazing project, this time with community youth. Here the plan was for young people, graduating from *ICC* affiliated schools, to develop viable business options, grounded in sustainable development principles. The project went by the name *Climate Action Teams*, which contracted to an attractive, and unique acronym (like the stage play): *CATs*.

CATs was amazingly motivating for all and clearly demonstrated the incredible strengths of African youth which takes me back to interactions with Anthony, who coordinated the Nairobi *CATs* team and was one of the leading lights of the whole project.

Anthony came from a poor background in the slums of Nairobi and was motivated, originally, by the *ICC* programme. To support himself and family he designed and made small animals from second-hand wire and glass beading. He was good at this, so one day I asked if he could make me an elephant. “*Yeah, sure,*” he said. “*I’ll bring it next week.*”

Next week came and one day I saw this enormous elephant coming through my office door, with Anthony hidden underneath it.

“I didn’t mean this big, Anthony,” I said to him. *“Just something small, like all the others you make.”*

“Oh, sorry,” he said sheepishly. *“I didn’t realise.”*

“How much is it?” I asked.

“Thirty-five thousand.” He replied; looking me straight in the eye; unblinking ... but with an almost indiscernible smile.

What could I say? We had not negotiated. He had me by the short and curlies!

About a week later, I gate-crashed a weekend committee meeting of young CATs leaders, in our Nairobi office. Anthony, who was in the chair, said to the others:

“This is our father; he has done so much for us.”

At the time I was taken aback by the statement, but it will stay with me forever. Anthony died not long after, at the tender age of twenty-two, and I often think back to those two meetings with him, which in some way said so much about the work I had become immersed in over the previous 25 years.

Looking back, I totted up that I have interacted with thousands of teachers and tens of thousands of young learners, across four continents. All I can hope is that, for at least a few of them, I have had a positive impact on their thinking, so that they in turn can help to make the world a more sustainable place to live in. And by that, I do not just mean sustainable, with regards to local and global environments, but also sustainable in terms of the way we relate to each other and care for those around us.

The tri-country initiatives taught us that it is not just about Kenya, or India, or the UK, it is about all three and everything together: places and people!