

Meet the Elephant of Kisa – Givan Okallo Ingari



By Shad Bulimo, August 1 2010

Khwisero is a sleepy village on the eastern fringes of Butere in Kakamega, Western Province. It has remained in a sleepy mode for centuries like a wounded elephant despite the abundance of natural resources. This is the home of intellectual giants like Prof George Eshiwani, Prof Arthur Eshiwani and Prof Eric Aseka Masinde; accomplished writers like Barrack Okwaro Muluka; legendary music maestros like David Amunga and Sukuma bin Ongaro, famous comedians like the late Peter Shicheya Lukoye (Tamaa), world class sportsmen like Mickey Weche and John Shoto Lukoye, the footballers and Evans Ashira Oure, the Denmark-based boxer. It is even where Francis Atwoli, the rumbustious trade unionist who eats and breathes fire across the land calls home not to mention the former KTN screen queen, Esther Arunga (Now Mrs Timberlake). Here also Weboko Inyundo, the engineer and his English wife, Jill live in retirement.

To the visitor, Khwisero is an idyllic setting fit for the queen except that what fish is harvested from the fish farms that famous retirees own is not shared among all the people who call Khwisero *ingo*. The relative tranquility belies the abject poverty that has blighted the community for generations. But if Khwisero is well endowed, why is it sitting at the bottom rung of the national economic ladder? I set out to find answers to this complex situation and my journeys crossed paths with one angry resident going by the name of Givan Okallo Ingari.

“Politicians are to blame,” he fired back rather abruptly. Surely matters of development are much more complex and it cannot be up to politicians alone to drive the process of economic development, I wondered.

Ingari, who is given to talking in parables, transported me to the land of the beasts to see if the jungle can help us find answers. Although not exactly George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Ingari offered that if you

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observe the behaviour of elephants going out to pasture or to water wells, you will always find that they move as a herd with one in front leading the pack. “If it turns left the rest turn left. If it turns right, the rest follow suit because in the animal kingdom, the elephants have a far more developed culture of trust with clear leadership structures from which everyone benefits,” he postulates. “In Khwisero, we don’t have that top elephant.”

“Instead, we have hyenas that keep fighting with jackals for political spoils and leftovers without a clear vision of where the people of Khwisero can find fertile economic pastures or ever flowing water springs. The people of Khwisero have become disillusioned with the current crop of politicians,” he says. Assuming there is vacuum in political leadership, is Ingari the missing elephant?

Born in Khwisero but raised in Nairobi, Ingari who finds inspiration in Mahatma Gandhi’s political philosophy says he cannot promise the people of Khwisero that he will deliver development singlehandedly. Development, he says, is a process which has to be about people. In that regard, he says he can only appeal to the people of Khwisero to join him on the journey so that together they can find answers and solutions to the economic malaise.

“I am a strong team player and I believe everyone has not just a role but a duty to participate in the game of economic development. We need leadership that can mobilise our engineers and professors to sit with the people and understand their problems and work through solutions jointly,” he says. “We don’t need professional politicians who keep making empty promises and never involve the people once elections are over.”

Ingari says that it is inexcusable that Khwisero should have poor infrastructure that is ten percent below the national average. He cites the example of Khwisero Secondary School which, for two consecutive years, has been named the worst performing. “This is not acceptable to me even with the excuses of poverty because Khwisero has some of the best brains in the country,” he says. These brains include, Prof George Eshiwani, ex Vice Chancellor of Kenyatta University, Prof Arthur Eshiwani, a board member KCA University, Prof Eric Masinde Aseka of history department, Kenyatta University and John Liboyi, one of the first IT specialists in Kenya.

“Who is the current MP for Khwisero?” he asks. Before I chip in, he answers himself. “Evans Akula Bulimo. But who is he? I have never met him nor do I know anybody who has. He went to parliament to sleep not to work for the people of Khwisero,” Ingari says, rather harshly, of his current MP who is yet to make a maiden speech in the august house.

Ingari, from the Abakambuli clan, regrets that CDF money has been either misused or embezzled. “I cannot point at anything and say this project was funded by CDF in Khwisero,” he says. “These are the kind of things that need to be addressed.”

If the constituents of Khwisero grant Ingari his prayers, the first thing he will do is to restructure the management of the CDF committee and make it truly an instrument for economic growth rather than a tool to reward the incumbent’s supporters and relatives.

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Another area close to Ingari's heart is the health sector. At the moment 200,000 people have to squeeze in three health centres – Namasoli, Mundoli and Khumusalaba which deliver a measly five percent of the health needs. "I happened to know Charity Ngilu when she was minister for health and now with her help, we are putting up water at Mundoli and Khumusalaba Health Centres. This is a personal initiative. I have also managed to get health officers posted at the three health centres but now we need medicine. Why can't Akula at least pick it up from here and help the people of Khwisero?" he asks.

The health situation in Khwisero contrasts sharply with the neighbouring Butere. In the past, Butere people came to the clinics in Khwisero but the health fortunes of the two neighbouring constituencies has seen a reversal whereby Butere has now surpassed Khwisero even though the latter is older. According to Ingari, this is largely due to the efforts of the Butere MP, Wycliffe Ambetsa Oparanya who has elevated Butere's health centre to a sub hospital with three doctors.

As far as roads are concerned, again Khwisero scores poorly relative to neighbouring constituencies. "If you drive on the bumpy Namasoli-Khumutibo road going to Yala, when the road becomes smooth then you know you are in Gem constituency," says Ingari rather sarcastically. "Nobody ever thinks that people in Khwisero have cars and that they too need good roads," he says.

On electricity the people of Khwisero have not benefitted much from the Rural Electrification Program. "Although there is a power line going to the home of Julius Arunga, the immediate former MP, most people cannot connect to it because they need Sh700, 000 to purchase the transformer and yet it costs Sh35, 000 if you are within 600 metres of the nearest transformer," he says. "These are some of the things that our leaders can initiate. They need to create rapport with energy companies and drive home the fact that investment in rural electricity is mutually beneficial."

"If you are looking at the topography of Khwisero from outer space, you would mistake it for Biblical Garden of Eden – green and serene flowing with natural springs. Things couldn't be very different on the ground. Very few people have piped water not even Mwihila High School, the pre eminent academic institution in the area. Not even Akula himself has water but he chooses to say and do nothing."

Because the leader has gone to sleep, women groups approached me to help them and I talked to Mheshimiwa Ngilu who empathised but said due to protocol reasons, she cannot be seen to be taking a cue from an unelected individual. Next I approached Oparanya to be a guest of honour at a fund raising event for women and youth groups. He too declined and gave the same protocol excuse that he did not wish to be seen to be undermining Mr Akula's leadership.

Although shoe shiners are dotted across the country, for a long time there was not a single shoe shine at Khumusalaba. When I introduced the idea in Khwisero the take up was so inspiring the youth told me I had shown them something useful. Where they used to idle around local markets and beg for handouts, they are now at least beginning to appreciate the culture of working for themselves rather than waiting for Providence.

Clearly the people of Khwisero are willing to work hard and better their economic lifestyles. However, they are crying for honest and dedicated leadership which so far is in huge deficit. The leadership

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doesn't always have to be political; it just needs to be visionary. Church leadership can provide a fertile ground to foster such vision. However, the Church is currently at a crossroads because of the way the clerics have chosen to play politics, especially referendum politics. Moreover, it is not lost to Kenyans that, by taking sides in the 2007 elections more than 1600 lives were lost and thousands still languish in IDP camps - a scar on this nation to which the men of the cloth are partly to blame.

If the church and politicians cannot be trusted to deliver the people of Khwisero to the Promised Land, who, pray, might just do that: Perhaps, trade unionist, Francis Atwoli? "Francis is a strong competitor but he is very unpopular on the ground. He prefers to play to the national gallery but what the people of Khwisero want is a leader who will be with them in all seasons," says Ingari.

Barack Muluka: I respect Barrack and I appreciate he is a bright guy but due to a combination of circumstances, he got punctured politically and I believe I can rely on his support. He is good at opening doors but poor at closing them. I see his role as that of a king maker.

Julius Arungah: The former MP may be a threat if he chooses to stand but he will be 64 in 2012 and those elections are going to be about youthful leadership.

So if Ingari is the leading elephant in Khwisero, will the rest of the herd follow him to watering wells? This rattles him and he begins to explain the role of clans in Luhya politics. He is from the abakambuli clan, one of the smallest clans in Kisa. Abasamia are the majority but during 2007 elections, Evans Akula from Khusukulu beat them because they had fielded nine candidates. He beat Arungah by just 80 votes.

Ingari whose favourite novelist is Robert Ludlum, the thriller writer, believes that people's customs and traditions define who they are and gives an indication as to where they might end up going. He has carried out an unpublished study on this subject and is widely credited with being an authority on cultural matters. As a custodian of clan traditions, his advice is frequently sought.

Ingari may be urbanite, youthful, dashing, ambitious and entrepreneurial but is that enough to be the lead elephant? "I have a different approach influenced by my experience working with NGOs, international organisations, government and businesses," he says. "I am not a lone ranger. I believe in team work."

I have done a few things in my village which I would want to replicate across Khwisero. I launched a bursary fund which works in such a way that those who have benefitted from it are obligated to support others as well. Through this initiative we have produced two doctors: Dr Charles Ambundo now working at Bungoma District Hospital and Dr Tom Andale doing his post graduate at University of Nairobi. The we have engineer Ibrahim Malika in Bungoma; Town planner, Alfred Eshitera in Lamu; Nehemiah Ndeta who owns Emukhunzulu Educational Complex in Khumusalaba and Kwa Watoto (primary and secondary) in Nairobi catering for poor children.

"I cannot tell Khwisero people that I am made of steel. Of course I am human and recognise my weaknesses. But I do believe that if we make honest mistakes, we should ask for forgiveness as soon as this is pointed to us rather than become defensive about it," he says.

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I set up SIKA High Tech Investments Ltd in 1992 that targeted 20 high flyers in Khwisero with John Liboyi, the IT director at Treasury as the chairman and the late Frank Litunya as Treasurer (then Kakamega Town Clerk) and I was the secretary. Shareholders included Patrick Indeche and the late Harrison Odongo Aywa who later became an MP as a result of SIKA's support. Others were late Major Eshiwani and Winstone Murunga, Engineer Silas Alwora of Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, Engineer Rodgers Okaro of Kenya Civil Aviation Authority, late Moses Okune, businessman and Livingstone Ambetsa, a deputy commissioner of KRA.

Side by side with SIKA was KEDEO which stands for Khwisero Development Organisation which we set up to act as a charitable arm but which we used for purely political purposes to help people like Odongo. But it attracted my political competitors like Atwoli who poured in too much money and killed it. Atwoli has told people that Ingari is his biggest threat but that my problem is I don't have money. But it is not always about money even though that is important. I am quite personable and I attract all types of people. That is my strength.

We all know that elephants are big and often get their way. However, animal kingdom mythology credits the hare or the fly as the elephant's biggest enemies. Ingari admits he is not invincible. However his greatest weakness is also his greatest strength. He gives too much. "I am dangerously generous. This is how mother puts it," he says

Ingari is the last born of the late Jared Ingari who passed on in 2005 and Jael from Essalwa in Bunyore. He has three sisters and one brother. The eldest in the family is Margaret Ombima married in Emutete, Lydiah Andako, a teacher in Kakamega Primary School, Willis Ingari, civil engineer who works Uganda with European Union and Betty Andeso, a teacher at Shimalabandu Primary School in Kakamega.

A thoroughly protective family man, Ingari is married to Millicent Nyanya, a teacher at Embakasi Girls High School and Miriam Wanyanga, a ground air hostess with Kenya Airways. With Millicent, they have Yvonne Ingari, a recent Bachelor of Commerce graduate from the University of Nairobi now working with Safaricom, Shawn Ingari, second year at university of Nairobi, Nicky Ingari and Emmanuel both still in primary school. With Miriam, they have Nigel, Trevor and Fleming. Fleming was named after his Danish classmate in Copenhagen who has in turn named his son Ingari in a straight swop.

Ingari whose favourite food is obusuma nende ingokho ye musherekha (ugali with chicken cooked in traditional spices) also loves football and rumba music. His favourite tune is by the late Lwambo Lwanzo Makiadi aka Franco known as "Lucida" – Le professeur, a la universite, au college, a la ecole, chercher le medicine," so it goes. Roughly translated in English is means professors, teachers, doctors look for medicine. This thing (HIV) is going to finish us. He was a true maestro; when struck by HIV he composed a song to warn people, he says of the Congolese music maestro.

Givan Okallo Ingari, the chief operating officer Integrated Logistics Ltd, the international freight forwarders, lists "Entebbe Raid" as his all time favourite movie. The speed and accuracy of the organisation and execution was impressive, he says. The Operation Entebbe commander made sure everyone was aboard when he was killed as he tried to board. It shows you how some people are

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prepared to make sacrifices on behalf of others,” he says. “I am one of those people willing to put my life on the line on behalf of my beloved people of Khwisero.”

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