
Cultural and Religious Foundations

Throughout my life as an academic and university administrator, I have had to draw a lot of inspiration from the teaching I received in my early upbringing. On reflection, I have realized that the earliest socialization within my father's household and my experiences during my primary and secondary school days contributed immensely to shaping my academic and administrative career. I was born in Nyamagesa Village, Nyaribari Masaba, Kisii County. I am the ninth child of the late Mzee Patroba and Beldina Nyatero Michieka. We were a family of twelve children, but some have already passed away.¹

My ancestry is from a very large clan, the Kerindo family that was named after my great-grandfather. The Kerindo family is one of the largest and most prominent in the larger Kamba Nane (Eight Brothers) clan. The clan is composed of very controversial, short-tempered, intelligent and arrogant offspring who can react against the slightest form of provocation. This is perhaps indicative of my great-great-grandfather's reputed short-temper. The larger Nyaribari is inhabited by several clans that allow inter-marriages between people from unrelated clans. Mzee Kerindo had four wives whose names I cannot remember. I am told he lived in Kitutu Chache, the original home of Omogusias, a people that is also referred to as *'Enda y'Enchogu'* which literary means *'The Elephant's Womb'*. Mzee Kerindo, the son of Obare (my great-great-grandfather) sired my grandfather Okioga Kerindo, who was his eldest son.

I was told that Kerindo loved Okioga because of his courage and obedience. He was a reserved son. Okioga married three wives; one of them, Kemunto, gave birth to my late father, Patroba Michieka in 1907. There were two other brothers and two sisters, namely: Mouti, Ongeru, Nyamaera and Nyakerario. In lineage, therefore, my grandfather, Okioga, commanded respect from all his brothers and step-brothers since he was the eldest son.

I never saw my grandfather alive but I learnt he was a very intelligent man and he helped sort out village disputes. My mother told me that he used to wear a blanket and a hat and owned several heads of cattle. He had some brothers including

Ombati Nyarangi Kerindo, Mayore, Achuti, Israel Onywere, Paul Mogaka Siro, Arika, Miranyi; and several sisters.

There was large exodus of people to the east, Masaba, in the early 1900s in search of new frontiers for agriculture and livestock rearing. Those who moved from their ancestral land, Nyaura village, in the outskirts of Kisii town, did not sever relationship with their relatives. My parents were peasant farmers who also migrated from Nyaura village in the environs of Kisii town and moved to Masaba in search of bigger land to cultivate. In 1915, Mzee Michieka and his cousins of the larger Kerindo ancestry travelled 30 kilometres to Nyamagesa Village and occupied virgin land that was then considered unsafe for fear of wild animals and skirmishes with the neighbouring Maasai and Kipsigis tribes.

The group which moved to the new frontiers settled there and embarked on farming and cattle-keeping. Knowing that my father had occupied land in Nyamagesa against all odds made me realize and appreciate the power of bravery in any of life's undertakings. As young boys, we were told several stories which taught us leadership traits, guidance, humility and bravery. The stories would later serve some instructive ends in my career.

Specifically, I come from one of the clans referred to as *Kamba Nane*, which means *eight brothers*.²

The Abagusii are a patrilineal people. My grandmother Kemunto was Okioga Kerindo's second wife, and gave birth to Mouti, Onger and three sisters. I was able to see only one of the sisters, Nyamaera, who passed away in 2012 at the age of 115. She was the fourth sibling in the family, followed by my father. Some of the information I have used was provided by her before she died. She was a great aunt who used to tease me a lot by referring to great things she and my father did during their youth. She nicknamed my father *Onchana*, the youthful name he used to be called when he was hunting game. He was a very accurate shot. During those days, my father was considered a great hunter and could spear wild animals from a long distance.

If it were today, his talent of being a good shot would be considered and tapped. Some of my cousins today serve in the armed forces and acquired their abilities from watching my father hunting. Others are among the best artisans in Kenya. Some of the grandparents whom I interacted with included: Ombati Nyarangi, Mayore, Onywere and Maturi.

My grandfather's brother, Achuti, who lived before I was born, was a great and unique man. He was one of the Gusii warriors who resisted the British invasion of Gusiland in 1908. He fought alongside Otenyo Nyamaterere who led the resistance against the British. The British, led by a fierce soldier named Geoffrey Alexander Nothcorte (also referred to as Nyarigoti – being the Gusii pronunciation of his name) faced intense resistance from the unarmed Kisii warriors. Otenyo was killed in a fierce battle against the British soldiers and it is believed that his head was taken

to London. Just like Dedan Kimathi is respected for the role he played in the Mau Mau rebellion, Otenyo and by extension Achuti, are credited with the expulsion of the British from Gusiiland.

Achuti missed death by a whisker when he was shot twice; one bullet glazed his forehead and formed a lasting scar, and the other one was lodged in his right thigh but was later operated on and removed by a local Kisii 'surgeon'. He limped for the rest of his life! My father and his elder brothers who lived with Achuti until the latter's death in 1950 have great memories and respect for his bravery. He advised us to be brave like Achuti in the defence of our rights. Many of my family members do not condone mediocrity and cannot accept any injustice lying down. They speak out for or against any issues which affect them.

The Abagusii people were among the first communities in Kenya to fiercely defend their land and livestock using crude weapons against very sophisticated British firearms. That is why the Gusii highlands, which have a perfect climate for all types of good farming activities, were spared. A few thousand hectares were, however, taken along the eastern part of the slopes. The Mau Mau rebellion affected the Abagusii people just like it did other tribes in Kenya. The Mau Mau historians often downplay the roles that this community played. I was always inspired by my step-grandfather, Achuti, even during my early school days in Kisii where I first came into contact with British teachers.

Nyamagesa Village where my late father, Mzee Patroba settled with my uncles and their cousins is located on a hill overlooking the magnificent Maasai Mara plains to the east. The place is hilly, punctuated with beautiful valleys that are endowed with several rivers, streams and swamps. The terrains are challenging for any form of ground transport. If one flies over the hills, one sees continuous greenery punctuated by iron-roofed houses. As in many parts of the larger Gusiiland, Nyamagesa has deep loam soils suitable for agriculture, and cultivation of various crops is practiced, as well as cattle keeping. Gusiiland receives an annual rainfall of about 1500 mm which is evenly spread over the year. When it rains in Gusiiland, it pours. The tropical weather, which is characterized by plenty of sunshine, induces high crop productivity in the fertile soils. It is rare to hear of famine or food shortage in Gusiiland unless a catastrophe occurs. In many cases, poor seed quality or unprecedented floods may occasion crop failure, and hence hunger and subsequent famine.

My father had two wives – my own mother and my stepmother, Rachel Nyarangi, who also had four boys and four girls. During our upbringing, my step-brothers and sisters did not distinguish between their biological mother and my mother. According to our culture, we were all brothers and sisters who lived and ate together in one large homestead.

We grew up knowing that we were one large family under one caring father. We were always together in whichever activities we carried out. The only clear distinction

amongst us was the age difference. Five of my elder brothers were naturally advanced in age compared to me. My eldest brother William Nyamwange was closer to my father in age and I respected him because of that, especially during my youth. He was my disciplinarian and mentor. I never challenged him. His word to me and my other brothers was final. In fact, he used his position as an elder brother to always remind and intimidate us that he was supreme in decision-making.

Three of my elder brothers were close in age and they equally respected him. They always worked together in the farm when they were out of school. The brother before me, the late Hezron Tirimba, was so close to me that I regarded him as my age-mate despite having my late sister, Mary Bonareri, between us. My younger brother, Amenity, was equally close to me and very supportive. He often came to my rescue whenever I was in trouble. I, however, regarded him as a junior sibling whom I would bully at times. We were nevertheless very close and I could not do anything or go anywhere without making him aware. We were each other's keeper.

Religious Life

We grew up in a strict Christian family. My father and mother were staunch Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) followers who believed and followed the teachings of the Bible. My mother was a deaconess and a church building promoter. The early SDA missionaries instilled religious doctrines into the Nyamagesa village community which changed traditional beliefs.

One great church elder that made a major difference in our community deserves unparalleled recognition: my uncle, the late Augustine Ogero. He made the Nyamagesa community and its environs what it is today. Elder Augustin Ogero was a teacher, a preacher and a strict disciplinarian during his 'reign'. He was a proclaimed law implementer, law executor for the community, especially for the young boys and girls. He shaped the characters of both the youth and elders alike. I grew up knowing that Christian and education doctrines went hand-in-hand.

I went to church at an early age of five years on condition that I was not to go and tend our cows with my elder brother, Tirimba. Going to church then was, and even today still is, a silent mandatory obligation of the SDA community. The rules and regulations of the church, and especially the Ten Commandments, are always in force and must be adhered to at all times. The community elders quoted and reminded us of the same messages in every single encounter.

I used to be asked to read the Bible in special youth congregations and recite several biblical verses in front of the entire church. I developed confidence in standing and talking to crowds of grown-ups. I was considered a brave, young boy who could face the audience without stammering or getting nervous or confused. I became brave and bold at a very early age. Public speaking, as I realized later was not just an automatic art, but a skill that needed to be acquired through practice early in life. This was best developed at a tender age and built on as one advanced in

maturity. Reading the verses required some degree of confidence and bravery, lest one trembled and skipped lines. I was always eager to lead the children's Sabbath school in my church. I must, however, admit one thing: one must go through some fear and nervousness initially before one gains full confidence to address a congregation.

My Early Schooling

I first went to school in 1957 at the age of seven. Elders in our community were always reminding us of the benefits of acquiring a good, sound education. We were told to go to school and learn as this was the only sure way to good living. We were further exhorted to be obedient to all who were older than us. In addition to these basic requirements, we were taught to obey, remember and recite the Ten Commandments. Taking alcoholic drinks was condemned, and those who were found doing so were considered rebels who ought not to mingle with others. Incidents of deaths occasioned by consuming illicitly-brewed alcoholic drinks in Kenya threaten the well-being of its citizens. However, up to the time of writing this book, alcohol abuse in Nyamagesa Village was not as pronounced as in other surrounding villages. Instead, the area has for long been, and still is, more famous for the academic excellence of its youths.

Any elder who came across anyone's child misbehaving had an automatic right to mete out instant punishment necessary to correct the child. The community respected elders' judgement at that level. I, honestly, did not know how this right was accorded to these elders. The youths feared and respected anyone senior to them. If a youth absconded from school, the whole community would want to discipline the concerned youth. I did not want to fall victim. Indeed, the elders and the community at large made us what we are today. I pay tribute to their early wisdom that education was the answer to a better life in future.

My father told me one afternoon in January 1957 that I would go to Ibacho Primary School the following week. This was exciting news as I knew that I would get a new uniform but no shoes, and meet new pupils and teachers. My elder brothers had already been through this process and I saw no big issue about it. I was sure that I was no longer going to tend our cattle in the mornings, and I was going to be able to read and write! I looked forward to being a class one pupil. There were no nursery classes then. I also knew that Saturdays were my free days and I would be reading my verses to the congregation in church. I would also get exercise books and a slate to write on. My most exciting expectation was the opportunity of graduating to dipping a nib into an inkpot and then writing in an exercise book! I had seen what my elder brothers were doing, how well they were dressed and the neat writing they displayed on the blackboard we had at home. I had also witnessed how well they were respected and treated when they came home from either day or boarding schools. The uniform they wore and shoes were so neat that they contrasted sharply with my tattered shirts and shorts.

My first day at Ibacho Primary School arrived. I got up very early, wore my uniform and walked there barefoot. It was some three kilometres (1.5 miles) away up and down some hills. Some four boys from my home area had also been admitted to the same school. This was the closest school to Nyamagesa Village. Gesusu and Nyanturago primary schools were farther away than Ibacho and our parents opted for it since it was also opening its doors for the first batch of Standard One pupils that year. During those days, there were no baby classes or nursery schools. One therefore went straight into class one.

My friends, Ratemo Monyenge, Tirimba Okongo, Paul Mageka, Nicodemous Mose, Aska Monyenye and I all met at the grounds of Ibacho Primary School on the first day of opening. We all followed the tyre track of the bicycle used by my uncle and teacher, David Onyiego Onywere (now late), who had been posted there to teach. I recall very vividly that it had rained heavily the previous night and after wading through the morning dew and stepping in the mud, one left temporary marks which those coming later could track. I knew this because cattle stolen by the Maasai and Kipsigis was tracked by the hoof marks they left behind until they could be recovered from a hideout. My father told me that cattle foot marks and warm cow dung droppings assisted them to trace stolen cows. Later on, I was occasionally involved in tracking stolen cattle from either Maasailand or Kipsigis area. Only brave men could pursue cattle raiders.

We reached Ibacho Primary School dressed in blue uniforms, which I thought were smart. I recall many of us in Standard One considering ourselves the greatest as there was no other class ahead of us. The classroom was grass-thatched, with an earth-smearred floor and a makeshift blackboard. There were twenty of us who had come from all corners of the surrounding villages. I recall that we were sixteen boys and four girls in the class. Soon after, two girls quit and went to get married.

My most astonishing observation was the age difference between a group of us from Nyamagesa and those we met from other places. We were so young that they called us lads, heckled and subjected us to doing all manner of clean-ups in the mornings. Bullying of pupils existed during our primary school days. We could not report the boys as we feared they would attack us on our way home. This behaviour hardened us at an early age. We had good teachers, some of whom had come from teacher training colleges, and they protected us particularly during break and physical education periods.

My luck came when I was appointed the class head – a monitor. My role was to pick chalk for the teacher, wipe the blackboard, keep order in class and carry out the roll-call. I was also charged with maintaining silence in class and reporting any noise makers to the class teacher. I had some authority and recognition amongst my Standard One peers. I do not, however, recall reporting cases of indiscipline to any class teacher, except when I was in Standard Four, handling disks. This is where any pupil speaking in his or her mother-tongue was given a disk-like object which

in turn he or she would give to the next pupil who made the same mistake. All the teacher needed to do was to ask for the disk from the pupil who got it first. That pupil would mention who he or she had given it to, and it would be followed all the way to the last pupil who had it that day. This was meant to discourage the usage of mother-tongue in school, and promote the use of English.

We used to arrive early in school, go to parade for inspection, do some marching or mark-time, sing the National Anthem then entitled '*God Save the Queen*' and enter our respective classes marching in style. Our lessons lasted for half a day then, which meant they had to stop at noon. As a monitor, my role again was to return the remaining chalk, a checked roll-call book, a duster and the teacher's ruler to the office. There were no other privileges accorded to me except being told that I was a good class monitor. I appreciated the compliments. Today, I do acknowledge the good deeds of my workers and often thank them more handsomely than just making verbal compliments.

These were my routine duties every morning. There was no incentive for my dedicated services as is done nowadays, but I enjoyed my work. The only advantage we had as class monitors was that we had a special place on parade and would recommend disciplinary measures for misbehaving pupils. We were also respected by the immediate communities for the role we played. The rural people knew our roles in school. Prefects had more powers than monitors.

Our half-day schooling was fun. I remember my mother, Mama Beldina Nyatero, waking up every day at 5 am to fend for us before we went to school. Considering the distance from my village to Ibacho Primary School, walking all the way to be in class at 7.30 am was not easy for young boys and girls. My mother was very special when it came to feeding her children. She could cook '*ugali*' (maize meal) for us to eat that early before we left for school. The half-day school was only applicable to Standards One to Four. Due to lack of classroom space, we had to leave the classrooms for the upper primary classes (Standard Five to Standard Eight) to use in the afternoon.

We covered all periods as prescribed in the syllabus during the morning hours. Classes ended at 12.00 noon and we had to trek home over the hills, valleys and rivers to Nyamagesa Village. There were many times when it would rain on us in the mornings and afternoons. This, however, was not a big deal as the rain would drench our clothes and they would still get dry on our bodies. Most days in Kisii are punctuated by sunny and rainy periods.

Back home in the afternoon, we had our chores to contend with. I used to get home at about 1 pm, have lunch if it was there and then head straight to tend our cattle. I would relieve my father who would then go and attend to other more demanding chores. I was reliable and timely in relieving him. My father knew that come 1 pm, I would be there without fail. This allowed him to plan his afternoon accordingly. My other brothers were either in full-day schooling or boarding and

were therefore not available. My elder sister Ruth was in another school and if she came early, she assisted mother in the kitchen or went to fetch firewood, water or vegetables. School days were so programmed that we could not be available for any other duties. I recall that at the end of the day, late in the afternoon, my father would call me and teach me how to write numbers and letters.

My father had a very good handwriting but was slow. He had learnt the basics and could keep records. My mother was illiterate, but had very sharp memory and did cram parts of the new and old testaments in the Bible. My other afternoons, when cattle were kept in their shed, were spent in practising in the church choir, weeding farms and cleaning up our homestead.

The young boys from my village who I walked with to school formed a defensive clique to protect ourselves. We walked to primary school together, returned home in a group and played makeshift soccer balls as a group. We were taught to be social by our parents who encouraged us to study as a team. I was always ready to volunteer on any task either in school or at home. We were taught to look out for the girls who went to school with us in case they would be molested by other boys. It was interesting to note that other boys from neighbouring hills viewed us as potential enemies who could harm them because we were always together.

The grouping was an advantage to us since no one dared to bother us. The other boys' houses were in close proximity to the school and we envied them because they were able to dash home for tea break and leave us hungry in the school compound. Some pupils who were lucky to have relatives around the school or were related to the teachers could be invited for tea or porridge. Occasionally, a sympathetic teacher could call me to his house and serve me with tea which I appreciated. The early school education I have narrated was typical of many primary schools in Gusiland. My experience from Standards One to Four, was exploratory.

I believed in excelling and keeping my school uniform clean. I would remove it as soon as I arrived home, and do homework: reading, writing and arithmetic. I set aside reading time after the cattle came back home. My brothers and sisters who went to other schools encouraged me to study in the evenings. I used to peruse through their work and learn from them. We had a makeshift type of table where I placed a small kerosene lantern. It produced reasonable light for reading and writing. Our parents encouraged us to study hard and bought us reading materials. I had to strive to be among the first three at the end of each term. As a monitor, it would be most embarrassing to perform poorly because other pupils would heckle me, and call me all sorts of names. In fact, they would attribute bad results to over-indulgence for being a monitor. I was, therefore, under continuous pressure to excel lest I would be called names even by the community.

My formative schooling was eventful. I met other boys and girls from the neighbouring hills, compared notes, talked about our parents and bonded. My circle began to grow through networking and making friends. The youngest boys

in our class performed very well during the end-of-term examinations. I was one of them. One thing that was very clear in our interactions was not to leave anyone behind as we traversed the rivers and hills to our homes. We were together at all times except on weekends. The teachers knew us as a group of lads who were polite and always punctual.

The mentality of teachers then was to cane pupils for any mistakes they committed. Caning was a typical way of disciplining the youth, especially late-comers. I detested being caned and did everything possible within my powers to be on the right side of the school rules. I was, however, given several strokes for not marching properly. My father never wanted his children caned in school. He believed that teachers could hurt them, and this often happened to other pupils. I later saw the sense in his belief and followed his philosophy; I never wanted my children caned either.

We feared all teachers like hell. They always carried canes provided to them by monitors or prefects. There were times that I would bring a small piece of stick to be used for caning pupils and the teacher would turn on me with the same stick and whip me for bringing a tiny cane. The sizes of caning sticks varied with the teachers. By the way, boys were caned on the bottoms and girls on the palms. Latecoming, noisemaking, failure to deliver firewood to school, failure to sweep the dusty floors, failure to bring water to teachers' houses, failure to respond either 'Yes, Sir' or 'Yes, Madam' and other minor offences could land one in trouble. Punishment was meted out in broad daylight at the parade by either the headmaster or the duty master.

During my primary education, I encountered various influential teachers who had a strong bearing on my early education and character.³ I have named the teachers not in any order of seniority but on account of certain attributes which changed my life. Some of the teachers stayed in our school for a long period while others were transferred to other schools. There were numerous incidences which I will highlight in later sections of this book. Most of the teachers were helpful to me and liked to assign me duties which they believed I could accomplish.

As a class prefect, having been promoted from the cadre of a monitor to that of a prefect, I was assigned to ensure that the small school 'library' was well maintained. Some junior reading books like *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift were stocked here. I kept all records of the reading books, borrowers, date taken and date returned. I was trusted and no books got lost. The only advantage I had was to borrow several short storybooks to read at home because I had access to them. Many titles were of English short stories. I could take two or three books for the weekend and return them on Monday after reading them. I actually became fluent in the language and was able to write and read well.

As a library prefect, I would also carry books to class, distribute them to students during a particular reading period and collect all of them at the end for safe keeping.

I was strict while distributing and collecting them as some students could easily take them away. I was the accounting officer of the books for my classes. Honestly, there was nothing like a library. Books were stacked in piles in carton boxes arranged according to the different subjects. The rooms were dusty and crowded. Leaking roofs would destroy some. Those were the typical primary school libraries in those days.

I was responsible for reporting lost or torn books to avoid being caned or punished. During the discharge of my duties, there was one critical observation I made: never to be late in carrying out my chores. The last thing I wanted was to be declared late in accomplishing any assignment. I do not recall any single day when I reported to school late. In fact I would be there very early in the morning, open the classroom door, which was partially broken, and then start cleaning the blackboard. I developed the habit of being punctual to class.

I became known for keeping time, and my additional role was to ring the school bell for parades and lesson period change-over. If I knew I could be late for any reason, I quickly abandoned what I was doing and would be on time for the next duty. Part of the failure of many of my friends was the non-compliance with time demands and not observing strict deadlines.

Other than caning, there were other ways of meting out punishments to latecomers. For instance, one had to dig up and produce a live mole. This was a mammoth task which caused several pupils to quit school. Some students could opt for ten or twelve canes on a chilly morning, rather than unearth a live mole from the deep underground. Tirimba Okongo and Makori Nyagwencha had to go through this punishment and they dug up the whole field without any success. I did not want to be found on the wrong side of the rules and go through this harrowing punishment.

School drop-outs became rampant, because of excessive punishments, but many of us persevered. In fact, we assumed that severe punishments were the norm. We heard of more serious punishments of pupils in other schools where parents went to fight teachers using pangas or machetes. Other punishments demanded the presence of one or both of your parents or a guardian. This was the ultimate embarrassment to anyone in school. At this point, one was threatened with expulsion or severe punishment if one was to be allowed to continue with school. The demand was so painful to the pupils that nobody wanted to commit an offence to necessitate the summoning of a parent or guardian. It was degrading, debasing and disrespectful.

Luckily for me, I did not have to summon my parents to Ibacho Primary School. I had enough advice from home and I consequently behaved. It would have been absurd for a class leader to be requested to bring a parent to school on disciplinary matters. All these problems were manifested in all classes from Standards One to Four and later continued to upper primary.

My entry into Standard Four meant that we stayed in school all day from 7 am to 4 pm. Those of us who proceeded to Standard Five were about twenty-five and

I recall some of them. At this level, other pupils joined us from the neighbouring schools due to various reasons. We considered ourselves great to be in the upper primary classes.

I made several friends with whom I did many things in common: sharing books, the occasional meal and home visits. This was where I met mature entrants who had repeated classes several times. Some of them were married men. I thought I had seen senior class mates at lower primary. I now had to contend with older boys as a prefect. Some of these were uncontrollable and no one dared them, not even teachers! I still recall several names of my Standards Four to Eight classmates.⁴

Standards Five to Eight classrooms were small and always packed to capacity. The names I have given were those I could remember from Standard 5. To be honest, as we progressed to Standards Six, Seven and Eight, I could only recall a handful of us sitting for the primary school leaving examination which enabled me to join the secondary school. Many of them dropped out due to several reasons, which included academic pressure, indiscipline, poor performance in exams and transfer to other schools. The girls were either married off or just quit school. Others repeated classes but we still kept in touch.

I was close to my fellow students and they liked me as a good young boy who would not report them when they made mistakes. They therefore felt protected. This assisted me in remembering their names and the areas they came from. Some of them travelled much longer distances than us. I still served as the bell-ringer and class prefect but avoided any confrontations whatsoever. Again, my role as a class leader did not affect my academic performance.

These earlier experiences later came to enrich the perspectives I developed in university administration. For example, during my tenure, sometimes tribal politics emerged among the student community, who would sometimes be on opposing camps depending on which political party was more acceptable to senior political figures from their community. I remember one case when a group of students, one from the Kikuyu and the other from the Kalenjin community fought the whole night over differing political ideologies. The incident involved about 80 students.

The campus security alerted me early in the morning of the incident. I drove to the campus at about 4 am and summoned all the students to my office. I gave the students a long talk and advised them against what they had been involved in, emphasizing the importance of nationhood and the negative effects of parochial tribal political affiliations. Though the matter was serious, the students appreciated my counsel and apologized. The matter rested there and I gave the students another chance. Over time, they atoned and never got involved in similar skirmishes again. My verbal talk served as their punishment.

The manner in which punishments were meted out to mischievous pupils in upper classes was brutal to say the least. The training of teachers during those days was to literally apply the saying that *'spare the rod and spoil the child'* to its

extreme. During my primary school days, I underwent and also witnessed fellow pupils undergo forms of extreme corporal punishment which had an everlasting imprint in my later life. Some of the punishments were so unfair that, as children, we could tell the injustices and biases in each mistake. Three of these incidents are illustrative.

Incident One: I had an encounter with one teacher while serving as a class prefect in Standard Eight. As a prefect, I did not condone any latecomers since this was the school rule dictated to us by the head teacher. My duty was to comply and execute. I would write the names of latecomers and hand them over to the duty master for necessary action.

One afternoon, a teacher's wife who was in the same class with us came late. The mature lady strolled into class way past 2 pm after lunch. I think it was a Mathematics lesson which was almost coming to an end. In my young innocence, and being a prefect of a class and a law abiding kid, I loudly told the husband who was on duty that the lady had come late and deserved a punishment just like any other latecomer. Several late comers had been caned a few minutes before she arrived. She too, I reasoned, must be subjected to all the school rules which governed us. This almost put an end to my school career and life! I had stepped on a hot and glowing wire!

The husband/teacher, who was known for his hideous anger and tyranny landed on me with countless strokes, slaps, kicks, squeezing and curses. This was being done in front of my classmates who had a lot of respect for me. He thundered and cursed on top of his voice as he hit me. I recall him asking if I knew whether the lady was his wife or not. All the pupils in the adjacent classrooms were interrupted by his shouts.

The deputy headmaster came over from the office to find out what was happening! Everybody was alerted about the commotion in our class. One teacher; Mr. Hezekiah Mobisa Ombworo, walked into the classroom and he looked stunned. He saw me sobbing and bleeding from the upper lip where I had been given an astounding jab. He looked surprised and angry. I walked out of the class, followed him to the office and explained to the headmaster who appeared equally surprised at the merciless beating I had gotten.

I told them that I was being beaten because I had reported a lady who arrived late in class. I did not know that laws were applied discriminately. I was observing the rules and practice of the law with the hope that justice could be effected uniformly.

I was made to know that laws and justice did not apply to all. Some people were above the law and the weaker ones suffered the consequences. Much later in my high school, I came across this truth that all animals are equal but some are more equal than others. This was in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

I felt demoralized and still wondered what wrong I had done to deserve such a brutal beating. I later learnt that there were more teachers and pupils who

sympathized with me than the duty master and his arrogant wife. But did the lady classmate, the wife of the teacher, feel any mercy for me as I was being hammered savagely by her husband for reporting her lateness? I went home, a sad and bruised boy, and told my father about the incident. He was disturbed about it, but I told him that I was okay and would continue with my school work and avenge in other academic ways. Perhaps this was a booster to me later in life.

I still vouched to keep the law and continued to perform my duties unperturbed. I convinced myself to let the by-gones be just that, as I pushed ahead in my learning habits with zeal. That beating was perhaps an impetus to make me work hard and pass my examinations. In fact, I passed my Standard Eight examinations well and the lady failed miserably.

I concluded that for every negative and/or destructive activity, there was a stronger and more powerful positive thrust/success. This became my guiding principle which I have always shared with my family. Let no failure deter you from moving forward. For every single drawback, there are numerous successes awaiting you.

Incident Two: My very close friend called Martin was a brother-in-law to a teacher who taught us Mathematics. Martin made a mistake of answering a question rudely to this brother-in-law while in class. Incidentally, the same teacher was the one who had whipped me earlier in the term for reporting his wife. The teacher asked Martin to go in front of the class.

The teacher carried a cane at all times. He commanded him to bend and receive some of the strokes cane. Martin tried to resist, but the teacher pulled him by the pants, the way the Kenyan law enforcers lift criminals by the pants. The teacher whipped Martin fiercely. He floored him and stepped on his well-pressed shorts. The smart shirt and shorts gathered dust from the floor.

I sympathized with him, having gone through a similar experience myself. Again the teacher thundered all sorts of abuses and curses in front of a stunned class. He later remarked that he had taught him a lesson for being rude and disrespectful.

This kind of punishment made me wonder whether there was any other humane mode of discipline. We were not mischievous in any way to deserve harsh corporal punishment. During our school days, pupils grew up in fear wondering when their turns for beatings would come. Many, therefore, quit schools altogether and went off to graze cattle or simply wandered about the countryside. I kept asking myself a basic fundamental question: why could a teacher apply such a serious corporal punishment to a young pupil without first explaining the reason? One can spare the rod and still have a disciplined youth. That is why my father never wanted his children caned.

Incident Three: Pupils in upper primary classes were banned from speaking their mother tongue, *Ekegusii*. Any offender was punishable by receiving several strokes or in the form of carrying a disc. To deter the habit, a disc was given to students found speaking *Ekegusii*. The discs were administered by class prefects

and the school head boy. Each morning, prefects, me included, were called into the headmaster's office and handed a disc to give to the first student caught speaking *Ekegusii*.

The first to receive the disc hid it and was always on the lookout for another vernacular speaker to whom the disc was passed. This process was repeated until the end of the day where all disc-holders' names were called in reverse order. They were then paraded in front of the school for caning. This practice was implemented for a few years before being discontinued. It was a colonial mentality in the guise of promoting the English language in African schools. Its primary purpose was to promote speaking in English at the expense of *Ekegusii*.

The practice did not work as well as expected because many pupils performed poorly in English. Since I had the responsibility of handing out the discs, I opted to speak English or keep quiet altogether like some of my schoolmates. The school appeared to have zombies walking around the compound without uttering a word. This behaviour made our life miserable as we had to wait until we were out of the school compound to talk.

My earnest assessment of the situation was that one could not push an idea down others' throats. Instead, people should have the freedom to choose to agree and adopt a new idea. There have been several situations where good ideas have not been readily embraced due to the mode of execution. This knowledge came in handy during my tenure as the University Vice-Chancellor and the Director-General of the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA). I let my staff implement new programmes which they thought would enable them to work efficiently. My duty was to accord support and general guidance.

Incident Four: When I was in Standard Five, I had the opportunity to stay in a teacher's quarters instead of trekking home every day. I stayed with my cousin, Mr Nicodemous Mose, who was physically challenged. He had had a fire accident at infancy and both his legs were damaged just below the knee. He had to use special tailor-made round shoes for walking, while supporting himself with two sticks. He would walk to school very slowly and had to leave his house around 5 am.

The opportunity for us to stay in an Ibacho Primary School teacher's compound was a relief for him. I offered to live with him in one small kitchen where we shared a bed. We were pretty close.

Unfortunately, next to our kitchen lived a naughty lad, Peter Onyonta, who did not like my cousin Nicodemus. He always abused him, beat him up and ran away because Nicodemus could not run after him because of his condition. The young boy took advantage of Mose's disability and did all sorts of silly things to him. He was a year older than me and would not listen to my pleas to stop his habitual harassment. I sympathized with my cousin and considered taking action against Peter. He always made me feel very bad whenever he harassed and ridiculed Mose.

One afternoon, he joined us where we were seated and started abusing Mose. This was his way of provoking Mose whenever he saw him. I thought to myself: enough is enough. As soon he called him names, I interjected and told him to stop the abuses. My interjection aggravated the situation and he slapped Mose in defiance.

There was a pile of poles next to where we were sitting. I stood up, pulled out one of them and gave Peter a thorough beating. He cried out in agony. Then, a teacher who was passing by saw the commotion and intervened. I narrated what had transpired and what informed my violence.

The teacher listened attentively and further caned Peter for his naughty behaviour. He never harassed or assaulted my cousin again and kept to himself for the whole duration he was a student at Ibacho Primary School. He respected both Mose and me, and learnt the lesson of being polite and considerate to the disabled. I have always been very considerate of the physically challenged. That was one of my father's teachings.

My quick and prompt reaction over issues that I did not agree with would later arise during my tenure in university administration. There were occasions that I acted swiftly to save a bad situation, though sometimes I had to rein in my quick action and consult widely before making a final decision. On one occasion, the teaching staff went on strike at the national level over poor remuneration. This was in 1994, when I had just been elevated from Principal to the founding Vice-Chancellor of the University.

This was during the then one-party state when the President was still the Chancellor of all public universities and issues of university autonomy were really constrained by the political system. In those days, a strike at the university would be interpreted by political operatives as a weakness of the VC who had been overwhelmed by the situation. Sometimes this would lead to the sudden removal of one as VC. The consequence of this culture was that some VCs would go overboard and work against the interests of their staff and students just to appease the political system. During this strike, several VCs dismissed a number of high-calibre academic staff. In fact, 1994 is known as a time when public universities in Kenya lost qualified academic staff to other universities, especially in Southern Africa, while a growing number left to join the then emerging consultancy career.

The exodus was sparked by what was seen by the academics as the unwillingness of the university administration to lobby for better working conditions and remuneration from the political establishment. The exodus has had its impact till date, with many qualified academics unwilling to go back to the institutions in the face of severe shortages. On my part, I did not rush to make this decision. In fact, not a single academic was dismissed. Rather, I convinced the University Council, the employer, that there was no need to dismiss any member of staff over grievances that were genuine, as terms of service were then poor. I also had extensive discussions

with officials of the chapter staff union and assured them that the university would not penalize them, but would continue to explore ways of improving their terms of service. Later on, my initiatives such as the staff housing project that I initiated and which is discussed later in this work, was my way of keeping this promise to the staff, and it materialized.

But, sometimes, such wide consultation does not always work and, on some occasions, I had to take immediate action without consultation. An illustration is how I handled cases of staff that were cheating on their medical claims. I remember a case where one lecturer lied that his six-month-old baby had undergone extensive surgery at their rural home, some 500 km from Nairobi. Because of the urgency, I immediately approved the claim without any background check and verification from the University finance officer and the medical officer.

Later on, the university medical officer, a Doctor Were, requested to examine the baby who had undergone surgery. To our dismay, the university doctor established that no such surgery had been performed on the baby; rather the said member of staff had cheated and claimed payment from the university. The university incurred an expense because of my quick action, based on my humane reaction to a situation I thought demanded a quick action. Although later on the university recovered the money and sacked the member of staff involved, I learnt a lesson that, in administration, it is not good to make hasty decisions based on emotions. The purported urgency of the situation does not matter.

Academic Competition

During our primary and secondary education days, teachers always reminded us that education was the only weapon we could arm ourselves with. The future would be demanding. Time and again they reminded us that a good foundation was built on education. Education was a ticket to a better life. We believed so and worked hard.

I strived to remain in position one, two or three at the end of each term. Three and above were very competitive positions. Besides competing for positions, we also aimed for high marks. I tended to compete for these positions with my friends and the top five positions were always shared amongst us. The teachers knew this and encouraged that competition to the fullest. There were other bright repeaters who were a challenge. Keara Marando, Caleb Ong'era, Omat Mokaya Kariuki, Makori Nyagwencha, Matthew Aburi, to name but a few.

What motivated us to work hard? We were brought up in strict Christian families. We all attended the same church, Nyamagesa SDA, and had very supportive parents who knew the importance of early child development. They also extolled hard work. The community as a whole stressed the value of education. Our elder brothers and sisters had already attained the highest possible academic levels at that time. We were aware of the national schools and aimed at joining them.

One day an idea occurred to me to form a study group since we used to spend many hours together. I shared the idea with my friends, arguing that instead of each one of us studying independently, we could assemble in one hut and study together as a team. We could share scarce books in turns, save on kerosene, encourage one another through discussions in certain subjects, encourage the weak ones to work hard and finally do well in the final examinations, and hence be role models to the other youth. The idea was embraced by all of us and adopted! It was a simple plan of pooling our reading resources together. First, we used our homes as meeting venues on a rotational basis and later chose one central venue. The requirements were to include all those interested in the plan and who were Standard Eight candidates from the area. Wherever we went, one of our mothers would provide supper which we ate communally.

Our reading group started in January to prepare for the final primary examinations. It was strictly evening preps, six evenings a week except Fridays, as this was our Sabbath eve. Our aim was to meet from about 6 pm to dawn and proceed to Ibacho Primary for day classes. After visiting and inspecting all homes to ascertain suitability, we opted for Mzee Stephen Monyenye's which was centrally located for our studying plans. My home was farther down the valley and was not considered central enough for overnight studies. Darina, Monyenye's wife, was a nice lady and welcomed all of us to use her son's house for a period of one year. This was 1965.

Our study group comprised five candidates: Ratemo Monyenye, Tirimba Okongo, Samuel Ogoti, Paul Marsh Onyambu and I. We called ourselves The Nyamagesa Education Club (NEC); coincidentally, the small transistor radio we used to listen to the news was also called NEC. Each one of us had to eat from his house before gathering for the sessions. However, one could bring food for all to share. The purchasing of all other amenities was shared equally. These amenities included: kerosene, match boxes, a lantern and at times tea leaves and sugar for late-night hot beverages to keep us warm and awake. We did not have any elaborate sleeping arrangements but there was one bed which was shared by all the five of us in turns. The sleeping period could not exceed three hours per person and one had to declare his time for sleeping.

The hut where we studied was divided into two rooms, a study room with a large table and five chairs. The other space was occupied by a small bed. The bed literally measured about one metre wide by two metres in length. It was connected by a gunny bag and a tiny mattress fitted on it. For the whole year, we were determined to perform well and excel in the examinations, hence the perseverance.

We borrowed several books from older boys, acquired past examination papers and their model answers from many teachers who resided nearby. We were lucky to have an English and Mathematics teacher who resided nearby, Naftal Onyambu Onkwani (now deceased), who used to give us impromptu mock tests, mark and return them to us. I still regard the late Onyambu as one of our greatest mentors in our early years.

These earlier experiences, studying in hardship came in handy during my tenure in University administration when we had to implement cost-sharing policies. The experiences enabled me to implement cost-sharing in a manner that did not affect students so much, especially regarding issues related to cafeteria prices and establishment of bursary schemes for needy students at the university level. My elevation to the office of VC was at a time that Kenya was implementing the World Bank-supported cost-sharing programme in all public universities, a situation that was met by resistance from students and parents as well.

Mr Onyambu was one of the most polite educators that we ever had in the community and was always available for consultations after his normal teaching assignments. We were sure of one thing: examination would take place in November and each day counted. Time was of essence. Despite all the nice arrangement we had for preps, there were several challenges. Some of us even fell asleep during the day classes. I remember Tirimba Okongo snoring at 3 pm during a class lesson and the teacher wondered whether he had indeed slept the previous night. He had certainly not.

I knew how to balance my study and sleep periods. I am a light sleeper to date and can go for hours without being exhausted. At night, I would request to study until 1 am or 2 am and sleep for the rest of the night, get up by 5 am and proceed to school. I cannot remember how we got breakfast. But somehow we ate ripe bananas or chewed sugarcane for lunch.

These arrangements made us influence intra and inter school competition. The community knew of our organized study group and we got a few boys wanting to join us. We allowed them, although late, but on one condition: that they bring their beddings and follow our rules and regulations. We did not want to be accused of discriminating against other boys from the community. They could not, however, cope with the times and conditions of our work so they gave up.

The five of us persevered through the cold nights as the weeks rolled by until we sat for the examinations. The results for the Kenya Primary Examination came out and all of us passed well to join various provincial secondary schools. Two of us joined Kisii High School and three joined Sameta Secondary School. My grades in the Standard Eight final examinations were as follows: An A in Mathematics, A in English, and B+ in General Knowledge for the three subjects that we sat for. I still keep my precious clean certificate.

Future Implications

What lessons did we learn at primary education level? We formed an organized study group voluntarily under my general guidance. We knew the importance of good and quality marks to enable us join good secondary schools. We were disciplined, organized and responsible at a very early age. We practiced cost-sharing, shouldered responsibilities, kept time and fulfilled our promises.

We also allowed and accommodated other boys to join our study group; but they could not cope with our conditions and eventually gave up voluntarily. We were also generous to all. We were exemplary in the area. All of us persevered through the cold, rainy nights typical of Nyamagesa hills.

We ate together as brothers, emulating our mothers and fathers. We were a young community comparable to any large society. We respected one another and agreed to do chores in turns without complaining.

We shared our thoughts and promoted unity, understanding and tolerance. We needed one individual to influence the process. We were each other's keeper. We all proceeded to higher education as we dispersed into various secondary schools. We later became independent and proceeded on individually.

The NEC succeeded in 1966 and was voluntarily disbanded. One surprising thing was that none of us got sick despite the cold nights we used to sit through. I consider the natural foods we ate to have been the explanation for our good health during our youth.

Growing up in rural Gusiiland had its challenges besides going to school. My parents were peasant farmers who relied on a meagre income from farming. Tea and pyrethrum were the two cash crops we relied on. We also cultivated subsistence crops like maize, beans, vegetables and potatoes. I used to volunteer for house or farm-related chores whenever I had an opportunity. We still had to balance between going to school, weeding, ploughing, picking tea and pyrethrum, and ensuring that home work was done. My late elder brother, William Nyamwange, was very particular about time and wanted us to excel in class work.

My personal belief was that I had to balance all these chores by not wasting any time on unnecessary engagements. Besides being focused on schoolwork, I was also involved in extra-curricular activities like sports and athletics. My sporting talents were, however, not that spectacular. I did, however, have good vocals and I used to be in the church choir.

The late Uncle Augustino Ogero was a self-proclaimed disciplinarian of Nyamagesa. Nobody dared him and his word was judgement. As a church elder, Mzee Ogero commanded adherence to the SDA doctrines and ensured that the Sabbath Day was kept holy as prescribed in the Bible.

He used to ring the bell every Friday at 6 pm to signify the commencement of Sabbath. All systems stopped, no manual work was done, but prayers started. Both the youth and elders feared and respected him. He was a teacher, an elder and a disciplinarian. He was responsible for the elitism of Nyamagesa Village.

I was told that while he was a teacher, my late brother, William Nyamwange, David Onyiego and Justice James Onyiego Nyarangi strayed from his class one day and went to watch a football match in Kisii Stadium, some 20 kilometres away. He gave them a record beating. The three boys were beaten so hard that they

got permanent scars on their legs, buttocks and hands. But they were all grateful for his role as a teacher. I grew up knowing my boundaries and avoided crossing paths with the late Uncle Augustino Ogero. Children belonged to the community in Nyamagesa Village and punishments were the order of the day. I performed my duties on time and reported back the results to whoever had assigned me the work.

Early childhood discipline makes a world of difference for future generations.

Notes

1. They included William Nyamwange,(late) Tabitha Mocheche, Joel Onami, Andrew Okioga, Samuel Clement, (late) David Ombogo, Ruth Moraa,(late)), Hezron Tirimba (late), Mary Bonareri (late) myself and Amenya, Grace Kemuma. My step mother had 8 children: Hellen Nyakerario, Thomas Ogutu, Askah, Gladys (late), Stanley, Annah, Mogaka(late) and Samuel.
2. The eight brothers include descendants from: Bomobebe, Bonyamoyio, Bonyakoni, Mwamonda, Mwamoriango, Mwaboto, Bogeka and Bonyamasicho
3. Machoka Singombe, David Onyiego Onywere, Zablun Anyieni, Johnstone Nyonga, Reuben Oanya, Hezekiah Mobisa, William Nyamwanye (brother), James Kabuna, Charles Magati, Barnabas Tureti, Johnstone Rayori (later Senator), Bathsheba Matonda (the only lady), Samuel Rogoncho, Samuel Kenanda Meraba, Gilbert Nyangweso, Hezekiah Michoma. I recall them because I interacted closely with all of them at my very early age.
4. They included: Omato Mokaya Kariuki, Zablun Chanai, James Chanai, Caleb Omboto Ongera, Matthew Aburi Nyatundo, Samoita Botange, Basweti Mariga, Ogutu Marindi, Ogutu Kombo, Ogutu Onsinyo, Ogutu Kiyiete, Omare Onsinyo, Sunusunu Matunda, Tabitha Nyangate, Dinah Onyambu, Prisca Mokua, Wilikister Joel, Samuel Oanda, Anyona Martin, Matabuta Marangeti, Ogutu Ondimu, Kebwaro Ondimu, Miriam Ogero, Monicah Monyenye, Nyanduko Ogutu, Omare Maaga, Omare Mangongo, Isomba Nyatundo, Miencha Orora, Robert Nyagaka, Melchzedik Anyona, Nyasikera Motari, Makori Nyagwencha, Samuel Mirieri, Samuel Nyabera, William Onsare Mabeya, Tirimba Maturi, Nicodemus Mose Ogutu, Peter Marando, Keara Marando, Onchari Nyakundi, Nemwel Nami Matunda, Tabitha Nyangate, Dinah Onyambu, Prisca Mokua, Wilikister Joel, Samuel Oanda, Anyona Martin, Matabuta Marangeti, Ogutu Ondimu, Kebwaro Ondimu, Miriam Ogero, Monicah Monyenye, NyandukoOgutu, Omare Maaga, Omare Mangongo, Isomba Nyatundo, Miencha Orora, Robert Nyagaka, Melchzedik Anyona, Nyasikera Motari, Makori Nyagwencha, Samuel Mirieri, Samuel Nyabera, William Onsare Mabeya, Tirimba Maturi, Nicodemus Mose Ogutu, Peter Marando, Keara Marando, Onchari Nyakundi, Nemwel Nami, Mecha Nyakundi, Peter Onyambu, Batsheba Ontiri, Rael Ontiri, Matundura Ontiri, Miencha Orora, Onkoba Nyambane, Ratemo Onchera,Ratemo Ondara, Anyona Marangeti, John Arumba, Kebwaro Masese,Marucha Okero, Marucha Ombworo, Tariani Ombworo, Dinah Peter. Plus the Nyamagesa boys.