

With The Lid Off

John Matshikiza

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It's hard to describe my friend Godfrey Nzamujo. He introduces himself as a humble Catholic priest (in fact a monk) and as an aside mentions his farm project in Benin, which, he adds, you should drop in and see some time if you are in the vicinity. So you get the impression that he is one of those plain-clothes sky-pilots who spends too much time dabbling in abstract notions of African development politics, and pops in to the church to give his flock a good harangue once a week, just to keep his hand in.

You couldn't be more wrong.

The Songhai Centre, Nzamujo's brainchild, was born in 1985. In that year Father Godfrey stepped into the small West African republic of Benin, neighbour to his native Nigeria, and asked the government of President Mathieu Kerekou for a piece of land to try out an experiment in small-scale sustainable development. Kerekou was probably as bored as you or I would be at having to listen to this enthusiastic priest's description of what he intended to do with the land, but he granted him a few acres just outside Benin's second city, Porto Novo, in any case, and probably hoped that he would just go away.

Nzamujo went away and took possession of the unpromising piece of swampland that he had been granted. But he didn't sink up to his neck in sludge, malaria and despair, as previous missionaries might have done in this inhospitable environment. Instead, he created something remarkable.

To hear him tell it, the whole thing came about as a kind of personal epiphany, a flash of mind-shattering insight on the road to Damascus-Damascus, at that time, being a small university town in southern California, where Nzamujo was content to pursue a brilliant career as a dedicated researcher and lecturer in various fields of the sciences.

OK, now hold on, I hear you saying. Is

this guy a monk, a priest, a scientist, a lecturer, or a farmer? Is he African or American, and does his story actually have anything to do with African sustainable development?

The answer is: "Yes to all of the above".

What happened was that, one night when he was minding his own monkish business on his Californian campus, Nzamujo was awoken (as happens to people who have a conscience) by a dream. The dream was in the form of a parable, a very African parable. In brief, the dream told the story of a man who was sent to help out a distant village in distress, and never came back to his own village because the pleasures and temptations of the distant village were so great that he forgot the needs of his own homestead and settled down there, never to return.

"What am I doing in California?" Nzamujo asked himself when he woke up. He had been sent there by his people and his church to improve himself, and had instead got caught up in the selfish pursuits of following one degree after another, and living the Californian version of the life of Riley — as much as monks permit themselves to do so, of course.

And so he determined to return to Africa, and founded the Songhai Centre, named after one of the great independent African empires of pre-colonial days. Nzamujo's guiding principle was: "The only way to fight poverty is to transform the poor person into an active producer" His way of doing this was to create a living and teaching environment where ordinary Africans could learn the skills of self-advancement. And, pulling out all the stops of what he had learned over the years about mechanical and electronic engineering, farming, economics, business and husbandry in general (spiritual and temporal) he set about turning his vast, abstract knowledge into

something practical. In less than 20 years he has developed an environment where the small portion of land produces pawpaws, bananas, giant mushrooms, pigs, a domesticated version of a furry and nutritious rodent known as "bushmeat", cabbages, fish, chickens, ducks, turkeys, manioc, sheep, cattle, rabbits, edible giant snails, various varieties of beans, maize, cashew nuts, mangoes, rice and sunflowers, to name but a few.

These are harvested and transformed into consumable and saleable goods at the centre's bakery, cannery, bottling facility, restaurant and countless other mini-industries in this mini-economic environment. Not to mention the mechanical workshops where young people make machinery to speedily husk maize and perform other vital agricultural tasks for small scale farming, and the IT centre where communication skills are taught and on and on and on. Enough already, you hear yourself thinking as you pant your way around this outrageously busy complex behind this indefatigable black priest. But the best is yet to come.

Nzamujo's masterpiece, for me, is the creation of a Utopian African village at the centre of the complex. The village is in essence a living diagram of a sustainable model of production and

survival.

The centrepiece, you would be surprised to find, is the lavatory block. And the reason is that, since human beings consume so much of what they produce, recycling their own waste is the key to creating a self sustaining environment. And so, at Songhai, septic tanks are anathema. What you eat and drink goes straight into collection channels beneath the lavatory block and is processed through a series of canals into a pool, where it is all cleansed through the natural agent of water hyacinths ("God put everything on Earth for a reason") and then recycled back into the bio system that has produced all the amazing products you have consumed in the first place.

Yes, indeed, Songhai is a model for African development. The unmistakable message is that Africans can feed themselves.

So you have to wonder why its example is overlooked in the rush for development models that .will be more favourably (and expensively) regarded by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. And why we need the lofty volumes of Nepad paperwork when some people are simply rolling up their sleeves and getting on with it. But then there are a lot of things that you wonder about these days.

John Matshikiza is a fellow of the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research