

My Life in Tanzania and Mwanza

By Fr. Martin van de Ven W.F.

Fr. Martin wrote this article earlier this year before going on home leave. He gives us an idea of his work in Tanzania and how Mwanza and the country have developed since he knew the country and its people first.

I have been involved in finances for almost eighteen years, the first five years in the Diocese of Mwanza, seven years in Boxel, Holland, and again six years here in Nyegezi. My successor, Fr. John Gerrard, was appointed while he was still working in a parish of the Diocese of Tabora. He came to Nyegezi for a week or so in March to get acquainted with the work. He is no stranger to the job as he was the Provincial Treasurer of the British Province for a number of years. Fr. John went on home leave and then took over officially on the 1st July. People ask me: what are you going to do. I don't know yet but I hope to deal more with people again.

Fr. Martin van de Ven is a White Father from the Netherlands. He was the White Fathers' Treasurer for the joint Tanzania/Kenya/Sudan Province living in Nyegezi, Tanzania.

Picture above: The market at the Likoni ferry, Indian Ocean coast, south of Mombasa, Kenya

I have lived in this part of Tanzania with the waSukuma for almost forty years. When I arrived here in 1961, learned their language (before I learned kiswahili, the national language of Tanzania) and still use this language very much. The Sukuma tribe is the largest one of Tanzania, about six million. I learned kisukuma the way a child learns a language: listen and speak. I know how the wasukuma say things, but I don't know why! Maybe I'll get a chance to find out more about the language of the wasukuma, but also about the customs and religion.

NYEGEZI

We are three here in the Provincialate at Nyegezi, but we have guests almost every day. Mostly White Fathers who have some business here, or who just come to have a few days of rest. Nyegezi is about ten kilometres for the centre



of Mwanza town. Our house is the property of the Archdiocese of Mwanza. The late Bishop Joseph Blomjous started it in the early sixties as a research centre. They did research on how cotton growing influenced the social and economic life of the people here, and also about how the growing number of primary school leavers settled in society.

In 1968 the Bishop of Mwanza offered the house to the White Fathers as Provincialate: no rent, just maintenance. The house is situated at the end of a small road with huge granite rocks and plenty of trees. It's an ideal place to live and to work. After five months of dry season, the rains have started again a couple of weeks ago. The whole world changed, everything is green again and alive. It's good to be here!

MWANZA CITY

Mwanza is a fast growing town. When Tanzania got independence in 1961 the population was thirty thousand. Now there are more than seven hundred thousand people living here, with an annual natural increase of 3% and another 8% through immigration. Every hill of the town is full. In most cases the buildings were erected illegally. The houses are 'glued' to the hills. Services like water, electricity, sewerage, roads, are a problem. The Town Council has started negotiations with the residents. They have been promised compensation for their 'houses' and have been given the guarantee that they won't be 'bulldozed' away. In any case, it's not easy to use a bulldozer on those steep hills! The roads in town are terrible, mainly because no maintenance has been carried out for years. But there is hope: The European Union has

[1] Cotton has been grown on the southern shores of Lake Victoria for over 30 years and *theodan*, an insecticide, has been used to spray cotton plants to keep the weevils down. It is consequently a poison and certain enterprising fishermen use it in fishing in the Lake. Their method is as follows: they lay their nets in the water, then at a distance spray *theodan* into the water causing fish to take evasive action moving in the direction of the nets. *Theodan* does not kill the fish but it can intoxicate them so that they are easily caught. Humans eating such a fish can get diarrhoea. About two years ago the European Union banned the importation of fish from East Africa because, amongst other things, they detected *theodan* in the fish. The problem is supposed to have been cleared up and exports of Nile Perch have resumed to the EU, but some wily fisherman still continue to use *theodan* to fish the smaller tilapia.

[2] *Kuleana* in Swahili means 'bringing up together' (derived from *kulea* meaning 'to bring up' as parents raise their children) thus indicating 'doing things together'.

given a subsidy to repair the roads and to tar-mac them again.

The fishing industry is booming. After the lifting of the boycott of the European Union to import fish from Lake Victoria because of *theodan* a strict quality control is carried out. [1] There are eight fish processing factories in Mwanza with more than four thousand employees and thousands of private fishermen around Lake Victoria have a good income by providing fresh Nile Perch to the factories. Mwanza recently, as second town in Tanzania, was given the status of 'city'. The Tanzania Episcopal Conference officially opened St. Augustine's University Tanzania (SAUT) here at Nyegezi. It is the successor to Nyegezi Social Training Institute (NSTI).

STREET CHILDREN

Mwanza town has many street children. Some are orphans, whose parents have died from AIDS. This group however is relatively small because most of such destitute children are absorbed in the African extended family system. In most case however, the children who turn to the streets flee violence, stressful living conditions in their homes or maltreatment by parents or guardians. No real statistics are available but looking at the number of boys and girls begging in town clearly shows the magnitude of the problem.

One of the well organised programmes that cater for street children is the *Kuleana Centre*. [2] The Centre was established in 1992 as a private initiative by two young Tanzanians of Asian origin. Since then it has become a leading

advocate for children's rights in the country. Most of the children are aged between ten and thirteen years old. The *Kuleana Pizzeria*, one of the most popular restaurants in town, is staffed entirely by young people from the Centre. This gives them practical skills, not only in the kitchen but also socially, as they integrate with the public in their duties.

ECONOMICS

The economical restructuring requested by the World Bank and the IMF to privatise state-owned industries, has caused a real gold-rush around lake Victoria. Ashanti Goldfields has set up a mine in Geita with an economical viable life span of ten years. Great investments have been made, also in services to the local community, roads, health centres, water supply, schools, but also compensation has been given to the people who had to leave their traditional place because of mining activities. The crucial point of course is for the government of Tanzania to keep its word to protect private capital. So far the government of Benjamin Mkapa is living up to its promise of making Tanzania a new investment 'haven' for foreigners.

POLITICS

Since Independence in 1961 general elections for President, Members of Parliament, and for District Representatives are held every five years. Since 1995 more political parties take

part in the elections. Ten million people registered themselves for the elections of last year and 8.5 million actually voted (85%). President Benjamin Mkapa of the ruling party *CCM* was elected for a second term of office with a 71.7% of the votes, a higher percentage than in 1995. The opposition parties obtained a popular support in the 1995 elections, though most of that was a negative vote of discontent with the one-party which had ruled since 1961. After the '95 elections the opposition never rose above this negative stand. They remained weak parties and their leaders failed their followers.

The elections on the Mainland went smoothly but on Zanzibar they were chaotic: election offices were closed, ballot boxes disappeared and in sixteen Districts the elections had to be rerun the next week. The foreign press reported exclusively on the elections in Zanzibar, which is less than 5% of the electorate and ignored the Mainland's elections. Peaceful elections in Africa make no news abroad!

Thanks to Fr. John Slinger W.F. who provided information for the footnotes.

Picture above: Setting out on a fishing trip

Recollections of Mwanza

By Fr. Nico de Bekker W.F.

It's not always easy to get a 'story' from a missionary. "What shall we talk about?" they say. Many of our Readers would probably ask "Just tell us about the everyday things of life. The daily happenings in your work; descriptions of the villages, towns and countryside; and especially the people you meet". As with everyone's daily life, we take things for granted and do not recall everything we do. Despite that here are three short stories from Fr. Nico de Bekker. Fr. Nico is one of our White Father missionaries who used to work in Tanzania and now has returned to his home country of the Netherlands. He has the gift to recall various events and to put pen to paper. Here Fr. Nico tells us about three people he met and the incidents which happened to him.

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BERNARD

My meeting with Bernard lasted less than half an hour but it was unforgettable. Driving home in a leisurely manner after my weekly shopping expedition to Mwanza, I noticed a young man trudging along the road with a plastic bag slung over his shoulder. I stopped to offer him a lift and within minutes a world of misery unfolded.

Bernard (he's not baptised, yet that's what he calls himself) was born in a village not far from Shinyanga, about a hundred miles from Mwanza. His parents had never sent him to school but he had managed to learn to read and write from the more fortunate children in his village.

About a year ago, Bernard started to have severe pains in his left arm. The local rural health worker sent him to the local hospital at Shinyanga where they did their best to help

Bernard, but all in vain. Eventually he was referred to the regional hospital at Mwanza where more specialised treatment was available.

Transport to the hospital (not from) in such cases is paid for out of government funds, and in the government hospitals treatment and full board are free. But it is no fun to have to survive on hospital food and many patients buy additional food and especially fruit. For that you need visiting relatives and some extra money.

After some time, Bernard's relatives found it impossible to continue to make the long Journey to Mwanza and six weeks before he was discharged from the hospital they stopped coming altogether and he started to run out of money. He soon realised that he didn't even have enough cash for the bus fare home, so what he had went to pay for a long distance phone call to a friend in Shinyanga, who was asked to contact the folks at home and let them know he needed help.

After three days, hearing nothing from home, and with only the odd meal from the hospital kitchen to sustain him, Bernard had had enough. He decided to try his luck by walking the hundred miles to Mwanza. When I picked him up at 3 p.m. that afternoon he had only covered ten miles and was clearly exhausted. He was very grateful and asked if he could come to the mission. He said he would work there to earn his bus fare from Mwanza on to Shinyanga.

Listening to Bernard's story I soon decided the first thing he needed was a solid meal, so we stopped off at a roadside 'restaurant' in the next village and I ordered a double portion of

the dish of the day for Bernard. The owner very kindly contributed a Coca Cola to the feast.

The next thing was to try and get Bernard home as soon as possible. While Bernard was getting through a mound of rice and beans, I went outside to have a think, assess the situation, and then place all my worries in the Lord's hands. Suddenly, along came a small truck at full speed. I waved it to a halt and out jumped Brother Cyril of the Maryknoll Fathers, working in ... you've guessed it ... Shinyanga!

Of course Brother was only too happy to take Bernard home so I called him from the restaurant and off he went. I don't suppose I'll ever meet up with him again but it was a roadside encounter I'll never forget.

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LUHENDE

Luhende lives thirty-five miles away from our Parish Centre and he's blind. He is one of a group of young people preparing for baptism. They support one another in their zeal to learn the catechism and to live a Christian way of life in an area where there are few Christians.

The first time the group came together for Religious Instruction was during the rainy season and they had to make their way over the hills and along the muddy roads to the Parish Centre. Luhende knew he would never be able to keep up with his friends so he had to seek an alternative means of transport.

He walked five miles to the nearest bus stop in the neighbouring village, slept in the bus drivers house and finally got a free lift to the Mwanza-Tabora main road, Here he had to wait for a Mwanza bound bus and eventually alighted at the junction with the Buhingo road. He then took another bus that brought

him within a mile of our Parish Centre. In all Luhende had covered about sixty miles over an unknown area. Not bad for a blind person!

When he arrived at the mission I asked him if he had any money. "No", was the reply. Had he eaten anything today? Another "No" (It was by then 4.30 p.m.) Had he brought a bedsheet or blanket for the night. "No". Had he any soap to wash with? "No". Had he a change of clothes? "No".

There was a reason for Luhende's complete lack of possessions and I wasn't really too surprised. As he is blind he can't work

Picture above: Some proud new Christians on their Baptism day

in his father's fields, so he doesn't earn any money, and quite frankly, his father couldn't care less. Fortunately I had just received some money from friends at home so I was able to help **Luhende** with his basic needs.

Luhende received a rousing welcome from the group of catechumens and stayed for a whole month. He made an active contribution to the Religious Instruction Course as he is gifted musically. He knows a vast number of hymns and even does a certain amount of composing himself. He is also very good at leading the hymns with a congregation.

He'll be back, I'm sure for the next Instruction Course leading up to Baptism. It's people like **Luhende** who provide the example for our future Small Christian Communities in Tanzania.



MASANJA

Masanja is a common enough name in our part of Tanzania, but this **Masanja** received my special attention right from the first time I met up with him one hot Sunday afternoon. I had celebrated mid-morning Mass in the village and was having lunch with some members of the parish council. During the course of the conversation they invited me to go and see **Masanja**, so after the meal we all went to the house where **Masanja** lived with his father. The parish council then asked me to baptise him there and then!

Masanja was a paralysed boy about thirteen years old. He was sitting crouched on his hands and feet in a corner of the mud hut, wearing nothing but a loin cloth around his body. He couldn't work, he couldn't go to school and his father, a poor farmer, was hard put to it to provide for his crippled son.

The parish council members were convinced that **Masanja** would never live to adulthood,

that's why they wanted me to baptise him at that moment. I explained that although the boy was in a bad way, he could be helped and there was no reason for him to be living in such conditions. Why couldn't he be given religious instruction at home, and taught to read and write at the same time. "In fact", I went on, wanting to make a practical lesson, "I am very surprised that the Christians in the village have done nothing to help the boy until now".

Some weeks later we had a Parish Council meeting and some members were not too happy about what I had said concerning **Masanja**. On the other hand, the majority were convinced what could be done to help the boy and they decided to take some action. Nothing happened immediately and those concerned never mentioned him.

Then one day I came across a smiling **Masanja** in front of the local primary school. He was sitting in a motorised three wheeled vehicle specially designed for invalids. What had happened? The local catechist and the Christians had gone about their task seriously. They had given large sums of their own money, held a collection among other Catholics, used a considerable amount from their outstation fund, successfully approached the village council for a subsidy, and finally they had managed to lay their hands on an invalid tricycle for **Masanja**. He was now able to come to school and to the village chapel for Sunday services.

I wish I could end on this happy note, but not so. During a long period of drought in East Africa, **Masanja's** father moved his family to another area where he sold the tyres of **Masanja's** tricycle to buy food. Now he would like to return home to his own village but he is too ashamed of what he has done. And what about **Masanja's** future?



EDITOR'S POSTSCRIPT

There are a hundred and five **White Fathers** present in Tanzania. They are involved in various fields and work in the arch-dioceses of Dar-es-Salaam, Mwanza, and Tabora; and in the dioceses of Geita, Kahama, Kigoma, Mbeya, Rulenge, Singida, Sumbawanga, and Zanzibar.

In 1998 the total population of Tanzania was 32,128,480. In the same year 11,643,000 (34%) are Catholics, 22,000 are Orthodox, 1,600,000 (5%) are Anglicans, 4,507,000 (13%) are Protestants. There are 272,000 (1%) Christians of other denominations so that all Christians together number 18,044,000 (53%) and 11,916,000 (35%) are Muslims. There are also 10,000 Hindus and 3,954,800 (12%) of other faiths.

The figures are from the Catholic Missionary Union page for Tanzania at http://www.cmu.org.uk/stats/aff_tan.htm.

SOME PREVIOUS ARTICLES ON TANZANIA

ISSUE	DATE	TOPIC
323	August-September, 1995	Tanzania Profile
350	February-March, 2000	Fifty Years in Africa Some Notes on Tanzania

SOME PREVIOUS ARTICLES ON KENYA

ISSUE	DATE	TOPIC
305	August-September, 1994	Enkare Nairobi
339	April-May, 1998	My Work - Some Casual Reflections (Undugu).
358	June-July, 2001	Efforts to Break Up Multi-Faith Constitutional Reform Fail Some Background Information on Kenya The Burning of South 'B'

Picture above: Making pots