

Hanyane Massinga Centre for Old Ladies / 'SHELTER FOR DISPOSSESSED WIDOWS' (24-03-03)

Story of Hanhane from Catherine Mudime Akale, regional missionary: *"For me, and I am sure, for many Africans, not just Cameroonians, Old People's Homes are a Western phenomenon and I was dumbfounded to learn that the United Methodist Women of Mozambique have set aside a facility to cater for old women. What had happened to our unique African tradition where our old are dear, cherished, revered, respected and taken care of at home, I asked myself? The women had the physical characteristics of advanced life, it is true, but they were neither weak, infirm nor feeble. There were no nurses. They cultivated their own cassava and maize, etc. farms and they were a support network for each other. In my conversation with them they exhibited wisdom of age, maturity and they spoke sensibly. **These are women who were accused of witchcraft, dispossessed of their property (cattle, houses, coconuts, farms) and disowned by their own biological children or other close relatives and exiled from their homes and communities after their husbands died.** The buildings are constructed with local materials - reeds - and roofed with aluminum sheets. There are currently 25 women in the centre and each structure houses four women. They cook in threes. Cyclone Japhet passed through the centre a week before my arrival and blew-off the roofs of two of the huts. These are yet to be replaced. Some of these women are weakened by illness but there is a general air of well-being and camaraderie amongst them. I decided to interview two of the 25 women to give a human face to their circumstances. It is important to note here that some women have died and been buried here since the centre was set up in 1982."*

Joaquina Tomo's story (by Dr. Catherine MUDIME AKALE, Regional Missionary) Joaquina is among the four pioneer women admitted to the Hanhane Center for Disposed Women in 1982. Joaquina does not know her age, neither can she remember for how long she was married to her husband before death parted them, but she admits that they were married for a long time. She was blessed with four children, two boys and two girls. All of them are alive and well. Her husband died after the war. Immediately after her husband's death, her elder son, heir and next of kin accused her of having killed their father through witchcraft. He consulted a sorcerer who confirmed this to his allegation. *When I asked her what the reaction of the other three children had been and why they had not intervened nor taken her into their homes, she replied as follows:* Their brother had succeeded in convincing them, since she was capable of killing her husband and their father, she will not hesitate to do the same to them and their offspring. Today it is their father, tomorrow it will be them. So they all shunned her and asked her to leave her home and their community. *I asked her why she had not gone to her other extended family relations, as the African tradition is such that extended family members are their own social support network.* Joaquina said they had all been told that anybody who harbored her would have their house burned to ashes and their coconuts cut down and burned. Nobody wanted to take such a risk. (Coconut is the main cash-crop in this area of Mozambique and the family owned from 200 trees upwards). *I then asked Joaquina how she felt/still feels about being treated like that by her own biological children.* Her response was that it was very painful at first and it affected her terribly. She came to the centre in 1982 and it took her a long time to accept that this was really happening to her. It was like a bad dream from which she thought she would wake. But she has been here [at the Hanhane Center] for such a long time now and she is consoled by her friends who have had the same or similar experience. She is content with her life as it is now. She is resigned to it.

[Catherine Akale]At his juncture, I discontinued the interview because I noticed that in spite of what Joaquina was saying, about having forgotten and getting on with her life, just relating the story brought back memories she would rather like to forget. The process of remembering and retelling her story was psychologically traumatic. She did not shed tears nor did she become emotional but her body language and facial expressions were beginning to change. That was sign enough for me to stop.

Castarina Amela's story

Like Joaquina before her, Castarina arrived the centre in 1982. She had been driven by her nephew. She gave birth to five children. Three died but two are still living. *I asked her why it was her nephew and not her children who had driven her from the family home and property? What did her own biological children say or do?* Her answer was similar to that given by Joaquina. Any relative who took her in was threatened with the complete destruction of home and property. But she did not elaborate on her own children's inaction.

Rosita Nating's Story

Rositta has been in the centre for five years. She does not recall how old she is nor how long she was married. She gave birth to two kids who are all dead now. One died in the war of liberation. She has five grandchildren among whom is the grandson who blamed her for his father's death and therefore drove her from the family home with the accusation that she is a witch capable of killing them as well. Her house was destroyed.

Comments:

All people are entitled to human dignity, irrespective of economic status and gender. A society has little claim to have developed if some sections of it can offend and abuse the human dignity of others and get away with it by virtue of their social power and position. After reflecting deeply, I came to the conclusion that the name 'Old Women's Centre' fails to portray, to depict, to represent vividly or give the true reason for setting up such a home in Mozambique/Africa. This deviating attitude is inconsistent with our African behavioural pattern, custom, ethical or social norm. What the children and close relatives have done has outrageously violated natural or proper feelings. It is inhuman by any standard and culture. After discussions with the UMW Leadership and Bishop Jaou Somane Machado, I was given the assignment to think up a new name. My suggestion then is to rename the centre '**SHELTER FOR DISPOSSESSED WIDOWS**'. Distinct features in developing African countries are the high proportion of widows resulting from differential mortality patterns between males and females and the practice of men marrying much younger women. Potash, B 1986 suggests that widows compose up to one-quarter of the adult female population in many African societies. Meegama suggests that most communities have attempted to deal with this through the support of multigenerational extended families. In this way, families have absorbed much of the burden of caring. However, fast-changing economic and social environments mean that this kind of support system is giving way [even in Africa where filial piety and familism favours high status and full involvement for the elderly]. Nevertheless, the majority of them continue to live in extended family network (mainly patrilocal residence) suggesting a strong continuation of traditional family association.

The Hanyana Massinga centre is an extreme example of a deviation from what the general subjugation of women even by their own biological offspring. It is sufficiently extreme and horrifying to make any sane person question the basis of what is being done in the name of society and tradition. This example is an illustration of the disintegration and failures of the traditional African family in the rapid social and economic change with no system of public welfare in place. **There is also no doubt that the issue is complicated by the culture of the communities the women hail from, society and gender inequality.**

- To succeed in abolishing such a practice will demand fundamental attitudinal shifts in the way that this particular society perceives the human rights of women. The starting point for change should be

educational programmes that assist women to recognize their fundamental rights.

- The greatest determination, combined with the sensitivity and understanding of local conditions, will be needed if it is to be abolished.
- To achieve real change will require more resources, more detailed planning, and more substantial commitment from the state, the churches (not just the UMC) and international organizations. **The Women's Division representative at the UN should take this up with the rep. of the Gov't. concerned. Liz's forum on Violence Against Women should take it up as well.**
- The underlying course should also be tackled- **gender inequality**- through effective use of media since legal strategies are usually not effective in the context of traditional and customary practice.
- Of primary importance is the raising of awareness of the social consequence. The provision of training and support to those involved is also crucial.
- The constitutions of most African countries recognize women's equal rights. However, marriage, divorce, child custody and property inheritance are still being governed by customary or community religious laws which discriminate against women and limit women's rights. Enforcement of existing laws is slow making them merely ornamental and not active vehicles of social change. Lack of awareness and enforcement have remained major obstacles to women's exercising even their limited rights. The women's voice has certainly grown in strength since Beijing 1995. There is need for the encouragement of Mozambican women's articulation of the issue through the Female Lawyers Association and an assertion of their own points of view concerning gender relations at the primary level in all spheres towards greater equality. **Exploring possibilities of a country-specific workshop on the issue in collaboration with Mozambican Association of Female Lawyers and the Christian Council of Mozambique.**