

Dear Friends,

Today April 27th 2003 is Easter and my 3rd Sunday here in Eritrea. I have just come out of the 5th meeting with His Excellency (as they are referred to here) the Minister of Health Mr. Saleh Mekey - a very intelligent, energetic and extremely well focussed gentleman probably in his 70s.

The main topic that has dominated our meetings is, how my stay here can be extended for at least six months. In the last two meetings, he has offered me a resident status but keeping my consultancy remuneration. Very tempting. His wish is that I should stay and impart as much skills of Entertainment Education to their different groups, as possible.

Since I came, I have been working with Health Educators, the National Youth Association, the Women's Association, the media houses and the people serving their National Service terms.

The country has a massive health promotion campaign. I am in the section focusing on the prevention of maternal and child mortality. Primarily, I had come to help in developing IEC (Information, Education and Communication materials) to be used on Television, Radio and in the print media like posters, billboards and the news papers.

But when I introduced the Ndere way of doing things, they saw a new possibility of faster and more effective mass mobilisation - hence my additional duties of working with the different groups and the request to stay here longer.

I have, of course not accepted to stay. Instead, I have proposed that they organise and send different youth and women leaders, health journalists and any other creative artists to our NDERE CENTRE for periodic training. I will organise and either come or send other trainers at different times so that in the end we have a stronger collaboration than my stay for one extended period.

All this sounds rather personal, and you may wonder why I should bother you with my personal affairs. However, as I came out of the meeting today, one thing was very clear. Certainly, nobody here would ever have known of my (Ndere's) way of doing public mobilisation and Education, had it not been for the fame bestowed upon me(us) through the unprecedented and historical assistance that we have been receiving from Austria for the last nine years.

Before Austria lent me an understanding ear, most people regarded my ideas as wild imaginations and day dreaming fantasy of an adolescent in adult skin. It took Austrians during the troupe's tour of 1992 to listen to this masturbation (excuse my language) and give me the benefit of the doubt. I still admire the courage and patience of people like Maria Hirsch, Michi Stadler and Sabine Hahn who managed to sit through all my lengthy explanations and finally took the step of introducing me to Ministry officials where I first met Mag. Anton Mair (candidly known as Toni), Dr. Michael Hahn, Dr. Sadaat and one other person I have never been able to recall.

The meeting was more of my talking and they listening. At the end of that meeting I was more than sure that this was just one of those many sessions where I always talked myself horse and no result would be expected.

That evening I met Dr Hahn, then husband to Sabine. He clearly told me that his interest was in HIV/AIDS and my plan was too general to be supported as a programme. But he mentioned that Toni had picked interest and advised Sabine and Maria to follow it up with him.

I was asked to write a proposal, which was a matter of reorganising the different write-ups that I had presented to countless organisations and Embassies without a single success. I quickly did this and left it with the Project Group for the Rehabilitation of Uganda (PGWU - Maria and Sabine) and went back to Uganda.

In 1994, after innumerable correspondences and sometimes very nerve wrecking arguments, Austria risked the first batch of their tax payer's money to me (Ndere). THIS WAS THE TIME WHEN THE AVELANCHE WAS SET ROLLING.

Suddenly, my fantasies of taking Ndere troupe to every corner of Uganda - to the people that had neither television nor radio, the folks that neither read nor wrote, the ones that had never been visited by health or agricultural extension workers, the people that were afflicted by illnesses which could easily have been preventable if only they could get correct information, the vast public majority that had no access to any form of entertainment like cinemas, theatres or football matches, the likes of my parents whose income was not even the equivalent of US\$50 per year, the real victims of Uganda's political turmoil of 30 years, - became a reality.

We traversed the country with several brilliant productions addressing serious but common issues like organic soil management, home hygiene, taking children to schools, building self-help schools, malaria control through avoiding stagnant waters and bushes around the homes, HIV/AIDS, improved housing using local materials, environmental degradation - name it, - and the crowds were ecstatic.

We then turned our guns to the elites, the policy makers and the politicians. We publicly took them on tackling sensitive issues like corruption, privatisation of the economy, bad politics and gender discrimination. Ndere became a household name both in rural and urban areas.

Visible actions were taken in response to the massive awareness that we arose. In places like Kabale and Kisoro where Government attempts of establishing the Bwindi and Mgahinga Guerrilla National parks had met with very stiff resistance from the local communities that had even led to the tragic death of the German expert, were amicably solved. The climbing bean and the Nitrogen fixing crops were introduced in Kabale, Iganga and Kamuli districts. The AIDS awareness spread like bush fire. By the time we went to do our entertainment education among the pastoralist communities in the South West, we found people even borrowing used condoms and returning them to the owners for re-use or to be borrowed by others!! This practice and other risky behaviours soon disappeared.

On the Government front, it can not have been a mere coincidence that when we massively performed "Munaku" which was critical of the Education system, the White paper on Education was written. When we traversed the country with the anti-corruption "Sweet Venals" and run it on radio and television, heads started rolling in Parliament - two ministers were censored and several district administrators got the purge. When we extensively performed "Time Bomb", the Affirmative Action bill was hastily passed by parliament. When our "Rhythm of the Future" made the state controlled economy a laughing stock and source of anger for the public, the privatisation process moved on without a hitch.

The Troupe has treasured, kept and maintained all the properties that were acquired through the project. Our vehicles have had the longest life spans despite the very rough conditions and roads that they have been subjected to during our countless rural visits.

Soon, it became clear that we, as one troupe, were just a drop in the Ocean. There was no way we could be every where at the same time.

Fortunately, our scheme of sponsoring talented but disadvantaged children to school had paid dividends. The troupe was now largely composed of highly motivated young men and women who had come in as helpless and often destitute children, but were now well educated and self confident professionals. They were very strong believers in the Troupe's philosophy and approaches. They did not need to be convinced that their own birth places could greatly benefit from our work. But they knew we could not reach everywhere.

So each one went back to their own districts and formed a satellite group, where there was none, or rejuvenated and refocused those which were in existence. This was the beginning of the famous Uganda Development Theatre Association (UDTA), and the year was 1997.

We ran countless training workshops for these groups. Word spread quickly and many other groups were spontaneously formed and called upon Ndere troupe to offer them the same training. We decided to call their leaders and we held a congress. A formal organisation - the UDTA - was created with Ndere troupe as the core organiser. A national executive committee was formed. Ndere run district workshops and conducted district elections to form District Executive committees, and the lower sub- county committees.

The mobilisation capacity of these district committees is incredible. We started with only 18 groups in 18 districts in 1997. Today we have 954 groups in 31 districts. It would have been many more if we had not stopped the expansion to new districts due to financial constraints. All this the district committees are doing voluntarily without any funds from the national secretariat - Ndere.

The groups have become role models in their districts. They do not only perform entertainment education shows, but most importantly, do practice what they teach as demonstration sites to the surrounding communities.

Each group and region has unique problems. The groups together with the communities propose different solutions. While the Moroto - Kotido groups may focus at the disarmament process, the ones around the national parks may be on the peaceful co-existence with, and the benefits from the Parks.

Ndere Troupe eventually ran several workshops to introduce and link the District Administrations and the NGO community with the UDTA groups. It is very gratifying to learn that many of the groups are now conducting several campaigns that are sponsored by either Government departments, separate NGOs or even individual private businesses. Noteworthy of these efforts are the South Western water project, The rural Water and Sanitation project especially in the Eastern region, The immunisation campaign especially in Masaka and the Tourism industry in Kisoro.

Besides their Entertainment Education activities, the groups do hold annual exhibitions of their works and products. They range from educational music, dance and drama, to displays of their handicrafts and farm products. The exhibitions are competitive. Ndere troupe sets the syllabus, organises and conducts the training workshops, and eventually presides over the competition[ions].

The competitions which start at the sub-county levels, go to the districts and the champions meet in the now famous UDTA national festival in Kampala that has attracted international acclaim. The 5th of these massive festivals was held last January - 14th-20th 2003. Important dignitaries have attended these festivals. H.E. President Museveni has attended two consecutive ones.

On the infrastructure side, miracles have happened. The Troupe's home which was code-named "Village of Cultures" in the initial stages of the proposal, and which was planned to be built on a one and a half acre piece of land, has now developed into the magnificent Ndere Centre For Development Theatre - poised to serve not only Ndere Troupe, but to become the power house for the entire development theatre movement in Uganda. My work in Eritrea now convinces me that the centre will definitely serve other African countries as well.

Let posterity remember the heroic and unwavering courage and commitment that Mag. Anton Mair, the then head of the Austrian Embassy's Regional Bureau for Development Co-operation (ARBDC), exerted in order to have the Ndere Centre project approved against all odds. His deep understanding and appreciation of what I was trying to do in Uganda first through the Ndere Troupe, and then UDTA, made him really put the traditional diplomatic coat aside, and

got down to the practical nitty-gritty. I can dare say that without the tireless, diligent and patient personality of Toni Mair, there would probably never have been such a thing as the Ndere Centre that we all are so proud of.

Mr. Stephen Wyard, the Architect who accepted to abandon his job with prestigious Firms that were building famous structures like the Rwenzori house, and come to sit at the ARBDC primarily to design the Centre whose construction had not yet been approved, was another case of unique courage. His conviction can only be understood by looking at the architectural beauty that the Centre has become. Stephen surprised everybody when he graciously accepted to hand the project that he had so much worked for, for so many years, to another firm of Architects (FBW) to design his prize centre piece - the auditorium. He refused to follow what would have been a legally viable argument in the interest of the smooth continuity of the project.

I will never forget the uncountable meetings that I held with these two gentlemen (Toni and Stephen) - often times into the late hours of the night. Many times we faltered and almost lost hope. We were only kept going by the rock-type optimism of Toni.

I really fought hard to resist the temptation to embrace Toni, just like I fought my tears of joy, when His Excellency Ambassador Georg Lennkh put his signature to the Ndere Centre Agreement in a ceremony of the three of us. I wanted to let out the loudest noise Vienna had ever heard, but we were in the Ambassador's office. But I eventually did as Maria Hirsch walked me back to my hotel. I have never known what the people on the streets thought about this African in a business suit yelling and jumping all over the place.

We would never have been able to turn agreement documents into real money, or beautiful architectural designs into buildings, if it was not for the charisma and hard work of the other people that succeeded Toni Mair.

I am specifically referring to the charisma and creativity of Mr. Christian Susan who eventually handed me over to Dr Konstantin Huber - commonly referred to as Koni.

Frankly speaking, I was shattered when Toni and Stephen left almost at the same time - before even the first brick was laid on the plot. I must say a special thank you to Koni for offering me such a smooth transition. Koni did not only make me feel relaxed, but he dived into the whole project and gave it a new momentum.

Eventually, there came the soft spoken but very aggressive Mr. Hans Schattauer. Hans, as we all call him, and Koni, do make a perfect implementation team. The two of them have presided over the project during the actual construction but at a time when funds were low due to the budget cuts in Austria. But despite all odds, they have made sure that the real dream turns into the most beautiful centre I have ever seen.

Hans has worked extremely hard to ensure that phase two is approved in time and the construction process between phases one and two just flows on.

What I am trying to say in all these word is simply THANK YOU for making us what we could never have become. The fact that Minister in Eritrea is trying hard to convince me to stay here is clear testimony that you did support a viable effort and it might be holding the real key to sustainable development in Africa. I know we are still requesting for more aid. But at least the road is a bit clearer than was in 1992.

With the Grant from Austria, Ndere, and I in particular, have become famous and recognised internationally. Austria has brought hour, pride and confidence to us.

I want to assure you that I and my colleagues will not let you down. History will bear us witness.

Kindest regards

Rwangyezi Stephen

(Director of [Ndere Troupe](#), Executive director of UDTA - Uganda Development Theatre Association and administrator of Ndere Centre Project)