

Working and Teaching in Tanzania

by **Gabriel A. Rincón-Mora**

Atlanta, Georgia

We arrived at the Mwanga bus station a little past one. I stepped off the ratty taxi cab and paid my white bearded driver 20,000 shillings.

We agreed on 18,000 but I gladly gave him the extra two dollars. A mini bus pulled over and parked just in front of us. Men, women, and children stood all around the clay-dirt station, leaning against whatever they could find, smoking, talking, and spitting. I burned under the sun only for a moment, before walking off to a shack hoping that it'd be a bar. I was relieved to pay for a Sprite, place my backpack on the ground and sit next to a woman gossiping with others on the veranda. I was no longer a stranger, although my white, non-Swahili speaking face would've proved otherwise.

This is how my volunteer journey into Tanzania began. A couple of paled-faced strangers walked off a bus, saw me and walked straight over. They were a bit nervous and felt visibly relieved when they saw



Mwanga school children greet the volunteers at the beginning of the journey with thumbs raised.

me, especially when they found out I too spoke Spanish. Soon after, our contact arrived — Mr. Dustan Shimbo, a lawyer assigned to the volunteer organization.

In all, about sixty volunteers joined us from various parts of the world: Spain, Korea, Japan, Switzerland, Belgium, England, Kenya and Italy, to name a few. I was one of two Americans in the whole group. Half of us were assigned to the city of



After completing their work on the water conservation levy, the volunteers were taken into the indigenous village of the Masai Boma. These two Masai children observe as the volunteers and officials from the village communicate.

Mwanga and the rest, including myself, were hauled over open country to a remote farming village called Kigonigoni.

Our first project was to make bricks for the construction of primary and secondary schools. We first dug the ground to turn and gather enough dirt for the mud. Then we mixed the dirt with water, stepping on the mud with our bare feet, before transporting it in buckets to the place where we made the bricks. The process was simple but the work under the heat of the bare sun was arduous. We were supposed to work with the villagers, shoulder-to-shoulder, but we ended up doing it on our own. The villagers' needs were more pressing than their desire to erect schools. The importance of education, as is in many other parts of the world, is not uniformly self-evident.

During the second portion of our stay, we worked on a water conservation project. The farming village of

Kigonigoni lies on dry land and the lack of water is very much a life-threatening issue. The local farmers and the government of Tanzania have teamed up to build levees and channels to steer water to the various parts of the farming community. This project, however, is expensive and time-consuming. The farmers therefore agreed to build the structures and pay for half of the material themselves. The government would pay for the other half and offer some guidance in the construction process. Our volunteer group was assigned to help build such a levee.

Unlike the brick-making project, we worked with the farmers, shoveling, hauling, digging, breaking stones and mixing cement. In many ways, the job was more demanding than making bricks but it was much more rewarding. We'd take turns at digging and shoveling, sharing the load with the farmers and helping each other when we were noticeably tired and dragging from

exhaustion, although they were more efficient and better at it than we were. We couldn't really communicate but our work and sweat bound us. We laughed at each other, at my clumsy attempts to peel a sugar cane for a snack, at their curiosity of our Western ways, at how white we were, at everything. It was obvious that this project was indeed important to the community and we were not only making a positive impact but also forging cultural ties of friendship.

For the last day of our stay, out of appreciation, the villagers killed and cooked a goat for us. I was on kitchen duty that day and assigned to help them cook. By the time I joined in, they had already killed and skinned the goat. The women were very friendly and quickly put me to work, though. The skin was on one side and a bucket filled with the insides of the animal on the other. I cut all the insides into little chunks, as instructed, and placed them in another big bucket, which was later dumped in two-foot wide pots of cooking rice. The testicles of the goat were roasted in open fire separately (only men normally eat this delicatessen and I, of course, partook in this tradition, which is not unlike the Spanish tradition of eating bull's testicles otherwise known as "criadillas" during bull fights).

The rice and meat, I must say, were delicious, although the soft, liver-like texture of certain pieces was a bit less inviting than the rest. At the end of the feast, the women danced and sang traditional songs and men responded with hurrahs and such, invoking the women to continue. Some of us joined in the dancing and singing, and the villagers ignored our

obvious singing and dancing inadequacies.

On our day off, out of courtesy to us, the government officials at Kigonigoni took us to a Masai Boma, an indigenous tribal village. They used their government influence to take us as "visitors" (not tourists), which is not an easy feat, given the Masai's independent and highly protective nature. We drove through open country to the even more remote Masai village of Caramba. Red adobe and uneven pine shacks populated the community. The men wore red and blue drapes around their bodies with wide-looped earrings encrusted in their ears.

Married men had short black hair and unmarried



To show their appreciation for the volunteers' help, the villagers sacrificed and cooked a goat. The insides of the goat are considered a delicacy in this Tanzanian people's culture.

men wore long, beaded, red hair. Women were bald and wore brass and white loops around their necks, wrists and ankles. They were as awed by our presence as we were by theirs.

A group of men led us to a meeting hall and waited for the elder of the village to sit, at which point the second in command spoke in their native language, then in Swahili for the sake of the officials, and finally — to my surprise — in English to welcome us. We and the villagers were invited to ask questions of each other through our interpreter. I

“I prepared to talk about American geography, history, culture, globalization and micro and macro economics.”

spoke up and ended up acting as sort of spokesperson for our group. I was interested in learning about their way of life and others were reluctant to start a dialogue, including the Masai.

I asked them what their pressing needs were and not surprisingly they said water. As we kept talking, the challenges of communication became evident. We hadn't a solution to their problem, just curiosity and a willingness to share and lend a helping hand. We felt, through no fault of our own, we had somehow let them down, as if they might have expected an answer or solution from us.

The discussion, now monopolized by the second in command and myself, started to strain under the weight of the misunderstanding. The village elder, unfortunately, was inebriated and a figure head, and continued to blurt out incongruous comments, which the translator reluctantly interpreted for me. The government officials and some of the Swahili speakers in our group finally stepped in. We, the volunteers, apologized for the misunderstanding and the situation cooled down. It was then that we were invited to see them dance.

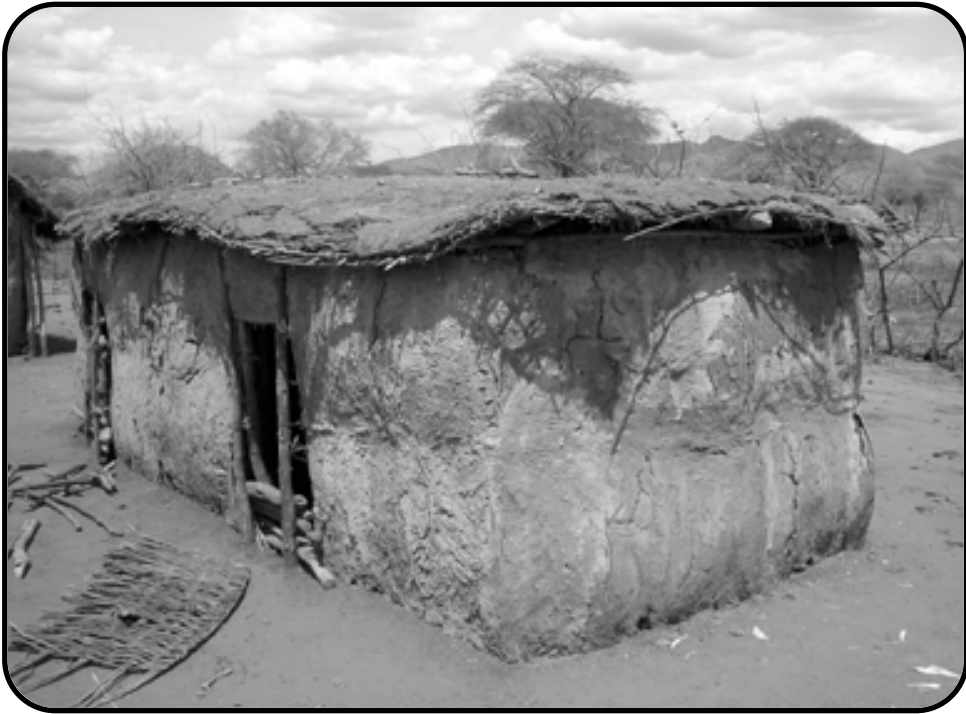
Unmarried men jumped and shouted two or three at a time, taking turns. Their long skinny legs launched from the ground and wiggled in the air as they hopped up and down. The women encouraged

them by clapping and also shouting. We were invited to participate in the dancing as well. The second in command and true leader pulled me aside to thank me for the comments and suggestions I gave during the meeting. He asked me what I did for a living and, upon learning I was a university professor, invited me to come back to the village and lecture on Western ways.

I returned a few days later, alone with a driver on a motorcycle through open country. Unfortunately, we had a blow out near an abandoned school building that was being used for a parliamentary campaign meeting. My driver introduced me as a professor and the candidate for a seat in parliament kindly asked his driver to give me a ride to the Masai Boma. The driver drove me to the village and offered me a Sprite on the way (I do not normally drink Sprite this much). He then left me alone with the Masai. A group of Masai men, including the second in command, were waiting under a tree and warmly greeted me.

This time expectations were clear: I was to lecture and nothing else. I prepared to talk about American geography, history, culture, globalization and micro and macro-economics. I didn't really know what they wanted to learn, so I simply started on geography and improvised my way through the rest, based on their response and interest levels.

They were intrigued and puzzled by world history and culture, and honed their interest to globalization and economy. I told them economy, like in nature, is based on a circle of life, circle of interdependent economies exchanging goods and services through the medium of currency. To join such a global economy, each member must contribute to reap the benefits of working together. Member countries are generally interested in engaging and encouraging new economies to join and therefore enhance the benefits of all by increasing the size of the market and number of possible goods manufactured and sold. To join, however, like an athlete training for the Olympics, a nation must be prepared and qualified,



This is a typical adobe hut constructed of mud, wood and hay in the village of Caramba, Masai Boma.

knowing what it is willing to “give” in return for what they are entitled to “get.” Not understanding this tradeoff is what I thought placed unnecessary burdens on developing countries like those in South America and Africa.

To engage these growing economies, organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) offer loans to third-world countries. Ideally, the third-world countries would be able to develop their economies to such an extent that they become self-sustaining and capable of re-paying their debts, all the while joining the global market. Unfortunately, many African and South American counterparts are not often ready for this engagement and are unable to repay the loans according to the contract. At this point, the IMF exercises policies that are unfortunately repressive in order to recover its money. These policies are implemented when a default occurs during or after the contract period of the loan. The problem with this, of course, is social unrest and questionable overall gains.

I think the root cause of the resulting predicament is that these struggling economies are not



The visit to The Masai Boma was educational for both the volunteers and the villagers, as ideas on economic strategy were discussed.

ready to join globalization and should probably not be seeking any international loans, as of yet. Local economic circles must first be developed and debugged to understand the requirements and social tradeoffs of a market, without the strains, responsibilities and penalties of the larger world market on them. To this end, the Masai Village could viably develop their own micro-economic circle, which is just an analogy for what many third-world communities can do. They could specialize in various fields, like collecting water and herding animals, and barter their goods and services among themselves before attempting to engage foreign markets. They could study each of these fields and increase their productivity and effectiveness, slowly increasing the standard of living of the community and understanding how to enact

rules of government for the benefit of the community at large and the market that supports it.

I told them that through education they could not only learn the best means to address the water issues they face but also how they could establish a local economy that would attract government, foreign and private investors. I told them that writing a good proposal, which requires education, is key to eventually having loans approved. Asking for money without a plan is not attractive to the west, I told them.

Colonialism certainly had very bad effects in Africa, as it did in other parts of the world, but this is no reason not to develop now that colonization is dying, and accepting loans without fully comprehending its ramifications is a very dangerous business. The G8 (group of eight world leaders) just recently pardoned several loans to Africa and England is spearheading a campaign to help their cause. I, however, think it is not the west that will best accomplish Africa's development but

Africans themselves.

I cannot imagine how much more help I could've provided as a volunteer than by the discussion we were having. I wanted to share two things from the bottom of my heart, the value of education and the dangers of globalization. I don't think my messages were the most popular but I believe they knew I had no other agenda than to help and share knowledge, because they treated me like an equal and our discussion was a healthy exchange of ideas. And just as the visit started, it ended. They warmly took me by the hand and bid me farewell as a pick-up truck arrived to take me back to Kigonigoni.

We finished our water preservation project and rode back through open country to Mwanga to join the rest of the group. Our hosts arranged for an official celebration with government officials and a party, after which I started my journey back home, which took me through Moshi, Dar es Salaam, Johannesburg, London and Chicago before finally arriving back safely in Atlanta.