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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesrurales/8538>
DOI : 10.4000/etudesrurales.8538
ISSN : 1777-537X

Éditeur

Éditions de l'EHESS

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 30 novembre 2007
Pagination : 131-136

Référence électronique

Bob Nakileza, « A true story of coffees magendo through mount elgon (uganda) », *Études rurales* [En ligne], 180 | 2007, mis en ligne le 01 janvier 2007, consulté le 20 avril 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesrurales/8538> ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesrurales.8538

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| Editions de l'EHESS | *Études rurales*

2007/02 - 180

ISSN 0014-2182 | pages 131 à 136

Pour citer cet article :

—Nakileza B., A true story of coffees magendo through mount elgon (uganda), *Études rurales* 2007/02, 180, p. 131-136.

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A TRUE STORY OF COFFEES *MAGENDO* THROUGH MOUNT ELGON (UGANDA)

Bob Nakileza

THE STORY that unfolds is a thrilling experience scanning the events centred on the coffee trade (*magendo*) in the remote eastern highlands of Uganda in the mid to late 1970s.

Over two decades down the road this live drama still prevails in my memory. Never fading memories of ferrying heaps and heaps of *zimwany* through the thick and dark forest, and open alpine moorlands of Masaba mountain. Masaba mountain also commonly called Mount Elgon is a shared feature shared by Uganda and Kenya. Day and night, there would be many queues of people trailing with coffee on their heads for men or backs for women. Little did it occur to me that this was an unpatriotic practice to my beloved pearl of Africa. In the hands of the self-proclaimed conqueror, the British Empire, the pearl was falling and we were probably knowingly or otherwise helping it to fall faster. Who cared! It was a dawn of downing the terror. To me as to many of my lot it was an opportunity to see the much praised country of Kenyatta and enjoy scarce commodities like sugar, bread, or

name it. Many things were indeed scarce, but not coffee at that time.

The seemingly lucrative trade had a magnetic pull on the energies of all the able-bodied, young and old, in the environs of Mount Elgon. I recall doing it over ten times, though the poverty was never quenched from our home. Many things bought for my personal use disappeared into thin air. I spared my scarce and yet important primary school time to walk barefoot over 500 kilometers over the endless hills and through the different vegetation zones along little-cleared paths. On many occasions, I walked beside the valley of my death! It was a huge scare whenever comrades were heard to have fallen victim to the many ambushes by pirates! But, surprisingly, though many succumbed to their swords and spears, *magendo* lived on and on. Thank God I survived and survive today to tell the story. Also I am thankful that I was able to recall and note down this story that my dear French friend Bernard Charlery so much encouraged me to write ; having narrated it to him, it caught his ears. He is a coffee man!

Precisely how many kilos I ferried during the three years, God knows! At that time, keeping records did not matter. But simple maths can tell you what it is if I made the trip over ten times and was carrying about 18 kilos each time. The price was very unpredictable and varied greatly over the years. I only recall the average price of 20 Kenyan shillings. The Kabindo fellows would carry up to 35-40 kilos on every trip. We moved like small blank ants; some going up or down, others coming in continuous or broken queues. Information would then be exchanged regarding the security situation or

market prices. Sometimes, the intelligent ones would travel during non-peak times so as to obtain the best bargain. It remains a mystery how much coffee was exported or money gained over the *magendo* period. I can only speculate it was in many millions of US dollars.

Fun was part of it all. To let you forget your worries, the sojourners sang well-coined songs. It was equal to marching to a war front. Not everybody would sing well. A few talented fellows, the MDDs, sang several times, one after another, over long distances from one resting stage to another. You wonder who paid them! I loved to keep close to them, for you never felt tired. There were also jokers. Obscenity was what I hated. But it made one laugh or smile when the going was tough; it was enough to grin just to spare your dry lips from cracking. Others would yell *Yee be be be be... Ye atusamo wisamo ye*. That meant step in the footsteps of the person in front. Since we were in queues, no one would waste energies to go aside for a release in case your tummy was uncomfortable or bubbling.

Transactions were done after some little bargaining in Swahili in the bush on the Kenyan side of the border. If you knew nothing in Swahili, this was an opportunity to learn or be cheated. After the sales on the Kenyan side in the forest close to Suam border town, it was all happiness. People bought all sorts of things; radios, record players, blankets, mattresses, etc. The trade was booming and I guess those Kenyans involved made huge abnormal profits. Virtually anything for domestic and personal use was bought and transported on heads again. On the way, people would play their cassettes at full blast

and dance *kweli kweli* deep into the night or morning time. The best dancing halls were the bamboo forest. The dancing styles of the time were very distinct and no one was left on the ground whenever the music was played. Most music was Kikuyu type or Luo and from Bukhusu. For example: *Kyebukube ye soka yamagendo owo... Sindulu safuga kusoka Kyebukube*. Another interesting one was *Ekinesi nadudu yaya wabakina... Sinaga sange Nadudu zesi wayila...* This used to drive people crazy twisting their hips and sweating as if in a fight.

There is a time for everything, so the Bible puts it. Amidst this happiness, were times of tears or sorrow. The *musako* was a threatening thing to hear about. *Musako* is well-known in Kenya and to many Ugandans who have worked there. A neighbour to my home village was caught up one day. That day was the worst. Just a few kilometers at the border, we lost our coffee in confusion after a stampede. There was no alternative. We went ahead to Suam town to get some support from village mates or any other sympathisers. In the night, we camped in a nearby pine forest but little did we know it was a day of *musako*. We were woken up by barking dogs, as if to warn us of the imminent danger. Many ran for their lives naked or half-naked. That neighbour (the Late Magwali) was deep asleep in a sisal gun bag. The Kenyan police grabbed him and many others, and all were taken for three months of hard labour at an unknown destination, which later was established to be prison farm. I was quick enough when I woke up to run through the dark pine forest, dodging trees and tree stumps. It was indeed a narrow escape. The

direction taken was instinctively determined. It was not my day, you would say!

Magendo, you are gone and may you rest in eternal peace. Though many may hate you, I will remember you for the sweet ventures of

my youth. I toured the dark and open ecosystems of the mountain, believably where my ancestors live. You sculptured and armed me but also cushioned me to face the tough challenges that have come in my life.