BOOK REVIEW

SELF-RELIANCE IN KENYA:
THE CASE OF HARAMBEE

BY

M.P. Mbithi and R. Rasmusson
Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1977

Professor Mbithi and Rasmusson's book has reached us at the right time when demand for grassroot development is acute. This is as a result of the failure of the 'trickle down' growth theories which were sold to us by the West.

The book provides us with information on the origins of the Harambee movement which has and still is a very powerful movement in the country. However, the central argument the authors are trying to put across that the development frustrations plaguing many African countries is due mainly to: "...failure to grasp how development is perceived by the small men,"[1] is too thin to be accepted by anyone who has closely been following the debate on the causes of underdevelopment not only in Africa but in other third world countries which are tied to the Western capitalist system.

This is not in any way meant to suggest that the authors have not been reading. No. The point is that the methodology they apply in analysing social change is faulty and will be harmful in practice. The authors succeed very well in giving us a *descriptive* account of Harambee movement in Kenya without any penetration into the substance of the historical process. They treat the movement in its 'own world', isolating it from what has been happening in the rest of the 'non-Harambee' world in Kenya. The social statistics which Mbithi and Rasmusson managed to gather are not at all used to show the motive forces of social development, being no more than an attempt by means of abstraction to describe and assess the course of social development in Kenya. Harmony is the overall direction of this movement, being a state in which all the forces of society and all its members have been and are component parts of a single social whole. It is because of this approach that the authors for instance make the grave mistake of stating that: "...contrary to some opinions, Harambee is not a means by which peasants in Kenya are manipulated by the elite".[2] Those who know the politics of Kenya will find this a bitter pill to swallow.

The assumptions which the authors seem to implicitly apply in their analysis are dangerous. These are: assumption of capitalist development, self-perpetuation of this movement, and presence of local control of the products of local labour. These three in particular are inapplicable in the case of Harambee in Kenya.

Harambee as a communal undertaking, the Harambee spirit itself is a good thing and nobody should underplay its importance in the development of Kenya. However, the economic conditions of its application have to correspond to communal aims and needs. What is wrong with Harambee or any other type of rural development is not the failure in its application as such, but its application under a capitalist economic structure. The profit motive of the Kenyan economic set-up as is eloquently stated in the Sessional Paper No. 10 (1965), is the main stumbling block to this movement.

As long as the products of labour participate in the 'free' market, the peasants cannot benefit fully from them, since they do not have full control of them much less receive equivalent exchange for them. Somebody else in the so-called modern sector reaps the benefit of Harambee, and this amounts to the exploitation of other peoples' sweat. Harambee spirit corresponds to the communal essence of the African people, the spirit of social co-operation as demanded by the mere necessity to survive. Its benefits can therefore only be finally obtained under similar conditions, i.e., non-private property economic and social structure. The failure of Harambee movement should be seen in the light that these conditions do not exist in Kenya at the moment.

But the fact that the Harambee movement exists at all is a reflection of the discrepancy between capitalist development, as prescribed by the West, and organic form of social structure in Kenya. Capitalism has had to take into account (objectively) this reality; but the attempt to solve this contradiction by Harambee movement has boiled down into one essential economic factor: saving profits for big capital. If Harambee centres can prove to be self-sufficient this absolves the Government of the sins of underdevelopment in rural areas thus avoiding taxing big capital, which it would otherwise have to do to provide financial assistance to these areas.

In fact, those Harambee projects engaged in the production of raw materials, such as coffee, sisal, timber, etc. end up saving big capital huge profits because the marketing boards and other businesses do not have to provide the money (capital) for the production of these products. This is done for them by Harambee participants but in exchange, it is the capitalists who pocket the surplus labour contained in these

products, and since this labour is cheap by virtue of its being communal, it delivers monstrous profits to the exploiters.

The conclusion is inevitable therefore that, no model of development is good enough for the vast masses of the people as long as capitalist development is the basis for such models. This is the pith of the whole matter. This is in no way meant to suggest that all attempt to alleviate the suffering of the ordinary people should be disregarded. Attempts can and should always be made to force liberal scholars like the authors to dispell the myths of harmony in social development. Any capitalist structure is loaded with contradictions and crisis. This should be noted by scholars and especially those who daily breath and see the pains of capitalist exploitation in third world countries like Kenya. Scholars from these countries should discard formal idealistic ideologies for they are unworkable or unproductive in the social realities of all the underdeveloped countries tied to the capitalist West. Failure to do this will only result in dodging around the real issues and the people will sink deeper into the painful pits of poverty with all its manifestations. Of course, scholars like Mbithi, Rasmusson and others will not feel the pain due to the privileged positions they hold in the social pyramid. This may explain why the authors have adopted such a shallow approach to a very complex and important social issue in Kenya.

We demand being told why Harambee was formed. In response to what and why? These questions require more than mere collection of facts. Finally, for those who find joy and satisfaction in descriptive analysis, this book is a classic. However, remember that data does not speak for itself. It should be used to demonstrate social dynamics and not social statics.

George Ngugi

Footnotes

1. Mbithi, M.P. and Rasmusson, R. *Self-Reliance in Kenya: The Case of Harambee* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies), p. 9.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 13.