Harambee: Self-Help Development Projects in Kenya

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"HARAMBEE" is the national motto of Kenya. The word is emblazoned on the country's seal. President Kenyatta often ended his speeches to the public with an enthusiastic call for "Harambee," delivered with a sweep of his famous fly whisk, to which the assembled people respond in loud unison. It was June 1, 1963, the day when Kenya attained Internal Self-Government when Jomo Kenyatta first gave the term public currency and declared, "I... give you the call: Harambee!" (Kenyatta, 1964: 7). "Until then," to quote Sir Malcolm MacDonald who was Kenya's last Governor General, "the universal cry of the African nationalists in Kenya had been 'Uhuru' meaning 'Freedom,' but now he declared that the national slogan must be 'Harambee,' meaning 'Let's all pull together' " (Macdonald, 1964: ix).

The most visible fruits of the Harambee spirit are voluntary community self-help projects throughout the country that include the building and support of schools, construction of health centres, and the cooperative digging of miles of ditches to accommodate water pipes. The late President of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, stated in his Republic Day speech of December 12, 1976 that these Harambee projects accounted for "forty per cent of capital development in all the rural areas" and voluntary cash contribution of one hundred million Shillings in 1976 alone (approximately US $13 million). The new President of Kenya, D. T. Arap Moi, stressed the importance of Harambee projects during his installation, and added that "... development of our country does not depend on large projects alone... Indeed, in total, many small efforts may contribute more to development than a few large projects."

Our aim in this paper is to provide a general introduction to Harambee projects in the hope that our description and discussion may contribute to the understanding of voluntary action in developing countries. The general nature of this article unfortunately does not permit more than a few thoughts about...
specific aspects of Harambee projects or historical notes such as the origins of the concept.*

The authors collected the data for this paper from a variety of East African sources including available literature on the subject from the libraries of the Kenya Institute of Administration and the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, from parliamentary debates and speeches, from articles in the Kenyan press, from field reports submitted by our students—most of whom were experienced civil servants and community development workers—and from personal acquaintance with Harambee projects.

Definition

The concept of Harambee is difficult to define since it is based on historical traditions that transcend tribes and is now utilized by various interest groups that attempt to mould the term to their own purposes. Most generically, perhaps, Harambee is collective and cooperative participation by a community in an attempt to resolve perceived needs through utilization of its own resources. The prototype of a Harambee project might involve a village that

* According to one source the word "Harambee" appears to have its origin in the Arabic language.1 In the Coastal regions of East Africa, unskilled workmen known as "Washihiri" from Southern Arabia performed backbreaking functions of moving heavy loads. They often used "Hamali" carts which are four-wheeled vehicles with long handles which were pulled and pushed by a number of men. When particularly heavy loads were on the carts, these Arab workmen would rhythmically chant "Haluma Jarraa,"² literally "pull together."

Later, the Washihiri were joined by African workers in the carting and hauling tasks and apparently adapted and shortened "Haluma Jarraa" to "Halambee." Most of the migrants working in the Coastal towns were from various tribes upcountry. When they visited their communities they introduced the phrase "Halambee" changing it in the process to "Harambee" since the sound "1" is nonexistent in most Bantu tongues.

While the term "Harambee" may not have originated from the tradition of most Kenyan tribes, the concept of mutual assistance and pulling together appears to be solidly grounded in the cultures of many tribes. Different names for joint efforts such as clearing the bush, weeding, building structures, etc., can be found. "The Luo call it Konyir Kende, Luhya Olwasi, Kamba Muwethia, Kikuyu Ngwatio, Masai Ematonyok" (Mbithi and Rasmusson, 1975: 3). These historical self-help efforts were mostly voluntary in nature with self-selected groups of men and women opening virgin land, cultivating fields, or helping a community member to move his family, house and all. In some cases, however, community work was obligatory as when tribal elders would command participation in projects such as building a road or supplying food to warriors.

When Jomo Kenyatta introduced the term as the national motto in 1963, he was thus utilizing an indigenous concept which, according to Sir Malcolm MacDonald, was "racey of the African soil." (1964: x)

1 We are indebted to Prof. Ali Jahadmy, a Kiswahili scholar, for this explanation.
2 Prof. Jahadmy recalls that in tug-of-wars in his native Zanzibar, their teacher would shout to the students pulling on the rope, "Haluma Jarraa," an indication that the term had gained currency beyond the Washihiri labourers.