

## **Of History and Membership: Tanzanian Disability Activists, Global Citizenship and History**

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### **Introduction**

Between November 2016 and January 2017 I have spent a little over two months in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where I have done numerous oral history interviews with people from different Disabled Peoples' Organizations (DPOs) and disability activists. In these interviews, members from the different DPOs not only talked about their own experiences, but also about the broader history of the disability movement. In analysing these narratives, the main purpose of this paper is to explore ways in which Tanzanian disability activists construct the history of a disability movement in Tanzania. I will analyse their historical recollections and examine how they use their history in claiming both national and global membership. Apart from exploring issues of 'belonging' in a Tanzanian context, I also use this analysis as a starting point to break through the current ethnocentrism of

disability history, not by contrasting ‘Northern’ histories with typically ‘Southern’ histories, but by inscribing Tanzanian historical experiences within broader transnational processes.

### **Theoretical framework: membership**

- James Ferguson on Membership
  - First in an article in *Cultural Anthropology* in 2002, entitled “Of mimicry and membership: Africans and the ‘new world society’”; later reprinted as a chapter in his book *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (2006)
  - Argues that claims from African citizens that they want to become like Europe are not about ‘mimicry’; they are not about Africans wanting to imitate Europe. Rather, they are about people who claim membership to a world society that increasingly excludes them; they are not about imitation or downright praise or admiration, but about access to certain aspects of ‘modernity’ such as education, health, material wealth, etc.
- Applying this on the disability movement in Tanzania:
  - Some statements could be read as instances of Tanzanian disability activists uncritically accepting or even praising Western knowledge and technologies.

However, my reading is that these claims are also about membership. Just like Ferguson's argument, it is about membership to a global community. But these global claims are closely intertwined with claims for national membership. This is because these people face a double exclusion: as disabled people in their own country and as Africans in the global arena.

- An important element in the claiming of this membership is the history of the movement:
  - First of all, it shows historical instances of how this membership has been claimed
  - Secondly, DPOs actively use their history to claim membership

### **Claiming membership through history**

When asked to relate the history of the disability movement in Tanzania, almost all respondents started their narratives in the days of late colonialism or early independence. To start their history at this point, refers to the first organized interventions on disability by two main actors: the colonial state and the missionaries.

Paralleling developments in the British metropolis, the Second World War led to the first efforts of the colonial government to rehabilitate "African ex-soldiers injured during

service” and an African Rehabilitation Centre was established in Nairobi in 1942, where injured servicemen from the different East-African colonies were for rehabilitation. Not much later, missionaries started to get interested in issues of rehabilitation and special education, and since the 1950s various special schools were established in present-day Tanzania by different missionary societies.

When conducting interviews with disability activists, the first date respondents gave when reconstructing the history of their DPO often referred to the creation of one of these special schools. For example, the director of the Tanzania Association of the Deaf (CHAVITA, Chama cha Viziwi Tanzania) claimed that the creation of the “Deaf-Mute Institute” in Tabora in 1963 by Catholic missionaries was the “official start of the history of deaf people” in Tanzania. His explanation of this statement was twofold.

1. Firstly, he contended that the opening of this school was surrounded by a lot of campaigning. Parents were encouraged to bring their children to this school, which promoted the view that education for children with hearing impairments was possible. The creation of this institute is thus framed as a first historical step towards breaking the stigma of deaf people as non-productive, ineducable members of society.

2. Secondly, this event is framed within a narrative of resistance. As the school used the method of oralism most of the students attending were not getting good results. This, combined with the persistence of the stigma regarding deafness, meant that students who graduated from the Tabora institute had very few career possibilities. This encouraged some of these students to join forces, which was allegedly an important impetus leading to the creation of CHAVITA in 1983. Furthermore, this school brought together students from different parts of the country and, defying the oralist method, they often communicated through signs, which led to the creation of new forms of sign language and the coming into being of a Tanzanian Sign Language from the bottom up.

Seeing that for DPOs in present-day Tanzania access to education is still a crucial issue in advocating for disability rights, it is no surprise that when reconstructing their history, activists choose these first moments of access to education as a starting point. It is however wrong to see this simply as an acknowledgement of how missionaries brought education to people with disabilities in Tanzania. Rather, these historical moments are framed within a narrative of how education has been the first step in the inclusion of people with disabilities in

the Tanzanian society, and how people with disabilities resisted or found solutions for some of the difficulties they often faced in these institutions.

The further history of the disability movement in Tanzania is constructed around some key events and with reference to both local/national and international developments. What is interesting to see is how local/national developments are always framed in a transnational way and how global events get translated to gain local relevance.

This goes a long way in explaining why the early 1980s figure so prominently in the histories of the disability movement as they are constructed by members of Tanzanian DPOs. The starting point is always the two Disability Acts of 1982. These two parliamentary acts for the first time laid out some ground rules on the employment of and the care for people with disabilities. It was no coincidence that they were passed in 1982, as this was the National Year of Disabled Persons in Tanzania. This was in its turn a continuation of efforts set up during the UN International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) in 1981. The IYDP was an important event in constituting disability as a global concern. It resulted in the formulation of a World Programme of Action (WPA), which was to be implemented during the International Decade of Disabled Persons (1983-1992). The reason why disability activists in Tanzania all refer to the IYDP

as a key event, is because of their role as translators. They both used the ideas enshrined in the WPA to tackle specific, 'localized' issues, while simultaneously framing local issues in an international human rights language.

To explore this issue, I will briefly zoom in on a report from a 'top policy makers' seminar held at Arusha in 1991 on the equalization of opportunities for Tanzanians with disabilities. The conference was organized by the Tanzanian government, in collaboration with the ILO. Over the course of two days, speeches were given by representatives from the government, ILO, different DPOs, and Disabled Peoples' International (DPI), which is the first internationally organized DPO founded in 1981. It is interesting to read the speeches delivered by representatives of the Tanzanian DPOs, where they constantly take on the role of translators.

One of the barriers to integration identified by most representatives is the framing of disability in Tanzanian society in terms of 'witchcraft' or 'curses'. These 'traditional beliefs', as one DPO-leader put it, were seen as an important element in the marginalization of people with disabilities, who were sometimes seen as *kibwengo* - an elf or evil sea spirit. This paper is not the place to go into the connections between disability and witchcraft in Africa, but what is important is to see how DPO leaders in the 1991 seminar did refer to instances of witchcraft,

claiming for example that "if a child with disability is born in a village, numerous causes will be enumerated and conclusion drawn is either witchcraft, curse, calamity or a punishment of a certain kind as a result of sins to the concerned family". What is interesting about these statements is that these culturally specific notions about disability appear in this highly transnational conference, where national and international actors discussed the implementation of a transnational instrument, the World Programme of Action. None of those present questioned the validity of this document or saw the universal language of it as incompatible with the 'local problems' described, or as the DPI representative put it: "We don't need another WPA but what is needed is its implementation". Inscribing to the goal of the WPA, 'full participation and equality', was thus seen as one way of dealing with these "traditional beliefs and taboos". In this way, DPOs translated between culturally specific problems and internationally designed instruments.

## **Conclusion**

The history of disability activism in Tanzania is strongly linked to an international struggle for disability rights, and offers a way to write the history of Tanzanian DPOs into a more global history. After all, fighting for disability rights means being part of a



globalized disability movement. This is true for disability rights activists and DPOs in Tanzania, as much as it is true for any other part of the world. To inscribe themselves in this global movement, Tanzanian DPOs themselves also firmly situate their own history within global developments. It is thus no surprise to read their claim that “Disabled People’s Organizations derive their legality and impetus from the context of the global history of disability of 1980s where numerous efforts, both substantive and promotional, were taken nationally and internationally to improve the overall situation of persons with disabilities”. In the same vein, CHAVITA can claim the creation of a deaf school in Tabora by missionaries as the official start of the history of deaf people in Tanzania, because that is the first time that deaf people gained access to an institution that is a sine qua non in gaining access to a more global citizenship.