Disability Rights Activism in Kenya, 1959–1964: History from Below

Fikru Negash Gebrekidan

Abstract: This article examines the early history of disability rights activism in Kenya. The transitional years from colonialism to independence were a period of great expectations. For persons with disabilities in particular, decolonization held additional possibilities and potential. National independence promised not just majority rule but also an all-inclusive citizenship and the commitment to social justice. Among the visually impaired of Kenya, such collective aspirations led to the birth of the Kenya Union of the Blind in 1959. In 1964, after years of futile correspondence with government officials, the Union organized a street march to the prime minister's office to attract attention to its grievances. The result was a government panel, the Mwendwa Committee for the Care and Rehabilitation of the Disabled, whose published report became the blueprint for social and rehabilitation programs. The government possessed limited resources, and the reforms that ensued were long overdue. Yet the sociohistorical dynamics behind the march are of particular significance. From the social historian's point of view, they affirm not only the historical agency of persons with disabilities, but also the need to recast and broaden the scope of African social history.

Résumé: Cet article examine les origines historiques de l'activisme pour les droits des invalides au Kenya. Les années de transition entre la colonisation et l'indépendance furent en période de grandes attentes. Pour les invalides en particulier, la décolonisation sembla apporter de nouvelles possibilités et opportunités. L'indépendance nationale promit non seulement la règle de la majorité mais aussi la citoyenneté complète et l'engagement à la justice sociale. Parmi les handicapés de la vue au Kenya, ces aspirations collectives aboutirent à la création de L'Union du Kenya pour les Aveugles en 1959. En 1964, après des années de vaine correspondance avec les responsables du gouvernement, l'Union a organisé une manifestation de rue jusqu'au bureau de Premier Ministre pour attirer l'attention sur ses réclamations. À la suite de cette action a été créé un panel gouvernemental, le comité Mwendwa pour la Réinsertion des Invalides, dont le rapport publié est devenu la référence

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des programmes de réhabilitation et de rééducation. Le gouvernement possédait peu de ressources et les réformes qui ont suivi étaient bien tardives. Cependant, les dynamiques socio-historiques ayant engendré la manifestation sont d'une importance significative. Du point de vue de l'historien sociologique, elles affirment non seulement la représentation historique des invalides, mais aussi le besoin de recadrer et d'élargir le champ d'étude de l'histoire sociale africaine.

This article examines the early history of disability rights activism in Kenya. For most Africans, the transitional years from colonialism to independence were a period of great expectations. For persons with disabilities in particular, decolonization held additional possibilities and potential. National independence promised not just majority rule but also an all-inclusive citizenship and the commitment to social justice. Among the visually impaired of Kenya, such collective aspirations led to the birth of the Kenya Union of the Blind in 1959. In 1964, after years of futile correspondence with government officials, the Union organized a street march to the prime minister's office to attract attention to its grievances. The result was a government panel, the Mwendwa Committee for the Care and Rehabilitation of the Disabled, whose published report became the blueprint for social and rehabilitation programs. The government possessed limited resources, and the reforms that ensued were long overdue. Yet the sociohistorical dynamics behind the march are of particular significance. From the social historian's point of view, they affirm not only the historical agency of persons with disabilities, but also the need to recast and broaden the scope of African social history.

This article is organized into three parts. The first section deals with the preindependence period. After exploring the circumstances behind the creation of the Kenya Union of the Blind (KUB) in 1959, it focuses on the two major struggles that preoccupied the movement in its early years: special constitutional rights and access to resettlement land. The second section traces the first policy conversations on disability to 1964, the year in which the government recognized the plight of the disabled as a pressing national agenda. It presents the street march of 1964 as the turning point behind such policy formulations, including the influential Mwendwa Committee Report. The third section highlights the transformation in disability rights activism in Kenya in the last couple of decades, a point that further underscores the nexus between disability studies and African social history.

The Preindependence Period

Disability, as a social construct, has come to represent a new frontier among social historians in Europe and North America. Disability discourse has joined the trilogy of race, class, and gender, and disability studies is now a fast growing interdisciplinary field with a burgeoning scholarship and

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several specialist journals (see Davis 1997; Longmore & Umansky 2001; Kudlick 2003). In universities across the developing world, by contrast, disability research outside the medical model is either rare or relatively new. With the exception of South Africa, where there is a budding interest in disability studies, this is particularly true of sub-Saharan Africa. While African societies, for various reasons, have a disproportionate number of persons with disabilities, works on disability in Africa remain few and far between. There is some irony in this silence, for African studies itself emerged in reaction to theories of social Darwinism and the pseudoscience of race, in which blacks were portrayed in terms of intellectual, moral, and physical deformity.

Since the early 1990s only about a half-dozen books in the social sciences and humanities have dealt with the subject. Livingston (2005) is grounded in medical anthropology; Teferra (2005) is a psychosocial study; Ingstad and White's edited volumes (1995, 2007) contain essays by social anthropologists. Only Silla (1998) qualifies as a social history. Thus, for Africanists, disability remains largely the domain of the medical profession, a topic more significant for social workers than for social historians. As Julie Livingston noted in 2006, "the history of disability activism in Africa has yet to be written" (114). This article hopes to contribute to the effort of filling that gap. It suggests that African disability should be understood in terms of precolonial and colonial trajectories, as well as contemporary transformations in the role of subaltern agency. Far from remaining passive victims, disabled Africans have been an integral part of contemporary social movements; and in Kenya in particular, their self-mobilization has had a tangible impact on government policy.

In what was clearly a precedent-setting gesture, *Disability Studies Quarterly* in 2009 dedicated an entire issue to Kenya. The articles interrogated Kenyan disability from contemporary human rights, cultural, linguistic, and literary perspectives, but paid little attention to the historical questions of cause and effect, or to what historians would call "change over time." Two years later the *Journal of African History* published a study by Jeff Grischow on disability and rehabilitation in Ghana, in which the author attributed the birth of a government policy on disability (1957–66) to two variables. First was Kwame Nkrumah's embrace of a pragmatic economic program involving the integration of the disabled into the workforce. Second was the positive influence of Sir John Wilson, an internationally renowned rehabilitation specialist whose work among the Ghanaian blind left a strong impression on the government. What is missing in Grischow's case study, however, is the influence of African activism in the development of disability policies. This article examines the early history of the Kenya Union of the Blind, a grassroots movement founded in 1959, four years before national independence. As the oldest organization of persons with disabilities in East Africa, KUB demonstrates the role of disabled Africans as agents of social change.

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Primary documents, mostly correspondence among activists, provided the bulk of the data for this article. Taped interviews, used to corroborate the written accounts as well as to fill in gaps, were conducted at the homes and offices of six informants during research trips to Kenya in 2009 and 2011. Since his graduation from the University of Nairobi in 1976, John-Mark Ivali has been teaching at the Thika High School for the Blind and is the most senior staff member there. Samuel Kabue, a disability rights activist, is the coordinator of the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN) at the Nairobi office of the World Council of Churches. Chomba Wa Munyi, ex-chairperson of KUB, teaches at Kenyatta University in Nairobi. Elly Macha, the former executive director of the Nairobi-based African Union of the Blind, is a consultant for nongovernmental organizations. Daniel Kasusya, who worked as a telephone operator in Nairobi from 1959 until his retirement in 1991, is the pastor of a church in Matuu, a small rural town in Eastern Province. Salim Afif, originally from Hadhramaut, Yemen, began his teaching career in Thika in the early sixties, after which he transferred to the Likoni School for the Blind in Mombasa, where he still resides. Kasusya and Afif are both founding members of KUB, while the other informants belong to the second generation of disability rights activists.

The Kenya Union of the Blind: 1959–1964

In 2006 KUB collaborated with the African Union of the Blind (AFUB) in carrying out an extensive research project funded by several overseas donors on the subject of the human rights of persons with disabilities. The project resulted in the publication in 2007 of a comprehensive report entitled "State of Disabled Peoples Rights in Kenya." In addition to sociocultural and economic details, the study included a brief section on the early history of disability rights movement in Kenya.

> In . . . [1964] a group of people with disabilities spent a whole night camping outside state house in Nairobi, the now official residence of the president. The group was seeking audience with the first prime minister who later that year became the first president of Kenya, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. The group of people with disabilities wanted Kenyatta to intervene in their circumstances of extreme exclusion from the society. In answer to the disabled community, that same year Kenyatta created the Ominde Commission to look into the situation of people with disabilities and advise him and the government appropriately. (AFUB 2007:32)

The report, while painting the overall picture reasonably well, was wrong in the specifics. There was no "overnight camping" at the State House, nor did the prime minister establish the Ominde Commission to address the plight of the disabled. However, on January 15, 1964, a group of blind men had marched to the Harambee House to present a petition to the prime minis-

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ter. There followed the Mwendwa Committee for the Care and Rehabilitation of the Disabled, whose recommendations had far-reaching results. In this sense, the year 1964 was a milestone in Kenyan disability rights history, and its mention by the report was well justified.

The march of 1964, and the various KUB activities preceding it, cannot be read in isolation from the overall history of colonialism. Whatever prejudice against disability existed in precolonial times, it was no doubt magnified under colonial rule. "As countries march forward," Kenya's *Daily Nation* reported in 1961, "the blind are being left behind—left to sit in the corner of some dark hut, unwanted, unloved, not understood." While dwelling on the stereotypic image of haplessness, the newspaper article captured an important fact about colonial social policy, or the absence thereof.[1] As Campbell demonstrates in *Race and Empire* (2007), Kenya was the colony where the science of eugenics enjoyed the most receptive audience, thanks to the aristocratic background of its settlers. There was no interest in investing in formal native education, let alone special schools, and the few exceptions were either trade and agricultural schools or schools set up by church groups. Thus, even after the passing of the famous Colonial Development and Welfare Act by Britain in 1940, government disability programs remained virtually nonexistent (see also Anderson 1970).[2]

Indeed, particular conditions made Kenya even more amenable to sharp social and class cleavage than its East African sister colonies. As a settler colony, Kenya saw a reconfiguration of its social fabric with the introduction of vast commercial farms and a cash-crop economy, which in turn monetized the value of native labor. This had a direct impact on the disabled, if one can extrapolate from Colin Leys's classic study of Kenyan underdevelopment (Leys 1974). On the one hand, monetization conferred a market value on a productive healthy physique. On the other hand, the rural areas or the reserves, where most of the disabled resided, lost their communal safety net with the influx of the able bodied into urban areas in search of such wage labor. Further depreciation in the quality of life followed, leading to desperate survival measures such as vagrancy and begging, or as the *Daily Nation* suggested, to social and physical sequestration.

Out of this paradox of modernization was born the first disability rights movement in Kenya. The catalyst was the Thika Salvation Army School for the Blind, founded in 1946 by the Salvation Army and located in Thika Town thirty miles northeast of Nairobi. Colonial education was a rare privilege and the best predictor of relative economic success and upward social mobility, even if it only meant mastering the three Rs during a few years at the mission school. But while the Thika School for the Blind was ranked high in academic excellence, job placement remained a chronic problem for its graduates. The number of such special schools gradually increased, but without addressing the question of opportunity, further compounding the problem. By 1967 there were about 450 blind Kenyans exposed to modern education, only less than a third of whom were employed, according

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to a special survey conducted that year. "It is ironic that the very success of the Kenya schools for the blind and the standard they have reached should raise a number of problems, the most serious being employment," the study lamented (quoted in Anderson 1970:96).

In the 1950s, when the first batch of Thika graduates began to search for employment opportunities after the completion of standard eight, a handful were offered additional training and hired as telephone operators in offices in Nairobi and Thika. Others found employment in some of the industries around Thika Town, mostly folding papers and packaging products. The rest resorted to vagrancy or melted back into the villages, never to be heard from again. The contradictions between the graduates' belief in education as an opportunity enhancer and the reality of an indifferent colonial administration thus sowed the seed for disability rights consciousness. In accordance with what the sociologist Michael Oliver (1983) would label the "social model" of disability, the graduates intuitively understood that their underclass condition was neither inevitable nor economically justifiable. As their leading activists were later to explain, they attributed their lack of opportunities not to blindness, but rather to social attitudes that sanctioned such discriminatory treatments (interview with Salim Afif, Jan. 26, 2011; interview with Daniel Kasusya, June 30, 2009).[3]

Still, for such convictions to coalesce into a grassroots movement, a leader had to emerge. "Every community, every minority, every movement needs its heroes," remarked the late Paul Longmore, a pioneer in North American disability studies. "Heroes instruct us as to who we really are, who we can become, and remarkable changes we can bring about if we act boldly, and if we stick together" (2003:53). In the Kenyan context, the individual who assumed this role was Jason M. Mutugi. Among the first to graduate from the Thika School, and the first to study overseas and earn a graduate degree, Mutugi was a trailblazer in his own right. By the 1950s some level of group consciousness had emerged among the Thika graduates, but Mutugi's vision of a national association would lend a sense of purpose to that haphazard sentiment, transforming it into the first disability rights movement in East Africa.

In his final years Mutugi narrated his life history to Samuel Kabue, a protégé who was one of his former students. According to the autobiography, which was circulated as a booklet at Mutugi's funeral in 2008, Mutugi was born around 1934 in the Kirinyaga district of Central Province, the region that would later experience some of the fiercest battles between the Mau Mau and the colonial forces. The only survivor of eleven siblings, Mutugi developed trachoma at the age of five, after which his vision steadily deteriorated. At twelve, after some years of regular schooling, he enrolled in the newly opened school for the blind as the youngest pupil. At nineteen, by which time he had lost all vision, he had graduated from Thika and found employment in the same school, first as a Braille transcriber and then as a Braille teacher. Later, in his thirties, he would spend five years in

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North America completing undergraduate and graduate degrees at York University in Toronto and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Mutugi 2008).

Although Mutugi, as a young man, maintained strong nationalistic views, his European mentors knew him as a devout Christian, thanks to his transcription of the New Testament in Kiswahili from print into Braille in just one year. From 1953 on, Mutugi organized an informal social circle of Thika graduates, or what came to be known as the "library group." Headed by a triumvirate of friends (Johnson Kieti, Henry Ochilo, and Mutugi himself), the group met periodically at the school, where it brainstormed on projects such as the promotion of Braille literacy and the opening of a national Braille library. Meanwhile, the Kenyan Society for the Blind, the local arm of the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind, was established in 1956 by act of parliament, followed by the Association for the Physically Handicapped of Kenya two years later. Both organizations were for, rather than of, the disabled, but their inspirational role was obvious. On June 27, 1959, the Kenya Union of the Blind finally came into being during a gathering at the Thika School, with forty-four delegates in attendance and with Major Gordon Swansbury, the school's principal, as the guest of honor (Mutugi 2008; interview with Salam Afif, Jan. 26, 2011; interview with Daniel Kasusya, June 30, 2009).

The first group of elected officers included Mutugi as president, Daniel Kasusya as vice president, Salam Afif as treasurer, and the Johnson Kieti (telephone operator at the Thika police station) as general secretary. Without an operational budget or leadership experience, the movement at this early stage differed little from the "library group" it had come to replace. Since membership fees and occasional fundraising events alone could not meet organizational expenses, some level of resourcefulness and personal sacrifice was expected. Nairobi-based members like Kasusya had to travel to Thika at least once a year in order to attend the annual meeting. Those living in Thika met more regularly to discuss latest developments over a simple lunch of bread and tea. Present at one of these lunch meetings in 1965 was a young British teacher, Tom Maley, whom the Union was trying to induct into its ranks: "I went to a meeting one Sunday and got home very late for dinner. I cannot remember which language the meeting was conducted in. I suspect it was English and that the business was incomprehensible to me. . . . One day, Salim asked me if I would like to make a donation to the Union which was short of funds. I did not know how to handle this request and refused. I can see now that it was a quite legitimate move on his part" (Maley 2004:27).

Good rapport with the local community helped solve some of the logistical challenges. Meeting space was provided by the Kenya Canners, a nearby pineapple canning factory where Paul Kasanzu, Mutugi's eventual successor, was an employee. Until the Union established its own postal address in late 1963, mail correspondence was carried out care of the Thika School.

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With the absence of paid staff, volunteers like Swansbury provided technical support and mentoring. Still, the movement remained independent, not to mention the fact that all letters were typed personally by Mutugi or Kieti, on a typewriter donated by a local businessman (interview with Salam Afif, Jan. 26, 2011).

Several dozen letters concerning the activities of KUB from 1959 to 1964 have been preserved at the organization's headquarters. Earlier communications between the Union and the colonial government dealt mostly with bureaucratic formalities. A letter written by Mutugi to the Registrar Law Court in 1959 included two copies of the application form for registration, the processing fee of twenty shillings, and the thumbprints of members, "as we are blind and cannot sign with an ordinary pen." Another letter from 1960, addressed to the District Commissioner of Thika, requested a written permit for the organization's annual general meeting. Proposed topics for discussion included business loans and a trading company, pensions and homes for the elderly, the appointment of a full-time social worker to facilitate employment, more special schools and training centers, and a Braille magazine (Jason Mutugi to Registrar Law Court, Oct. 19, 1959; Mutugi to District Commissioner of Thika, Nov. 4, 1960).

Even if KUB was preoccupied during the first year with gaining government recognition, it was not long before the movement made its presence felt in the national media. Contact with the media began in 1960 with a request to the Kenyan Broadcasting Service (KBS) for the airing of two news releases on the national radio: one on the opening of a branch in Nairobi, the other on the Union's recently completed annual general meeting in Thika. When the request found no response, KUB's follow-up correspondence took on a more feisty tone, demanding equal access to the media on the basis of the members' citizenship rights and the media's own civic obligation to society.

> We are bitterly complaining about the way you have turned down our two articles sent to you for broadcast during the months of July and November this year.... The purpose of sending you such articles for broadcast is to just let our blind comrades, who are unable to attend our meetings, know what we are doing for them.... It would be a great help to them to hear something about their Union; they cannot read newspapers, as you know.... Furthermore, we blind people consider ourselves to have a right of being citizens of this country, and should enjoy every privilege enjoyed by the seeing members of Kenya's community. During our last meeting we discussed important themes which we think our fellow blind would be interested to hear. Could you please broadcast it now? (Jason Mutugi to KBS, Nov. 24, 1960)

Whether the news release finally got aired is not clear. Regardless, the incident marked the beginning of a tense but eventually fruitful relationship between the KBS and KUB. Two years later the Union was allotted fifteen

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minutes of weekly airtime for the discussion of disability-related issues. First hosted by Mutugi and later by Kasusya, the program would last for over a decade before being discontinued in the mid-seventies (Mutugi 2008).

A decisive turning point in the Union's early history came in 1961. It began with the government's official recognition of the Union on May 19, after two years of red tape, and climaxed on August 20 when KUB activists, armed with a special permit from the Ministry of Defense, visited Jomo Kenyatta at his house in Gatundu. The visit with the leading nationalist was a well-planned outreach effort consisting of President Mutugi, Secretary Kieti, Vice Treasurer Henry Ochilo, and Paul Imburia as the representative of the telephone operators' association. The timing was premature, however, for Kenyatta had just come out of prison and held no government portfolio. Still, Kenyatta expressed a commitment to work on KUB's cause after independence, a promise his visitors would not forget: "I promise that in the coming government your problems will end. Come again and see me" (Jason Mutugi to Jomo Kenyatta, Aug. 20, 1961; see also Ministry of Defense to KUB, Aug. 16, 1961).

Back from Gatundu, the Union transformed itself into a lobby group on behalf of disabled Kenyans in general and the visually handicapped in particular. On August 24, for example, it distributed circulars to members of the two newly formed political parties: the Kenyan African National Union (KANU) and the Kenyan African Democratic Union (KADU). The petition called for a government department in charge of disability affairs, as well as for a law implementing the "compulsory employment" of the disabled by the business community. "The estimated population of the blind people of this country is in the region of seventy thousand," it reasoned. "If all these people are left to earn their living by begging, they would be such a big burden to this growing country. Why not do something to enable them to earn their daily bread by working with their hands instead of begging?" (Jason Mutugi to Legislative Council, Aug. 24, 1961).

An even more elaborate letter followed on May 21, 1962, only two days after Mutugi and his associates celebrated the first anniversary of the registration of their organization at Kenyatta's residence. In it the activists once again asked that the "welfare of the blind and other handicapped dwellers of Kenya" be addressed at the ongoing constitutional discussions. They proposed the most comprehensive list of government programs hitherto: compulsory employment, land for farmers and loans for small traders, free medical treatment for the blind and free education for their children, and special schools for the twenty-five thousand visually impaired children nationwide (Jason Mutugi to Jomo Kenyatta, May 21, 1962).

The campaign to have the plight of the disabled addressed by drafters of the constitution continued into 1963. "The welfare of the disabled people of this country has been given very little attention by the past governments," read KUB's petition to the famous Lancaster House Conference in February 1962 (Jason Mutugi to Lancaster House Constitutional Confer-

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ence, Feb. 26, 1962). "We, too, desire to enjoy the forthcoming 'Uhuru,'" pleaded another letter to the Legislative Council in Nairobi a year later (Johnson Kieti to Legislative Council in Nairobi, Feb. 18, 1963). The skillful invocation of *Uhuru*, the Kiswahili word for all that the freedom struggle stood for, must have touched on sensitive nerves, for Kenyatta and Tom Mboya, KANU's secretary general, responded immediately.

The response from Mboya was brief but empathetic. He wrote that the "subject of the problems of the blind" was unlikely to come up at the constitutional discussions, but that he promised to throw his "full support" if it did (Tom Mboya to Johnson Kieti, Feb. 21, 1963). Kenyatta, who by now was well acquainted with the Union, sent a more detailed response. Recalling a phone conversation between KUB and his office just the day before, he explained that talks were under way about "work for the blind and the disabled," although it was not yet clear if such services would be within the "jurisdiction of the central government." Reinforcing Mboya's point, he added that the topic itself had nothing to do with constitution making. "Meantime, I assure you that I understand your point of view and I shall bear it in mind when an opportunity for discussion arises" (Jomo Kenyatta to Jason Mutugi, Feb. 19, 1963).

As the next section demonstrates, the constitutional question would open up again several decades later, and lead to a much better outcome. At this point, however, KUB shifted its primary struggle to what it thought was a more tangible demand: land. The presence of blind peasants across East Africa, often assisted by children and wives, had been well documented, which meant that the prospect of KUB members working as small-scale farmers was not without a precedent. In 1955 a special center for the teaching of such rural skills was opened in Malakisi, North Nyanza, by the British Empire Society for the Blind, with Alexander MacKay as its regional advisor. On eight acres of land attached to a mission hospital, and with twelve resident trainees and one instructor, the center seemed vibrant and promising by 1956. "This novel Center, where the class-rooms are mud huts and the students learn to use hoes instead of Braille frames, is the first in a series of experiments to demonstrate that the blind can take an active part in the village and tribal life of Africa," was how Sir John Wilson, the director of the Society, summarized its mission (quoted in MacKay 1956:4). But for reasons that are unclear the experiment was short lived, and Wilson made no mention of it in the context of his 1959 visit to Kenya.

Despite the failure of the Malakisi project, the blind had already demonstrated elsewhere their ability to live off the land. In nearby Uganda, the Salama agricultural cooperation trained blind farmers in association with the Uganda Foundation for the Blind. In Nigeria, another community of blind peasants cultivated corn, pineapples, bananas, cassava, groundnuts, hemp, yam, and a variety of vegetables on sixty acres of land granted by the government (see Wilson 1964). Wilson, now with the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind, observed that the mechanical

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aspect of farming (digging, planting, watering, weeding, composting, and roof-thatching) posed little difficulty to the well trained." He described the Nigerian scheme in particular as "one of the most exciting places in Africa" (1964:59).

Whether or not KUB activists had heard of these successful experiments, their campaign for resettlement land was motivated mostly by local developments. In 1962 KUB had procured from the two major transportation companies (the Kenyan Bus Corporation and the East African Railways) a concession for subsidized passes for blind passengers (Mutugi 2008). Inspired by this accomplishment, the Union embarked during the next year on the single-minded pursuit of land acquisition for its hundred or so registered members. What rendered the resettlement question even more urgent, from the point of view of KUB leadership, was the "land consolidation" policy. As many uneasy European farmers left the so-called White Highlands on the eve of independence, the transitional government had purchased vast fertile tracts with British funding and parceled them out among African farmers. Persons with disabilities, making up the poorest of the rural poor, did not feature in the plan. Against this backdrop of neglect, KUB took up the land issue in earnest, the earliest example of struggle for economic rights by disabled Kenyans.

The painstaking, protracted, and eventually unfruitful correspondence between KUB and the colonial government over resettlement began in July 1962. Initially the Ministry of Land Settlement warmed to the idea and even dispatched one of its senior officials, a certain Mr. Abrams, to survey a site. But when the ministry dragged its feet and Abrams took no further action, KUB wrote back invoking the contemporary language of citizenship rights: "During the land consolidation many blind people were neglected, but this time we are to see to it that the blind will get land just like other people. We, too, are the citizens of Kenya and have every right to enjoy all the privileges available to the seeing community" (Johnson Kieti to Native Chief Commissioner Whenright, Feb. 22, 1963).

When a response finally came, it was not from Whenright but from F. P. Derrick, the official in the Ministry of State in charge of social affairs. Derrick asked that the land nominees be identified by "region" and "tribe," to which Kieti wrote back explaining that all blind Kenyans were "natural members" of the association "irrespective of tribe, creed or color" (F. P. Derrick to KUB, Jan. 11, 1963; Johnson Kieti to F. P. Derrick, Jan. 28, 1963). Then, just as inexplicably, Derrick diverted his attention to the Kenyan Society for the Blind (KSB), the European-led organization made up of middle-class volunteers and philanthropists, through which he authorized a half-hearted "pilot scheme." Six candidates, preferably young and unemployed, would be resettled, and on the quality of their performance the government would assess the project's long-term feasibility. It was a frivolous initiative, no doubt, but the involvement of a third party made the token offer even more insensitive. Sidelining KUB's stakeholder role, the task of supervising the project

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was delegated to Alexander MacKay of the KSB (F. P. Derrick to Alexander MacKay, March 20, 1963).

In the end, the fate of the token plots was not even certain. Despite a letter from the Ministry of State, which stated that authorizations for the six individuals were dispatched to their respective regional offices (J. G. Kiereini to KUB, Sep. 13, 1963), there is no record suggesting that the orders were implemented. Either the evidence is missing from KUB's files or, more likely, the authorizations, which took place during the busy months of government reshuffling, were never acted upon. At any rate, the gesture would have been too little too late. Thus, during the first four years of its existence, KUB had a mixed record of achievements. It had obtained official status as a legally registered organization; sought out and received an audience with Kenyatta himself; won concessions from the major transportation companies; and made its presence felt in the national media. But its major negotiations with the government, on constitutional rights and resettlement land, were a failure. All long-standing grievances and pent-up frustrations would thus be passed on to the new era, leading to what was perhaps the first instance of a protest march under the postindependence government.

The 1964 Street March and the Mwendwa Report

When Kenya gained independence on December 12, 1963, the entire country felt euphoric. The political atmosphere appeared vibrant with KANU, under Kenyatta, forming the ruling party and KADU, under Ronald Ngala, heading the opposition. However, KUB activists, although sharing in the national optimism, were still concerned about the untackled questions of employment, education, recognition of their movement as the legitimate voice of the blind, the creation of a government department of disability affairs, and the ill-fated resettlement scheme. As far as KUB was concerned, therefore, the time was finally ripe for Kenyatta, now prime minister, to live up to earlier promises, and hence was born the idea of a street march to his office at the Harambee House.

Since April of the previous year Mutugi had been in Toronto, enrolled as a student at York University. The idea of the march probably came from his successor, Paul Kasanzu, an employee of Kenya Canners and a trade unionist. Kasusya and Afif, the two marchers still alive at the time of this research in 2009 and 2011, remembered the event vividly with few variations, no doubt having recounted the story several times before. Early Monday morning, January 15, 1964, forty to sixty members converged at the Machakos bus station in downtown Nairobi, an ideal rendezvous for those coming from Thika. Using a long rope brought for the occasion to create an orderly procession, the march began at about 10:00 a.m. with the partially sighted, among them Kasusya, in the lead. For the first several hundred meters along Haile Selassie Road the march proceeded uneventfully, other

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than provoking some curiosity among onlookers. The atmosphere changed at the railway station roundabout, where the group was intercepted by the police and the peaceful march turned confrontational.

When orders to disband the group failed, the police tried a different tack. They volunteered to give the marchers a ride to the Harambee House on their truck, an offer that the activists believed was a trap and declined. Tear gas and threats of force ensued, only to be met by equally resolved opponents who formed a human chain and stood their ground. With the street blocked to traffic and a mob forming around the scene, a compromise was struck: the group's representatives would be escorted to the prime minister's office, where Assistant Minister Argwings Kodhek was to receive them, while their colleagues waited for their return at the roundabout. It is not clear whether Kasanzu and his two associates presented their petition to Ngala Mwendwa, Minister of Labor and Social Services, as Kasusya remembers the event, or directly to Kenyatta himself, as Mutugi's narration to Kabue would imply. At any rate, the standoff with the police was diffused following the concession, and all marchers returned home peacefully by late afternoon (Mutugi 2008).

The first written reference to postprotest developments appears in Kieti's letter of February 24 to Mwendwa. Written four days after a meeting between the ministry and KUB, the letter thanked the government for agreeing to

> appoint a commission to survey and sketch the general welfare of the blind and other disabled persons.... My colleagues and I unite in appreciating your effort in making this project possible.... You did a good thing in accepting three blind representatives to the commission, for it would have been rather hard for the seeing people to understand thoroughly well the common problems of the blind unless they are advised by the blind themselves. (Johnson Kieti to Ministry of Labor and Social Services, Feb. 24, 1964)

Mwendwa's disability panel, officially titled the Committee for the Care and Rehabilitation of the Disabled, began to meet in May at the National Youth Center in Nairobi, but with no KUB members. The committee consisted of ten representatives of the various ministries, plus a consultant from the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind. The now-familiar MacKay of the KSB served as de facto secretary and deputy chair. In preparing its report, the committee met a total of fourteen times. It studied the reports of several research projects carried out in other countries, listened to expert opinions, and dispatched some of its members to visit disability-related centers in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, and Kampala (Mwendwa 1964:1).

What finally came to be known as the Mwendwa Committee Report for the Care and Rehabilitation of the Disabled was released on August 17, 1964. In more than a hundred recommendations spread across twenty-eight pages (plus fourteen pages of appendixes and a bibliography), it

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provided the guidelines for the government's development of a social and rehabilitation policy for the disabled. Details focused on four groups: the blind, the deaf, the mentally handicapped, and the "crippled," with passing references to the "aged" and the "infirm." Even if some of its language echoed the biases of the medical perspective, as a whole it was a well-crafted document that sought to mainstream Kenyan disability services in line with contemporary practices.

The report incorporated cutting-edge ideas, many of them refinements of KUB's earlier proposals. It recommended that all existing schools for disabled children, like the one in Thika, be treated as "special schools" and offered enough government support to make them tuition free. In addition to vocational and trade schools, special agricultural centers would teach farming and related techniques. Sheltered workshops would provide an alternative for those unable to find regular employment because of a severe disability. Orthopedic centers with physiotherapists would help integrate the physically handicapped, the largest disability group, into schools and the workforce. Some of the proposals focused on accommodation and bureaucratic reforms. Workplaces were to be made accessible: namely, "the needs of the disabled worker [should] be born in mind in designing the layout of factories" (Mwendwa 1964:23). Voluntary organizations were to be encouraged and expanded, but under close government coordination so as to avoid concentration in certain geographic areas. Finally, the government was urged to develop a centralized policy on disability under the Department of Rehabilitation, and the department itself was to be monitored by an advisory board made up of disabled and nondisabled members.

Economic imperatives, as much as humanitarian concerns, justified such proactive policies. Government expenditure, costly at first, would be offset in the long term by the transformation of the disabled into a productive workforce. But the most profound observation in the report lay in the concluding paragraph, which reminded the government that economic justifications aside, persons with disabilities were entitled to the intrinsic rights of citizenship and human dignity:

> In considering costs, we will again point out that this can be justified, not only on humanitarian grounds, but for economic reasons. Most disabled persons are capable of being trained to do work of one kind or another. They are potentially a national asset, but without training they remain a liability. It is in the country's best interest to see that such training is made available for them. Nor should it be forgotten that they too, like the rest of Kenya's citizens, have a claim to that increase in human dignity which Independence brings. (Mwendwa 1964:28)

Over the years the Mwendwa Committee Report has virtually fallen into an academic black hole. There is no citation of the document in the 1982 university-based survey on the status of disabled Kenyans, in which a 1979 government disability study was credited erroneously as the "first" such

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report (Nkiyangi & Mbindyo 1982:3). Oral recollections fare slightly better. Although attributing the 1964 report to Ronald Ngala instead of Ngala Mwendwa, Afif remembered it and its favorable reception by his group, while Kasusya recalled that Ngala was merely the minister to whom Kasanzu and his colleagues had presented their petition on the day of the march. Yet even if confusedly remembered by activists and little cited in the literature, the Mwendwa Report remains a landmark document. Some of its recommendations were adopted by the Kenya Education Report of 1964, popularly known as the Ominde Commission, in which a brief section on special education and rehabilitation training was included (Ominde 1964). Even more significantly, the Mwendwa Report facilitated the first legislation on rehabilitation and vocational training, which was the basis for the Parliamentary Sessional Paper 5 of 1968, and which was later incorporated into the 1969–74 Development Plan (ILO 1972).

Changes came painfully slowly, but the course of action was set. Measures by the government, building on the Sessional Paper, began in 1968 with the establishment of the Vocational and Rehabilitation Committee under the Ministry of Cooperatives and Social Services. By 1971 an industrial rehabilitation complex was completed in Nairobi, followed by many more nationwide, where men and women could train as carpenters, tailors, artisans, and tanners. Likewise, several rural handicrafts centers, sheltered workshops, and agricultural schemes, as well as orthopedic and mobile eye clinics, were launched. Relative to the scope of the problem, the resources were limited and the programs served only a small portion of the targeted population. But a 1972 study by the International Labor Office (ILO) portrayed the overall effort in a very favorable light. Crediting the Mwendwa Committee for its catalytic role, the detailed report praised the various innovations as "more than satisfactory," while also remarking that some of the newly begun vocational facilities were too "elaborate" to fit local standards without further modification (ILO 1972:19).

Educational opportunities also expanded. The Thika Salvation Army High School for the Blind, the only one of its type in East Africa, opened in January 1967 as a joint project between the government and the Salvation Army (see Anderson 1970). The early seventies witnessed an even greater breakthrough with the university's admission of blind students, most of whom studied for the teaching profession or read law. And in 1975 the long-overdue special education services for children with special needs was introduced, which paved the way for the launching ten years later of the Kenya Institute of Special Education (interview with John-Mark Ivali, June 1, 2009; see also Ingstad & Grut 2007).

Challenges and Opportunities since 1964

Ironically, as the cumulative effect of disability rights activism began to bear fruit starting in the late sixties, the same period saw a drastic decline in the

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activism of the blind, and KUB's name did not even appear in ILO's comprehensive report of 1972. The government had expropriated the disability rights struggle and shunted off the grassroots advocates to the sidelines. The seventeen-member Vocational and Rehabilitation Committee, far from being inclusive, was composed of able-bodied officials and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (ILO 37). KUB's failure to insure continuity in its leadership also contributed to the setback, and even for the most veteran activists, growing family and professional responsibilities meant less involvement with the movement. Mutugi was preoccupied with his executive role as head of the Nairobi branch of the Chicago-based Hadley School for the Blind. Others left Thika for better opportunities elsewhere and lost touch with their former colleagues. In 1966 Afif was transferred to the newly founded school for the blind in Mombasa, where he settled permanently. Kasusya, by now an employee with the Kenyan Institute of Agriculture, was already well established in Nairobi. Finally, the tragic death of Johnson Kieti from pneumonia in December 1968 not only was demoralizing but also left a real leadership void that the Union was unable to fill (e-mail correspondence with Samuel Kabue, Sept. 12, 2009).

The Union was not brought back to life until the eighties, with the succession of Chomba Wa Munyi, a graduate of Michigan State University with a master's degree in special education. Relationships were established with overseas donors and a spacious headquarters was completed on land donated by the government near the national airport. In 1989 a revitalized KUB joined the newly formed associations of the deaf and of the physically handicapped in founding the United Disabled Persons of Kenya (UDPK), an umbrella body of some 130 local movements. Prior to that, at a meeting in Tunis, delegates from several countries had launched the African Union of the Blind (AFUB) with some support from the World Blind Union and under a special resolution of the Organization of African Unity. In 1992 Wa Munyi was elected as the third executive director of AFUB, a position later held by another Swahili-speaking East African, Elly Macha of Tanzania. KUB's building in Nairobi now houses AFUB's secretariat, a practical choice given Nairobi's periodic hosting of various disability-related conferences (interview with Chomba Wa Munyi, June 9, 2009; interview with Elly Macha, July 14, 2009; Vaughan 1998:131).

The 1990s represented a milestone in another respect. KUB had lacked equity balance in terms of gender representation. Given KUB's history of all-male leadership, few could have anticipated that Kenya's most prominent blind person would turn out to be one of the few female graduates of Thika. In 1999 Josephine Sinyo, a human rights attorney and chair of UDPK, made history as the first visually impaired Member of Parliament. Initially, Sinyo's appointment depended on the backing of a well-known departing MP, the paleontologist Richard Leakey. Once in office, however, Sinyo held her own. Overcoming the challenges of a difficult work environment with few accommodations, she served out her term gracefully, devel-

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oping an extensive international network in the process (see Radio Netherlands 2005; AFUB 2007).

Sinyo's proximity to the upper echelons of power symbolized the distance the disability rights movement had traversed, from a march on Haile Selassie Road in 1964 to a seat in parliament three decades later. At the more practical level, the positive precedent set by Sinyo gave a new boost to the call for a broader civic participation in Kenyan politics. Inspired by the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2003, itself the product of many years of lobbying work by UDPK through a specially designated taskforce, the national Constitutional Conference (2004) embraced the language of equity. In addition to sections on accessibility and reasonable accommodation, its Draft Constitution reserved 5 percent of all public offices, including parliamentary seats, for representatives from the disabled community.[4] The draft was rejected for unrelated reasons in the 2006 national referendum, and the subsequent revisions watered down the 5 percent mandate into a mere desirable "principle." But even with the less generous clause, the revised proposal, which went into effect in August 2010 as Kenya's Second Constitution, marked a watershed. In theory at least, it has created a legal space for special group rights, a concept that the first generation of KUB activists had long championed.

Conclusion

Africans with disabilities are among the poorest of the world's poor. Against such odds have emerged vibrant disability rights movements, of which the Kenyan case study is just an example. The struggle of disabled Africans, like the struggle of poor people the world over, is aligned against entrenched forces and has yet to make a qualitative dent in the economic arena. Educational and employment opportunities have increased for sure, but at too slow a pace to be thought of as transformational. Where such movements have made a real impact is instead in their roles as agents of social change, especially through their articulation and promotion of citizenship rights.

In 1964 KUB activists marched to the prime minister's office, sending the message that the disabled were a factor to be reckoned with in postindependence politics. Today, disability activism in the country is much more complex, comprising international concepts of human rights, gender equality, and reasonable accommodation; and several disabled individuals, whose rise to national prominence would have been unthinkable only decades ago, are now common household names and role models. The Kenyan struggle for disability rights has thus come a long way, as evident in the government's recent embrace of a disability-friendly constitution, fifty years after the idea was first proposed by the disabled themselves.

While the Kenyan case study of disability rights activism demonstrates a dynamic social revolution in the making, a critical engagement with such movements has been lacking among academics. Disability is a universal phe-

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nomenon that transcends every imaginable boundary, and that fact alone should have drawn attention to the African disability worldview beyond the medical paradigm. The practical applications are even more obvious, as disability is a fact of life that millions of Africans have to live with. African disability studies will result in the acquisition of practical knowledge for government policymaking and social planning. It will promote social change by creating awareness of local disability agency, like that of the role played by KUB trailblazers. To social activists and human rights advocates, it will offer insight into the least visible, yet most marginalized, segments of society. And to those who feel constrained by the trilogy of race, class, and gender, disability studies will mean the untapped potential of a fresh perspective, one that will help close a chronic gap in African social history.

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Notes

1. Despite such disparaging remarks, traditional reactions to blindness vary widely. There is no published study about the social conditions of the blind in colonial or precolonial Kenya. But we know that among the Fra Fra of northern Ghana, where blindness was endemic because of river blindness, the blind led relatively well-integrated lives. "In fact, blind people were chiefs, heads of households, and had no problem assuming their cultural duties," writes C. Edwin Vaughan (1998:125).
2. Apparently lack of policy initiatives did not prevent medical research on disability, mostly because of the need to control "contagion." The first data on blindness in Kenya were compiled by the colonial government in 1948 (Heath 1948).
3. For insights into Kenyan social attitudes toward disability through the analysis of the Kiswahili language, see Waliaula (2009). According to Waliaula, words for physical impairments in many Kenyan Bantu languages—such as the Kiswahili *kipofu* (blind), *kiziwi* (deaf), *kiwete* (lame), and *kichaa* (mentally ill)—begin with a prefix used to denote inanimate objects.
4. For a critique of the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2003, which some Kenyan activists find incomplete or unenforceable, see Armstrong (2009).

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