



AFRICA: Rhumba the teacher

Teaching in Kenya is judged by many to be the most important profession: with over half the population below 16 years of age and more than 30,000 schools to service, who can be needed more than a good teacher. In addition, education they say is the route to enlightenment, and if ever there was a downtrodden people who need enlightenment, Kenya is the place they inhabit. This is the predominant view from a grossly unequal society.

I first met *Rhumba* as he was shovelling sand from the street outside the *Blue Kuku Café*, in *Shanzu*, a suburb of Mombasa, whilst offering (ironic) praises to God for being so kind to his people. The irony of course is that the floodwaters might bring clean sand to the street, but they can also wreak untold devastation and disorder on what is already an extremely poor and downtrodden community.

Perhaps the first thing to note is that the God *Rhumba* had deferred to was Allah, because our teacher is a confirmed Muslim, in common with the majority in the area. And there is nothing at all wrong with that, be it Muslim, Christian or any other faith: it's good to confront one's God; having a little joke from time to time helps to let off a bit of steam and arrange things in perspective.

The second thing about this young man is that he has an outgoing personality. In a land where flamboyant characters are not uncommon, he nevertheless would rate head and shoulders above most. Someone said the name *Rhumba* grew from the fact that he liked to dance, but in fact the name was there right from day one. Maybe

he danced in the cradle, for indeed he does like to dance, whenever he gets the chance; he's that sort of person who says: *"Life is short; let's make the most of it"*.

Rhumba was born 22 years ago in Kirimane village, almost as close as one can get to the South-East, coastal corner of Kenya, in the hilly terrain of Kwale County, adjacent to the Tanzanian border. His village lies within a rural area known as Kibandaongo, home to the Duruma Tribe, the third or fourth most populous of the nine-tribe Mijikenda grouping, the original inhabitants of the coastal region.

When he was just four years old, his family moved away from their forested home in the hills and travelled about 100 kilometres, to start life afresh on the coastal plain. His father started a new government job in Mombasa and the parents chose to live in a district known as *Mikoroshoni*, a sub-district of the wider *Shanzu* region. There, they built a relatively large, stone house, where Rhumba's mother took good care of him and his two brothers. She was an inspiring young lady who also ran a food shop.

But just two years after making this bold move, disaster struck when Rhumba's father died after a brief illness, at the relatively young age of 40. The family were devastated, finding themselves marooned in a foreign place, with no patriarchal head to lead and support them. The only way forward was to go back to Kibandaongo, where Rhumba attended the local primary school, before being sent away to boarding high school. After finishing secondary level he resumed life with his two elder brothers on the coast in Shanzu, living in the family house built by his father. Now, in his late teens, Rhumba was ready to face the world.

"Even if that world is just Shanzu," he said to himself, *"It's a start."*

By this time, our young man realised that although there was a farm back in Kibandaongo, which could support him and his family, he really wanted to experience the wider world. He was not the type to just sit back and survive; he had received a reasonable education and felt a duty to himself and his community to use that education, as best he could, for the benefit of others around him.

His first job on the Shanzu ladder to fame and fortune, saw Rhumba learning the illustrious trade of chip frying! Working twelve hours a day, seven days a week, he

quickly became expert at turning common potatoes into a golden, mouth-watering delicacy, known the world over as chips. For his 70-hour week he received the princely sum of 5,000 Kenya Shillings (approximately \$US50) a month. Life can be tough on the bottom rung and especially in a place like Shanzu, but it was a start, and enough of a start to put food on the table.

With chip frying under his belt, Rhumba moved on to a more physically taxing labourer's job, on a building site. This toughened his muscles and improved his finances, with a doubling in pay to 10,000 Kenya Shillings per month (around \$100).

But then an offer which he couldn't refuse, came in from his former teacher at Kibandaongo Primary. The school where he had starred as the top pupil a few years before, wanted him back as a teacher. And although the pay was similar to that of a lowly chip-fryer, he jumped at the chance to make use of his own education, by teaching children who were fellow members of the Duruma tribe.

Our young adventurer, now in his late teens, stayed at Kibandaongo for a year, gaining respect from colleagues because of his teaching skills, even though he had no formal training. But Rhumba had an urge to do more. He had demonstrated his ability with youngsters who were his own people, but he felt the need to step out of the fold once again; to begin further studies.

So once again our man came back to Mikoroshoni, to evening classes and computer training. He had to find a job that would enable him to be independent and support himself. But not just any job; he was now able to add *School Teacher* to his CV. So emboldened by experience in the village classroom, and with that usual exuberance, he canvassed the many private schools in Shanzu, searching for a position as a teacher. This time his selection would be based on merit, rather than connections to people he knew. Undaunted, he eventually found a small school, not too far from his house. They saw a young man with enthusiasm and a bit of experience; he saw a school with a pleasant environment and small classrooms, where he could teach 15, rather than 50 children (the number he had taught in the village school).

And that is how he came to be in the Blue Kuku café - where I was fortunate to meet him— as he made his way home from football training one evening, with a couple of soul mates. The café being midway between the school and his house was a convenient place for a bite to eat and relax, before going home to sleep. It was a friendly looking eatery, with people milling around, and from the outer a warm yellow glow of light radiating from inside.

The café manager, Lucy, who lived in a small house not far from Rhumba's place knew him well and called out to him as he passed:

"Hey, Rhumba, come and try the kuku, it's really deeelicious!" ...in a no-nonsense voice that could be heard up and down the street.

"Is it blue?" was the instant response. *"I only eat blue kuku!"*

"Yes of course" Lucy replied. *"We make it blue, just for you!"*

This little exchange of words showed another side of Rhumba and one that he prided himself on: the ability to project himself as a comedian.

Some years before, in his early days at secondary school he discovered that he possessed the talent to make others laugh. He had charisma, and a talent for quick response or repartee, and was also very adept when it came to imitation. On one particular day the school principal was teaching Rhumba's class ...and he was mad! He had just given all the students a suspension for breaking school rules. Rhumba, playing with fire to some degree, stood up and imitating the principal, repeated to the class what the head man had just said. The students couldn't contain themselves and the whole class erupted in laughter. The principal looked at Rhumba in amazement, but Rhumba stood his ground.

"Sorry sir," he said, *"They didn't understand what you told them, so I imitated what you said, to help them appreciate more".*

Luckily for Rhumba the principal got the joke and laughed along with them, with the result being that he let the whole class off the suspension. As he walked out of the classroom with books under his arm, still smiling, he turned back to the students:

“Now just get back to your work; your comedian here saved you today, but don’t bank on it happening next time!”

This small incident did two things: it showed Rhumba that he had the capability of being able to amuse people, but more importantly, it demonstrated that the gift he possessed was quite a powerful tool, which could help ease tensions and change moods. It goes even further than this, because he now values comedy, and his ability to deliver it, as a useful asset in his role as a classroom teacher. He sees it as an important tool in the teacher’s toolbox.

“Comedy helps me to teach effectively in the classroom. It makes the kids laugh and be happy. To be a good teacher you can’t just go into the classroom and start teaching. First you have to make friends with your pupils.”

It seems like a good philosophy: to be a better-than-average teacher – teaching anything, for any age – you really need to have something extra that can bring your learners closer to you. Charisma and comedy go together to capture the hearts (and minds) of the students. Once that’s accomplished then the actual job of teaching becomes a much simpler task.

When asked what he wanted to do in life, Rhumba first replied:

“To become a qualified teacher. Teaching is a passion for me. From Class 8 onwards, I was always the one teaching my fellow students: tuition at the weekends, tuition in the evenings, tuition in the holidays. And the teachers were also happy with that because I was helping to improve their student’s grades. I plan to stay at my current school for four years, then I can have enough money to go to teacher’s college to get properly qualified.”

But then he thought a little more:

“I also want to be a farmer: planting maize, rearing poultry. Farming is another passion for me and is in my blood from Kibandaongo. I have a big area next to my house here in Shanzu. That will be the starting place. If I can mix the two - teaching during the week, farming on weekends and in school holidays - then I’ll be a happy man.”

Remarkable at just 22 years of age, in any society, but especially in a community such as Mikoroshoni, because there are so many pitfalls and potholes; obstacles in the way – both literally and metaphorically. Poverty in a country such as Kenya, brings a whole raft of possibilities and temptations: possibilities to fall into the potholes and illicit temptations to help get out of them. Malnutrition, illiteracy, chronic ill health, disease: just a few of the dangers. Drugs, crime and prostitution, some of the temptations for people living on the edge, brought about by abject poverty.

The extraordinary thing is that Rhumba, living within all this in his close surrounds, has the personality, the passion and the drive, to wade through the mire and stick to the plan. More than this, he has become a role model to others in the way he lives life. He is a person who likes to make people laugh as he helps them to learn.

“I need to make people laugh,” he said, “Because I hate to see them sad. I even wear different coloured socks, or a suit jacket with shorts and sandals, just to make them smile.”

And girlfriends, a wife, children?

“No, no, no, he says,” waving his hands in the air, “I want to sort out my own life first. All those things can come later”.

Quite a character, this guy Rhumba, who would probably have the resilience and the fortitude to make good in any society he happened to find himself in. But in Kenya, his talent coupled with ambition is sorely needed: an example of a bright new generation who can lead the way for others to follow towards a better future: away from corruption and poor governance, towards greater equality and a more sustainable society.

For Rhumba all is positive and on the right track; let's hope it stays that way. Far too often these lofty ideals and ambitions are diluted and corrupted, so the hopefuls of today become the same old conformists of tomorrow. We can only hope Rhumba does not conform to the norm and that his admirable ambitions are there to stay.

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