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THE OTHER ARUSHA

Luke MBEFO, C.S.Sp.

Evidently Arusha means different things to different peoples. For many foreigners it is the hub of the tourist industry in East Africa, the center from which Safari expeditions into the wild-life kingdom are organized and expedited. For African patriots, it marks the locus of Africa's Risorgimento, the source of Africa's awakening to self-consciousness typified by the famed Arusha Declaration. Although the social programme enunciated in that revolutionary document has been voided by lived experience, it remains nevertheless and forever the beginnings of Africa's renaissance. Indeed that Declaration can rightly be regarded as an earlier version of Obama's election slogan: "Yes, we can!" meant to indicate that African Americans were not children of a lesser god. One would wish that a refurbished monument celebrating that momentous event could be erected as a replacement for the present one such as to rival the Statue of Liberty in New York or the Arc de Triumph in Paris. If Arusha's International Conference Center boasts of bringing the world to Tanzania, it needs some outstanding landmarks to support that claim. But there is a totally different aspect to Arusha, which serenades my attention. It is a numinous dimension beloved by poets and mystics. Arusha's geography breeds biblical evocations and associations. It is this transcendental dimension that is the theme of my song. Allow me to explain.

In the first place, I suggest that the ancient Israelites should have first explored this town before formulating one of their commonplace dicta namely, when God created the world, they

claim. He is said to have used twelve sacks of stones for its foundation. One sack He used for the rest of the world and the rest for Jerusalem! The pyramids of rocks and stones that constitute the physical geography of Arusha dispose one to demand a revision of that saying. The range of mountains with the dominant presence of the elegant and majestic Meru, resonates with the Hebrew Psalms that celebrate the mountains that surround Zion. The Psalms, of course, play the religious language game by exploiting the analogical imagination. By definition, this form of language is evocative and resonates with symbolism. Natural realities become vehicles of transcendence, communicators of a Presence beyond but immanent in the present. They point the mind beyond the physical fact to the transcendental beyond, the invisible made present in the visible. One needs a poetical imagination to capture this region of experience which unobtrusively but forcefully imposes itself. Poets have celebrated this region of experience; musicologists like Hayden and Vivaldi have left us this Presence in the rhythms of *The Creation* and of *The Four Seasons*. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so Yahweh guards His people, announces the Psalmist. The range of mountains skirting Arusha's skyline prompts to comparison. Mount Meru when shrouded in the morning clouds could signal the awesomeness of the giving of the Law on the Sinai-Horeb complex. The mountains of Palestine where Jesus took refuge to converse with His Father can never rival the height of the magnificent Meru. Why can it not be a mirror of the epiphany of the Transfiguration? Pardon the dreaming Arusha is like the Greek mythological Sirens, it is alluring, fascinating. Hence it is tempting to situate the Sermon on the Mount on any of the surrounding range of hills. For the ancients, the mountain has ever been the habitation of the gods and goddesses, the place of encounter between the human and the superhuman. For the Chaga people, for instance, the Kilimanjaro was the residence of the gods and since it was irreverent to look at the gods in the face, they built their house backing that mountain. The first German

explorers who had, since the European Enlightenment disenchanted nature, were fascinated by a snow capped peak on the Equator. Without consulting the religious sensitivities of their host these Germans renamed the Kilimanjaro *Kaiser- Wilhelm-Spitze*. Was that not a desecration of a people's shrine? Or was it the secularization of consciousness?

The fauna and flora of Arusha offer ammunition for the "situation in life" of the parables of Jesus. The riot of colours displayed by the wide variety of flowers diminishes the sumptuousness and splendour of Solomon's fabled majesty. The loving concern of the Maasai pastoralists likewise evoke the image of the Good Shepherd who is ready to leave the bulk of his flock to seek the missing one. The lush gardens call to mind the image of the spiritual situation of those who put their trust in Yahweh; they never lack living water. Equally the blooming jacarandas have transformed the country-side into epiphanies of the glory of God. We are led to think of that *Kabod Yahweh* of which the prophet Isaiah bore witness to. A walk through the fields exposes one to a Presence hidden beyond the variety of shrubs and their flowers. The English word *wonderful* leads one to stop and to contemplate transparency and may be, even to adore. There is a region of experience which Arusha town offers but which we may be missing in our struggle for physical survival. The ancient Greeks laid greater emphasis on the contemplative life as on the active. Alexander the Great may have conquered kingdoms, but it was the philosopher who was to rule according to Plato's *Republic*.

Arusha region still offers what Religious scholars call the "primordial tradition" namely, the sacramentality of the world of nature, the sense that ancient people saw 'more' in the 'less'. The landscape was for them a reflection of a superior reality which contained the physical reality (Huston Smith). This 'spiritual dimension' escapes modern man who is informed by the deliverances of empirical science. Arusha suggests that we do not

lose the sacred dimension of natural life through its scientific exploitation. Scientific predictions are not always reliable. They have, in the recent past - bombed the moon in the certainty of uncovering water but failed to find it. They have also predicted that in two decades from now, the Kibo which is the snow capped peak of the Kilimanjaro ranges, would have lost its glaciers through global warming. Would this be an additional evidence of the human abuse of the divinely assigned stewardship of nature?

When nature is allowed to open itself to humans, humans will be disposed to be eco-friendly and will be less interested in destroying by exploiting the natural habitat. Arusha as it is at present is where we could join Francis of Assisi in intoning his hymn to "Brother Sun" to save us from global warming. The ecosystem may still be saved, if people would show respect to nature in its various manifestations.

Saint Augustine of Hippo, following the suggestion of one of the Psalms, named his response to the pagan accusation that the adoption of Christianity has brought about the collapse of the all-conquering Roman Empire, *De Civitate Dei*. In the Psalms Jerusalem is called the City of God. Arusha has more right to claim that appellation. Even in our day the associations of Jerusalem with the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam can never be overlooked. The Jerusalem Temple, the Christian Churches and the Islamic Mosque stamp the character of that city originally conquered by David, the ideal King of Israel. Jews of the Diaspora, Christians of every description and Moslems make their way yearly to this city to feel a certain nearness to God. The houses of prayer of these three monotheistic religions stand uncomfortably and often contentiously next to one another. It is Christian belief that God does not live in houses made by human hands. Arusha region incarnates this belief that God is ubiquitous in His creation. While the Arch-diocese of Arusha strives to erect its own cathedral to house the presence of

God , Arusha itself is, as this reflection has tried to show, already a natural Basilica without walls where the presence of God is announced by the symbols of the world of nature. God's ubiquitous presence is everywhere available in the physical topography of this amazing city. Indeed the town of Arusha from its geographical viewpoint is a true "City of God", a city of peace, a metropolis for all faiths.