

Film/ Africa**Keeping people poor...**

Excerpted from a report by Susan Ellis, Washington File Staff Writer, on the Uhuru Policy Group website (<http://www.uhurugroup.com/news/041204.htm>)

During a recent 5,000-mile, six-week, soul-searching journey across the length of Africa—through Egypt, Sudan, Congo, Angola, Namibia and South Africa—Kenyan June Arunga found a reason why so many of her African neighbours are mired in poverty: boundaries and the law raise barriers to free trade.

At a March 30 showing of excerpts of her documentary, “The Devils’ Footpath,” at the CATO Institute, a think-tank in Washington, D.C., she described an epiphany she had on the road to South Africa: “I met women in Namibia who were fishing in one part of a river and they couldn’t sell their fish 10 minutes away where a market was located. They had to sneak around and dodge the immigration officials.”



Her voice broke before she was able to continue. “I just couldn’t understand why boundaries that were drawn in some European capital 100 years ago are so stringently enforced and it’s made so hard for people,” she said.

This total inability to travel throughout Africa, great distances or small, she saw as key to why the continent languishes behind the rest of the world in commerce. On the plight of the Namibian fisherwomen, she added bitterly, “And then their leaders in the capital, in the

meantime, are writing poverty reduction strategy papers to try to put more food on their tables!”

Arunga shared the podium with Ghanaian-born scholar George Ayittey, a professor in American University’s economics department, who noted that today’s African leaders “all condemn the artificial colonial borders, yet they have been very vigorous and aggressive in enforcing these borders. Why? Because they use these borders to collect revenue.”

“In traditional Africa,” he said, “there weren’t these impediments. There was free flow of goods and people across Africa. Pre-colonial Africa was full of free trade routes—the trans-Saharan route was one notable example. Timbuktu, for example, was one great big market town. So, traditionally, Africans have always engaged in trade and always moved from one place to another to engage in trade. But the governments that we’ve had since independence have been so anti-market and so anti-trade, these governments have literally built walls around their various economies.”

While her trek through Africa demonstrated the wrenching difficulties many Africans face just to survive and earn a living, Arunga said, “it also exposed to me just how much people can take care of themselves.”

“In an internally displaced people’s camp in the Congo, where there were 17,000 survivors of the Congolese war,” she said, “these people living there were selling soap from Kenya, cooking oil from Uganda; and I kept on wondering, how did they get this stuff? They risk their lives to go through war zones to get this stuff and get it [to the camp] and sell it to their fellow countrymen who live inside this camp where they have to be protected by the UN.”

When she showed the BBC documentary to an audience of newspeople in England, she was stunned when a very prominent journalist asked, “Is there any entrepreneurship in Africa?” “These people in this camp came immediately to mind,” she said, “and I looked at her and I didn’t know where to start!”

Arunga’s voice broke as she exclaimed, “All there is in Africa is entrepreneurship! If it wasn’t for entrepreneurship, I think I wouldn’t be standing here today! It was because of my mother and her friends starting their own financial system to bypass [Kenya’s]

financial system they couldn't get access to, and saving money and loaning it to each other and investing it ... so that I've become what I've become; and so these and more [examples] are why I believe in the human person, the individuals' capability to take care of themselves; that people are rational; that people don't like suffering; that people don't like begging."

Arunga is only 22 and a law student now. She remembers that her parents, as well as those of her friends, encouraged their children to work very hard so they wouldn't end up on the street. "So to see all the legal obstacles that stand in the way of people becoming everything that they have in them to become just gets me in this state and has basically got me trying to expose some of these things," she said.

The sad fact, she says, is that "many of [the legal obstacles] can be changed by the stroke of a pen. It's not somebody outside who will change them. I think some of our leaders just need to be held to account so that they do these things. Most Africans don't need to be convinced about private enterprise working, about the benefits of markets, because they're already doing it. Most of them just have to do it on the black market because most of the stuff they're doing is not legal [according to the unjust laws]."

Asked what she plans for the future, Arunga said, "Basically, my experience making this film just illustrated lots of ridiculous things which I subsequently am planning to [use as a basis to] make satirical films because I think that's the only way to expose how you can legally impoverish people."

After all, she said with just a hint of irony, "It's such a full-time job to keep people poor; you need such resources, you need armies."

YEMAYA

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Writers and potential contributors to YEMAYA, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 500 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer