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TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM

AN ENTANGLED HISTORY OF THE DISABILITY MOVEMENT IN TANZANIA

Sam de Schutter

Introduction

Disability does not just refer to an individual impairment, but is constructed through social relations and is about how society deals with bodily norms and deviance. As social relations, norms and attitudes are not universal, it logically follows that different societies have different ways of thinking about and dealing with disability. In short, the experience of disability is culturally contingent and differs from one society to another. In relation to the history of disability, at least two remarks can be made regarding this statement.

First of all, historians of disability have not yet fully explored the implications of this contingency. What Catherine Kudlick observed in 2003 still holds true today: disability history has so far mostly focused on Western Europe and the United States. There is a need to include ‘non-Western’ societies in historical analysis, as this would bring into focus the “contingent, contextual nature of disability”, but this is so far still a “scholarly world waiting to be discovered” (Kudlick 2003, 790). For a broadening of perspective beyond the Western world, historians still need to rely on insights from other disciplines.

This leads to a second remark. While an awareness of the idea of cultural contingency has led scholars from other disciplines to explore experiences of disability in the Global South, this has often been done in a dichotomous way. At least two lines of analysis can be discerned. On the one hand there has recently been an increasing reflection on disability in the Global South by critical disability scholars, inspired by postcolonial studies (Grech and Soldatic 2015). This offers a valuable perspective, as it rightfully points to the power structures of global inequality in which knowledge and institutions circulate. However, it also asserts existing dichotomies between ‘the West and the Rest’ through an overarching metaphor of exportation: the West exports “‘knowledge’, methods ... and practice to an undeveloped South space” (Grech 2015, 17). The agency of people with disability in the Global South themselves is thus limited; they are only at the receiving end. On the other hand, there is a longer, anthropological tradition of pointing towards the local and cultural particularities of disability, asserting that disability is not a universal concept, but something that is

indeed culturally contingent. As a side effect, however, this has produced many analyses of disability as a localized phenomenon within one clearly distinguishable ‘culture’.¹ What this does – apart from essentializing the ways in which ‘a culture’ deals with disability – is setting the local apart from the global, contrasting local cultures with more global ideas and often ignoring the impact of global developments (colonialism or neoliberalism) on local concepts.

We have thus a ‘global’ perspective which limits ‘local’ agency and a ‘local’ perspective which diminishes the role of ‘global’ developments.² The purpose of this paper then is not to break with these strands of literature altogether. On the contrary, we need to build on the valuable insights these scholars have put forward: the context of global inequalities, the stories of resistance and appropriation, or the local specificities of disability. However, I want to explore how to write histories of disability that go beyond dichotomies between the local and the global and bring both aspects into a single framework. The question then becomes: how can we write about the history of disability in one particular locality while being sensitive to both local particularities (the cultural contingency of disability) and global developments within which local events are firmly embedded?

I would like to offer a first impetus to answering this question, not by offering a fixed and elaborate theoretical framework, but by exploring a case study from my own research. 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 this paper I use these oral history sources, in combination with sources from the Tanzania National Archives (TNA) and some published documents, to reflect on the history of the disability movement in Tanzania. Such a history will ultimately show an engagement with both local and global elements at the same time.

This paper is divided into two sections, based on themes and historical references that recurred in almost every oral history interview I conducted. In the first section, I will deal with the

¹For example, the pioneering volume on disability from an anthropological perspective, Ingstad and Whyte’s *Disability and Culture*, contained articles on the experiences of disability by the Punan Bah of Central Borneo, the Maasai in Kenya, the Songye of Zaire, etc.

²This is, for the sake of the argument, a generalization and simplification. There are of course notable exceptions, such as Julie Livingston’s *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana*.

beginnings of the disability movement and the question why most of the respondents situated these origins within the early educational efforts by missionaries in the 1950s and 1960s. In the second section, I will deal with the further history of the movement. Here, I will focus on how disability activists have acted as ‘translators’, adapting ‘universal’ instruments to their local circumstances and simultaneously bringing culturally specific phenomena within the realms of these universal discourses.

The Beginnings of a 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 (Anderson 2011), the Second World War led to the first efforts of the colonial government to rehabilitate “African ex-soldiers injured during service”. An African Rehabilitation Centre was established in Nairobi in 1942, where injured servicemen from the different East African colonies were sent “to enable them to overcome their disabilities”. This rehabilitation however was limited to “[t]he restoration of disabled men to physical fitness by physiotherapeutic measures not including occupational therapy”.³ While the rehabilitation services quickly expanded to include disabled civilians, they did not expand into the realms of training and education. Missionaries were the first to move into this domain. In 1950, the Anglican Church established the first school for the blind within the territory of present-day Tanzania: the Buigiri School in Dodoma. Other missionary orders also started schools for Tanzanians with visual impairments, although only after independence. The Swedish Free Mission and the Lutheran Church opened schools in Tabora and Lushoto, in 1962 and 1963 respectively. The 1960s also saw the first schools for other categories of disabilities, when the Roman Catholic Church established the Tabora Deaf-Mute Institute in 1963 and the Salvation Army started providing education for people with physical disabilities in 1967 (Mpopu, Oakland, and Chimedza 2007).

When conducting interviews with disability activists, the first date respondents gave when reconstructing the history of the disability movement in Tanzania, usually 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 was the “official start of the history of deaf people” in Tanzania. His explanation of this statement was twofold. 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. Secondly, this event is framed within a narrative of resistance. As the school used the method of oralism, which meant teaching children to speak and recognize speech through lip-reading, 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.⁴

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. 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. It is however wrong to see this simply as an acknowledgment of how missionaries brought education to people with disabilities in Tanzania. This becomes evident in the narratives of resistance, as in the history of CHAVITA above or in the similar ‘founding myth’ of the Tanzania League of the Blind (TLB), which was founded in 1964 by students from the Manoleo Vocational Training Center in Tabora. This organization grew from a student movement of blind students that protested against discrimination from the ‘hostile’ white management of the center, which trained both visually impaired and non-disabled students.⁵

Building an International Disability Movement

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. It usually starts with the first Disability Acts of 1982 and ends with the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2010. 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. It is therefore most fruitful to understand the history of the disability movement in Tanzania from the perspective of a transnational history. As Akira Iriye has put it, “in today’s world virtually all issues are of international scope and relevance. There is no such thing as a purely local problem that can be solved in isolation” (Iriye 2004, 218). This is no different for Tanzanian disability activists. A recent survey of DPOs in Tanzania starts its historical background by stating that “Disabled People’s Organizations derive their legality and impetus from the context of the global

³TNA, Ministry of Health, accession no. 450, file no. 1209, “Rehabilitation, 1941-1946”; TNA, Ministry of Health, accession no. 450, file no. 1209, “Rehabilitation, 1946-1948”.

⁴Interview with Dickson Mveyange, director of CHAVITA, 19 January 2017, Dar es Salaam.

⁵Interview with Emanuel Simon, Secretary General of TLB, 14 December 2016, Dar es Salaam; interview with Felician Mkude, Secretary General of SHIVYAWATA Tanzania Federation of Disabled People’s Organisations, 20 December 2016, Dar es Salaam. See also: TLB Temeke District. “About TLB Tanzania”, Tanzania League of the Blind - Temeke District. Accessed March 30, 2017. <http://tlbtemeked.blogspot.com/p/about-tlb-tanzania.html>.

history of disability of [the] 1980s” (Sokile, Mkatambo, and Rutachwamagyo 2013). It is thus important to study the growth of national civil society movements, such as the Tanzanian disability movement, as part of a wider transnational movement and to see how Tanzanian DPOs actively engaged with certain transnational events and instruments. In this respect, Sally Engle Merry uses the concept of ‘vernacularization’ to talk about how universal human rights language is used by local actors and adapted to local circumstances. She writes: “A key dimension of the process of vernacularization is the people in the middle: those who translate the discourses and practices from the arena of international law and legal institutions to specific situation of suffering and violation. Translators refashion global rights agendas for local contexts and reframe local grievances in terms of global human rights principles and activities” (Merry 2006, 39). DPOs in Tanzania have taken on this role of translators of transnational disability rights issues.

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). This consequently led to a large number of development projects in developing countries focusing on the issue of disability. 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. As one respondent put it, international events like the IYDP or, more recently, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) are ‘advocacy tools’, used by DPOs “to advocate within [their] own culture”, while they always try to “localize the situation”.⁶ This means



Paul Mlangasi, a blind teacher, explains a passage in Braille to a young boy at the Wilson Carlile school for blind children at Buigiri, near Dodoma, Central Province, late 1950s (via Wikimedia Commons)

that we need to look at how DPOs in Tanzania, departing from a locally embedded understanding of disability, strategically used these international events and instruments to further the integration of persons with disabilities in Tanzanian society.

To explore this issue, I take a short leave from my interviews and move to an interesting document found at the Tanzanian headquarters of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Dar es Salaam. It is 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 Department of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Labour and Youth Development, in collaboration with the ILO. Over the course of two days, speeches were given by representatives from the government, ILO, different DPOs, and the subregional chairman of Disabled Peoples’ International (DPI), which is the first internationally organized DPO founded in 1981. The report starts by stating the rationale behind the two-day seminar. Seeing that, ten years after the IYDP “little had been achieved towards integration of people with disabilities (PWDs) in the daily life of their communities”, the conference was meant to discuss how the WPA could be implemented in Tanzania. 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 (ILO 1991). The link between disability and witchcraft is however a difficult subject. Emphasizing explanations of disability in terms of witchcraft, sorcery and curses when writing about Africa, might be part of what Ingstad has called the ‘north-south myth’, where “in order to raise money, create awareness, etc., a picture of the situation for disabled people has often been painted as negatively as possible, emphasizing shame, hiding, killing, etc.” – and thus also witchcraft (Ingstad 1990, 188). Kisanji has furthermore noted that there is also ample evidence of positive attitudes towards disability in Tanzanian society (Kisanji 1995).

This paper is however not the place to go into the connections between disability and witchcraft in Africa. 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” (ILO 1991, 38). What is interesting about these statements is that these culturally specific notions about disability appear in this highly transnational conference, where international ILO experts and a representative from a transnational DPO, together with government officials and national DPO leaders discuss 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” (ILO 1991, 96).

⁶Interview with Felician Mkude, Secretary General of SHIVYAWATA, 25 November 2016, Dar es Salaam.

That is why the Tanzania League of the Blind requested “the government to declare another decade (1992-2002) as an active decade for implementation of recommendations contained in the WPA” (ILO 1991, 43). 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” (ILO 1991). 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” (Sokile, Mkatambo, and Rutachwamagyo 2013). 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.

As historians are slowly starting to include the Global South into their histories of disability, this paper is meant as a reflection on how to do this. It is not intended to discard the valuable contributions made by other disciplines. Of course power relations and global inequalities have a tremendous impact on what knowledge circulates and how it does so. It is equally true that having a disability in Tanzania is in a lot of ways significantly different from having a disability in, say, the United States. However, within this field of structurally determining factors, people with disabilities have lived their lives and disability activists have actively engaged with these local and global processes, and it is important to recognize their role in shaping their own history.



Deputy Minister Dr. Abdallah Possi at the events for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities in Dar es Salaam, 3 December 2017
Photograph by Sam De Schutter

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