

Personal Reflection – May 23, 2021

Machungwa No More

“They are good, but they ain’t oranges! -- Mizuri, lakini siyo machungw!”

I was studying Swahili in 1956 at a Maryknoll Sisters’ house in Kowak, Tanzania. Across the compound from our house was a primary school full of eager barefoot little boys and girls.

A beautiful large orange tree grew in our front yard. Each year, when the fruit appeared, as golf-ball sized, dark green ovals, a flood of kids arrived, to strip the tree of its fruit! They walked happily around the compound grimacing at the sting of very young oranges.

The Swahili word for oranges is *machungwa*, from the word *chungu* which means bitter or sour.

I asked Sister Margaret Rose if we could fence that tree before the next year’s fruit appeared. My plan was to open the fence to the school children when the oranges were ripe and juicy and sweet!

We did so. The children were thwarted when the tiny green golf balls appeared; they were disappointed and angry, kicking the fence which separated them from the *machungwa*.

Some months later, when the fruit was as large as tennis balls, we took down the fence. The children tentatively eyed the new fruit, then each snapped an orange from the tree, peeled it and ate!

I was there and asked them: “How was that?”

“Mzuri, lakini siyo machungwa. -- Good, but these ain’t oranges.”

by Jane Vella