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Behind Stanley Livondo's moneybags

By Kenneth Kwama and Oscar Obonyo

When five-year old Stanley Livondo appeared at his grandmother's door in Bushiangala, Kakamega District, one freezing morning in 1972, he had nothing, but a tattered blanket, a worn out exercise book and a pencil in hand.

His grandmother, Mrs Niffah Anjia, had to walk long distances to beg for food from relatives to feed his grandson, who had ran away from his parents' home owing to negligence and biting poverty.

"Since I could not afford to buy him a mattress, I told him to go to the shamba and look for banana fibre to sleep on," stammers Anjia.

-A man blows a traditional trumpet as Livondo in a chopper drops money as he takes off.

"For the many years that he lived with me, his bed was made of banana fibre," she adds.

Livondo could have remained unknown, but for a stunt that for some time shifted attention to his political activities.

Images of him "raining money" on villagers in Western Province from a helicopter were recently replayed on local TV stations and remain ingrained in people's mind.

This earned him the sobriquet, "Mr Moneybags". Nonetheless, Livondo still remains a mystery.

Says Labour minister, Dr Newton Kulundu: "He might be over-dramatising the whole thing (dropping cash from a helicopter), but the truth is that he is doing a lot of good to our people."

Jirongo is a pale shadow of Livondo

The Lurambi MP says Livondo is one rare man who has volunteered to use his own resources to promote the party and President Kibaki's re-election bid.

To many observers, he is to Narc-Kenya what former Lugari MP, Mr Cyrus Jirongo, was to Kanu under the aegis of Youth for Kanu (YK) 92 — a cash-money errand boy who performs his duties according to the script "from above".

But Kulundu draws a parallel between the two men, who incidentally are from Western Province.

Jirongo, whom the minister claims rose from "nothing to fame" on the mere account

of being a conveyor-belt — distributing cash from the Government coffers to the voters — is a "pale shadow of Livondo".

"Livondo already has the resources which he has put under use to popularise the President. This is a major sacrifice that only a few of us can afford to do," says the minister, a key supporter of Narc-Kenya.

Nonetheless, the question on many people's lips, as Subukia MP, Mr Koigi Wamwere, aptly puts it: "Who exactly is this man who rains a lot of money from a helicopter? What is the source of his money and what does he stand for?"

Perhaps it's inevitable that the cult of personality surrounding Livondo should give rise to its own heresy.

People regard him variously, but those who know him say he is the sort of person who can coax and intrigue his way almost through any situation.

Last week, *The Sunday Standard* sought answers from the activist's own kinsmen and village mates at his rural home in Bushangala, Kakamega District.

His uncle, Mr Fabian Okang'a, says Livondo was an ordinary person struggling to make ends meet until one evening in early 1992 when he got a call from an influential Cabinet minister.

The minister had apparently called the Western Provincial Commissioner's office to deliver an important message from former President, Daniel arap Moi.

"We don't know exactly what the minister said, but the man (Livondo) mumbled something about being told to buy a new suit for an appointment the following day," recalls Okang'a.

Mr Stanley Livondo (left) and Vice-President, Mr Moody Awori at a past function. Picture by James Keyi

"He did not know who he was due to meet."

Whether Livondo actually met the former President is still subject of speculation, but two weeks later, he landed his first real job as the regional co-ordinator of YK 92 activities, in Narok District.

The man is well connected

Okang'a was the first of Livondo's relatives to benefit from his new-found power when in 1992 the then YK 92 operative secured him employment with the Electoral Commission, as a deputy presiding officer in Narok.

Livondo, says Okanga, set up a formidable campaign machine and managed the process with great skill and ferocity, a fact that endeared him to top national Kanu officials.

While in Narok, the former YK-92 operative is also believed to have struck a connection with top entrepreneurs, including Mombasa-based tycoon, Mr Abdullahi Sajjad, who, relatives say, initiated him into international business — sugar

importation to be particular.

Serious businessman

Besides owning a series of businesses that spread across confectionaries and the hospitality industry in Nairobi and Naivasha, among other towns, Livondo is believed to have amassed his fortune in the sugar business.

But Livondo declined to be interviewed or photographed for this story.

A month-long effort by *The Sunday Standard* to get his input was fruitless as he was elusive—at some point suggesting that he was due to fly out of the country only for him to be spotted in Mathare slums in Nairobi the following day.

The man has suddenly become busy and Kulundu, too, has been desperately looking for him: "He gave me a cheque for one hundred thousand shillings for a harambee in my constituency, but I have spent the last two days trying to locate him just to say thanks without success."

However, during our month-long chase, Livondo has been dropping piecemeal information through brief and heavily curtailed telephone conversations.

So is he challenging Mr Bonny Khalwale for the Ikolomani seat? He was evasive when we put this question to him.

"My activities are purely motivated by my sincere desire to participate in development projects in order to improve the lives of our people, in Ikolomani, Western Province and the rest of the country," he told *The Sunday Standard*.

Kulundu shares this view. The minister says Livondo's interest may only be to assist another politician to oust Khalwale and separately to sponsor those vying for parliamentary seats on the Narc-Kenya ticket.

Asked to comment on the Livondo high-drama in the region, especially in his constituency, Khalwale refused to be drawn into the debate.

"I do not want to condescend myself to the level of this fellow, who apparently is well known to my constituents," says the East African Community assistant minister.

Khalwale strongly believes that Livondo is simply but an emissary of some "powerful outsiders".

He had to endure nights of ridicule

Born in 1967, Livondo was raised to be tough in moments of peril. One of his former classmates at Chavakali High School remembers how Livondo, who was a prefect in charge of a dormitory called Reez, was an active participant of all-night long disco parties during holidays.

These were a series of never ending parties, but Livondo's experience bordered on the absurd, as he had to endure nights of ridicule while out with schoolmates.

This is because unlike his colleagues who took alcohol, Livondo would drink milk sprinkled with tea throughout the night.

"The tables would be filled with brown bottles, but because he never used to drink, he would bring along a 500ml packet of UHT milk, which he generously sprinkled with the tea leaves. This would be his drink for the night, so we nicknamed him UHT," says the former classmate.

Grandmother's blessings

However, in his rural neighbourhood of Bushiangala, he is fondly referred to as Stan, short for Stanley. The villagers attribute his sudden prominence to blessings from his grandmother, Anjia.

Although she is tired and ailing, Anjia has an uncanny way of blessing Livondo's worldly properties.

When he first drove to the homestead in an old Toyota 110 saloon, the old woman requested Livondo to open the doors and leave the engine running to facilitate the blessings.

"She would go into the car and press the accelerator and as the engine roared. She asked God loudly to give Mr Livondo a Pajero for his next excursion to the home," recalls Livondo's aunt, Fan O'kubasu.

Strangely enough, Livondo drove into the homestead in a Pajero during the next visit. It is while blessing the Pajero in 2003 that the old woman is said to have requested God for something that even confounded Livondo himself.

"She told God that since her grandson had driven all the big cars, her last wish was to see him fly into the home in an helicopter," says Ms O'kubasu.

The now regular helicopter rides are estimated to be costing Livondo at least Sh700,000 per day. This might look exorbitant, but the villagers have not been left out of the windfall.

He has spent Sh20 million in six months

Besides the "raining money" that earned him the tag "Mr Moneybags", Livondo is said to have initiated more than 12 development projects in the last six months alone, spending slightly more than Sh20 million.

"He has revived cattle dips, built a library and raised funds for several churches," says Khepta Makhoka, a cattle dip attendant from Idakho.

"When he comes home, he makes a point of shaking hands with everyone, including the people who serve him tea — and he always jokes with them. People love him and he could pose major threat should he decide to vie for a parliamentary seat," he says.

Of peasant origin, Livondo had to repeat Standard Six several times because his parents did not want him to proceed to Standard Seven since they could not afford to pay his secondary school education.

As a result, he had a sporadic kind of education in Bushiangala and Sigalagala primary schools before joining secondary school.

By then, his life seemed to be fraying at every seam.

Okang'a recalls how the young Livondo had to walk home from school, several kilometres away, because he could not afford the two-shilling bus fare.

But lack of school fees did little to damp his efforts. Okang'a says Livondo would do odd jobs, working in deplorable conditions to raise his pocket money.

If indeed Livondo's emergence has sparked hope of prosperity in Ikolomani, it has also raised fears among politicians, most of who are lamenting that his lavish spending could push up their election expenditures and force them to start spending earlier than anticipated.

Those who know him say he is generous to a fault. Perhaps the same reason that has kept the people of Ikolomani constantly looking at the skies.

But one telling break from tradition is Livondo's refusal, despite his suspect philanthropy, to declare whether he will be vying in Ikolomani or not.

"Today", says a villager, "there's a belief, maybe hope that Livondo could vie and save Idakho people from the excruciating poverty."

No one doubts that Livondo is the man of the moment. But is he the man of the future?

It is still too soon to give a conclusive answer, but if other people's judgments were to be trusted, Livondo is, to quote his aunt, a great man.

"All his zigs and zags lead somewhere constructive, so we would not be surprised if he ends somewhere big," she says.

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