

Fundi

12/05/05 The Fundi I had the misfortune of finding out the derivation of the old expression 'to drop a transmission'; yesterday, and I was surprised to find it isn't nearly as metaphorical as I'd thought. The spinning metal shaft beneath my car looked like it was determined to find oil and it was pretty evident to me that I'd be out a little gold. But at that moment, the most pressing issue was just getting me and the old Rover cum oil derrick back home. And that's where the Fundi comes in; but, for the moment, hold that thought.

Here's what's broken down this week (and I'm not bitching, I'm just making a little list):

The water pump – not as bad as it could be, we always had a little trickle (and the porcelain is clean!)
 The car – but I've mention that The dryer – okay, no skin off our noses, but it's breaking Anna's heart
 The air conditioners – more on this a moment for herein lies the tale
 The light bulb in the bathroom – okay, this sounds minor but it is the second time for the same bulb in the same week and it's not like they just 'go out'. These puppies are in absolute light bulb heaven, they get to go out with a truly startling Bang (not to mention the hail of flying glass!)
 The telephone – and annoyingly, it can still ring but when you pick it up the line is always dead (yes, thank you, I did finally figure out that I could just unplug the phone).

Not to mention the electricity, but that always goes out, so it really doesn't count. Besides, it's related to the A/C so we'll get there in a minute; but just take a look at that list: water, A/C, electricity, car, dryer, phone; seriously, while I fully understand that most of our Tanzanian brethren have virtually nothing on that list, it is still what we might consider a fairly basic and necessary list. And again, this is where the Fundi comes in. But, before we get to the Fundi, let me continue my little rant. TANESCO, our local power company, forgot to maintain the transforms (okay, they didn't 'forget' - the Japanese who sold the transformers to them reminded them way too constantly for that) but anyway, one third of the generators in the capital city simultaneously broke down – I mean they were declared Out of Service as in 'never coming back'. No backup plan, no spares.

Literally eighty percent of City Center is blacked out and has been for three weeks. Meat rotting in the butcher shops, portable generators chugging away in front of the more fashionable shops. Gas is five bucks a gallon and store owners are quickly running out of cash. And what does the PR group at TANESCO have to say? Here's a quote: 'As we too are located in the area affected by the power outage, we are suffering just as much as you. This isn't something we wanted either.' The comment reminds me of a bit of family lore in which Nancy, livid at a month's delay in cabinet delivery for our re-modeled kitchen, finally took the contractor to task. He quickly cut her off saying, 'Don't talk to me about those cabinets – those cabinet are a very sore subject with me!' Okaaay; So the Fundi. Fundis are people with any sort of trade skill; plumbers, electricians, whatnot - and they are absolutely everywhere and even sporadically employed. They hang out on street corners and under trees with their little hand painted signs: Fundi Bomba (with a little drawing of toilet bowls and large pipe wrench), Fundi Electric (with his degree posted: MEES). And it is a good thing that they are so available because – and I swear I'm not making this up – we probably have an average of two or three in everyday. So no doubt you're asking 'Why?' Well, actually, that's a little hard to say – but I'll give it a try: Let's take the air conditioners, for example. In this hundred degree daily heat, the A/C is the ultimate bourgeois device; the Tanzanian equivalent of, say, your average family's 48" flat screen TV. These things are so protected that they have a Powatecta attached to them (at least that's how the Fundi explained it all to me). The Powatecta apparently monitors the current coming in (amps, volts, whatever kind of things power Powatectas are designed to protect) and the beauty of the concept is that they are specifically engineered to cut off before the power actually goes out!

Now, on the face of it, that may sound like a pretty good idea, but I think I've found the flaw; what if the power wasn't really going out? What if these little fluctuations are just TANESCO's way of trying to spread the remaining power out? Well then your Powatecta turns into a powa shuta offa and you are pretty much shita outa lucka as near as I can tell. At that point, even the Fundis can't help you out.

Which brings us back to the car. So there I am in the middle of this busy three lane dirt road, drilling for oil. Four guys selling eyeglasses sprouting from huge blocks of Styrofoam circle round. One of them says, 'It's the transmission. You are not going anywhere until get the drive shaft taken out. You can't even be towed.' Turns out, the guy is right. Turns out he is also a Fundi Gani, an auto mechanic (occasionally employed), and he dropped to the dirt and got to work. Thirty minutes later he resurfaces with the drive shaft in his hand, happy to accept a ten-spot for the work. I am glad that someone gets to smile in this lands where it seems inevitable that, as Achebe put it, Things Fall Apart.