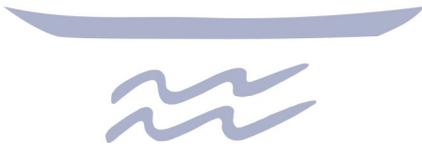


Mokoro



Remembering Kaori Izumi

By Robin Palmer

After a long battle against cancer, my friend Kaori Izumi died at her home in Sapporo, Japan, on 7 March 2013, aged 56. She was a truly remarkable person, a campaigner for women's land rights in a context of HIV and Aids in Southern Africa, an activist, a mover and shaker, someone who really made a difference in the lives of others. After she died, her husband, Rolf Nergaard, wrote to me saying that Kaori had wanted me to give a speech at her memorial celebration. I regarded this as both an honour and a privilege. So I spent a memorable week in Sapporo with Rolf and Kaori's children, Akari, Linko and Kai. The celebration itself was quite extraordinary, as over 200 people came to pay their respects and celebrate her life.



Kaori at Robin Palmer's last day with Oxfam, 2007

My speech at Kaori Izumi's memorial celebration, Hokkaido Christian Centre, Sapporo, Japan, 21 April 2013

Dear Rolf, Akari, Linko, Kai, ladies and gentlemen

I was delighted to learn from Akari that the colour code for today was to be 'colourful'.

This gave me the perfect excuse to wear this T-shirt, designed by Akari. It was the T-shirt given to participants in a series of 4 workshops which Kaori Izumi organised in Southern Africa on the theme of the land and property rights of widows and orphans. The logo reads *Property and a piece of land give women peace of mind*. The workshops were truly inspirational, like Kaori herself, and whenever I wear one of these T-shirts, which I do regularly, I always think of her.

When I heard from Rolf and Akari that Kaori had specifically requested that I give a speech at her memorial, I felt both greatly honoured to be asked, but also rather fearful about whether I could do full justice to one of the most remarkable people I have ever met.

We first met in 2000. She had just completed her Ph.D on Tanzania in Roskilde and was about to take up a post in Harare, Zimbabwe, as land tenure officer for Southern and Eastern Africa for FAO – the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN. I was then the Land Policy Adviser for Africa for Oxfam GB, an international non-governmental organisation, with headquarters in Oxford.

My immediate impression was of a veritable human dynamo. I had built up an extensive library on land rights in Africa and I think that Kaori photocopied virtually everything in my library! She also astonished my partner by buying me a bunch of yellow tulips as a 'reward' for my time. I was equally astonished.

Kaori stayed in Harare until 2007 and she did truly amazing

work during those 7 years. A 'human dynamo' pretty accurately described how she worked. She felt passionately about the position of widows and orphans who were having their property grabbed by relatives in the name of 'custom'. She made it her business to get out of her office, to meet women and some of the organisations trying to help them. She saw injustice at first hand and felt impelled to fight to make the world a better place. As she wrote:

What struck me was not only the brutality of their experiences of being evicted and losing their property, and the destitution that had followed, but also the resilience of these women and children, who were determined to struggle for their survival with dignity, providing support to other women and children in similar situations. The meetings with these women and children motivated me to organise workshops where some of them told their stories.

Kaori was a mover and shaker who really did make a difference in the lives of others. She was always up for a challenge and was never daunted, however strong the obstacles. She learnt about some inspiring initiatives and innovative responses to the situation, and she found sensitive and imaginative ways of sharing those responses in ways that might help others, for example the Memory Books created for orphans to remember their parents, and the work of the victim support unit of the police in Zambia.

She also collected many personal testimonies of orphans and of women living with HIV and she encouraged them to come to her workshops to tell their stories. This was often incredibly moving. She was forever focusing on the practical – what could be done to help people in a particular context and the need to get support to them at the right time. And she was not slow in banging on doors to urge people to make things happen. Everyone who worked closely with her felt inspired by her commitment and her passion. Importantly, we also had a lot of laughs along the way.

Kaori was someone who opened new opportunities for others, as a former colleague, Craig Castro, recalled:

I met a young woman who had her testimonial included in the stories Kaori organized through the workshops in Zambia and Zimbabwe. The woman was from the north of Zambia and she was now a member of staff of a national NGO which provided services for AIDS orphans. Through her work the young woman was able to get support to study for a university degree. It came to me that this was a result of Kaori's commitment to transforming a situation into something better. It all started from participating in a workshop to share her story with others.

Over those 7 remarkable years, Kaori and I worked together very closely, mostly on women's land rights. So I was a regular visitor to Kaori's and Rolf's house in Harare, near the university. Here Rolf created an atmosphere of calm and relative normality, which was in sharp contrast to Kaori's working environments. Here too we shared many laughs, some tears, and a certain amount of gin and tonics! The breakfast table was always interesting, with Kaori, Rolf, Akari, Linko and Kai switching effortlessly from Norwegian, to English, to Japanese and back again. I shall always treasure those visits. Indeed, I am moved to tears whenever I think of them.

In 2007 FAO, in an act of complete idiocy, abolished her position (and similar positions around the world). At pretty much the same time, Oxfam GB retired me and abolished my post. I gave a farewell talk on my last day, after 20 years with Oxfam. I asked Kaori in advance if she could send me some

photos from a workshop we organized together in 2003 in Pretoria. She declined to send the photos. Instead, she flew from Harare, at her own expense, to be with me on my last day as a gesture of solidarity (see photo). That was something I shall never, ever forget.

I was talking recently to people in my office in Oxford about an event I want to host there this June to celebrate Kaori's work and to mark the 10th anniversary of our Pretoria workshop. 'What kind of person was Kaori', they asked? Well, the word most often used to describe her, both in her work in Africa and later here in Japan after Fukushima, is an 'activist'. That is certainly, and fundamentally, true. But I said that whenever I thought of her, I invariably had a picture in my head of her laughing or smiling. And that is certainly not something you automatically associate with an activist.

As Dr. Izumi, she also commissioned some ground breaking work on *The Impact of HIV/Aids on Land Rights in Kenya* and she edited *Reclaiming our Lives*, a collection of narratives and responses from Southern and Eastern Africa, and *The Land and Property Rights of Women and Orphans*, featuring case studies from Zimbabwe.

These important works survive her.

I want to close by expressing my condolences to Rolf, for the loss of your wife, and to Akari, Linko and Kai, for the loss of your mother, and to say how truly privileged I feel to have had the honour of knowing and working with Kaori.

I shall always remember her.

Mokoro seminar

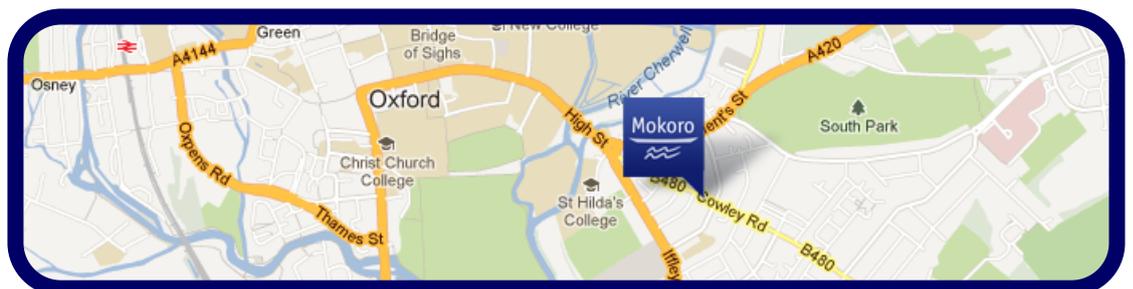
On **Saturday 15 June** (11-4) Mokoro will be holding a seminar, *Remembering Kaori Izumi, Pretoria + 10, and Women's Land Rights in Southern and Eastern Africa*. The focus of the seminar will be to pay tribute to Kaori and her work, to celebrate the 10th anniversary of an influential Pretoria workshop which Kaori and Robin Palmer organized on women's land rights in Southern and Eastern Africa, and to reflect on progress made on women's land rights in Southern and Eastern Africa over the past 10 years.

RSVP

Anyone wishing to attend, please contact [Zoe Driscoll](#) of Mokoro

VENUE

Mokoro Ltd, The Old Music Hall, Oxford



Robin Palmer at Kaori Izumi's memorial celebration with his interpreter Naonori Dotyval.