



A Nostalgic Return Home, May 2008

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After my Makerere days, the last time I was in Kampala was in 1970 and so it was with a great deal of anticipation that I looked forward to my return in early May 2008. The occasion was the meeting of the International Council of Human Rights Policy (ICHRP), of which I have been a member for some years. It is the first time since its creation more than 10 years go that the Council had met in a Sub-Saharan country. Our host for the meeting, a member of the Council, was Professor Sylvia Tamale, Dean of the Faculty of Law, at Makerere University. After years of one-party or military rule in our region, it was refreshing to find so many committed and courageous defenders of human rights and a vigorous and flourishing civil society in East African countries. The session on the human rights situation in Uganda was for me the highlight of the meeting.

Two unexpected events made my visit to Kampala something special that I will cherish for the rest of my life. I had attended a reception at Makerere given by our Ugandan hosts for participants at the meeting of the International Council on Human Rights Policy. After the reception, Professor Joe Olaka Onyango and the Deputy Vice Chancellor kindly accompanied me to Livingstone Hall where I was a resident tutor soon after I joined Makerere in 1961. It was for me a spiritual journey- a pilgrimage. Subsequently, we drove over to the Livingstone Terrace where I had moved into a townhouse after my marriage in 1963. Our neighbours then were the historian Alan Ogot and political scientists Ali Mazrui and Yash Tandon.

The second surprise was that Vali Jamal and Alex Aboagye, Senior Economist at the UNDP (both former colleagues at ILO), organized a public lecture for me in conjunction with Makerere University on the theme of "Migration, Diaspora and Development." Despite the short notice, a huge and diverse group of politicians, civil servants, teachers, business people, students and ordinary people packed the lecture hall in a downtown hotel. The two organizers discreetly intimated to the Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Apolo Nsibambi of my lecture, and he generously agreed to attend to honour his economics teacher from 1961! He even chaired the meeting and introduced me to the audience. John Nagenda, Presidential Media Advisor and Spokesman, also attended and gave the vote of thanks. He was an undergraduate at Makerere during my time there. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Makerere, Dr. Lilian Tibatemwa-Ekirikubinza, Vali Jamal and Alex Aboagye also spoke at the opening session.

My one regret during this visit was that I could not taste Vali's famous pillau at his restaurant café Viva, as he called quits before my arrival after struggling for a number of years. He agreed with me that the famous Asian business acumen is not always passed from generation to generation and that neither I nor he were cut to be entrepreneurs! On the other hand, Vali showed me the pages from his planned commemorative volume on Ugandan Asians. It promises to be an exciting publication. He told me he might include the recipe of his "smoked" biryani in the book!

Uganda had in many ways changed beyond recognition since I first stepped foot there in the early 1961s. The most dramatic change and that affected everything else was the expansion of its population from around 8 to nearly 32 million. Kampala had grown from a small charming town of around 200,000 persons to a bustling metropolis of over 2 million! Makerere student numbers had escalated from nearly 1,000 to closer to 28,000! The road between Entebbe and Kampala is on its way to becoming a giant suburb of the capital. It is thus hardly surprising that I had difficulty finding my way around in Kampala and recognizing its famous landmarks.

My visit to Kampala and to Makerere and the public lecture were deeply moving and emotional experiences for me. They brought back wonderful memories of an era long gone by. My visit was truly a home coming after an absence of several decades.

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