

UGANDA 2062

A Vision of a Preferred Future

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION THINK TANK

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A teenager leaves Uganda in 2012 and returns in 2062 to find astonishing changes.

Sunday, 1st October 2062: THE RETURN

The distinct change in the engine sound of the huge new Ugandan “Eagle Air” plane signaled the commencement of the descent and final approach. This journey had been very long in coming. It is exactly fifty years since I departed with my adopted family for a new life in the United States. During these years I have read and seen a lot in the media about the changes in my country of birth and have looked forward to visiting someday.

An invitation to visit Uganda courtesy of a promotion by the Uganda Tourism Board entitled “Visit the Pearl of Africa at the FIFA World Cup and Centennial Jubilee” provided the opportunity I had longed for. Drove of tourists are visiting the country. Besides touring, I want to see first hand how a country long known for mediocre performance rose to equal and outperform some of the best governed nations in the world.

The plane cleared the lowest clouds. An audible gasp went through the cabin at the sight below: a multicolored sea of lights. Much of this night flight over Africa had been over many islands of brightly lit areas. Now, closer to the ground, the sight was breathtaking. On my departure as a young teenager in 2012 soon after the Golden Jubilee, the night out of my window over Africa was darkness until we crossed the Mediterranean Sea. An article in the Airline travel magazine stated that electricity consumption in this once dark country had jumped 70 fold to what it now was then. The sight below was testament to this. I remembered having to light candles during the frequent load shedding in the orphanage. This happened half the time and often without any warning.

Brightly lit high-rise buildings and multicolored light reflections from the still waters of Lake Victoria came into view. Neat, well-lit wide streets, flyovers and traffic lights regulating vehicles passed beneath us. I made out the outlines of large luxury liners in the lake. The Entebbe - Kampala megacity lit the horizon to the north. Colored lights on a bridge across the lake stretched away westwards over the dark water. The Nakiwogo Bridge had opened up the growth of this once small peninsular town into the regions paralleling Masaka Road.

Entebbe airport, one of four international airports, had just been expanded for the masses of visitors to the recently concluded 2002 FIFA world cup. The countries in the expanded East African Federation had done a great job hosting this tournament. When Uganda lifted the coveted trophy, the nation went wild with celebration. My travel itinerary package had the option of flying around the country since all urban centres had airfields with several flights available each day. I had instead chosen to travel by road and rail. I wanted to get a closer view of the transformations that had catapulted a third world nation into first world status within one generation.

The plane gently touched down, it seemed at the edge of the lake and after taxiing past several gates each with large aircrafts parked next to them, we finally reached our docking gate, I disembarked with the international mixture of passengers and headed for the immigration counters. A large poster as we approached the immigration counters stated, "Warning: This Country Suffers from Extreme Allergy to Corruption – Don't try it, the Reaction Could be Very Unpleasant."

"Aren't you going to make sure I haven't carried a case full of drugs?" I asked the young customs agent. She laughed.

"Oh, you haven't. I know what is in your suitcase," she said, turning the screen of her computer so I could see. There, in 3 dimensional depictions, was a coloured outlay of my suitcase interior.

"What is that green thing in the corner?" I tested her.

"Oh, that should be hair cream; its components signify shea nut butter," she replied. She looked at my thinning front and grinned. "It is the best thing to keep hair from falling out."

Stories of supercomputers and super minds were not totally made up. Anyone trying games past this young lady wouldn't know what hit them. I had to play very carefully in this country.

Movement past immigration and baggage collection to the arrivals was seamless. Within 20 minutes from the time we disembarked from the plane, I was greeting a broadly smiling man waving a placard with my names, “Lutaaya Okello Wilson” inscribed on it. On the pocket of his shirt were embroidered the words: “Great Lakes Safaris”.

“Mr. Isabirye I presume?” I said as I stretched out my hand.

“Yes sir”, he responded with a firm handshake, “welcome home to the Pearl of Africa”, he responded politely as he relieved me of my trolley.

I had at last arrived home.

We made our way through a large waiting crowd of people at the arrivals terminal to a multi-storied car park across the airport access road.

“The journey to Jinja will take just over an hour using the express highway”, Mr. Isabirye said as he placed my travel bags into the car boot.

After hitting the three-lane “HI – Great Eastern Highway” out of the airport, there was no stopping. At first I thought it was because we were travelling just after midnight but it soon became apparent that even as we by passed the busier intersections, road construction had been done in such a way that the long traveller did not experience the bottlenecks of roundabouts and traffic lights. The city skyline was dotted with several tall buildings spread out over many places. I was afraid I would not be able to recognize even the few landmarks I had fondly kept in my heart as memories of my country of birth.

“As you can see Mr. ...”

“Just call me Wilson,” I interjected...”

“Ok, Wilson,” he grinned. “As you can see we have experienced a construction explosion. Forty years ago, the government channeled the oil boom money to physical and social infrastructure. Really high-quality structures,” he emphasized. “The continued investments over the years have completely changed the face of this country.”

We passed breaks between residential, industrial and less populated areas, which Isabirye informed me, were farmland. Uganda@100 messages kept beaming at us from electronic billboards along the highway.

“The country is now fully networked by such quality highways and - there you are - a modern rail system,” he said as a high-speed train whizzed past us in a blur on a parallel rail platform at a distance.

“That is the Airport Link train you could have taken,” he said. “Rail – real state-of-the-art - connects all the major cities and the neighboring countries as well.”

“What about the water?” I asked.

“O yes,” he replied. “Lake Victoria is also well networked. Passenger, cargo- and fishing crafts too are now many to all countries in the region.”

I vaguely remembered passing through rural less sparsely populated areas in making the journey from Jinja to Kampala as a child. While the time of night did not enable me to see at close hand the developments along the route, it was evident that the two cities have more or less merged.

“This is the Mabira Forest conservation area”, Isabirye said as we entered a foggy zone.

I felt a leap of joy inside me.

“Mabira? It is still here? ”I asked. “I thought with the prices of wood ...”

“That’s what many think. But this is Uganda, the greenest country in Africa,” he almost shone with pride. “The forest has been conserved and built up despite the large population growth.”

He was again thoughtful.

“We almost lost it,” he spoke distantly, sadly. “Then forty years ago the Environment Management Agency finally got teeth to bite. Forest encroachers were firmly dealt with. Wetlands encroachers were moved out. It didn’t matter who you were. Even road construction was controlled – only this highway was allowed through the reserve. It meant standing against big money and people with big power. My uncle was shot because he stood firm. He was responsible for the Mabira zone.”

“You mean people died? To reclaim the environment?”

“Oh yes,” he said. “He wasn’t alone; activists, journalists, government officers, and ordinary people. This was something people felt for. Many were jailed too. But today ecotourism in Uganda contributes far more significantly to the economy than many other sectors. We are making big money out of it. It is a new national character. We have clean, fresh water. We have clean air. Many communities were radically re-planned for nature. It was a major point in starting to brand this country the Greenest in Africa.”

Soon we were crossing the new bridge over the River Nile. Dancing lights from the buildings along the riverbank reflected from the waves of the man made lake that resulted from the

construction of the new dam. Down the river, the ten storied Nile Source tower lights played on the clouds.

“ Most of those buildings you see are hotels and resorts. We have developed tourism all along the river Nile and long overtaken Egypt in the number of tourists along the Nile.

In a few minutes we pulled up at one of the hotels along the riverbank where I was to spend the next two nights. The friendly hotel butler ushered me into a neat deluxe bedroom with a balcony overlooking the Nile.

“How do I connect to the Internet?” I asked thinking about the video connection to my wife back home.

“Oh you could even have done it on your journey here from the airport,” he said. “Entire districts are hot spots; this is one of them.

Walking out to the balcony, a cool breeze blew against my face as I looked across the water to the other side, I wondered what my life would have been like if I had remained in this country 50 years ago after being abandoned in the bushes by the roadside and taken up for adoption. I looked at my watch, it was 2.30 am.

Monday, 2nd October 2062: REST AND JINJA TOUR**DIARY ENTRY:**

Woke up late. Tried to sleep off the fatigue of yesterday's journey. Glad to be away from the approaching winter. Excellent climate here. Must be one of the best in the world. It stays this way all year!

Had a late brunch. Hopped onto the open-air double decker City Sight Seeing Bus Tour. Had to pre-book tickets 3 months in advance - peak tourist season and oversubscribed; tour bus full. Very green city. Has the semblance of being planted in a jungle. Teeming with very busy looking people. No idling here; everybody in a rush to get somewhere. Sites packed with tourists- half of them African! Africa has advanced - even back home more African tourists: big change.

Marine Pier, Source of the River Nile, a boat trip on the man made lake from the dam built over 100 years ago.

Ttanda Falls! Watched white water rafters. The Nile is very powerful. Went for farm tour, one of many horticultural farms. Finally Industrial Area; now geared for import substitution.

Emotional reunion with childhood friend, Idembe and his wife. Will be taking me round the country this week. He is all I consider family in this my country of birth. Stayed up late in the evening reminiscing about our childhood at the Mulekwa Children's Home before the Wilsons adopted me. Got to know that almost a year later the Anguyos, a Ugandan family, adopted him. Through his foster family he was educated and later introduced to politics. Will be meeting his foster brother later in the week and meeting up with his wife again in Kampala. Told them how my adopted parents insisted on keeping my African names.

Tuesday, 3rd October 2062: SPEED TRAIN JOURNEY TO KAABONG

A taxi dropped us off at the Jinja Metropolitan Railway Station and in the terminal building, we walked through a wide long busy corridor with offices, restaurants, bookstalls and waiting rooms on either side to the covered railway platforms. Below the rail over bridge were three bullet shaped trains. Through swarms of travelers arrived at Platform 15. I had taken advantage of the tourist travel promotion put up by the Tourism Board for the 2062 FIFA world cup and the Centennial Jubilee celebrations. It enabled the use of one round-the-

country ticket on both train and bus services following several designated routes. Thousands of football fans and tourists took advantage of the promotion to tour the country.

Placing our luggage in the provided racks we made our way to our allotted seats; this was a fairly full train coach. I was pleasantly surprised by the roominess inside. Each seat had reading magazines and personalized touch screens for watching movies.

“Welcome to the Eastern Line, Equator Train Service shortly departing for Kaabong,” a jovial female voice announced over the intercom as we settled into our seats. “The expected travel time is three hours with brief stops at the cities of Tororo, Mbale, Soroti and Lira. Meals are available on order or in the restaurant coach. Toilet facilities are available on every coach. We extend a very special welcome on board to all travellers on our Centennial Jubilee promotion. Channel 50 on your personalized video screens will keep you updated on the attractions available in every part of the country we will traverse. At some points the train will slow down to enable you view places of interest. Do let us know if there is anything we can do to make your journey more enjoyable. In preparation for departure, please fasten your seat belts and ensure that your tickets are easily accessible for checking shortly after departure.”

“We entered the age of the high-speed train 30 years ago.” Idembe started, “It grew from the recognition that chronic traffic congestion on the country’s highways, particularly on the Kampala - Tororo corridor, weakened the nation competitively.

“The main artery of the speed train network forms a ring around the country putting most parts of the country within easy reach. Following the oil boom of the 2010s the government paid prime attention to the development of Mass Rapid Rail Transportation and the breakthroughs in electricity production made it feasible. The Chinese who were leading in high-speed rail construction at the time were engaged to build a nation-wide artery and also train Ugandan engineers who now fully run the system. They worked with the Uganda People’s Defence Forces to replace the old railway system with a new modern electric one and gradually expanded and improved it to a level where rail became the main method of transportation even for goods.”

“Was Karamoja part of the rail network from the beginning?” I asked

“No,” Idembe offered as the train eased off from the station. I was surprised at the ease with which the train accelerated to a speed where the countryside was a blur.

“The Lira-Kaabong connection was added in 2040 to tap into the growing tourism and mining industries in the Karamoja region. The Kidepo Valley National Park had become a favorite destination for tourists.”

“The proximity of Kaabong with Kenya and Southern Sudan together with the growth of the mining industry in Karamoja made the extension of the rail link commercially viable. In a few weeks the National Park will be marking 100 years and has created very attractive tourist packages. That partly explains the number of passengers on this train.”

The 120-kilometre journey to Tororo took just 30 minutes at speeds averaging 250 km/hr. The sprawling towns of Iganga, Bugiri, Busembatia, Nagongera, wheezed past us. A special type of decelerating window that reduced the sensation of motion enabled me to catch a bit of glimpse of the countryside scenery gliding by. It is evident that the modernization process in the country has not completely destroyed communities in the countryside. Agricultural land has been preserved.

At the Tororo City Station stop, I made out in the distance two cable cars making their laborious journeys in opposite directions to and from the summit of Tororo Rock. Channel 50 was running a documentary on the many places a visitor could hop off and visit in Tororo.

“The Cable Car Company has created a big tourism boom with its cars on Mountains Elgon, Moroto, Rwenzoris and here in Tororo. In peak seasons especially during school holidays one has to book several weeks in advance to avoid delays in queues.” The commentator’s voice spoke through the headphones.

In the corridor, a number of noisy passengers donning T-shirts emblazoned with the words “I conquered the Tororo Rock” looked for their seats.

Soon we were on our journey again enjoying the world famous brand of Elgon coffee, which had just been served by the train stewardess.

“That is one of the stadiums used for the recently concluded FIFA World Cup,” Idembe said as the train slowed down at the outskirts of the City of Mbale He was pointing to a bowl shaped stadium in the distance.

“At the time I left, Uganda was associated with mediocrity and lagged behind in relation to her peers. What happened?” I asked as I looked out at the stadium flanked by the mountain ranges. “How did you even come to win the FIFA World Cup?”

“You left at an inflection time in our history. It was the beginning of Uganda’s renaissance.” Idembe leaned over across the table separating our seats. “Somewhere in the mid 2010s, the nation began to stir up and awaken from a long slumber. The leaders at the time concentrated on galvanizing the people to believe in themselves. Even I through the youth camps I attended began to believe that Uganda could join the league of great nations. Almost imperceptibly at first, the nation began to arise and take charge of its destiny.”

“Did the economic woes in the western nations have any thing to do with the change in perceptions?” I asked as I reminisced on those years of global austerity.

“I guess so”, Idembe replied, “As the aid handouts from the west began to dwindle and dry up, it dawned on us that if we were to survive and indeed grow we had to depend on ourselves; no one else would do it for us. We had to make the same sacrifices other great nations had made, generate the will and required effort to rise above the limitations that at the time looked like massive mountains.”

The aid dependent mentality was systematically confronted at all levels. Discipline was enforced in government. Wasteful spending was checked. Corruption was firmly dealt with. All available resources were mobilized – human, infrastructural, organizational, technological and financial. We began to take off.”

SOLAR POWER

Soon after leaving the Soroti City stop, a reflection caught my eye through the deceleration view window, “What is that?” I asked.

“One of the most important pieces of the National Transformation puzzle. It is the reason why we can even travel on this train. That is the Kaberamaido Concentrated Solar Power Plant (CSP).

“In 2015 it became evident that hydroelectricity production was not enough to enable us continue on our desired path of growth. Alternative sources of electricity were sought and CSP looked the most viable for several reasons. First, it was confirmed that Uganda’s high altitude location on the equatorial Sun Belt of the earth gave it some of the highest solar

radiations on the globe; well above what was being received in parts of North Africa, North America and Southern Europe and yet in these places, CSP technology was already economically feasible and successfully implemented.

“Secondly it was confirmed CSP was more environmentally friendly than hydropower which was the major source of power in Uganda at the time. Thirdly CSP was shown to take a much shorter time to implement - just over a year from the concept outset – compared to hydropower, which on average was over two times as expensive, and took three to six times as long to set up. Fourthly, it was understood that combining with a thermal process, it was possible to generate solar power day and night all at costs substantially lower than hydropower. Lastly it was shown that a CSP plant had the same power potential as a nuclear power plant but was cheaper, safer and cleaner.

“The Government acted decisively to invest in East Africa’s first solar thermal power plant. There are currently four of them located in this region powering not only Uganda but also the neighboring countries. CSP has been a critical driver of Uganda’s transformation making cheap energy available to tens of millions and powering major industrial and transportation initiatives. In the 2010s and 2020s, CSP did for Africa in electricity production what mobile phone technology did in communications in the 1990s and 2000s.”

Idembe woke up from a short nap as the train slowed down approaching the City of Lira.

“Not far from here is a place called Apac, whose claim to fame was malaria.”

“At the time of your departure in 2012, Apac District had the infamy of being called the “Malaria Capital of the World” with 5,000 infections being reported every week. Today all that is history. Malaria is no longer the killer it was then thanks to the advent of new technologies especially the malaria vaccine. HIV/AIDS has since been tamed as well, largely due to a moral movement that came with a great emphasis on traditional values of chastity in the 2010s.

“How are the hospitals”, I asked remembering the time I had to spend in hospital during one of my many illnesses as a child.

“We have one of the best health care systems in the world. Every part of the country has well equipped medical centres and is well facilitated by medical personnel. Where health indicators such as the maternal mortality and infant mortality rates were weak fifty years ago, they have been improved to some of the best levels in the world. Health professionals no

longer shun working upcountry because every place is well facilitated. There is great emphasis on prevention programs. Average life expectancy has increased from 52.4 years in 2012 to more than 70 years today. Many who were teenagers like myself at the golden jubilee in 2012 are alive to recount memories of those years of awakening.”

As we disembarked from the train exactly three hours later in Kaabong Train Station, Karamoja, Idembe mused, “Fifty years ago this was more than a whole day’s journey with the possibility of not reaching the destination due to poor roads and broken bridges.”

The tour vehicle picked us up from the station and took us to our pristine hotel accommodation, Wumula Hotels and Resorts, a hotel chain with hotels in every major city and town of Uganda.

I struggled with sleep due to the jet lag. When I finally did, images of the countryside whizzing past me kept recurring in my dreams.

Wednesday, 4th October 2062: SCHOOL VISIT

“This place is unrecognizable from what it was.” Idembe said as we travelled on the tarmacked road to the town suburb where the academy was located. The streets were filled with pedestrians walking purposefully to their destinations.

“The high-speed train, modern highway and airport have connected this once remote region with the rest of Uganda and further on to Kenya and Southern Sudan.”

In order to get an insight into one of the main drivers for change in the last 50 years of Uganda, I had requested Great Lakes Safaris to specially arrange a school visit in an area where in the past, children hardly went to school. In no other place, I was told, could the impact of targeted Education be better seen than in Karamoja. At the time of the golden jubilee, the people of Kaabong had the unenviable repute of being the poorest in Uganda. This region I was told, had the worst indicators in the country for many areas: infant mortality, neo natal mortality, maternal mortality and school drop out.

Karamoja was given special consideration because of its backward state at the time. Special education programs were set up to address mindset change. Trees were planted. Cheap housing provided and as tourism grew, mechanisms were set in place to ensure that the local

communities optimally benefited.

Fifteen minutes later we drove through the gates of the school into a tree lined driveway leading up to the visitors' car park next to the school administration. A sweet scent from the flowerbed around the car park filled the air.

"Ejok-a, Mr. Lutaya Wilson," the school administrator greeted me in Dakarimojong as she welcomed us to the patio. She was dressed in a brown business suit.

"Ejok-nooi", I responded hesitantly as I tried to repeat the answer I had been coached by Idembe.

"Very good!" She exclaimed, "If you stayed here long enough you would soon be speaking the language. The Principal will meet you after we finish a tour of the school campus." She led us through a corridor into a courtyard.

"This is one of 50,000 government schools strewn across the country built using the same building plan. It takes this number of schools to ensure that all school going age children can attend school."

The classrooms had about 25 students, each with a single chair and workstation. In the higher classes the students had personal computer screens with wireless computer connection. In every class we visited a student came up to us and personally welcomed us to their class.

"Fast wireless Internet broadcasting has enabled most classes to be taught centrally nationwide," the class teacher informed us. "Every student has to be at their study station at the appointed time." Teachers play much more of a tutorial role.

During the campus tour, several teachers and staff stopped and greeted us.

"Every tour is important at our schools and so the Principal informs all the faculty and staff in advance", the administrator said on seeing the surprise on my face. I can now understand how Ugandans have maintained their legendary hospitality.

"We stopped using paper twenty years ago," the administrator whispered as we entered the school library. There were hardly any books in sight. Students worked silently on computer

screens that filled the large room.

“One of the earliest skills students learn these days is how to type. The main use of paper is to ensure that students do not lose the old skill of writing. The whole curriculum a child has to go through, even the textbooks, are loaded on a tablet computer and only opened by the teacher at right time by using special codes. The great thing about all this is that the information is audio visual and so the student’s learning is greatly enhanced.”

“How about exams?” I asked remembering the exam malpractices I used to hear about.

“Oh, computer technology has greatly reduced that. Exams are electronically conducted. Face and thumbprint recognition technology are used to enable the student start the exam. Random electronic checks are carried out during the exam. Exam results are almost instantaneous. The opportunities to cheat have been greatly narrowed down and quite frankly, people don’t bother any more.”

The scent of freshly baked bread hit our noses as we walked past the home economics building. We walked past science laboratories with sophisticated looking apparatus. The language lab had translation headsets for every student and screens for visual projection. At the far end of the building complex, students in overalls chiseled and hammered away at plunks of wood.

“Next to the carpentry workshops over there are the tailoring and metalwork workshops. Part of basic education is the impartation of practical skills.”

The sports field had two tennis and one basketball court adjoining a swimming pool with a gymnasium.

“Drip irrigation techniques are being utilized in the gardens beyond the sports field. They form part of the school farm that is managed by the students. A good part of the food we eat comes from there.

On concluding the tour, the administrator ushered us into a spacious comfortable waiting room where we were served with coffee and cake from the Home Economics department. On the wall a large flat electronic screen scrolled pictures, key statistics and messages about the school. On the coffee table were Yearbooks and school brochures. I felt very welcome at this school.

The Principal greeted us by name in Dakarimojong. From his looks, he must have been about my age. After exchanging pleasantries, I asked, "Please tell us about the cultural transformation in Karamoja from your perspective."

"Fifty years ago we had a very high drop out rate among school going children," he started, "Young boys were, at a very early age, put in charge of grazing cattle. As for girls, many never attended school in the first place. Instead they were very often kept in the homestead, waiting to be married off."

"The key driver of cultural and national transformation was Education both in and out of school. A vigorous campaign was launched to address the cultural mindset."

"The 2015 Education Review Commission recognized that the education system was not providing a solution to the future in terms of the human resource it was producing. It was realized that if we wanted an ideal country we had to critically analyze the whole school system. The vigorous debate that followed together with the engagement of Think Tanks resulted in the revamping of the national education system and the introduction of a radically different outcomes based curriculum that also very directly focused on changing the mindsets of the next generation and providing a holistic education."

"The condition of the teachers was comprehensively addressed and education infrastructure development made a priority. Over time the Education system began to produce graduates that were relevant to the needs and opportunities present in the country. For example while in the past there were hardly any courses for the tourism industry, today a large number of graduates come out of our tertiary institutions ready to contribute and earn from the tourism industry which is one of the largest in the world."

"The Curriculum Board, which I happen to serve on, focuses on the kind of people we want to take over in our political, economic or business spheres and works to produce such a people through a vigorous process of objective driven education and training. With subsequent reviews every decade, we have developed an education system that adapts itself to produce a relevant future citizen. Literacy rates are now 100%."

In the cabinet behind him were several trophies. What specially caught my eye were two on the top shelf that were emblazoned in gold. Following my gaze, the Principal said, "Oh one

more thing, we have fostered a spirit of innovation among our students. Those two golden trophies were awarded to our senior students over the last couple of years for outstanding innovative ideas in the Secondary Schools competition. In the last ten years, Uganda has consistently featured in the top ten most innovative nations in the world based on the number of patents registered on an annual basis.

At the end of the half hour meeting, the Principal walked us out of the office. After a photo session next to the school signboard, he thanked us for visiting his school.

“Ikianyun!” he said as we shook hands.

Looking at my blank face, he laughed. “That is Dakarimojong for good-bye”.

As we were driven back to our hotel, Idembe quipped, “Our generation holds in very high regard the government and leaders at the time of the oil boom. They were decisive in rejecting the pressure from all sorts of groups to spend the cash windfall on consumption. Instead they invested heavily in infrastructure and education. That strategic decision to empower the upcoming generations has made Uganda one of the most dynamic nations in the world. It has borne fruit in every aspect of national life including our recent lifting of the FIFA world cup.

Thursday, 5th October 2062: NORTHERN LINE TO ARUA

The 450 km journey to Arua lasted three hours and thirty minutes. The Northern Line of the Equator Train Service had flawlessly timed stops in Kitgum, Gulu, and Pakwach.

“Whatever happened to African time?” I asked as the 7.27 a.m. train left Kaabong right on schedule.

The answer came from a voice seated beside me.

“Only the Wazees like me still struggle with time keeping,” the elderly looking man said loudly. I was rather taken aback that a stranger could just jump into our conversation uninvited. “Almost missed this train,” he continued.

“The school system eradicated African time,” Idembe added unperturbed by the intruder.

“That is part of the cultural change we have undergone.”

“You have an accent,” the old man said looking directly at me, “Where are you from?”

I was not used to this kind of intrusiveness from a stranger. Besides I thought it is he who had the accent not me. Seeing my discomfort, Idembe smiled.

“This is my long lost brother Lutaaya Okello from Key Blazer, North America.

“Okello? Kopangho?” he said as he stretched out his hand. By this time Idembe was laughing heartily, enjoying my cultural unease.

“This Okello is a global citizen yet to learn Acholi,” Idembe teased.

“Lagen is my name. I am a farmer from Butangira, Gulu.”

“Farmers from this part of the country have not lost their friendly touch despite the big bucks they are making from their large farms,” Idembe laughed as he shook hands with Lagen.

It was then that I noticed that there was a buzz of conversation in the train coach. I had heard the same buzz in the train journey two days ago and just assumed that the travellers knew each other. Strangers seem to get along here like long lost friends.

Looking out through the deceleration window, I seemed to have taken a step back in time to see what the Ugandan countryside must have looked like 50 years ago. Virgin land was interspersed by almost infinite expanses of farmland growing a wide variety of foods, fruits and vegetables. “Our produce goes all over the world. I haven’t quite found fruit that tastes like that from my farm,” Lagen said as we savored bowls of fruit salad served for breakfast by the train catering service.

“I totally agree. One of the things I miss most when I travel abroad is our fruit and natural tasting food. Uganda finally rose to her agricultural potential. Not only do we have national food security, we are now the official breadbasket of the whole sub region. At some point in the 1970s we actually became a net importer of food. Not anymore. The last 40 years have not disappointed.” Idembe said.

“I’ll tell you what triggered this whole thing”, our neighbor who was eating rather noisily quipped, “Cooperatives. Ours has about 5,000 farmers and we sell our produce directly to our customers abroad. Most of the farms you see out there are cooperative farms.”

“True, but leadership played a fundamental role. Around 2010, the national leaders picked up the cue that scarcity of food would be a major world problem by 2025. Strategic plans were set out instituting changes in the agricultural sector to take maximum advantage of this imminent opportunity. We collaborated with nations like Israel, which were world leaders in modern and efficient farming systems. Research showing which crops grew best in different parts of the country was done and rigorously applied. Food processing plants were built near the places of food production in conjunction with the private sector.”

“Does the traditional African homestead still exist?” I asked Lagen.

“Our villages were reorganized. When services were brought to a central place and transportation improved locally, it was easier for the population to accept to move to these centres while maintaining our gardens for farming. So yes, The African homestead does exist but in a modified form. Our villages are not what they used to be when I was growing up. They are all serviced with piped water, electricity, and other social services like schools, hospitals and shopping centres.

“Another key leadership factor,” Idembe continued, “was security all over the country. The government has ensured that the country has an army able to defend itself against any external threat and a competent police force to deal with any internal unrest. The security enjoyed all across the country has enabled developments like this Northern line speed train service to take off.”

“When I was growing up, there was a terrible man called Kony. He made living in this part of the world a nightmare. At one time I used to sleep on the streets of Gulu with thousands of other children to avoid being abducted. That period is a distant memory. We farmers are benefiting from our fertile farmland. I am returning from a meeting with clients in North Western Kenya. This Northern Equator Train Line services the thousands of farms in this whole region. The International airport at Gulu transport most of our produce destined for the foreign markets.”

The train begun to slow down as we hit the outskirts of Kitgum town.

“ Sixty five percent of Uganda’s population now lives in urban areas as evidenced by the sprawling metropolises like this one,” Idembe said pointing out of the window. “That too has played a part in freeing up land in the countryside.”

Tuned in to Channel 50, I watched a Tourism Board promotion of a fascinating brand of agricultural tourism as Uganda maximized its tourist potential: travellers being encouraged to get a first-hand sense of life on the farm. The destinations included farm houses that have been turned into small agricultural museums, bed-and-breakfast guest houses set in rolling pasture lands, and working farms and ranches that take in guests.

Lagen disembarked at the City of Gulu. “Next time you come around, come and visit my farm. You will love the quiet of the countryside,” he said as he passed on his business card. The card had his farm address complete with a website.

We met up with the Nile again at the New Pakwach Bridge built to accommodate the demands of both the high-speed train and expanded highway.

Channel 50:

“The opening up of Eastern Congo and Southern Sudan brought tremendous growth to the City of Arua. It is here that Ugandans began to appreciate that they were land-linked and ceased to bemoan the fact that they were land-locked. Arua now boasts of City status with an International Airport, fast train links to Congo and Sudan and motorways connecting the rest of the country.”

“A number of families these days are availing their homes for bed and breakfast in order to cash in on the booming tourism industry,” Idembe told me as the tour vehicle made its way from Arua Metropolitan Train station to the Anguyos’ home. “This type of accommodation arrangement is enabling the growing number of middle class senior citizens to cash in on the tourism boom.”

Surrounded by a well-tended garden resplendent with coconut palms and other tropical plants, the grass-thatched guesthouse was built with traditional Ugandan building architecture in mind. It was evident that significant emphasis was placed on providing comfortable and clean accommodation to guests.

Later in the evening as we had dinner while enjoying the sunset from the verandah of the family house, Idembe’s teenage nephew and niece Andrew and Susan served us. Mrs. Anguyo hardly left the dinning table. The teenage school going children showed a deep respect for their parents.

“Please have some more vegetables Uncle Idembe,” Susan pleaded, “They are from my very own garden”.

“And I cooked them”, Andrew quickly added. The sweet fresh fruits and delicious African recipes whose names I could not pronounce kept me going for additional helpings.

“We have taught our children to do all the work at home. In our growing up years one could hire a maid cheaply but these days all children go to school; domestic assistants are professional and very expensive,” Mrs. Anguyo told us.

As we reclined at the table after dinner, Idembe’s adopted brother, Mr. Anguyo, a lay reader at his church, recounted how their father had led a movement for the restoration of family and traditional values in the 2020s and how that movement had spread beyond the borders of the nation.

“The movement played a major role in forging partnerships between the family, religious institutions and schools while upholding family values and getting national values into the education system. It helped ensure that the moral base of the country was not eroded. Respect for time and a new work ethic became mainstream. Without that,” Anguyo added, “the nation would have long descended into the decadence prevailing in other parts of the world.”

I went to bed leaving Idembe and Anguyo discussing family matters.

Friday, 6th October 2062: AERIAL SIGHT SEEING TO KISORO

“Ladies and Gentlemen, Welcome to Eagle Air’s one and a half hour tourist flight to Kisoro. This is Captain Adam Rubondo from the flight deck. Flying at an average altitude of 8,000 feet on this sight seeing flight, we will be viewing some of the most beautiful well-conserved places on the earth. From Arua International Airport, we are taking a southeastern direction and following the Albert Nile to Kabalega National Park, Uganda’s largest national park. Along the river you can see several cruises ships. Uganda provides the best opportunities of cruises in Africa especially in this section between Murchison falls to Nimule.

Over to the left is Murchison Falls, one of the most powerful waterfalls in the world, long recognized as one of the 7 Natural Wonders of the World. The waters of the majestic Nile squeeze through a narrow gorge, only 7 metres wide, before plunging down a 43-metre canyon. Together with the adjacent Bugungu Wildlife Reserve and the Karuma Wildlife Reserve, the park is part of the 5,308 square kilometres Murchison Falls Conservation Area.

The sprawling cities below are Masindi on the left and Hoima to the right. Those of you on the right of the aircraft a short while ago might have just made out at a distance the oil rigs that 50 years ago woke up these two once sleepy towns to make them the second largest

metropolis in Uganda. The growth of these cities has been well managed in order to conserve the habitat and wildlife.

We are flying over the Western Rift Valley, on the right are the waters of Lake Albert leading us to the eastern side of the 50 km long Rwenzori Mountains. Also fabled as mountains of the moon, the Rwenzori Mountains are higher than the Alps and are still ice-capped. Known for their outstanding natural beauty, these mountains form the almost 1000 square kilometer Rwenzori National Park and host Africa's third highest mountain peak plus many waterfalls, lakes and glaciers.

Directly below are the twin cities of Fort Portal and Kasese. On the right, you may just be able to see some cable cars taking tourists up and down the mountain foothills. Over to the left you can see the busy traffic on the H3 – the Great Western Highway leading all the way to Kampala.

We are now directly over the Kazinga Channel joining Lakes Edward and George. It is located in the Queen Elizabeth National Park, home to 95 species of mammals and over 500 species of birds, the highest concentration of bird species of any protected area on earth and also the best place to see the tree-climbing lions.

Further out of view to the right and forming a continuous forest with Queen Elizabeth National Park, lies the Kibale National Park, one of the last remaining expanses to contain both lowland and mountain forests. It has one of the highest diversity and concentration of primates in Africa and is home to 13 species of primates including a large number of endangered chimpanzees, 325 species of birds and over 250 tree species. These adjoining parks form a 180 km wildlife corridor, an important eco-tourism and safari destination.

The dense forest below forms part of the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. It is only accessible on foot and is most notable for hosting half the world's population of mountain gorillas. The impenetrable forest is one of the richest ecosystems in the world. It provides habitat for some 120 species of mammals, 348 species of birds, 220 species of butterflies, 27 species of frogs, chameleons, geckos and many endangered species. Floristically Bwindi is amongst the most diverse forest in East Africa, with more than 1,000 flowering plant species including 163 species of trees and 104 species of ferns.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are making our approach to Kisoro International Airport. Ahead are peaks of the Mufumbiro Mountains, which are part of the Virunga Mountains and home to the rare mountain gorilla. The 33.7 square km Mgahinga Gorilla National Park is our smallest but perhaps one of the most famous, as it is one of the only two parks together with Bwindi that offer habitat for the mountain gorillas.

Kisoro is just about the end of the road for those visiting western Uganda. Enjoy your stay here and be sure to take a volcano trek to fully enjoy the scenery. Visit Lake Mutanda and don't forget the mountain gorillas. Shop at the many colorful markets, and those of you with International connections report to the transit desk in the main terminal building. We look forward to your next flight with us.

In preparation for landing, please ensure that your seat belts are fastened and your video screens are stored away. This is Captain Adam Rubondo thanking you for flying Eagle Air.

Saturday, 7th October 2062: TROPICAL GARDEN ROAD ROUTE TO KAMPALA

“In 2025, The Uganda Tourism Board branded the 460 kilometre drive from Kisoro to Kampala the “Tropical Garden Drive” for its charming scenery”. We followed the H4 - the Great South Western Highway. The three-lane highway widened to four in the busier intersections around the cities.

Idembe drove the Sports Utility Vehicle hired from the Great Lakes Safaris car hire office at Kisoro International Airport. I will deposit the vehicle at their office at Entebbe airport on my departure. I wanted to be free to soak in some of the most breathtaking scenery in Africa.

Out of Kisoro, the road hugged the steep hillsides as it turned and twisted down the 100-metre drop to the City of Kabale. We stopped at a couple of designated popular tourist stops with roadside picnic areas to enjoy the scenery. In the picturesque valley agricultural City of Kabale, we made a brief stop at Africa's deepest crater lake, Lake Bunyonyi; home to a large number of bird and fish species as well as otters. I noticed the same determined walk on the streets of Kabale; no loitering. Smartly dressed men and women each walked with a purposeful pace.

From Kabale towards the University City of Ntungamo we drove through two well-lit tunnels dug through the hills. In the lowlands, orderly farm fields, fruit orchards, and farmlands scattered with strikingly plain storehouses and adjoining houses lined the highway. Undulating hills rolled off into the distance. The greenery, which is more actually dark green, justifies the “Tropical Garden Drive” brand. The exits off the highway were well labeled and the traveller could tell well in advance the approach of an exit.

“This is Uganda’s own Silicone valley”, Idembe told me as we approached the Ruti suburb of the City of Mbarara.

“The focus on developing science, technology and innovation (STI) 70 years ago has handsomely paid off. Most of Africa’s innovations in information technology come from right here. Together with the strides made in education, the application of science and technology has unleashed the full creative potential of Uganda. Some of the recent innovations made by the multiple research institutions spread across the nation would have been unthinkable even thirty years ago. Uganda has successfully transitioned herself to a knowledge-based society and innovation-based economy.”

Those buildings over there are information technology parks; they are found in most of the main cities. We share a significant portion of the Business Process Outsourcing global.

We bypassed the Ranch City of Lyantonde and had lunch in the Commercial City of Masaka.

Farms continued to roll by on the way to Kampala. At the City outskirts in suburb of Mpigi, I spotted Exit 43 leading up to Entebbe International Airport through the famous Nakiwogo bridge.

The central business district of Kampala covering several hills was vibrant with activity. National flags were flying on buildings and cars almost everywhere one cared to look. Billboards of both local and multinational companies hang off high-rise buildings. Traffic was regulated by an endless array of traffic lights. “Uganda @ 100” banners hang over many buildings and video billboards flashed an assortment of messages congratulating the country on achievements in the last 100 years. Pedestrians wore shirts, dresses and caps with Centennial Jubilee messages. Passing through an endless maze of intersections, we finally reached our hotel accommodation in the Mukono suburb.

Sunday, 8th October 2062 LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

Idembe insisted on taking me for a morning church service and thereafter to the National Leadership Academy for lunch. The service was full and lively. The sermon focused more on the last 100 years of Uganda and ways in which the Church could reach and help provide solutions to struggling parts of the world. From the sermon, I picked up that this church like many others in the country were supporting hundreds of missionaries abroad.

“I wanted you to experience both,” he told me after the tour of the Leadership Academy, as we enjoyed lunch in the restaurant. “All the changes you have seen in the country would not have been possible without the combination of a strong moral base and strong focused and credible leadership. Both of these took hold of the country about 40 years ago and have been the bedrock of the transformation of Uganda. Religious institutions transformed themselves into social institutions directly engaging the society and providing solutions to problems. It was a major shift in the mindset of religious institutions.”

“It is mandatory for all leaders in politics and the public service to regularly spend some time at the National Leadership Institute which offers many different leadership courses throughout the year, including refresher courses. This has greatly helped in harmonizing the nation’s approach to development. Before that it was chaos with everyone pulling in their own direction.”

“And corruption?” I asked as I remembered the emotional roller coaster I experienced as the Wilsons struggled to adopt me and take me with them out of Uganda.

“When the government first took a tough uncompromising stand against corruption and indiscipline in its ranks it surprised everyone and many were skeptical that they would maintain the tempo. One by one, senior government and party officials were imprisoned, then several public leaders began fleeing the country rather than face the humiliation of public trial and imprisonment. Maintaining this stance for several decades enabled the country rid itself of a cancer that was beginning to cripple it. Corruption is now viewed as a grave danger to our existence as a nation.

“As a result, the leadership today is accountable. Honesty and equity are now societal virtues enabling the maintenance of good quality leadership throughout society. The nation’s

institutions are strong and there is transparency in government and the private sector. The justice system is accessible and accountable helping to infuse intolerance to corruption.”

“National leaders have been able to guide the nation out of a state of narrow-minded interests with stronger allegiance to tribe, religion and social groups to one where the whole nation has a shared sense of national identity, values and wholesome attitudes.”

I had been a witness to the same passion for the nation whether in Kaabong, Arua and Kisoro

At an evening dinner, in honor of visiting dignitaries, courtesy of Idembe’s political connections, we shared a table with two members of Parliament: Hon. James Mukasa representing a constituency in Dokolo district in Lira and Hon. Betty Achieng representing a constituency in Kisoro district.”

Monday, 9th October 2062

The Centennial Independence Day Parade was held at the newly built stadium where the Uganda Cranes lifted FIFA world cup in July. People came as early as 7:00 a.m. in order to get good vantage points. By the time we were ushered in to the VIP section courtesy of Idembe, the 100,000-seat stadium was full. Around the stadium, the black, yellow and red colours of the national flag were waving everywhere. In the stands, people danced to popular national songs sang by local musicians. It looked much like a rock concert.

“Those three elderly gentlemen over there to the left are the three former Presidents,” Idembe shouted in my ear above the din. Soon various dignitaries including members of Parliament, members of the Cabinet, the Prime Minister and the state and federal Presidents of the East African Federation arrived.

The State President received visiting heads of state. The crowd sang all three stanzas of the National Anthem with gusto. Overhead three military helicopters dangled the State Flag in a fly past. The parade began with the march into the stadium of military contingents including the Infantry Regiment, the Marines, the Uganda Police, the Uganda Prisons, students from the National Service program in the military and police, and various schools, plus civil groups accompanied with military music. The high point of the parade was the entry of the FIFA World Cup Champions, the Uganda Cranes in an open top double decker bus. You

could have thought that Uganda had just won the cup. The whole stadium rose to its feet. Those in the stands were jumping up and down. The cheer in the stadium was deafening.

Uganda Air Force flypast of various military aircraft over the stadium was also a favorite.

Students carried out mass gymnastics displays on the field with a pageant depicting 100 years of Uganda. The whole spectacular show lasted about an hour. "Proudly Ugandan" was more than just a catchword. I could feel it in the air.

As the National Anthem played at the end I felt a kindred spirit with this nation. This was my home too.

The citizens of this nation once referred to as, "The land that God Forgot", are the envy of the world. As the nation embarks on its second century I wonder what greater heights she can achieve.

POSTSCRIPT:

As the Eagle Air jumbo jet takes off for my direct flight to New York a week later, I know I must come back with my family for a longer visit. But first, I will be hosting Idembe and his wife next summer.