

MAYOR OF LONDON

Voyaging into the unknown

By Joseph Masane*

BACKGROUND

Whether they sailed across the Atlantic in passenger liners as part of the post-war Windrush generation, or part of the more recent arrivals who have boarded aeroplanes crossing several continents to take up university studies, millions of Londoners have tales of how they arrived in the capital. This article captures some the awe and unexpectedness of some of these journeys. Having arrived in London four years ago, the writer also shares his own experiences of travelling from Uganda to London as an exiled journalist.

Joseph Masane is a Ugandan investigative Journalist and broadcaster. He is a participant on the Refugee Journalism Project, an initiative based at London College of Communication that supports exiled and displaced journalists.*

*Name has been changed at author's request.

Voyaging into the unknown

Throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s, the SS Monserrat was one of the many ships that weaved between the chain of islands that made up the Caribbean. Its passengers were men, women and children of the Commonwealth who wanted to start new lives in the United Kingdom.

One passenger who boarded on the Leeward island of Monserrat was an anxious but eager teenager. Her journey would take her thousands of miles away from her home, and it would be peppered with new experiences. “I was excited because it was my first time travelling on a ship and there were so many people. It was an adventure,” she told the Conversation Booth as part of the London Community Research project. “There were a few people on there from the same village. In my cabin there was Ruby, Ann, Elvie plus two babies...quite a few of us.”¹

Her final destination would be Southampton Dock, but the journey would take her via Tenerife and Spain, to pick up fuel and produce. “I was so excited so I couldn’t sleep. I kept on going up and down and seeing things that I had read about. I saw a parrot for the first time...Everything was beautiful to me as a young person, a teenager, from the Caribbean...adventurous.”² This passenger was one of almost half a million West Indians who – between 1948 and 1970 - made similar journeys, some by boat others by plane, to the UK. Most came to work, others for their studies, or to join loved ones.

According to the Office of National Statistics, more than a third of people now living in London were born outside of the UK. This means that all of these people arrived here after making some kind of journey, and each with a personal story to tell as to why they were drawn to the UK’s capital. I became one of the 33,000 or so Ugandans who have come to call London their home. My own journey was a little unusual as it was motivated by fear. I hoped that by coming to London I would be safe. Back in December 2015 as an investigative reporter based in the capital, Kampala, I became involved in a story about the forthcoming Ugandan presidential elections which resulted in me being arrested, beaten and imprisoned. I knew I would no longer be safe in Uganda, so I quickly made a plan to flee the country and travel to London.

My travels started at Entebbe Airport with just one suitcase. I planned to leave behind my life in Uganda – my loved ones, my profession and most of my belongings. This was the first long-haul flight I’d taken, and some aspects of the on-board experience came as something of a surprise. At first, I refused the in-flight meal I was offered by the crew, as I was not familiar with the type of food they were serving, and I was concerned that it could make me sick. As the hours passed, though, I was overcome by hunger. I was hesitant to

¹ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

² London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

ask for the food I had earlier declined. Eventually I gave in and asked the stewardess to bring me something to eat, which she found amusing. I had also thought that if the pilot makes any mistakes, it means we would die. I asked myself whether it was right for me to escape persecution from the Ugandan authorities only to then die on a plane?

Those interviewed by the London Community Research project who came from warmer climates described being struck by the drab, colourlessness of the scene they arrived to in London. As one woman arriving from the Caribbean commented: "I couldn't believe that London was so cold, very cold, even though it was May when I came. It was so dark and dismal..."³

I don't remember much about my own arrival at Heathrow, other than it was March and cold, as I was too stressed and confused. Having disembarked the plane and made my way through the airport, I then had to contend with an abundance of train platforms leading to all manner of places. I was new to England, and completely lost as to how I would reach central London, my final destination. Eventually people directed me to where I could catch a train to Paddington.

I often think back to one of my first days in this city. My first journey around London by the iconic red bus was quite an experience, as I knew nothing about Oyster cards, so I jumped on board thinking I'd be able to pay in cash - the method used in Uganda. People laughed at me and knew that I was a newcomer to the capital.



(Photo Credit, Veronica Otero)

Once I had worked out the correct way to pay, I sat upstairs so that I could take in beautiful views of the city. I saw wonderful roads, the likes of which are yet to be constructed in Uganda, and well-designed buildings. One thing which really stood out, and which still challenges my understanding, is that the trees here die in the autumn and resurrect themselves with leaves in the spring. Soon I started counting the months to see how long it took the dead trees to grow new leaves.

³ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).



Since I arrived in this city, my home has been in the borough of Haringey. Roughly 275,000 people live here, and of those, more than 100,000 were born overseas. Ugandans living in London are fairly spread out, and Haringey doesn't have a huge Ugandan population, but more than ten percent of the foreign-born population of the borough started their journeys in Africa. There is a Ugandan restaurant on West Green Road, and several shops where you can buy typical produce from Uganda, as well as from other African countries. It has become familiar and like home to me. I like living in London more than any other city in the UK. This familiarity and acceptance of all that exists in London is shared by others who were interviewed for the London Community Project. One woman shared: "I've lived in various different places in the UK. So, to return to London there's a sense of familiarity and comfort. I don't find difficulty with the number of people around. There's a familiarity that feels quite deep rooted."⁴

(Photo credit, Veronica Otero)

Of course, I miss Uganda. I'm not really in touch with my family, I miss friends and my job. I have been asked many times since arriving in the UK whether the decision I took to come here was worth making. The simple answer is yes, it was worth it and I would do it again. I feel relieved that I made the journey to London, and happy that my life is now safe.

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⁴ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

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