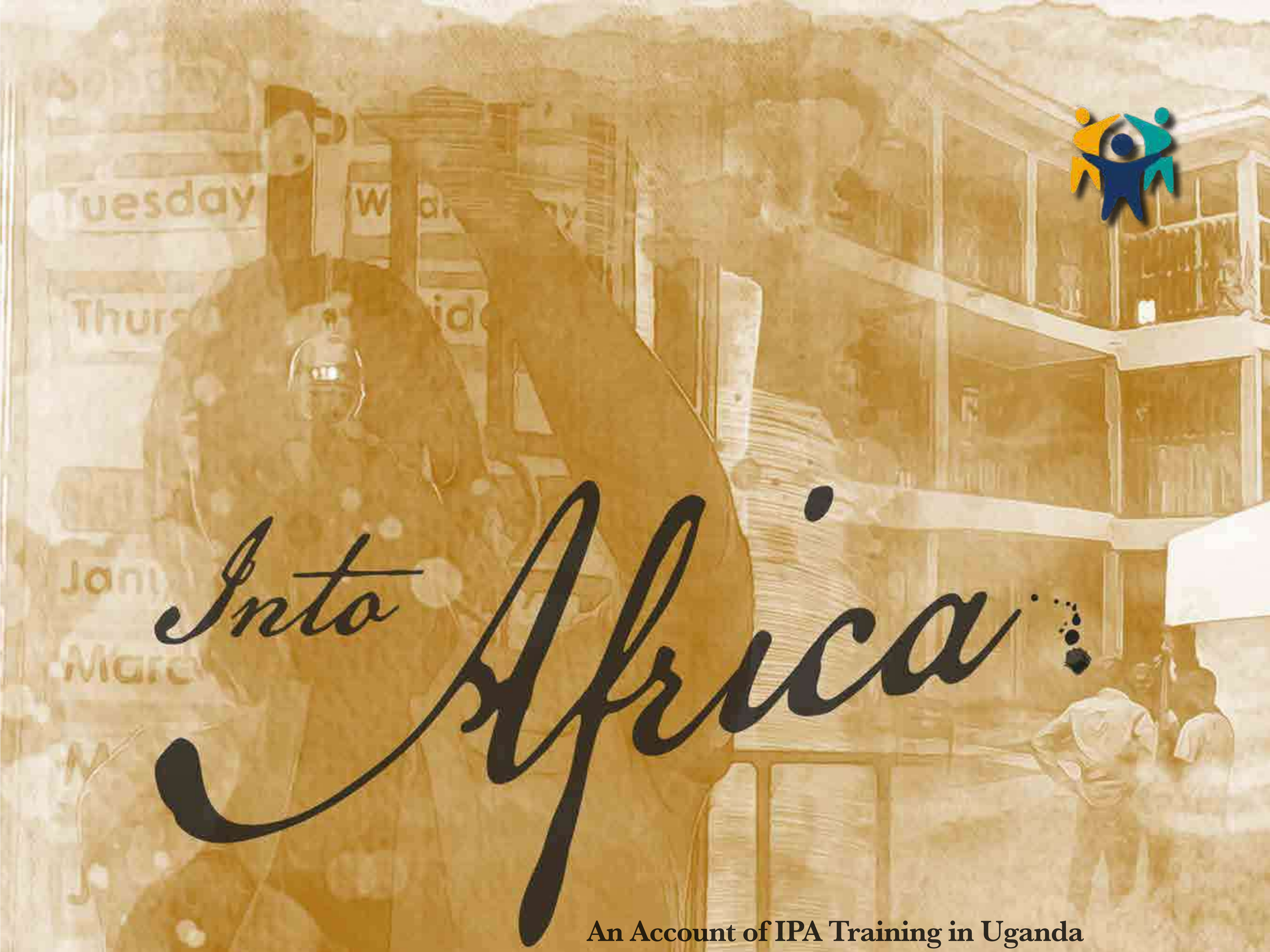

Into Africa

An Account of IPA Training in Uganda

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The journey begins

As the airplane leaves the wet tarmac of Amsterdam's Schiphol airport, a haze of tiny drops appears around the silhouette of the engines. It's the beginning of a long journey. Some of us have been travelling since the late hours of the night. As always, I can't sleep.

Once the plane levels and begins its long cruise towards Entebbe airport, a strange feeling of calm presence in the moment fills my heart. I'm a seasoned traveller, but this time it's different. This is my first time in Africa.

When I heard that the Project Princess Initiative had called us to Uganda to deliver IPA trainings on a range of topics to primary school teachers and school leaders, I was quite surprised.

I went over my knowledge of the land, and I had to admit that it really wasn't much. The Virunga mountain range, home of the mountain gorillas, where Diane Fossey conducted her research up until her death. A film depicting the rise of Idi Amin and his iron fist regime. Lake Victoria, from which the Nile flows. Another film, describing the life of Danish writer Karen Blixen in the neighbouring country in Kenya, and the longing and sorrow that accompanied it.

There is no doubt in my mind that the unknown is waiting for us. I know, as it is often the case, that when the traveller eventually returns home, he (or she) is no longer the same traveller.

In the olden days, cartographers used to indicate the lands which remained unexplored with the ominous dictum hic sunt leones, "here are lions". Interestingly enough, "lion" (simba) is one of the two expressions I know in Kiswahili. The other one, the world-famous hakuna matata, needs no explanation. I'm laughing at the idea that "no problem" and "lion" could coexist in my mind.

Mimi ni Mwalimu

Whenever I travel to a country in which I'm a foreigner, I always make a point of learning at least some of the local language. There is much to learn from the way the words of a language take shape in your mouth. It's a special kind of food, one that takes time to articulate, but it's the key to everything. No matter how small, it will make a difference. It will inform your encounter with the Other.

I have several hours to go over my notes on Kiswahili and try to memorise as many words as I can. As I practice, strange connections start forming. *Mtu* is "person". *Mto* is "river". Is there a connection here? Does the life of a person flow like a river, with a direction that might be unknown and yet determined? Does the water of river, just like the water of life, keep changing as it runs towards the sea and so, as Heraclitus said, no-one ever bathes twice in the same river?

And child is *mtoto*. Is it the repetition that makes the word cuter, as in Chinese?

Many words in Kiswahili come from other languages. English is the primary source for modern terms, like *dareba* from "driver". I spot several Arabic terms related to culture, like *mwalimu* "teacher", *madras*, "school", or food, like *samak* "fish". There are echoes of many more, including French and Dutch.

Yet, Kiswahili does not sound to me like an artificial language. Somehow, it sounds and feels like a strong tree with roots half-hidden in the mist, penetrating deeply into the ground.

Among the phrases I'm practising there's also *mimi ni mwalimu*, "I'm a teacher". As the aircraft suddenly shudders in a gust of turbulence, I wonder if that's true, or if it's going to be like many other times before, when I receive far more than I give.

In just a few hours, I would be told by most of our companions that they speak Luganda, rather than Kiswahili, but for now I'm happy
K
with my poetic thoughts.

Interlude - Kigali

Our airplane makes a brief stopover in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. Although I can't see much through the half-clouded window, I do recall pictures and videos from the events of the late 90's. Africa is reminding us that this is a land that abides by other rules. Extremes are more intense, in every way.

Landing

When the screeching brakes take our aeroplane to a halt, it's already dark. Leaving the airport, we are met by a gush of night air. Slightly humid, a little warm, but devoid of the scents I am used to. As it fills my lungs, I realise I have set foot in Africa.

Fiona, our host, is already there waiting for us. A mother of twins, something we are told is reason for great celebration and pride in Uganda, she exudes enthusiasm and determination. She is genuinely happy to see us, and her hug feels strong and sincere.

The driver's seat on the right side and the navigator display in Japanese are clear indications of the origin of the car. I remember reading that many cars who are thought to be too old are shipped to Africa, but I had no idea of the scope of the phenomenon. Over the course of our five-day adventure, we hardly met any car that wasn't made in Japan.

Suddenly Sunrise

Our director, Eszter, had told me.

-We're very near to the Equator. You get light pretty much from 6am to 6pm, and then it's lights out, in the blink of an eye.

We're meeting at 8 am for breakfast but I set the alarm clock to 6:30. The passage from night to day is almost abrupt, like a timelapse. I have to remind myself to use bottled water for brushing my teeth.

In the hall, Eszter and Judit are waiting. The latter is making good use of her time by knitting a blanket for her newborn grandchild, something that gives her great joy and pride.

I'm all set for today's training. I reviewed the activities. I've got notes in my phone, in case I forget something. My camera's battery is fully charged. I'm not scared, but I want to make sure every moment counts. This is not a place that we can visit that frequently.

I keep waiting. Nothing happens.

Half an hour later, I turn to Eszter.

-Africa time. She'll be there, don't worry.

In other parts of the word this would be a problem. Here, there's no malice to it. It's just

the way things are. It is inconvenient, but it is also an indication that there are things more important than being on time at all costs. Uganda has started teaching me its ways.

Fiona greets us with a warm smile and a big hug. We fit into the car. As Eszter and Fiona engage in small talk, I remove the cap from the lenses and adjust the manual setting of my camera.

-By the way, we did tell you about roads in Uganda, didn't we?" says Judit, rather casually.

-No. What about them?

-You'll see.

Boda-boda

When I was a university student, I took a course on African literature. Fiona is a wonderful example of the storytelling prowess of the people of this continent, providing an accurate running commentary for almost the entire duration of the trip to her school.

-In Europe, you ride bikes for sport. Here, we use them as transport. They're everywhere. We call them boda-boda. Because we have many young people and not many jobs, many people are unemployed, so they use this as a source of income.

The scene Fiona is describing defies imagination. All sorts of bikes are swinging all around us with remarkable nonchalance in multiple directions. Entire families ride on the same boda boda. All kinds of people use them, from young gentlemen who carry car spare parts to conservative Muslim women.

Boda-boda drivers are also a convenient marketing tool. Many wear jackets in high-

visibility colours, and if you pay attention to the messages, often about tests and prevention, you get an instant reminder of the sheer complexity of the problems that Ugandans face every day, even in the capital city of Kampala.

Judit pointed out that in spite of the rather maverick nature of the boda boda drivers, we didn't see a single crash for the entire duration of our stay. We also didn't see any car with the markings of an incident!

The City

Our route takes us away from the rather central position of our hotel towards the outskirts of Kampala. There's so much to understand that I take pictures just so that I can look at them later and reflect. Whole buses acting as taxis drive by us, some of them with made-up glyphs meant to mimic Chinese characters. It might seem far-fetched, but one only has to pay a little attention to construction sights and large warehouses to witness the extent of China's penetration in Africa.

The colour of the red dirt of the side roads is striking, like out of a dream. One moment it's hawker carts and wheel stalls selling green bananas and watermelons, and a moment later it's mannequins with visibly different body shapes adorned with the bright, joyful patterns of local clothing.

The bouncing of the car takes me from my reverie.

-Told you- says Judit, smiling

Calling them "craters" might be stretching poetic license, but it wouldn't be too far from truth. Once we leave the main road and venture into the labyrinth of unpaved tracks - to avoid traffic, Fiona is quick to point out - the car prances like a pony, and very ominous thuds come from its underside.

There are lots of children playing around. Some of them are clearly from poor families. This is where the conflict ignites within me, fuelled by my protective instinct towards younglings. Some of them are carrying jerry cans, which means there is no running water in the household.

I remind myself I should think twice before passing judgement on people I do not know in a country I do not understand. Fiona, who is still narrating, very subtly teaches me one of the best lessons of my life.

-You know, there was once a lady who came here from very far away. She saw all the children going to school, walking alone, and she was very upset. She said, 'Oh Fiona, this is not possible, we must do something'. I told her 'Hey, I'm just Fiona, I can't change everything. I just do my best, you know?'

Protecting children is a valid principle, but if you overdo it you end up taking away opportunities to become independent and to do things on their own. Not facing any kind of adversity won't do anything to prepare children for the reality of their adult life, although the difficulties children face in my own country are not remotely comparable to those that children will face here.

This journey taught me many difficult lessons. I suppose the greatest one is this: the magnitude and complexity of the problems make it impossible for any one individual to change things in one sweeping move. At the same time, every single action, however little, does make a difference.

The School

We reach the Childtime Brookside Academy through an iron gate. It's a three-storey building painted in vibrant blue and surrounded by a small lawn with lush trees. A small brook runs to its left. For the duration of our training, whenever the sound of laughter abates, our activities are be accompanied by the gentle sound of running water. Aside from that, and the occasional sound of leaves rustling in the breeze, the silence is stunning. I have the distinctive feeling that things are growing, relentlessly, albeit at their own pace.

Part of the school is still under construction, but signs of dedication are everywhere when I walk into one of the classrooms. The bare concrete floor is very clean. The walls are painted in bright, joyful hues. Large, handmade posters hang from the walls. A lot of care went into the design and the drawings.

There are decorations to make them prettier.

My heart skips a beat. For a moment I'm back in rural Japan, teaching English in elementary schools, making my own posters, and confronting more than one child coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, again, Uganda is a different reality. The choice of words of the posters couldn't indicate it more clearly. You've got "tear gas", "barbed wire", "razor blade", right beside "family", "doctor", "education".

Most crucially, this is the home of the Project Princess Initiative. The brainchild of Fiona, it is a programme that focuses on supporting children who have experienced violence and abuse so that they can complete their education.

There is a palpable feeling of community that inhabits this place. The more time we spend here, and the stronger we bond with our companions over both hearty laughs and thought-through insights, the more intensely we come to understand the strength of the sense of community that runs deep into the heart and mind of Uganda.

CHILDTIME BROOKSIDE ACADEMY

MOTTO: Train a Child....Prov.22:6

VISION: To train children the way they should go in the following Ways:

* academically
* emotionally
* socially
* physically
* spiritually

MISSION: - To attain academic excellence.
- Training children to be confident, responsible and respectful citizens.

The Training

‘Lesson plans basically exist to be thrown out’.

That’s one of the (many) surprising things I’ve heard Eszter said. And I understand she means every word of it.

An IPA training like this requires a lot of preparation. We don’t have people sitting for three hours while we lecture them on the theoretical intricacies of this topic or that best practice. We go for the direct, hands-on experience requires more effort but offers far greater returns in terms of retention. Simply put, people learn better when they “do” their own learning.

That’s why we plan every single day very carefully, select the most appropriate activities, and then take great care to adapt them to the cultural characteristics of the local context. We spend significant amounts of time and energy in researching the specificity of the place we visit. However, all this only takes us so far. The real adventure, so to speak, begins when we meet the reality on the ground. In that moment, all the participants we have contemplated in our planning become real people, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, curiosity, desires. Fears, and dreams. And we are there to meet them, and work with them.

Doing this requires a readiness to adapt and restructure a number of activities, perhaps even entire modules, to ensure that learning is actually taking place and that participants’ time and

efforts are worthwhile. Hence Eszter's line. "Student-centred" sounds really good, but translating it into reality is another thing.

Meeting people during training is an extraordinary experience, and opens the door to all sorts or unexpected discoveries.

We will be working in parallel groups, covering a range of topics that span from trauma-conscious education to Whole School Approach, from communication to conflict management. Eszter and Judit are veteran trainers, there is so much to learn just by observing them.

No one trainer is equal to another. Some like to start by playing catchy tunes from the local musical landscape, and that's the case with one of us here. Some other, like myself, like to keep things active but on a fairly quiet level. For as long as the training is ongoing, there is a never-ending dialogue between the participants and the trainer. It's hard work. We're here for you, we're here with you every step of the way, but we're not going to make the journey in your stead.

Contrary to what one might expect, good trainers don't speak that much. They set the stage, provide support, "read the room" and adapt accordingly, but they do not take from you the burden of being responsible for your own learning, and the joy that accompanies it.

Good trainings provide opportunities for both participants and trainers to discover new things about themselves. The first activities that we run are designed to bring together the individual participants and help them bond into a single group. It involves some exchange of information. Inevitably, surprises follow. I manage to properly shock some of the participants by honestly replying "yes" to the question "have you ever been reprimanded in school?". It happens here, I'm told, it's a very serious thing. On the other hand, one of the ladies attending the training mentions rather casually that she has seven children and twenty-one grandchildren. The reason is surprisingly simple.

-Because we can. You know, there is lots of food in the village, and families are really big. There's always someone there to help you. So, if I have to go somewhere to do something, I know I can leave my children with someone, and they will be safe. If I were in Europe, where you are all on your own, I probably wouldn't have children.

The diversity of somatic traits and the wide variety of hairdos are a testament to the diversity of Uganda's ethnic makeup. Since 1986, Uganda has experienced substantial political stability.

Later, working in pairs to discuss topics related to interpersonal relationships, an even larger shock comes completely out of the blue. My companion is trying to explain communication practices in Ugandan culture, and she tells me:

-It's not the same for everyone, of course, but some of it depends a lot on who you are talking to. If he's older, or if he's someone important…you know, talking to you, some people might think 'you are white, so I'm listening to you more…'

It had never occurred to me that my complexion could make any difference. Difficult as it may be, it's yet another indication that while Uganda has made strides, the past still needs to be reckoned with.

Over the course of our training, attitudes relax and deeper, stronger bonds are forged. There was never any resistance, and we are always amazed at the happy, warm demeanour of our hosts. It does take time to get used to each other, and when it happens, it's conducive to really important exchanges.

It's also important for trainings to have clear goals, both at an individual and a group level, so that everyone knows what the destination is and can navigate the route more confidently.

Some of the problems that teachers and education professionals face in Uganda are universal to all other teachers everywhere in the world. For example, managing your classroom, dealing effectively with difficult students. Eszter's response is as puzzling as it is revealing.

-I always say that the only classroom in which learning is taking place is a noisy one.

That's a hard one to grasp, if you are used to considering discipline the defining quality of your school life. It doesn't call for anarchy in the classroom, of course, but for an honest reflection on the necessity to enforce perceived discipline as opposed to creating room for students to experiment student-centred learning first-hand.

Other problems come as a real surprise. Under the Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) programmes, education in Uganda is officially free, and the government provides a capitation grant to cover the cost of education in public schools. However, delays in receiving funds often result in schools introducing additional fees for textbooks, uniforms, exams and so forth. For the poorer families, education can be financially challenging, even unsustainable. In some cases, we are told, children can be sent home until the family has settled the accounts with the school.

We are also told that there is a wide variety of bursaries, both State-sponsored and offered by religious groups, NGOs and private philanthropists, that provide financial support to those families who would not be able to afford education for their children. However, the need far exceeds the availability, which means that a large number of families still have to face very serious difficulties, and many children will not complete secondary education.

Teachers also consistently report that a major concern of theirs is not just the salary, which, like in many other countries, including mine, is not top tier, but whether it will be paid on time.

Another preoccupation that is obviously on everyone's mind is security. When asked to design their ideal school, all groups have security among their top priorities, and that involves fences, gates, and security guards.

The big picture can be disheartening. One might question what relevance a small team with a small number of trainees could possibly have, but I've come to understand it's the wrong way to address the issue. Even though solving these problems for everybody will take enormous efforts and a very long time, something can be done right here, right now. That's what we're here for.

We also have plenty of good laughs. At one point, Judit's group gets so loud that we must wait until their activity is over to resume ours. In our group, we are role-playing how to defuse tense situations and communicate effectively using non-violent communication. I've been given the role of a teacher and I'm facing off with someone who turns out to be an outstanding actress in the role of a very angry, despondent parent.

Two minutes into the role-play, she says:

-And what is this *mzungu* doing here, anyway?

I've got that word in my notes. It's one used to describe a white person.

-You know, ma'am, it's true that I'm not from Uganda, but to tell the truth, students in my country are very lazy. I've heard that Ugandan students are really good, so I came here…

Visibly delighted, the "parent" in question stops complaining, and the exercise comes to an end. In a real-world scenario, things would be much more complicated. Like most of the problems we have come to grips with, communication cannot be fixed simply by applying heuristics.

-We shift the focus from who you are to what you do. You are ok. It's what you do that we can work with.

One of the funniest segments of this training is when the groups are tasked with designing a 10-minute activity to teach me some of the local language, without any explicit instructions in English. Some people choose Kiswahili, while other use Luganda. I'm effectively illiterate in either, and that has two consequences: it reminds me of what it means to be clueless, which as

a language teacher I always make a point of being aware of, and it encourages participants to design their “lesson” around the “student”. Needless to say, I often make a mess of things, and my teachers need to try hard to cope with my faltering pronunciation.

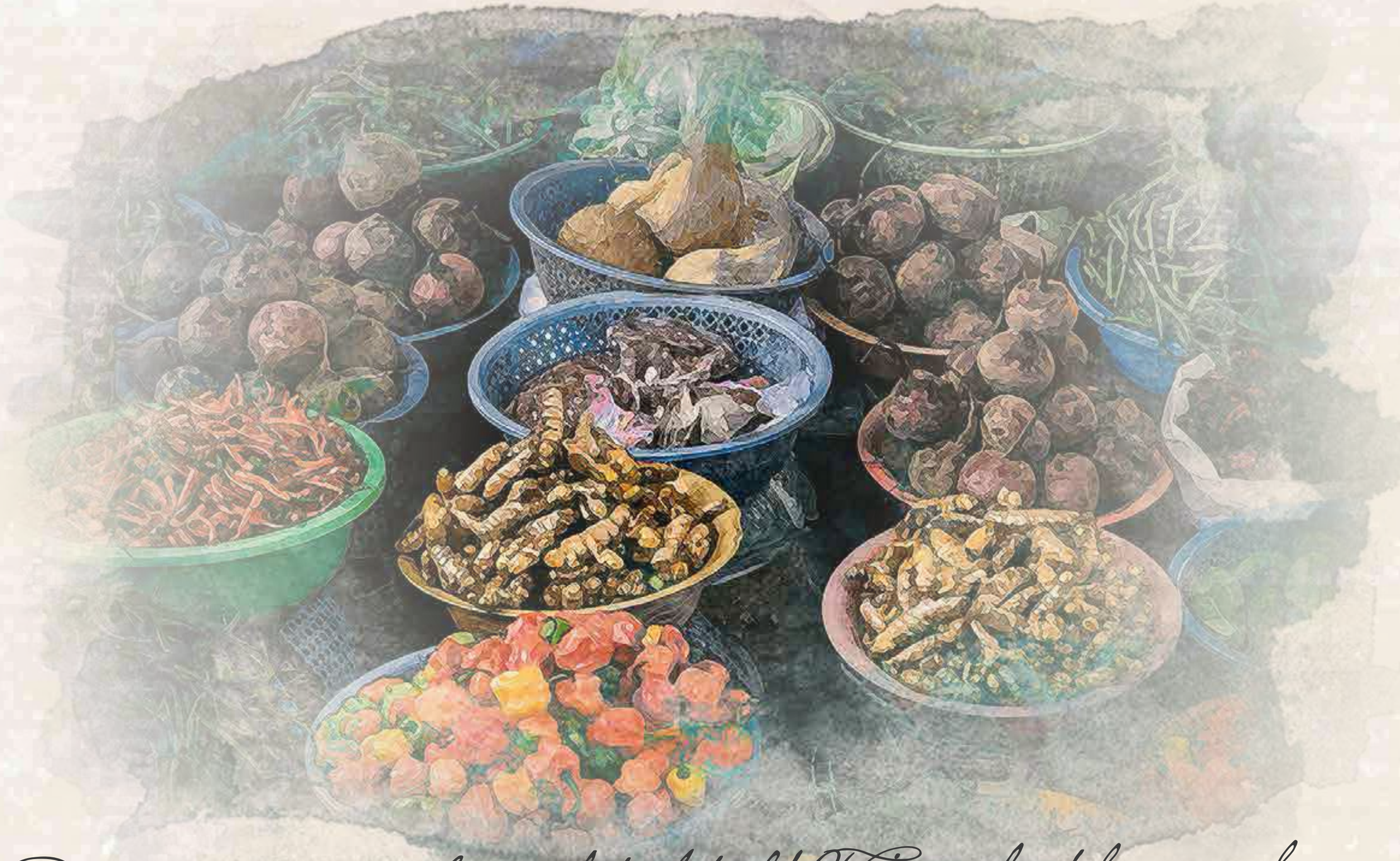
The end of the exercise is not the end of the activity. We always make sure there is enough time for discussion, involving both those who participated directly and those who observed. Doing something is a good first step, but it’s not all there is to learning. In fact, as Judit very aptly says in one of the sessions she’s leading, quoting John Dewey: “we don’t learn from experience. We learn by reflecting on experience”.

When the group is engaged and everybody feels confident to speak up, all sorts of fundamental topics arise. How do you choose the target language? How do you correct mistakes? How do you keep the pace of the activity? What materials do you use? Why?

Proving that trainers are fallible, and willing to make a fool of themselves when doing so would be in the interest of the learners, are two very effective ways to build trust and lower anxiety in the group. People are defined not just by their qualities and their choices, but also by their mistakes. If there are no mistakes, there is no learning.

After the morning sessions, we eat a simple but delicious meal from the school's kitchen. Every now and then, small children walk into the school compound, accompanied by their parents. Some of them run away. Some others don't dare getting closer, but as the days go by and we become part of the daily routine, even the shiest start coming closer, like the Little Prince's fox. When I manage to fold an origami paper crane for a little girl who can't be more than 5, she thanks me with a courtesy. A perfect fit of the Project Princess Initiative.

At the end of each day, we part with our companions. We are tired but filled with a warm sense of accomplishment. We are driven back on the bumpy irregular track and observe again the baffling combination of challenging situations, modernity, and local ingenuity. Hays of red, hand-made bricks drying in the sun. Goats and cows grazing by the road. Boda-boda darting very close to us. Placards with very imaginative messages and slogans that are pure brilliance. A huge market with a bounty of tropical fruit, where Fiona occasionally stops to stack as much watermelon and pineapple as the car can take. Police and military personnel with the ever-present AK47.



During our stop at the market, I told Fiona about how much my ideas have changed. My impression is that people in Uganda are proud of who they are, and they deserve respect, not pity, for what they try to achieve. Fiona said: that's right. People here like to work, they want to build a better country. don't need charity. They need guidance.


ABS
E & EDDY

After dinner, we take the time to go over the sessions of the day together. We share insights, discuss, strategize. We restructure the training, rethink or adapt some of the activities, scrap some others entirely. I admire the dedication and uncompromising attention to detail of my veteran colleagues. One the core principles of the pedagogy I was exposed to in my youth was never to praise too much, lest people be content with the result and stop making efforts. This is quite different: they were good in these areas, so how can we improve them still?

In the evening, in my hotel room, I listen to the hum of the waning traffic coming in through the mosquito net, feeling a strange sense of nostalgia for a country I know so little of, and whose understanding I've barely started to scratch, and increasingly moved by the quiet kindness of her people.

Parting ways

Our last day ends with an exchange of presents, and the promise of meeting again soon. When Ugandans present someone with something, they do so on their knees. Something that won't fail to stir more than one reaction in my homeland, but this is how the things are here. We are also treated with a performance of local dances, both contemporary and traditional, testifying once more the great sense of pride and respect that our hosts have for their own culture and their own traditions.

The word "mzungu" literally means "wanderer". When my turn comes to thank our hosts, what I tell them is this: I know I am a wanderer in this world, but you have made me feel at home, you have made me feel among family.

Tombs, tribes, and palaces

At Parents International, we always strive to include a cultural experience in our training schedule. In doing so, we aim to better understand the reality on the ground and practising ourselves what we recommend to all our trainees: lifelong learning. Fiona has organised a packed programme for us.

One such place is the Ndere cultural centre, which is dedicated to the preservation of the rich heritage of traditional dances. Traditional architecture is also a feature of the centre, with many examples ranging from granny's cottages reminiscent of a hobbit's home to reed huts used to store food.

I can't help seeing a parallel between these ree d huts and the sacred buildings of shintō religion, which likely originated as elevated foo d storing huts in southeast Asia. F or a moment, I feel overwhelmed by the thought of how far humans have come since the first hunter-gatherers ventured out of Africa millions of years ago.

Perhaps the most striking of the places we visit are the Kasubi tombs, a UNESCO heritage site that is the resting place of the kings of Buganda kingdom. We are met by no-one else than the prime minister of the previous king, who will be our guide. Before we enter, my colleagues wrap a large piece of fabric around their legs, as a sign of respect for the sacredness of the site.

The Kasubi tombs are surprisingly unadorned. Yet, a powerful aura of sacredness fills the air. All the buildings have wonderful, thatched roofs supporting by fig-tree columns. The ceiling of the entrance building is made of concentrical reed rings.

-The top ring was constructed measuring the head of the king, because he is at the top of everything. All the other rings represent the clans of the Ugandan people. There are 56 clans in Uganda. All of them are represented here. All of them have a role to play.

Our guide explains that when the British came to Uganda, they found that the kingdom of Buganda was the most organised of all the others present in the region, so their based they rule on the pre-existing institutions already in place. He stresses that the British first came at the invitation of king Mutesa I, and only afterwards did Uganda become a British protectorate.

-In our culture, the king doesn't die. He 'disappears' into the forest. So, because the king has disappeared and hasn't died, whenever a ruling king visits the Kasubi tombs, he must lay down his paraphernalia and dress again as a prince. He is met by the official drummer, who lives in this hut. However, since the drummer must be a celibate for life, only men are allowed to enter.

There is something incredibly fascinating in the idea that a king, while sitting at the top of the hierarchy of the living, returns as a prince in the presence of his predecessors. This, like many other traditions, is rooted so deeply in the fabric of Uganda culture that makes it inconceivable to change it.

The tombs proper are a large conical hut, surrounded by the dwellings of the previous kings' families. A king, we are told, cannot lie alone. Someone should always be there to serve him, should he awake during the night. The wives of the 'disappeared' kings take turns on a monthly shift to inhabit the tombs. They are free to come and go, but they never fail to spend the night inside the hut.

-During the day, they would welcome visitors and offer them food. The tombs can be accessed freely. But the king can never be alone, especially at night, so someone will stay here".

We are shown examples of local handcraft, a fabric made of dried figtree bark, apparently the oldest ever uncovered. The coexistence of what I would define as animist beliefs with the Christian teachings is what surprises me and my companions the most. Somehow it must be possible.

The idea that mourning should have precise temporal confines before moving on is very interesting. In a way, it seems to be another expression of the ways of this country, which focusses on the issues at hand rather than worrying about the future or longing for the past. It doesn't feel like lack of empathy, but rather as a wise coping strategy. After all, it is only in the present that humans live.

The Lubiri Royal Palace and the Government Building are connected by the Kabaka Anjagala Road. Kabaka Anjagala literally translates as “the King loves me”. The link is both practical and symbolic: the road is flanked on both sides by large sculptures representing the totemic entities of the clans of the Buganda Kingdom. Some of them are animals, some other plants or mushrooms. Every day the King travels the road, he is reminded of every single clan, and of all of his people.

We are not allowed to visit the Government building for longer than the time necessary for a quick photo of the statue of Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II, the current king. We have better fortune at the royal palace. One of the guards, shouldering the ubiquitous AK47,

points at the hoisted colours. The king is there, so we won't be allowed into the palace, but we can visit the grounds. The beginning of our tour is rather ominous. Our guide welcomes us with a bright smile, before announcing:

-We will start with the torture chambers of Idi Amin.

Depicted as a charismatic but ruthless dictator in 2006's The Last King of Scotland, Idi Amin is a deeply polarising figure. While his 8-year rule was marked by untold violence against his own population, there are many in the country that admire him for his power and the benefits that investment in infrastructure brought to the nation.

The torture chambers were originally designed as a weapon depot. At first glance they are not particularly frightening, but as our guide narrates their story, her voice bouncing around walls of the anonymous concrete, we begin to see a glimpse of the suffering they once hid.

-Prisoners would be blindfolded and driven around for an entire day, so that by the time they were taken here they would have no idea they were still in Kampala. See this mark? That indicates the level of the water that filled the torture chamber. They would turn on electricity and electrocute people until they told them what they wanted. After that, they would leave the electricity on.

The troops guarding the royal palace live with their families inside the compound. We stop right at the entrance of the reed fence that surrounds the palace proper, a surprisingly sober building in light pastel colours.

-This fence is never trimmed, because the king here is alive. At the Kasubi tombs, the fences are always trimmed, because the kings there have ‘disappeared’.

The readiness to discuss openly traumatic events of the past is remarkable. I think many countries in Europe, including mine, could benefit from such an example.

Parting meal

The last stop of our tour is a restaurant, not too far from our hotel, where we share a traditional meal with Fiona and many of our companions.

-Our food is not very tasty. We don't use oil or salt. Young people like western food, because it's very savoury, says one of the ladies accompanying us. It reminds me of the autobiography of an Anglo-Italian explorer, Fosco Maraini, in which he recounted the childhood memory of his very British governess replying to his complains about her cuisine by saying "my dear, food ought not taste good".

Much of the food we are served, including a delicious, rich soup, is prepared using banana leaves as a cooking pot. We are told it is a typical and widespread cooking method, and I'm surprised to learn from Eszter that at the time of her grandfather they used to wrap butter in gunnera leaves. An interesting reminder that while differences among peoples are real and many, in many other ways we are one.

Mashed bananas are an interesting alternative to our potato-based equivalent, and I must say that the taste, while unfamiliar, was a pleasant surprise...

A song of Africa

We move towards the aeroplane that will take us to Nairobi, and then Amsterdam in the warm air of the night. To my left, low on the barely discernible horizon, a yellow arch of a first-quarter moon shines against the pitch-black sky.

In this moment, I can't but think of Karen Blixen's word. I know she had a different country in mind when she wrote them, but I've found that human feelings are universal, and my heart knows no boundaries.

Leaving Kenya for her hometown in Denmark to recover from a serious illness, Karen Blixen muses on the life she leaves behind.

I know a song of Africa, of the giraffe and the African new moon lying on her back, of the plows in the fields and the sweaty faces of the coffee pickers.

Does Africa know a song of me?

Will the air over the plain quiver with a colour that I have had on?

Or will the children invent a game in which my name is?

Or the full moon throw a shadow over the gravel of the drive that was like me?

Will the eagles of the Ngong Hills look out for me?

A part of me will remain here. I am sure my colleagues feel the same. There is something in the beauty of the land, in the quiet kindness of its people, that calls to the deepest recesses of my heart. I feel I have received more than I have given.

I suddenly remember something one the teachers told me at the end of our final session.

-Thank you for teaching us this game. I will use it in my P.E. class.

Children in a far-away country, from a completely different culture, speaking an entirely different language, will play the same game I used to play as a child, and that I have taught to my children. Whether they will call it by my name or not is beside the point.

If my colleagues and I have managed to give these teachers just one more measure of confidence in their own abilities, and these children one more reason to laugh and have fun while enjoying the extraordinary adventure of their education, that will be our prize.

That will be our song.

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