



Tei Tei and the Ugandan Diaspora's role in national development

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MUNIINI K MULERA > LETTER TO A KAMPALA FRIEND

Dear Tingasiga;
One of the most enduring lessons I learnt in medical school was about the death of an African migrant worker in England. His name was Tei Tei, a Nigerian whose death more than 60 years ago was masterfully recorded by Professor Cedric Keith Simpson in *Forensic Medicine*, his outstanding textbook on the subject.

Professor Simpson wrote: "Tei Tei, a Nigerian who had gone to Britain to earn, in the shortest possible time, the money to buy a farm in Africa, had managed to save, from his employment at a dock-side gas-works at 4 Pounds Sterling per week, the sum of 15 Pounds Sterling in some 15 weeks in spite of paying for lodging and food and clothing.

"He lived in an unlit room in the Isle of Dogs, East London, without heat, eating white rice and stewed vegetables. He became thin and weak, but refused attentions of any kind, being found dead in bed one morning. Autopsy showed him to have reached an emaciated state with skin changes of pellagra and haemorrhages, both from gums and around knee-joints, due to scurvy."

While, hopefully, very few of his successors abroad have suffered his fate, Tei Tei's life and experience is very familiar to anyone who has had to struggle in these cold, fast-paced foreign lands in pursuit of cash to uplift their lives and those of their relatives back in Africa.

His was a struggle that would be joined by millions of us, forced to leave mother Africa by the disruptive political, military, economic and social insecurities that Tei Tei, a subject of a relatively benign British colonial State, would never have imagined.

Currently estimated to be 140 million strong, the sub-Saharan African Diaspora toil in Tei Tei's footsteps, driven by the same spirit of patriotism to a continent that is ours by birth and by right.

The evidence of this patriotism is recorded on the balance sheets of national treasuries, with impressive figures for Diaspora cash inflows.

According to the World Bank's Migration and Development Brief, the annual Diaspora remittances to sub-Saharan Africa in 2017 totalled \$37.8 billion. This figure is projected to grow to \$39.6 billion in 2018 and \$39.6 billion in 2019.

The Ugandan Diaspora continues to be rightly celebrated by our home government for our financial support to our motherland. Ugandan Diaspora remittances have shown a dramatic increase since the World Bank began tracking the figures in 1999. From \$233 million that year, it rose to \$442 million in 2002, then \$452 million in 2007, \$913 in 2012 and a very impressive \$1.375 billion in 2017.

To achieve this, Ugandans abroad have had to work very hard, with many doing multiple jobs, and denying themselves luxuries, holidays and time with their families in Uganda. Many have gone back to school or changed careers altogether in order to get ahead.

Many have endured the adverse effects of overt racism. Others, especially women in some of the Arab countries, have been physically, psychologically and sexually assaulted. Nearly all of us have endured emotional statelessness, never fully belonging to our adopted lands or to our homeland.

Of course, like numerous Africans abroad, Ugandans enjoy great respect in nearly all

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fields of human endeavour. They possess an enormous fund of knowledge, skills and experience that their host countries happily pay for and do everything they can to retain them in their places of work.

So they should. Places like Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, Sweden and the USA, which received the bulk of the earlier wave of Ugandan immigrants, got people that had already had free college and university education, paid for by Uganda.

More recent arrivals from Uganda have brought great skills, vitality and very impressive adaptability to their adopted countries. The annual dollar value of this intellectual and skill import from Uganda is probably impossible to estimate, but it far exceeds the \$1.375 billion we sent home last year.

So, to what extent should this Diaspora remittance be celebrated? Besides building personal residential homes, very little is spent on economically productive investments. The Bank of Uganda estimates that 74 per cent of the Diaspora remittance is spent on consumer products, many of them imported from China and other remittance-source countries.

For example, much of the money for health-care is spent on buying drugs that are made in Asia and Europe or on sponsoring patients that seek medical care in India or South Africa. Very many spend money on motorised public transportation that relies on imported oil products.

Recipient families use the money to buy used clothing and other consumer goods from China, Europe and North America. A large percentage of these goods are bought from stores owned by Asians, who repatriate their profits to their home countries in US dollars.

Therefore, most of the remitted money is recycled back to the developed countries, or it is redirected from Uganda to middle income countries such as India and China.

In my view, the Ugandan Diaspora should seek opportunities for enhanced investments beyond supporting consumption at home. Tei Tei's plan was not to spend the money on consumables, but to invest it in Nigeria.

That he saved 25 per cent of his weekly wages for this purpose is in itself an inspiring challenge. To me, Tei Tei is the patron saint of the expatriate Africans, a hero whose African dream should inspire us to increase our Africa-focused savings and investment in economically productive ventures.

To that end, an opportunity exists for the Uganda Government to tap into the potentially large pool of Diaspora funds to support infrastructural and other long-term investments. One avenue is to aggressively pursue the realisation of the long-talked about Diaspora Bond. We shall have occasion in a future column to examine what I suggest we call the "Tei Tei Ugandan Diaspora Bond."

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