Transition 39

WAKING UP

Kampala, July 1971

Dear Rajat,

I have read Transition 38. I must immediately put on record how deeply moved and stimulated I have been by almost the whole of this new issue. It is like awakening from a long deep, and troubled sleep. I have suddenly been able consciously to articulate the new sense of hope about my home, Uganda, that has been growing these last few months. Let me try to explain why I feel this way. If I appear at times confused or obscure, it is only the result of the feeling of excitement I have, as I write this. It is difficult to know where to begin, but perhaps, Paul Theroux's 'Curfew' will serve as the best starting point.

I was in Uganda, at Makerere, throughout the curfew which inspired Paul's troubled essay. I too felt the growing sense of mental and moral malaise and the terrifying certainty that many innocent people were being slaughtered. But I did not recognize the 'curfew' for what it really represented at the time. Significantly, Paul ends, "I found I could not teach anymore." I now know that, for me, the curfew has been much longer than Paul's. Mine lasted from the burning of Kabaka Mutesa's palace in 1966 until January 1971.

It is incredible that I, a trained and relatively experience social scientist, was unable to see through the fatal results of a slow strangulation by the hold of a corrupt and deceitful regime. I could not see the truth about an administration which was, except in a very few rare cases, deliberately destructive of its most faithful servants and admirers, in a most subtle and terrifying way, most of them did not know that their honest loyalties were being played with and used to achieve ends they would never have imagined. Paul says of the events that precipitated the 1966 curfew that "only anthropologists took sides".

I, an anthropologist, took sides, but I kept my 'public mouth' shut. I was too afraid of being labelled reactionary, a 'traditionalist'.

So I withdrew, and my curfew became a long and painful one. I began to have doubts about the values I had placed in the 'Africanness' of Ugandan institutions and respect I had for societies and cultures as different from monarchical Buganda and Bunyoro-Kitara and egalitarian Wugogo and Maasai of Tanzania and Kenya. I never did condone or support the desecration of the kingdom of Buganda, neither did I wish for a divided Uganda. But I did realise that Uganda's decline to the state of oppression so vividly, exposed in Transition 38, and by the events after the 1971 coup, was closely connected with act of desecration.

But I did not (how, how did I not?) see that the growing restrictions and oppressions of a regime that used glib political rationalization as a consciously applied opiate, needed progressively larger and larger doses of self-anaesthetization which nearly eventuated in my own mental sterility. I am not trying to absolve myself of guilt; I am trying to realise the external complementarities of it.

This brings me to Ali Mazrui's deeply moving and illuminating on King Frederick Mutesa II, the last Kabaka of Buganda, 'The King, the King's English, and I'. I can see from this essay, given the time at which it was written and other related pieces, that Ali responded to the increasing mental persecution and blackmail in Obote's Uganda by sharpening his acumen as a social scientist and deepening his compassion as a human being. Unfortunately for my own perception of events, I was out of Uganda in New York from September 1967 to July 1968, a critical time in the consolidation of Obote's regime as evil bringer of superficial political ideology, false love, and a lie about 'progress' in human development in Uganda. From the physical and emotional remoteness of America, I could adopt a form of scepticism, often effective in other circumstances, which labels as exaggerated all bad stories emanating from a distant but familiar place. I even explained away to my own apparent satisfaction the anxieties that Raymond Apthorpe, my friend and colleague in Kampala, communicated to me both while I was in New York and after my return to Uganda.

But now I realise that throughout this period I was, perhaps half unconsciously, disillusioned and depressed. It may be that the spark which partially ignited conscious awareness of my feelings and analytical truth that I already knew was an incident which occurred in January, 1970, after my return from New York and I must relate the bones of it here.

One Sunday afternoon I was sitting at home with my family at Makerere when the young nephew of my close friend and research assistant, Mr. Fred Lule, arrived panting at my door. My heart fell when I saw him. He told us that Fred had been arrested at gun-point about an hour before by seven plain-clothes policemen who had arrived in two Ford Zephyrs. He had been driven away at high speed, after his house had been turned upside-down, and his garden searched. (He had been told to straighten out his things with his hands hand-cuffed, before they took him away). My immediate reaction of pain and shock mixed with a feeling in the pit of my stomach that, somehow, I had known that something like this would happen.

I drove straight to the Central Police Station, known generally as the 'CPS'. Enquiries confirmed that Mr. F. Lule was being held in a cell in a basement of the building, the 'reason' for his arrest was unknown except that it was under the 'emajensi'. I asked to see him but was rebuffed. I asked if I could write him a note, infront of the constables, to say that I knew of his arrest and do everything I could for him and his three children and other relatives. His children had been left helpless at his home, since his wife was not

there at the time. This request too, was refused. The next morning I tried again, thinking that a new set of constables would be more yielding to my pleas, but was again told that I had no chance whatsoever in my attempt to see my friend. My final suggestion that his wife be allowed to see him was also futile.

For the next two days and half I spent, all my waking hours trying to see people I knew in the CID, lawyers, or any others whom I though could help. Eventually I had to accept the advice of John Kazzora, the distinguished lawyer, who told me as a friend he would take Fred's case, but could do nothing for the first twenty-eight days; even then, he could not say for certain whether the 'tribunal' would consider the case. I felt like a trapped animal, trying to get out of a cage.

However, I did eventually get through on telephone to Wauyo, then senior Inspector of Police, now in detention. I assured him that I knew Mr. Lule very well, and that he had never been involved in any political organizations or groups, though he certainly held strong views on many issues. Wauyo said he would try to find out about the matter, but could guarantee nothing, not even information.

Those three days and nights of anguish over the detention and persecution of a close friend taught me a great deal both about myself and, more importantly, about the regime we lived under. But I knew my pain could in not in any way be compared wit Fred's terror during those long hours, each marked by the chiming of the clock in the tower of the High Court nearby. He was locked away from his family and friends, *in the full knowledge* only that he had done nothing to deserve it; he had neither hope nor idea why, or for how long. No one told him anything, and he was bolted in a cramped cell whose population over the days consisted of about fifteen detainees, charged mostly with such offences as criminal assault, robbery and homicide. One of the two befriended him, and wept, and he wept; and I wept with him.

But Fred will tell his own story elsewhere, in his own way. Suffice to say that he had been arrested on spurious and un-investigated allegation by a vicious enemy with a personal grudge against him, that he had a fire-arm hidden in his house. On the third day, the day of his release, his lengthy and only interrogation began, 'where is the we found with you when we arrested you?' No apologies were offered for this illogical and taunting 'question'. He was sent back to sanity, barefoot with no money, and the gratuitous threat, 'We will come for you again if we need you'. Such was the level of 'humanity' 'progress' and 'love' in the petty empire ran by Hassan, head of the CID.

Perhaps the fact that Fred knew that he had some friends outside saved his mind during those days of darkness and, just probably, my enquiries accelerated his release. Other in a similar position spent twenty-eight days, weeks, months, even years without hope.

When I read 'Notes in Transition', all came back to me vividly, and somehow, I could now put so many things in perspective. I had been unable to this before. 1966 and January 1970 seem almost to be in another and remote age. I remember sitting over a beer at Sussie Bar with Abu Mayanja in late 1968. I had been tremendously impressed by his lone opposition in parliament to another piece of oppressive government legislation; the bill to make mandatory death sentences upon those convicted of robbery with violence, even those who were shown *intending* to commit robbery with violence. I told Abu I had also wanted to circulate this in a letter to the newspapers from New York, but I was not then a citizen of Uganda, I felt that I would wait until I was. He said, 'Don't be a fool Peter. If you do then, they will get rid of you more easily'. Three weeks later Abu was arrested in the early hours of the morning. He spent two years in detention, three-quarters of it in solitary confinement in a six-foot by eight-foot cell, twenty-three out of twenty-four hours a day.

I got my Ugandan passport in March 1971. I felt no fear at all in committing myself totally to my beloved Uganda, and I wondered what you must have felt, Rajat, when Obote's regime stripped you of your Ugandan citizenship in February, 1967?

Yours sincerely,
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