



A Tale of Two Lockdowns, 33 Years Apart

By A. K. Kaiza



I did not return to the scene until 15 years had passed, by which time I was already more than twice as old as I had been when the events of 1987 abruptly ended my childhood.

In early February 2002, I was in the press pack that accompanied the inaugural East African Legislative Assembly on the inspection of the Soroti Flying School, once the property of the East African Community. I found time and nipped off to St Andrews Madera Boys School, where I had studied from 1985 to 1987.

Even then, in my mid-20s, the paradox was unavoidable: Had I truly left St Andrews the day that the Red Cross evacuated scores of us school children trapped behind the front lines in Soroti?

Can a psychology shaped by the tragic knowledge of impermanence and strife learn to trust and easily move on? How could I say I had put the months of 1987 behind me when the first thing I did upon return to the school was to make way straight for the Stretcher House dormitory?

Standing there with my face pressed against the window, looking inside, it was the events of early August 1987 that came to mind, to that early morning when a teacher sent me and two friends to buy soap in the town with the absurd, early colonial name, Camp Swahili. And there, as we ask about, comes the single gunshot, the high whine of a military truck racing back to town, and then the preternatural sight of the men, the fighters of the rebel prophetess, Alice Lakwena, shirtless, in their black shorts, their torsos glistening in the sun from shea butter, which we later learned had

been smeared to bounce off bullets.

The key event shaping a personal future starts at that moment. Explanations are not needed. You have learned a lesson; when the time has come, you must run, do not hesitate. We are going very fast. We cut through the Madera Seminary, which in ordinary times had been forbidden. We are reaching the school compound when the bombardment begins, and all over the town, when the shock of the explosion draws our attention, we see a pillar of black smoke, as if to announce the beginning of hell, *habemus bellum*.

We make it to the Stretcher House dormitory and dive under the beds. And there, for the next two hours, we track the movement of the front line by how close the sounds of battle are. We hear it recede from the town, come past the flying school, which is a mile from our complex of missionary schools. (Madera was set up in 1914 by the Mill Hill fathers and came to include a school for the blind, a girls' school, a boys' school, a technical college and a seminary.)

Shortly, the front envelopes us. Its progress is majestic, slow, following the sloping ground from Soroti town, going down a slight incline to dip into a swamp. This swamp halts the battle, as the army decides against pursuing the attackers beyond the Arapai ridge.

There is, intermixed with the terror, a character to war you read about but is the privilege of an accursed few who get to know it intimately. It is the macabre nature of war that men find irresistible, the grisly truth that a war in motion can also be attractive.

Yes, the sounds of war can be a terrifying, seductive symphony. The sharp mosquito-like buzzing sound of a bullet flying mere feet from your ears, the tearing, rocketing then shuttering register of mortar shells, the ear-splitting rending, as if a giant were holding a sheet of metal as one holds a piece of paper then rips it to pieces as missiles tear overhead. The inscrutable lopping repetitiveness of a machine gun that sounds like someone drumming on a home-made drum fashioned from an old aluminium saucepan. But everyone looks forward to the artillery, the big boy stuff, with dread fascination; the imperious rapid impatience of Katyusha rockets which come as if the earth were being cut up by a high-velocity grinder tool, and, target found, the centre of the world collapses.

In a lockdown, life loses meaning

But as I drew away from the window, my memory drained, I remembered that I had to leave to rejoin the delegation of East African MPs at the Flying School. Then a shot of the feeling I once lived with daily attacked me

How can one explain such a feeling? There's the febrile malarial listlessness to it, a dry-throated longing, like having a nightmare whilst fully awake. That day in early 2002, I felt as I had for much of 1987 - that there was no point to life, that going on with it would only lead to a future of dystopian mediocrity.

But if the 2002 reunion did not answer the question, then March 2020, when news came of the world locked down in fear, left little doubt. There, across the valley from my apartment in Entebbe, the planes stopped landing and taking off. The grass around the runway was starting to grow wild. Amidst the dead silence all around, I could sense the collective fear of humanity that was awaiting the calamity.

It reminded me of 1987. I heard once more the silence of the skies when the flying school Piper and Cessna planes stopped flying. I saw the spot of greenery on the runway. The school lawns, once meticulous, had become wilderness. And in the night, there were blood-curdling cries that registered in the morning as another funeral in the villages beyond the Catholic missionary complex of Madera.

This was the second time in my life that I was going into a lockdown. The first one lasted nearly a year and it was devastating. It was only in March 2020, 33 years later, that I began to learn that a certain part of me never made it past August 1987.

My mind went back to that day when I saw the fighters of the Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena. It was the first time I saw them; I never saw them again; I have never managed to unsee them since.

By August of 1987, northern Uganda had already been in a lockdown for many months. The savage war in Luwero, southern Uganda, had migrated to the north. And there, with changed fortunes, yesterday's rebels becoming government and yesterday's government forces the new rebels, the texture of the violence acquired a new complexion. And yet 1987 was early days in what would be a savage two-decade-long war that has not yet ended. But how could an 11-year-old boy whose chief interest in life was to see mummy know that?

The manner of the war meant we were liable to get trapped easily. Hitherto, northern Uganda had had a string of nationally enviable schools. The shutdown of the schools began in Gulu, and made its way east, as did the fighting. The result was that we who came from Lango and Acholi were at the initial stages, in the safety of Teso, by which calculation our parents thought it best we stay there. But no one had anticipated the rapidity with which the war would move. Within weeks, in late July 1987, the Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena had crossed over to Teso. That morning, we saw the rebels running down from the Arapai Railway station to Soroti town, where they aimed to take over the airfield of the flying school.

The lagging progression of the war had allowed parents from the east and south to pick their children via the road to Mbale in the east. We would have needed the road to the west, which was shut off. Hence, the first term break had come and we had stayed in school. The second term had started and it was thought best we simply continue with our studies.

But there was to be no second term. Barely had it begun than the parents returned, this time with the vigilance of birds not taking a chance with their nest again. Then the road to the east was cut. We were doomed.

We, the seven students who had spent the last six months at the school, felt the loneliness instantly. In a lockdown, the early days are the most lonely. You feel the prickliness of abandonment. After the warm companionship of crowds is gone, you become aware of your status. There is a grim numbness from which you emerge drained of everything, even fear.

Your concern is for it to end, for you to get your old life back. But that life is gone. Sterner times await you. You learn new ways, new languages, believe in new gods and causes. It is likely that you or the people you love or know will die. You will learn fear.

When the school was empty, we, the stranded, knew we were preparing for something darker. The first month was the worst; we had hope. We spent hours watching the drive into the school, hoping to catch the familiar frame of a parent, the sound of the diesel 504 Peugeot from Aboke that would collect us.

One teacher, Miss Ekit, kept watch over us, like an aunt, but she had nothing to feed her relatives taking refuge in her house, let alone us.

For the next four months, the 400 by 300 metres of Madera Boys marked the confines of our world. We dared not, and were warned against, going into Soroti town. There was a railway station over the ridge of Arapai. There was no train. There was a flying school close by. Only the most connected

parents airlifted their children away.

To stay locked down, to know that darkness is enveloping the world around you, is a terrifying reality whose greatest damage is not what happens or what does not happen to you in the months you spend alone. You go into isolation expecting the big moments, the war, the calamity, to come confronting you personally. More often than not, the extremes do not happen. But that is also a revelation; because the big things have not come to you, you grow to learn that you are but one insignificant soul. When the extremes do come to you, as they do to a few unfortunate ones, then that too is another revelation; you were but a mere speck of dirt in the great maw of history. You are personally ground into the dirt but war, or peace, plough on regardless.

A Do Me Good hangs us out like tethered goats

As the shutting down of the north began, hidden impulses and prejudices started to surface. The deputy head teacher of Madera Boys, a prickly little man we called A Do Me Good (which was what he called the cane he never walked without) separated all the Luo speakers from the rest. Our beddings and suitcases were taken out of the dormitory. We stayed under the trees during the day and slept in the classrooms at night. We were the dangerous breed. The Nilotics had been overthrown by their arch enemies. Now a punitive raid by the southerners in power against the Nilotes was feared. And in Teso, it was thought, associating with Luo speakers would draw the ire of the new rulers.

In the initial stages of the war, this fear was an extreme event. An attack did come, but it was from further north, and they came, not for us, but for the cattle of the Teso. The Karamojong cattle raids intensified, and we watched as Teso, once a rich, well-fed and proud region, lost its collective wealth.

Before we had even left, skin diseases of indescribable virulence had spread throughout the land. That had been during that ill-fated second term when we had remained uncollected in the school. And although the Ministry of Education had been informed of A Do Me Good's doing, and we had been reinstated in the dormitories, what was coming for the north was bigger than the calculations of an obscure deputy headmaster in an obscure school.

Everyone else left and so there were hundreds of beds left for us. As my childhood friend John liked to joke, there was now a bed for each of his fingers, toes, ears and teeth.

But something else stuck. To be foreign in a time of strife is to attract fear and suspicion. In our case, we had spoken the same language as the last regime's, and the fear of association – for the Teso were as Nilotic as we were – stayed throughout the time we lived alone in the school.

The second month arrived. The delivery of maize meal and beans from the Ministry of Education ceased. The school store was broken into and the last morsels of food were taken. First we ran to the teachers. We returned with sticks of cassava. Some called us "Elangoit" (Teso for Lango) to our faces and chased us away. For me personally, it was a frightening time. (My name, Kaiza, is from my great grandfather three generations past who was Bunyoro, a culture and language my own grandfather barely remembered, but it meant I would be regarded as enemy by all sides). It did not take long for us to realise that it had been the same ministry delivery that had kept them fed.

There unwalked paths to the roads disappeared and the lawns had a return-to-the wild look. Unswept, the leaves played in the wind. There was a high season of large, egg-yolk orange sunsets. The dusks descended as harbingers of doom. We feared the nights for the dreams that awaited darkness. We feared the nights because children fear darkness. There was a cemetery close by and

in the evenings, we thought we caught willow-the-wisps skirting the perimeters. (As I write this from Entebbe, power is gone, dogs are barking wildly and two days ago, a neighbour who returned from Europe with all his family, workers and dogs, was taken into quarantine.)

In the desultory daytime air, we kept to the shade. Towards the end (which you never see coming), we switched from fearing the nights to fearing the daylight. We started to long for the night. We knew the school very well and could stow away in safer corners at night, even inside the heavy branches of the mango trees, till morning.

In a last twist of the knife, one day, Okello, my second cousin, came running to Teacher Ekit's house where we had taken water, and informed us that a military truck had come and taken two of the boys, the Ejuras, away. They were flown home in a helicopter. We came from the same town. Their father knew people. They left us behind. Now there were just five of us left - me, John, Okello, the portly Akona, and Ocen, a quiet little boy I never heard from since.

The going of the Ejura boys marked a turn for the worse. Corrosive silence took over. We played football less. Looking back, this was preparation for the next phase, and when it came, our own childhood deserted us. We aged prematurely.

Learning to live without food

Starvation is an event of immense clarifying power. It seems there are two types of human beings: those who have never faced starvation and so do not know many things; and those who have faced starvation and can see through the veneer of most things.

Whilst we had had the supply of maize and beans, we led sad lives, longing for home and fearing for our safety.

But when one day, Okwana, the school cook, did not show up, something switched. Three days went by with barely anything to eat. There was the shame we individually shared, when one by one, we disappeared - to forage in dumps, to gouge the backs of kitchens.

The suggestion might have come from John. He was the strongest-willed of our lot. His father was the doctor of Aboke, an imperious old man. John had the family haughtiness in him. It had come as a chance discovery one morning when while collecting fruits from the borassus palm trees fringing the school, I stumbled upon a root. John came to pull me up. But I had heard a snap in the soil. I went down and dug hands in. I came out with a large tube of cassava. Disbelief. Joy. The surreal moment.

But we had become wise to something by then. John bade me be quiet. We poked around and discovered that this garden, belonging to one of the teachers that had fled the war, had been badly harvested. We took what tubers we thought we could conceal. We ate some raw, but decided that it was best we steal over to the Madera Technical College, over the fence, to cook it, to avoid attracting attention.

Along with some sweet potatoes we dug out of poorly harvested fields, we settled upon cooking in the soil. We dug up the ground, and lighting switches, waited for the bigger sticks to catch fire. We collected rocks and placed these in the fire, and placing the cassava and potatoes in with the rocks, we covered the lot and left. We returned and dug out baked cassava and potatoes.

We fed off the gardens around the school for about a month when the tubers stopped coming out. We collected tins, including paint tins, to cook with. But by then we had discovered the "carelessness" of the Teso farmer. That was our actual word. We set out to "correct them". Hence the word "correction" was what we called our forage.

The word would have been from Okello, my second cousin. Okello was the genius. His marks for all four primary school subjects lingered in the 80s range.

The story from there took on its own character. It was what we became. The fear we had had of ranging out the school perimeter vanished. Hunger gave us courage we were unprepared for. We made our way past the school for the blind, correcting, gathering. We found groundnuts. We found patches of vegetables we recognised. We gathered tamarind fruits. We walked boldly past military roadblocks.

The groundnuts were a boon. We gathered skills we did not know we had. To turn the nuts into butter, we roasted the seeds in hot soil, taking the moisture out. We pounded the lot and ground them. With the vegetables we had sun-dried, the groundnut butter made for a delectable sauce, a far cry from the cassava.

We went past the flying school, going south of the prisons farm.

This manner of feeding became routine. And we used the correction walks to beg for salt from families we knew in Soroti town. The shutting down of the region was having a terrible effect as essentials and incomes ran out. By comparison, we in the school had space, the "correction" to live by.

But the town had its complexities, of course. There were the Asian families in Soroti town who never seemed to run out of things, whose shops remained well-stocked. There were the high civil servants in the senior quarters. There were the bars and restaurants that lined Jumbhai Road that our steps slowed down going past. The piles of chapati, samosas and roast chicken were set there as if to remind us of our status.

And so the discovery of a further truth in the life of decline.

In town, we got looks. We were shouted away from certain places.

It was John who understood this instantly. The state of us had deteriorated. We had no soap. We were malnourished, unwashed, and walking in town. We were a threat. Who knows, a piece of soap, a soda, precious things, might be snatched.

It was a long walk back to Madera. The looks we got began to register. Our hands were covered in scurvy. We had seen town children our own age playing with samosas and chapati and ice cream.

It was not the war that was damaging; it was what the war turned you into that did the harm.

Ice cream had become too good for us.

Till today, I do not understand by what miracle none of us came down with malaria or typhoid. In the state we were in, it would have taken but a little nudge for the ultimate to come.

By late 1987, banditry had taken hold. Internecine conflict had broken out between the Teso that supported the new Museveni regime and those that did not. Class differences turned Teso against Teso. We watched as even some of our own teachers put on military uniforms and joined either the rebels or the new regime and an intra-ethnic war raged. Each morning brought news of someone who had disappeared the night before.

There was a teacher, Mr Odongo, who had kept a distant, avuncular eye on us. He never approached us but hung about where we understood he was overseeing us. One evening, there was a gunshot, so

close that the shock of its explosion silenced our little group. Later in the night, we heard a knock on the classroom door. Mr. Odongo may have studied our peregrinations and knew we no longer slept in the dorms. When we opened the door, there he stood, cradling his arm. He had been shot.

We did not know that the bullet had to be taken out. We did not know why he was running a temperature. But John, from watching his father, understood a few things. It was he who ran out for help. Mr. Odongo was taken by adults to hospital and we never heard of him again.

Another teacher, whose brother had joined the government militia, was not so lucky. The bullet got him square in the chest.

A bridge, a land mine

We became inured to life, which is a dangerous stage. One day, a skirmish broke out in Arapai but we just sat by the window, watching, wondering if they were killing many, in between talking about what they were eating back home.

Another afternoon, over at the girls' school, where my sister was, but which was better provisioned because the nuns ran a tight ship, we heard screaming. In no time, we heard the gunshots and saw scores of men running with the mattresses they had stolen from the girls.

Shortly, we watched as, first, a helicopter sounded off overhead. Then, there was the piercing roar of what may have been a Mig15 fighter jet. John and I were sitting under the tall jacaranda trees by the football field. The Mig heeled up, then, in a terrifying moment, it pitched down, splitting the air, screaming and then it dipped below the tree line. Then it was coming up.

The explosion tore the air apart. We did not run. We had been told to stay put if soldiers or planes appeared. The fighter jet tumbled overhead, we saw it turn upside down, the head of the pilot showing.

In the commotion of jet roar, we had not noticed them. But a single shout drew our attention swiftly. The army had amassed by the football field. And in a straight line, shoulder to shoulder rather than single file, they started to march, sweeping into the bush.

We heard our names. It was Miss Ekit. We got up and ran to the dormitory. She pulled us in and shut the door. We all went under the beds.

There was something about that second battle, coming sometime in November, that was different. It did not sound as dramatic. In fact, it was dull. And it cleared off into the distance. But after that, masses of people disgorged from the countryside and Soroti town became a refugee camp. A Do Me Good disappeared.

We discovered that there had been far more people in the vicinity of Madera than we had known. All had been in hiding, but were now outed by a turn in the war that we did not understand.

People were listless. A faraway look diverted their attention from the immediate. A look like hunger, but deeper, more spiritual. Mute, dull, zombies. We had stopped noticing ourselves, but there we were. Our clothes were too big for us. We had taken to stripping bark off trees to tie our shorts in place. Our shirts were in tatters.

The next week, Miss Ekit told us to pack. She had heard me narrate my stories of travel, for before 1985, my father took me around the country on his business trips. I understood a bit about Kampala, as I knew Mbale very well. Ekit asked me about a friend of our family who was a high-level civil

servant in Mbale. She had me repeat his name and the street on which he lived. I did not understand why.

The next day, a long truck drew up outside the technical school. Again, the amazement came. There were scores of schoolchildren hidden in many places whom we did not know about. We were packed into the truck. It drove out of Soroti. We did not speak. If we crossed Bukedea, the border between Teso and Bugisu, we would be safe.

But there was one last throw of fate before we left. We had not yet crossed Aoja Bridge when an explosion whipped our heads to the back. A van had driven over a land mine and lay on the roadside, burning.

The truck had missed it. We the Aboke group were left in Mbale. I took the group to the home of my father's friend. My father came shortly afterwards and took us all back to the north, via Kampala. But not to our town. In my absence, my family had fled to a place near the Nile, where we still live.

In the coming months, Teso turned into hell, culminating in the notorious Mukura massacre, some of whose perpetrators were the first to die in the Rwanda war five years later.

I did not see John, Akona or Okello again till the late 1990s, and have not seen them since.

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