

Rosbina Nathoo

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Memories of Uganda

Rosbina Nathoo: “I was born in a small town called Masaka. Masaka is close to Mbarara.”

Shezan Muhammedi: “Yeah it's not too far, my aunt is from Masaka.”

Rosbina: “Masaka was a lovely place. My paternal grandparents came from that place and my maternal grandparents came from Mbale, but I grew up in Kampala because when my mom and dad got married, they were very, very young. I had a brother then. He won a lottery ticket, a football-soccer ticket. It was Liverpool. My dad loved playing those Liverpool tickets. Anyway, he won a major lottery and that's what made him move into the city, so since then we lived in the city. My childhood memories of being in Uganda are living in this little home called Madras Gardens. It was in old Kampala and very close to the old Kampala school and the Kabaka Hill. That's all I remember. You know, it's funny, our communities there, residential neighbourhood communities, were named after the Indian cities. There was Bombay Gardens, Madras Gardens, Delhi Gardens. The old Kampala school was next to us, it was just up the road, and the Aga Khan School that we went to was about a twenty-minute walk, but for little feet, it felt like half an hour. That was quite an experience.

Uganda was a beautiful place. It has always been known as the pearl of Africa, but unfortunately, when all this happened, it regressed back years and years and years, which is too bad. Now my childhood experiences, well, it was so naïve. We played doll with each other in the neighbourhoods. The only African people we were exposed to at that time were our servants, so we spoke a little bit of kitchen Swahili like, “Bring me this,” “Bring me that,” which I have forgotten now. My husband can speak fluent Swahili, if he was thrown into Tanzania he would just ramble off. I'd have to struggle, I would have to struggle. But wow, school was wonderful, we went to an Aga Khan-based school. We had multicultural people there, meaning we had the Hindus, black Africans, we had Ismailis. To us, that was our world, the Ismaili community was our world. We played with Ismaili kids, we played with our neighbourhood.

We played all these beautiful sports, we played hide-and-seek, and we played—I don't know if you know a game called seven stones, it was called nagil. We would hit these seven stones and then everybody would disperse and run and then we'd play tag. Wow, that was a neighbourhood get-together. It was amazing how all the neighbours would get together. Usually around this neighbourhood there would be a compound, they called it a compound, or a little park area. That was our play area. We did not have toys and things like that—bicycles, yes, but we played with sticks and stones. So that little game was called nagil.

If we played wheel, we would use a bicycle, the frame of a bicycle. We would use a stick and roll it along the roadside, playing with that. I loved going bare feet. Everything was tarmac or mud roads, but bare feet—I don't know what it was about me—and always running in scraggly

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clothes, petticoat they called it, because it was so hot all the time. So that kind of community living, being completely safe, oblivious to any danger, going to school, studying, seeing other people, praying, going to jamatkhana every day because we had such a strong base of the Ismaili community. We went to—we used to call it religious education classes. We had education classes every evening. We started our school assemblies with prayer. Just like you would see in a convent school but at the Aga Khan School so everything was Ismaili oriented and wow, totally safe and very strict! It was very autocratic. It was a very British way of bringing up the kids. You did get punished by getting canes from the headmaster. We used to get those hand slashes with the canes, and ouch. You get one or two of those and you'd remember to smarten up and get your homework done, or if you get a whack on your bottom with one of those canes. It was abuse at that time but we didn't know, but that's how we grew up.

Everything was community oriented. Our world was our family, our friends, and yes, at that time, we were told to keep away from Africans. Why? Because we feared them, they were of the poor. They would come home, they were usually labelled as thieves, they would come to the house in the middle of the night and come and rob homes. That was the most terrifying, traumatic—you know you'd have dreams saying, "Oh, I'm not sleeping in my bed alone or in my room by myself because I'm dreaming of a thief coming in," or "I hear noises," or, you know, things like that. It wasn't as scary knowing there was a thief in the house, it was after that when the thief was caught, when the robber was caught, oh my god, they would just punish him so badly. So much harm was done to that poor person. But then, we didn't know where they came from, what poverty does to them? What is it that they are looking for? Were they really bad people? We don't know, we didn't know any of this. It left a very traumatic impression as a little child, you know, with things like that.

As I grew older and I became more aware of my surroundings—you know, I've been one of those people, I always had an open mind, and when I went to secondary school we were integrated with the other African kids around us, so to me, they're people. You should see the shock in my parents' eyes when I first brought an African student home, my classmate. They freaked out saying, "You're not allowed to do this," and "You're not allowed to see this person," and "You're not allowed to go out with this person." I said, "We're just doing homework." So things like that. It did come off as being a little prejudiced. I don't know what that was all that about, I don't know, but we were brought up that way.

As we engaged as adults and educated youths in school, it became very obvious that colour did not matter. We were two intelligent people here. We were amongst a group of friends, we were part of what you call the rotary club, we participated in sports, we did things together. They were appreciating Asians for our culture and for what we did and we were appreciating them, the African youths. As a little girl I was not allowed to go anywhere on my own, we were always being protected. Either we had an *aya* [nanny] with us or an *ascari* [security guard] with us to make sure that we were either walked to school or if we were going to jamatkhana that

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day. A lot of it was done on foot, we never really thought of cars or things like that. But our play—we would play hideouts, we'd be on the roof of the house. We would climb on to the rooftops and that would be like being on top of the world, you know, being on the rooftops, hide-and-seek, things like that. Simple, simple little things. In my home, I was allowed to have a pet. We were allowed a dog, we called it Happy, and every time a stranger or a passerby would come by—she was an Alsatian dog—she would bark. She was our protective dog, she'd alert us if anything came around but that was sad because eventually she was poisoned and she died a very cruel death. We don't know how that happened, but, you see, things like that happened.

What other memories? Playing with the kids around, playing hide-and-seek with the community, nagil, those were the fun things.”