Carolyn Pirani: Living in two cultures, Uganda, 1967

Editor's note: Mixed marriages are now common in the Uganda Asian community but I could count just ten until 1972. The liaisons often occurred in Britain during the long years of studies in the cold climate, with no prospects of returning home except at the end of the degree. I asked Carolyn to write about her six-month stay in Kampala in 1967 so soon after her marriage to BBK.

Abbotsford, December 2012.

I was born in North Finchley, London, where I did my early schooling and later my family moved to Cambridge. After completing my A levels I went to St Andrews University in Scotland to read Science. I met Bahadur (BBK to his friends) when we shared lectures in Physiology. Our decision to get married was not well received by either family because "mixed marriages never work" but we went ahead anyway. It was mixed in two ways, race and religion. We were married on July 1st 1967 at Cambridge, BBK graduated with his medical degree from St Andrews on July 4th and we left London for Kampala on July 7th - probably the most momentous week of our life together!

I had already met BBK's mother and sister Zebun a few years earlier while they were visiting London, but nothing had prepared me for the enthusiastic crowd of Kassams at Entebbe Airport. There must have been at least twenty of them, with a convoy of cars to escort us to the family house on Rashid Khamis Road in Old Kampala. It was a lovely house, so light and airy and open, welcoming any breeze that wafted through to keep it cool and so different from British houses built to keep out the cold and the damp.

It took me a little while to get everyone's names right but I was so warmly accepted by my new family that I hardly felt homesick and really enjoyed exploring my new situation. Adapting to a different culture, cuisine and language and the general happy atmosphere was an exciting experience which I still cherish. I had grown up in a family of four and as none of my extended family lived in the same area of Britain any visits to relatives were rare. I loved being part of such a close extended family in Kampala and was thrilled to travel to both Nairobi and Moshi to visit more family within two weeks of arrival from the UK.

We took the train to Nairobi and at the first stop BBK introduced me to the art of haggling when we bought snacks and drinks from the local vendors. We had a good laugh when he told me the bunch of bananas for which I had just paid 5 shillings was really only worth "char anna" (50 cents). Excitement mounted as we came to the escarpment and they added an extra engine at the rear of the train for the steep climb. It was thrilling to see almost the whole Rift Valley from the train. We spent two days in Nairobi with sister Malek's family, sight-seeing some of the city. We then flew to Arusha to visit sister Zarina and I can still...
remember the view of moon-lit Mt Kilimanjaro from our bedroom window. We made a day-trip to Lake Manyara National Park where we saw lions sleeping in trees. We parked a respectful distance away to watch, but just then an open-topped Mercedes came along and stopped right in front of us, directly underneath the sleeping cats. Our grumbling turned to howls of laughter when one of the beasts emptied his bladder right into their car!

Back in Kampala I began to settle in to my new life. As a student I had become pretty self-sufficient and I began to feel quite sorry for Johnny, the houseboy, who just never seemed to stop working. One day I did my own washing and ironing which really upset him - was his work not good enough for the Mzungu woman? I had to get used to sitting around reading. I did, however, take interest in the food preparations with Ma. The dishes she made were so very different and so much tastier than Indian restaurant food in the UK. I loved the “exotic” vegetables, like bhindi, okra, and brinjal. Even moong daal, janjaro and potatoes had never tasted so good. Then there were treats like bhajias, samosas and kebabs, and, of course, fish, meat and chicken curries. All this great food was washed down with fresh-squeezed tropical fruit juices! For someone who grew up with food-rationing in post-war Britain I was in an epicurean paradise! I tried my hand at making chapatis, but never quite got them puffy or round! Our main meal was at lunch time when the whole family got together and there was happy banter about the morning’s activities, plans for the remainder of the day and, of course, cricket scores. After lunch a short snooze was a must before the family members returned to their desks or dukas. The evening meal was finishing up the leftovers with perhaps some fresh rice and fruit.

Our initial plan was to be in Uganda for only three weeks but much to my delight BBK was offered a position in Internal Medicine at Mulago Hospital for six months. I also found work in a WHO Medical Research Unit attached to Mulago Hospital where I worked with a group of doctors and scientists interested in blood-clotting mechanisms.

I loved Kampala. BBK took me to all his childhood places with stories of the “drama” that had taken place there. We visited Kampala’s seven hills, each topped with its own individual landmark. Museum Hill was just across from our home and we loved walking there in the evenings to see all of Old Kampala under us, as well as the Aga Khan Club with its legendary sloping cricket pitch at the side! I felt comfortable walking around Kampala on my own as I have a good sense of direction. I could never master the art of bargaining, so if I found something I wanted I would return with my husband who was, and still is, a master at it! Something I could not get used to was being singled out as a Mzungu for preferential treatment. Once in a Post Office queue the teller simply asked me to come ahead to be served. Nobody else minded, but I did! There was another occasion when our colours raised eyebrows. We were invited by our medical colleagues to a University Christmas party at Kampala Sports Club. As we walked up to join our friends already seated, all conversation stopped: A mixed couple at the KSC? Oh, horrors! What is the world coming to!

Sunday family picnics at Entebbe were a delight. Whole meals were cooked by Ma at our house and packed into the car boot, each sibling’s family did the same, and then, after a series of rushed phone calls, a time was set for
UGANDA ASIANS

Masaai village, Ngorongoro, 1967

We contributed, we contribute
"our" convoy to drive to Entebbe. It seemed all Asian families were on the same route. I spent time with the younger relatives exploring the Lake Victoria shoreline and the wonderful botanical gardens. One rare free weekend for BBK we went to Murchison Falls and to this day I still feel a rush when I remember the enormous crocodiles slithering into the water from the river bank to surround our boat as we motored past. Even the hippos which had been accompanying us seemed to have vanished in the rushing waters.

At the end of our six months we did a safari before heading back to Britain for BBK to complete his specialist training. We had decided by this time that Uganda would probably be our permanent home. Our safari was planned for three, as brother Sadru was accompanying us and sharing the driving. After the heavy sleep-inducing tiffin lunch packed by Ma I took the wheel. Two antelopes jumped across the road right in front of the car. I screeched to a stop, waking the two dozers. They insisted on examining the car for the impact but the only thing found was a drinking glass from the lunch stop which one of us had placed behind a strut on the front bumper. A hundred miles of murram road had failed to dislodge it! After a stop at Malek’s house in Nairobi we crossed the border into Tanzania.

We visited Tsavo National Park and saw many animals. At one point a bull elephant started to charge but luckily we still had the engine running and were able to make a quick getaway. At Ngorongoro on an evening’s drive to the main lodge we would have run into a herd of buffalo but for the reflection of our headlights in their eyes. The next day we descended into the crater, where, even with all the wild life around, our highlight was a Maasai village. I was amazed at the beaded ear decorations of the women and they were fascinated by the mixed race couple. In Serengeti we had to stop for a real "Zebra Crossing", at least twenty of them ambling across the road! At our last stop to shake off the safari dust we saw a well-guarded President Jomo Kenyatta swimming in the Indian Ocean off Bamburi Beach only a few hundred metres from us!

We left Kampala at the end of January 1968 with plans to return in four years when BBK would have completed his training as a specialist but this was not to be and in 1974 we emigrated to Canada with our two children. We lived in Toronto and Winnipeg before moving, in 1997, to Abbotsford, BC, down the Fraser Valley from Vancouver, where we can have more contact with my husband's siblings and their families. I eventually learned to cook most of our favourite dishes and among our friends, wherever we have lived, our "curry parties" have been legendary - but then, none of our guests ever tasted Ma's food! My chapatis are still oddly shaped and flat so when we have family gatherings at our place I ask a sister-in-law to bring them along!

Mixed marriages are no longer looked on with such scepticism as they once were and there are several within my husband's extended family and in the general population at large. In this book about "pioneering" all kinds of things in the Uganda Asian community I like to think we pioneered the trend!