

Teso College

I was a teacher at Teso College from September 1964 until November 1966. At that time, it was a boarding school for 600 to 700 boys, preparing for the Cambridge O-level and A-level examinations.

The exams took place in November and the papers were then sent to Britain to be marked. Most of our students came from the surrounding district, but quite a few came from other parts of Uganda. We also had several refugees from the South Sudan, where a civil war had been going on since 1956; some of these students were older than most of the teachers.

I had studied Physics at Leiden University, the Netherlands, and expected to teach that subject when I arrived. But a Physics teacher was not needed until next term, so I offered to teach Math instead. Ah, said the very British Head of Department, you mean Maths! So after mastering that subtle difference in pronunciation, I taught Maths for my first term, and Physics plus some Maths after that.



The classrooms and laboratories were housed in long single-storey buildings, placed parallel to each other. They had chalkboards and enough chairs and tables for all the students. A fair amount of Physics equipment was available to do experiments. The student dormitories were two-storey. The administrative offices were in a separate building, with a carport for the headmaster's Mercedes. At that time, the headmaster was Mr. John E. Jones, affectionately known as "Johnny". The Assembly Hall was attached to the offices; it was large enough to hold all students. We started teaching at 7 AM, when it was still nice and cool, and we had an assembly every morning at about 10 AM, after the breakfast break. Teaching staff were all housed on campus.

The area occupied by the dormitories and classrooms had walking paths only, with grass in between. These paths had been laid out in a rectangular pattern, and students were expected to strictly stay on the paths and keep off the grass. Of course, it would often be more convenient for a student to walk diagonally, but if he was caught doing so, by a teacher or a prefect (a senior student assigned to help maintain discipline), he would be marked down for detention for "crossing the compound".

Another rule that was strictly adhered to: students were expected to be back on time after the holidays. Between terms, there would be a few weeks in which students would go and visit their families. But if they arrived back late, that meant detention. So students would come up with all sorts of stories why they couldn't possibly have come back on time. At the beginning of my second term at the College, one student came up to me and said that he had been delayed because his grandfather had died. I felt great sympathy for him, and expressed that sympathy, only to discover later that grandfathers had recently been dying in enormous numbers all over Uganda.

Detention was always a matter for debate among staff: what to do with students who had committed some small (or not so small) offence? For a while, they were told to come on Saturday morning to do manual labour of some kind (under supervision by the duty master), like digging or cutting grass. But this was felt to be unduly humiliating. Having them write lines was regarded as an alternative for a while but it was felt to be just too boring and useless. I don't think we ever found a satisfactory solution to that problem.

All teaching staff took turns being duty master, for a week at a time. Duties included supervising detention, going around the dormitories at 10 PM to check that all lights were out, and generally keeping things in good order. Teaching staff were also expected to help support extracurricular activities like sports. In spite of being a very mediocre tennis player, I coached the tennis team. The picture shows the tennis team of that time; from left to right: Okot, Taliwaku, Ogwang, Magimbi (captain), Aminu, Ajena-Opio. We had a problem with Aminu's feet: they were too big for any shoes that the Bata



shoe shop in Soroti town could offer. In the end, we had shoes made especially for him. He was polite enough to wear them a few times, but it was clear that he didn't like them, so after a while he went back to playing barefoot.

In the weekends, I was films master. We had a 16-mm projector and I had films sent up from Kampala or Nairobi and showed them in the Assembly Hall. I particularly remember one Saturday evening, when I showed *The Third Man*, one of the Orson Welles classics. The film came in three reels, each in its own metal can. I put on the reel from can nr. 1 and was a bit surprised about how the film seemed to start without any introduction, but I thought: some films are like that. When one or two colleagues came up and suggested that I might have started with the wrong reel, I was adamant that this was the reel from can nr. 1, therefore it was the first reel. But when that reel finished, the letters **THE END** appeared on the screen, and I had to admit my mistake. I decided to show all three reels again (in the right order), but that meant that lights were not out at 10 PM that Saturday.

The Assembly Hall was also used for dances. Since Teso College was a school for boys only, a truckload of girls would be collected from the nearby girls' school. Everyone would sit down along the outside of the hall, leaving the central space for the dancing. Then, when the music started, all the (many) boys would get up and rush across to where the (few) girls were sitting, and politely ask them to dance. Teachers and their wives were invited to the dance also, and the more daring students would come up to me and very politely ask for permission to dance with my wife. That permission was always granted, and Willemien (my wife) and I both enjoyed those evenings.

The Assembly Hall had a stage, equipped with stage lights and a huge curtain, where plays could be performed. John, one of the teachers of English, decided to produce *Hamlet*. The participating students were very diligent in doing all the necessary preparations: memorising texts, turning up for rehearsals, etc. All staff and students were aware of this; so when the big day came, the Hall was packed. Of course, since this was an all-male school, the female parts had to be taken by males also, which caused considerable amusement among their friends. But the final scene of the play, when the main characters die one after another, was the greatest success of all: the entire audience rose, cheered and roared with laughter.

In 1995, I was back in Soroti, on holiday with my son Martin (who was born in Uganda) and his fiancée. We had flown to Nairobi and travelled around Kenya before arriving in Soroti in a matatu, a taxi intended for up to 10 people but which often carries a significantly larger number. As we came into town on July 8th, we noticed a huge banner across the road saying "Teso College Open Day, Sunday 9th July". So instead of going to the College that same day, as we had planned, we decided to leave it until the next day.

It turned out to be a memorable day. It was the first Open Day in the history of the College since 1969, an initiative of Mr. Oliba, the headmaster. The Assembly Hall was packed with people, students and their parents. Students had prepared exhibits in the classrooms and laboratories. It was sad to see the state of disrepair of most of the buildings; all the windows of the Assembly Hall were broken, the floor had turned into sand, the floor of the stage had collapsed in places, of the curtain only a shred remained, in one corner. But we were amazed to hear that, throughout the troubled Amin- and Obote-times, the school had continued to function and had never closed down. And we admired the positive attitude shown by both staff and students, and the pride with which they showed us around the school. All the staff were Ugandan, and the number of students had doubled since my days! Mr. Oliba introduced us to the people in the Assembly Hall. It turned out that he had been one of my students; he remembered me, and he even remembered that I had been films master and tennis master. I was most impressed! And I was even more impressed when my second wife Anja and I visited Teso College in 2005 and saw the beautiful new Library!



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