

OPINION

UASU strike: The ghost that won't give the Varsity peace

stream of income even during low tourist seasons. Their service has also improved communication between the mainland and the nine islands in the lake that are home to hundreds of members of the local communities.

"I have been motoring on this lake ferrying tourists for the last sixteen years without a single accident," says Joshua, who was trained on the waters of L. Victoria for three months before taking up the controls of his 25 horse-power engine boat. For a ride on the 29 foot boat christened "Sese Canoe" with a capacity of 10 passengers and a crew of two on board, tourists pay Sh 1500 and locals only Sh 100 for a trip round the lake, to view hippos and crocodiles at an arms length.

In what is clearly a move to promote local tourism, the society, through their boatmen - the second crew member serves as a fare collector, the look-out for hippos and crocodiles, and life-saver all rolled into one - are allowed to charge discriminatory fees depending on whether one is a resident or foreigner. The boats are equipped with life-jackets for each passenger and crew members it is authorised to carry.

"I make about two trips carrying foreign tourists every day, while residents' trips can vary from four to six in a day," says Joshua. A quick mental arithmetic of his earnings given that the boat on average ferries eight passengers means he pockets quite a tidy sum every evening, not unlike our city matatus! This is not inclusive of the tips from tourists, mostly the foreign ones, in appreciation of their service which includes a full account of the lake and its features. Most of the tourists are from Israel and France, he says.

As we rode on the lake, Moses the look-out would point out the bobbing heads of a hippo family near the boat and Joshua would take cue and stop the boat meters from the huge water beasts. At first, the hippos held their distance from the boat as if posing for the cameras that clicked at them. The animals would then slowly submerge in the muddy waters, only for the guide to point out a crocodile gliding inches away from the boat, eliciting panic and more clicking of cameras accompanied with anxious laughter from students - all this while Moses, the guide, has his legs dangling from the boat's front.

However, after several such encounters, courage replaced the thinly veiled anxiety and those on board paid some more fare to be taken further into the lake for an adventurous trip to Barmolok island. From a distance, we surveyed the Olkoka Tourist Camp - a tour paradise frequented by foreign tourists, fenced off with a perimeter wall in the lake.

An entry fee of Sh 100 is charged to keep off idlers. With the sun now slowly setting on the horizon, its rays casting a brilliant glow on the lake waters, a speeding tourist-filled motorboat curved a beeline for Olkoka camp, as we headed for the shore.

That a boat capsizes from a close range to the shore is an old adage which almost came to fulfilment for us in "Sese Canoe" when the engine abruptly went off three Kilometres away from the mainland. At this point, conversation became strained and one could read like a book the scared faces of the adventurous students as Joshua painstakingly mended the oil-soaked engine.

However, the hitch was soon behind us with a sigh of relief, but the fear was nothing compared to the look on the faces of the aquaphobics among the students who had earlier in the afternoon waded off the fun seekers with outright fear as the boat set out on the voyage. Among them, one Geoffrey Otieno, to whom large water masses are synonymous with death asked the authors of this story to write their wills in his favour before going into the boat.

"I wish I was there with you after all," he mumbled in lamentation as he met us, refreshed on return from the aquatic exploration. There can be no denial that L. Baringo is multi-purpose lake with thrilling experiences for the daring. With the sun red over the soiled waters of the lake, it was time to start the long journey back to Nakuru town for the night.

The University administration saw it coming. The Government saw it coming. But like the proverbial ostrich they wished it away, heads blissfully buried in the sand. This time the ostrich was lucky. But only this time.

After a calculated lull of slightly more than a year following the suspension of the strike, there is every reason to believe that University Academic staff Union (UASU) is gearing to burst upon the university administration with devastating impact. This time, the ostrich will need more than just luck. This menacing message is contained in a workshop paper entitled *Strike, Suspension and After* by Githinji and J.W. Nyikal. In this paper, the two academics contend that:

- Suspension can be lifted at any time without notice.

- ... Strategies should be put in place for reactivation of the strike should the registration fail.

One of the most subtle effects of the strike is psychological. The anxiety which the mere mention of UASU elicits from some lecturers, particularly those who opposed the strike, borders on paranoia. A senior professor who refused to be interviewed sneeringly remarked that he did not want anything to do with that "stupid" UASU strike. Stupid is hardly subject of academic discourse in an institution where stupidity MUST be given meaning.

The Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Francis Gichiga, admitted that the UASU problem was the worst crisis that the University has ever faced: "It is like playing a game of chess (because we are) ... dealing with intelligent people." In this remorseless game of chess, it is the students who are the pawns. For their innocence, they had to suffer. And for punishing innocence, both the university administration and UASU are guilty.

It is now time for atonement. By suspending the strike, UASU made a strategically positive step which attests to the scheming intelligence Prof. Gichiga acknowledged. Some of the reasons advanced by UASU for suspending the strike confirm this:

- A semblance of normalcy through technical appearances and administrative deceit and propaganda has been established at the universities.

- The universities administrators (sic) were happy and satisfied with this and were ready to perpetuate it forever.

- There was a shift in public opinion against lecturers due to adverse Government propaganda which depicted lecturers as heartless and unmindful of the plight of the students ...

One does not require the intellectual depth of the UASU leaders to realise that they are playing at fighting fair. Again, it is the students who are holding their breath most keenly, praying that the university administration will lay to rest the UASU phoenix permanently.

Sadly, the UASU phoenix is likely to reappear because its grievances have not been adequately addressed. At the heart of these grievances lies derisory remuneration. It is true, as Prof. Gichiga says, that lecturers "have out-priced our economy," but there is certainly something bizarre about an economy which makes paupers out of its thinkers. This tribe of over-educated destitutes cannot think for the country when basic survival takes so much of their thinking. Constructive thinking on an empty stomach is a task even for a genius.

- There has been a lot of public hullabaloo about falling academic standards in the local universities even from quarters not qualified to comment on academic standards in primary schools. The academic standard of a university is the province of its senate and external examiners. If academic standards are falling, it is their professional and moral obligation to admit it and prescribe expert treatment. Surely, this is not asking the impos-

Kitcha Magak revisits the UASU saga and its repercussions on the Varsity community



sible from those charged with the responsibility of maintaining the quality of our education. But if it is true that academic standards are going to the dogs and the administrators find denial prudent, then we are heading into an academic abyss from which only supernatural intervention would save us.

The level of commitment among the academic staff, however, lends some credence to the falling-standards theory. Most lecturers are not as committed to their work as they should be because of perceived marginalization by the administration. Dr. Mathew Buyu, one of the dons who was an UASU insider, agrees that poor terms and conditions of service, "dampen the spirit of the lecturers... (who) were felt demoralised, especially by the fact that the strike raised pertinent issues regarding the welfare of the lecturers, which issues were not addressed by the administration." Dr. Buyu leaves the University of Nairobi to join Egerton University presently.

Prof. Gichiga also admits that "if the staff was compensated adequately, the level of commitment would be restored." Asked if lack of dialogue between the administration and UASU has affected his performance, Dr. J. W. Nyikal said: "I was committed to my teaching (but) now it has left me with a sense that my contribution to the university did not matter." Bluntly put, it will take better salaries to fully restore the lecturers' spirit of professional commitment. Bluntly put, students will continue to acquire less-than-the-best education as long as the UASU demands are not satisfactorily met. The critics of the current university academic standards may have a point after all.

Exodus is an ugly word when referring to professionals abandoning ship. Unfortunately, has been the word used to describe the departure of many lecturers from the University of Nairobi. Prof. Joseph Nyasani, Principal of College of Humanities and Social Sciences, sees the word as "a misnomer, unfortunate and mischievous." He adds that, "a mere one percent left the university." Dr. Nyikal on the other hand says leaving has taken many forms such as transfers, sabbatical leaves, leaves of absence, study leaves, resignation and even expulsions. Dr. Orwa Kadar, the chairman of UASU, for example, was expelled from the university. While exodus may be an extravagant overstatement, it is true that the number of lecturers leaving the university for various reasons is unprecedented.

The question of why the lecturers are abandoning ship is important, but most important is the question of the impact of such exits. The most telling is the loss of continuity of academic flow. Every departure of a lecturer creates an academic hiatus and a lot of time is wasted looking for replacement. In most cases, the colleagues who are left behind have to share the extra burden until a replacement is found. More often than not, these colleagues are not as well versed in that area as the one who has left. Such circumstances compromise academic standards.

The UASU strike degenerated into a public mudslinging match between the different camps. This undermined the professionalism which the administration always took for granted. The media were used as fora for trading thinly-veiled schooled insults. The public was thrilled because for the first time the academic elite of the society was exposing its human face; a face nearly as repulsive as the politicians'. In an article entitled *Intellectuals for Hire* (Finance, October 15, 1994), for example, Dr. Odegi-Awoundo's at-

tack on pro-establishment scholars reminiscent of the mire so readily hurled by the politicians: "So they will cheat, abuse, sing the political chorus if these were what would help them get a promotion, or access to other material comforts, or if that is what is needed to retain their positions."

Numerous articles to the print media by pro-establishment academics like Prof. Henry Mwanzi also displayed an amazing propensity towards tilted logic aimed at ridiculing perceived enemies. One would have expected these intellectuals to have sober dialogue with each other to sort out their differences. After all, a university is supposed to be a place for reasoning.

Although most lecturers interviewed



Dr. Adar: Expelled

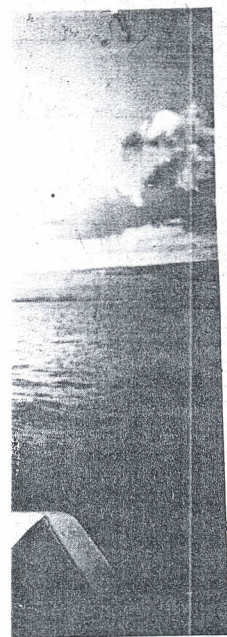


Prof. Nyasani: No loss

denied it, such reciprocated public ridicule has strained personal relationships between certain lecturers. The resultant acrimony undermines the spirit of academic co-operation to the detriment of the students in particular, and the entire university in general. True, fences are being mended, but intellectualism comes with titanic egos which get in the way of meaningful reconciliation. In this war of oversize egos, the solution to mutual disdain may be a slow and painful process.

Prof. Nyasani does not think the strike had repercussions on the university: "I don't think, in my own view, that the strike had such a big impact on this institution. It only created an awareness among the general public that the university is run in a unique way consonant with the provision of the Act of Parliament and Statutes attendant thereto."

According to Prof. Nyasani, "UASU smacked of trade unionism which is repugnant to the principles of intellectual academic pursuit." This view encapsulates the attitude of the administration towards UASU. Have we heard the last of UASU? The university administration must avert this likely war. This time, if this war is allowed to break out, there will be neither losers nor winners, only victims.



Picture by James Macharia

shares family

get them going while I look out for the crocodiles and hippos from my raft," he says. So far none have, miraculously, been lost to the meat-loving crocodiles, says 'aul, laughing off our fears.

To supplement their subsistent lifestyle, the family sells some of its goats to residents of the mainland, as they have well over 50 head on the island. Baringo's famous for its resilient goats which thrive even in dry lands. To be auctioned in the annual Kimalo goat-auction, always attended by the area Member of Parliament, resident Moi.

For the communities living around the lake on the mainland, L. Baringo is their main source of cooking, washing and bathing water. It is also an invaluable source of water for livestock herds. Although it is classified as a freshwater lake, it suffers from heavy siltation owing to it being fed by rivers Molo, Endau and Larabel which, together with several minor rivers, unload tonnes of soil from the dry highlands surrounding the lake. This occurs mainly during the rainy seasons, when heavy erosion along the river banks happens.

High temperature during the dry seasons usually results in heavy evaporation of the lake's water with the result that the water recedes for upto 400 meters from the shores during the months of January and February. This information we reliably learnt from our guide on the tour and boat driver, Joshua Chepsergon, who has spent the last 16 years ferrying tourists on his boat.

Joshua, who has successfully navigated a motor boat owned by the Baringo Fishermen Co-operative Society, says, "I cannot imagine life in the area without the lake." To him and his colleagues, tourism has become a major economic activity around the lake and indigenous fishermen formed the cooperative to facilitate participation in the lucrative service industry that has emerged.

By forming the cooperative, the fishermen are assured of a monthly salary, after remitting proceeds from their tour fares to the society. This ensures a steady