



MZUNGU IN KAMPALA with Bryan McInnis

The people who keep Kampala moving

I saw a man in Kampala doing work most of us will never notice. He was pushing several heavy bunches of matooke up the road on a bicycle. There was no announcement, no audience, no recognition. Just slow, steady movement toward the market.

If you live here long enough, you start to notice how much of the city runs on people like him. The quiet ones. The ones who are not featured in headlines or highlighted in development reports. The ones who simply wake up, shoulder something heavy, and begin moving it forward.

I passed him on a boda. He was drenched in sweat, his pace deliberate. Not hurried. Not hesitant. Just steady. He did not look up at passing cars. He did not seem distracted by the noise of the city waking up around him. He just kept moving.

It struck me how often I enjoy Ugandan

food without thinking about how it reaches my plate. We talk about sauces, spices, stews and favourite restaurants. We debate who makes the best luwombo or where to find the freshest tilapia. But underneath so much of daily life here is matooke. And underneath the matooke is someone like him.

Someone woke up early, loaded a bicycle, and began the long push toward the market.

Kampala is full of people whose labour is essential but easily invisible. Vendors arrange fruit before many of us are awake. Guards stand through long, quiet nights. Women sweep dust from storefronts knowing the dust will return by afternoon. Boda riders carry people, packages, furniture, chickens and sometimes other bodas through traffic that appears, to the untrained eye, to have no rules at all.

Remove these people and the city may

look the same for a while. The roads would still be there. The buildings would still stand. The signs would still hang above the shops.

But slowly, life would stop working. Food would not arrive. Doors would not open. Children would not get to school. Offices would not function. Homes would not be cared for.

The visible city depends on the invisible one. I think this is true everywhere, but Kampala has made it harder for me to ignore.

In the US, convenience often hides the human chain behind it. Food arrives packaged, ordered, delivered and sanitized by systems designed to keep labour out of sight. Here, the chain is more visible if you are willing to look. You can see the effort. You can see the sweat. You can see the weight being carried.

That visibility is a gift, if we allow it to become one. I am trying to pay better attention to the people who make ordinary life possible. Not because noticing them solves everything, but because failing to notice them makes us less human.

Gratitude begins with seeing. Respect begins with refusing to treat someone else's labour as background scenery.

That morning, the man with the matooke did not know he had become a teacher to me. He was simply pushing his bicycle up the road.

But I watched him and thought; this is how a city moves.

Not only through leaders, institutions or big plans. Through people whose names most of us will never know, carrying what must be carried, one slow step at a time.

<https://fromthepearl.substack.com/>

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