



Out of

# Africa

*Ugandan-born Anthony Kasozi fled his country when he was 16. The experience taught him resilience and independence, he tells **Liz Hall**, and he's been on a rich learning journey as a leadership coach ever since*

By Liz Hall

**L**eadership coach, consultant and adviser Anthony Kasozi says he doesn't like talking about himself. But thankfully he obliges, with a conversation peppered with insights, inspiring personal stories and lots of chuckling.

Kasozi, director of Quilibra Consulting and an associate with Ashridge Consulting, has lived a rich and diverse life, and he openly shares some of his key experiences, reflecting on what they've meant for him and for his practice.

These experiences include his family's flight from dictator Idi Amin's Uganda when Kasozi was just 16, a crisis around his contributions to the often brutal organisational restructuring in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, and his proximity to death when he helped set up an AIDs education charity in Africa.

## ACTS OF LEADERSHIP

Although he didn't set out to be a coach consultant, looking back, he "can see the links and connections that make sense".

One link is leadership. In addition to having led organisations, and coaching, advising and consulting to leaders, Kasozi is a published

author about the leadership 'shadow' (see *References, page 26*), with Erik de Haan. He says he's felt like a leader for as long as he can recall.

"The whole idea of leadership, responsibility and accountability was always very prevalent in our upbringing. My mindset from a very early age was, I am a leader in my community, my tribe, my family, it doesn't matter where I am, I am a leader, the moment I step out and say, we're going to do this, I am taking an act of leadership."

Kasozi was born and bred in Uganda's kingdom of Buganda and his maternal grandfather was one of the kabaka's (king's) many administrative chiefs. Born two years before the country became independent in 1962, Kasozi spent a lot of time with this grandfather and his siblings in their holidays.

"I became aware from five or six years old that my grandfather was in the local Bugandan parliament. He was one of the first people to have a television and because his wife – my grandmother – had suffered a stroke we were careful not to make her jump. But we would always get terribly excited and make too much noise. So he would always say to us, who is going to take responsibility? And he would use the English word. And although I didn't know

Ed Miller

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what the word meant then, I grew up thinking whoever said they would take responsibility would be the one who got the slipper,” he chuckles.

“I laugh now, but it was an incredibly powerful experience. He was an amazingly kind man, an incredible disciplinarian, with a lot of wisdom and rich experiences. He was involved in helping to take people from the King’s African Rifles to Mombasa, Kenya, to fight in the Second World War, he resisted the British Empire and colonial government before independence and he was very involved after independence in the King’s Assembly.”

His grandfather may have been a role model for leading well, but Kasozi has since found that many leaders struggle, particularly in challenging times, to avoid their ‘shadow’ sides coming to the fore.

“I’ve seen the abuses of leadership first hand, from political abuse to people leading teams, abuses by people who are not necessarily bad or evil. I, myself, look back at episodes in my life where I think, I really did that badly and wouldn’t do it that way again.”

### **MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES**

Attending an English school, being exposed to radical counter-colonial literature, working in a number of different countries, and having daughters, are among the experiences that have shaped Kasozi’s world view around diversity, humility, tolerance, openness and having choices.

Although as a protectorate, Uganda didn’t have the more extreme versions of apartheid or colour prejudice, education was still broadly segregated and Kasozi and his siblings were the first African children to attend an English school.

“That was another tremendous influence. Many years later I found I’d been reading the same things as my wife had, who grew up in England. It gave me an enthusiasm for language, for storytelling, an insatiable appetite for reading,” he says.

He realised early on “that the world wasn’t made up just of what I knew, hearing these stories of different lands and cultures.”

He was influenced as a teenager by the massive political change that swept across Africa in the 1960s and 1970s.

“There was a rise in nationalism as a backlash against colonialism, with a desire for Africa to be truly independent, not just politically, but economically, too. A lot of our influences were rebelling against being attached to what we saw as our colonial masters, so we took great delight in reading everything our teachers and institutions around us wouldn’t want us to read – Malcolm X, Karl Marx and so on.”

Kasozi’s “recognition that actually there isn’t just one school of thought”, was therefore further reinforced.

Another great influence has been that, in addition to having a “very strong mother”, he has daughters. This has “made me more passionate about gender issues. And the more diverse

teams I work with, there tend to be fewer power-relational problems than with all-male teams!” he chuckles.

“[With females] you never get away with ‘I’m alright’. With all my male relationships, it’s let’s do something together rather than talk about feelings.

“My daughters are half-African, half-English so the whole question of diversity and gender, and identity and supporting their development and their learning is something I am acutely aware of.

He stresses “the importance of encouraging my daughters to think and consider what is it that they carry out with them that gives them the freedom to negotiate in a male-dominated world. And one of these things is education.”

He also believes more young people, particularly early in their career, should be exposed to coaching and mentoring.

### **UNCERTAINTY AND CRISIS**

He recalls how “the whole African project about the possibility of the enlightened states of Africa and African unity” started to take root, but then didn’t last.

“It all came crashing down because we had corruption, military coups one after the other and we were caught in the Cold War battles between the US and Russia. At the time, being in it, one was very aware that what had been very settled had suddenly become very chaotic. In Uganda, we had a coup and another in 1971, which brought Amin to power. Economically, the world started to fall apart and we started to get more insecurity. For me this was another telling point at which I suddenly realised the fragility of civilisation.”

This sense of fragility and uncertainty was compounded further when Kasozi, his parents and some of his siblings fled Uganda quickly and dramatically for political reasons. He



describes “literally getting up one morning and being told you can’t take anything. I was on holiday as I’d just done my O-levels, but we pulled my youngest sister out of boarding school just as she was going into breakfast without even going back to her dorm to get her stuff.

“We were very fortunate because my father had in the 1950s befriended a young Kenyan in Uganda because of the Mau Mau [uprising against the British in Kenya]. Now in the 1970s he was a senior civil servant in Kenya and he took us in.

“I feel a lot of empathy when I look at all the Syrians crossing borders. Now, as a father, I think it must have been horrid for my parents. When we got to Kenya I realised they didn’t know what to do, that it was a question of survival, that it was safer to move than to stay.

“And so all of that basically made me an incredibly independent person. I think I am quite resilient – it takes an awful lot of things to happen before I think, this is a real disaster.”

### CONSTANT SUPPORT

“I’ve also realised you absolutely cannot make your way in this world without others. Despite my strength, at each and every single time of challenge, there’s been someone involved, a teacher, a grandfather, a friend, a headmaster, who saw beyond and through whatever circumstance and connected with me.

“I think it’s really important in this individualistic era – we can’t make our way alone, we have to do it together, and the tougher the issues are, personally and collectively, the more we need each other, need people who can mentor each other, and so on.

“A really strong commitment on my part is giving away things and being prepared to just be available for others. I can’t say I ever regret it. I get the most satisfaction out of seeing others develop. Until I get into really difficult cashflow problems!” he laughs.

“So it’s not surprising I’ve ended up doing the stuff I am doing. I realise that it’s the people who’ve coached and mentored me – without that badge – who’ve helped me on my way.”

### ROAD TO DAMASCUS

After a teacher “badgered” him to attend a British university – “literally to shut her up, I filled in an application form – you know, these people who change your life”, he ended up in the UK, joining Unilever after graduating.

Then “at a time when everyone was going to the City”, he joined Deloitte, which later became PriceWaterhouse. After spending many years consulting on mergers and acquisitions, implementation of computers among others, the brutality of some of the profit improvement programmes he was involved with got to him.

“We ‘saved’ a number of companies, but at the end of it, you actually thought, gosh, I think we knocked the soul out of the business... we weren’t paying attention to psychological contracts of people who’d been at the business for a long time.

“In the West, provision and support for people being made redundant was minimal. It was incredibly brutal in the 1980s and 1990s with all the restructuring. And that really was an eye-opener for me, and made me think, I don’t want to do this type of consulting work. If you’re going to make changes, see the people behind the processes and make technology serve people.

“I had a real crisis of confidence in my skills, things I was good at and things I didn’t feel were aligned with what I now know were my true values. At the time I just felt desperately



unhappy. And having a young family with a young daughter who called me Mummy because she didn't see Daddy often enough to know the word.

"Then, one day, I went along to hear a Romanian priest talking about his experience in the Romanian Revolution of 1989, of people sitting in the square [in Timisoara] and being shot at. When he was asked why they persisted in taking people out into the square, he used a line which is now very commonly used: 'If not us, then who, if not now, then when?'"

Kasozi had also just been approached to manage operations in Africa for a new AIDS educational charity, ACET. "And that line coincided with me battling over what to do. So I went to my wife and said, look, I am resigning and I want to go to Africa to do this project. And we moved to Uganda, the first time I'd been back since I left. It was post-revolution and there was still shooting going on – it wasn't even safe to get blood transfusions in hospital.

"Looking back, it was a crazy time, a crazy place to take a partner who'd never been to Africa and a two-year-old daughter. It was not only two of the toughest years of my life, but two of the most rewarding."

He spent time in the Congo and Tanzania, as well as Uganda, where he "confronted prejudice and fear – about sharing the communal towel or that AIDS was carried by mosquitos.

"And also living with and seeing people dying – going to work and knowing that in two or three weeks that person isn't going to be around. Spending lots of weekends at funerals, but also working with doctors and nurses who understood that special thing about holding people's hands and accompanying them – that empathy. It really spoke to me. I learnt a lot about dedication and my earlier experience of a West that wanted to abuse Africa and use us as pawns was contradicted completely by this

humanitarian dedication, as people went to their limits."

When he went back into consulting in Europe, he would only do work that enabled people to develop capabilities. "The whole question of humanity had become really significant, being aware of the environment you are working in and the effects our interventions have on others."

At Ashridge, he met people with psychological and humanistic backgrounds "who were concerned not just about the health of the bottom line, but the fullness of one's experience...I understood for the first time what people and organisation development really meant. And the idea that my job is in a sense to do myself out of a job. Whereas the model in a lot of consultancies is that your job is to sell on the next job... in a sense you create dependency."

### QUALITY CONVERSATIONS

He was introduced to supervision, the importance of paying attention to the system, and of respect and adult conversation.

"I realised one of the reasons my grandfather was so influential was that even [when we were] six he spoke to us in an adult way; we respected him, but he never made us feel scared. I thought, if we were able to bring this into our practice, what might it look like? Increasingly I found how energising [this approach] is and how much easier it is to solve problems [this way].

"When you're talking about senior-level leaders, who are knowledgeable, experienced and expert, actually they've got everything they need from a technical perspective. But what really matters is the quality of thinking, of conversations, of relationships.

"Helping people develop good, strong relationships so they can deal with the challenges they face and allow them to enjoy the work they do is where my passion is. In the end, it's all about coaching in one way or another,

action learning, getting people to listen to each other, creating enough trust to be able to have the conversations we need to have."

That said, he's concerned about an increasing "fatigue" in organisations around coaching. "I'm occasionally sensing a cynicism around it – all these managers who want to become coaches when they retire – and I found myself at one point having to defend why coaching is so important.

"I think there is a conversation to be had about what our role is as coaches: how should we engage with people who've had a lot of coaching?"

He says it's important for leaders, for all of us, to know what really gives us energy in this busy world.

"I find I like walking. And music. I grew up in Africa where there's always an excuse to dance and frankly, whatever mood I am in, if I put on some good music, it literally changes my physiology.

"And being an introvert who has developed an extrovert way of working, boy, do I need to charge my batteries! Often that literally means being alone and doing nothing...Wandering around, being in the sunshine, dancing – I could do that every single day!" 🎧

### References

- 1 E de Haan and A Kasozi, *The Leadership Shadow*, Kogan Page, 2014
- 2 E de Haan and A Kasozi, 'Leaders in crisis: attending to the shadow side', in L Hall (ed), *Coaching in Times of Crisis and Transformation*, Kogan Page, 2015