

TRAVELOGUE#1

ZAMBIA - THE AMAZING MAIZE AND MILLET COUNTRY

By Nagesh ©

Part#1 – Getting there

I thought long and hard on my long haul from Mumbai to Nairobi and then onwards to Lusaka.

'Why would anyone go to a place like Zambia?

Curiosity? Career opportunity? Exotic location? Or plain destiny'...

I decided on the last option as I savoured the cold tasteless lunch on Kenyan airlines flight.

After leaving to Nairobi, the feeling of being in an alien land had settled down in my mind like a lump.

At the Nairobi airport, black faces stared at me hiding little of malice towards another looter from Asia, out to plunder the wealth of 'their' Africa.

I hid my face behind the newspaper and cursed at the air conditioner purring away on the distant stained wall, which wasn't helping the sweltering heat in the waiting lounge any.

A large Kenyan woman occupied almost two seats for herself next to me, and her six children with mucus dribbling from their noses yelled and chased each other tripping over cabin baggage of other waiting passengers. No one could care less.

I looked up sharply once when two of them tugged at my baggage playfully.

She shushed them, smiled at me brightly and spread her hands and said,

"Children, Bwana!"

< *Bwana means Master, Sir usually addressed to Whites and Asians alike*>, as if that explained everything perfectly.

It was fifteen minutes to flight and no one was there at the flight desk till then. Boarding passes not issued. Immigration not checked.

We were then shown the immigration desk, which opened barely five minutes before the flight take off. Such callousness.

The burly Kenyan officer frisked me as if handling a glass vase. Then the baggage was checked. He pointed to the South Indian Spice powders that we use to make curry.

"Whass in thiss?" he hissed near my face. An uncomfortable mixed aroma of sweat and beer reached my nostrils.

I grimaced and said, "That's food ... Indian food" I couldn't think of anything else.

"Can you open this?" He went on challenging me. He was getting his kicks.

"I can, but you may start sneezing because its hot" I showed him my tongue "Very spicy". He grimaced and zipped up the bag.

"As long as its not drugs, you know...Opium... Cocaine...we don't mind". He waved me away.

Thank God, I didn't want him to sneeze in my face either. Besides he would have spilled all the powder.

I slipped away carrying my bag toward the exit to the vestibule.

The airplane meant for Lusaka was an old beat-up Boeing 707. The large Kenyan Airhostess showed her 32 intact pearl white teeth at the door and ushered me in. A faint smell remained in the plane, despite the airfreshner and mosquito repellent spray that had been used shortly before. Little did I know that this 'native' smell was to stay with me for the rest of my next year in Zambia as well.

The journey was bumpy and the plane had only two Europeans, clad in jeans and shorts, obviously far, far away from their continent making every decent effort to enjoy their 'vacation'.

The man was fat and had red jowls and drank beer from a can and the woman was a cute redhead wearing revealing summer clothes and was reading a paperback novel.

There were some 20 to 30 Africans belonging to Kenya or Zambia on the flight spread over the length of the plane (I could not guess which country then, although later I became a kind of expert in distinguishing them). The food on the Mumbai –Nairobi had been bad enough. I didn't even sample the so-called Asian Vegetarian meal that the smartly clad dark airhostess offered me on the Lusaka flight.

I just had a soda not to disappoint her. (You will learn that all aerated cool drinks including Coke, Pepsi, Sprite and Canada Dry etc are all called 'Soda' there)

The plane touched down hard and ran awkwardly forward and I wondered if there were potholes on the runway too. I felt airsick distinctly.

The sun was hot and blazing down on my neck when I stepped out. We had to walk all the distance to the Arrival lounge. I felt tired and wiped out. Except the six boisterous children of the Kenyan woman no one else seemed to be in any better frame of mind.

My friend Mahendra Reddy stepped out to welcome me as soon as the cursory immigration formalities were over.

After stamping my papers the fat officer had smiled up at me, "If Bwana would be so kind..." obviously asking for a tip.

"This bwana is yet to make any money", I had grinned, disappointing him and had walked out snatching my Passport and work permit.

I will skip the talk between Mahender and me concerning work. We became good friends instantly and stayed that way till I left back from there. The polite do-gooder Jeeves-like character, Mahender Reddy.

The trip out to the city was long too. The airport is some 30 kilometres from our office cum residence. The vehicle used was the most famous in Zambia, the Mitsubishi 4 seat pick-up van.

The black driver called Zulu was driving very fast, side stepping the numerous potholes that resembled craters on way to the City centre of Lusaka.

The first thing you notice about Zambia or Africa in general is Space.

The vast unspoilt, unpopulated flat space, the empty fields as far as the eye could see, the huge nothingness and you feel like a small fly on an empty football field. This sight of the vast space uninhabited itself is the first culture shock you experience if you are coming in from a crowded country like India for the first time. I was.

We did come across some huge maize fields and sugarcane fields on the way from airport to city but that's about it.

Zambia is a bushy country interspersed with some trees, mostly non-fruit bearing. The bushes line the roads four to six feet tall for miles on end and you hardly see agricultural fields or irrigated wetlands that are so familiar on Indian countryside.

We rode into Rhodes Park area and stopped in front of a huge metal container that was modified into a Caravan and around it a smattering of smaller buildings stood in what appeared to be someone's property complex and then surprisingly Mahender told me that we had reached the Office.

So then, I sighed contentedly, at last, I was in Zambia, as I walked into the caravan that housed our office.

Part #2: Settling down and looking around



THE BEST STREET IN LUSAKA IN CENTRAL AREA.

I was posted as the Project in charge of George Compound in a week's time after reaching there.

My boss was a London born Kenyan citizen who stayed in Zambia six months a year named Saggat, a Punjabi gentleman in his fifties. Not the amiable type but he did pretty well for himself and seemed to exhibit authority and control. He took instant liking to my polite manners and as days passed, also to my skills in expression of spoken and written English. Soon most of the correspondence was either drafted or checked by me even for other Project managers.

My house was the closest to the office, a mere 10-minute walking distance.

I shared the electric fenced house, which had a good garden in front with a Project Director called Bhamra, a Sikh. We had separate portions of the house of course.

Bhamra's Cook called Softy a young man in twenties trained to cook Indian food served for me as well for a few days before a permanent cook was allocated to me.

It was on a rainy Sunday morning that I saw Thomas.

His full name was Thomas Ngube. He was small for a Zambian and had small curly hair on his head and stood embarrassedly before me in a pair of shorts and a dirty Manchester United T-shirt. Softy told me that it was his brother.

The relationships like brothers and sisters lose their sanctity and meaning fast when you consider the social and family structure in Zambia.

Same father, same mother or same sister individually can suffice for one to become another's blood relative. Yes, I do mean the family ties are very loose here although I am tempted to say the same of their characters. But who am I to talk about their loose character; me, a married monogamist Brahmin from India can hardly be a good judge of ancient African traditional tribal life style.

Softy told me this boy will do everything but bwana (that's me) needs to be a bit 'patient' till he learns the ropes. I heartily agreed.

Man! Washing, cooking, ironing your clothes, keeping the home clean...everything! And all paid for by the company too.

One could only imagine all that from a dedicated housewife with difficulty these days and so you will know why I was relieved. That too here in faraway corner of the vast Africa. Yes, it sounded good.

Thomas took his time, six months in all before he passed his probation. I had to tell him sometimes, yell at him some other times, but he slowly learnt to do everything... pretty poorly!

That was more than what I could manage on my own and hence I didn't complain too much. Even when plain rice resembled wet ball of flour meant for chappatis, Rasam no better than hot bath water and dirty broom was kept on top of ironed clothes or when undergarments were put to dry on kitchen utensils.

I didn't complain and if I did it was only to myself!

Sunday mornings washed away my blues as Bhamra's cook in the adjoining house usually called me in for brunch and I loved his stuffed Aloo parathas.

Rhodes Park is one of the upmarket residential areas and that was the reason it had half of its road width actually tarred. Only the other half was ridden with potholes or left simply untarred. You can guess about other unfortunate souls living in down market areas and you won't be too much off the mark. That was Lusaka for you in 2000.

The exchange rate for the local currency used to fall like leaves in autumn, every month.

Kwacha is the name of the unfortunate Zambian currency, which was rated at 1400-2300 per one US dollar in a span of one year that I stayed there. It actually fell by 900 to 100 points per dollar in one year.

I travelled to work in a two-seater Mitsubishi pick up that I learnt to drive myself as my driver called Lungu used to become mysteriously sick three days in a week.

He coughed and wheezed and grew thin as a reed in three months. Then one day he told me he had caught the bug an year back. The word meant he had AIDS.

When he made a stopover at Luanshya (a border town near Congolese border) he had sowed wild oats with someone after a night of revelry. He said after drinking six mugs of Chibuku, what can you remember. I nodded my head gravely, although I had never tasted Chibuku before. < He died six months after I left Zambia>

Chibuku is a local liquor made from maize of course. Fermenting the maize flour and drinking the brew fresh is pastime that refuses to die down among Zambian working class. They call these bars as taverns, an old Colonial term hangover. They play loud and shrill Congo drumbeat music as an accompaniment to add to the celebration in taverns. Zambia loves Congo-born music genre, it is very popular. Almost every young soul in Zambia seems to be either drinking or singing or shaking their waists wildly to the beat, sometimes all the three together!

Everything edible in Zambia has only one source. Maize or Millet.
They eat maize, drink maize and they sleep maize.

The poor, that is almost 75% of Zambians, eat maize ball as their staple diet. It's a kind of wet flour ball made of maize and eaten raw (uncooked) with raw vegetables like Onion and tomato or if you could afford with a Chicken piece. This is popularly called Nshima. (Pronounced SHEEMA). Washed down with Chibuku of course. Everyone above the age of 12 or so consumes this liquor openly with their families.

Those who can afford better also eat Nshima regularly but they wash it down with Mosi beer instead of the cheaper Chibuku liquor. Mosi is a local brew and it is consumed in gallons across the country especially on weekends. Zambia is not much of hard drink country. You will find popular western liquors like Brandy, Whisky or Wine only in Five-star Hotels or Ministers' homes. No one seems to mind much as long as they get their regular quota of these two drinks.

A sad thing that you cannot help notice is the growing numbers of people falling victim to AIDS.

It is not strange to hear of one or two AIDS related deaths daily during tea breaks in any office, say someone known to you, his brother, her uncle...

My observation is that the concept of strong and long lasting marriage is essentially missing among Zambians. This is despite the fact that the Government has declared the country as a Christian State and most of them are churchgoers. The devout ones would swear by God that this not true but facts are too glaring to think otherwise.

Adultery in marriage is not very uncommon and high incidence of risk of looming AIDS still does not deter the average Zambian. Only the Govt agencies and UN organizations make a big hullabaloo about it .The concept of safe sex has not many buyers either.

Then there is drug abuse too and that of infected syringes that inevitably go with it.

Part #3: My work and the workplace lifestyle

The poor of the country live in isolated shanty slums once they were designated to live in by their erstwhile British masters conforming to the racist policies in force then. The term 'Compound' thus has a colonial ring to it in the sense that only the poorest of the poor opt to or manage to live in those difficult areas.



I was designated to work in George Compound in Lusaka, which was talked about in whispers even by my black colleagues. I could make out that it was crime ridden and one won't be happy for long there. An educated Asian in the dirty small alleys filled with criminal minded hostile residents. Uh-huh, they felt, not a chance. This is hopeless, they averred.

I thought to myself, I had come here and so let me see everything this place has to offer. The Good, the Bad and the Ugly! Besides there was no other replacement willing to take my place either. And I was not chickening out then. I did not.

The project involved a Japanese funded Water supply and Sanitation Facility at about 50 strategically located paces consisting of a precast Concrete Faucet and drain . Each such panel has two faucets fed from one huge Concrete Overhead tank within 2 KM distance. There is also a public laundry panel where on a flat concrete platform you wash clothes the traditional way. You know, soak the clothes with soap water, taking water from the faucet panel adjoining it and beat the clothes with a flat paddle-like wooden stick.

That's the way it works in most of Asia too.

There was also the associated pipeline network to feed the water to all these facilities. The consultants were Japanese who expected stringent quality standards, which are oftentimes difficult to meet in developed countries. As a Civil Engineer having worked in India, Dubai and USA, I can say with some confidence that the Zambian labour skill standards must be at the rock bottom of all that I have seen.

Coupled with Japs not relaxing their standards despite this, I was in a constant stressed state of mind during this project tenure. Many times the Consultants had me demolish and redo a facility for even pardonable mistakes and I got the flak from my bosses for the losses incurred as well.

It was tough going.

You just don't get skilled masons, carpenters and craftsmen there in any decent numbers. In fact good builders who build mansions for cream of the society there import all the labour force from nearby Zimbabwe and South Africa. We could not do so as this was a Joint venture of Zambian and Japanese Govts and local people had to be employed per rule. More than anything else, the Village council of the George compound had also made an unwritten stipulation that only local George Compound residents had to be employed there. Else they stopped work by violent drunken protests. There used to be constant bickering and fights over this matter saying that 'such and such a person' did not belong 'from here'.

All this has one common disturbing Origin. Poverty, poverty and more poverty.

To give you an example, I had two sites there and I have seen one guy working as a carpenter in one of them got retrenched as he stole the tools but came back to my other site and had joined as a mason there unknown to me during my vacation to India.

That's the kind of people you get there. They earn their money for that afternoon's ball of Nshima and evening's glass of Chibuku.

The other matter that worries anyone who ventures to go to a Compound is about personal safety if he is an Asian (Le Indie, they call out in French threateningly with obscene hand gestures!) and about the money he is carrying.

They straightaway approach you in hordes when you are working and say " Give me my money", If you dare ask 'which is his money that you have', they simply stare and spit on the ground and swear," My country's money is ALL my money... Its NOT your country's money". Which means they wouldn't tolerate their local currency to be in the pockets of a foreigner. All their Country's money is THEIR money. Some twisted Logic, this! As I said that disturbing single cause. Poverty.

You want to talk about Police and the law and Order there.

OK, to cut a long story short, the Law is Out Of Order there!

One mug of Chibuku and whispers of 'You and Me Poor African brothers and look at these rich Bwanas and their foreign cars' will melt the heart of any local policemen and he is bound to look the other way. Some Kwacha changing hands will even make him strip his uniform and join them in crime. This is not an exaggeration. It sure used to happen in the year 2000 and I am quite sure with Kwacha rate today standing devalued at 3000 or so, things would not have improved drastically either.

It's not my case that my own country is 100% Crime-free or safer for carrying large amounts of money insecurely. But then note a subtle difference here.

When foreign criminals surround you in an alien land with hostility directed primarily towards you being a foreigner there itself is going to make the crime look all the more sinister and frightening. I hope you got the drift.

But then I used to carry large amounts of currency on Saturdays, the weekly payment day to the site and inevitably an armed escort was provided for my safety.

My own workers who used to call me with beseeching 'Bwana this' or 'Bwana that' on other days used to behave like born goons on that day for some reason. The act of disbursing payments used to be full of arguments like, '*Loans should not be deducted, Absent days should be allowed for payment, Employee insurance was all bogus and the company was siphoning off that money, you are cheating the poor uneducated Africans by having crooked accountants*' etc.

A gentleman once even threatened me with dire consequences 'if we people didn't leave his country alone'. His eyes were awash with Chibuku. He held a small weapon in his black knurled hands, the western world recognises that weapon as AK-52 gun.

Whew... It used to be a draining exercise. I felt like having their Chibuku and sleep like log on those nights myself although somehow I never did muster enough courage.

Again I hasten to add that its not that there aren't any 'good normal people' in Zambia, there are and quite a few were my friends too but then you will hardly find them in a Compound rife with crime and abject poverty.

Part #4- Further experiences and musings

Oh well, you can enjoy your life to a certain extent in Zambia too. Let us not be too dispirited.

The roads in Zambia are with the blessings of UK and the Schools are funded by Germany if I am not mistaken. Apart from some interior roads. You do have wonderful straight roads on the freeway. Many European countries behave like BIG Brothers and help out with millions of dollars for their poor African brethren. Their bit for the third world, you see.

It's like the British and Indian way of traffic over there. The right handed driving. You get to see some Old Rolls, Peugeot, and newer Toyotas, BMW, VW, Mercedes and all the fancy cars of Europe out there. And some of the dinghy Land Rovers and Range Rovers too. God knows how they own them, though. I mean comparing with the citizens and their status at Compounds.

So there are obviously people who have made money there and are still making. Not the least of them are Indian Gujaratis. These Gujaratis have made not only Zambia but the entire southern half and Eastern Africa their home since Mahatma Gandhi's times. They own small to large businesses, factories, Petrol bunks, Grocery shops and automobile dealerships. The Gujaratis are so many in numbers that that an Indian is inevitably refereed to as a 'Patel' (Common Gujrati Family name) unless informed otherwise by the local Zambians.

They have their own Hindu temple in Central Lusaka near the GPO or thereabouts. Its quite beautiful and you can get to see beautiful idols of all Hindu deities adorned on the walls. The community and the temple take active part in organizing festivities like Diwali with some fairs like 'Food melas' or exhibition etc where some south Indians pitch in too with their steaming Idlis and Dosas. There are a few Indian restaurants too in Lusaka although coming from India I never thought they were that 'hot'! But then it's a good getaway for the resident Indian community there.

It is said that the Copper belt of Kitwe and Ndola have sizeable Indian community and my Indian colleagues used to try hard and get into projects located there to feel more homely. They said they get to watch the recent Bollywood Hindi movies also.

There is a Sathya Sai Mandir (Temple) and Bhajan center there and there are weekly Bhajans (Prayers) and satsangs (Communion) held there on Sundays for an hour.

I used to go there quite a few times. Once after returning from India, I went back there and distributed the Prasadam (divine gifts/ blessed items) from India to the devotees there and they were thrilled no end.

There is a small but compact Gurudwara there built by the resident Sikh Community, which too is worth more than one visit. It's so peaceful, your heads turbaned, you sit there peacefully and meditate and you can get to hear some beautiful and melodious gurbanis or Sikh prayers and devotional songs. They serve food to everyone daily free of cost over there. Sunday lunch is excellent and you can have a bellyful of Punjabi meal. You can serve food to others there too and feel happy to be of service.

There used to be a place called Sai Video near the Central Market's Roundabout (they do use archaic English terms like 'roundabouts' for signal lights and circles or squares on the roads) which I used to frequent and they have hundreds and hundreds of movies of Indian and Hollywood makes in CDs in that shop. The rentals are pretty high as he is monopolising the market but not that high that you cannot afford it on a weekend if you are a movie buff. They make some finger-licking 'chaat' (spicy Indian snacks) items too over there. Worth a visit on a dull weekend.

There are movie theatres in Lusaka showing fairly recent Hollywood films but sadly no civilised person visits these places, with the result all of them have fallen into bad times and have turned into centres of gambling, noisy drinking and flesh trade.

My friend Alice (a secretary for my boss), a cheerful busty woman of large proportions and a larger heart had told me to watch out for all the danger spots in Lusaka in detail once, lest I become a victim of the ever growing crime menace there. Bless her!

Anywhere in Zambia, you could lose your car in a jiffy, Burglar alarm or not. Car Parking attendant present or not. It is indeed a serious problem even in the Capital. Less said about the lesser cities or towns the better.

Your car parts would be dissected and sold in the grey market by the time you complete writing the Police complaint.

A month before I left for India a fellow Project manager, Gupta from Ndola came back with a sullen face saying that they had stolen his car part by part in a single night. The headlights were gone, the seats and the steering wheel, the stereo and all the four tyres plus all the gasoline in the tank had gone when he woke up on late Sunday morning. The car was sitting on four stones where the tyres used to be! The watchman was having beautiful Chibuku-induced dreams in the meantime, of course.

Our Japanese consultants lost their Mitsubishi van to the same residents of the compound on whom their Govt was spending close to 2 million dollars on the projects in all. The Chief Consultant Kogo called me over and yelled at me, 'what the hell is happening in this damned place and were they employed by my company?' I let him blow his lid. Then he smiled and said, 'Sorry, Nagesh... You are a foreigner here yourself, I clean forgot' and sighed, 'I owe you one '. I never got a chance to return the favour.

Healthcare:

Any piece on Zambia is not complete without mentioning the dreaded Malaria disease prevalent there. They give you a shot for Yellow fever and such unheard of diseases back home in India when you leave for an African Country. But no one has a vaccine for Malaria that I have heard of.

It's not that there are lot of mosquitoes over there that you see in swarms or anything like that. There are a few but all of them are of the dreaded Anopheles type, I was given to understand by Doctor Rao who treated all Indian expatriates in our Company.

I fell victim to Malaria twice. Yes, one month for the first time and then the third Month once again. You get to eat quinine tablets and get disturbed sleep feeling shivers running up and down the spine for a week or so and then its gone. The third month, it's back with a vengeance. God knows what happened to the famous immunity theory.

Oh, there could be different strains of Malaria, you see. Do malaria virus undergo mutation, beats me.

Like different Computer viruses needing separate patches...Hmmmmmmm.

PLACES AND PEOPLE I MET:

There is Kafue River and town on the way down south of Lusaka on the highway to the famous Livingstone town, which is on the southern border of Zambia. We had a project coming up over there at Kafue and it had a compact smallish powerhouse undergoing retrofitting job too already.

I spent a night there. Rajni Patel, the Resident engineer there treated us to a hearty Gujarati meal and a Hindi movie in the night at his place. Like most well settled Gujaratis in Zambia, both his children lived abroad. One in UK and the other in USA.

We even surveyed what could be our Company's new corporate office and staff quarters site at a place called Lilongwe, a cosy farm owned by a Czech couple who were

returning to Europe. Africa no more remained the Whites' domain you see. It was happening everywhere. White farmers of Zimbabwe were leaving in hordes back to UK and other destinations too.

Africa was back in Black hands. There is a lot of love lost among the these two communities there. A sort of simmering discontent.

LIVINGSTONE AND VICTORIA FALLS

We had a tough time reaching the southernmost town of Zambia named after is illustrious British Discoverer called David Livingstone. There are hardly any good breaks where you could rest in safety after heading south from Kafue and it was getting late. We wanted to reach the town before dusk and we barely made it, huffing and puffing. We had some work on the powerhouse modification job down at the Powerhouse on the Zambezi riverbank.

Zambia owes its name to this huge perennial river that looks like a sea its widest place and that was closest to the powerhouse. Occasionally you do see crocodiles come up for air and dip back.

The water is clear blue and clean. There is absolutely no water pollution that is remotely possible here. There is so much of the river and so few people around and simply no industries to name any.

A little down the Zambezi River is the spectacular Victoria Falls. Columns of spray can be seen from miles away over a width of nearly two kilometres into a deep gorge over 100 meters below. The falls stretches across the borders Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe.



There is only one hotel to speak of and they call it a 'Star category hotel'. But it's like everything else in Zambia. The substandard-ness is all too prevalent and pervasive. But it will do for a couple of nights for die hard nature lovers. I am not and one evening sufficed and we had to rush back to Lusaka the same night. We were on duty, you will understand, these are only the perks and the fringe benefits.

One day my driver and I went over at University of Zambia, the UNZA for some technical help in material testing.

It's a serene campus near Kaunda Square before Chelston and it has a lovely lake right in the middle of campus surrounded with equally welcome greenery. An ideal Picnic spot, if they allow you to have one. But there was absolutely no one there for kilometres on end, on that Monday afternoon. So your guess for a Sunday outing is as good as mine.

I could never go back to that place again, though.

Part #5: The straw that broke the camel's back:

Back home it was getting close to an year after my departure. There seemed to be no provision from my employer for bringing my family over here, Even if they allowed it was doubtful if I would have consented to bring them in. I had seen too much of Zambia in 10 months for that. Nor was there any talk of Salary hike. My wife was carrying our second child when I had come over to Zambia and I could only hear that she delivered our daughter. I was not there. You wont know what it does to a man when he is alone in a foreign country. I began to miss them all much. The weekly telephone calls we used to have did not seem enough at all. Used to feel hollow inside after each call. My wife for her part encouraged me well on the phone.

Slowly Zambia had begun to lose its sheen for me. I was getting nowhere career wise and settling-wise.

Those days, I got a Muslim friend called Jilani who hailed from my state, Karnataka in India come in to work for us and we stayed together for sometime.

He was a good man basically and was a fair vegetarian cook too and Thomas learnt quite a few tricks from him.

For my sake Jilani never cooked meat at home and we bonded very well.

One night it suddenly happened. The night that made all the difference. We had watched a late night Hindi movie on my VCR and slept late.

The next day being Sunday I always woke up late. But Jilani always got up at 7 AM and he shook me awake that morning. I rubbed my eyes and stared at him numbly when he said 'Look someone has been in here. We have been burgled, looks like that' 'Get up'.

We hurried out to find that our rear door was broken in and the kitchen looked like a storm had wiped it all away. I mean there was nothing in the kitchen.

The Kitchen was there of course but there was nothing in it!

Every container, grocery, crockery and cutlery was gone.

They had even taken our trashcan away. They had cleaned us out.

More frightening was the sight of a heap of Rice sitting there in the middle of an empty kitchen and it had a burning candle stuck in its peak!

Man, it was scary...Like a Voodoo practice or something.

Jilani was so scared that he screamed at me ' Don't go there, stupid' when I went a little closer to have a better look.

Surprisingly we had closed our bedroom doors and we were unharmed. Normally burglars here steal VCRS and TV more, both of which were there in my room!

Whew!

Someone told us later that Zambians don't even know what to do with rice and hence had left it back and had used the heap as a stand for sticking the candle in for light to complete their task.

The incident of someone threatening me with a AK 52 had also happened to me a week earlier.

That coupled with this incident helped me make up my mind. I was through with this place. I wanted to go home.

My brother sponsored me a trip to Dubai around that time. It looked too good to leave it alone. I submitted my resignation. They made me go through the entire notice period, No waiver was offered or shown.

Jilani got bored and went back to India for a holiday and kept on extending his leave till I left for India. I never knew if he went back. Bhamra, my immediate boss, resigned and went back to lead the a contented retired life in Baroda.

As the day neared for my departure, Thomas cried a day before. Many eyes were wet too. Including mine. I had undergone a tumultuous life here.

Yes, Zambia had shown me its Good, the Bad and the Ugly faces. In equal measures or not, I could not say. In bearable limits or not, I could not fathom. My family seemed to be crying out for me. That was uppermost in my mind then. I wanted to return for good. Whether it was wise or not, I could not be bothered.

My heart wept twice as I left for the Airport for the last time. Once for Zambia for what it did to me and once for what it did not.

I looked back at Zambia as the flight took to air. My eyes took in the half barren, half green vastness vanishing away fast as we climbed higher. The Nshima, the Chibuku, the Compound, The Mandir, Thomas, Mahender (my friend) and finally my Mitsubishi pickup van all flashed past my mind's eye in a nanosecond and were gone.

Peace.

End.