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“A place to call home”

Mo Tejani writes about three decades of globe-trotting

For many of us, identity is linked to passport, identity card, birthplace or culture. But what would you do if you could not define your sense of self in relation to any of these things? That was the dilemma Mo Tejani found himself in when, at the age of 21, he and his entire family were expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin.

Amin had seized power during a coup in January, 1971. On August 4 the following year, the dictator gave Uganda's Asians (mainly of Indian origin) 90 days to leave. His declared intention was to "Africanise" the country by "cleansing" it of Asians, some 50,000 to 80,000 people who made up the economic backbone of the nation at that time.

For Tejani, who was born in neighboring Tanzania to Muslim Indian parents and raised in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, East Africa was the only home he knew. But now he was no longer welcome there.

This eviction was the launching point for a journey that would take him across five continents, working primarily with NGOs in various refugee projects in Southeast Asia and South America.

His travels, exploits and experiences are now the subject of a memoir called **A Chameleon's Tale: True Stories of a Global Refugee**, which was published this week in Thailand and abroad.

He and his family were only able to take with them what possessions they could carry. His mother, father and seven of his siblings (he is the youngest of nine) left for Vancouver. Tejani and his brother, Phiroz, went to live in England. The next 34 years of his life would also include sojourns in Asia, North America, South America and Australia.

While Tejani says he doesn't regret too much in his life, he lists one of his "missed opportunities" as not smiling or laughing enough. The truth of that statement was hard to credit the day we met, since even the slightest whiff of humor provoked a wide grin and then a laugh that started in his belly and seemed to take over his whole body.

"My nieces and nephews call me 'crazy Uncle Mo', cause they know me as just this guy who shows up from time to time with crazy stories of his travels," said Tejani, now based in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

And it was the effect that these "crazy stories" had on people he met on his travels that provided the impetus for writing the book.

"When you sit around with people from different walks of life you share stories, and the more I told my story, the more people said, 'you should really write about it'. The

thought stuck in my head and then I made two attempts, but at that point in my life parking myself in one spot and disciplining myself to write was very difficult."

The book started out as a work of fiction but Tejani soon found that he couldn't focus on the project. It was then that he decided to tell his own story and in the first person.

"As soon as I switched to my voice it was like a flood. In the course of about four to five months it all poured out of me. I realized that it was more than just a series of anecdotes, it was actually a journey - a journey that's been in my head constantly and subconsciously for a long, long time."

And the journey was a complicated one that took him to the UK and the US during his university days, then off to Thailand with the Peace Corps teaching English and doing voluntary work in refugee camps around Southeast Asia, then back to the US to complete a master's degree in international studies. He later returned to Thailand as country director for an NGO and then did a stint in South America with the Peace Corps.

The chronology of the book is much like his own search for identity and his place in the world – at times meandering in time and place. But Tejani says that this was intentional-given the subject and scope of this first volume.

"I knew I wanted to write about women, refugees, NGOs, Thailand _ but the real story is about a man who's lost his home and who's looking for a new one."

One anecdote describes a trip he made to the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal. At an event where people are prone to take an ultra-nationalist sense of pride in the exploits of their country's athletes, Tejani was faced with an "identity crisis" of sorts.

"This was a real dilemma for me: Who do I root for? What country? But what is it? It's a global sports event, so if I root for the best sportsman or sportswoman, regardless of nationality, then I'm doing the right thing."

A **Chameleon's Tale** is chock-full of stories about Tejani's escapades (a road trip that takes him from California to Argentina), adventures (climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania), and brushes with death (being caught by the tsunami on Koh Surin with his girlfriend). But many of these tales serve to illustrate Tejani's own, at times desperate, desire to find his place in the world.

"Thais often ask, 'Ma jaak nai?' _ Where do you come from? I always say, 'Ma jaak lok' - I come from the world. I'm a human; I'm from this planet; and my religion is mankind.

"There was a time when I envied people who knew exactly what they wanted and what culture or country they belonged to, and life they wanted. I don't any more. Now, I'm just as happy to talk to people who have lived in a small town their whole life, because I can learn a lot from them too. If everyone I talked to was a traveler, it'd be boring, wouldn't it?"

by Karen Rocznik.

As for his own life, Tejani said that even if he hadn't been expelled from Uganda he would eventually have been bitten by the traveling bug; Idi Amin just gave him a push.

"He took away my shackles and gave me the key to freedom that one has by being a refugee; he took away my identity, he peeled it off. It was hard work those first few years, there was a lot of pain, a lot of anger and 'why me?' But over a period of time it changed from 'why me?' to 'lucky me!'"

'**A Chameleon's Tale**' is now available at leading bookshops in Thailand and also via the Internet (www.paiboonpublishing.com). Tejani will be giving a book reading and slide presentation on June 25th 06 at Henry J. Bean's Bar and Grill in Pattaya; it's due to kick off at 10:40am