

MAYOR OF LONDON

The sights, sounds and smells of belonging

By Irene Elizabeth

BACKGROUND

For those coming to London from different countries, it is easy to feel lost in a city made up of almost nine million strangers. Finding ways of building a sense of belonging is crucial in planting roots and feeling welcomed in a new community. This article looks at how London became home to the writer through her finding familiarity and acceptance in the vibrant multiculturalism of a south London market.

Irene Elizabeth is a filmmaker and broadcast journalist with thirty years of experience, mainly working in Africa. She specializes in documentary film, focusing on marginalized communities, advocating for change and educational development. She is a participant on the Refugee Journalism Project, an initiative based at London College of Communication that supports exiled and displaced journalists.

The sites, sounds and smells of belonging



(Photo Credit; Veronica Ortero)

My sense of belonging to London came in the form of Tooting market, south of the capital. Established in 1936, this is one of London's largest indoor markets, where customers can purchase fresh food, arts and crafts, fabrics or music. Although it was over six thousand miles from my home town of Kampala, Uganda, as a newcomer to London, I found comfort and belonging in the exotic sights, sounds and smells of the market stalls. It felt very familiar. Follow one path and my nose would pick up the aromatic earthiness of cinnamon, then on another path the fresh rawness of red snapper laid out on slabs of ice, and on another the sweet stickiness of over ripe mangoes.

From all directions vendors would shout out to passers-by, cajoling them into buying their wares. I discovered that haggling over the price was a universal ritual enjoyed by both market vendor and buyer. Once the price had been agreed, the beautifully woven silk pattern kaftan was stuffed into the buyer's handbag. Everything reminded me of those great Saturday afternoons spent romping through packed markets of Kampala, stopping at stalls, looking for a good bargain.

The desire to feel a sense of belonging is common amongst most people, but it is particularly important for newcomers to a country who are trying to establish roots. We want to forget that we are outsiders, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers; but it is not

easy to forget. You are someone who feels as if you have no country to call home. The sheer loneliness of sitting in a room for days on end with no one to talk to, no family, no friends, nothing familiar to hold close or dear to you, just solitude, can be crushing.

The Survey of Londoners research found that Black and Asian Londoners have the highest rates of belonging to the capital.¹ I can't help thinking that this is a testament to the multicultural spirit of London and the multiple ways we find belonging. For some this comes with being part of community organisations, having strong friendships bonds, family connections, membership of religious or spiritual groups, or collective leisure pursuits. Belonging also builds over a period of time and is by memorable life events like marriage and the birth of children.

For me, it wasn't just the familiar smells and rituals that made me feel a sense of belonging in Tooting Market. It was also the feeling that as an outsider, a foreigner, all were welcomed, irrespective of where you came from. Walking through the main gates, I couldn't help but notice the bunting of national flags hanging from the beams above. My eyes would always scan them looking for my own native land's flag. Sadly, I never saw it. This coming together of global identities continued within the market itself with businesses selling wares from all continents. There were Japanese noodles, Lebanese meze, Mauritian curry, Sri Lankan saris, Portuguese pastries, Australian burgers, Kenyan jewelry, Tibetan art, Halal meat, Guyanese roti, British beef, I could go on.

This inclusiveness reminded me of home: All were welcome and barriers didn't exist. We understood each other's motives. There was no judgement going on, no one was superior or inferior. The market was open to business for all, providing you had the right currency, of course. From the conversations recorded by the London Community Story Research project, feeling as if we belong binds us together and has a positive impact on our lives.² I have to agree. This, alongside the Survey of Londoners research, shows how strongly we identify that belonging with our location. Most Londoners exhibit high levels of belonging to the capital, with 81 per cent saying they belong to the city; and 75 per cent saying they "see their local area as a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together".³

I feel contented and at peace when in a place where there are others who either share a similar background to me, or those that seem genuinely interested. Just being able to be myself, without having to justify my presence to anyone, even to myself; not feeling awkward, but free to be who I am and being accepted for who I am.

I first came to know the area of Tooting when going through a very dark place in my life. I would come for weekly visits to the chemotherapy unit at St. George's Hospital. There is something about going through a rough patch that particularly brings on the need for

¹ Survey of Londoners, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/survey-of-londoners-headline-findings>).

² London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

³ Survey of Londoners, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/survey-of-londoners-headline-findings>).

things around to be familiar and reassuring. Yet, I was far away from everything that was dear to me, having been exiled from my home country of Uganda, Africa.

For me, without the anchor of my family and being far removed from things that were part of my identity, I constantly sought solace in places or people that brought to mind memories or created feelings that made me feel at ease and secure, even if that place was not my native land. Unexpectedly, I found belonging in the busy walkways of Tooting Market.

After several months of treatment, I was fully cured of my cancer. As much as I am grateful to the dedicated medics at my hospital, I can't help thinking that Tooting Market played its own role in my recovery. Having that sense of belonging helped restore equilibrium in my mind, ground me, while at the same time comforted and uplifted me, making me feel safe in the knowledge that all will eventually be well. And indeed, all was, and is well.

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