

THE STORY OF KIROYERA TOURS

The start of Kiroyera tours sprang from a resolve by five sisters to advertise the apparent neglected Lake Victoria. Our home is in Kamachumu 70 km from Bukoba town which lies on the shores of Lake Victoria. Our Mother Ma Winifrida Kalemera (late) was a great proponent of young people of Bukoba area to always come back home after their studies and help develop their home region. She said constantly to us that local parents in our area often deprived themselves to the point of removing iron sheets from the roofs of their dwellings to sell them and pay school fees for their children. The parents then went back to thatching the dwelling with grass in the name of educating their children. It is therefore improper for the children after they are educated to neglect their home areas and disappear to work and develop other places she always lamented.

It was like this: On 21 May 1996, a popular passenger ship plying Lake Victoria waters between Bukoba and Mwanza, known as MV Bukoba tragically sank in the lake killing 1000 people. Shock waves spread all over the world among people who knew the ship and Lake Victoria. Media reports blew everywhere but pictures of the ship were not there for quite a while. It was obvious and clear that awareness of Lake Victoria and its surrounding was really low among international media! As we spoke about this among ourselves in the family, the long low lying call to go back home and work towards advertising the beauty of our homeland and the greatness of Lake Victoria awoke with strong vigour. Mary the initiator of the idea was working in Botswana tourism department at that time, Rose was in Tanzania working with Swiss aid, Restituta and Redempta were in UK and Ediltruda was in USA. The idea begun and thoughts of what, how where exactly and the resources needed were exchanged. Over time the idea became concrete. In early 2001 the company Kiroyera Tours was registered by registrar of companies Tanzania. Mary's contract with Botswana Government ended in April 2002 and she decided she was going back home to Bukoba to run the company.

Reaching on the ground the knowledge of tourism obtained from working in Botswana became the biggest asset. Bukoba at that time was totally unknown on the tourist map on Tanzania. Many people thought this was a crazy idea and surely doomed to fail. So many people asked what tourist attractions there were in Bukoba? The answer was: The beautiful sunset and marvelous shores of Lake Victoria and the islands were potential attraction; friendly people and our intricate culture were attractions too. People often laughed at this answer and said tourism is in the National Parks in Arusha and where big

game is. They were right in a way but time was to prove that Bukoba too was an attraction if it were well advertised. We told people that places in the world that get the most tourist numbers such as Paris, Cape Town and London are not wildlife places, people go there for cultural attractions!

The beginning was tough. All of us were still young mothers or just starting employment. Children needed to go to school, family chores were demanding and distances to travel back home were very long. We were short of capital and as a startup prospects of getting a loan were a far cry. Our father Omulangila Augustine Kalemera had been working as a community development officer before his retirement. He became handy as he was knowledgeable in accounting and office management. He also knew many areas around Lake Victoria and helped with pointing out possible tourist attractions. He was among the first volunteers at Kiroyera Tours. Our mother was the land lord who partitioned a section of her town café in Bukoba overlooking the main market and offered us office space where people could see us easily. Work started. Getting the local community to support our endeavor was important. We participated in forming Kagera Tourism Development Association (KATODEA) which before long became a strong marketing arm of the region, KATODEA made it a point to celebrate World Tourism day every year and this was reported to the ministry in Dar es Salaam. With helpful partners like Dr Kaiza of Botswana and Mr. Dick Persson we opened a private Museum in Bukoba the first Museum ever in the region. It is called Kagera Museum and has attracted many a visitor to Bukoba and many school children from far and near. A staff component of Kiroyera tours begun to grow and excel in handling of Tourists. Volunteers from Europe became a common component of Kiroyera Tours. Visits to Islands did not take long to become a clear attraction especially visits to the nearby Musila Island. Bicycle tours around Bukoba also became popular. In both cases we avoided the expensive route and kept overhead costs very low. All we did was hire bicycles from local people, call a mechanic to inspect their suitability for use on a tour and soon we had many bicycle owners registering at our office to offer the service. A portion of the money the tourist paid went to the bicycle owners. The same went to fishermen and their boats. Fishing is done at night and our tours are done during the day. We rented boats for visits to the Islands and shared proceeds with boat owners. We started opening up places that had waterfalls and caves and many people came to our office to tell about possible attractions which were in their areas. It was very expensive for us to allocate time and money for petrol and the like to do such exploration. After exploration we had to write about the attractions that were suitable and then package them in possible attractive itineraries. But we tried our best and the Ministry of tourism then under Mrs. Zakhia Megji became a big support. A mission from Ministry headquarters came to Bukoba to explore and write about attractions of Kagera region.

The community remained very important to Kiroyera tours and our support expanded to forming two NGOs that would carry the work of supporting orphans resulting from the HIV/AIDS pandemic that had become prevalent in the area for a long time. The NGO is called Heritage Initiative (HI). We also supported formation of Bukoba Disabled assistance Project (BUDAP). The disabled people are victims of polio who were beggars on the street and the project is for developing their economic independence by use of Tourism.

From intensive work in developing tourism in Kagera region Mary got a nomination to The Board of Directors of the Tanzania Tourist Board. This was the opening which now got Kagera on the Tourist map. Kiroyera Tours won a lot of awards for excellence in service, in governance, in innovation, tourism promotion and in business. Writers of guidebooks found Kiroyera tours a remarkable enterprise and many including Lonely Planet, Brandts Guide and the Rough guide continue to hold Kiroyera tours in their various editions.

Income from tourism and numbers of tourists continued rising with years, but it was not enough to grow the company effectively. Kiroyera decided to open branches in areas where the catchment for tourists would be expanded. It now has a branch in Dar es Salaam.

Fifteen years in tourism has allowed Kiroyera tours to grow from offering small cultural tours to become an established provider of educational, conservation and adventure tours across Tanzania and into Uganda and Rwanda. We are proud that our reputation has also allowed us to extend our reach into the large tour group market, and we wrote a new chapter in our story when in 2014 we began providing cruise ship shore excursion in Dar es Salaam and Bagamoyo caring for over 300 clients at one time!

Our story continues to be written, however our values, passion and commitment to our clients and the people, cultures and wildlife of Tanzania will never change. We look forward to the future with great excitement and optimism!

Mary Kalikawe
Managing Director