"Are we refugees?" – Ugandan Asians and the Making of a Refugee Moment

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The figures cut a solemn shape on the runway, saris flowing in the autumn wind, arms filled with young children or bags containing their last possessions. It was September 19, 1972, when the first flight carrying South Asians exiled from Uganda landed at London Stansted Airport. The 193 passengers were greeted by journalists, volunteers and, out of the edge of the photograph frames, protesters, in images which would become emblematic not only of the exodus, but of refugee moments in Britain as a whole.

In the 50-plus years since then, "Ugandan Asian refugees" has become common phrasing to refer to the collective, including by some within the diaspora today, who identify as having been, or being descended from, refugees. The expulsion and forced relocation of 50,000 people undoubtedly echoed a refugee experience.

But this terminology gets to the heart of the Ugandan Asian exodus, as this is a story driven by citizenship, bound up in the shifting sands of post-colonial African governance, British law and international rule through to the implementation of the United Nations Refugee Convention. This seismic "refugee moment" may be better understood as a forced displacement, in which the majority of Ugandan Asians were not in fact refugees in the legal sense, even if they were treated as such and this became an important identity marker.

As a child of the exodus, growing up in Sydney far from its nucleus, my life and multi-national identity had nonetheless been quietly shaped by my family's journey wrought by the end of empire. My maternal grandparents, who had left southern India in the 1950s to take up teaching jobs in the then-British Protectorate of Uganda, spent two decades in Kampala before President Idi Amin ordered them out of the country. They were some of around 28,000 people who came on those planes to Britain, before the family later moved on to Australia.

I grew up with a fascination about these two distant countries – India and Uganda – and a knowledge that my family had been forced to leave one of them. It would take me many more years, deep conversations and visits to both countries to begin to understand the complexities of this history and how it continued to impact my own life.

Imperial Echoes

On August 4, 1972, a year after taking power in a military coup, General Idi Amin stood before troops at a barracks and announced he wanted all Ugandan Asians to leave his country within 90 days. Amin has often been centred in retellings of the exodus, as a singular, sizeable character who changed the course of tens of thousands of lives on a whim. It's an attractive

narrative but overlooks the vast machinations at work behind the exodus, in the long arm of the British empire and questions of nationhood and belonging in post-colonial African states.

Uganda's Asian population had been brought to the country by the British, Amin said in an address to the nation, so they remained in his view, "the responsibility of the British".[2] Ten years into Uganda's independence from British rule, his words evoked questions being asked in the continent's early post-colonial years, in a reckoning with the past and an Africanisation move towards true independence.

Although South Asians had been traveling to East Africa for centuries from their early roots as merchant traders, it wasn't until the British empire moved people like commodities that significant migration occurred to the region. Indian trade and migration were encouraged in light of slow European arrivals and accelerated through indentured labour, which brought up to 40,000 people from British India to construct over 1200 miles of East Africa's railway network, including connecting Mombasa on the Kenyan coast with inland Uganda (Adam, 2016).

Within Uganda, a stereotypical divide-and-rule policy played out in a race and class hierarchy which stratified society with white settlers at the top, South Asians as the intermediary middle class and Black Africans at the bottom. Subservient to the British, but afforded advantages over Ugandans, South Asians held a fragile yet privileged position. It is a complex equation. Doubtless victims of imperialism, they nonetheless participated in a system in which they were given trading advantages that left them owning 90 per cent of the country's businesses at the time of the expulsion, a major cause of ill feeling towards them. Yet they had been positioned in this role during the imperial years, restricted from other spheres and consistently viewed as outsiders. One accusation levelled at the community by Amin, amongst others, was that Ugandan Asians had "kept themselves to themselves" by refusing to integrate with the wider population. In part, a lack of assimilation could also be said to have been set in motion by the colonial structure.

In the years after Britain handed over power to Uganda's new prime minister Milton Obote, South Asians came to be seen in some quarters as either an unwelcome legacy of empire or a convenient scapegoat for any manner of the country's ills. It was Obote who first spoke about their potential departure and years before Amin's diktat, he developed Move to the Left policies which included both restricting private companies which were owned by South Asians and tightening citizenship laws (Hundle, 2018). Citizenship would come to be the differentiator in the coming years.

Refugees and Citizenship

The expulsion of Ugandan Asians rendered a community without a home, forced to leave their former lives behind as they packed small suitcases for a journey into the unknown. In the

modern conceptualisation of a refugee and certainly in the language of the then-British government, it would appear this was a refugee crisis.

The UN's 1951 Refugee Convention legally defined what a refugee was and outlined their rights – the need for which had been made clear by the mass movements precipitated by both World Wars. But although its European focus was broadened by the 1967 Protocol, in part due to the rise of refugees created through decolonisation, the Ugandan Asian expulsion still proved a tricky test case.

Colonial echoes had left Uganda's South Asian community with remote cultural ties to the motherland but more concrete ties of citizenship. Arriving in East Africa during the imperial years had resulted in varied forms of British citizenship – British Protected Persons (BPPs) and Citizens of the UK and Colonies (CUKCs). The system was wilfully complex and in flux thanks a range of new legislation in both countries, which was restricting the access colonial and Commonwealth citizens had formerly had to the UK.

The Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962 was a first step towards limiting their movement, which was solidified in a second, stricter bill in 1968 in the wake of Kenyan migration to Britain. In Uganda, Obote's government responded to these veiled racial laws with the Trade Licensing Act in 1969 and then the Ugandan Immigration Act the year after, targeting South Asian non-citizens.

Although ostensibly offered Ugandan passports at independence, in reality it was bureaucratically challenging for South Asians to obtain citizenship (Bloom, 2026). Some were left with BPP or CUKC status by default, while other families hedged their bets and split citizenship among their members. It was often the head of the house who took on Ugandan citizenship for the business access it afforded them, particularly as the legislative noose tightened against non-citizens through the late 1960s. This would have major consequences in the expulsion.

International Framing and the United Nations

The expulsion is often held up as a moment of British welcome, but this overlooks the government's stark initial efforts to the contrary. This included sending telegrams around the globe asking other countries to assist in resettlement, turning the UK's postcolonial responsibility into a collective, international one.

In managing the framing of the exodus, "a crucial step was to redefine the expellees as refugees rather than UK citizens in public discourse," says Tendayi Bloom, so-called "burden-sharing" for which Prime Minister Edward Heath even privately acknowledged that "a suitable resolution by the United Nations might be helpful" (Cosemans, 2022). Back at home, this was coupled with ensuring the public-facing response was staffed by volunteers, in an attempt to

appease taxpayers in Enoch Powell's era of anti-immigration rhetoric and solidify the impression of a humanitarian response.[3]

As the 90 days played out in Uganda, those with Ugandan passports had been stripped of their citizenship, while the changing laws in Britain meant many with UK passports could not technically access the country. A population who should have been entitled to both Ugandan and UK citizenship could use neither, making them effectively stateless.[4]

But under the UN's 1951 Convention it was hard for them to qualify as refugees, because while they had a "fear of being persecuted for reasons of race or nationality", many were not "outside the country of their nationality", or due to the twin ties could not be said "not have a nationality". While the UK government would eventually fold and accept 27,000 Ugandan Asian arrivals with British papers, the situation was more complex for those without them.

The Geneva Convention had been written with European states in mind, and the Uganda case showed the difficulties when faced with what Ria Kapoor (2025) calls the "seemingly irreconcilable approaches to citizenship within the postcolonial Commonwealth", which were "escalated, largely by the UK, into an international problem for the UN."[5]

Around 5,000 truly stateless Ugandan Asians were still not automatically seen as refugees under the Convention as they had not crossed an international border. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) could only act at the last moment, when it could be said the group could not leave by Amin's deadline, allowing UNHCR to issue travel documents and evacuate them to camps across Europe – as the only Ugandan Asians meeting international legal standards to be recognised as refugees.[6]

Statelessness Versus Semantics

For most of my life, the Ugandan Asian expulsion was something in my origins, but distant and abstract. Few in my generation had heard of the mass movement beyond a passing reference in the film *The Last King of Scotland* and it wasn't taught as part of British history syllabi (thankfully, this is changing). One of the driving factors for my book *The Exiled: Empire, Immigration and the Ugandan Asian Exodus* was to write the history I hadn't seen represented and to show that what was pigeon-holed as a remote, African history was a very British story with present-day relevance.

As I came to researching and writing this book, across both secondary literature and the extensive life interviews I carried out with both those exiled from Uganda, and also the next generations, I found the varying ways different people reflected on their experiences and the terms they used to describe them very striking.

I interviewed a number of people who self-identified as refugees. They had lost their houses and livelihoods and above all the country they called home, most never to return. They may have spent time in former RAF bases dotted around the UK in the temporary camps set up by the Uganda Resettlement Board to house around 22,000 of the arrivals. Lining up to receive canteen food on metal trays, sleeping on bunk beds in shared billets and wearing coats donated to them by the public to ward off the winter chill held all the necessary characteristics of being a refugee.

Some, like my own family, did not feel an identification with the term, or even shied away from an association with it. Feelings of shame and stigma are not unexpected in a time in which migrants and asylum seekers are so often vilified by politicians and press – the word migrant itself bestowing an undeserving agency upon many who desperately seek refuge. Some I interviewed used "refugee" dispassionately, for others it felt like it was a more fully embodied identity, worn with pride and ownership.

Ugandan Asians came to be held up as exemplar refugees, a model minority to whom others would do well to emulate. If a lack of integration had been viewed as a problem in Uganda, perhaps it was natural that the 1972 generation focused on assimilation in Britain, to great effect. Former Prime Minister David Cameron wrote that Ugandan Asians were "one of the most successful groups of immigrants anywhere in the history of the world", while the expulsion's 50th anniversary proved an opportunity for politicians like Boris Johnson to reiterate Britain's generosity in welcoming them, and refugees since. The arrivals – first unwanted, then politicised – continue to be put to work now.

So how should we speak about Ugandan Asians today? Within a widened understanding of the practical application of the word refugee, do the legal definitions ultimately matter? To speak of all Ugandan Asians as refugees irrefutably confuses the understanding of the true refugees of the expulsion, those left stateless. It also overlooks the varying motivations behind the labelling of the expellees as refugees, including the British government's efforts to avoid responsibility for imperial legacies.

But these are imperfect terms, and it is down to each person to decide how they relate to their experience of the exodus. In my writings I choose not to call the Ugandan Asian collective refugees, but I respect when individuals identify themselves this way and use their chosen terminology. It must be left to those who experience forced migration to choose the language that fits their experience – but it is for those of us who study migration to clarify that language's meaning, always remembering to witness how leadership past and present puts history to work for its own purposes, and be ready to call this out, whenever needed.

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Endnotes

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[2] After first announcing his intention to expel the Ugandan Asian population on 4 August, Amin later gave a message to the nation and a press conference which were widely quoted in the international press and from which a number of quotes around the expulsion order originate from.

[3] Becky Taylor has documented the volunteer efforts in Britain, from the reception teams who greeted the Ugandan Asian arrivals at airports to the over 60 voluntary organisations who worked at the resettlement camps, including the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS), the Red Cross and St John Ambulance.

[4] For more on the citizenship status of Ugandan passport holders, see: K. C. Kotecha. 1975. 'The Shortchanged: Uganda Citizenship Laws and How They Were Applied to its Asian Minority', International Lawyer, 9/1.https://scholar.smu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4048&context=til

[5] Ria Kapoor's work demonstrates the complexities of statelessness of Ugandan Asians in India and Sri Lanka who did not meet the UN's definition of refugees.
Tendayi Bloom's recent research into UN documents from 1972 has shown that the UK continued to lobby the UN in the wake of the expulsion, pushing forward the drafting and adoption of a declaration "laundering inequality in citizen rights". After initial appeals to the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities to send a "telegram of remonstrance" to Kampala, this involved the development of the 1985 UN General Assembly Declaration on the Human Rights of Individuals who are not Nationals of the Country in which they live (DHRN).

[6] The UNHCR mission sent planes to countries including Italy, Austria and Spain, where people were housed in transit centres. For further details see Sara Cosemans (2022). Undesirable British East African Asians. Nationality, statelessness, and refugeehood after empire. Immigrants and Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora 40(1–2): 210–239, p. 226.and Lucy Fulford (2023) The Exiled: Empire, Immigration and the Ugandan Asian Exodus. London: Coronet.