

KAMIL IDRIS

Biography*
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When one views the life of Kamil Eltayeb Idris, from his birth in Sudan through his time in Geneva, Switzerland, certain characteristic traits become evident: a reaching out, a search for the new, the unknown, for truth and authenticity, and a work ethic which did not allow him stop for anything. Even from a young age, Kamil exhibited these characteristics, and they helped him to succeed, literally at every stage of his life. Becoming the Director General of WIPO on November 1, 1997, was another step on his life's path, definitely a major one, which reflects and reinforces his search for the new, the unknown, and for truth. The achievement of becoming Director General, and his accomplishments while he held that position, most clearly reflect his relentless sense of the value and meaning of work, and of never, ever quitting until the current task is properly finished.

Kamil was born August 26, 1954, in an old house in the city of Omdurman, one of the three main sections of Khartoum (Khartoum, Khartoum North, and Omdurman), which is considered by many to be the true historic capital of Sudan. It had a village like quality to it, with verdant areas of nature, open spaces and an inviting environment where children could play and explore. From that house, he could see the Nile River. He was also close to the confluence of the White Nile and the Blue Nile rivers.

This is a special area where these two rivers meet and merge into the mighty Nile. From that spot, the Nile flows northward with purpose towards the Mediterranean Sea. It is a place which would have deep and lasting effects on Kamil, visually, aesthetically, symbolically and spiritually. From early on, he saw these two rivers joining, and forming one bigger, stronger river, as metaphor and as one of his early life's lessons, that connective vision and union were more powerful than separation, or aloneness. He also saw the rivers' joining as symbolic of the continuing search for truth, reflective of the power inherent in truth. These early childhood insights, and their memories, prompted Kamil to study philosophy later in his higher level education, a passion which continues today.

Growing up alongside the Nile helped to shape Kamil in several ways—one of which was physically. As a youth, he and his friends would swim in it. From the shore of Omdurman, on the side where he lived, he would swim out to Tuti Island. Mastering the currents, and avoiding the boat traffic and the other challenges which the Nile presented, served as literal life lessons to the young Kamil, mainly concerning what it takes to navigate through life with control, with grace and security, and with not only the thought of surviving, but with the objective of prevailing.

Nearby to the Idris house lived Kamil's grandmother on his mother's side of the family,

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Zainab Mazin. He had a close relationship with Zainab, who, throughout his life in Sudan, offered an additional source of love, security and wisdom, and who often looked after him and watched over him. When he was 16, she taught him one of the most important lessons of his life, among many, that would shape his life for years to come, an incident which is covered below.

He was the youngest of the five children of Amouna Haj Hussein and Eltayeb Idris . His mother's family had, in prior generations, come from Morocco, Egypt and Turkey, and had lived in Sudan for several generations. His father and his father's family had always lived in the Nubia region of northern Sudan.

Kamil's father was a civil servant in the government of Sudan. He worked as a senior administrator in the national railway system, and through that work, traveled throughout the country. Kamil, and his brothers and sister, sometimes accompanied his father on trips. One of the most inspiring of Kamil's travels, even to this day, was a trip he took when he was 5 years' old, through the vast desert to the north of Sudan where he saw historic ruins which reflect the rich cultural heritage of the nation whose land mass constitutes more than one million square miles.

At six years of age, he started his formal education in the public elementary and preliminary school, the same one which his older brothers and sister had attended. He walked to school, approximately a mile, and home again. One of his hobbies at that period of his life was fishing. He and his friends would fish in the Nile, using simple lines and hooks, and when they caught fish, they would often build a fire and cook what they caught, fresh fish for breakfast or lunch that day. These adventures of catching fish, cooking and eating them on the spot fostered in Kamil a sense of respect for nature, and the value in never wasting any food, of catching only enough to eat, and of being aware of the cleanliness of the river and its surrounding environment, including fresh water to drink.

Kamil's subjects in school were the traditional subjects, which included, among others, mathematics, sciences and history. His classes were taught by different teachers, and were taught in the Arabic language, with some taught in English. The students would bring food to eat for breakfast. Sharing was the custom and culture, even at that age. If a student forgot or was unable to bring food, he had not to worry—the others would always share with him. That concept of sharing, which extended beyond food, to notes, to thoughts, to other essentials in life such as clothing, is another lesson Kamil received, at an early age, and carried with him throughout his life, a sense of partnership and shared responsibility for the welfare of others.

At 1:45 on an afternoon in 1960, Kamil was visiting his father, who was in the British Hospital in Khartoum. Kamil was almost 6 years' old. His father got out of bed, and took him to the balcony, where they both looked out over the city. He pointed out a small shop close by, and said "I will acquire this is for you." He promised Kamil a big hug tomorrow, and instructed Kamil to have a good life, and to get a good education. Kamil, accompanied by his mother and the family, left the hospital, and returned home to eat lunch. At 2:30, a family friend arrived at the home, and informed the family that the father had died.

This event had a major impact on Kamil and on his life from that point forward. He intuited that he would have to go forward, essentially alone in life, and build up and rely upon his own courage and strength in order to survive and be successful. He would re-live a somewhat similar scene with his mother, later when he was 16.

At 14, Kamil started working, in addition to his education classes. From that point forward, work would occupy a primary place in his life, as would the concept of work, giving one hundred percent to whatever the task, and not quitting until the job is finished. His first work was as a child laborer, in factories in Khartoum, specifically in factories which made paper, sesame oil, and toothpaste, and in a bookbinding enterprise. He held those jobs while going to school in the mornings, and working in the afternoons into the evenings. That taught him much about life, while he earned small wages.

It was in his last childhood job, working in the bookbinding operation, that his grandmother played a major role in shaping his then, as well as his future, life. They were close, and he saw her often. He had told her about his work in the bookbinding operation. She was inquisitive, then suspicious, and then investigated. She found out that the whole operation, unknown to Kamil, was one which produced counterfeit books, essentially an illegal enterprise. She admonished Kamil that this operation, and even more important, his participation in it, was legally wrong, was religiously prohibited, and was socially unacceptable. Kamil immediately quit his job and refused the wages. But just as important, the lesson from his grandmother in this incident implanted life-long thoughts about the value of works of the mind, that they are precious assets which must be protected from theft, from damage, and must be given proper respect. It was a keen lesson also in right versus wrong which, at age 14, was perhaps the first sign that intellectual property would play a large part in Kamil's life.

It was also just after the bookbinding counterfeit enterprise lesson from his grandmother that Kamil set off on another life-changing series of events, traveling, seeing the world outside of what he knew in Khartoum, and learning about other cultures, other countries and different values. At 16, during the summer, he traveled first by train, from Khartoum, then by boat across Lake Nasser, stopping halfway at Abu Simbel, and continuing on across the lake, and then again by train to Aswan, and then on to Cairo. He most often rode on the top of the train (a ride of more than 24 hours), where it was free; this place on the train was a bit dangerous at times, as the train traveled across the desert under the hot sun at midday, or at night through the desert cold, and as well under dangerous cables. Kamil had little money at that time, so he bargained for passage by assisting the crew, engineers and workers on the boats and on the trains, often preparing mint tea for them, among other tasks. As with all of the other travels in his later life, but most especially on this first trip, he saw and experienced the "outside" world, saw distant sights, encountered different cultures, met other travelers and people of interest, and was confronted by new ideas, different viewpoints and information which then (and even to this day) shaped his life.

After this first trip at 16, Kamil traveled every summer, generally to Cairo, and generally using the same or similar means of transportation. Having become a more experienced world traveler, on these later trips he had become a trader to pay for the trips. He took small quantities

of, for instance, sub glasses, and nuts from Sudan, and traded them in Egypt for cotton bed sheets. On these latter trading trips, he often came back in 4th class on the train, the cost of which he could generally afford because of his trading activities, and at least he could be inside the train.

When he arrived home from his first trip to Cairo, his mother took him aside and informed Kamil that she was seriously sick. In this conversation, she told him that "determination is everything, and that courage comes with determination." She also said that "if you can still hold a pencil, you can still make a mark," and that "even sickness is a state of mind." The only difference here with his mother, from Kamil's traumatic experience of his father's death, is that his mother beat the cancer which she was then fighting, and lived. She continues to live in 2008 as this is written, in the same old house where Kamil grew up close to the Nile River, and on his visits to Sudan, often warmly relives with him those times.

Kamil was the youngest of five children. The oldest was his sister Samira, now a widow who does volunteer humanitarian work. Next in the line of age were his three brothers. All are still alive and living in Sudan. His oldest brother Farid is an administrator for a national organization and a former diplomat; his next older brother Siddig is an engineer in the electricity field. And the brother Izzeldeen directly above Kamil is an administrator for a regional organization. Between Kamil and his brothers and sister, their mother has over twenty grandchildren.

In his late teens, while a student, Kamil took on several different jobs which, in retrospect, shaped the man who became Director General of WIPO. He worked as a journalist, on a free-lance basis, writing articles on theatre, art, metaphysics and philosophy. He was also an actor in live theatre productions. For these endeavors, he earned some wages, but he mainly sharpened skills and senses which would help him succeed in his later life. He studied philosophy during this entire period. His social life was shared mainly with peers and friends who were older than him, a course which may have been shaped by his being the baby of the family.

His grandmother advised him to devote his time to philosophy, sciences and law. She told him that "you can make sand your bed, and sky your cover, but you can never cover the sun with a blanket." At the end of that discussion, Kamil refined her advice to: search always for truth, and do not try to compete with God. Kamil looks back on that and the other advice she gave him as giving him the perspective to look beyond the horizon before his eyes, beyond the classical faculties of life... to get the big picture. She died when Kamil was almost 20.

By the time Kamil's grandmother passed away in 1973, he was concurrently pursuing two separate lines of studies at two separate universities. At University of Cairo in Khartoum, he was studying pure philosophy. At the University of Khartoum, he studied law and jurisprudence. He graduated from both with distinction. Kamil received his LL.B (Honors) on May 1, 1977, from the University of Khartoum, and his BA (Honors) in Philosophy,

Political Science and Economic Theories from the University of Cairo, on (date?). He served as an assistant teacher during these studies, helping undergraduates in philosophy and jurisprudence.

While he was a student at the universities, he also traveled extensively when he found the time, to Turkey, Eastern Europe, Greece and the United Kingdom. Kamil stayed in the United Kingdom for a few months, in the village of Whitney, which is in the suburbs surrounding Oxford University. While there, he worked in a restaurant, cleaning dishes, and lived in a basement apartment with very little heat, which made that winter, a cold one, also quite memorable.

While studying and teaching, Kamil sat an examination for the foreign service of Sudan, and passed with distinction, at which point, early 1977, he was accepted into the Sudan Institute of Public Administration in Khartoum, which he attended for a year. Classes were held during the day and, at night, he continued to serve as a part-time professor.

Towards the end of his year in the Sudan Institute of Public Administration, he applied for a scholarship to attend Ohio University in Athens, Ohio (the oldest university in the mid-west, founded in 1804), to study for a Master's degree in International Affairs, with emphasis in International Law. He was accepted into that program. Although it was a one-year program, he finished his study requirements in 4 months, and received a Master of Arts degree in International Affairs on June 10, 1978.

At the University of Ohio, just after Kamil arrived to start his studies there, an incident occurred which taught him another life lesson. He arrived in Ohio late, after the classes had already started. His International Law class professor, a renowned individual, refused to seat him in the class. University officials told him to seek another class with another professor, as this professor had a very difficult personality. Kamil actually sought out a possible transfer to another university. He met with the professor, who agreed to allow him to attend the class, on a trial basis. Kamil showed up early at the next class on Monday morning, and was eventually joined by the other students in the class.

The professor arrived and began his lecture, focusing on the *North Sea Continental Shelf* case, and asked the students present if they knew anything about it. After calling on all the other students in the class, who were stumped by the case, the professor finally asked Kamil about it. He stood up, and spoke for about 7 minutes on the case. When he finished speaking, the professor expelled him from the class. Kamil again considered transferring to another university, completely lost as to why this turn of events might have happened to him.

After a week of mulling over the situation, Kamil saw a note on the message board for the class, requesting him by name to personally come to the class the next Monday, which he did. The professor entered the class, and announced that the day's lecture would be, not about International Law, but about "absent minded professors." He admitted that he was wrong, that

Kamil was right, and that from that point forward, Kamil would be his teaching assistant, and would be paid \$300 per month for his work in that position. The professor then left the classroom, with directions that Kamil would give the lecture that day.

Kamil drew a large life lesson from this bizarre episode, which ironically occurred within his first few weeks in America: that courage and self-confidence were indispensable in life, and that one must put aside fear and self-doubt. Also, he saw that it is always necessary to observe first, to understand one's surroundings, the situation one is in, before taking any action.

His stay in America was another part of his life which had a deep impact on him (as it does on many foreign students who go to America to study). While he was there, another event which had deep impact on him was the historic visit of President Sadat to Jerusalem, an event he experienced from afar but which demonstrated to him the lengths and courage required to break precedent and seek true (global) peace.

When he finished his courses at Ohio University, ending up with close to a 4 point average, he returned to Sudan, to Khartoum, and was re-engaged by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His responsibilities there were first, in the Arab Department, then in the Research Department, and then in the Legal Department. During his time there, Kamil was elected to the Legal Experts Committee of the Organization for African Unity (which is currently known as the African Union). He passed his bar examination, and was admitted as an Advocate and Commissioner for Oaths. During this time, he also taught part-time as a professor of law and philosophy.

During this post-Ohio period in Khartoum, he often visited his old house close to the Nile River, where he had spent his youth. He also started work on his doctoral thesis.

In 1979, the Sudan Foreign Affairs department offered Kamil a posting to the country's mission in New York City, a posting which he welcomed, having visited New York while studying in Ohio, and which would have afforded him many opportunities for further studies and new cultural experiences. However, it was not to be, as the department shortly changed its mind, and requested that the New York City post be given to a married person, which Kamil was not at the time. Instead, the department offered Kamil a posting to the country's mission in Geneva, Switzerland, where he remained until to the end of the period.

At the Sudan Mission in Geneva, Kamil was initially a Third Secretary, then Second Secretary, then Vice Consul and Legal Advisor to the Mission. In September of 1979, Kamil attended his first meeting at WIPO, where, ironically, the Mission of Sudan, along with two other Geneva Missions (Saudi Arabia and Nigeria) plus the World Bank, were renting offices in the WIPO premises, which the Organization was not then able to completely fill with its own staff. In that first WIPO meeting, of the Coordination Committee and the General Assembly, the Director General, Dr. Bogsch, was proposing to replace the existing DDG, Mme Laubway (??) of Côte d'Ivoire, with Mr. Marino Porzio of Chile. Kamil observed everything, especially the

strong man leading the Organization. Kamil did not meet him, nor interact with him during that meeting, but did receive an in-depth introduction to the Organization he would lead several years later. Mr. Porzio was ultimately approved as the new DDG by the end of the meetings.

As WIPO staff increased in number, the Sudan Mission moved from the WIPO premises to new offices. Kamil thus left the WIPO building for the new offices of the Mission, but was destined to return a few years later in a different capacity.

One of the first of his major achievements in Geneva was when he was elected as spokesman for the Group of 77 Countries (developing countries, mainly before UNCTAD, but also WIPO), and for the African Group, where he put forth the Groups' positions on such subjects as technology transfer, business practices, and economic development. This was a big opportunity for a young diplomat to work with Ambassadors and high-level officials. He handled the position in such a way that not only were his contacts and relationships growing, but also so that the international community in Geneva was getting to better know him.

Kamil's activities, and portfolio, in respect to UNCTAD and WIPO, in 1979 and 1980, looked a lot like the Development Agenda on which WIPO has recently focused, demystifying IP and bringing its benefits to all developing and least developed countries. He recalls saying to his colleagues back then that "IP is foreign to no culture and native to all nations."

In 1980, the Mission sent Kamil to New York City to represent the country at the Law of the Sea Conference, where he was elected as the Rapporteur for the 3rd Committee on Marine Scientific Research. He spent three months on that assignment. The meeting ultimately ended successfully, creating at a later stage the Seabed Authority which currently operates in Jamaica.

In 1981, Mr. Porzio, at the request of Dr. Bogsch, met with Kamil, and asked him to come and work at WIPO. Kamil said that he was not interested in making such a change at that time. Six months later, Mr. Porzio again asked Kamil, come to work at WIPO, and he again said no. In September of that year, Dr. Bogsch personally requested to meet with Kamil, and in the Director General's office, asked him to work at WIPO—this time, Kamil indicated that he would reflect on it. Several weeks later, without response, Dr. Bogsch requested that Kamil apply for a position at WIPO, as P-4, Senior Program Officer, in the Technical Cooperation Division. Kamil applied, and won the competition. His first day on the job at WIPO was on January 31, 1982. Shortly after starting work at WIPO, the Technical Cooperation Division was divided into three separate units: the Africa and Western Asia, the Asia and Pacific, and the Latin America and Caribbean divisions. Kamil was placed in the Africa and Western Asia division, and worked under Mr. Ibrahima Thiam.

Three years later (date), a new division was created, the Arab Bureau, and a competition was held for its first Director. Kamil entered that competition, and was the successful candidate. He thus went from P-4 to D-1. His work as Director of the Arab Bureau took him to all 22 Arab countries. He dealt with all of the regional organizations in that part of the world, including

ALECSO, ISESCO, the League of Arab States, and the Federation of Arab Scientific Research Councils, among others. He also regularly dealt with Ambassadors and Ministers in that position.

Kamil's relationship with Dr. Bogsch was, as Kamil remembers it, "a pleasure, but not always easy. Dr. Bogsch was brilliant, was always thoroughly prepared for any meeting or activity, and was a real leader, by any definition. His style was to ask questions and get as much information as possible before taking action. As a result, those around him had always to be prepared. Often, one did not know in advance what the subject(s) was going to be--but nevertheless, Dr. Bogsch always expected those closest to him to be prepared. I learned much from him." Dr. Bogsch had another side, which was not too well known, and that was his family side. Kamil remembers him as quite paternal to those closest to him.

While working at WIPO, as was his custom throughout his life, Kamil simultaneously pursued other activities of note. In the early 1980's, he enrolled at the University of Geneva in a doctoral program in International Law, and was graduated, with distinction, with a Doctorate (Ph.D) on August 17, 1984. Along the same lines, in 1991, he was appointed as a Member of the United Nations International Law Commission (ILC), a position in which he served until 1996. As part of his work in that position, he was elected Vice-Chairman in 1993, and as well, served on the ILC Working Group on drafting the Statute of the International Criminal Court. He was re-appointed to an additional term on the ILC, from 1996 to 2000.

In 1993, Dr. Bogsch asked Kamil if he would like to be promoted to D-2. Kamil responded then that he was not interested at that time, thinking that such a promotion would be his last at WIPO. He had his eye on a DDG position, even back then. Later in that same year, Dr. Bogsch proposed to the Coordination Committee two candidates for the second DDG position (François Curchod was the other incumbent DDG), both of which were not accepted.

After those two unsuccessful nominations, he approached Kamil about accepting the DDG position; Kamil responded, "Give me two weeks before I answer." In those two weeks, Kamil met with most of the Member States' representatives, and firmed up support, so that when he went back to Dr. Bogsch to agree to be nominated, he already knew he would be approved. Upon Dr. Bogsch's nomination, Kamil was unanimously approved as DDG, and served his first day as the new DDG on July 29, 1994. Within three years of that date, he would run for Director General of WIPO, and become the new Director General on November 1, 1997.

In 1985, Kamil married Azza Mohyeldeen Ahmed, whom he had known since his youth in Khartoum. The couple settled in Geneva, where Kamil then worked at WIPO. The couple today has five children, whose ages are, as this is written: Mohammed, 20; Dinas, 17; Dalia, 15; Dahd, 12; and Mumin, 7. The first three are medical students in Sudan, while the latter two attend the International School in Geneva.