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Ghost Town

By Andrew Rice

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NAMATABA, Uganda–A Ugandan man's home is not just his castle, it is his child. It begins life as an empty plot of land. On this *tabula rasa*, the man endeavors to imprint his aspirations, in the form of beds and bathrooms and walls. He raises the house with love and patience, saving his shillings and building it bit by bit. First he excavates the land and lays a foundation. Then he nurtures it with bricks and mortar. He lays a roof and installs windows. Over the years, as the man gains stature and substance, the home grows too, mirroring his rise in the world. It gains more rooms, running water, electricity. The man expands, refines, expands, refines. Sometimes he rests. But he is never finished.

Julius Odwe's home is located in the village of Namataba, Wakiso District, just outside the city limits of the Ugandan capital of Kampala. It is a two-story turquoise-trimmed brick bungalow with three bedrooms and a garage. The detached wing of servants' quarters out back and the satellite television dish that pokes from his roof let you know that Odwe is a prominent man. A broad-shouldered 47-year-old, he is the second-ranking officer on Uganda's police force.

Odwe designed his house himself, and did a lot of the masonry work. The feature he's proudest of is his rooftop porch, which provides a fine perch from which to view Namataba.

"Those green roofs, all these big houses, they have all come up since I have been here," Odwe said as he stood on his porch one recent Sunday afternoon, looking over a vista of whitewashed houses tucked snugly behind walls topped with jagged glass.

Five years ago, when Odwe moved to town, Namataba was little more than a sleepy farming settlement. Now it is going the way of villages from Wakiso to Westchester: Farms are being subdivided into housing plots and families are moving in. In less than a decade, Namataba's population has swollen from a few hundred to more than 2,000.

The new residents are mostly middle-class refugees from Kampala, where the population has more than doubled in the past two decades, from 450,000 in 1980 to over 1.2 million today. Kampalans have the same gripes as city-dwellers everywhere: traffic is awful, crime is getting worse, people aren't as civil as they used to be. Ugandans think of themselves as country folk anyway; few Kampala residents are more than a generation or two separated from rural life, and even the most confirmed city-dwellers tend to have a house back in their ancestral village. In Namataba, the new suburbanites found a life reminiscent of the country with all the amenities of the city. The land was cheap and the schools were good. It had safe, quiet, banana-tree-lined streets.

Then, about 18 months ago, something happened that very nearly ruined Namataba's carefully-built suburban idyll. A new neighbor came to town, one so alien—so otherworldly—that it threatened to turn the village into a place of misery and plummeting property values. Into a ghost town, really.

Odwe first noticed something was amiss when a high concrete wall went up

In the spring of 2002, Regina Mukiibi started renovating her brother's old house in Namataba. Julius Odwe, a neighbor, took pictures of the construction from his rooftop porch. Normally, no one would have stood in the way of her project. But Mukiibi was building something that seemed bizarre and terrifying: a funeral home. (Photo courtesy of Julius Odwe.)

along the property line separating his place from his rear neighbor's. The house's owner, Fred Mukiibi, had died four years before. Mukiibi had been a businessman—an undertaker. His company, the first of its kind in the country, coordinated "memorable and magnificent" burials, for a fee. He had also been a friend of Odwe's. "He left some children, who were also like my own children," Odwe said.

After Mukiibi's death, the house had passed to his sister and business partner, Regina. Now Regina appeared to be renovating. Peering over the wall from his porch, Odwe could see dump trucks and laborers at work. This in itself would hardly be cause for alarm: Uganda is a country under constant construction, and home improvement is something close to a national pastime. But the construction workers doing the renovation were locals, and they were telling strange tales. From what they said, Regina Mukiibi wasn't planning on moving into her brother's house. Instead, she was turning it into something that seemed bizarre and terrifying to many in Namataba: a house not for the living, but for the dead. She called her project a "funeral home."

The people of Namataba saw no shortage of reasons to oppose the funeral home. "Our area, it is so residential," said Eliezier Lukoda, the chairman of Namataba's elected village council. Local residents conjured nightmare visions of their tree-lined streets clogged with funeral traffic; of their placid days pierced by the wailing of mourning relatives; of their natural springs polluted with embalming fluids. Most of all, though, they could not escape a nagging fear of an invisible annoyance, an apprehension that went to the heart of African beliefs about death and the afterlife. They wondered that Mukiibi's hearses might be bringing not just cold, stiff corpses to their village, but spirits that were very much alive. They worried these unwanted spectral visitors might make trouble in the neighborhood.

Over the course of the next year, Namataba would be the scene of an intense debate, one that pitted the villagers' fears against Regina Mukiibi's beliefs, which were grounded in two other principles much-treasured in Uganda: That a property owner has a right to build whatever she likes on her property; and that "development," in the form of adopting western customs and ways of thought, is both desirable and inexorable. Mukiibi would come to see the debate as a battle between progress and superstition.

Needless to say, things got nasty. There were angry public meetings. There were shoving matches and insults and a near-riot. There were accusations of political corruption and police misbehavior. In the end, Uganda's minister of health had to step in and sort out the controversy.

"If they were building a shop, nobody would have been bothered," Odwe said. "If they were building a hostel for students to live in, nobody would have cared. But people said, 'You will be dealing with dead bodies!'"

* * *

Regina Mukiibi is not your stereotypical undertaker: dark-suited, solemn, male. She is not your touch-feely, "Six Feet Under" type either. She is a beefy woman of 48, with thick arms, a boxer's square chin and a pugilistic spirit. The latter quality caused her a fair amount of trouble through the funeral-home debate. In a profoundly chauvinist society, where women traditionally kneel to greet men, Mukiibi has proved herself unafraid to kick a few in the knees.

"She's a very, very tricky woman," said William Sitenda Ssebalu, Namataba's member of parliament and one of Mukiibi's chief antagonists. "Very arrogant."

Even Mukiibi's defenders say that she might have helped her cause had she been a tad more diplomatic. At various times over the course of the debate, she characterized the people of Namataba as illiterates, morons and drunkards. She views herself as a modernizer, a missionary, and she doesn't have much time for Ugandans who won't forsake their outdated African traditions, and embrace the American way of death.

"There is an aspect of backwardness in our people," she told me. "The government treasures this project. But

there are many idlers around. They fear ghosts. They are very, very primitive."

Mukiibi believes Uganda needs a funeral home. The country has one of the highest mortality rates in the world, about 17 deaths for every thousand people, more than double the rate in the United States. But where others see only tragedy, she sees opportunity: to help bereaved families, and to make a tidy profit doing it. Undertaking may be an unremarkable profession in America, but it was an entirely foreign concept when Mukiibi's family introduced it to Uganda, where the deceased's mourning family was traditionally responsible for every aspect of his send-off, from preparing the body, to purchasing a handmade wooden coffin, to digging the grave.

"You see, death comes with a lot of pressure, a lot of agony and all that," Mukiibi said. "We take over."

Ugandans certainly spend an inordinate amount of time going to funerals. Take a representative month here. (The time I was working on this article.) Take a representative sample of around ten people. (The number I extensively interviewed.) Four of my interview subjects, nearly half, had a close family member die during that time.

One of them was Ssebalu. One night shortly after I last talked to him, his infant son was put to sleep under a heavy blanket. The infant suffocated in the night. I attended the funeral, which took place the next day. It was a huge affair, befitting Ssebalu's status as a member of parliament. There was a memorial service at his home. Then several hundred people packed into private cars or minibuses, or climbed on the back of trucks, to go to the family's burial ground a few miles away. Family members lowered a tiny coffin into a grave at the foot of an avocado tree.

If the statistics hold true, such scenes will be repeated about 400,000 times this year in Uganda. Despite the fact that the country is (mostly) at peace for the first time in decades, the economy is growing at a brisk clip, and the quality of medical care is slowly improving, life expectancy today is just 46 years, exactly what it was in 1970.

Uganda's fatal flaws are legion: malnutrition, malaria, poor roads, poverty. But AIDS is the main culprit. The disease has ravaged sub-Saharan Africa. An estimated 84,000 Ugandans died of it in 2001. Under President Yoweri Museveni, who came to power in 1986 just as the epidemic was exploding, Uganda has made admirable progress in reducing the percentage of its people infected with HIV. Schoolchildren are taught about the disease and condoms are readily available, if sporadically used.

Still, there will be no corpse shortage for some time to come: Out of Uganda's population of 24 million, an estimated 1.5 million people are infected with HIV today. Many of them are rich or middle class. Men with money and power in Africa—like everywhere else—find sexual partners much easier to come by. So do the small but growing number of Ugandan women who possess money and power in their own right.

Fred Mukiibi, Uganda Funeral Services' founder, was an entrepreneur. He knew a growth industry when he saw one. In 1997, he started Uganda Funeral Services. He invited Regina, his older sister, to join him.

"He had the vision," Regina said.

Fred, an ex-seminarian, was trained as a lawyer. Regina had worked in a bank. For the five years prior to opening Uganda Funeral Services, the two of them had operated a tour company together. In their travels, they had seen the way funerals were conducted in Europe, the United States and South Africa.

The Mukiibi family opened their funeral business on the ground floor of a rundown building next to Kampala's

The pugnacious Regina Mukiibi, outside the parlor of her funeral home. "We thought people would appreciate our innovation," she said. They didn't.

taxi park. They weren't equipped to store or embalm bodies, the way those overseas undertakers did. But they could sell all the accoutrements of a western funeral. They imported fancy coffins. They hired out professional gravediggers and pallbearers. They rented out hearses—black minibuses with red sirens on top, emblazoned with the company name.

Today, Uganda Funeral Services' offices see a steady stream of gloomy-faced visitors, who pass pastel floral arrangements on display in the lobby and lacquered mahogany coffins stacked along the hall to take seats on tatty couches in Regina Mukiibi's office. The room is low-lit, with wall-to-wall dark red carpeting. The proprietress is a devout Catholic, and she has decorated the walls with religious iconography, including a watercolor of the Last Supper and a Virgin Mary clock. Above her desk, at the far end of the room, is mounted a framed photograph of her brother Fred shaking hands with Pope John Paul II.

Uganda has one of the highest death rates in the world, mostly due to AIDS. For the families left behind, death usually means a trip to a roadside coffin maker. Here, one stands next to his wares in a Kampala market. Regina Mukiibi aims to put an end to a la carte *funeral planning at least for those families affluent enough to pay her fee.*

"The ceremony is so colorful, it reduces on the terror," Mukiibi told me one recent morning as she flipped through a thick picture album of funerals organized by the family firm: Suited, gloved pallbearers carrying coffins; famous mourners laying wreaths; elaborate concrete tombstones. In one photograph, President Museveni himself was standing by a graveside. Mukiibi pointed to the coffin. "That is the mother of His Excellency," she said.

In the beginning, Uganda Funeral Services mostly catered to expatriates and the extremely well-to-do. But Uganda is a status-conscious society. Middle-class social climbers now have the option of buying the "Executive Funeral Package," which is essentially an insurance plan. Policy holders pay a yearly premium, and get the assurance of a proper burial. For 20,000 shillings ($10) *per-annum*, benefits include a coffin, death certificate, hearse and food for the mourners. The Gold Plan, which costs 270,000 shillings ($135) a year, includes such frills as embalmment, an autopsy and a handsome, tile-lined grave.

Before the Mukiibi family came along, Ugandan funeral planning had always been an *a la carte* affair, put together on the fly by grieving family members. Typically, when a Ugandan dies his body is immediately brought back to his home, where his extended family gathers. The family elders convene a funeral committee. (Ugandans love committees.) Delegates are assigned such tasks as buying a coffin, arranging for refreshments and finding a truck to transport the body to the family's ancestral burial ground, which may be some distance away. As word of the death spreads, friends and neighbors stop by the house to view the body, and to contribute *mabugo*, or mourning money, which is supposed to go towards financing the funeral.

Indigenous African religions were based on ancestor worship, and respect for the dead is still one of the fundamental tenets of Ugandan society. A dead person's family is supposed to perform elaborate burial rituals, which vary from tribe to tribe. The Baganda, for instance, say that the body should be ceremonially cleansed with the damp fibers of a banana tree, and wrapped in cloth made from soft, spongy bark. ("It absorbs all the fluid and so preserves the body," said Dr. Henry Wabinga, a pathologist at Makerere University's medical school.) After the body is buried, mourning family members must camp near the grave overnight to keep their loved one's spirit company.

The funeral itself is a huge event. Because people have such far-reaching and close-knit social networks, a service for a prominent Kampalan may draw hundreds of distant uncles and cousins, clansmen and tribesmen, village friends and town friends, schoolmates and workmates. In more remote areas, the deceased person's entire village may well show up to see him off.

In theory, preparing the body and planning the funeral serves a psychological purpose for the bereaved family. "To be close to the dead is a way of accepting that the person has died," Wabinga said. But Fred Mukiibi thought that urbanized Ugandans, being as harried as professionals anywhere, might see the appeal of hiring an undertaker. Many of them secretly chafed at the funeral-planning responsibility, which seemed an onerous

task at an awful time. Uganda families, like families everywhere, aren't as close as they used to be: Where once everyone lived in a single village, now relatives may be spread from Kampala to Boston. And the old burial rituals didn't make much sense to a generation of Ugandans reared wearing European styles, watching English soccer and listening to American hip-hop.

"This is a fast-urbanizing place. The old ways cannot continue," said Dr. Jacinto Amandua, a ministry of health official who devised an official government policy advocating the establishment of funeral homes in Uganda. "My children, I don't think they know what I do in the village."

This was certainly true for my friend Olive, a marketing executive in her twenties. She told me that when her mother died recently, she was far too emotional to handle the complicated preparations entailed in hosting hundreds. "In the village, it might be all right," she said. "But not in Kampala." Olive called Uganda Funeral Services.

"Modern society wants something that saves time," said Matthew Kibuuka, Uganda Funeral Services' general manager. At his company, he said, "you only ask how much you pay, and then we solve the problem."

To traditionalist Ugandans, this businesslike approach to death seemed ghoulish. How could someone profit from the passing of their loved one? What kind of family would hand their relative's body over to a stranger?

"New things are normally opposed," said Kibuuka who, in contrast to his boss, looks *exactly* like an undertaker. (Gray suit, Rotary Club lapel pin, breviary on his desk.) The way Kibuuka sees it, you can't fight progress. "We used to dress in barkcloth, but the moment we saw this more beautiful and suitable clothing, we changed. Certainly, these things are done culturally just because nothing better is known."

This year, Mukiibi estimates, the family company will organize more than 100 funerals. It has opened a branch office in the western town of Mbarara, and there is talk of further expansion to Jinja and Kigali, the capital of neighboring Rwanda.

Sadly, Fred Mukiibi did not live to see his vision fulfilled. He died in 1998, at the age of 33, after what Regina described as a long illness. The family firm organized his funeral. It was, everyone later agreed, a very elaborate, dignified and modern affair.

After her brother's death, Regina Mukiibi assumed control of the Uganda Funeral Services. She began thinking of creative ways to continue expanding the business. Building a funeral home seemed the logical next step. She and her brother had seen them in their travels. Working from that western model, she envisioned a large facility with space to properly display coffins and wreaths, and a sitting room suitable for viewings. It would have a refrigerated "cold room," where bodies could be stored, to give overseas relatives a chance to get home for their loved one's funeral. Perhaps, she thought, the company could even embalm bodies on-site, eliminating the middlemen at hospital mortuaries.

"We are committed to answer the national challenge to modernization," Mukiibi told a newspaper reporter around the time she unveiled her project.

And where would she locate this funeral home? That was the best part of Mukiibi's plan. She already owned an empty building that seemed perfect for the purpose: Her brother's house in Namataba.

* * *

My first year in Kampala, I lived on Naguru Hill, a quiet neighborhood toward the outskirts of Kampala. To get to my house, you ascended a lousy dirt road, which wound past gnarled trees and patches of wildflowers. At first, I thought the place felt isolated. But after a while, I grew to appreciate coming home after a long hot day in the city to a place that felt insulated from frustration and disorder. It was home.

Then, one day about a year ago, men with machetes came to my hill. They cut down the wildflowers along the road, uprooted the trees, and burnt away the underbrush. Not long after that, great earth-moving vehicles lumbered up the road. They cut a huge gash in the orange soil of the hillside. The land they were tearing up had been city-owned, and was supposed to be reserved from development. But when I asked around, I discovered that the city council had recently cut a smelly land deal with a local tycoon. He was building a headquarters for his television station on the property, along with a massive antenna.

Once the construction project started, Naguru Hill was no longer quiet. During the days, dump trucks and backhoes blocked the route to my house. Periodically, large boulders dislodged by the construction would tumble down the hill and into the road. In the rainy season there were mudslides.

I felt angry. I felt violated. It wasn't so much the mud or the noise that bothered me. It was the feeling that the life I had constructed for myself was being upended by forces over which I had no control. How dare he? This was *my* neighborhood.

People in Namataba felt the same way when the funeral home came along. They were proprietary about their neighborhood. They took pride in the pricey private schools that opened when all the professionals moved to town. They valued the feeling of security that came from living down the street from a deputy police chief like Julius Odwe. ("People are happy," he said. "If

A road through Namataba. *Over the past few years, the village, which is on the outskirts of Kampala, has swollen with refugees from the bustling city. When the suburbanites came, good schools, running water and businesses followed. "The plots around the roadside here became very expensive," Julius Odwe said. The funeral home seemed a threat to everything they had built.*

there is a crime, they just call me.") They rejoiced when running water was extended to the village five years ago. They prized the convenience of the new shops that popped up along the paved road that skirts the village: Jasi Fashion Designers; Master Dry Cleaners; the Angel Beauty Salon. There was even a movie theater of a sort, the New Line Cinema and Sports Centre, a dirt-floored, clapboard building with wooden benches, satellite television and a VCR.

Property values were rising fast, and that seemed certain to continue—at least until Regina Mukiibi came to town. Her funeral home threatened to upset the comfortable habitat people had worked so hard to build in Namataba. They got scared and angry. They decided to fight back.

In America, these kinds of development dustups are so common that we have created an acronym to describe them: NIMBY, or "not in my backyard." When I was a newspaper reporter in the suburbs of Philadelphia, I covered my fair share of NIMBY disputes. There was a certain formula to them: a rapacious developer, a worried citizenry, a beset town council. Inevitably, the stories culminated in an angry, endless town meeting. One of my favorite such disputes involved a proposal to build a tower for cellular phone transmitters in Marple Township. The good people of Marple, scientific evidence be damned, were convinced it would emit cancer-causing cosmic rays. They hectored the town supervisors until they voted the project down, even though in doing so the supervisors were technically breaking federal law. Another long-running feud pitted a group of wealthy homeowners against a neighbor they described, with the apocalyptic vehemence of Patrick Henry, as a traffic-causing, clamor-creating, threat to Lower Merion Township's way of life. What was this wicked neighbor? A nightclub? A shopping mall? A group home for the deinstitutionalized mentally ill? No: an art museum.

Through the spring of 2002, the residents of Namataba worked themselves into a NIMBY-eqsue lather about Regina Mukiibi's funeral home. People repeated all sorts of rumors about what she was building on her brother's property. Then, in late May, Namataba's village council received a letter from Mukiibi. It read in its entirety: "We wish to introduce ourselves to you as Funeral Undertakers in Uganda. We have established a Funeral Home at [Namataba] well equipped with all that is required for the purpose. We therefore request your maximum cooperation at all times."

The letter's terse tone suggested Mukiibi considered her project a *fait accompli*. Indeed, she had already spoken to local officials in Wakiso District, who were enthusiastic about her plans. The reasons why her government allies were so acquiescent would later become a matter of much speculation, but Mukiibi said the reason was simple: She was bringing jobs to Namataba. Plus, she had many friends within Kampala's elite ruling circles. She had buried their relatives.

"The support of certain people in the government, I think it blindfolded her," Odwe said.

At first, the local opponents of the funeral home were determined but leaderless. In Odwe, they found a champion. As a police bigwig, he was a man powerful enough to go toe-to-toe with Regina Mukiibi. Moreover, he had a reputation for honesty and rectitude—which was surprising, considering that he was a Ugandan cop. In 2000, a commission charged with investigating a force notorious for its venality and corruption found Odwe to be that rare thing: an "exemplary" officer, who was "truthful, honest and respectful."

On the recent Sunday when I visited Odwe at his home in Namataba, he was in a relaxed mood. Instead of his usual olive uniform, the deputy police chief was wearing black jeans, a beige shirt that was open at the collar and a round floppy-brimmed hat to ward off the brutal sun. We sat in his garden, where chickens and guinea fowl wandered among exotic trees. Odwe has a university degree in forestry. He identified each of the trees by both their Latin and African names,

adding that this one's leaves eased stomach ailments, or that one's scared off snakes.

As we talked, a friend of Odwe's happened to drop by the house. He and the man spoke gravely for a moment in an African tongue.

"You know, I lost my father two weeks ago," Odwe told me when the man left. His friend had been offering condolences. Odwe said he had buried his father himself. In keeping with the traditions of his tribe, the family members had kept the body at home before the funeral, cleansing it with herbal mixtures and wrapping it in a white cotton cloth.

Julius Odwe on his porch, September 2003.

Nevertheless, Odwe said that he was not opposed to funeral homes as a matter of principle. The idea is a good one, he told me. Advanced. He just thought Regina Mukiibi should have located it somewhere else—that is, not in his backyard.

"The objective is not bad, but what was being contested was the *modus operandi*," he said. He considered Mukiibi's approach to have been arrogant and highhanded. The way the people of Namataba saw it, she was an outsider who cared little about whether their village remained livable.

"They did not take the interest of the local people to be very paramount," he said. "They simply assumed that somebody has the land, and somebody can do anything with it."

* * *

Odwe was right. That was exactly what Regina Mukiibi thought.

"It is my land," she once blurted out to me in exasperation. "I should do with it what I want."

In fact, she had every reason to expect that she would be able to build her funeral home. In Uganda, the balance of power between developer and the populace is tipped decidedly in favor of the developer. Ugandans are fanatical about land. It represents a person's source of sustenance. It is the measure of his wealth and the place he will likely be buried when he dies. It is proof that he is a "serious person," as Ugandans say. The government dares not tax it. Some towns have zoning regulations, but they are widely ignored.

Namataba, being a very new community, wasn't even zoned. But the residents did have one weapon at their disposal: Their village council. Grassroots democracy has been one of the truly revolutionary innovations of President Museveni's 17-year rule. Once, all power in the villages belonged to local chiefs, who often ruled like mini-despots. Museveni replaced the chiefs with elected councils, which are supposed to represent "face-to-face, participatory, community-based politics," writes Ugandan political scientist Mahmood Mamdani. Today, there are an estimated 45,000 such village councils nationwide, with some 400,000 elected officers.

The fight over the funeral home would be a test of whether Museveni's local-government reforms were real or just window-dressing. Mukiibi had decided to make an end-run around Namataba's village council. She hadn't bothered, either, with such niceties as submitting building plans or an environmental-impact statement to local authorities. Instead, she was relying on her powerful government friends to push the project through.

On June 2, 2002, a week after Mukiibi's letter demanding "maximum cooperation" arrived, Namataba's village council held a panicked public meeting. One after another, village residents raised the alarm about the death house going up in their midst.

The council's decision was unanimous: The funeral home project must be stopped. The council fired off a letter to Uganda Funeral Services ordering the company to halt the project.

Mukiibi ignored the letter. Construction of the funeral home went on. Odwe, who knew about surveillance, started tracking the development's progress from his rooftop porch. "I have a camera," he said. "Every time I saw something [new] I took a picture."

Over the next few months, people in Namataba became increasingly hysterical. The local council wrote Mukiibi's construction company threatening legal action. Odwe wrote a district health inspector, begging him to check out the funeral home. "The people appear very bitter," he wrote. "The situation may be of security concern if not addressed in good time."

The health inspector visited the property. He fired off a letter to Mukiibi saying that the project was both "illegal," because she lacked the necessary permits, and "aesthetically unacceptable" to the people of Namataba. He warned that the funeral home could pose "a danger to public health," because embalming chemicals might seep into the natural springs where many poorer residents fetched their water.

On July 27, 2002, a petition signed by 210 residents of Namataba arrived at the offices of Uganda's Ministry of Health. "Corruption by selfish leadership cannot be allowed to jeopardize the lives and health of all of us," it

read in part. "The villagers are prepared to go all the way to see that [the funeral home project] does not continue."

At the Ministry of Health, officials recognized that the situation in Namataba was getting out of hand. The same day the petition arrived, they ordered Mukiibi to stop renovating her brother's house.

That got her attention.

* * *

It wasn't just ghosts that had the people of Namataba spooked. Some of their complaints were the usual NIMBY stuff. They were vexed about traffic along their winding, narrow dirt roads. They fretted that there wasn't enough room for parking inside the funeral home compound. They worried about pollution and Ebola, a horrific (though rare) disease that is spread by exposure to bodily fluids that can seep out even after death. They were certain that the developers couldn't be trusted and were sure to cut corners—the health inspector found that the "cold room" where Regina Mukiibi intended to treat and store bodies didn't even have running water yet.

Especially, people worried about noise. It is said that in pre-Christian times Ugandan tribes had no concept of accidental death, or of disease; there was witchcraft at work in every demise. To deflect suspicion, a dead person's relatives would make a very public show of grief. Today, Ugandan funerals are still loud affairs.

"This would become a village of crying and wailing," Odwe told me.

People in Namataba, perhaps stung by Mukiibi's ridicule, were reluctant to directly address the issue of ghosts. In public, they articulated their concerns only elliptically, in references to the "dead bodies" and "psychological torture." Public officials would refer to the citizenry's worries with euphemisms like "the social component" or "the cultural issue." When I mentioned the word "spirits" to Eliezier Lukoda, the village council chairman, he recoiled. "Spirits are not a problem," he said defensively. "We are not interested with those things." Odwe said the issue was a "not a major factor."

But William Sitenda Ssebalu, Namataba's plain-spoken, 36-year-old representative in Parliament, said that fear of the supernatural was the main motivating factor behind Namataba's opposition. "They're saying that in the dead of night, at 3 a.m., that's when the evil spirits will start moving, to attack them in the night," he told me one Friday afternoon in late September, as we sat in the paint store he owns in downtown Kampala.

Ssebalu, a burly man who boasted of his wealth and sophistication ("I am a globetrotter. I have seen these funeral homes."), maintained that he personally doesn't believe in ghosts. "This is just flimsy reasoning," he said. But his constituents did, and that was why he fought Mukiibi.

"When she was going into business, she only looked at [business]. She never looked at the social component," he said.

To a traditional African way of thinking, no one is ever dead and gone. The spirits of one's ancestors wield great power in the world of the living. People who have recently died are the most engaged in earthly affairs. They are the "living dead," in the words of journalist Blaine Harden. Dear but not quite departed, their spirits hover in a twilight zone between the corporeal world and the afterlife.

"The newly departed are useful links to the forces that direct the fortunes of men," Harden writes. "The living dead can be conduits for good luck and guardians against catastrophe. Unless, God forbid, they are improperly buried."

The people of Namataba knew that Uganda Funeral Services intended to bring hearseloads of fresh corpses into their village every day. Who knew if the restless spirits that followed the bodies, awaiting their sendoff to the next world, would be angry that their relatives had forsaken the old traditions by entrusting their burial to a total stranger?

Mukiibi would later point out that Ugandans should be used to having dead people in the neighborhood. According to tradition, you bury your relatives next to your house, not in some faraway cemetery. There is one such family burial ground just a short walk from the place where she was building her funeral home. Those spirits, she said, were in Namataba to stay, whereas the funeral home was just "a mere stopover" for bodies on their way to a permanent resting place.

But there's a difference between knowing that Grandpa Alfred is buried in the backyard and living next door to a funeral home. "This one is your grandfather, who is part of you," said Dr. Wabinga, the Makerere University pathologist. The funeral home, by contrast, "has all sorts of people."

"If a dead body of an unknown person is brought [into the village], it is strange," Odwe said.

And once all those spirits from other families and rival tribes start to rub up against one another? … Well, there goes the neighborhood.

There was uneasiness, too, about the proprietors of the funeral home. Mukiibi looked at burial as a business. To many, that seemed abominable. "If you deal with dead bodies, culturally, people … do not think it is normal," Odwe said. "They only think it is natural if it is your relative." It was like the difference between marital love and sex with a prostitute. In one context, preparing a body seemed fitting

and proper. When a financial transaction was involved, it seemed sordid and wrong.

"People are saying these people who handle dead bodies are terrible," Ssebalu said. The Member of Parliament, who proved to be every bit as combative in opposition to the funeral home as Mukiibi was in its defense, said he sometimes worried that his undertaker nemesis might be capable of anything. "Killing you is nothing," he said, "because they see dead bodies every day."

* * *

On a sunny Sunday in September 2002, a hearse pulled up to a church near Namataba. Regina Mukiibi stepped out, accompanied by about a half-dozen employees of Uganda Funeral Services. Out on the church grounds, several hundred residents of Namataba were waiting for her. They sat on wooden benches, or cross-legged on the grass, and many carried signs. "Power Can Never Cause Influence," read one. Another, which was adorned with a drawing of a skull, read: "Uganda Funeral Services Plans For The Dead … We're Not Corpses."

After Uganda's health ministry halted the funeral home project, Mukiibi's lawyers had written it an angry letter. "Our view … is that the public is acting out of ignorance and this is being fueled by some opportunistic and malicious circles," it read in part. From his porch, Odwe saw the renovations were proceeding despite the ministry's order. There were anxious phone calls, and Ssebalu had agreed to set up a meeting between the funeral home's owner and her antagonists. The idea was that Mukiibi would clear the air and educate the people of Namataba about what really happens at a funeral home.

In reality, Mukiibi was in for a roasting.

Mukiibi later came to believe Ssebalu had set her up for an ambush. She claims that the morning of the meeting, the MP sent a sound truck through Namataba, broadcasting a message that Mukiibi summarized as: "come and fight this project or else your children are going to die." She also says he brought jerrycans of locally-brewed gin to the village to get everyone's tongues nice and loose. (Ssebalu says there was a sound truck, but denies it said anything incendiary. There was no boozing before the meeting, Odwe said.)

Whatever the truth, the people of Namataba were clearly primed for a fight. When the meeting started, one angry resident after another paraded to the microphone set up at the base of a tree to inveigh against the funeral home.

"This is the right of the people. We have a right to reject a mortuary or funeral home," Odwe told the crowd. "So if it means that we [must] march to parliament, I think we can do that."

"It is wrong," he added later. "There is nothing we are going to accept which relates to dead bodies."

The crowd whooped and hollered in approval. Mukiibi shook her head in disgust.

A man in a blue shirt took the microphone. "You're not going to tell me that someone is going to sleep comfortably in his bed when he knows there are dead bodies right next door!" he shouted in Luganda.

"We must not accept it," Ssebalu said. Later the parliamentarian added in Luganda, "They shouldn't be bringing dead bodies to stay around people."

When Mukiibi and her allies stood to speak, the crowd made it clear that it was not interested in a lecture about the merits of a western-style funeral. People hooted and jeered.

"You cannot vote over someone's business," vainly shouted one defender of the funeral home, a young man in a white soccer jersey.

The boos crescendoed. People rose from their seats and waved their hands dismissively, as if to say "goodbye, good riddance." One Namataba resident, a schoolteacher, tried to rush the man with the microphone. He had to be held back

Since Regina Mukiibi started up Uganda Funeral Services in 1997, their distinctive black minibus hearses have become a familiar sight on Kampala's roads. "How many people carry the corpses on bicycles or in the back of pickups?" she asked ruefully. Her company, she said, intends to put an end to such undignified behavior.

by cooler-headed villagers. There was a lot of pushing and shoving. A woman in a green dress broke into tears.

A sound truck started blaring a Ja Rule tune, which somehow defused the mood a bit, and local militiamen stepped in to restore order. Amid calls for peace and calm, the meeting resumed. But there wasn't much left to talk about. The meeting broke up.

The people had spoken. Mukiibi and her party climbed back into their hearse and sullenly slipped away.

* * *

After the bumptious meeting at the Namataba church ground, Mukiibi's determination to build her funeral home only hardened. "She knew big people in government," Ssebalu said, and she now deployed them to apply behind-the-scenes pressure. Several high-level public officials, including a presidential adviser and the mayor of Kampala, called Ssebalu, urging him not to scare away an investor in the local economy. "I received a lot of threats," he said. "I told them to go to hell."

Mukiibi's friends were able to get her into a meeting with Jim Muhwezi, Uganda's minister of health. She presented him with an extensive prospectus prepared by a management consultant. It estimated that she had invested well over $200,000 in the project. It sought to deflect the residents' concerns about traffic, noise and the rest.

When he stopped the project, the health minister had commissioned a task force to look into the funeral home project. It had recommended approval. That, and Mukiibi's presentation, was enough to make Muhwezi change his mind. In December 2002, he wrote local administrators, informing them that he had cleared Mukiibi to open her funeral home.

There was panic in Namataba. Ssebalu organized a hasty meeting with Muhwezi, who backtracked a bit. He agreed to visit the village in early January, to see for himself how people felt. Subsequently, his advisers urged him to put the visit off, warning that the people in Namataba were "highly emotional."

When the minister failed to show up on the appointed day, a mob of locals gathered. They tried to storm the metal gates of the funeral home. When they were turned back, they marched to the office of Lukoda, the village council chairman, who they felt was soft on the developers. They broke all the windows and put a padlock on the door, trapping their local leadership inside the office. A riot was avoided only when a police officer who happened to live in Namataba came and convinced the mob to disperse peacefully.

"They just wanted the government to know the problems around here," Lukoda later said.

Things degenerated from there. Mukiibi went on radio talk shows and described the people of Namataba as a bunch of village idiots giddy on bootleg gin. That prompted a huffy letter to the health ministry, signed by Odwe and a number of lawyers, civil servants and professors. "We are no mere drunkards," it read.

Eliezier Lukoda, Namataba's village council chairman, standing in front of his office. In January, an angry mob protesting the funeral home came and broke the window behind him, and locked the village councilors inside. Lukoda said he understood why the villagers were up in arms. "In our culture, we are not used to those bodies," he said. "Someone may get psychological torture."

Mukiibi wrote the prime minister, accusing Odwe of "petty jealousy." He came out against the project, she claimed, only because the new wall around the funeral home had cut him off from a vegetable garden he kept on her property. ("Nonsense," Odwe told me.) She also wrote the Speaker of Parliament, accusing Ssebalu of mounting a "smear campaign" against the funeral home. On the radio, she attacked the parliamentarian as an "illiterate" (according to Ssebalu's recounting), and alleged he had come out in opposition to the funeral home only after she rejected his demand for a $10,000 bribe.

"He said you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," Mukiibi told me.

Ssebalu shot back: He said it was Mukiibi who offered the payoff, which he rejected. "I cannot be bought," he said. That was not true of other elected officials, he claimed, alleging that Mukiibi had gone around "bribing people" to get her way.

"Uganda is not developed. Why? Because people are selfish," Ssebalu told me. "This Regina Mukiibi is only after money. She even goes to church to pray for people to die. Because if no one dies, she has no business. … This is the problem with Uganda: people praying for other people to die."

Finally, on April 15, the health minister came to Namataba. In the shade of a jackfruit tree, Muhwezi met a large contingent of villagers, who handed him a petition accusing Mukiibi of waging "a provocative and degrading campaign against all efforts by those opposed to the project or helping to support the rights of the weak." It urged him to reject the funeral

home, lest their property be "devalued."

Muhwezi read from a prepared statement. "Uganda Funeral Services is advised to relocate the proposed funeral home from Namataba Village … to a more appropriate and acceptable location," he told the crowd, to loud applause.

For all intents and purposes, that buried the funeral home.

* * *

On July 26 of this year, plainclothes policemen came to Fred Mukiibi's house in Namataba. Rumors had been going around the village that despite the health minister's pronouncement, Regina Mukiibi had put her funeral home into operation. The cops didn't have a warrant, but they threatened to break down the gates to the premises if they weren't allowed in.

Matthew Kibuuka, Uganda Funeral Services' general manager, rushed to the scene to find out what was going on. "Know that I am bad news," one of the police officers told him, dangling a pair of handcuffs, according to a complaint the company subsequently filed with the department.

Kibuuka let the officers come inside. They didn't find any corpses. The funeral home was dusty, empty and forlorn.

"It was virtually ready," Mukiibi said, shaking her head sadly, as she showed me around the place a few months later. She had spent thousands of dollars on renovations. Everything was in place. The only things missing, in fact, were the bodies.

Fred Mukiibi's old house was a spacious, cream-trimmed brick building, with a large sun-splashed front yard. Regina took me around back, where she showed me a paved parking lot. (Parking: *Check*.) She brought me around the side of the house to take a look at the septic tank. "This is the treatment chamber," Kibuuka said, pointing to a metal manhole. (Environment: *Check*.) Across the way, Mukiibi pointed out the freestanding men's and women's bathrooms she had built. (Facilities: *Check*.) She told me that she had promised the village that if the funeral home was approved, she would widen and pave the roads leading to the house. (Traffic: *Check*.)

Mukiibi showed me a small structure at the end of the driveway. From the outside, it looked like a garage. She opened its twin metal doors. Inside the brightly-lit room were three long concrete-slab tables. In a rear corner was a refrigerator with three ominously man-sized compartments. This was the infamous "cold room," the place the bodies were to be kept.

Mukiibi walked over to a faucet along the wall and turned the tap. A stream of water sputtered out. She gave me a triumphant look. (Water: *Check*.) She said that, whatever the villagers might have feared, she would never have treated the body of someone who died from Ebola at the funeral home. (Health: *Check*.)

We entered the house itself, and Mukiibi led me into the parlor. The atmosphere was appropriately funereal. The curtains were drawn. Couches adorned with lace doilies were arranged in a rough square around an oriental carpet. A statue of the Virgin Mary stood on a table along the rear wall. A beaded rosary hung from a ceiling fan. In the adjacent dining room stood an electric organ, which didn't seem to work.

On April 15, 2003, Ugandan Health Minister Jim Muhwezi (pictured with microphone) met the people of Namataba in the shade of a jackfruit tree. He declared that Mukiibi would have to move her funeral home somewhere else. The people had won. (Photo courtesy of Julius Odwe.)

We sat on the couches. Had there ever been a funeral service at the home, the coffin would have been positioned in the center of the room. For now there was just a coffee table. Someone put a gospel album on the stereo. An upbeat rendition of "Amazing Grace" piped into the room.

"We accommodate the bereaved here," Mukiibi said. The whole place was designed for solemn conversation and quiet contemplation—not crying and wailing. "The people we handle are not these *local* people," she said. "They are dignified people." (Noise: *Check*.)

Her cell phone rang. "The body

is in London?" she asked the caller. "You want us to clear it?" After she got off the phone, she explained that the client was an expatriate Ugandan who had died overseas. The family wanted her to pick the body up at the airport.

"We thought people would approve of our innovation," Mukiibi said, wearily. But it hadn't turned out that way. The problem, Mukiibi said now, was that a vocal minority had "incited" Namataba's residents, preying on their cultural fears to kill what should have been a welcomed addition to the neighborhood. "They are using their big chairs to suppress the project," she said.

Mukiibi said she still hoped to open a funeral home somewhere else one day soon—she's talking with the mayor of Kampala about locations in the city—but she was still bitterly disappointed about the time and expense wasted in Namataba. She saw the demise of her funeral home as a victory of ignorance over progress, of demagoguery over wise government.

The infamous cold room. Next to the refrigerator intended to store bodies awaiting burial stands Geoffrey Mukiibi, Regina's son, who works for the family business.

Unsurprisingly, over her back wall, Julius Odwe viewed things differently. "The people who supported this, the majority of them don't live here, and we said, 'Why don't you go where you are wanted?'" he said.

It would be easy to scoff at the people of Namataba, as Mukiibi did. But how many of us act rationally when it's our homes, our habitats, at stake? Just as no number of scientific studies could convince the people I covered back in Marple Township, Pennsylvania that the cell-phone tower being erected in their backyard wouldn't someday cause them brain tumors, no number of lectures from Mukiibi or the Ministry of Health could convince the people of Namataba that the funeral home was nothing to worry about. Ghosts, cancer: these are fears, more primal than rational, of the unknown, unintended consequences of new technology.

"You cannot force this thing on people. It is a new thing," William Sitenda Ssebalu said. "People are saying that over the years we built this area. We built schools, we brought electricity. How can you move a funeral home into our midst?"

Odwe said that his victory over Mukiibi was really a demonstration of "the power of the people." And this was something new in Uganda. For a long time, his countrymen had expected little from their government. A sorry history of repression, corruption, dictatorship and war had taught them a bitter lesson: While it's wonderful to have rulers who are responsive to public opinion, it's worth settling for ones who don't kill you.

That attitude is slowly changing. After 17 years of fragile peace and halting reform, people are beginning to demand more from their government. They are starting to believe in democracy. In Namataba, people had faith that if they shouted "not in my backyard" loud enough, someone would listen. Right or wrong, superstitious or not, in a democracy, they had a right to be heard.

"They reasoned we were small people here," Odwe said. "But we said, 'Who is the government? The government is the people.'" ❑

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