ICWA
LETTERS

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

AR-5
Sub-Saharan Africa

Andrew Rice is a Fellow of the Institute studying life, politics and development in Uganda and environs.

33 Rules of the Road:
An American's Guide To Driving in Uganda

By Andrew Rice

NOVEMBER 1, 2002

KAMPALA, Uganda–Not long ago, Omondi Mak'Oloo, the editor and publisher of *Kampala Motorist* magazine, was ambling around the yearly car show at the Sheraton Hotel when he saw a peculiar sign. It read: "National Road Safety Council." He walked up to the table.

"I asked them," Mak'Oloo recalled, "What do you *do*?"

It was a fair question. Uganda's roads are a terrifying place—nasty, brutish, unpoliced, and only getting worse. "We seem hell-bent on self-destruction," Mak'Oloo had written in an editorial in his magazine's most recent issue. "We insist on committing as many atrocities as we would imagine possible to get away with."

Sitting on the other side of the table was a slight, rumpled fellow wearing big plastic-framed glasses. He introduced himself as James John Magola Wanume. He knew only too well what Mak'Oloo was talking about.

Magola is a calm man, a retired government bureaucrat and the author of several books with titles like *Typewriting Drills* and *Learn to Punctuate and Say Exactly What You Mean*. For the past 13 years, he has made it his lonely, self-appointed crusade to preach defensive driving to a nation that wears its recklessness on its sleeve. He is exactly the sort of fellow you'd expect to tell you, scornfully: "Road discipline is simply not a culture in Uganda"— as he did when I met him, a few weeks after his encounter with Mak'Oloo.

Magola's job takes him all over the country, teaching children and adults the rules of the road. Everywhere he goes, he carries a stack of photocopied posters he created to explain the meaning of road signs. Because of the nature of his work, Magola spends a lot of time driving. So I asked him if he had any personal principles he followed when he was out on the roads.

"There's no way to separate discipline on the road from the rules of the road," he replied. "Discipline on the road means you obey the traffic regulations—that's it." He then started reciting some of the finer points of the country's universally-ignored Highway Code.

My eyes began to glaze over. I had had this experience before: Ugandans may ignore their laws, but they love legalities. In theory, this is a country that possesses a well-established criminal-court system, based on British common law. In practice, it's easy to bribe your way out of any charge, and thieves are often lynched by mobs on the street, or, in a recent and highly-popular innovation, shot on sight by a special military task force dubbed (for no immediately obvious reason) "Op-

eration Wembley." In theory, this is a country with a progressive constitution, which ruling-party politicians quote with a reverence befitting Holy Scripture. In practice, the government ignores the constitution whenever it sees fit, as it did when it recently shut down the country's only independent newspaper, *The Monitor*, for a week. Most people here accept this wide gulf between the Uganda that exists on paper and the Uganda that exists in fact as an unalterable fact of life. Then there are the optimists, like Magola, who are trying to close the gap.

Still, I wanted to know how Magola, for all his talk about rules of the road, dealt with the more sordid reality. I asked him: How do you stay safe out there?

"We say, in Uganda take every driver as ignorant and undisciplined," he replied. "Don't assume the people driving on our roads will do the right thing. Expect them to do the wrong thing. Just stop and let the fools go."

So call that rule number one.

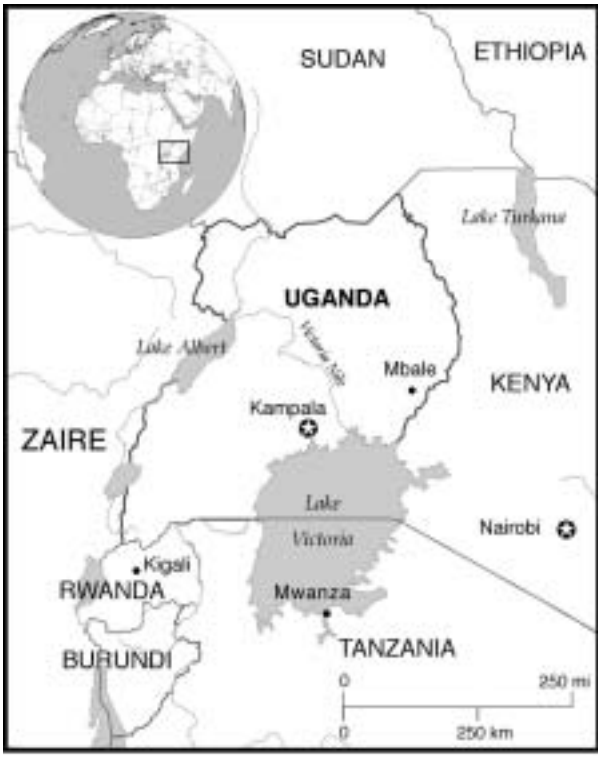
• Rule #2: Starting Off
"Give the proper signal if necessary before moving out, and only move when you can do so safely and without inconvenience to other drivers."

—From the East African Road Safety Training Center's *Highway Code Guide for Drivers and Riders*.

BRRRUMP! The car lurches forward and stalls.

"That's bad!" screams Moses Mukasa. "Very, very bad!"

Paul Izza shakes his head in frustration. "I've been driving, but the gear is not like this."



We are sitting in a dirt parking lot near the center of Kampala, inside Mukasa's old Toyota Corolla hatchback. This car is closest thing to a driving school in Uganda. Men with no particular training attach plastic signs on their roofs—Mukasa's reads "Ddembe Driving School"—and suddenly become driving instructors. Izza is 25, just recently arrived in Kampala from the countryside. I had paid the 10,000 shillings (about $5.50) for his one-hour driving lesson. In return, he let me tag along.

Izza had approached the car with the assurance of an experienced driver. He told me he had been driving for three months. But it's taken him several tries to get the Corolla moving.

"Pop the clutch and we go, please," Mukasa says. "Slowly, slowly."

The car stalls again.

"If you don't know, please tell me," Mukasa says, exasperated.

"I know, I know," Izza replies.

"The car can't go if the clutch is down."

"Mmmmm… Ok."

"You don't know."

"I know!"

• Rule #3: Approaching the Roundabout
"You should approach the roundabout at the right speed and in the correct gear, showing the direction indicators of your intended turn. … Once you have entered the roundabout, avoid changing lanes."

The Clock Tower roundabout is the southern gateway to Kampala, and since the country's main airport lies to the south, it's the way most newcomers enter the city. So your first impression is: Chaos. Pure honking, bumper-to-bumper chaos. Bicycles laden with huge bunches of green bananas weaving across three lanes of traffic. *Matatus* (passenger vans) stuck in mammoth mud puddles. Men with wheelbarrows darting through the narrow spaces between stalled cars.

The other day, I was stuck in traffic at the Clock Tower when I saw something out of the corner of my eye. I turned, just in time to see a tractor-trailer truck drive up over the curb and cut across the park, brushing close to the clock as it barreled through. No one else—including a traffic police officer on duty—seemed to notice the ma-

neuver, let alone think it objectionable.

Welcome to Uganda, I thought.

The Clock Tower at midday. The tower itself has a storied history: It was erected to commemorate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, and dictator Idi Amin used to execute people by firing squad there. Today, it's the place where Ugandan driving can be observed at its Hobbesian worst. The town fathers are talking about replacing the circle with a traffic light, but few are optimistic this will actually happen, let alone improve anything.

• Rule # 4: Keep to the Left
"In East Africa vehicular traffic is required to 'keep to the left' of the road … Visitors from countries where the 'keep to the right' rule operates are urged to be on their guard, for what might be correct procedure to follow in their country could be highly dangerous here."

Everywhere we go, Americans bitch about the driving. In Ecuador, a college roommate writes, "traffic laws are seen more as recommendations." In Beirut, relates a friend who has just returned from there, "you can park anywhere, including sidewalks." Israelis, says a former coworker, "tend to do everything aggressively, and with little regard for life and limb. That sort fearlessness makes them good soldiers. It also makes them remarkably lousy motorists." In the most famous scene in the film *National Lampoon's European Vacation*—a neat encapsulation of American attitudes about the rest of the world—the Griswold family spends hours trapped in a London roundabout, driving past Big Ben and Parliament over and over again.

Why this obsession? I've come to think the complaints are a coded way of asserting America's assumption of national superiority, the way Germans in Uganda lament inefficiency, and the French here think everything is much more civilized in West Africa, where everyone speaks French. Ours is a driving culture. Americans invented the Model T and the SUV, the shopping mall and the drive-through window. We wrote *On the Road* and created *Knight Rider*. (Germany may have embraced David Hasselhoff, but a wisecracking Trans-Am is *echt* American.)

American car culture now penetrates all but the remotest corners of the globe. And yet foreign drivers terrify us. This is the contradiction at the heart of America's troubled relationship with the world: Everyone is becoming more like us, and yet everyone seems more threatening than ever.

• Rule # 5: The Numbers Don't Lie
"The Highway Code tries to help you be safe on the road, but in spite of taking care, you may be unfortunate enough to be involved in an accident."

Preconceptions aside, allow me to make the case that Ugandans are among the worst drivers in the world.

In 2000, an organization called the Global Road Safety Partnership, which is funded by the World Bank, produced a report entitled "Estimating Global Road Fatalities." The report found that, worldwide in 1999, between 750,000 and 880,000 people died in car crashes. Eighty-five percent of these deaths were in "developing and transitional" countries. The economic cost of road accidents to these poorer nations, the researchers determined, was around $60 billion a year.

In 1996, the most recent year for which data was available to researchers, 1,594 Ugandans died on the roads. This is a small number compared to the nearly 42,000 people killed in the United States, or the 71,000 killed in China. Even as a proportion of its total population, Uganda's road death toll was fairly modest, comparable to Japan's or Finland's.

However, these statistics fail to account for one crucial difference: dirt-poor Uganda has far fewer cars than America or China or Japan or Finland. The question is: How well do those people who *do* have cars drive? Luckily, the researchers found a way to get at this question. They looked at how many fatalities each country had as

a proportion of the number of cars on the road. In Japan, for every 10,000 cars on the road, there will be just one fatality per year. In the United States, the number was two in 10,000. In China, the number was far higher: 26 in 10,000. In Macedonia (where I endured the scariest drive of my life, a death-defying, bone-shaking bus ride), the number was five in 10,000. In Venezuela, the worst-driving country in South America, it was 58 in 10,000. Israel and Lebanon, with two and three deaths respectively, trailed far behind the regional champion, Syria, with 36 deaths per 10,000 cars.

And in Uganda? For every 10,000 cars, 122 dead. More than one death for every 100 cars. In America, that percentage would translate to nearly *2.8 million* fatalities a year.

• Rule # 6: Maintain Your Lane
"YOU MUST NOT … drive without due care and attention or without reasonable consideration for other persons using the road."

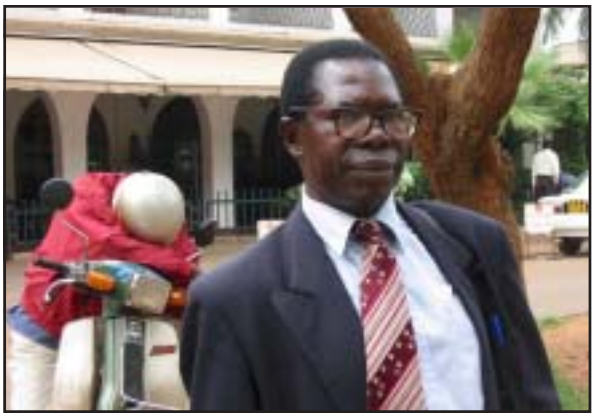
"The driver doesn't even seem to realize he's in the wrong," said John Kamya, a superintendent of the Uganda Police force. "That's what makes me think he just doesn't know."

Kamya is the department's officer in charge of community relations. As part of his job, he writes a weekly newspaper column instructing Ugandans about how to drive responsibly. He spends a lot of time on the basics:

While on the highways, you often find a line in the middle of the roads … First and foremost, never cross the middle line and drive on the other side of the road, unless you are overtaking. Always drive on the left side of the middle line.

— John Kamya, "Why Are There Road Markings?"
The New Vision, May 28, 2002

"The driving here is poor," Kamya said. "Very poor.



James John Magola Wanume, Uganda's traffic safety czar, in front of the Speke Hotel. Sometimes Magola feels like he is fighting a losing battle. "When it comes to Uganda, we have no road safety taught in schools. So someone learns to drive without any discipline at all." Behind him, a boda-boda *driver ducks to avoid having his picture taken.*

The worst I've seen." But why? Kamya discounted the idea that there is anything culturally preordained about it. The factors that make for bad driving are the same problems that afflict Uganda in general: decaying infrastructure, corruption and poor education. As usual, it all comes back to money. How can people be expected to drive well on roads that are covered with potholes? How can they be expected to respect the law, when police routinely ask them for bribes? How can people be expected to follow the road signs if they can't read the signs in the first place?

• Rule # 7: Know the Signs
"Traffic signs are important and every driver and rider should know their meaning at a glance."

Paul Izza has finally figured out the clutch. We are puttering down a residential street. He brushes close to a man riding a bike.

"What does that sign say?" Moses Mukasa asks, pointing to his right.

"You are good!" Izza replies. "You test me. Some people just go, you know."

He doesn't answer the question. The car creeps along.

"Read the number plate on that Pajero," Mukasa says, pointing to a passing Mitsubishi SUV.

Izza says nothing.

"You are taking too much time. Do you know how to read?"

"Yes," Izza says. "But I am just concentrating ahead."

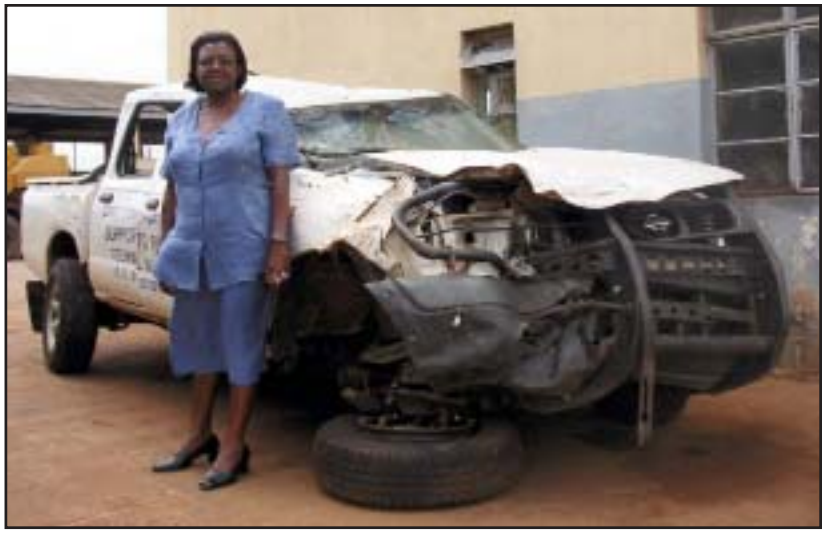
• Rule # 8: Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear
Excerpt from the diary of Sir Peter Allen, a former British colonial official and judge in Uganda:

Wednesday 12 September [1956]
Today I prosecuted an African [Roman Catholic] priest for dangerous driving. Father M was driving on a motor scooter, and came out of a side turning without stopping and hit and injured a pedestrian. The victim and an eyewitness testified that the priest did not stop at the junction before entering the main road and he made no signal there and apparently didn't even see the pedestrian. The priest's version is that he stopped, signaled and turned onto the main road and the victim then stepped into the road directly in front of him and he couldn't avoid hitting him. The magistrate preferred to believe the testimony of the pedestrian and the independent witness, particularly as the priest rode off without stopping at the scene … and expressed no regret for injuring the man and failing to help him.

• Rule # 9: Things Can Always Get Worse
"The formula for traffic safety: Alertness + Courtesy + Common Sense + Patience."

"It was really much better in the colonial days," said James John Magola Wanume.

Magola said his quest to improve Uganda's driving began in the early 1980s. During the reign of the dictator Idi Amin, he had gone to Canada to study. When Amin finally fell, in 1979, Magola returned to find the roads were nothing like what he had seen in North America. "Things had gotten completely hopeless," he said. "There was virtually no literature about road safety in general, and traffic rules in particular." So Magola began writing his own pamphlets, in English and in local African languages, as a kind of hobby. In 1989, he was appointed to the board of the National Road Safety Council.



Irene Muhumuza, secretary of the National Road Safety Council. Her office is located in the same compound as a motor pool for government vehicles. "This one was over-speeding," she told me.

But sometimes Wanume thinks he's losing the battle. There are seven times as many cars in Uganda today as in 1990. The problems seem only to be getting worse. A little money might go a long way—it could pay for a real driver education program, perhaps, or buy cars for the traffic police. (For now, most cops have to police the roads on foot or, at best, aboard a motor scooter.) But for all the millions upon millions of dollars Western aid agencies pour into Uganda every year to fight public health scourges like AIDS and malaria, there is little outside money available to fight bad driving. Though it, too, is an epidemic of a kind. Within a decade, the Global Road Safety Partnership report found, the number of road deaths worldwide could rise to as many as 1.3 million a year.

• Rule # 10: Accidents Happen
Excerpt from the first entry in my (very-soon-to-be-abandoned) journal, May 22, 2002:

Saw our first car accident—it only took a couple hours—a fender bender out the hotel window.

We had opened the windows to let in the evening breeze. There was a loud squealing of brakes, a dull bang and the tinkling of broken glass. I looked out the window and saw two cars splayed across the intersection.

The most interesting thing was how the men who were idling in the dirt parking lot across the street all came running over, like ants to a watermelon. They appeared to form an ad hoc traffic court between the two motorists.

Most accidents, the police—and hence the statistics-gatherers—never find out about. (According to one study, only 25 percent of minor traffic accidents are reported.) This is how they are arbitrated: At the sound of a crash, dozens of "witnesses" materialize. They crowd around the two drivers. Who was at fault? How much should he pay? For a price, the local loudmouths will be happy to take your side—or your opponent's.

I watched the strange scene unfold outside my window. Everyone was yelling and waving their hands. Then, abruptly, the tribunal reached a decision. Money changed hands.

They both drove off, the matter seemingly resolved.

• Rule # 11: F=ma
"Overtaking, when badly carried out, is likely to cause an accident."

Recently, I went to visit Irene Muhumuza, the secretary of the National Road Safety Council. I asked her if she could recount any examples of particularly outrageous driving she had seen. She thought for a moment.

"Actually," she said softly, "I lost my brother in an accident." He was driving on the two-lane road from their hometown of Mbarara, in the west, toward Kampala. A bus coming the other direction was trying to pass a car along a blind curve. "It made a head-on collision with the vehicle my brother was in. Three people died on the spot. My brother died in the hospital. This is what happens with all this overtaking along bends."

• Rule # 12: Live In the Fast Lane
"DO NOT OVERTAKE in the face of oncoming traffic or where you cannot see far enough ahead to make be sure if it is safe."

This week, front pages of Kampala's newspapers have been filled with news of another bus crash. The vehicle, on its maiden journey, had been given a rousing send-off in Kampala earlier in the day. Then it set out for

Nairobi, and "suffered the fate of the Titanic," as the local paper *The New Vision* put it. Passing another bus on a treacherous stretch in heavy rain, it ran off the road to avoid an oncoming car. A tree limb ripped off the top of the bus. Thirteen people were killed.

The back pages—the sports sections—of the same newspapers carried stories about the death of four members of a local soccer-club official's family. "The tragic death happened at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday," *The Monitor* wrote. "*Mzee* Kirumira, 65, [the official's father] who was heading to Mawokota for his brother's burial, had his Diana pick-up ram into a speeding Isuzu bus, as he overtook an omnibus." Note the use of passive voice, as if *Mzee* Kirumira's pickup truck had somehow developed a mind of its own and veered unbidden into the oncoming lane.

It was hardly an unusual week. Not long ago, Col. Gad Wilson Toko, a member of a military junta that ruled Uganda for a time, died in a fiery collision after he tried to pass a truck that was spewing sickening black exhaust in his face. Unfortunately, the exhaust prevented him from seeing a car coming in the opposite direction. A few weeks before that, more than 70 people were killed when a truck carrying cans of kerosene rammed into a passenger bus near Rutoto. A survivor who escaped the truck, which was coming from the Congo, later said the vehicle's brakes had been malfunctioning for miles, and that the driver was swerving from lane to lane to slow the truck down. The dead passengers, burnt beyond recognition, were buried in a mass grave.

•Rule #13: Hurry, Hurry, Hurry
Excerpt from a newspaper column by Lilliane Barenzi, written shortly after the Rutoto crash:

As soon as you get on the road, any road, in whatever manner, you are immediately swept into a hurricane of suicidal tendencies. Everybody is in a rush to get somewhere, and they don't really care how they get there or, probably, if they get there. Pedestrians dash across the highways at blind corners, ten-ton trucks thunder down minuscule avenues, government-registered Land Cruisers overtake three cars—that are also in a bid to overtake—at a time, and expatriates weave in and out of heavy traffic as if they are in another time zone.

Since it is common knowledge that Uganda is one of the poorest, most debt-ridden, disease-ridden, corruption-infested countries of the world, don't you think that it's amazing that its citizens are always in a hurry? To do what, you can't help but wonder?

•Rule #14: Cut to the Front (Part 1)
"If desire to overtake for overtaking's sake becomes an obsession … fight it."

"I don't think they're in a hurry. It's just bad driving," said Omondi Mak'Oloo, the editor of *Kampala Motorist*. "Ugandans are generally very slow people."

By day, Mak'Oloo sells office equipment. He learned to drive in Germany, where he attended college. Then he moved back to his home country, Kenya. He was horrified by what he saw on the roads.

He didn't think he could imagine anything worse. Then he moved to Uganda. "The Kenyan drivers are also quite bad," he said. "But the difference between the Kenyan driver and the Ugandan driver is that the Kenyan knows what he's doing—he knows he's breaking the law. The Ugandan is just completely oblivious."

Kampala Motorist mixes driving tips ("Is it true alcohol is bad for driving?" asked one recent letter) with car-model reviews, rally-racing news, yellow journalism ("Hell's Fury as Vehicles Collide in Rutoto"), and the occasional short story. Mak'Oloo said he created the magazine to appeal to the more sophisticated Ugandan driver. So far, he conceded, sales have been disappointing.

Mak'Oloo has come to believe that the anarchic driving culture symbolizes a deeper truth about the continent of his birth. "It's something about Africa," he said. "We—and by 'we' I mean Africans—we seem to have a problem with wanting to make shortcuts." It's routine: Housewives unashamedly cut to the front of a long grocery line; business executives skim off the top of company profits; government ministers rob the citizenry blind.

"Until something nasty happens, it's OK," Mak'Oloo said. "And it is kind of a culture."

•Rule #15: Cut to the Front (Part 2)
"In slow hold-ups do not change lanes to jump the queue."

It's around 7 p.m. on a weeknight, and traffic on the paved two-lane road up to Naguru, the hill I live on, is backed up for a half-mile or so, snaking past the fruit stand and the little wooden shacks selling chickens and Coca-Cola, all the way down to the local police barracks.

As I inch up the hill, one of my fellow drivers pulls out into the middle of the road, passing me on the right. Others follow his lead. The two-lane road becomes a three-lane road. Suddenly, a *matatu* pulls up onto the grassy shoulder of the road, and passes me on the left. Others fall in behind him. The three-lane road becomes a four-lane road. But the traffic stops moving again. Someone in the makeshift right lane gets impatient. He pulls even further right, *into the path of the oncoming traffic*. The oncoming car slams on its brakes as the impatient guy tries to get around the car in front of him. The four-lane road becomes a gridlocked five-lane road.

Finally, near the top of the hill, I reach the source of the bottleneck, the obstacle everyone is in such a

hurry to get around: a speed bump.

•Rule #16: Don't Forget Your License
"Before driving any motor vehicle make sure … your driving license is not out of date and you have signed it in ink."

The Corolla is crawling down Kampala Road.

"Drive the street according to the situation," Moses Mukasa says. Up ahead, a car juts into the road, apparently trying to parallel park.

"Don't you see this car is parking?" Mukasa asks.

"Yeah," Izza replies.

"Don't say yeah—you don't know."

Mukasa, a well-built man in a New York Yankees cap, says he has been working as a driving instructor for five years. It takes a month's worth of lessons, he says, before a student is ready to take his driver's test. But he admits that it's only a small minority that ever even attempts to take lessons. A driving permit can easily be purchased from any of the many corrupt officials at the Uganda Revenue Authority, which oversees licensing.

"We don't have too many laws in Uganda," he says. "Someone just drives. You find out in the end it kills people."

•Rule #17: The Law of Unintended Consequences
"Approach junctions with great care."

One thing the Ugandan government *has* spent a great deal of money on in recent years is road improvement. The nation's highways, once a potholed mess, are now considered some of the best in the region. (Though the improvements have spread unevenly, and according to each region's relative political influence, most Ugandans assume.) Better roads mean faster driving. And that is one reason traffic fatalities have increased so dramatically, authorities say.

Even some measures meant to improve traffic safety sometimes have the opposite affect. For instance, a traffic light was recently installed at one particularly complicated intersection near Makerere University. Once a notorious point of gridlock, traffic now flows relatively freely there. However, because some people tend to take the lights literally—green means go, immediately—there has been an accompanying increase in the number of serious traffic accidents at the junction. Before, you couldn't pass through the intersection fast enough to do any damage.

•Rule #18: Know the Competition

Number of motor vehicles registered in Uganda, circa. 2000: 252,000.

Number of traffic police officers in Uganda: 306.

Number of radar speed guns in Uganda: 1.

•Rule #19: A Very, Very Serious Offense
"Stop when required to do so by [an] authorized person in uniform."

One Sunday afternoon shortly after he arrived in Uganda, my friend Neil, an American, stopped at the bakery to buy bread. There were no parking spaces along the side of the road, so he double-parked while his wife ran into the store. It seemed alright—it was Sunday, there was no traffic, and this was, after all, Uganda.

Neil's wife was hardly inside three minutes when two police officers, double-heading on a motor scooter, pulled up behind the car. One of the officers opened the back door of Neil's car and jumped in.

"This is a very, very serious offense," he said. He directed Neil to drive to the Central Police Station.

Just short of the police station, the officer told Neil to stop. The motorbike pulled up behind them. The officer told Neil he could settle the matter right there in the car. The fine would be 5,000 shillings (about $2.80). Neil gave him the money.

"Thank you," the officer said, brightening. "Now I will have my tea." He hopped back onto

There are traffic lights along Kampala Road, the main thoroughfare in the city, but no one can remember the last time they worked. Cars trying to turn onto the road or cross the street have to fend for themselves.

the motorbike and he and his friend drove away.

• Rule # 20: Watch Yourselves
"There are [legal] requirements effecting [sic] all road users. These should be studied by all road users for knowledge of what the law requires him to do."

Wadadha Johnson, the newly-appointed head of Uganda's traffic-police division, said he is trying to crack down on graft. One corruption-fighting measure: All traffic cops now wear nametags so they can easily be identified. Substantial budget or salary increases are out of the question, though. And this is the biggest problem, said Johnson's colleague on the police force, John Kamya. For instance: Since few of the traffic police actually have cars to patrol the road, they mostly have to rely on random roadblocks. To get to those roadblocks, the police are told to hitch free rides on *matatus*. "How are you going to enforce the law against someone you begged a lift from?" Kamya asked.

Johnson said the solution is to educate drivers, "ensuring that the people police themselves."

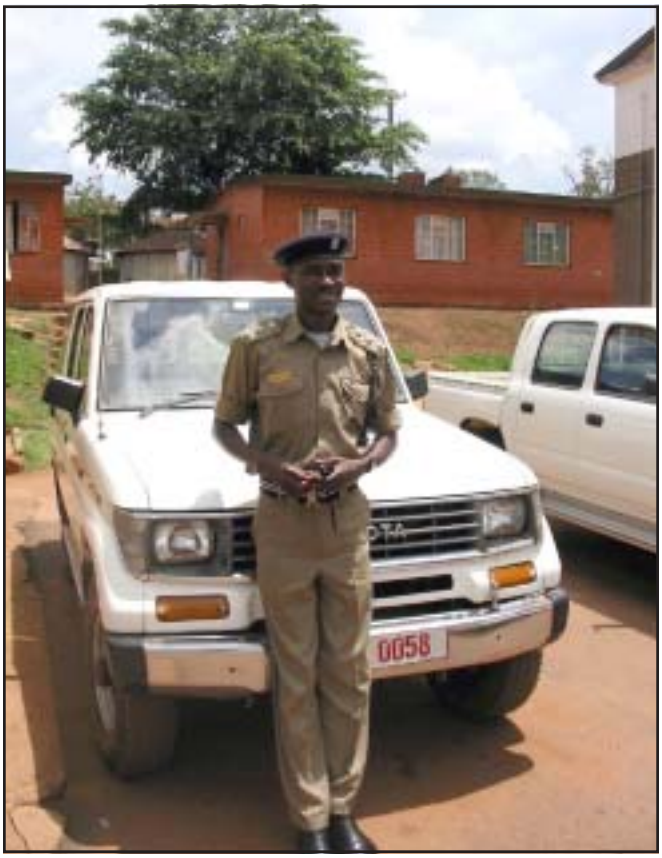
• Rule # 21: Remember Darwin
"You may be walking along, crossing a road, getting on or off a public vehicle, driving along, riding a cycle or a motorcycle, or in charge of animals. You all have a responsibility to Road Safety and respect for each other."

In general, the Ugandan roads operate according to strict Darwinian principles: The compact cars swipe past the *boda-boda* motorbikes—so named because they were once used for smuggling across the Kenyan border. (They now carry passengers instead of contraband; the drivers are still daredevils.) The *matatus* bully the compact cars, but generally yield to the SUVs. The SUVs with government plates blow past the SUVs with civilian plates. The big trucks brake for no one.

Outside of town, passenger buses careen down the middle of the road, forcing anyone in their path onto the shoulder. "They take advantage of the size of their vehicles to scare other vehicles off the road," Johnson said.

Pedestrians are the most powerless group of all. Of the more than 1,800 people killed on Uganda's roads last year, by far the largest number—758—were pedestrians.

Should you happen to hit a pedestrian, the American Embassy advises you to keep on driving until you reach a police station. "Traffic accidents draw crowds," warns a fact sheet the embassy gives out to all new arrivals. "In some cases where serious injury has occurred, there is the possibility of mob anger." Unlike a lot of things the embassy warns newcomers about, this is a real danger. Particularly if a child has been hurt, the villagers are liable to seriously injure you, the driver, or worse. Come back with someone who has a gun.



Wadadha Johnson, Uganda's new traffic police chief. He says he wants to crack down on bribery in the force. "We're the front-line image-setters of the police department."

• Rule # 22: Render Assistance
"Should an accident happen, you are obliged to ***stop*** *immediately. … Move casualties only if there is immediate danger of fire from spilled petrol or when the traffic cannot be averted. … When the casualty has to be removed, handle with great care especially if broken bones are suspected."*

Edward, a young Ugandan professional, tells the following story:

One day, he was driving down William Street, near the center of Kampala. Suddenly, from nowhere, a body flew across his hood. Horrified, Edward went around the side of the car and found a man crumpled on the ground, seemingly unconscious. An angry mob gathered around. Edward decided to get the hurt man into his car as fast as possible. "I do not know where I got the strength," he recalled. "I picked him up and carried him. I put him in the back of the car."

Edward drove away as fast as he could. Talking to himself, he tried to decide what to do. "Take him to the hospital," he said to himself, aloud. At that, the man miraculously regained consciousness.

"Please sir," he murmured, "may we go to my rela-

tives' first?" The man's relatives turned out to live in a notorious slum. When they saw what had happened, they got menacing. Edward took the man to a medical clinic run by a friend of his. He agreed to pay for his treatment, and gave the man $50 and his business card.

A few weeks later, Edward returned from a vacation to find the man he hit waiting in his office, balancing himself on crutches. He demanded still more money for his medical bills. Edward gave him some. Later, he called his friend, the doctor. He told Edward he had treated the driver for only the slightest of injuries. But the driver kept developing serious "complications," which would bring him and his relatives back to Edward's office, demanding more money. Finally, Edward had to call the police.

• Rule # 23: Watch Your Back
"To have continuous information of the traffic behind while driving, the driver is advised to look in the mirror more frequently."

Suddenly, Izza jerks the wheel to the right, nearly swerving into a car that is passing him. "Never escape on the right," Mukasa admonishes him. "Expect a car to overtake you at any time."

"But I wanted to dodge that hole," Izza explains.

Mukasa is right, of course. Occasionally, when I'm stopped in the middle of the road, my turn signal on, about to make a right turn, I will see a pair of headlights in my drivers' side mirror. Then the car pulls into the middle of the road and roars past me. Either he doesn't notice that I'm about to turn into his path, or he feels the risk of death is not worth the inconvenience of slowing down.

Izza picks up speed going down a hill.

"For you, you want speed," Mukasa says. "Too much acceleration. You should take your time. Think about what comes next."

• Rule # 24: The Right of Way (Part 1)
"YOU MUST NOT … drive in a manner demanding the right of way."

The *matatu* was racing towards the intersection. Nicholas, a British expatriate, had a split-second decision to make: turn in front of the van, or wait for it to pass. He turned. Rather than slow down, the *matatu* pulled out into the oncoming lane. Nothing unusual there. But when it came even with Nicholas' car, it began moving over. It ran Nicholas off the road, and sped off.

"He was angry because he thought he had the right of way," Nicholas said.

The right of way, John Kamya said, is regarded by many Ugandans as a talismanic protection against accidents—or at least against being at fault for them. I have the right of way, so why should I slow down for you? "Some colleague has told those people that when they are the main road, they have the right of way," Kamya said. "They become so inconsiderate."

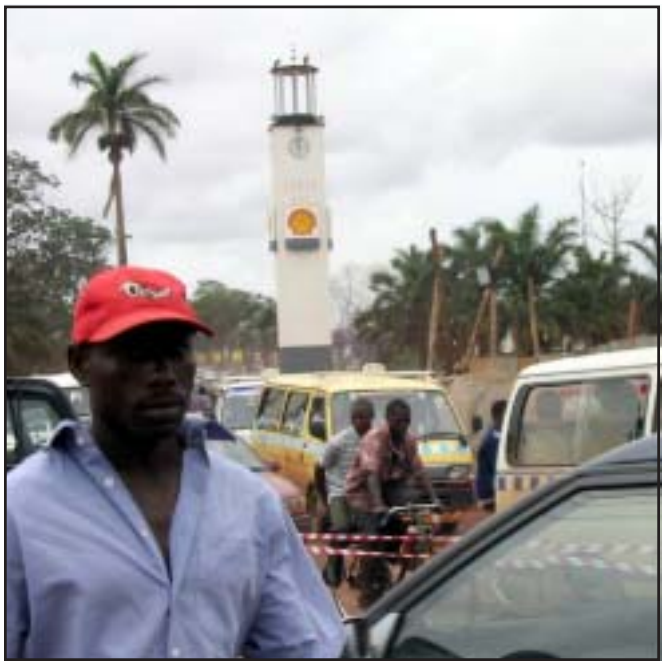
To illustrate his point, Kamya took out a sheet of paper and sketched a diagram of an intersection—a junction where a secondary road feeds into Entebbe Road, a major highway. He drew a lonely little car sitting on the secondary road, waiting to pull onto Entebbe Road, which was clogged with other little car drawings. "He just wants to go, but they won't allow him in," Kamya said.

"The foundation is bad—those values of courtesy, patience, decency."

• Rule # 25: If At First You Don't Succeed, Drive a Taxi
"[The] horn should be used to warn other road users of your presence but never used as a rebuke."

It is universally held that the *matatu* drivers are the worst offenders on the Ugandan roads. They pass without care. They drive without headlights. They stop without warning to pick up or drop off passengers. They honk for any reason, or no reason at all.

"Driving here is not a respectable profession," said Wadadha Johnson. "Many people end up being drivers because they've failed at everything else. …So somebody



A pair of boys on a bicycle (center) attempt to negotiate their way through the streets around the Clock Tower roundabout. Bicyclists—and particularly children—are those most likely to lose out in the Darwinian struggle for control of Uganda's roads.

goes into the job with all that frustration." In theory, taxi drivers are supposed to have at least three years of experience and must pass a rigorous test, but in practice, just about anyone can obtain a license for a price.

"So it's no surprise to see that the level of competence is not good," Johnson said. "And at the end of the day, these are the people who are driving you and me."

•Rule #26: The Invisible Hand
"YOU MUST NOT … carry passengers in such a manner as is likely to cause danger."

The *matatus* and their riders, though mutually dependent, are engaged in a constant battle against each other. The struggle is governed by the laws of supply and demand. During slow periods in the day, when the vans are half-empty, the riders have more power. They can tell the drivers to slow down, or order them to stop at a moment's notice. Often, they use this power to torture the driver. Sometimes you'll see a *matatu* pull over, let a passenger out, pull back onto the road, drive ten feet, and then stop again. Inside, a passenger has refused to get out a few feet short of the place he wants to be dropped off.

On the other hand, during busy hours, when competition for places in the vans is tight, the drivers have the upper hand. They cram as many passengers into the van as they can. They drive as recklessly as they like.

I recently had lunch with a Ugandan Roman Catholic priest named Aloysius. He told me his most harrowing *matatu* story. He was headed to Mbarara, about four hours away. He squeezed into a *matatu*, only to find himself under the control of a particularly maniacal driver. After one near head-on collision, Aloysius asked him to slow down. The driver refused.

"What?" the driver taunted the priest. "Are you afraid of dying?"

•Rule #27: Laws of Gravity
"All drivers and the [bicycle] riders are advised to keep well to the left."

Probably the most lawless place in Kampala is the expansive open-air parking lot where the *matatus* congregate. Inside, the white vans are crammed into the lot, with hardly an inch between them. Outside, it is as if the laws of gravity have been turned off. Any semblance of lane discipline is lost; cars just rush towards any open space, right or left.

I found John Ndyomugyenyi, chairman of the Uganda Taxi Operators and Drivers Association, in a dimly-lit office in a building overlooking the park. Over the clamor of clattering trucks, racing engines and honking horns out the window, he told me things are getting better: "There is a very significant change from three to five years ago." His association has set up defensive driving courses, and is establishing tight controls on who is allowed to drive a *matatu*, he said. "We are trying to discourage the youths. The youth drivers are not responsible."

It's the *boda-bodas* that are truly incorrigible, Ndyomugyenyi said. Recently, Kampala's city council attempted to pass regulations requiring scooter drivers to pass a road competency test. They rioted.

•Rule #28: Time Is Money
"Never drive so fast that you cannot stop well within the distance you can see to be clear."

"It's not that they're naturally badly behaved," said taxi driver Isaac Kasiba. "You lose time, you lose money."

Kasiba is 35 years old, and has been driving a taxi for seven years. His is a high-end model—a compact car. He mostly caters to tourists who stay in the hotels around town. He says he has a business administration degree, but he can make more money driving than working at a nine-to-five job.

His problems, though, are the same as the *matatu* drivers'. The drivers don't own the cars, but rather lease them from an owner for a flat rate per day. The faster they move, the more trips they make; the more trips they make, the more passengers they pick up; the more passengers they pick up, the more money they take home.

Or take the case of the large passenger busses. Who's to blame for their reckless driving and the carnage it causes—the drivers, or the bus owners that insist on unrealistic timetables? An editorial in *The Monitor* recently pointed out one interesting bit of history about the busses: At one time, there was a movement to have governors installed in them to regulate their speed. That was, the editorial pointed out, "some years ago, before ministers and MPs became big players in the bus industry." Needless to say, reform doesn't seem likely now.

•Rule #29: The Right of Way (Part 2)
"Wait until there is a safe gap between you and any approaching vehicle before you complete your turn."

Kasiba turned right across a busy intersection. *SCREEECH*! I looked up from my notebook to see a white sedan stopped just a few feet from my door. The two men inside were yelling something in an African language.

"You see?" the taxi driver said. "You see? Some are very impatient."

I asked Kasiba what the people in the other car were saying. "He was yelling, 'I have the right of way.'"

"The seething, kidney-shaped bowl functioning as the taxi park had originally been a volcanic hill," Moses Isegawa writes in his sprawling novel about modern Uganda, The Abyssinian Chronicles. *"During the last active phase two things happened: the hill shattered, creating this valley, and the surrounding valleys were transformed into the seven round-topped hills at the core of the city of Kampala." I don't know if this account of the taxi park's origins is literally true, but it sounds right; it's a seismic place, sulfurous, filled with exhaust fumes.*

• Rule # 30: Don't Take Yourself So Seriously
"Do not drive nose to tail, leave enough space between you and the vehicle in front so that you can pull up safely."

After I talked to Omondi Mak'Oloo, I left the offices of *Kampala Motorist* and retrieved my own car. Rachel and I had to stop by the butcher shop. It was afternoon, getting towards rush hour, and our route took us through a nasty road running through the industrial area of Kampala. There happened to be a train passing through, and the road was heavily congested.

Abruptly, I heard a loud thump, and the car heaved forward. The car behind us, a large SUV, had rear-ended us—not hard enough to do any damage, but still hard enough to make me lose my cool.

"*JEEEZUS*!" I yelled, sticking my head out the window. Looking back, I could see the driver. He was laughing.

• Rule # 31: Do Unto Others
"Make sure you always park the vehicle safely … where it will cause the least inconvenience to others."

John Kamya, the police superintendent, said it's not as if all drivers in Uganda are untrained and unqualified. There are plenty of skilled drivers, too. The problem is that the bad drivers drag everyone else down to their level.

"Because the majority are undisciplined drivers who ignore the law," he said, "what's the use of being the only disciplined driver in town?"

Take the case of my friend Mike, an American from New Mexico. There, he and his family live at the end of a dirt road, in a house Mike built himself. He is a self-sufficient guy. By the end of his half-year in Uganda, however, Mike had reached the limits of his tolerance for Kampala's roads. Like Conrad's Kurtz, Africa had driven him to the edge. "I don't even look at those guys on bicycles anymore," he told me. "They're on their own."

A couple of days before he was supposed to leave Kampala for good, Mike finally snapped. He was trying to parallel park outside the Speke Hotel, a pleasant spot along Nile Avenue, where he and his family were to have a goodbye lunch. But when he looked over his shoulder, preparing to back into the space, he saw the car following him had pulled up to his back bumper. Its driver was glaring at Mike. He honked.

This happens all the time in Kampala—the idea of stopping long enough to allow someone else to pull into a parking space seems to be anathema to most drivers. But Mike had had enough. He wouldn't budge. Traffic along one of Kampala's busiest roads backed up and then came to a standstill. People got out of their cars to see what the matter was. Mike just sat there.

I happened to run into Mike and his family as they were finally finishing their meal. His wife, highly amused, related the story of Mike's driving breakdown, and how she had finally prevailed on him to give up and move along. Mike just sat there, staring ahead blankly, struck dumb by the horror of it all.

• Rule # 32: Reversing Direction
"Remember that in responsible hands, the motor vehicle has contributed much to [a] better way of living; in reckless hands, much to a violent way of dying."

John James Magola Wanume says he still believes he can change Uganda's roads for the better. He thinks he knows how. "Why is road discipline not a culture in Uganda, and why is it a culture in Canada?" he asks. "It's a culture in Canada because it's taught in schools." Magola said promoting early education is the key—and to that end, he recently wrote Uganda's first road-safety textbook for schoolchildren. Its cover depicts two children playing with a soccer ball in the road as a giant red truck bears down on them. Inside, it gives tips on how to choose the best walking route to school, how to safely ride a bicycle along the road, and how to keep grazing animals from dashing into the highway.

Omondi Mak'Oloo is more skeptical. "One thing you can

bet your last shilling on," he wrote in the most recent issue of *Kampala Motorist*, "is that the senseless carnage on the roads is not about to end tomorrow. Not even the day after. In fact, not in this generation or the next generation's generation."

• Rule # 33: Parking
"When you leave your vehicle: switch off the ignition and remove the keys; secure all windows and lock all the doors."

We're in the home stretch. Paul Izza pilots the Corolla up Nile Avenue, turns left, and we are back at the dirt parking lot where the trip began. Izza struggles to pull into the parking place.

"Turn!" Mukasa yells. "Stop. Stop! Now turn this way." Eventually Izza situates the car to Mukasa's liking, and turns off the ignition.

Paul Izza behind the wheel. Two weeks after we went for our ride, he called to tell me he now had his driver's license. He didn't say how he obtained it.

"Your driving would be fine," Mukasa says, "but you don't want to listen. Or you listen, but you forget. You find it easy. But this thing you're driving"—Mukasa pats the dashboard—"this thing kills."

Afterward, I hang around for a while to talk to Izza. I ask him to tell me about himself. He struggles with his English a bit, but I figure out that he's an orphan from Adjumani, in Uganda's war-torn north. He's been digging ditches up there, but has come to Kampala in search of a better life.

"What kind of work do you want to do?" I ask.

He points to a passing *matatu*. "Driving," he says.

I take out my wallet and hand him a 10,000 shilling note. "Here," I say, "have another lesson." ❑

Andrew Rice can be reached via email at andrew_d_rice@hotmail.com

ICWA Letters **(ISSN 1083-429X)** are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599
Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

Author: Rice, Andrew
Title: ICWA Letters - Sub-Saharan Africa
ISSN: 1083-429X
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia;Mideast/North Africa; South Asia; Europe/Russia; The Americas

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.