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## Sub-Saharan Africa

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# The Prodigal

By Andrew Rice

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KAMPALA, Uganda—When Othieno Centurio dreams of his future, he pictures a little house in the village and “a big damn car”—a four-wheel drive Toyota 4Runner. Kampala’s back-jarring potholes will trouble him no more. There will be a job working for the richest guys in town, free-spending *mzungus* (white people) flush with hard currency from governments or foundations or churches back home. “I don’t want to work with black folks,” Othieno says. “When an American employs you, you know he understands your problems. But that is not with us here in Africa.”

He will marry. Not a girl like the ones he grew up with, but an American. She will love him unselfishly and will always offer to split the check after dinner. There will be children, but just one or two. “I will not reproduce like these Africans,” he says, shaking his head. Once he makes a bit of money, he’ll start his own business. He’ll finish the house he started building long ago, not far from his father’s hut. Every weekend, he, the wife and the kids will leave

## About the Author

“President Bill Clinton went to Uganda in 1998, and declared that President Yoweri Museveni was a leader ‘determined to chart a new course for the continent under the rubric of the new African renaissance.’ Yet look a little closer and you see that Uganda’s renaissance is, at the very least, still a work in progress.”

So wrote Andrew Rice in his application for a two-year Institute fellowship.

“As I write this proposal,” said Andrew, “the local papers are filled with news of the disappearance of Museveni’s defeated presidential-election opponent. Fearing arrest, the poor man jumped his back fence and fled to, depending on the source, Kenya, South Africa or New York. That story eclipsed the week’s big news: the arrival of an international commission charged with investigating a United Nations report that Museveni’s family was directly profiting from the pillage of the Congo.”

“Which is the real Uganda—the IMF poster child, or the human rights offender? Does the country’s intervention in the Congo mark the emergence of a regional power, or is it merely another ‘Big Man’ power play, bent on plunder? Has Museveni succeeded in creating a real nation where once there were only warring tribal and regional interests, or will old grievances re-emerge once he passes from the scene? In short, is Museveni Uganda’s George Washington—the father of a nation—or is he just another Daniel arap Moi?”

“This is what I’d like to find out.”



*Andrew Rice, near his house on Naguru Hill, Kampala. That’s Lake Victoria in the background.*

Kampala, and the potholes, for the village of his youth.

"That's it," Othieno said. "That would be my African, Kampala, dream."

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*HONK!* Othieno laid on the horn as his beat-up Toyota Corolla jerked to a halt, rudely returning us to his present situation of uncertain prospects and depleted funds. Through the cracked windshield, I saw an addled-looking pedestrian scamper past. *HONK!* A *matatu*, one of the countless shared minibuses-for-hire that terrorize Kampala's streets, agitated from behind. "Now the taxi people behind me are feeling mad because I stopped," Othieno said.

Gingerly, we navigated a foot-deep chasm in the road. Othieno cursed as a motorbike darted into his path. When he returned from America, he had told his friends about the rules of the road. "Where the light is green you pass. Where it is red you have to stop. But here I was driving like an American. And the people here were abusing me. 'You don't know how to drive!' You know, because I was patient. And that was a mistake, according to them."

"My sisters were like, 'You have changed!'"

It was an afternoon in mid-June, and the two of us were headed out of town on Entebbe Road, toward Lake Victoria. Othieno was the first friend I



*Matatu: These Toyota minibuses terrorize Kampala's roads. For a few hundred shillings fare, riders cram them themselves along narrow bench seats, and are transported at breakneck speed. Some are so crowded they resemble Barnum and Bailey clown cars. The fellow leaning out the window is the conductor; he yells the matatu's destination to passers-by.*

made in Uganda. I wanted to see where he lived.

The Ugandan writer Moses Isegawa, in his novel *Abyssinian Chronicles*, describes Kampala as a city where life goes on "in diaphanous chambers of adjacent experience, with every race, every class and every tribe separated by a glass wall." I know what he means. From the moment I arrived in Kampala, the new American in town, I found myself being absorbed, not entirely willingly, into the little white society that lives in houses on the hills, literally and figuratively above this riotous black metropolis. "The whites," Isegawa writes, "were the goldfish in mobile aquariums, gawked at as they rolled through the city on the way to their schools, their clubs, their power jobs." Othieno, on the other hand, had told me his place was a walkup apartment above a store selling "small things like wristbands and bread."

Yet Othieno was hardly a "typical" Ugandan, and his differences were what made me interested in his first impressions of Kampala. In some ways, he was as much a stranger to this place as I was. Over the past decade, he had traveled from a tiny, impoverished village to Bloomington, Indiana, where he earned a business degree from Indiana University. Now he was back, struggling to find a job and running low on cash. Almost as frustrating, he was discovering that the culture he was born into had be-



come, at times, as foreign to him as someone else's country.

"Many people who have been here for a long time say they have seen a lot of changes," he told me one afternoon, over a beer at the bar next to my hotel. "But if they had been to a developed place, they would say *naaaaaahhhh*. I mean, the same old flies I used to see. The same old dust and broken roads. People are still sick, suffering from malaria and that kind of thing. So there is nothing much which has changed, according to me."

I had first met Othieno waiting for my flight into Uganda. He was sitting, alone with a duffel bag, in front of the Kenya Airways gate at Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta Airport. He was wearing a red, white and blue Tommy Hilfiger shirt, little oval glasses and a pair of wristwatches. The gold one, an Elgin, he bought at Wal Mart, he later told me. The platinum one he got off the internet. "It is just a duplicate of this kind of bling-bling," he said.

In his bag, Othieno was carrying the proceeds of his time in America: About \$8,000 cash, a DVD player, and a stack of movies, including *Dr. Doolittle* with Eddie Murphy, *My Fair Lady* with Julie Andrews, and *Viva Las Vegas* with Elvis Presley. ("I went to Las Vegas and I wanted to show that," he later explained.)

He struck up a conversation with me and my wife, Rachel. We chatted amiably for a while about America and Indiana and NBA basketball. He told us what to expect from Uganda, and offered some house-hunting advice: "Find a white man to show you where the white people live. If you live where I live, they will rob you." As we boarded the plane, Othieno promised to look us up at the hotel where we were staying. We smiled and nodded politely.

After an hour-long flight, we stepped out onto the tarmac in Entebbe. The night was steamy and the air was thick with tiny lake flies. Othieno disappeared into a mob of friends and family, shouting with joy at the sight of him.

Later, Othieno would tell me about what happened afterwards. The whole group had piled into cars and driven the 30 kilometers back to Kampala, where the sister of a friend had prepared a welcoming dinner. "We had *matooke* [steamed plantains—the Ugandan national dish], rice and chicken and peanut sauce," he said. Othieno said he was full already. "I was not used to the food. I was used to hamburgers and all that. Chinese, you know."

Othieno rented a room at the Roadmaster Hotel, a little guest house painted a peeling turquoise on the outskirts of town. There was a bar out front where he and his friends continued the celebration. His friends laughed at the way he

talked—his American inflections, his hip-hop slang, his prodigious use of the f-word. "That is here, when you mention that word, really obscene," Othieno said. "But of course I told them in the states you use that word like any other thing. And they were like 'Hell no, guy you have really changed.'"

"I was like, I am from the States, I am not from Africa, you know."

The end of the night came. Othieno was expected to pick up the tab. He was exasperated. "In America, you go have a drink—everybody pays for his or hers. But here, everybody tells you 'let's go out' and they expect everything from you, because you are from a place where there are dollars."

Exhausted from his long travels, Othieno and the group went back to his tiny room, jammed with three beds. Othieno climbed into his bed to go to sleep. His friends, as is the custom among young Ugandan men, tried to climb in beside him. "In the States, men don't share beds. And I have been telling them 'Hell no—I am not sharing!'" Othieno said, laughing. "They said, 'What is wrong with this guy?' They laughed their heads off."

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I had nearly forgotten about our friend from the airport when, a few days after I arrived in Kampala, he strode up to the table where we were sitting outside our hotel, wearing a wide smile and an American-flag bandanna on his head.

"Hello! It is Innocent," he said.

Innocent is Othieno's middle name, his Christian name. He uses his two names more or less interchange-



Roadmaster Hotel: This is where Othieno spent his first night in Uganda. "It's a filthy place," he said. "The mosquitoes really bit me. You can still see the scars. I was like 'What the hell is this?'"

ably—he is Othieno to his African friends, Innocent to his friends in America.

His mother called him Innocent, too. Othieno was born in a small village called Walaweji, in the province of Tororo, in the far eastern corner of Uganda near the border with Kenya. It is a little town of thatched roofs along a rutted road, home to a few hundred people. Everyone is related to each other. Othieno, now 30, was the youngest of 12 children. Two brothers did not survive infancy. He and his older brother Owino were the only sons.

To hear Othieno tell it, Walaweji is a dismal and magical little place—intensely poor, deeply religious, gripped by a powerful fear of witchcraft. As a child, he says, he was bedeviled by “night dancers”—naked, wraithlike creatures who would knock on his door late at night, disturbing his sleep. No one knew who the night dancers were, although everyone assumed they were people in the village.

“My father is a farmer, a peasant,” Othieno said. He pronounces the word *pee-zant*. Still, Othieno’s family was, by village standards, somewhat well-to-do. Owino, who was about 20 years older than Othieno, got a job in the police force, and later went into business as a trader. He sent home money, so that Othieno’s father could replace the thatch roof on his house with sheet metal.

Othieno’s father and mother were stern. “In Africa, we fear our parents,” he said. “We are not given that love.” The house had stringent rules. Every morning at dawn, each child would pick his own food from the garden. Attendance at school and two Sunday church services was mandatory. Infractions like truancy and food theft were punished with the swift lash of a switch.

“We were beaten. You know, *beaten*,” Othieno said. (Where did your father hit you? I asked. “Anywhere,” Othieno replied, laughing. “Those people who were beaten only on their butts, they were from educated families.”) “But that is good,” he said, “because that is the real world.” When the other village children stole off from school to hunt birds in the forest with their slingshots, Othieno, fearing the switch, went to class.

These days, he said, most of the guys he grew up with spend their time scraping out subsistence from the land, drinking *waragi*, home-brewed liquor made out of fermented bananas, and smoking marijuana. “They are just *pee-zants*. Very, very poor. In the village. They don’t know where Kampala is.”

Othieno showed promise as a student, and when he reached high-school age he won the opportunity to attend St. Paul’s College, a Catholic boarding school in the neighboring province of Mbale. Owino, who lived in Mbale, paid his tuition.

Othieno did well at St. Paul’s, well enough to harbor

hopes of attending a university. He applied to the American University in Nairobi and Makerere University in Kampala, the best school in Uganda.

Then tragedy struck. Owino, who had done so much to assure his younger brother secured a good education, contracted AIDS. He died in 1990, just as Othieno was graduating from St. Paul’s.

“When my brother died, all the plans died from there,” he said. Paying for the university was now out of the question. More than that, his brother’s wife was ailing, too. When she died, there would be five children to provide for. It fell to Othieno, the only remaining son, to provide for their upbringing.

He enrolled in a teacher’s college near his home village. “I wanted to at least get a [diploma] from that. Because if I was too much frustrated, I would have then stopped studying. I would have got married and said ‘No, this is the end of the road.’”

He qualified as a teacher in 1992, and took a job teaching geography and religion at a secondary school in Busolowe, two villages away. He rode a bicycle to Busolowe and back, one and a half hours each way. The ride wore holes in his pants.

“I was like, ‘What am I doing?’” he recalled. “I can’t replace my trousers, man.”

He moved back into his parents’ hut, thought, and despaired. Finally, after a year, he heard about a job working with street kids in Nairobi through a friend, a Russian missionary. He scraped together some money and moved there. But the job, with a church group, turned out to be unpaid. “I was like ‘I’m wasting time,’” Othieno said. “‘Let me go back home.’ I left Nairobi, came back home, and then went to Kampala, and started looking for jobs.” As we drove out to Othieno’s apartment, I asked him whether he had ever doubted whether things would work out.

“I didn’t know,” he said, “because I had lost all the hope.”

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“It’s a question you often get into with people, living in Kampala: ‘What is poverty?’” Nick Shirra, a Welsh agricultural engineer who has lived here for almost a decade told me. “It’s one of those words like ‘love.’ What does it mean? You meet people in the shantytowns, in the countryside, they have nothing materially, but they don’t feel poor. ... I think it’s a loss of hope.”

I posed the question to Othieno: What is poverty? It was rush hour, and we were stuck in traffic at the clogged, cacophonous Clock Tower roundabout on the south side of town. Young children were approaching the gridlocked



*Othieno on his porch. The poster is from Museveni's reelection campaign last year.*

cars, hands outstretched. "They are just street kids who don't have their parents," Othieno said. He rolled up the windows.

"You guys don't have poverty at all," he said. "You guys, I think, are like a thousand years ahead of us." He gestured out his window, where men in rags were picking through mounds of garbage dumped at the side of the road. "Would you find this kind of thing in the U.S.? This kind of *shit*?"

I asked him about what Shirra said, about poverty being a want of hope, not money. If that was the case, weren't there people in America who knew poverty? Othieno snorted:

"Ok, sometimes there is poverty in the states. You can go and pick up trash and you are given \$7 an hour. And you survive. But here there are no jobs. ... Somebody finishes his degree, expects to get a white collar job, he will not."

I had touched a nerve. When I first met Othieno, at the airport, he had talked enthusiastically about his job prospects; perhaps he would start his own business. But Kampala was not treating him kindly, business degree or no business degree.

"Here in Kampala you have to know somebody," he said. "Through friends you can get a job here, through relatives. And me, I don't have any relatives in Kampala."

Othieno's problem wasn't just familial. It was tribal.

He is a Jopadhola, from the east. "And this government is from the west, you know," he said. Uganda's president, Yoweri Museveni, is from around Mbarara, and came to power leading a guerilla incursion from the western part of the country. Ever since, critics have accused his government of dividing the spoils of power in favor of the western tribes.

"All these guys you see driving these big cars, they are from those areas," Othieno said. "They are the ones enjoying the World Bank money and that kind of thing. Meanwhile, we people in the east, we are grasping. They say 'To hell! You go and grow crops. Grow this! Plant this!' While these guys are enjoying life, driving Mercedes and all these big cars. And that is the problem I am going to face."

Breaking into the private sector, meanwhile, offers its own challenges. Commerce in Kampala is dominated by two groups: Asians of Indian and Pakistani ancestry, and the Baganda, the tribe that gave the country its name. The British ruled Uganda through the Baganda, and they have dominated the country's economy ever since.

Othieno doesn't care much for the Baganda. "Their main thing is to make money and that's it," he said.

We were on Entebbe Road now, the pockmarked highway that runs to Lake Victoria and the airport. Othieno illustrated his feelings about the Baganda by way of a famous story that happened along this stretch:

A few years back, Nasser Ntege Sebagala, the former mayor of Kampala, a Muganda (individual member of the Baganda) and presidential aspirant, traveled to Boston for a conference on garbage disposal. The police there, unimpressed by his title, arrested him when he arrived on an outstanding warrant for passing \$44,000 in phony traveler's checks. The episode might have seemed comical in America, but there was outrage in Kampala. "I came from my place of work and I was coming this direction that night," Othieno said. "Any car that had a *mzungu* was being smashed. They smashed a lot of cars."

"This was a Baganda thing," he said. "Ssebagala is a real thief by nature. Because he was already very, very rich. But he makes these fake checks. And that's why these Kampalans like him—because he's their type."

Othieno honked his horn at a car that had pulled to the side of the road. It grudgingly moved forward a couple of feet, and he pulled into a dusty parking lot, next to a building painted with a bright-red advertisement for Close Up toothpaste. We had arrived.

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Othieno first came to Kampala in 1996, fresh from his disappointment in Nairobi. He had few prospects and shrinking hopes. He lived with his cousin's brother in a

one-room house, jammed in with his relative's wife and children. Deliverance came in the form of an evangelical Christian charity called World Vision. The Americans running the place gave him a volunteer job, working in the far southwest of the country. "It was a bit OK, because they bought for us mattresses and a bicycle," he said. Othieno threw himself into the job, and before long he was earning a salary. That helped pay for his three nieces and two nephews to be educated.

Othieno was born a Catholic, but around this time he became "saved." He paints the decision in purely practical terms: "When I joined World Vision, I had to be born again or something like that," he said. He was hardly alone in Uganda, where missionaries are everywhere and evangelism permeates the culture, from the streets—where many of those hellraising *matatus* are spray painted with slogans like, "Redeemed by the blood of Jesus"—to the stadiums, where revival preachers lure crowds with huge screens showing World Cup soccer matches (sermons at halftime), to the ramshackle roadside churches where faith healers offer "cures" for AIDS.

"When I left for the states, the girls who were saved, they were not wearing trousers," Othieno said, meaning that they were wearing modest skirts, as opposed to pants. "Or making their hair. Or making their nails." World Vision had stringent rules for its employees: "You were not allowed to drink, you were not allowed to smoke, you were not allowed to sit in a bar like this and have a good time," he said one afternoon, as he enjoyed a beer and a cigarette at a Kampala bar.

Othieno used to think all Americans were religious like the people at World Vision. "But then I saw the way the born-again act in the States. It's not the same as here. Here they are extremists. They are Christian Talibans."

Othieno rose rapidly within the World Vision organization. Eventually he was promoted to oversee an entire subcounty. He paid school fees for orphans, gave out small loans. He was in charge of building new schools and orphanages. "I was like the big man," he said.

But Othieno had still bigger plans. For years, he had been calling an uncle in America, asking him to arrange for him to come. "I used to call and pester them," Othieno said, "and at last they accepted."

In 1999, Othieno boarded a plane for the first time. After three days of travel, sleeping in airport terminals, he was deposited in a strange place called Indiana.

"For the first three months I couldn't

believe myself," he said. Soon after he arrived, his relatives took him to an American shopping mall. He saw aisles and aisles of new televisions, new stereos, new jeans. "Man, I only opened my mouth like this." He dropped his jaw.

Othieno went to live with his uncle's family. "They gave me a lot of hard time," he said. He said they only cared about money and material things. He could feel their embarrassment at his provincial ways.

One day, his uncle gave him a document, an application for permanent residence in the United States. He told him to get the paperwork started. Othieno refused, saying he had always intended to return to Uganda. He moved out soon afterwards.

Still, Othieno loved his time in America. He still talks about the place in awed, if sometimes somewhat skewed, terms. In Othieno's America everyone works 80 hours a week, eats at Burger King and Red Lobster, shops at the mall and goes to Las Vegas for vacation. Even its rainwater is better than Uganda's. "In the U.S., that [runoff] water is cleaner than what we're drinking. Because it comes down from clean grass down nice road and it's clean. The water we drink [in the village] is from like a stagnant well. Where the cows can drink from."

Granted, America was overwhelming at first. In Uganda, school children are discouraged from talking in class—it is taken as a sign of disrespect to the lecturer. At Indiana students talked all the time. "A kid can talk to



*Pearl of Africa: This is a sign on Kimathi Ave. in Kampala. Winston Churchill came to visit Uganda for a couple of weeks in 1907, shot a prodigious number of animals, and dubbed the country "the pearl of Africa." (He also suggested that Kampala was unfit for habitation: "there seems to be a solemn veto placed upon the white man's permanent residence in these beautiful abodes.") The nickname stuck.*

the teacher like a big person," Othieno said, a touch disapprovingly. "I found difficulties at the beginning. But then I realized what was going on and I copied." He adapted quickly. He got jobs working at a car dealership and a restaurant, and sent money back to the village. He learned all kinds of rules—classroom rules, social rules, road rules. There were many differences from Uganda. For instance: when the police pull behind you and put on their lights, you have to stop. (He made this discovery after an unfortunate misunderstanding involving a car with dealer plates and a high-speed chase back to the dealership.)

He explored new places, like Bullwinkle's, a gay bar in Bloomington. Some friends took him there, and he loved it. He took pictures of the place to bring home to Uganda. Othieno swears that Bloomington has the second-largest gay population in the United States. ("First is San Francisco, then Bloomington.") Whether that's true or not, Indiana must have seemed like Gomorrah coming from Uganda, where homosexuality is still illegal and the prevailing attitude about gays might charitably be described as "medieval." (One government minister, a woman who has been a champion of gender equality, recently suggested quarantining Uganda's gays on a deserted island.)

Othieno came to see things differently "Now I know what a gay is, I am free about gays, because they were my friends there," he said.

He met all kinds of new people. "I never had friends who were Africans in the States," Othieno said. He said he avoided African-Americans too, because he had heard many negative things about them before he came to America—that they were prone to violence and criminality.

He mostly dated white women. The African-American women glared at him, but he didn't mind. The experience, however, has made returning difficult, he said.

"I used to have girlfriends here, but I don't feel like having these girls anymore," Othieno said. "Ok, these black girls are really sexy; they know what sex is all about. At least better than American girls." He flashed me a pitying look. "Since I have had both of them I know that. But those American girls, they know what *love* is all about. They know that when somebody loves you, she loves you. Most girls [in America], if you go out together or buy dinner she will even want to add some money to pay for the dinner. Most of these girls here love you because of money, because of materialistic things. That's all."

Othieno said that since he had returned, he had seen some of his old girlfriends. They've flirted and asked him to buy them things, like airtime for their cellular phones. "I'm telling her I don't have money for that. And they

are telling me I am a bad guy now. And I am saying, 'Ok, to hell!' ...

"That is what the culture is all about," he said, "and that is the change which I have had in me."

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We got out of the car. A woman stood in the doorway of the small shop beneath Othieno's apartment, eyeing the two of us curiously.

Othieno led me through a narrow corridor to the back of the building. It opened up onto a small courtyard, littered with garbage. A group of small, shabbily-dressed boys kicked a soccer ball back and forth in front of a line of one-room concrete houses, not much larger than garden sheds. When we passed, they stopped kicking and stared.

Othieno smiled at the kids. "They sleep in that filthy place back there. They share with the kids and their mother one room," he said.

We turned right and climbed a stairway up the back of the building to the second floor. Othieno unlocked the door, and we walked into his apartment.

The tour didn't take long. Walking down a dark hallway, we passed the bathroom, with its purely ornamental toilet and sink (the place doesn't have running water), a guest bedroom filled with boxes, and Othieno's small, windowless bedroom. His clothes hung on hooks above the bed.

The hallway ended at the living room. It had a linoleum floor and was furnished with yellow and black floral-print furniture. His American DVD player sat beneath a large television set. A small balcony overlooked the road and the rolling hills outside Kampala, dotted with puffs of smoke where farmers were burning underbrush. Plastered to one wall of the balcony, facing the road, was a faded and peeling election poster of Museveni.

"So this is my place," Othieno said. "A simple place, at least for beginners."

Othieno didn't like the place when he first saw it, but the rent was cheap: 100,000 shillings (around \$50) a month. He paid three months up front, and had the landlord dig him a pit latrine out back. His power goes out for days at a time. At night, the mosquitoes feast on him. "I gave some money to some guys to clean around the back and collect the rubbish people were throwing," he said. I thought of the big pile of garbage I had seen on the way in. "But it is again just like the way it was. Because the neighbors keep throwing it all over."

Othieno is about broke; he blew \$5,000 of the \$8,000 he brought home the first day he was home, buying his

Toyota. He spent a fair amount of the balance on a trip back to his home village.

His job search, so far, has been less than fruitful. Shortly after he returned to Uganda, Othieno paid a call on the offices of World Vision. He still knew people there, and he wasn't above working for the "Christian Taliban," so long as they paid. But he was told there were no openings. "The boss, the program officer, put his brother in my position," he said.

Othieno has very specific ideas about where he wants to work. He wants a job with an American or European embassy, or a charity, or a non-governmental organization—anything, so long as he's working for white people. He is hardly alone in this sentiment. Among young Ugandans, working as a middleman for an NGO is seen as the quickest route to wealth. A good job at an NGO pays about 500,000 shillings (about \$275 a month). Othieno's niece, by contrast, works in a bank, and makes about one fourth of that.

I asked Othieno what he thought about the increasing uneasiness in Uganda with the role donor organizations like the World Bank were playing in shaping the country's politics and economy. Some newspaper columnists were calling it a new form of colonialism; Museveni had recently called for the country to wean itself from foreign money.

Wouldn't it be better for Ugandans to chart their own course?

"These Africans, they pay less, they are corrupt," he replied. "If you do not bring in an American or a Briton, all that money will be thrown away. Someone will buy these big cars, construct a house."

So Othieno keeps looking. There was an interview for a job as a fund-raiser for a charity building a school in Jinja. The talk with the boss, an Englishman, had gone well, but then Othieno had met the project director, a Ugandan. The project director would make appointments to talk about the job, and would fail to show up for them. One day, Othieno convinced the Ugandan to bring him along to a meeting in Jinja. Halfway through the meeting, the project director excused himself and left, stranding Othieno in a city about two hours from Kampala.

But Othieno keeps coming back. "I am not sure" whether the job will ever materialize, he admits. "There is no salary. I am just there. And I do not call that a job."

Othieno put on a Sting CD, and we sat in his living room and drank a beer. The soft afternoon sun seeped through his curtains, closed to deter burglars. I asked him: If life is so hard here, why did you come home?

Othieno smiled. "You know, I was missing Uganda so much," he said. "I was missing my family. And the

cheapness of the place. Because [in America], I was trying to work and I was spending all of the money paying the bills. Sometimes I was not even able to pay the school fees for my nieces and nephews here."

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It was true, family responsibilities had brought Othieno back to Uganda. But for a long time I didn't know the whole story behind his return.

Last winter, Othieno's mother fell ill. In December, the family took her to a clinic, where the doctors X-rayed her and found a large cancerous tumor. Her health declined through the spring. Othieno was finished school, but he had already purchased a ticket to fly back to Uganda in May. The airline wouldn't let him change his return date.

On April 30, Othieno's sister, who couldn't afford to call America, relayed a message through a friend: His mother had died. Relatives buried his mother in the village, near the hut where Othieno was raised. A few days after he came home—the same day he paid his unexpected call on me at the hotel—he had set out in his newly-purchased Toyota to pay his respects.

It took him ten hours of driving over bad roads to get home. No one ever drives to Walaweji. Outside of the village, he saw some cousins, and had them cut a route through the underbrush. They were astonished to see him.

"Most people didn't know I would come back. Most people who come to the US, don't," Othieno said. "They were surprised—even my father didn't believe it."

When he pulled up to his father's hut, seven of his sisters, alerted to his return, were waiting. Someone brought a chicken to slaughter in his honor. Everyone pulled up chairs and sat down outside the house—prodigal sons are not supposed to enter until after the celebratory sacrifice is performed.

His father got out of bed and hobbled outside on crutches. Not long ago, Oloka had dislocated his back. "And of course, he was not taken to the hospital because there was no money," Othieno said. "So he remained like that. He is now a lame person." Othieno had heard about his father's condition from one of his sisters, and had scraped together some money to buy his father a bed and mattress, a rare luxury in the village, where most people sleep on papyrus mats.

His sisters told him about his mother's final days: "My mom had told them, 'You greet for me Innocent.' All the time my mom was asking, 'Where is he? Where is Innocent?'"

"Everybody started crying," Othieno said. "Even me,

I started crying, you know. It was an emotional time.”

Othieno had thought about bringing flowers for his mother’s grave, the way they do it in America. But he had decided the flowers in Kampala were too expensive. Instead, on the way to the village, he bought two 20-liter plastic jugs filled with *kongo*, a local brew brewed from millet, for the villagers to share. That night, the village had a party outside the hut.

They traded stories and gossip about goings-on in the village. One cousin had recently foiled the government’s attempt to build a road through his land by casting a magic spell; snakes appeared and scared the workers away. Another villager, “a stubborn guy” convinced he had been placed under an evil spell, had burned down all the shrines used by the local practitioners of magic.

“Many people came up to greet me,” Othieno said. “Well, not only to greet me, but to see what I may have brought for them.” Visiting home is expensive for Othieno. It’s the same everywhere in Africa. “The hooks of extended family cut into the hearts and pocketbooks of almost every African,” the journalist Blaine Harden wrote in his 1988 book *Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent*. “With its labyrinthine web of rights and duties, the extended family is a day-care, social security, and welfare system. . . . This system of commerce and welfare does not follow free market precepts, Marxist dogma, or the rule of law. It is governed by ties of blood, of tradition, of guilt.”

Othieno had benefited from this system when he was young, and his brother had paid for his schooling. He had done his best to repay his debt by providing for his orphaned cousins’ upbringing. Now, however, he was returning to the village from America—a rich man, everyone was sure. “To them, they see Americans and people from America as wealthy people,” Othieno said. “They thought I came with a lot of money. But I told them no, I am just as poor as I was before.” No one believed him. Distant relatives pulled Othieno aside with dismal stories. “And you see, they are putting on rags. Real, real rags,” Othieno said. “Shoes are just dreams.”

Othieno had brought with him a bag full of old clothes, donated by his roommates in Bloomington, which he distributed around the village. But so many needed so much. His father needed to see a doctor about his back. His sister’s children weren’t going to school—there was no money for school uniforms and books. Another sister showed up at the party with bruised and swollen arms. She explained that her husband had recently taken a second wife, and was now beating her. She wanted out of the marriage. But to gain a divorce for her, Othieno would have to pay back her dowry. “And I don’t have the cows,” he said.

The village wasn’t quite as Othieno remembered it. He was struck by “the darkness, the filthiness of my own

home.” His family brought him water to drink, but he refused. He had brought his own from the city. “Even when I was eating, I was struggling, chasing the flies away.” Bedtime couldn’t come too soon.

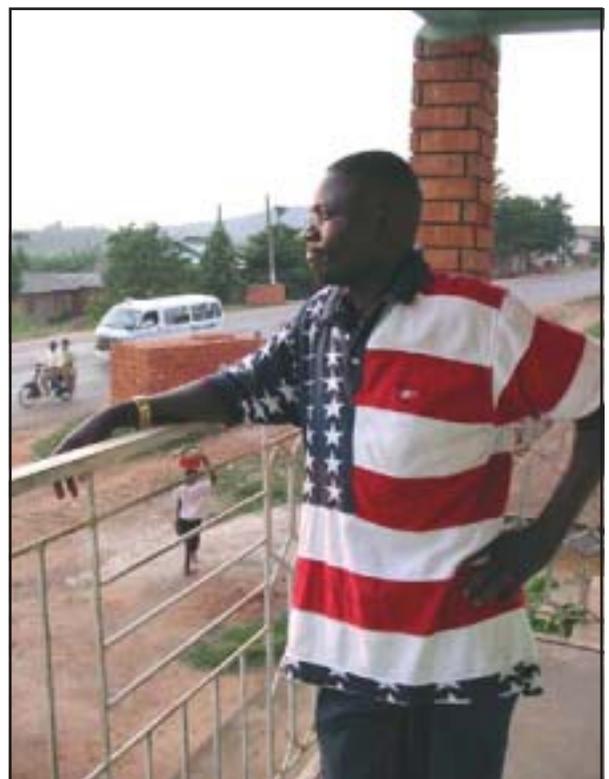
According to tradition, during the mourning period, the family sleeps outside the house, near the grave, to help the deceased feel more comfortable while adjusting to the afterlife. Othieno laid down dried banana leaves near the village fire and tried to go to sleep under the stars. The mosquitoes savaged him.

By Monday, four days after he arrived, he was on the road back to Kampala. “I wanted to finish the week but I couldn’t,” Othieno said. “Because of the mosquitoes and the hardships there. I ran short of money and sleeping out was really horrible. Mosquitoes—*ugggggh!* So I said no, let me rush back to Kampala.”

\* \* \*

“In my village,” Othieno told me the afternoon of our trip out to his apartment, “they take me to be maybe a confused guy. Because I have gotten along without getting married—I’m 30, I’m old. . . . Because I sleep on a mattress and drive my funny car. Culturally, I should be having kids. Reproducing, you know.”

But for all his disparaging talk, Othieno still talks of



*Othieno looks out over Entebbe Road to the hills beyond. In the background, a young girl carries bananas for sale, and a matatu roars past a boda-boda, one of the little motorbikes for hire which are the cheapest form of transportation around.*

returning to the village one day. He has a plan. He wants to start his own business, importing salt from Mombasa. He already knows people he can buy it from. He figures it will take 20 million shillings (about \$12,000) to get started.

“I have some piece of land” in the village, he said. Some years ago he began building a house on it; now he’s restarted construction. Like most Ugandans, he places great importance on owning land—a person who has land is a person who has established himself, and a person who is rich is a person who owns a great deal of land. “Land is the best,” Othieno said. One day, when he has finished the house, he plans to spend as much time as possible back home.

It was dark, and Othieno said it was time to head back. Thieves are thick along Entebbe Road at night. All

along the road, little shacks were jammed with used TV’s for sale, their bluish screens flickering against the darkness. It struck me, as we rode back into the city, that in some way Othieno’s dreams of the future—big car, white wife, village home—represented divisions within himself, divisions that came from living in a faraway, affluent, culture that can never be his own, but will always remain a part of him. Othieno may tell his friends that he is “from the States, not from Africa,” but he will never be able to escape the place he was born.

Not that he really wants to. I asked Othieno whether he was happy to return to the village—mosquitoes, dunning relatives and all. His face broke into a wide smile.

“I felt so good to be in that dirty place,” he said. “I felt so good and so happy. I was like, ‘Yes, I’m back home.’” □



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## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

### Fellows and their Activities

#### **Martha Farnelo** (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

#### **Curt Gabrielson** (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

#### **Andrew Rice** (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

#### **Matthew Z. Wheeler** (August 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

#### **James G. Workman** (January 2002 - 2004) • **Southern Africa**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of freshwater supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his six years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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