

ICWA LETTERS

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Sub-Saharan Africa

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By Andrew Rice

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KOBOKO, Uganda—Koboko, a town of 30,000 people, lies in the far northwestern corner of Uganda, in the shadow of a sharp, sand-brown mountain that is reputed to be cursed. It is one of the poorest towns in one of the poorest countries in the world. The majority of the population never attended school. The adults are thin, and the children are stunted from malnourishment. Clean drinking water is a rarity. Toilets are a luxury. Anemia and diarrhea are among the leading causes of death.

It had rained hard the day I drove into town, and Koboko's rough dirt roads were a bog of mud. Driving down a steep hill near the center of town, I struggled to control the car as it skidded to and fro. At the bottom of the hill was a stream swollen with what smelled to be raw sewage. Kids were playing in it.

The main drag through Koboko is a wide road lined by a string of dim, dingy restaurants. Rickety pickups periodically raced through town, bullying the few brave bicycle-riders off the road, as the truck's passengers in back teetered atop grain sacks. Most of the trucks bore license plates beginning with the letters "NS," which stands for "New Sudan," an unrecognized, rebel-controlled state. Koboko is just a short drive from Sudan, and is even closer to the Congo, another war-racked country. A few miles north of the town, there is a place where the road itself is all that represents the Congo border. A shop on one side is painted with a single chipped word, "Zaire," the discarded name of a derelict nation.

Concepts like law and government seem similarly faded. There are few border posts; smuggling is a way of life. What legitimate economy there is in Koboko is provided by numerous relief organizations, which use the town as a base for shuttling aid to southern Sudan. Thousands of refugees from that country's unending civil war live in camps outside town. Recently, after rebels killed a truck driver from Koboko as he made a run across the border, a mob of locals set upon their Sudanese guests, beating two to death and burning 17 huts. When a chuckling resident told me the story of the uprising against "those Dinkas," I was reminded of a line in a book I once read, which said that the tribes who live around Koboko have one of the highest homicide rates in the world.

Koboko is Idi Amin's hometown, and it seems like the sort of place he would be from.

At the time I visited Koboko, in late July, Amin was very much on Ugandans' minds. The news had just broken that the old man, who had been living in exile in Saudi Arabia for the past 24 years, was in a coma and likely to die. One might have thought this would have been cause for rejoicing in the country he tried his level best to destroy with his dunderheaded antics, his disastrous economic policies and his fabled brutality. "I would not bury Amin," vowed Uganda's current president, Yoweri Museveni. "I will never touch him. Never. Not even with a very long spoon."

What was surprising, though, was how many Ugandans seemed ready to forgive Amin—or even to deny he had done anything requiring forgiveness. Politicians called on the government to allow Amin to return from exile so he could

die at home. At a defensive press conference, Museveni promised to arrest his predecessor if he set foot in the country alive, but conceded that once dead, he could be buried in Uganda. (Reports were going around that Museveni had promised “arrest the dead body” at the airport.)

The Monitor, a newspaper in Kampala, the capital, canvassed bars and street corners for opinions, and found a great deal of sympathy for the deposed despot. “Every African leader makes mistakes,” a salesman told the paper. “I would give him my vote if he recovers and wants to run for president,” said a taxi driver. “People say he killed so many people, but I think there is no leader who has not killed,” said a shop owner.

Up north, in Amin’s home region of West Nile, the assessments were even less measured. The people there recall him not as a bloodthirsty dictator, but as a hometown hero. I drove to West Nile in the last days of the Amin’s life to seek out those who knew him best, fully realizing that I wouldn’t learn much about the events bound to fill the obituaries of the man Ugandans called “Big Daddy”: The estimated 100,000 to 300,000 people killed during his eight-year rule; the bodies dumped in the Nile for the crocodiles to devour; the human heads he’s said to have kept; or the rumored dinners of human flesh. These were Amin’s men, I knew, and they would want me to appreciate the unrecognized side of a misunderstood man. But the stories they would tell me—and the unabashed pride with which they told them—ended up revealing a great deal about African politics as it was practiced then, and to no small extent is practiced still today.

Amin may have been a tyrant, but he was *their* tyrant: a son of West Nile’s soil, a kinsman. When he ruled they had been rich; now they were poor. When he ruled they had had jobs; now they had none. When he ruled they were strong; now they were weak. When he ruled they had *mattered*; now, they seemed hardly to count at all. Tribe trumped truth, and grievance obviated guilt. Nostalgia was all they had.

I turned left off of Koboko’s main road, skidded down the muddy hill, forded the fetid stream, and reached dry land again. I drove a mile or so further. Then I came upon a lone, elderly man walking slowly down the side of the road. He was short and skinny, wearing a tan safari suit and a round Muslim cap.

“That’s him,” Ibrahim Duke said. I pulled the car to the side of the road and Duke jumped out to talk to the old man.

Duke was my guide through West Nile. He was born



A giant portrait of President Idi Amin looms above spectators at a Kampala soccer stadium in 1977. When Amin died in August, the rest of the world remembered him as a bloodthirsty tyrant. In Uganda, feelings were more mixed. And in West Nile, Amin’s home region, they recalled the dictator with undiminished adulation. (Photo Courtesy of The New Vision)

there, and he served in Amin’s air force. A compact man, with slitted eyes and a high nasal voice, Duke talked fondly of his army days. “You had drink and women on either side of you, and the bullet in front of you,” he told me one evening. After Amin was ousted, he briefly made his living as a poacher, trafficking in rhinoceros horns. (Rhinos are now extinct in Uganda.) He also got mixed up with a rebel army. That’s all behind him now, Duke says. He works as a printer in Kampala. He stopped boozing and carousing some time ago, and now takes care to pray to Mecca five times a day. He is trying to get right with God. “I did many bad things when I was in the army,” he confided, though he never volunteered any details. I liked Duke, and I didn’t particularly want to know them.

After a moment, Duke returned to the car. The elderly man hopped into the front seat. He introduced himself as Major General Isaac Lumago.

“Let me take you to my wall,” Lumago said. “It is not a house. It is a wall.”

* * *

Lumago directed me down the road until it ended. Then we bumped over uneven ground covered by high weeds. We came to a narrow footpath and drove along it until we reached a water pump. It seemed we could drive no further, so I stopped.

Besides Lumago, five of us got out of the car: Me, Duke, my friend Allan Begira, who had come up with me from Kampala because, like many southern Ugandans, he had never seen West Nile, and two friends of Duke’s who had latched onto our journey for vague rea-

sons. Lumago led us all up the footpath, through a collection of thatch-roofed huts, and finally to the ruins of an old brick building.

Behind the weeds and yellow flowers that had climbed over the walls, I could discern the outlines of what had once been a mansion by Ugandan standards. We pushed our way through the stalks of corn Lumago had planted in what had once been his front yard, until we reached a spot of concrete. This had once been his foyer, Lumago said.

“See, there were three bedrooms over there,” the general said, pointing to the right side of the house. Then he gestured to the left. “Five bedrooms on the other side.”

Lumago told us the story of what had happened to his house: After Amin was ousted from power in 1979 by a combined force of Tanzanians and Ugandan exiles, he fled to the Congo. In the rush to get out of the country, he left all of his belongings in the house, and the keys in the door. He said he had hoped that the liberators would simply unlock it, loot, and leave. Instead, they destroyed the house. The new government’s soldiers, who were mostly from tribes related to Milton Obote, the president Amin originally deposed, had lost countless relatives to the denizens of West Nile. They were eager for revenge, and they took it out on the exiled soldiers’ houses. They plundered them, or burned them, or dynamited them.

“Politics here used to be very bitchy,” Lumago said, laughing softly.

Lumago’s macabre home tour was a routine I would repeat all over West Nile. When I came to talk to Amin’s men, they would inevitably ask me to take their pictures next to their ruins, not the new, more modest homes they had built nearby. Sometimes the house would be missing its roof and windows, but would still retain its basic



Major General Isaac Lumago and his Amin-era mansion. The house, like many in West Nile, was destroyed by the soldiers who ousted Idi Amin from power in 1979. “Politics here used to be very bitchy,” Lumago said. (Photo Courtesy of The New Vision)

form. Sometimes it would be little more than a cracked floor and a few jagged brick pillars.

Lumago led us back out of the ruins, to the cluster of huts that now serves as his family homestead. We sat on wooden chairs in the shade of a tall tree. Lumago said he was sick and old, and had no money to rebuild his mansion.

“This is what life is, up to down,” he said.

Under Amin, Lumago, now 63, was one of the most powerful men in Uganda. Trained at British military academies at Sandhurst and Omdurman, in the Sudan, he had risen quickly in the army, not the least because he belonged to the same tribe as Amin, the Kakwa. He served as Minister of Industry, then as Uganda’s ambassador to Lesotho, and finally, for a short spell in the 1970s, as chief of staff of the army. He said he got the latter job because when, in 1976, terrorists hijacked a Tel Aviv-bound jet and flew it to Entebbe, he alone among Amin’s generals had warned the president that Israelis might attempt a commando raid. When the Israelis did mount a daring rescue, Amin purged his incompetent generals and put Lumago in charge.

“Amin had his good points and his bad points. It was 50-50,” Lumago said. “He was approachable,” he recalled. “If he saw people dancing the local dances, he would join in.”

And the bad points?

Lumago leaned back in his chair. “Well, if some reports got to him, say, five times, he may ... *take action*, you know? That I don’t think was a good point.”

* * *

Lumago’s assessment, however perverse—true, Amin killed people, but man could he dance!—at least acknowledged, in some faint way, that the regime had a dark side. In this respect, it differed markedly from the story I heard over and over again in West Nile, which seemed to have hardened over years of exile and hardship into an official mythology. West Nile’s Amin was a kind man, a good sport. He loved to box and play rugby, and was captain of the presidential basketball team. (One of the many titles Amin awarded himself was “Uganda’s Sportsman Number One.”) He was a nationalist who had tweaked the country’s former colonial masters and granted economic power to the people. Amin was undone, not by his own mistakes, but by an international conspiracy involving the British, the Israelis, various international corporations, rich Indians he had kicked out of the country, Ugandan exiles allied to Milton Obote, and a few malcontents within Uganda who were allied to them. All that talk about Amin the killer, Amin the illiterate, Amin the cannibal—it had been concocted by western media bent on smearing an African leader who could stand on his own.

When it came to Amin, the people of West Nile said, the



The two sides of Idi Amin: Amin (above, right) dancing with Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana... And (below) an unidentified prisoner, an alleged rebel, being led away by Amin's soldiers in 1977. According to the best estimates, between 100,000 and 300,000 people died under Amin's regime. But the killing is hardly acknowledged in West Nile. (Photos courtesy of The New Vision)



ters: Polygamy is the rule, and each wife gets a hut of her own, which cuts down on the friction that might naturally arise if everyone lived in one house.

Mududu met us in the courtyard, and led us into the largest of the huts. The major, now 55, was tall and thick-necked, with a receding hairline and pillowy lips. We went into his small living room, which, in the Ugandan style, was crammed tight with furniture and decorated with outdated calendars and posed black-and-white photographs. I sank deep into a saggy plush couch.

Mududu told me he had once been one of Amin's bodyguards. I asked him what he remembered of his boss.

"The people had love for him," Mududu replied. The major repeated stories that, with little variation, I heard again and again across West Nile. Amin was the kind of guy who, if he saw a throng of people along his motorcade route, would order the driver to stop, so he could plunge into the crowd and kiss some babies. If he saw a pedestrian walking along the side of the road, he would pull over and offer the man a lift. If Ugandans were suffering through fuel shortages, he would show his solidarity by riding to work on a bicycle.

"He was a very, very simple man," Mududu continued. "Very, very with the people, with high discipline towards elders. He could come and chat with you—the *president*. He could very easily be approached and mix with the people freely without fear."

Once, Mududu said, Amin had come to his mess hall. The president sat down at his table, with the regular soldiers, and told them he wanted to share their meal.

"He said he wanted to eat his meat on the bone," the major recalled.

* * *

winners had written the history books. They were the losers.

"Amin originated from here. I think people do not have a negative attitude towards him," said Haruna Imaga, 61, who until recently served as a member of Parliament from Arua, the largest town in West Nile. "Obviously, as president, he might have had weaknesses, but he tried his best to serve his country."

On our first day in West Nile, Duke took me to visit an old friend of his, Major Ratib Mududu, who now is a local elected official in Arua. Mududu's home was a little off Arua's main road. It consisted of several mud-brick huts surrounding a treeless dirt courtyard. Duke told me that in this region homesteads are usually built in clus-

Yumbe is about 50 miles northeast of Arua, but the trip takes several hours by car. The road is windy and rocky and, in places, so narrow that if you're stuck behind a truck—and it seems like you're always stuck behind a truck—your pace slows to a maddening crawl. The road passes corn and tobacco fields. Tall brick towers, used for curing tobacco, dot the landscape. A dozen or more rivers and streams run through the area, and sometimes all there is to a bridge is a few wooden planks nailed together. All along the road, women walk balancing huge sisal sacks on their heads. They wear color-



splashed wrap dresses made of fabric imported from the Congo and long, flowing headscarves.

Muslims are a small minority in Uganda, but they dominate Yumbe. The town looked like a spaghetti western set: a single dusty street lined with ramshackle shops. A little outside town stands a large mosque, which is pockmarked with bullet holes. Locals say that after Amin's ouster the liberators used it alternately as a place to rape women and a convenient latrine.

Near the mosque, Yumbe ends and the next town, Kuru, begins. Kuru is so dismal it made me yearn for Yumbe. Out front of a rundown bar, a group of young men lingered next to their bicycles, divvying up a bag of *kat*, a bitter-tasting green leaf that when chewed, usually along with a piece of bubble gum, acts as a low-grade stimulant. *Kat* devotees say the drug heightens the senses and sharpens the mind, but in Kuru, the natural question arises: To do what?

Past Kuru, the road grew sandy, the foliage sparser. The sun beat down. We pulled up to the home of Lieutenant Colonel Musa Eyaga. Eyaga's house, like Isaac Lumago's, had been demolished by the liberators. He had partially rebuilt, putting a metal roof atop a small portion of what was once a spacious ten-room home.

Eyaga's wife came out of the house.

She bowed her head, took Duke's hand, and touched it to her forehead and chin. (This is the way women in West Nile greet men.) She told us that Eyaga wasn't home: It was Friday afternoon, and he was at prayers.

The mosques in this area look like larger versions of the huts people live in: round, with thatched roofs reaching so close to the ground that one must stoop to enter them. We stopped at three within the space of a mile, finally finding Eyaga at the third. The lieutenant colonel smiled and shook my hand, and we leaned against the trunk of a shady tree to talk. Worshippers inside the mosque eyed us curiously.

Eyaga said he was around 60. (Like many people in West Nile, and Uganda as a whole, he is not sure of his exact birthday.) He was wearing gray corduroys, a white shirt, and a white embroidered cap.

After some initial pleasantries, I got to the point. Tell me about the coup, I said.

"I was the controller," Eyaga boasted.

Here is how Amin became a dictator, according to a man who was there. In 1971, Eyaga was a mid-ranking army officer with Malire Battalion, an elite unit based in Kampala. On January 24 of that year, fighting broke out inside the Malire barracks between soldiers loyal to President Obote, and those who supported Amin. The tide of the battle was going against Amin's men, until Eyaga commandeered an armored personnel carrier and rammed it into the locked doors of the barracks' armory. He and others snatched up guns and ammunition.

"We clashed with [Obote's men] until they were overwhelmed," Eyaga said. Amin's loyalists fanned out across the city, to take control of Parliament, the radio station and other strategic points. Eyaga called Amin at his home



The road to Yumbe

in Kampala, which he called "the Command Post." He told Amin his soldiers had won the battle, and he was now president. As the Eyaga recalls it, Amin replied gravely, "I understand everything."

The rest was history.

I asked Eyaga if subsequent events ever made him regret helping to bring Amin to power.

"I was very, very happy with his regime," Eyaga said "And not just me. Ugandans. Ugandans are very happy with Amin, up to now."

Since I had been in Uganda, I had spent months researching Amin's atrocities: the murder of the country's Anglican archbishop and the chief justice of its Supreme Court; the massacre of countless soldiers, whose only sin was to be tribally related to the deposed president, Obote; the orchestrated killings of hundreds of civilians in western Uganda in the wake of an abortive rebel attack in 1972; and tens of thousands of other disappearances, for which there were often no explanations at all. What about those, I asked Eyaga.

"Any government can do something bad," he replied. The people who were killed, he said, were rebels who were plotting to overthrow the government. "They themselves caused the problem, not the government."

According to West Nile's Amin myth, the atrocities that came to define the dictator in the world's eyes never happened. Or if they did happen, they were explained away as self-defense. Or they were said to have been committed by Sudanese mercenaries: "non-Ugandans," as one former general put it. Or they were cynically rationalized as a sad but necessary fact of life when it came to the hard business of governing in Africa.

There was no one to blame for the atrocities. Certainly



Lieutenant Colonel Musa Eyaga, the self-proclaimed "controller" of Amin's coup, outside his home.



Yumbe is one of the most heavily-Muslim areas of Uganda. This mosque outside town was plundered by the liberators in 1979, and has never been fully rebuilt.

not Amin.

"Me, I don't blame the head of state," Ratib Mududu said. "The people who call the head of state a murderer have never seen the president killing. ... As a father, when your children misbehave, you will always be blamed."

"Humans, especially in Africa, are not meant to stay with each other without the supervision of laws and law-enforcement agencies," said Isaac Lumago. By "law-enforcement agencies," he presumably meant organizations like Amin's Bureau of State Research, whose agents used to pop into people's offices unannounced, drag them out, and stuff them into the trunk of a car, never to be seen again.

That Friday, standing outside the mosque, Musa Eyaga recounted the litany of coup plots and guerrilla attacks that plagued Amin's regime. He pointed out that when it comes to dealing with rebels, the current government, under Museveni, is scarcely more humane. Over the last 17 years, a brutal civil war has plagued northern Uganda, and the government has not hesitated at times to use scorched-earth tactics that hurt innocent civilians as much as they do the rebels. The government's secret police sometimes detain its political opponents in illegal "safe houses," where they are allegedly tortured.

"If such a thing were to happen [now] and the present government hears it is me, Musa, who has done it, will the government leave me?" Eyaga asked. "They will kill me!"

* * *

Major General Isaac Lumago was tired of talking about the past. It was well past noon, and he was hungry for lunch. We all were.

We walked back down to the car, and drove back to

Koboko. Lumago directed us to one of the restaurants along the commercial strip. This was the best place in town, he said. To me, it looked indistinguishable from every other restaurant in Koboko: a dim room with several long tables, attended by a couple of corpulent, slow-moving waitresses. Periodically, the waitresses would disappear into the “kitchen”—really a couple of rusty pots cooking over charcoal in the back yard—and return with plates of cassava millet and goat stew.

When we walked in, the waitresses apologized: We were late for lunch, and there wouldn't be enough meat for all of us. I decided to skip the meal. (It turned out to be a good decision. Allan suspects he got worms from his plate of goat.)

I sat down at one of the tables on the restaurant's front porch to collect my thoughts and jot down some notes. There was a book sitting on the table, a fat biography of Oliver Cromwell. I asked around; no one was sure who it belonged to. I opened the back of the book, and found a card in back, which said it had been checked out of a British library in the late 1980s.

Lumago came outside, and commented on the book. He was an educated man, and he knew who Cromwell was. The general sat down. He was angry at Uganda's government, he said. He could be useful. He had skills. He knew how to fight rebels. But no one ever called him to ask for help.

When he returned from exile in 1997, Lumago said, “The president personally promised me money to settle in and start a business.” But no money had ever materialized. “Maybe now they are waiting to spend it on my funeral.”

The food came, and the general devoured his meal like a hungry man.

“Since I have been back,” he told me, “I have lost 20 kilos.”

* * *

In Uganda, as in much of Africa, weight is a metaphor for wealth. Someone who has won a government job, which will give him a chance to skim and steal a bit of money to buy a house or a nice car, or pay school tuition for his relatives, is said to be “eating.” A rich man is “big” or “fat.” When Idi Amin ruled, Ugandans from other tribes called those from West Nile the *mafuta mingi*, a Swahili term that means “very fat.”

Like Lumago, Amin's men are thinner than they once were, but the memory of those fat times still animates their memories, and feeds Amin's myth.

Before Amin came to power, West Nile was always considered a backwater. It received little rainfall and was

prone to drought. The people there were desperately poor, and the comparatively wealthy southern Ugandan tribes looked down on them. The British who colonized Uganda decided that the people of West Nile, coming from “Nilotic” stock, were good for manual labor and soldiering, while the southern Bantu-speakers were more sophisticated.

For a brief, brutal moment, Amin turned the prevailing hierarchy upside down. The golden rule of Ugandan politics is: The tribe that makes the rules gets the gold. (It is as true today as it was in Amin's time. Allan, whose father is from the same western tribe as Museveni, noted as we drove through West Nile how many of the houses had thatched roofs, in contrast to his own home region, where more pricey sheet metal is *de rigueur*.) Amin plied the tribal spoils system to the limit. When the president kicked out some 40,000 businessmen of Indian descent, claiming that God had ordered him to do it, he redistributed the Indians' cars, houses and businesses to his cronies in the army, who were mostly from West Nile. Amin's henchmen formed syndicates to smuggle coffee, cotton and other cash crops, enriching themselves even as the rest of the economy, deprived of export goods, collapsed. While most Ugandans scrounged for items like sugar, soap and cooking oil, Amin's tribesmen always seemed to have more than enough.

All this largesse flowing from Amin to his ethnic kin bought the president protection, even as it impoverished the rest of Uganda. It helps explain why, a quarter of a century later, so many in West Nile still profess such fierce loyalty to him.

One morning Duke introduced me to Nuru Dralega, who was sitting on a stool outside a shop in Arua. An aging, heavysset man, Dralega said he had once been Amin's driver. He recalled that when the Indians were expelled, he set his sights on a hotel and restaurant in Kampala whose owner had been kicked out. He filled out an application, and soon he was its proud new proprietor.

“He made it very smart, with traditional food,” said Duke, who used to hang out there.

“It is not only people in Arua and West Nile who like Amin,” Dralega told me through Duke, who acted as a translator. “It is all Ugandans who like Amin, because Amin opened the eyes of all Ugandans to business and things like that.”

After Amin was overthrown, Dralega, like many soldiers in the defeated army, fled to Sudan and joined a rebel army, which fought Uganda's succeeding governments. Museveni eventually lured the rebels out of the bush with promises of money and amnesty. Dralega came home.

I asked him if, all these years later, he still regretted Amin's ouster.

“Why shouldn't I be unhappy?” he replied, combat-

ively. "My father was overthrown. Where was I going to get my bread?"

Amin's largesse trickled down even to the lowest level of West Nile's society, to isolated villages like Ladonga, just to the east of Koboko. Ladonga is the birthplace of Major General Yusuf Gowon, another former chief of staff of Amin's army. Gowon is Duke's uncle, and one day, he took me there to Ladonga to talk to a group of the general's other relatives.

The villagers offered me a chair as a show of hospitality. They squatted on a papyrus mat. Just beyond their



Ibrahim Duke, my guide through West Nile, standing in what was once the living room of Major General Yusuf Gowon's home, near the village of Ladonga. Duke is a relative of Gowon's.

huts were the skeletal remains of Gowon's Amin-era mansion. On the floor of what appeared to have once been a spacious living room, white chunks of cassava were drying in the sun.

Sheik Noah Safi, the imam of the local mosque, dressed in white mufti, translated.

Gowon is currently on trial in Kampala for the murder of a local chief in 1972, in the early years of Amin's reign. Naturally, Gowon's relatives thought he had been wrongfully accused. He was a good man, they said. When he

was a general, he had paid school tuition for many local children. He built a primary school and a medical clinic in the village. When Amin was overthrown, soldiers from other tribes came to town. They killed women and children. They demolished Gowon's house, burned down the school, looted the clinic. One of Gowon's brothers told me that these days, his own children could not afford to attend school.

Under Museveni, western politicians and journalists have unendingly hailed the "economic miracle" that has supposedly taken place in Uganda, and the country has become a darling of international aid groups and lenders like the World Bank. I asked the group in Ladonga how they felt about Museveni: Were they better off now than they were under Amin? Safi translated the question, and the group on the mat broke into guffawing laughter.

The imam translated their reply: "During Amin's time, we were working."

Now Amin was dying, and West Nile was poorer than

ever, returned to its customary place in Uganda's regional pecking order: at the bottom.

Just outside Koboko, Duke took me to meet another old army comrade, Major Solomon Ayile. The major lived with his large extended family in a collection of huts on the slopes of Mount Liru. Bearded and barefoot, Ayile sat cross-legged in the grass outside his hut. Half-naked children and teenagers in tattered clothes gathered round to listen to us talk. It is customary for Ugandans to welcome visitors, even if they are strangers, with a soft drink or tea. But Ayile didn't offer anything—because he didn't have anything to give, I surmised.

Ayile seemed nervous: Koboko may be isolated, but even there they have heard that there are such things as international war-crimes tribunals, and the presence of a white person asking questions about the past provoked unease at many places I stopped. Ayile answered my queries with banalities, telling me as little as he could without seeming rude. After about 15 minutes, I could sense the conversation wasn't likely to go anywhere, so I thanked him for his time, and we all got up to leave. Ayile seemed relieved. He walked us back to the car, and we got in.

As I was about to pull away, Ayile waved as if he had something more to say. Duke rolled down the window on the passenger side. Sheepishly, Ayile apologized for the condition of his home.

"You can see we are living like birds in these grass houses," he said. Once, he said, he had had a spacious home on the hillside above. "They demolished all our houses," he continued. "They even took our vehicles. Now we are poor. But we are getting used to this life."

This is how politics work in Uganda. When you're in power, you have everything. Once you're out of power, you're nothing. So when you have power, you do anything to keep it—no matter how nasty.

* * *

Before I left for West Nile, I asked Andrew Mwenda, a friend of mine and a local radio talk show host, how Ugandans would react when Amin died. There wouldn't be much commotion, Mwenda predicted. "People today don't know Idi," he said. In a literal sense, he's right. The killings of the 1970s and 1980s—the regimes that immediately followed Amin's were, while not so flamboyant, no less cruel—and the scourge of AIDS pruned a generation. Today, more than half of the population is under 18. These new Ugandans have no memory of Amin's regime.

Uganda has not wholly forgotten Amin, however. In the days after he fell into a coma, the country erupted into a contentious debate about the dictator's legacy. On one side stood the families of those who perished during

his regime, along with President Museveni, who has often derided Amin's "stupidity." On the other side stood many Ugandans who, with Amin on his deathbed, felt emboldened voice their long-stifled feelings of sympathy. It was hard to tell where the majority of Ugandans stood, but Amin's admirers certainly made more noise than his detractors.

Those in Amin's corner, many of them Muslims, clamored for the government to allow the former dictator to return from exile. "I am coming to Kampala to ask President Museveni to allow our former president to come home," General Mustapha Adrisi, who served as vice president under the despot, told *The New Vision* newspaper. "He worked here and is entitled to get treatment in his home country. He did a lot for Uganda and Africa."

There was never much chance that a living, breathing Amin might reappear on the scene. The dictator, suffering from kidney failure, was surviving on life support. He had lived well in Saudi Arabia on a generous government stipend, augmented by frequent deliveries of his favorite foods flown in from Uganda. (By the end, the always-stocky dictator weighed more than 400 pounds, one of his wives disclosed.) Now, with good doctors attending to him and his wives at his bedside, Amin seemed destined to die in exile.

What would happen after that, however, was a contentious question. African culture stresses the importance of being buried on one's own land. Amin's relatives in Uganda were agitating for the government to fly the ex-president's body home, so he could be laid to rest on his farm, near Arua. Many politicians said he should be granted a state funeral, which sounded about right to people in West Nile.

"He should be buried in a hero's place," Musa Eyaga told me.

Among those agitating for Amin's honorable return home, General Adrisi played a prominent role. "Let his body be brought home for burial, regardless of the atrocities that he did," Adrisi told me when I met him in July.

Superficially, it was easy to understand why Adrisi might feel such affection for Amin. He was as close to a right-hand man as the dictator possessed. Adrisi grew fabulously wealthy during his time in power, through coffee smuggling and other unsavory businesses dealings. People called him "Mr. Foreign Exchange." The story behind the nickname was that once, when treasury officials told him the government lacked sufficient foreign exchange—meaning dollars or other hard currency—to fund some personal project, Adrisi responded: "Who is this Mr. Foreign Exchange? Bring him before me and I will fix him."

Still, I was surprised Adrisi had come out so vociferously in favor Amin's returning to Uganda. His glowing words about Amin now were markedly at odds with what

he had said just a few years before, after he returned from exile in the Sudan and was called to testify before the Uganda Commission of Inquiry into the Violation of Human Rights, a panel appointed by Museveni to unearth the truth about Amin's killings.

"All these were Amin's personal doings," Adrisi told the commission. "I, as vice president, was there to advise him, but though I always honestly did, he was adamant. Amin was a bad leader and should take all the blame for his bad government, for everything always ended with him."

Moreover, Adrisi had good reason to hate Amin, who had once tried to have him killed. In 1978, towards the end of Amin's regime, Adrisi was involved in a mysterious car accident. He narrowly escaped death, and was flown to Cairo for medical treatment. Subsequently, Adrisi admitted that at the time of the accident, he was plotting a coup against Amin.

Now Adrisi was once again praising Amin. I went to his house curious about what had caused the old soldier to make such an abrupt about-face.

Adrisi's compound, in a suburb of Arua, stood behind high walls, and a red-bereted military policeman was on guard outside his high metal gate. When the guard opened the gate for us, I drove inside to see a handsome two-story brick house. It was, by far, the largest home I visited in West Nile.

Since Adrisi returned from exile, Museveni's government has taken good care of him. In addition to the military guard, he has a well-paying (if ill-defined) job as a presidential adviser. The government rents the house for him. As I pulled in the driveway, I took note of the shiny gray Toyota Land Cruiser with Ugandan government plates parked in the garage, as well as the sizable number of goats grazing around the back yard.

Adrisi's job, and the relative opulence in which he lives, is intended to send a message to the people of West Nile: This government is for everyone, let bygones be bygones. Adrisi is only one of several Amin cronies who now live comfortably in Museveni's Uganda. General Moses Ali, Amin's former Finance Minister, is now a Deputy Prime Minister and one of the highest-ranking officers in the army. Others serve in lesser roles. It has never been clear to me, however, whether the government's goal in dispensing this patronage is changing hearts, or merely keeping mouths shut.

One of Adrisi's daughters led us inside the house into a downstairs parlor, where we sat while the household help swept the stairs. Then we were led to another, smaller sitting room upstairs. After a few moments, Adrisi walked in, accompanied by his aide de camp, Captain Mohammed Ojale.

Adrisi sat down in his yellow rocking chair. Between us was a wooden table covered with lace doilies. A pair

of ceramic animals, a pig and a cow, sat on top of it. Adrisi wore a green *kitenge* shirt, black pants and black loafers. He was 69, and he looked much worse for wear: His cheeks were sunken, his forehead a washboard of wrinkles and bulging veins. He had a bad, hacking cough. Periodically he rubbed his right leg, which had been badly broken in his fateful traffic accident.

Ojale introduced himself and the general. A fleshy middle-aged man, Ojale also serves as Adrisi's official translator. (He will soon be his son-in-law as well: at the time I visited, Ojale's boss had just decided to give him one of his daughters as a wife.) People in Arua had warned not to bother bringing my own interpreter to Adrisi's house: The general, they told me, speaks a language all his own, a *mélange* of Swahili, Luganda and assorted other tribal tongues. Only someone with a practiced ear can make out what he's saying.

Adrisi spoke at length in a low, gravelly voice. Often, Ojale's translations of his monologues were little more than a few sentences. I got the distinct feeling the captain was acting as an editor as well as an interpreter.

"He says, as a good Muslim, he is not in a position to tell who was giving the orders," Ojale said. "During his reign"—he meant Adrisi's term as chief of staff of the army—"nobody was killed. When he had the fracture and was taken to Cairo, then the killing resumed."

Adrisi grabbed his bum leg.

I tried to ask Adrisi about the car accident. Ojale



General Mustapha Adrisi (seated) watches military aircraft pass above during a military exercise in the 1970s. (Photo Courtesy of The New Vision)

balked. He said he wouldn't translate questions he felt were beneath the vice president's dignity.

As Ojale and I argued about the issue, the uncomprehending Mr. Foreign Exchange's eyelids drooped.

HRAAAAAAAAAACK!

Adrisi turned to his left, and spit into the corner of his living room.

Ok, I said. What about the coup? Could Adrisi help me at all in understanding how it was that a man like Amin came to power?

"These are disagreements among Ugandans," Ojale replied. I was not Ugandan, he noted.

My friend Allan was Ugandan, I said. He was too young to remember the coup. Maybe, I suggested, the general wouldn't mind telling the group about Amin for Allan's benefit.

Ojale turned to Allan.

"Are you Bantu or Nilotic?"

Allan replied that he was a Bantu, from the Banyankole tribe.

A pained look crossed Ojale's face. "Why is he here?" he asked. Duke tried to intervene, telling Ojale that Allan was my driver, which wasn't true. The captain eyed him suspiciously. Allan was from the west, like Museveni.

"You could be a spy," he said to Allan, accusingly.

At that moment, it became clear to me that however much the Museveni's government may want to transcend Uganda's bitter tribal past, men like Adrisi were not quite ready to make the journey. The old resentments and suspicions, the very forces that drove men to kill in Amin's name, have not been forgotten, however much the government may want them to be. Even a man like Adrisi, a presidential adviser with a fine house and a fancy government car, lived in fear of Allan, a college student, just because he happened to have the same tribal background as the president. The government may have purchased Adrisi's compliance, and perhaps even his testimony against Amin. But it had not bought his heart. Like so many in West Nile, he was still Amin's man. Not because Amin was a fine person or a great leader, but because he was one of his own.

Duke managed to iron things out between Allan and Captain Ojale, but Adrisi didn't have much more to say. I tried to press the issue of Amin's burial plans further, but Ojale explained to me, in the tone one might employ with an over-inquisitive child, that Adrisi was a presidential adviser, which meant his feelings on such



Adrisi (left) in July 2003, standing on the foundations of his wrecked mansion in his ancestral village, not far from Uganda's borders with Sudan and the Congo. His aide de camp and translator, Captain Mohammed Ojale, stands to his left. Since he returned from exile, Adrisi has built a small house on the property, but is hoping to expand. He told me he is looking for donations.

matters were meant only for the president.

However, he said there *was* one thing Adrisi wanted me to know. The vice president was in dire financial straits, Ojale said. His grandchildren did not have money to attend school. His ancestral village home had been destroyed long ago. "He does not even have money to rebuild his house," Ojale said, plaintively. "Can you help?"

HRAAAAAAAAAACK!

Mr. Foreign Exchange spit into the corner again.

* * *

For a few weeks after I left West Nile, Idi Amin lingered at the edge of death. Then, on August 16, after more than a month in a coma, he died. Amin never knew the date of his birth, but by the best estimates he was around 80 years old.

Even from the grave, Amin continued to divide Ugandans. The day after his passing, the front page of *The New Vision* featured a giant, glowering picture of the dictator, and, under a giant headline reading "Amin Is Dead," a quotation from Isaiah:

Now you are as weak as we are! You are one of us! You used to be honored with the music of harps, but now you are in the world of the dead. You lie in a bed of maggots and are covered with a blanket of worms.

"I am not mourning at all," President Museveni said at a public event in Soroti, an eastern town. "What did he achieve? What did he do for Uganda? What will he be

remembered for?" the president asked the crowd.

"That he killed," the audience responded.

Meanwhile, hundreds of mourners gathered at the main mosque in Kampala to say the traditional Muslim prayers for the dead. There was no body to bury, as it turned out: the Saudi government had Amin swiftly buried in Mecca, Islam's holiest city. His eulogists thought it a most fitting solution.

"This is a sad moment not only for Muslims worldwide, but for Uganda," a member of Parliament from Arua told the mourners. "We have lost a loving brother. How the world looks on Amin fulfills the saying that leadership is a dustbin. When you gone, everything bad is heaped on you."

"We apologize to all those on whose toes Amin stepped," another eulogist said.

The Weekly Message, a Kampala newspaper of Muslim bent, printed a rapturous, if only intermittently grammatical, valediction for Amin. "Lots of untrue ideas laden with sheer open lies, hatred and exaggeration have been told about deceased former Uganda president, Idi Amin Dada basing on Judeo-Anglo-American media conjectures," it began. "Widely considered a great man, Amin lived a life of mixed fortunes—where he was either admired or resisted but never ignored in all aspects."

Up in West Nile, the mourning was even more unrestrained. Three days after Amin's death, Arua came to a standstill as thousands gathered at the Amin family farm just outside town. "Although people are saying he killed many people, I ask you to forgive him and pray for his soul," Mustapha Adrisi said in his eulogy for his former boss.

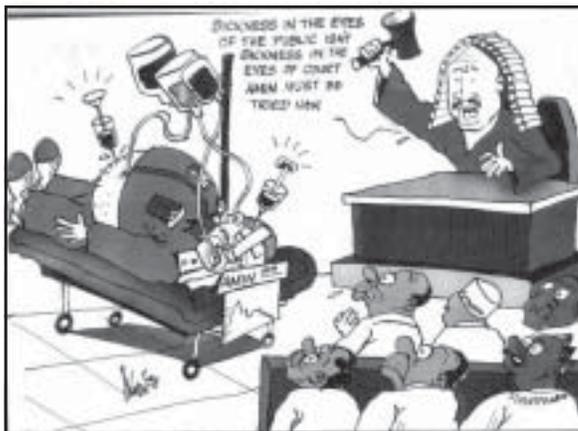
A few weeks before, back when I was still in West Nile, I had gone to visit Amin's farm, which is located at the edge of Arua's airstrip. Back when he was president, Amin had had lavish plans to turn the airstrip into an international airport. Those plans, like so many others made in the fat times, had long since fallen by the wayside. Today, most of his extended family members live in thatch-roofed huts, like most everyone else in West Nile. A cement-walled house, of modest size with a sheet metal roof, stood behind a barbed-wire fence. Amin's family began building the house a few years ago, in hopes that Uganda's government would allow the dictator to return from exile to spend his last years at home. The invitation never came.

Near the house, dozens of women clad in colorful Moslem garb sat cross-legged in the grass, waiting for news of the dictator's health. Well-wishers had been coming all day. As I stood there, a former top aide to Amin popped in to say hi.

"He is improving," Amule Amin, Idi's younger brother, told a visitor—inaccurately, as it turned out.

"He is a fit and strong man."

Amule had just come in from the fields, where he had been digging holes for fence posts. His hands were caked with mud. His gray pants were ripped at the knee, and his shirt was torn at the shoulder. Back when his brother ran things in Uganda, Amule was a helicopter pilot. "Now we survive by digging," he said. By "digging," he meant farming.



President Yoweri Museveni promised to prosecute Idi Amin if he ever returned to Uganda alive, and, when he died, said that he was "not mourning at all." Many Ugandans felt their president was being vindictive, and that Amin deserved to die at home. In this editorial cartoon, Museveni is caricatured as an overzealous judge, pounding his gavel as Amin lies in a coma.

Amule bore a certain resemblance to his brother Idi: Same squarish face, same rumbling voice. His was wiry, with gray-specked hair, and he said he is 54. He pulled up a wooden stool to talk to me next to a hut across the street from the family farm. Gently, I tried to ask whether the family was making preparations for a funeral. Amule said it wasn't—he was still hopeful that his big brother would pull through. At the same time, he anticipated the onslaught of mourners to come. Hundreds of people had shown up at the house since Amin's sickness was disclosed, just to see how he was doing. "So many people, from all over Uganda," Amule said.

"The people really need Amin, whether he is alive or dead," Amule said. "The people like Amin so much."

Amin's brother offered us the standard tour of the farm: past fields of corn, sweet potatoes, peanuts and cassava, through the ruins of Big Daddy's once-magnificent country home. "It was so nice," Duke said. "It used to have a tile roof." A single scrawny cow was grazing in the grass growing in the cracks of its foundation.

All the talk of murders and cannibalism, Amin's brother said, had been exaggerated. "This does not hurt us at all. We understand that those who talk bad about Amin, especially the authorities, they fear Amin," he said. "They fear him because he is popular. If he comes back, he may change things upside-down here. ...

"Leaders come and leaders go," he continued. "They are not permanent. They will also get sick and die. They will also go. And others will talk about them the way they talk about Idi Amin."

The tour didn't take very long. Another visitor was ambling up the dirt path to the house, one of the Amin's many former bodyguards. I asked Amule if I could take a picture of the house. He said no. His brother Idi didn't like it. "He sometimes calls," Amule said.

We all piled back into the car, and I drove back down the road toward Arua. Duke said it had been nice to see Amule again: They were buddies, having once served together in the air force.

"He used to be very fat," Duke volunteered. "Now he is thin." □

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