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The Big Man, His Wife and Her Husband

By Andrew Rice

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KAMPALA, Uganda—George Serunjogi was in love with Joy Nandaula. And who could blame him? Nandaula was young, good-looking, and smart—a thoroughly modern Ugandan woman. Serunjogi first spied her across the room at a friend's housewarming party. It was 1996, and Nandaula was still an undergraduate at Makerere University. Serunjogi sent an emissary over to talk to her. Within two months they were dating. Not long after that, Nandaula moved into Serunjogi's house.

Serunjogi was an older man, a widower in his forties. Nandaula liked that. "I wanted a mature man who had seen it all," she would later say. He had a good job, as a desk officer in Uganda's Ministry of Finance. Serunjogi's family met Nandaula's family, and before long, he was calling her his "wife."

Later, when it was all over, Serunjogi would say his young wife was too headstrong—a typical "Makerere girl." She wanted things. He bought them: expensive clothes from a Ghanaian expatriate he knew, a small car. Most of all, she wanted a job. So Serunjogi pulled a string for her. In early 1999, he called a friend at Uganda's Electoral Commission—he would later refer to him only as "the Big Man"—and asked him to help out his wife.

Nandaula loved her job at the Electoral Commission. A referendum on whether or not to retain Uganda's "Movement" system of government, which bans political parties, was coming up. She traveled all over the country, coordinating the sometimes-messy business of voting in a young, poor democracy.

"Towards the end of 1999, our relationship started having problems," Serunjogi would recall. There were signs of another man. Often, he said (and, as in all accounts of failed relationships, the details are in dispute), someone would pick her up for work early in the morning. Sometimes she didn't return until late at night. On occasion, work would take her out of Kampala for days. Serunjogi suspected she wasn't going alone. One day, Nandaula came home with a nicer car, a Toyota Corolla. She said she had paid for the Corolla herself, but Serunjogi was suspicious. She got angry, saying other men were pleased to see their wives driving.

The relationship ended with the referendum. The night before the vote, Nandaula was out until 3 a.m. Serunjogi waited up. When he heard a car pull up outside, he opened the gate to his driveway. He saw a man ducking into the back seat of the car. He recognized the man: It was Nandaula's boss, the Big Man. Nandaula moved out the next month, coming in the Big Man's car to pick up her things.

"I have packed. I am going away," Serunjogi recalled her saying, his voice cracking, as he recounted his story of love and loss to a parliamentary investigatory committee this May. "But I'm going to squeeze you until I put you down to your knees."

* * *

It's safe to say few Ugandans had ever heard of George Serunjogi before he gave his now-famous testimony on May 8; in other circumstances, his private

heartache would certainly have stayed just that—private. As it was, events conspired to make the saga of Serunjogi, Nandaula and the Big Man a national obsession. Before the scandal passed, it would discredit the entire Electoral Commission, disgrace a prominent politician, lead to several arrests, and fray relations between the government of President Yoweri K. Museveni and Uganda's largest tribe, the Baganda. It would also show, in particularly raw detail, how political power operates, and corrupts, in Uganda today.

Certainly, no one who was there will forget the scene in the hearing room. Serunjogi looked like a villain in a low-budget horror movie. A large man, he wore a checked blazer, a floppy canvas hat, and a white plastic mask with holes cut in it for his eyes, nose and mouth.

His appearance foreshadowed the gothic turn the story would take next. A few months after his wife left him, he explained, a man had come to his house and splashed acid on his face, leaving him with grotesque burns. He couldn't identify his attacker—but he point-

edly mentioned that neither his wife, nor the Big Man, whom he refused to refer to by name, had bothered to visit him in the hospital.

The press went wild. The front page of the next day's issue of *The New Vision*, Uganda's state-owned daily newspaper, carried a picture of a masked Serunjogi, his finger poking accusatorially, below the headline "TOP EC MAN TOOK MY WIFE." The radio airwaves filled with tawdry talk, much of it surrounding the identity of Serunjogi's mystery nemesis, the "Big Man."

Suspicion quickly focused on one person, the chairman of the Electoral Commission: Aziz Kasujja. "For us," said Felix Osike, the *New Vision* reporter who covered the scandal, "we read between the lines and knew straightaway who he was referring to." Kasujja was already embattled. The parliamentary probe Serunjogi testified before was ostensibly looking into problems in recent local elections. Under Kasujja's watch, it was alleged, Election Day in Uganda had turned into an occasion for confusion, fraud and occasional violent confrontation; the

Electoral Commission had become a patronage mill. Such shenanigans are, sadly, pretty run-of-the-mill stuff in Uganda, and hardly differentiated Kasujja from many other public servants. But sex and acid—this was something new. Kasujja was in trouble.

"The Electoral Commission acts like a brothel," groused Miria Matembe, Uganda's moralistic Minister for Ethics and Integrity. "The press has had a field day with the mountain of girlfriends, husband-stealing, wife-snatching, and general happiness at the EC," editorialized *The Monitor*, the *New Vision's* independent competitor. Soon, allegation after allegation would tumble out—millions of dollars pocketed, an expensive computer system that didn't work, kickbacks and contracts for cronies.

"People smelled blood," said Sam Rwakoojo, the commission's secretary, "and the enemies came in."

I arrived in Uganda as the scandal was reaching a boil. To a newcomer, *l'affaire* Nandaula had the familiar echoes of a political sex scandal in the United States—a certain impeachment comes to mind—but there were strange dissonances, too. What did it mean to "snatch" someone's wife? And what exactly was a "Big Man"? What did these words mean to Ugandans, and why was the public so captivated by this particular sordid story?

I soon discovered that, like all great scandals, the case resonated not because the situation was so unusual, but because its elements



George Serunjogi's explosive testimony to parliament about "the Big Man" at the Electoral Commission, his wife, and being burned with acid by an unknown attacker set off the scandal. "Commissioners of the Electoral Commission recruit young girls and relatives to provide sexual satisfaction," he told the committee. (Photo by The New Vision.)

were so common. “This thing happens all over in our society,” Felix Osike said. “Kasujja’s only problem is that someone came out and complained.”

More than a century after the introduction of Christianity, Uganda remains a fairly polygamous society. An estimated one in three Ugandan women is engaged in a polygamous marriage. Every rich or powerful man is assumed to have a second, third or fourth “wife” stashed away in his home village, or in a low-rent flat on the outskirts of town. (Though “marriage,” in this context, is defined somewhat loosely.) While Serunjogi’s story was particularly grisly, there are thousands of other men walking around Kampala with similar tales. “Very, very many,” Osike said. In a desperately poor society, the battle between Figaro and Count Almaviva is fought every day. More often than not, Figaro loses.

But if Serunjogi fit neatly into a well-established category of cuckolded husband, Nandaula refused to conform to the role of the docile, disputed wife. In this respect, she too represented a recognizable figure—the bold, educated, outspoken, sexually liberated (by Ugandan standards) new woman. She made no apologies for leaving Serunjogi. When others expected her to shrink back with humiliation, she seemed to revel in the attention.

Finally, and most important of all, there was Kasujja—the Big Man himself. He was a type Ugandans knew all too well. In some sense, it seemed, the audacity to “snatch” another man’s wife (whether she was willing or not to be snatched seemed to be largely beside the point) was closely related to the impunity with which he allegedly accepted kickbacks, hired pals and otherwise pilfered the public purse. Both sprang from a wellspring of power—power that could be checked only from above, not from below.

* * *

Kasujja’s chief nemesis, as it happened, was a woman, too—a large, gruff one with a flat-top hairstyle. Miria Matembe, Uganda’s Minister for Ethics and Integrity, is one of the more prominent women in Museveni’s government, and certainly the loudest. (A jacket blurb on her autobiography reads: “Call this book Big Mouth shouting for women.”) She has been Uganda’s highest-ranking ethics policeman since the anti-corruption ministry was created in 1998. She had been baying for Kasujja’s blood for years.

I met Matembe for lunch one day at Fang Fang, a Chinese restaurant favored by Uganda’s governing elite. She breezed in fifteen minutes late, curtly asked who I was



Felix Osike, investigative reporter for The New Vision newspaper. Osike, by his own proud admission, did as much as anyone else to bring Kasujja down. “Actually, I was the one putting a lot of pressure on him,” he said, glowing with the satisfaction of a hunter who’s just bagged a buck. “I think, if you can’t handle the situation, you should get out of it.”

(we had set up the interview over the phone weeks before), and had us moved to a private room. As we ate, she waved as the president’s daughter and son-in-law passed by, and told me she believed Kasujja’s end was nigh. “I do believe action will be taken,” she said.

Action had been a long time coming. At one time, under Kasujja’s predecessor Stephen Akabway, the Electoral Commission had been considered a bastion of fair-minded nonpartisanship. During Kasujja’s reign, it had become widely regarded as the country’s worst-functioning bureaucracy—which was really saying something. Jobs weren’t advertised; commissioners brought in their own new hires, inevitably members of their own tribes. (The membership of the commission’s board was divided relatively equally among regions of the country, however, creating a kind of nepotistic balance.) The commission lavished money on big, ambitious and expensive projects, like a plan to issue plastic registration cards to each Ugandan voter. Computer consultants were paid \$400 an hour to set up a digitized photo registry as the cost of the project doubled, to \$26 million. “We have not seen the cards, and yet the election has been conducted and concluded,” Matembe said.

Three top administrators at the Electoral Commission were arrested for embezzlement in October. More recently, nearly 600 employees were fired. At that very moment, Matembe said, an 84-page report on corruption at the Electoral Commission by the Inspector General of Government (IGG) was sitting on President Museveni’s desk.

A place like the Electoral Commission, Matembe said,

was almost hard-wired for fraud. To take one example: When the administrators were arrested, she discovered that employment contracts at the commission gave employees furloughs with full pay in the event they were jailed. Yet Matembe angrily rejected the premise that Uganda's government might in some way be to blame for the rot.

"It's not that it's the system of government—it's the people themselves," she said. "What has happened in Uganda is that corruption is not shunned at all. Materialism has taken the place of respect for ethical values. Those who condemn, who shun corruption, are actually looked at as fools, useless."

Corruption is not a uniquely tropical disease; after all, it was a New York City politician, George Washington Plunkett, who coined the inimitable phrase "honest graft." Yet somehow, in many African countries, corruption has evolved into something different—a rot so pervasive, so pernicious, that it threatens to undermine the foundations of government itself. "Leaders in Zaire, Liberia, Somalia and elsewhere did not just steal," writes Princeton political scientist Jeffrey Herbst, "they stole so much as to cause the state to dissolve."

Just as Eskimos have a hundred words for "snow," Ugandans have a dozen or more phrases to describe bribes—corrupt officials "eat," "drink," "fill their bellies," ask for "chai" or "tea." "Man eateth where he worketh," goes one popular aphorism. Where does this culture of corruption come from? Matembe blamed Uganda's violent past. "In one time in this country, you got as much as you can as quickly as you can, for tomorrow you die," she replied. "These values of 'you have to work hard' ... all these were destroyed."

Matembe has an Augean job. Sometimes, it takes years of investigation to arrest someone; often, police files on corruption cases go "missing" from the prosecutor's office. "If I could make corruption high-risk, so people fear being corrupt, then I would have made big headway," she said.

She has a long way to go. Corruption has afflicted the African states ever since they won independence. Why? Matembe may argue that it's due to the moral failings of individual Ugandans, but many historians blame the disorganized way Europe rushed out the door in the 1960s. Elections were hastily organized as the colonists left. That gave an enormous advantage to those who already had political networks built. In most countries, that meant the local chieftains. Put in place by colonial authorities, these Big Men of the village ruled via patronage—they distributed land and provided political protection to the villagers, and the villagers gave them loyalty in return.

Like a Chicago ward boss, the local Big Man could deliver votes. And like a Chicago ward boss, the Big Man

expected to get something back when his man was elected—jobs for his constituents, roads to his village, money for himself. "Power was to be the engine for development and for individual job opportunities and upward mobility," writes political scientist Morris Szeftel. "For many, the state was the means through which past discrimination would be redressed and private wealth promoted."

Rival Big Men began to fight over their cuts of the loot; when it suited them, they inflamed tribal passions to put pressure on the government. "The 'Tammany Hall approach,'" historian Basil Davidson writes, "almost at once led to a dogfight for the spoils of political power." More patronage was required to keep the peace, and corruption became self-propelling. Roads crumbled, schools declined. Tribal identification, once a fluid concept, hardened into a kind of caste system. The ruling clique, terrified of losing control of the spoils, made sure it won all future elections by stuffing ballot boxes, or doing away with the façade of democratic rule altogether.

"Under the UPC," Matembe said, referring to Milton Obote's Ugandan People's Congress, the party that came to power after independence and ruled again for a brief and bloody period after Idi Amin, "we didn't call it corruption—it was daylight robbery."

Matembe's boss, President Museveni, came to power



Miria Matembe, Uganda's moralistic Minister of Ethics and Integrity, is charged with fighting Uganda's endemic corruption. "It's not that it's the system of government, it's the people themselves," she said. "This is the only government that has attempted to fight it"



after along guerilla war in 1986, promising to be a different sort of leader. And while the president is certainly not poor (he owns several well-stocked cattle ranches), he is, at the very least, far more discreet than his predecessors. Museveni did away with the local chieftains and replaced them with elected local councils, with an eye toward creating more accountability. But in practice, things have not changed much. Within the local-council system, political scientist Mahmood Mamdani writes, "the politics of 'eating' and 'drinking' spread literally unchecked."

* * *

So, is there not one honest man (or woman) in Ugandan government? One recent Friday afternoon, I paid a visit to Stephen Akabway, Kasujja's predecessor at the Electoral Commission, at the offices of the Uganda Revenue Authority, where he now works.

"I live by neutrality," Akabway said. The former chairman is, in many ways, Kasujja's mirror image: slim, graying around the temples, with the mild manner of a schoolteacher—which he once was. Akabway led the commission through the early days of Ugandan democracy, and emerged, to nearly everyone's surprise—not the least of which his own—from the experience as a kind of folk hero. I asked him to tell me his story, and Kasujja's.

In the early 1990s, Museveni summoned Akabway, an old high-school chum, from an obscure posting in the Ministry of Education to oversee Uganda's first free elections. The vote would be a key test for Museveni's "Movement" system of government, which bans political parties on the grounds that they lead to tribalism and sectarianism, and forces candidates to stand on the basis of "individual merit" alone. Critics said such notions are

theoretical dressing in the windows of a one-party state. But Museveni himself would be standing for president in 1996. His principal opponent would be Paul Ssemogerere, a hoary veteran of Uganda's independence politics, who had the backing of Milton Obote, the exiled president against whom Museveni had launched a civil war. But Akabway kept a potentially explosive situation contained, presiding over the election with remarkable equanimity.

Nevertheless, soon after the votes were counted, Akabway was packed off to the Revenue Authority. Museveni said the tax-collection agency needed a straight arrow to clean up corruption there. (It hasn't happened yet.) But many felt Akabway was removed for other reasons. Around this time,

Akabway said, a change was occurring within Museveni's Movement. "The desire to win elections at all costs—that was being developed," he said.

"There was a fairly strong section [of Museveni's inner circle] who felt it would not be quite safe if I [remained Electoral Commission chairman], because they saw I was a person who followed election law to the letter," Akabway said. "It would be risky."

Hardly anyone had ever heard of his successor, Kasujja. "Really, he was a nobody," Felix Osike said. Kasujja's principal political experience had come as a member of the Electoral Commission's board, working under Akabway during the 1996 elections. "He was a hard-working man," the former chairman recalled. "He had [a few] little problems with PR." Akabway smiled. He is an understated man.

Kasujja, or Hajji, as most people call him, was a banker, a rotund man with pronounced jowls and small, deep-set eyes. He claims to have graduated from a university in Bangladesh. He is friendly and gregarious—the first sort of man you would expect to be successful in politics, and not the last sort you'd expect to be accused of corruption. (In fact, in 2000, a commission appointed to investigate a rash of bank collapses in the country recommended that, given his record in the private sector, Kasujja not be allowed to hold any public office at all. The recommendation was ignored.)

A nobody or not, several factors worked in favor of Kasujja's fast rise through Uganda's government. First, he was an early and enthusiastic supporter of Museveni's "Movement." Second, he was a Muslim, a member of a large, influential family in Masaka, a

town to the southwest of Kampala. (In Uganda, Muslims are an important minority group, making up about 16 percent of the population.) And third, Kasujja was a Muganda, a member of Uganda's most important tribe, the Baganda.

Museveni appointed Kasujja to the 1995 Constituent Assembly that wrote Uganda's constitution. "He was there to represent mainly the Muslim line," Akabway said. From there, Kasujja rose quickly through the governmental ranks, winning a spot on the board of the Electoral Commission, then the chairmanship.

Things quickly changed under the new boss at the Electoral Commission. "My old friend Kasujja, he completely abandoned the style of work as we established it," Akabway said.

Elections no longer ran so smoothly. First there was the 2000 referendum on the Movement. Kasujja suggested that anyone joining an opposition-led boycott of the vote be jailed. Then came the 2001 presidential election. Museveni faced an opponent from within the ruling Movement, his former doctor, Col. Kizza Besigye. (One of Besigye's principal issues was the spread of corruption.) Before the election, there were reports of paramilitary Movement cadres terrorizing opposition strongholds, harassing Besigye supporters. Afterwards, numerous cases of Louisiana-style ballot-box hijinks came to light. Kasujja kept quiet. Still, no one was happy with him; Museveni, who won 69 percent of the vote, would later say Kasujja's incompetence had "cheated" him out of getting 70 percent.

This year's local elections were a crowning fiasco. A contract to print ballots wasn't issued until the last minute (and went to a company fronting for some Electoral Commission officials, it was alleged). At some polling places, ballots showed up misspelled, late, or not at all. There were allegations of intimidation at the polls by Movement officials and military men. Nevertheless, opposition candidates swept to victory in many places, particularly in and around Kampala. In one race, the Electoral Commission recounted the results seven times. The opposition candidate, who finished in the lead each time, might have had to endure an eighth, if a court hadn't stepped in.

The Movement was not happy with the results. As the losses mounted, Kasujja's friends in the Movement began turning on him. "The Electoral system is full of mistakes and the sole aim is sinister," Maj. Kazooka Mutale, Museveni's shadowy "political assistant," told *The New Vision*. "I normally don't think aloud on such matters," said Museveni, who often does, "but I was not happy with the Electoral Commission."

But Kasujja was protected by some political realities. The constitution had been set up to make it difficult for the president to remove the head of the election board.

Politically, Matembe said, it would have been difficult for Museveni to do it before his reelection; even now, it would take overwhelming evidence of malfeasance. "They would say, look they're changing the Electoral Commission to suit their interests!"

Then there was the ethnic problem. Kasujja had gotten the job, in part, because he was a Muganda and a Muslim. Now loud elements of those very groups were howling that their man was being persecuted. On the radio, there was nasty invective about Museveni, who has taken great pains to disentangle religion and politics in Uganda, having it in for Muslims. "They're saying the president is in the habit of using people and sacrificing them," Felix Osike said.

"The majority of people give lip service to the fight against corruption as long as the people are not friends of theirs, not their own person," Matembe said. "Once it's their own person, they shy away, they attack you. ... They tribalize it, they regionalize it, they ethnicize it."

At a January press conference, Kasujja defiantly resisted calls for him to quit, calling resignation "a cowardly act," and terming himself a "superstar."

"Why should I resign?" he ranted, waving a copy of the tabulated local election results at the astonished reporters. "I may look ugly. I may have a third-class appearance, but I have a first-class ticket at my job. My performance is beautiful. I am an old man but still strong. I cannot be scared by mere threats. I cannot resign."

* * *

Corruption was on my mind one recent evening as I drove through Kampala on my way to a party celebrating the publication of Matembe's new autobiography, when suddenly I was presented with a rather stark illustration of the way power operates in Uganda. The car in front of me, a white Mercedes, abruptly stopped, halting traffic behind him as he tried to make a U-turn across a busy four lane road. I had to slam on my brakes. This was nothing unusual in Kampala. But what happened next was. A huge dump truck, rumbling down the road in the other direction, screeched to a halt, allowing the white Mercedes to complete his turn. I wondered at this unprecedented (and dangerous) bit of driving courtesy. Then, as the Mercedes came back in my direction, I saw the reason for the truck driver's deference: Attached to the car's hood were a fluttering pair of yellow, red and black Ugandan flags.

What was it that made the truck driver stop? Clearly, he had no way to know if the Mercedes' passenger was a tribesman. Surely, he wasn't expecting any patronage in return. All either of us could tell was that there was someone important in the Mercedes. A Big Man, if you will.

What did it mean to call Kasujja "the Big Man"? The phrase pops up everywhere in Uganda—in the newspa-

pers, in casual conversation. Sometimes the Big Man is the president himself. Sometimes the Big Man is a well-connected businessman, esteemed elder or corrupt political boss. Sometimes he is all three of these things at once.

Originally, the Big Man was a village elder, someone we would call a chief. He wasn't born into his position; he competed with other men to win it. In some African languages, historian Jan Vansina writes, the words describing such men are related to those meaning "fame," "honor" and "to become rich." "What it meant to be such a 'big man,'" Vansina writes in his book, *Paths in the Rainforest*, "is well expressed in the invocation during a ceremony performed at puberty among the Djue of Cameroon." The boy's grandfather would give him an ivory bracelet and say:

This elephant which I put on your arm, become a man of crowds, a hero in war, a man with women rich in children, and in many objects of wealth prosper within the family, and be famous throughout the villages.

Today, of course, journalists, novelists and political scientists use the phrase to evoke something entirely different: an all-powerful, often malevolent, African ruler. In V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, the character of "the Big Man" is a thinly-veiled portrait of Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko. In real life, Mobutu raised rapacious Big Manism to the level of caricature: He married identical twins, quaffed prodigious quantities of pink champagne, built a lavish palace in his home village of Gdabolite, supposedly socked away billions in Swiss bank accounts.

How were the historical, probably benign, Big Men transmogrified into ogres like Mobutu? Academics have spilled barrels of ink on the topic. But they basically settle into two camps. One school holds that it's all our fault—that is, the colonialists'. There were two few Europeans to govern Africa, so in most places, the Great Powers relied on local tribal authorities to (often literally) crack the whip. In Uganda, for instance, the British struck a deal with the Baganda, the dominant tribe in the area: We'll give you guns; you go conquer and rule on our behalf. Complicated and consensus-driven forms of local rule were replaced by the figure of the all powerful chief, the "clenched fist," in Columbia University professor Mahmood Mamdani's memorable phrasing, in which all local authority was vested.

Opponents of this view don't dispute that colonialism was a nasty and shameful chapter in European history. But they claim the roots of Africa's problems *have* to go deeper. The colonial era in Africa lasted less than 80 years, Jeffrey Herbst points out in his book *States and Power in Africa*. "Ruling over the roughly 43 million people in British tropical Africa in 1939," he writes "were a grand total of 1,223 administrators and 938 police." The colonists didn't even bother to build extensive roads.

Africa's big problem, Herbst argues, was and is geography—the problem of trying to extend authority over vast, sparsely populated areas is just too much for anyone. So Africa developed states that were too strong at the center—where armies without much to do (there are have been few wars of conquest in Africa) plot coups—and too weak at the fringes, where the chiefs continued to hold sway.

But whatever the academics may say, Ugandans have a very different perspective on the origins of corruption and unchecked power. To a person, every Ugandan I asked rejected the premise that Africa's political problems are wholly attributable to the colonial experience, or to some accident of geography. Rather, they favored another theory—that the authoritarian features of Ugandan's politics were in some way ingrained in their culture. The problem, they said, was that Ugandans were simply too deferential.

"You cannot speak disrespectfully to the Big Man," said David Ouma Balikowa, a founding editor of *The Monitor*. Even Amin, Balikowa said, used to draw large, adoring crowds when he visited the villages—it was respect for power that brought the people out. (It is worth remembering Amin's nickname: Big Daddy.) "You are supposed to keep quiet. Even to me, people say, 'How can you write this way about the president?'"

Simon Ebitu, the security guard who watches my house at night, put it another way. "In Africa, you cannot speak against the man who is above you," he said. "You fear him, because if you say something, he will..." He stomped his black boot on the concrete.

"To people who are uneducated," James Kahoza, Uganda's former Auditor General, wrote in a 1998 essay on corruption, "power is perceived in its raw forms. Even though leaders are now elected, the uneducated people do not consider the power they possess as accountable power. The leader therefore personifies the chief with whom the society is familiar."

The truth is no doubt more complicated. But there is no denying that there is a deep respect for hierarchy in Ugandan society, and a strong element of the paternalistic in Ugandan politics. Take the case of a wedding I recently attended. The reception was held in a large auditorium; an emcee took great pains to point out "the Big Men" in attendance, a pair of government ministers. Whereas most attendees, including the extended families of the bride and groom, sat on hard folding chairs facing the stage where the couple was sitting, the Big Men and their wives sat on relatively more comfortable plastic chairs. While we ate off our laps, the Big Men sat before a table, covered with a white tablecloth. And when it came to time to give speeches, the Big Men went on longer than anyone else. One of the two, the defense minister, a tribesman of the groom's, advised him to produce as many Bakiga as possible. "In Uganda, women now have equal rights," he said. "So Julius, treat Allen [the bride] as your equal. And

Allen, treat Julius as the first among equals.”

Museveni, too, talks differently than an American president might. Americans may look to our president, however grudgingly, for leadership in times of crisis. But it’s hard to imagine George W. Bush, say, advising a group of young girls to abstain from sex and learn how to use the toilet, as Museveni recently did. Uganda’s president loves to digress into sometimes hilarious anecdotes about his own people’s “backwardness.” More ominously, he rails against intellectuals and radio hosts who would poison the minds of the village folk with talk of multiparty government. We may call George Washington the father of our nation, but he is a distant ancestor at most; Museveni is a living, vigorous patriarch, at times warm, at times overbearing.

“The president of Uganda is not the president of Uganda,” a young, western-educated government official said at lunch one day. “He is like the God of Uganda.”

Yet in what sense did Aziz Kasujja, a mid-level public official, fit into this picture? The Mercedes was the key. In Uganda, there is not just a Big Man. There are many Little Big Men. Dozens or hundreds of them. You can recognize them by the luxury cars and late model sports utility vehicles they drive around Kampala.

The trail of corruption starts with the president’s family (his younger brother and potential heir-apparent, General Salim Saleh, has been caught with his hand in the cookie jar several times), and continues down through the ranks. Top politicians battle for control of “eating” ministries—that is, the ones money flows through. Big businessmen fight for government contracts and sweetheart land deals; everyone knows they are immensely wealthy, yet their names appear nowhere on the tax rolls.

“Kasujja was such a person—he had power, he had money,” said Osike.

* * *

In truth, Kasujja probably would have been fine if he had just been incompetent and corrupt. “I don’t think we would have ever gotten him on the embezzlement,” Osike said. But then along came Joy Nandaula. However “ugly” Kasujja may have claimed to be, when links to a young, attractive employee at the Electoral Commission and the messy breakup of her marriage emerged, the scandal took on a whole different dimension. Stealing elections, stealing money, stealing wives—Ugandans saw all these sins as signs that a profound kind of moral turpitude had set in at the Electoral Commission.

“You can have all the muck you want,” Mary Karooro Okurut, Museveni’s house-poet/press secretary, would write of Kasujja in an op-ed column, “the corruption, the incompetence and the like, but when sex comes in, that is the last temptation. That’s

when you know things are getting really complicated.”

Polygamy is a fact of life in Uganda. Nevertheless, not a few powerful men watched Kasujja’s public roasting and squirmed. I asked a friend of mine, a university student, why the story had touched a nerve with so many people. He responded by telling me a story: A few years ago, he had discovered a secret: His father, a successful businessman, had a second family—a wife, kids—who were living on the outskirts of town. His mother wasn’t happy about the situation, but put up with it. After considerable pushing, my friend had gotten his father to introduce him to his alternate family, and he was now trying to build a relationship with his half-siblings. “Actually,” he said, “all of our friends have the same problem.”

“These things happen, but we don’t usually write about them,” Osike said. He listed a couple of cases. A high-level Movement official had “taken” a parliamentarian’s wife. Another Electoral Commission official (the delightfully-named Charles Dickens Owiny) is alleged to have offered his driver’s family a place to live in the “workers’ quarters” behind his house. Then he sent the man out of town. When the man returned, his wife was living inside the main house. “The Big Man said ‘oh, leave me alone,’ and that was the end of the driver’s marriage,” Matembe said.

Matembe said she saw the sex scandals as beside the point—distractions from the real issue of corruption. But to many, Kasujja’s alleged shenanigans were *exactly* the point. “Everybody said, ‘Oh, this man is busy snatching people’s wives—that’s why the Electoral Commission is having all these problems,’” Osike said.

The New Vision and *The Monitor* jumped into the investigation of Kasujja’s personal life somewhat reluctantly, Osike said. The *Vision* had known about the alleged affair for some time, but it ran with the story only after Serunjogi’s public testimony forced its hand. Other publications had far fewer scruples. Kampala’s Luganda-language newspapers dug into every corner of the bizarre love triangle. The earthy tabloid newspaper *The Red Pepper*—itself a new element in Ugandan society—abandoned its old formula of sex-and-soccer and adopted a new one: sex and “Nandy.”

The woman herself, it soon emerged, wasn’t even in the country. She was off in England, taking a graduate course. But the newspapers tracked down her father, who attacked Serunjogi, saying the two had never been legally married. Members of Kasujja’s family, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told *The Monitor* that it might be best if Nandaula stayed in London for a while. “Senior family members had to be called in to make Susan [Kasujja’s wife] stop banging on the tables,” one source told the paper.

In some quarters, there was outrage and disbelief.

“She moved from one man’s house to another,” said a caller to one local radio show. “Where is the shame?” But others asked: Can a wife be stolen, if she wants to go?

Nandaula, for her part, refused to shrink back or apologize. On Sunday, May 19, Nandaula spoke for the first time. And what she had to say was defiant. From London, she told *The New Vision* she had lived with Serunjogi, but that she had “never been married or engaged to him legally, traditionally, spiritually or in any other way.” She said the cars she drove, supposed gifts from Kasujja, were paid for with her own money. But she didn’t deny having an affair with her boss. “There is all a plot against me,” she said. “When people see a young girl moving up in the ranks quickly, they think it is all about looks and beauty. I now have a master’s degree. Not many people in the EC have those qualifications.”

In this sense, Nandaula symbolized something that is changing in Uganda. More and more young women, at least in the cities, are getting university educations and white-collar jobs. They have sources of income independent of their husbands. And they are less accepting of the established order. Kampala’s men are left to grouse about the “Makerere girls” and their money-grubbing ways.

Nandaula finally returned to work at the Electoral Commission on June 7. Life had changed. Dressed in a “pinkish suit,” she was met by a swarm of journalists shouting questions at her. She ran and hid in the photocopy room, and had to be smuggled out of the Electoral Commission complex in a white SUV. The newspapers printed the license plate number.

The *matatu* conductors renamed the bus stop outside the Electoral Commission “Nandaula.” People shouted lewd things at her on her way to work. *The Red Pepper* photographers followed her around town. One night they tracked her to a gas station. They cornered her in the bathroom and took her picture. The cover of the next week’s issue showed a grim-looking Nandaula, a cell phone to her ear, trying to call the police.

Meanwhile, things were getting nasty inside the Electoral Commission’s headquarters complex on Jinja Road. There were rumors that the scandal came about because of a rift among higher-ups over contracts and other spoils. One employee told police a commissioner had threatened



The press has had a field day with the mountain of girlfriends, husband stealing, wife snatching, and general happiness at the EC, The Monitor editorialized. Kasujja pleaded, “Please can you spare me?”

to burn him, too, with acid. One day, someone fired an AK-47 bullet into Electoral Commission Secretary Sam Rwakoojo’s office.

The pressure got to Kasujja. He pleaded for mercy from the press. “Please can you spare me?” he begged *The New Vision*.

Kasujja’s enemies would do nothing of the sort.

* * *

Miria Matembe and I were finishing up lunch when her cell phone rang. She took the call, and talked animatedly in another language for some time. Then she hung up.

“That was the IGG [Inspector General],” she said. By coincidence, he had been in parliament, calling for Kasujja’s dismissal as we ate. Matembe chuckled conspiratorially. “He was telling me there are so many people to arrest.”

The Inspector General’s report hit the papers the next day, July 17. The facts were damning. Officials at the Electoral Commission, the report found, had bilked the government of more than \$2.5 million over the course of several years, via fraudulent expenses, double-billing and outright theft. They let big contracts to companies owned by top officials and their friends. (The Electoral Commission’s vehicles, for instance, filled up at a gas station owned by one commissioner.) A good friend of Kasujja’s had been paid to oversee a “renovation” project that had never been started. Kasujja himself owned the trucks that transported goods for the commission; inves-

tigators found he was charging the commission exorbitant prices. None of these offenses were discovered by the commission's independent auditor, because the auditing job had been given to an undergraduate business student at Makerere University.

Kasujja was defiant. "You go hang yourself," he told a reporter asking for comment. He called a press conference to announce: "I am not going anywhere." Then he turned on his accusers. "I can excuse the *Monitor* because they are looking for money," he shouted. "But the *New Vision*, which is owned by the taxpayers! Why? Why?"

But Matembe was right. Kasujja was finished. One morning last month, my phone rang. It was Stephen Musigire Kabbera, a young official at the Inspector General's office. "Have you seen the papers?" he asked. "Kasujja has been sacked!"

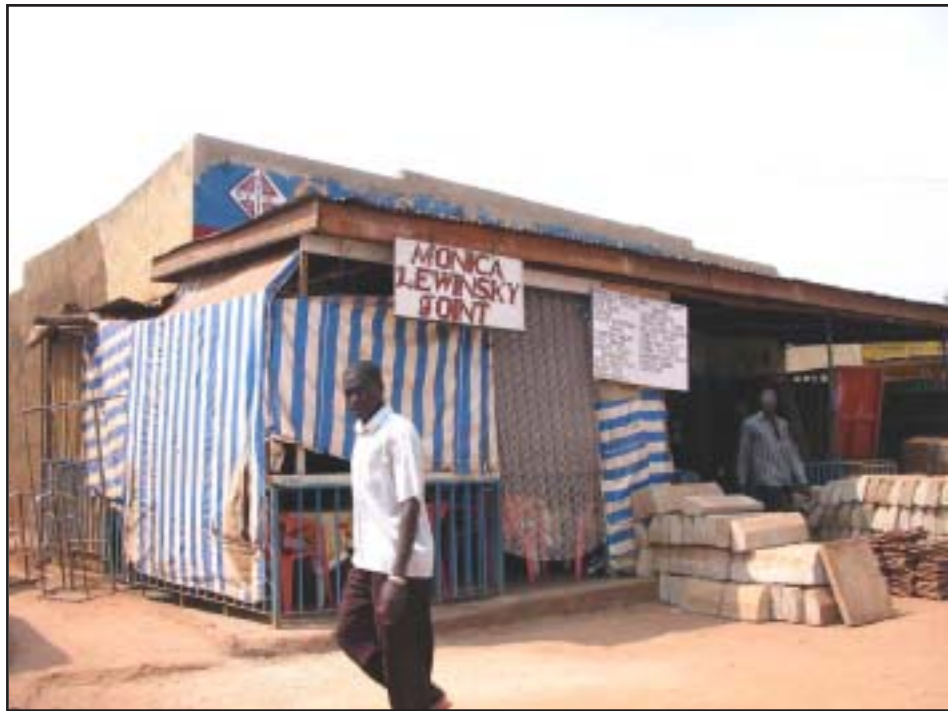
Museveni had spoken. Kasujja and five of the six other commissioners were fired, or, officially, "retired in the public interest." The lone surviving commissioner would be taking over on an interim basis. People had some faith in her honesty. She was a Roman Catholic nun.

Two days later, I finally made it over the Electoral Commission's headquarters to see Sam Rwakoojo, the agency's top administrative official. We originally had an appointment to meet the day Kasujja was fired; I had pulled up to find the gate to the commission's complex chained shut, a pair of soldiers armed with machine guns standing guard.

Rwakoojo was on the phone when I arrived. "Yes, yesterday I was busy delivering the famous letters, the dismissal letters," he said to his caller, laughing.

Mr. Rwakoojo is a smooth-talking, dapper man, with a small neatly groomed moustache. He is a former member of parliament. (He blames the commission for his loss to an opposition candidate. "But I am not bitter," he said.) He was brought in last year to clean up the commission. "If in two years you hear that money has been eaten at the Electoral Commission, you'll know it's me," he said when he got off the phone.

Kasujja, he said, had taken a fall he didn't deserve. "The problems here were really with a few administra-



The Monica Lewinsky Joint, located on Jinja Road in Kampala. A simple meal there costs around 1500 shillings, or less than \$1.

tors who were basically dishonest human beings," he said. But, he added, "when something is wrong, people are screaming for blood."

"We're a reflection of this society," Rwakoojo said. "If this society is morally upright, we will be morally upright. If this society is corrupt, there is that percentage of people who will be corrupt."

Later that morning, I was walking along Kampala Road, when I spied the latest issue of *The Red Pepper*. It bore a large picture of a smiling Nandaula, sporting a new short hairstyle, beneath the headline "Mzee Kasujja is a Ladies' Man—Nandy." Inside, Nandaula gave an extensive interview, in which she, too, said bigger men than Kasujja were to blame for his undoing. "The EC saga has its origins in a clique of people who wanted to bring chairman Kasujja down," she said. "They thought the best way to do it would be to start with me."

This time, Nandaula denied having had an affair with Kasujja ("he treated me like his daughter"). She called Serunjogi "wild, arrogant and [a] no-good lover," and said he used to slap her around. She talked a bit about herself: "My style is cool. My favorite jewelry is gold. ... I also like sexy dresses, short, provocative suits and a fancy G-string. I like cars and right now I drive a Land Cruiser."

She didn't harbor any hard feelings about being stalked. "I thank you for making me feel important," she said.

For the moment, Nandaula still works for the Elec-

toral Commission. George Serunjogi still has his job with the Finance Ministry, though he has been nowhere to be seen since he set off the entire scandal with his testimony to parliament three months ago. He is said to be in South Africa seeking treatment for his face. The police have talked to Nandaula and Kasujja about the acid attack. The investigation is said to be ongoing, but no one much expects it to go anywhere soon.

As for the Big Man himself, the Investigator General recently said he didn't have enough evidence to prosecute Kasujja on criminal charges. He may even land on his feet—there are rumors that Museveni will name him an ambassador to soothe the anger of his tribal backers. Kasujja hasn't been giving interviews to anyone, though when reached on the phone recently by a sympathetic local paper, he cryptically quoted a Luganda proverb, "*Owamanyi akukubya gwokute*," before hanging up. Translated roughly, the proverb means: "The powerful man will use your own stick to beat you."

Miria Matembe savored her victory over Kasujja by attacking him yet again. This time the issue was the rich golden parachute he and each of the fired commissioners were given—80 million shillings (about \$45,000), an enormous amount by Ugandan standards. Soon afterwards the severance package was withdrawn.

At our lunch, I asked Matembe about the common perception that there are powerful people—Kasujja and men bigger than he—who are untouchable, beyond the reach of the law. She responded by ticking off a long list of prominent politicians who had been thrown in jail or disgraced over corruption charges in recent

years. Kasujja, she was sure, would soon join the list.

"So where's the Big now?" she asked.

It's true, Kasujja was cut down to size. But what had really been won? Kasujja had turned the Electoral Commission into a laughing stock, had undermined Ugandan democracy itself—but it had taken a sex scandal to bring him down. Already a half-dozen would-be Big Men are positioning themselves to take his place. No one has much confidence that his replacement will be any more competent, or any less venal.

Stephen Akabway watched Kasujja's self-destruction from afar, and felt a strange sort of sympathy for his successor. He believes the chairman was a victim of the political cross-pressures inherent in trying to serve two masters, the government and the people. "I suspect, though I have no evidence," he said, "that the pressure from the executive was simply too much for him."

And maybe that's the heart of the problem of corruption in Uganda. Kasujja's job, ostensibly, was to help Uganda's citizens exert their will on the people who ruled them. But he knew his real mission was to please the rulers, not the ruled. He would be accountable only to the man above him. The radio caller had asked: Where is Nandaula's shame? Well, where was Kasujja's? He had resisted calls to resign until the last. Museveni finally, belatedly, put an end to things, and Museveni was the only one who could have.

In Uganda, there is only one true Big Man. Everyone else serves at his pleasure alone. □

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 (October 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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