

## Here and There

By Penny Randell

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How exciting to have the chance to open your heart enough to allow a distant land to sweep you away. Keep in mind that all the while you will be inundated by an alluring culture unlike anything you have ever known, that has somehow survived hideous atrocities and maintained much of their traditional roots. Comparing and contrasting an American community that's located in Colorado's Rocky Mountains with a major city in Uganda, East Africa can be enlightening and life-changing. The obvious differences, such as climate, basic socialization customs, and communication in general are rousing, but to incorporate the subtler practices that increase cultural divides are worth a more engaging assessment and understanding.

In most of Africa, success is measured through number of accrued family members. The larger the family, the better your chances of survival. Here in Uganda, polygamy is legal and gracefully accepted as the norm. If a man has three wives instead of just one, he can produce many more children, and perhaps receive better care when he is old. With that said, it is a known fact and fairly accepted that this country in general is considered to be "a man's world." No, women here know nothing about chivalry, and often trail behind the man when walking. There are no opening of doors or opportunities for the woman to be placed first. However, it's the woman who must earn school fees for the kids. It's the woman who literally carries the load.

Here efforts to maintain order and extreme cleanliness are never-ending. When these folks clean, they go deep. Gardens are kept immaculate, as workers use reeds to brush away fallen leaf litter and produce a ground covering of well-swept earth and grass. Most hotels are maintained by female housecleaning crews that scrub floors on their hands and knees, six days a week. Each room is dusted and polished every day, and the bathrooms are left spotless. Too, the people themselves are usually clean and appropriately dressed for the occasion. That alone remains outstanding, for clothes are washed by hand in the front of a cottage, a maze of individual cement enclosures, or mud huts called home.

Particularly inviting is tone of voice. Ugandans speak ever so softly and rarely yell. Their ears are trained to discern the slightest of sounds, picking up on everything that surrounds them. Unlike Americans, even exuberance is a bit muffled and the art of listening is keen. People here don't make much effort to be noticed. Judgement concerning dressing attire is rare, and school children are required to wear uniforms. That's not to say folks don't show what they've got. Of recent, more and more ladies are adorned with colorful, designer-like bags.

Manners are instilled from the start. Many children kneel when approaching an adult and are exceedingly quiet and attentive to their family elders. Often the restaurant server precedes food delivery with a basin and water to wash your hands. Sometimes, they repeat the process after the meal is concluded. Eating with one's hands is common, yet the use of forks, spoons, and knives are much more prevalent in the city. Occasionally an intoxicated one will make a public

appearance, but they are pretty much tolerated, if not ignored completely. Toothpicks are offered at every table and when used, they are concealed by covering the mouth with a hand.

Ugandans are gentle people, yet straightforward when announcing their desires, requests, and curiosities. White people, known as *mzungus*, are always the target for financial assistance on all levels, and folks are not shy when they state their expectations. Somehow, they are progressive enough to join the cell phone generation and wise enough not to engage in addictive substances like tobacco. Most have an insatiable appetite for news and read the paper daily. Strikingly, no one appears to act as though they feel superior to anyone. The familiar member of parliament, government official or anyone else is not revered from a distance. Even their president is approachable by the common citizen. Age is never an issue. Socially speaking, it's equal rights for all.

Moving on to the subject of time, we encounter major variances that turn the Rocky Mountain model inside out and upside down. This is Africa time, and to us it smacks of an absence thereof. In addition, all city roadways are dangerously congested at all times, and jams happen every day and everywhere. These practices can alter a cheerful disposition, for as the hours pass by it's a challenge to not become befuddled, irritated, and without recourse. It's a hard pill to swallow, but little if anything can be done.

But that's OUR viewpoint. What about THEM and the positive values of lax time? Ugandans, take time seriously, but on the other end of things. Tomorrow might not come. Because of this, relationships are rapidly established and words are caringly stated. Just imagine standing on Kampala Road (major city roadway), holding hands with someone you spontaneously met, answering questions, and making plans to meet again. These introductory solicitations of sentiment take time. Establishing these relationships is key, for chances are they will last forever, if you allow.

Traffic in Kampala, the capital city, is pretty much impenetrable. There are few street lights, no lane dividing lines, and drivers routinely challenge one another, pass, and force you off to the side...if there is a side. Although the police are out and about, there just aren't enough to assist and disperse the onslaught of cars, mini vans used for taxis, broken down vehicles that should never be allowed on the road, and thousands of *boda bodas*, motorcycles used for transport. In short, there just aren't enough roads.

No doubt some of these drivers are the best in all the world. To maneuver in such tight quarters takes pure guts and lots of knowhow. The *boda bodas* wind through halted cars like fast-moving snakes, assuming they won't be crushed. But, somehow kindness is alive on the streets. This is crucial and prevents "knocks" and deaths. On the other hand, pedestrians have few rights. It's up to the person who is "footing" to figure a way to manipulate the jamming, and that means patience, much luck...and a wary eye.

Sadly though, cultural standards, social norms, and well-established laws are forever engulfed in and answer to the contagion of theft and corruption. Much of Uganda's population knows desperation all too well, and struggles daily to stay afloat. Here all efforts and resources combined might earn you a dollar...or not. Women perform backbreaking assignments while on the job and

receive no more than a fraction of what they should. There are ever-increasing school fees to gather, many diseases to fight, and the threat of robbery that lurks even in the clear light of day. But through all this the insistent belief and mantra that God will provide is ever present; reassuring and comforting to all, no matter the situation.

Americans by and large go to any extreme to create lasting peace of mind. Mental therapy is the norm and prescription drugs for conditions like depression and anxiety fill the medicine cabinet. Opinions rule! To be well-liked is central and the need for such can challenge individual core beliefs, thus influencing and altering behavior. There it is said that if you end your life with three true and trustworthy friends you are lucky.

Seemingly everyone could gain from a dose of Ugandan culture. This is a society of acceptance and forgiveness. This is a nation of hope and heartfelt dreams that routinely sustain the drive for peace of mind. Truly, in the midst of what might appear to be doom, gloom, and chaos Ugandans cheerfully rise and make the most of every minute of every day. Indeed, these charming, fun-loving, forever smiling people must be recognized for their worth. Known as the Pearl of Africa, Uganda remains forever buoyant and a powerful force that fosters a happy heart to all who receive their light.