

A Week in Uganda

By

Brian Hatton

Muyembe is a very small village sitting pretty-well on the equator in rural Uganda. This is my impression after staying there for just one week. Life is tough for most people. An existence where you eat what you grow, and try to sell or barter excess food for luxury items like paraffin for your lamps, and perhaps a carton of washing powder or a little soap.

This is a place of mud huts with bare earth, or cow dung, floors. There is no running water – you collect that from the borehole, or the river, every day. The toilet is a hole in the ground. Cooking is done outdoors on an open fire, so gathering wood is a regular chore. Each family has a compound with several dwellings and adjoining land for cultivation. Some of the land is worked cooperatively by members of women's empowerment groups. These are set up by African Village Support, the charity which was hosting our visit, to enable the women to have at least some income to provide for their children. Matoke prepared by steaming and mashing peeled green bananas, is a staple ingredient of most meals. Maize and rice are also grown, along with green beans and tomatoes. Eggs and goats meat also feature in the diet. Ploughing by oxen is as common a sight as the ancient, battered tractor.

And here people walk great distances – we met one of several school teachers who walk 3 miles to work each day. Public transport is predominantly the Matatu, the ubiquitous African taxi –we would call it a minibus. On one journey I was one of 24 people inside the 14-seater vehicle, with at least one other clinging to the outside!

Motorbike taxis are everywhere. I saw many carrying three people, and one carrying an 8-foot table, Then four on a bike, two or three with five on a bike, and one with an unbelievable six people on one machine! The other taxi is the boda-boda, a bicycle with a parcel rack on the back, on which the passenger sits side-saddle.

“I was one of 24 people inside the 14-seater” There is no petrol station for 30 miles or more, so the few who own a vehicle (typically a very old and battered affair) have to buy fuel from local dealers who sell it from Jerry cans at inflated prices. Much of it is diluted with paraffin, causing engines to knock and break down, adding misery to an already difficult journey over pot-holed, dusty, earth roads.

Bandits from the region bordering Sudan and Kenya have a history of cattle stealing around Muyembe. The last incursion was only 6 or 7 years ago. The bandits came armed with AK 47s. The villagers hid their cattle inside the school and other buildings, but most were taken. Since then, Asian traders, have bought up much of the land. The peasants could not resist the offer of so much cash that they readily agreed. Now their cash is long spent and they have neither money nor land. The Asians have since established profitable sunflower production there.

The situation is not unlike 19th century Europe, where the poor were in rags and families were large and death came early. Families typically contain 7 or more children. This is understandable where one in five does not reach the age of 5. In the absence of any welfare, children are a guarantee that parents will be looked after in old age, and before that, they contribute to the economy of the household by performing carrying, cleaning and childminding chores to free the adults for work.

And yet, this is a society which is trying to embrace the 21st century. I have an iconic photograph of a young woman, obviously educated and in a good job (probably in provincial administration) carrying a jar of water on her head, with a laptop bag slung over her shoulder!

We attended the Anglican church. It is falling down due to termites eating the mud walls and wooden framework. At the offertory, some villagers were placing tomatoes and eggs on the plate – the only currency they have. I was taken to see the replacement church. The construction of this brick-built

structure has been on-going for years. As the money is found, more bricks are added. It is doubtful that, without outside financial help, the church could be completed before the existing one collapses. At present it is up to window-sill height. It will be a community and health centre as much as a church, just like St. Peter's which we built in Greenfields Township in South Africa. It can be completed –with a concrete floor as well - for only six thousand pounds.....(Contact me if you care to donate) *

This was a step into the unknown for us. There is a lot more to tell. What made the greatest impression? The stoicism and practicality of these inherently religious, resourceful, kindly and friendly people.

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* Anybody wishing to donate, please contact www.parishwindow.co.uk for his email address