Okuwangaala: The Persistent Vitality of the Vernacular

David Stairs

The author would like to thank Kasule Kizito and Sydnee MacKay, whose many helpful suggestions made this a better article.

"In highly industrialized societies, design appears to have replaced nature as the dominant presence in human experience. The nature we do experience is often engineered and manipulated at an astonishing level of subtlety to serve human purposes."

V. Margolin / R. Buchanan,
from the introduction to *Discovering Design*[1]

"In other societies, however, especially nonindustrial ones, there is often no clear distinction between professional and amateur design abilities—the role of the professional designer may not exist. In craft-based societies, for example, craftspeople make objects that are not only highly practical but also very beautiful."

Nigel Cross, "Discovering Design Ability,"
from *Discovering Design*[2]

"He [the villager] came to live more and more with his own fabrications as the environment. Being of his own making, the things around him were indistinct from himself, and he was less differentiated than he wanted to be."

Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness*[3]

1 R. Buchanan and V. Margolin, eds., *Discovering Design* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xii.

2 Ibid., 112.

3 Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1982), 42.

Man with a cellphone

Prologue

The tropics, crucible of bloodborne diseases, is an endless complementary cycle of deluge and desiccation. The cumulative corrosive effects of humidity, dust, and fatalism prove a nemesis to most technology, especially high-tech. Yet the young man in the next room is very excited. He has just discovered some shareware on the Internet that permits him to send a brief text message from his workstation to a remote cellphone. "Big deal," I can almost hear you say. And under any other circumstances, your indifference would be justified. But this event is happening in a society that has overleapt two-and-a-half centuries of smokestack industrialism to find itself teetering on the brink of the IT Era. Welcome to the manifold ironies of life in modern sub-Saharan Africa.

Cultural Chauvinism Revisited

In his 1865 travelogue, *Expedition to the Zambezi and Its Tributaries*, David Livingstone wrote: "The races of this Continent seem to have advanced to a certain point and no further: their progress in the arts of working iron and copper, in pottery, basket-making, spinning, weaving, making nets, fish-hooks, spears, axes, knives, needles, and other things, whether originally invented by this people or communicated by another instructor, appears to have remained in the same rude state for a great number of centuries."[4] Much has changed since this so-called "friend of Africa" wrote for his aristocratic audience, except perhaps our attitudes about Africa and its people. In these, we are still more Victorian than we realize.

Livingstone the missionary often was superseded by Livingstone the capitalist. He wanted to develop Africa economically as much as convert Africans to Christianity. While condemning the African slave trade, something of a cause celebre in his time, he painted an effective picture of Africans as otherwise economically inept, and in need of European-style trade. Thus began the double subjugation of Africans as both a cheap source of raw materials and a growing market for European goods. While Christianity quelled the rebellious, "humanists" such as Livingstone showed Africans the glories of European manufacture, preparing the continent for the exploitation that continues to this day.

The mature discipline of developmental sociology generally accepts that "crisis narratives," such as Livingstone's, have played a decisive role in maintaining the balance of power in favor of donor nations and institutions over developing nations.[5] For almost two centuries, Western governments, corporations, and NGOs have used war, famine, the slave trade, and supposed environmental degradation as justifications for predatory interventions in Africa. If there's a truism about Africa, it's that development myths about Africa's neediness have been exaggerated, tailored to suit the established beliefs of a Eurocentric sensibility.

Without wishing to reinforce Livingstone's image of Africans as still locked in the Neolithic era, it can be observed that many drive cars, but destroy their suspensions and crack their windshields on abysmal roads. African cities have running water, but it's often not drinkable until boiled. In the villages, there is no plumbing, and families can spend a large portion of each morning carrying water in twenty-liter plastic jerry cans. Big foreign cell phone companies recently have arrived in Uganda which, given the deplorable state of the ground phone network, is a blessing for that elite portion of the public who can afford airtime.[6] Everyone else communicates face to face. I believe this implies less an antiprogressive attitude in Africa than a complex set of social and historical mores which, unfortunately, make for a poor comparison with the West, especially when one talks about technology.

4 Anne Hugon, *The Exploration of Africa* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 154.

5 A. O. Hirschman, *Development Projects Observed, 1968* (Brookings Institute).

6 Telephone ownership in Uganda, as of 2001, was at less than two percent of the population (250,000/21,000,000); Reelection Manifesto of President Y. K. Museveni.

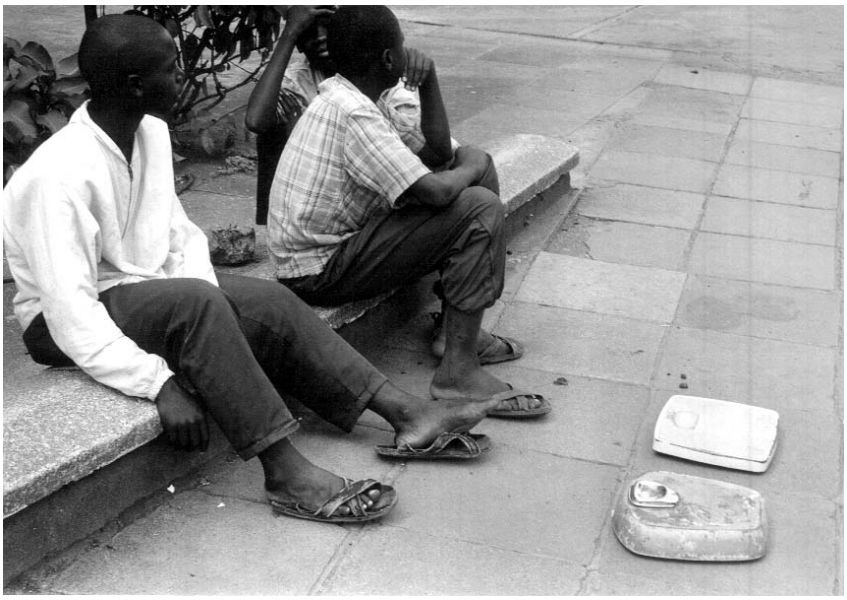
In his recent book, *The End of Work*, Jeremy Rifkin laments the devastating effects of workplace automation on the industrial workers of the world. He quotes Julie Fisher of the Program on Non-Profit Organizations at Yale University describing people of the nonindustrial world: "Because they're so desperately poor, there's literally no opportunity for them in the formal economy—it's essentially irrelevant to most people in the world." [7] This comment gets it half right. Individual participation in developing economies is modest, and often informal, but also nearly universal. When laborsaving devices are rare and cheap labor plentiful, people tend to work as wheelbarrow porters, shoewashers, scales boys, house girls, and at a thousand other humble occupations. Where backhoes don't exist, foundations must be dug by pick-and-shovel gangs. People may seem "desperately poor," but at least they're not suicidal as a result of being sidelined by workplace automation.

It is dismaying then, though hardly surprising, to find similar bias voiced in Western attitudes toward African design culture. The allure of narratives about our cultural superiority is very strong. When a designer from New Zealand makes incautious references to the fact that "...the inescapable iconography of the Coca-Cola can to be found in a Ugandan town..." [8] one worries less at his naiveté than about the hypnotizing power of marketing copy. The fact that Coke is one of the largest employers in Africa has as much to do with the shortage of potable water in a torrid climate as with received wisdom about the penetrating power of corporate promotions in developing countries.

7 Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1995), 283.

8 *Emigre* #37 (1996 letter from Danny Butt, Dunedin, N.Z.).

Metal recyclers, Bombo Road.



Scaleboys.

Boda Boda taximan awaits a fare.

Symbol of "inescapable iconography"...

...or harbinger of corporate doom?

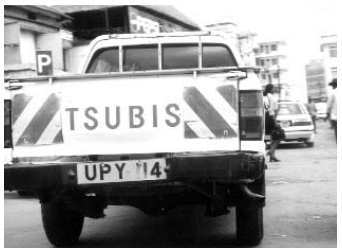
Resourcefulness of the Resource Poor

A nation of some twenty-two million souls, Uganda has a land mass about the size of Oregon. Sitting astride the equator, roughly three hours east of Greenwich, Uganda's agrarian economy is famous for its tropical fruit, organic produce, and its coffee. Possessed of a variety of climates and ecosystems ranging from desert to montane, Uganda's natural beauty is celebrated (Churchill called it "The Pearl of Africa"), and nature is coeval with culture in the day-to-day lives of its people.

Most manufactured goods in Uganda are imported, just as they were a century ago, and like last century, they must compete, nose-to-nose, with a vital and affordable tradition of handicraft manufacture. Although, like other African nations, Uganda lags behind in industrial manufacturing as a legacy of colonialism, in nearly every observable instance, the influence of Western design on Uganda is subsumed by the dominant local culture.

Today's modern Petrol or Caltex service station one day will suffer the same fate as yesteryear's Esso station, now a woodshed. Sacred cows of twentieth-century design, like Edward Johnston's "Railway Sans," are inadvertently distorted by well-meaning letterers, while the faded street signs of the colonial era seem to be literally based upon it. Corporate promotional intentions are subverted to a highly humorous end with the required addition of high-visibility panels to the tailgates of imported pickup trucks. But nowhere is the vernacular more widely visible or fecund than in Uganda's distinctive signage.

Signpainter's bastardized Railway Sans...



A 2002 "Tsubis."

...while colonial-era street signs seem to be modeled upon it.

Hair parlor signs.

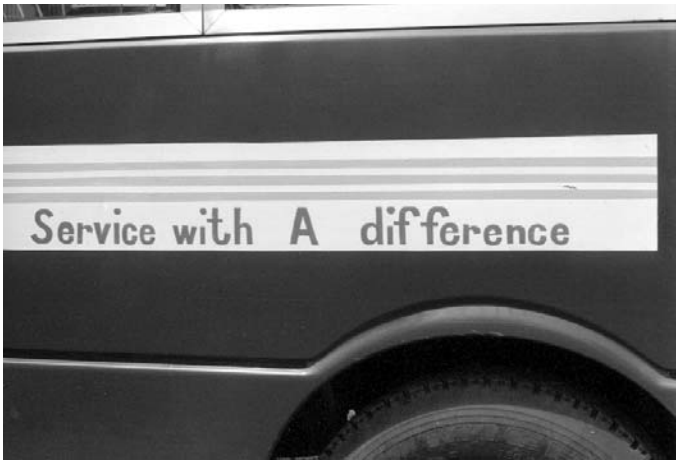
The sociology of labor, as well as economic necessity, determines the parameters of self-reliance. In Uganda, many people must make their own signs, and these possess all the spontaneity and candor of this primarily oral culture. Hair parlors have elaborately illustrated signs, proof that Ugandans put great stock in their appearance. Some of the crude anatomy of these images might, at first appearance, be construed to frighten patrons away. But the average person is not an art critic, and professional sign painters often are self-taught. Then too, as a friend has pointed out, greater emphasis is placed on functionality in African design. If the sign brings people in the door, it's a success, in spite of its aesthetic qualities. Yet, even a formally trained eye, after viewing hundreds of these signs throughout the country, must admit that they have a certain charm.

In an informal economy, one's livelihood can derive from the slimmest of means. Popcorn making, battery charging, charcoal selling, and mobile phone rental are just a few of the innovative ways Ugandans make ends meet. Even traditionally formal institutions such as the Post Office are infected by informality. The sidepanels on one Post Office vehicle were stenciled on white, adhesive-backed contact paper. Lettershape, baseline shift, and kerning all are consistently irregular. On a mailbox around the corner, one can find sans-serif letters on the one side, and serifs on the other. In this sense, Nigel Cross has it right. The distinction between amateur and professional in Uganda is very grey. It is difficult for professionals to establish any kind of effective presence in an economy in which nearly every individual utilizes his or her "design ability" on a daily basis.

Reverse-engineered popcorn makers.

Once in a while, a masterpiece of vernacular signage will appear only to vanish with the winds of economic adversity. On the coffin sign found briefly at the Mulago Roundabout opposite Kampala's main hospital, the artist had painted a white background leaving a crude octagonal window which used the plywood grain in the coffin shape to great effect.

The breadth and depth of vernacular signage in Uganda is fertile ground for a large monograph, or perhaps a whole series of design dissertations. One thing is certain, this type of folk art successfully competes on a human scale with the larger-than-life-size corporate signage looming over it.



Post Office bus.

Seen across from Mulago Hospital.

Traditions of Ugandan Dress

Upon meeting Kabaka Mutesa I, King of the Baganda, in 1878, Henry Morton Stanley was favorably impressed. In *Through the Dark Continent,* among the many journal observations regarding his visit to the shores of Lake Victoria, he had this to say about Bagandan dress:

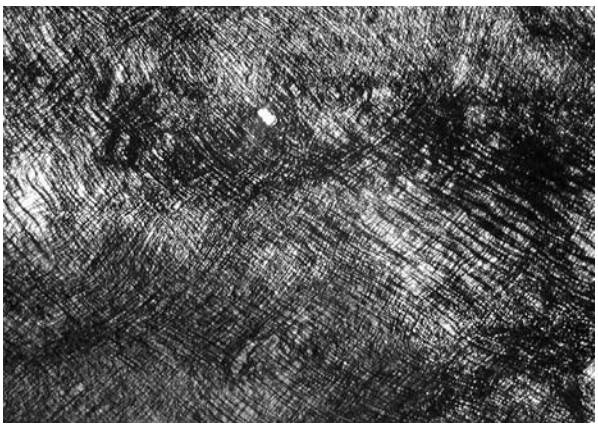
> The women and chiefs of Mutesa, who may furnish the best specimens of Waganda, are nearly all of a bronze or dark reddish brown, with peculiar smooth, soft skins... The native cloths—the national dress—which depended from the right shoulders of the larger number of those not immediately connected with the court were of a light brown also. It struck me, when I saw the brown skins, brown robes, and brown canoes, that brown must be the national color.[9]

This passage aptly describes the traditional Baganda material known as *olubuggo* or "barkcloth," fabric literally made from beaten fig tree bark.

At the time of the historic meeting between Mutesa and Stanley, barkcloth was widely used by the Baganda. A softer version was used for bedsheets, with a stiffer version for blankets. One advantage of barkcloth over cotton is that mosquitoes can't bite through it. The Baganda had many grades of barkcloth, from that considered fit for the Kabaka on down. Fabric made from bark is not unique to Uganda. The practice also exists in West Africa, specifically Ghana. Since modern Ugandan languages derive from a Bantu parent language, both language and fabric could be connected to the great Bantu diaspora east and south.[10] These days, Ugandans use barkcloth primarily for ceremonial purposes at funerals, weddings, and initiations (although in rural areas, it is still used for bedsheets by children and the elderly), and the technique for making it is becoming a lost art. But it is not an exaggeration to say Ugandans still are particular about their dress.

9 Hugon, *The Exploration of Africa*, 141.

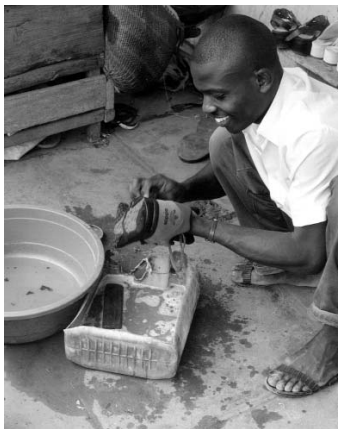
10 Personal conversation with Kasule Maria Kizito, a trained barkcloth maker, 11/2/01.



The naturally fibrous "weave" of *olubuggo.*

Take a high polish on shoes, for instance. Often, when passing a stranger, the first thing a Ugandan looks at is his shoes, the condition of which communicates valuable information about the person's social status, if not character. In a dusty environment, wearing shiny shoes requires the meticulous care of multiple pairs of footwear. Hence, there's a booming secondhand shoe bazaar at Kampala's huge St. Balikuddembe Market, and a significant industry of shoewashing, blackening, and polishing.

Although Western-style dress prevails for everyday use in Uganda, there are frequent variations from the norm. Men often can be seen wearing women's shirts. This probably follows from the need to employ saturated colors in tropical sunlight. Not only is women's clothing generally brighter, at Balikuddembe, bulk clothing often is not gender differentiated. Stranger still is the little girl in my young son's preschool class who wears her dress backwards. The dress is cut to be worn with the label in back, but the girl's mother has decided that, comfort notwithstanding, the dress should be worn with its label prominently displayed in front. This would seem to suggest that Ugandans are label-conscious, but even this can be deceiving. Those designer cK and Nike casual togs one sees on Kampala streets, typical examples of the effects of volume used-garment dumping on the developing world, were purchased for pennies at Balikuddembe and, since they often are worn by poor members of society, lose much of their effectiveness as status symbols.



A shoewasher at work.

The used shoe bazaar, Balakuddembe Market.

In contrast to these anomalous examples, whether a result of cultural miscue or economic necessity, there are few errors when it comes to Ugandan traditional wear. For men, the Ugandan equivalent of a tuxedo is the *Kanzu*, a full-length, white or cream, embroidered cassock. Like the jacket which generally accompanies it, the *Kanzu* is imported, is probably of Arab origin, but is widely worn today by both Muslims and Christians.

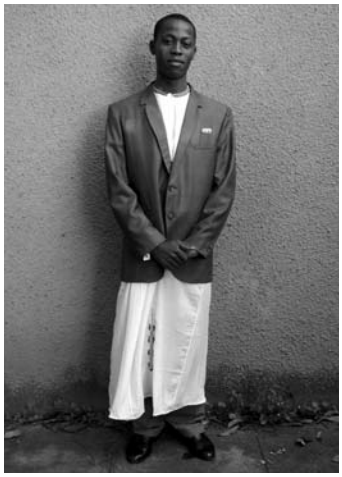
Less formal, but no less striking, is the *Kitenge*, a patterned shirt/pant ensemble that resembles nothing so much as pajamas. While it is startling the first time one sees a man in bedclothes on the street in broad daylight, with a little cultural adjustment, one has to admit they look very "smart" indeed. Arriving from West and Central Africa in the 1930s, the *Kitenge* is cool, and thoroughly Pan African.

The traditional women's formal dress in Uganda is the *Busuuti*, which came into use after European contact. The *Busuuti* is a colorful, but heavy, full-length garment requiring a full six meters of fabric for its construction. Originally ending just above the breasts, it was formalized by Indian tailors who added padded shoulders to it, creating the *Busuuti Gomesi*. *Busuutis* are not used only for formal wear. Ladies of rank in Ugandan villages wear them every day, utilizing a variety of less formal, lightweight fabrics.

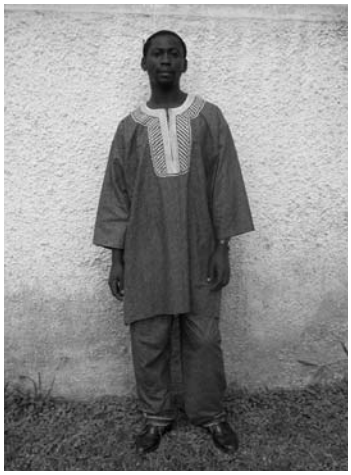
Although the *Kanzu*, the *Kitenge*, and the *Busuuti* are émigrés, unlike the indigenous bark cloth, they have become good Ugandans and are here to stay. Their adoption is testament to the flexibility of Ugandan traditions, and to Uganda's position as the crossroads of east central Africa.

Candidate for the Ugandan National Chair

The British author, art educator, and founder of the art school which bears her name at Makerere University in Kampala K. Margaret Trowell, once wrote,



A *Kanzu.*



A *Kitenge.*

A *Busuuti Gomesi.*

> The difference, then, between a work of fine art and a design for a craft is not absolute but is rather one of emphasis and degree. In a primitive or pre-industrial society even this difference is far less than in a more sophisticated one, for here life is an integrated whole and in both the sculptured ancestor figure and the decorated calabash the practical and the more intangible creative qualities are fairly evenly balanced, for the sculpture is made for the very practical purpose of harnessing spiritual power for material ends, while the decorated calabash has a recognized symbolical significance as well as a material use. The distinction between fine and applied art would puzzle the primitive artist.[11]

Margaret Trowell instinctively understood the intimate connection between Ugandan art and craft. In her curriculum at the then Makerere College between 1937 and 1957, she included a course on basketry.

At any given time of day, the sidewalk notions lady or fruit seller at an open-air market in Uganda will not be idle, but will be sitting busily plaiting colored palm-leaf strips that later would be assembled into mats or carrying bags. Many of the three dozen vendors at the Ugandan National Arts and Crafts Association's CraftsVillage represent rural cooperatives and individual artisans who produce a wide array of woven baskets, bowls, trays, food covers, hats, fabrics, and other items. The range of shapes and sizes of woven materials is broad, and the variety of colors and designs stifles any suggestion that this work is derivative. A Nubian *tabaga*, from central Uganda's Luwero district, is a woven food cover that would enhance even the most elegant Western table.

11 K. M. Trowell, *African Design* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 14.

A plaited, strip-woven *ekikapu.*

A nubian coiled *tabaga.*

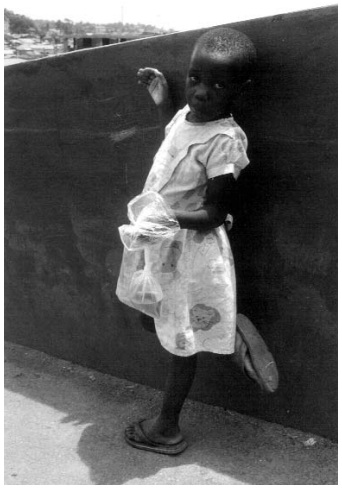
But in Uganda, weaving doesn't stop at cloth and household implements. Most of the shopkeepers and street vendors I've referred to are sitting on an *akatebe ak'ekibbo,* or "basket stool." This is part of a wide range of domestic furnishings made from bent rattan cane resembling nothing so much as nineteenth-century Thonet chairs. The three-legged *akatebe* looks like a vortex, its inverted cone of concentric spirals creating a naturally comfortable depression. *Akatebes* are simple, durable and, at less than a dollar for the adult size, quite affordable.

Ironically, many furniture vendors also sell overstuffed couches and chairs, comprised of foam cushions mounted over a sprung wooden frame upholstered in a variety of gaudy fabrics. Ugandans seem to like these faux pieces, reverse engineered from cheap European prototypes. But for design elegance the *akatebe* can't be surpassed.

Barak at Human Touch handcrafts makes traditional rattan furnishings...

...while just across Ggaba Road, faux English overstuffed chairs are available.

An *akatebe.*



A young girl brings cooking oil home in a plastic bag.

The Complete Recycled Tire

The landfill which serves Kampala is compact because most of its contents are organic matter, one of the blessings of a nonindustrial society. Formal curbside recycling, commonplace in America, is completely unknown in Uganda. In its place is a series of informal screenings performed by street children and impoverished older people, who pour through tons of refuse in public dumpsters searching for plastic or glass containers, and other recyclable metals. Domestically manufactured plastic bags have replaced the more durable woven variety, such as the *ekikapu,* and are used for carrying everything including milk, oil, and diesel. But they're an outside idea, and have brought the plague of litter, which is anything but Ugandan beauty swirling on the breeze.

A better example of Ugandan design resourcefulness is the fate of auto tires and wheels. Thousands of metal wheels are employed each evening at the numerous open-air markets around Kampala as charcoal hobs for roasting corn and bananas. These are heavy-gauge steel, therefore longlasting, and easy to come by. Rubber auto and truck tires, a source of acrimonious waste-to-energy debates in the West, are almost wholly recycled in Uganda. Tires are cut up and woven into bed liners for pickup trucks.

Another application is for *lugabire,* or sandals, sometimes called "million milers." Spartan and unpretentious, *lugabire* are very durable protection for the soles, and are a popular alternative to the more expensive imported thongs or flip-flops. Considered "poor man's shoes," *lugabire* are eschewed by upscale Ugandans who pay thousands of shillings more for Western-made sandals whose deeply grooved soles imitate auto tire treads.

Victor Papanek always was impressed by the things people in underdeveloped areas did with manufactured goods. Ugandans prove they know the meaning of recycling and the value of durable materials by the way they reuse manufactured commodities.

Recycled auto wheel used as a maize roaster, Wandegeya.

Woven truckbed of reused tires.

Marshall sidewalls receive new life as a pair of *Lugabire.*

Transportation and Distribution Systems: Small and Private Are Better

Goods and people are always on the move in Africa, and Uganda is no exception. Most people walk, or ride bicycles, but not in a Western manner. The bicycles of Uganda are heavy one-speed vehicles with black, reinforced-steel frames sporting a sturdy rear carrier. These are used to ferry people, with a foam pillow mounted atop the carrier, or goods, without the pillow. Everything from pineapples to mattresses and charcoal to lumber is hauled on bikes. The author has seen steel pipe and rebar being moved, and some general commodity dealers pedal about with completely mobile stores of brushes, brooms, and kitchen accouterments on board. Bicycle porters compete with both motorscooters and much slower wheelbarrows, often stacking dangerously wide or heavy loads on their carriers before trying to navigate the potholed streets.

Most roundabouts in Kampala are uncontrolled, the British-era traffic signals having fallen into disrepair and subsequent disuse. This results in gridlock at certain times of the day. Some chronically clogged intersections recently have been redesigned by the Japanese government through a good neighbor grant. But Kampalans seem resigned to the congested conditions of their busy streets.

Before 1990, there were a variety of bus services in Kampala, both private and public, but today the public system has been completely replaced by the most familiar symbol of urban transportation, the *matatu*. These second-hand Toyota diesel vans are commonplace throughout East Africa, sometimes making headlines when an overcrowded one is involved in a fatal accident. *Matatus* in Uganda are strictly limited to carrying sixteen people, including driver and conductor, and can convey a passenger from one side of Kampala to the other, a distance of several kilometers, for about fifty cents.

Everything is moved by bike, from pineapples...

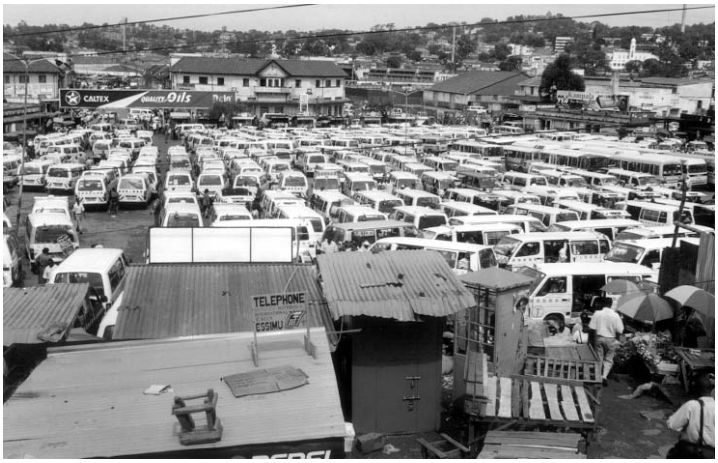
...to oxygen cylinders.

Papyrus bikeload, Nateete.

Although regulated by the city and self-policed by a taxi union, *matatus* are privately owned and their operators compete vigorously for full loads and individual fares. With privatization the apparent wave of Uganda's future (the Uganda Electric Board and Uganda Telecom, once publically owned, were both recently privatized), and the busy streets plied by an armada of passenger-oriented taxi vans, it is hard to imagine Uganda returning to a system of public transportation anytime in the foreseeable future.

Matatu in action.

Taxi union official in stenciled smock.



Old Taxi Park, Kampala.

Security windows being transported.

City General Metal Works, Katwe.

Beautifully Secure

Uganda gained independence in 1962, but remained at peace only until 1966. What followed, the Obote and Amin years, plunged the country into two decades of brutality and civil decay. During those dark years, guns dominated society and people feared to move about after nightfall. Those who owned homes and businesses took measures to protect them, and a new industry was born. Today, many buildings have barred windows and gated entranceways. But these are no ordinary bars and gates.

Katwe Road runs south from Kampala snaking along the perimeter of the Kabaka's traditional enclosures. In an earlier era, this was where the king's blacksmiths lived. According to Professor P. N. Sengendo of Makerere University, "At the general domestic level, individuals in society were expected to be knowledgeable about the function and aesthetic qualities that constituted good craft. The Baganda saying, "Omuweesi ekamuzimbya kukulo kulagirirwa" means literally that the blacksmith deliberately situated his business along the public road in order to receive instruction and advice from the passers by." [12]

During colonial times Katwe, which means "place where people find creative solutions," was the cradle of Uganda's independence movement. Today the Katwe district is a light industrial area jammed with dozens of iron mongers and sheet metal fabricators, such as the City General Metal Works. Security doors, gates, and windows are made in a wide variety of designs and colors.

Security gates, Kanyanya.

Many are topped with spikes, and gates have a personal entry door for pedestrians. These gates are obviously not for the poor, who must rely upon the traditional papyrus reeds, but a home or business in a middleclass neighborhood of Kampala won't be found without them.

At Bugolobi, in southeast Kampala near Lake Victoria, the Bugolobi Apartments housing complex of more than 900 flats is home over six-thousand people. Originally used by Amin as army barracks, the flats now are being sold to occupants as condominiums. In the '80s burglary was so common that residents had to act in self-defense. Today, most flats at Bugolobi have security bars on their porches, each installed by a different ironworking firm in a wide variety of designs and patterns.

Security is a serious business in Uganda, especially in Kampala, although people are no longer afraid to walk at night. Beyond the armed guards, patrol dogs, and concertina wire, Ugandans are striving to endow security with a more beautiful face.

12 P. N. Sengendo, "The Birth and Growth of East African Modern Art at Makerere University" (1996, unpublished essay).

Bugolobi Flats.

Okuwangaala: The Resilience of Indigenous Traditions

The most difficult aspect of life in Africa for the average Westerner is not malaria, or the heat, or even the lilting dialect of English spoken in many areas, but the enormous cultural differences. Donor nations and institutions like to link fiscal accountability to socially progressive concepts, such as democracy. But Africans complain and, to an extent, are justified in saying that this is unfair. It assumes that Western values and mores apply to all parts of the world, which often is not the case.

Westerners are mystified by African political clientelism and fiscal corruption, but it is really just a fact of tribal life to most Africans. Jean-Francoise Bayart writes: "The rise, in Africa, of activities officially classed as criminal is aided by the existence of moral and political codes of behavior, especially those of ethnicity, kinship, and even religion, and of cultural representations, notably of the invisible, of trickery as a social value, of certain prestigious styles of life, even of an aesthetic, whose capacity to legitimize certain types of behavior is considerable." [13]

13 J. F. Bayart, S. Ellis, and B. Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999), 15.

Hence, the "informal" economy, that underside of the nation's gross domestic product in the form of goods and services hidden from the tax collector, is much more prevalent in Uganda than in America. Together with other factors including the lower cost of living, reduced dependence upon manufactured goods and services, and the universal application of handicraft, this parallel economy allows many Ugandans to get by with much less than their American counterparts.[14]

Dependence upon older, communal modes of economic participation—homemade handpainted signage, for instance, or printing presses shared among several owners—is more a matter of day-to-day exigency than of a conscious resistance to the West's dominant and domineering metaphor. Nevertheless, Ugandans are painfully aware of the West's advantage in areas such as high technology, manufacturing, and weaponry, and their government regularly invests in these imported products. Since Uganda's economy is primarily agrarian, major manufactured goods including autos, largely are imported. But the influence of Western design often is diluted, absorbed, and made Ugandan. Rather than being conquered by the colonialists for a second time, Uganda resists the onslaught of Western design in a plethora of ways. This is what we mean by the Lugandan word *okuwangaala,* or "long-livedness." Will it always remain thus? This is more difficult to say. My young friend with the cellphone is one of thousands of modern Ugandans who are impatient for change. And change will come, as it often has in the past, but for better or worse?

Rereading the seemingly enigmatic Paul Shepard quotation at the beginning of this article, I try to recall why I chose it. I return to *Nature and Madness* where, a little further on, I find: "...for the idea of history is itself a Western invention whose central theme is the rejection of habitat. It formulates experience outside of nature and tends to reduce place to location." [15] Here, I believe, is one insight to Western civilization's misunderstandings about technology in Africa. If technology is, as we like to think, the instrumentalization of history[16] then, in Africa—the birthplace of all civilization and the one "location" where habitat *is* history—we Westerners have created a reasonably serious dichotomy between nature and technology. Yet, even by such an account, my opening remarks were surely wrong. Humidity, dust, and fatalism do not have a corrosive effect on technology, but a clarifying one. They keep technology securely in its place, subsidiary to nature, the one constant truth, and our collective original vernacular.

Epilogue

Life in the tropics isn't getting any easier. Refugees streamed out of the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo in January 2002 in an effort to escape the worst volcanic eruption in Africa in twenty-five years. Rwanda allowed the refugees to enter, but Uganda, still

14 Ibid., Bayart et al, "It is nowadays recognized that the major aggregate indicators, such as figures of Gross Domestic Product, levels of production and economic activity, sectoral growth rates, statistics of purchasing power and so forth, do not reflect the reality of the economics which they purport to represent and cannot be considered as wholly viable." 17.

15 Shepard, *Nature and Madness*, 47.

16 For an interesting perspective see Robert Heilbroner's "Do Machines Make History?" in Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx, eds., *Does Technology Drive History?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 53-65.

smarting from U.N. condemnations, turned them away. The Ugandan army was back in Eastern Congo, ostensibly to stabilize its borders and make good on Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's promise to "pacify the country by 2002." Unfortunately, the U.N. saw the Ugandan mission in Congo as a criminal incursion, and called for its cessation.

In the wake of September 11th terrorist attacks on the U.S., business has gotten very lean in Kampala. Ugandans wonderingly admit that, even in this remote heart of Africa, they are more a part of the global economy than they had previously thought. Heavy trucks continue to flow east and west along the Mombassa/Kigali highway, moving arms and men, matoke, and contraband. In a nation where sixty-nine percent of the populace earns less than $1US per day,[17] the "informal economy" is often is the only way to make ends meet.

As I stop to enjoy the hard afternoon rain sweeping across the countryside, falling with the force of a cataract as it cools the dusty air and creates near-flood conditions on the gutted but still heavily traveled roads, I hear the soft electronic peep of a cellphone from somewhere deep in an adjoining room. Yes, life will undoubtedly go on, much as it always has here in tropical Africa, a place where fortune tellers and marabouts still thrive, largely because the future, like the weather, remains open to colorful conjecture. And this, after all, is good.

17 According to the World Bank 1998 Annual Report.