
Out of Africa: Three Personal Reflections

Milton D. Sikkema was born in Nasir, Sudan; while Jeffrey Neevel was an M.Div. candidate at Western Theological Seminary, he and Susie had a nine-month pastoral and teaching ministry in Alale, Kenya; Kate Jellema spent one year in Kampala, Uganda, as a Visions in Action volunteer.

Memoirs and Mission Milton D. Sikkema

While reviewing my life the other day, I came to the realization that I have now lived more of my life in the United States than in Africa. This realization was somewhat shocking because until now I have tended to identify myself as "African" simply because I was born there. Africa has always felt like home to me. An issue with which I continue to wrestle is the role that one's home plays in one's identity. My parents were "called by God" to the Sudan in 1952 and I joined them at a village named Akobo (in a location once described as "the dribble on the end of Ethiopia's nose," which I find to be a rather intriguing tag for one's home) in 1957. That feels like a very long time ago. I relocated to home (the United States, that is) in 1976 and have remained here more or less permanently ever since. In many ways the later date feels the more ancient of the two. I offer this background simply to state that for my life, questions concerning the location of one's home combine with the passage of time to skew memories. Therefore, if the following "memoirs" are somewhat skewed, the reader will understand the reason.

Open Earldis and Quivered Hearts

It was pitch dark in the close, early morning heat when I felt Dad's agricultural hands shake me into awareness. "Listen to the lions roar," he urged. I had no choice. The sounds of the lions confronted me in ways impossible to escape. Sleeping arrangements in the Sudan were designed to provide as much relief from the heat as possible. Our family slept on a veranda with nothing but mosquito nets over our beds and screens around the porch to offer easy access to whatever movements of air might drift our way. Or whatever lions. I had no choice but to *listen*.

Hollywood has created one more unreality by its portrayal of lions, especially in the choice of sound effects. The roar of a Hollywood lion is wimpy, something that provides entertainment for an audience eating popcorn in the cool darkness of a theater. The lion's roar that forced open my five-year-old earlids, clamped shut in the midst of that stifling darkness, was terrifying! That haunting roar echoed through the porch screens and the mosquito nets, and shook my heart in a way that makes it quiver to this day.

Perhaps it had this lasting effect because the roars that opened my earlids that morning were a harbinger, a precursor to one of the "Jions" of life that was to slash and upend my family. This Lion used a sneak attack. The only accompanying sound was a voice crackling over the radio telephone used for communications among missionaries. The Sikkemas were being given six weeks to leave the country. There was political unrest in the Sudan. The Islamic government in the North did not appreciate the mission work being done in the South.

We were, therefore, given six weeks to make it look like we had never been. Six weeks to pack whatever belongings seven people could fit into a four-passenger Cessna 180. Six weeks to knot up loose ends. Six weeks for a five-year-old boy to say goodbye to the "dribble on the end of Ethiopia's nose," the only home he had ever know. Six short weeks to visit the special places that only a five-year-old can hide in his heart; six weeks to sever ties with all the friends he had ever made. Six weeks to get ready to face that utterly foreign place that my parents called home, America. Six weeks to . . .

A good Calvinist would probably say something about the omnipotence, sovereignty, and protection of God on behalf of our family. (Others who were expelled were given twenty-four hours notice emphasized by bullets flying through their home.) My parents often say things about holding on to life and its trimmings with a gentle, loosened grip. While I agree with what the good Calvinist and my parents have to say, people who know me realize that I am usually quite reserved when it comes to having "something to say." Words come hard when reflecting on life. What I can say is that life placed a tall order for a five-year-old to try to accomplish in six short weeks. To this day I am not sure I have the order filled, nor the job done.

Most five-year-olds tire easily and early. Holding on to life is hard work for those with small hands and quivered hearts, no matter how loosened or gentle their grip. Looking back, I have found the truth to be that rather than my holding on to life, the one who called himself "Life" placed a gentle grip on a five-year-old, a grip that has been maintained to this day.

The Frog and the Lion

The missionaries called it a jeep, but the natives promptly dubbed it "the frog." The World War II Army surplus vehicle had two bulbous eyes emerging from the front fenders that stared into the African night as best they could. It still carried its Army green coloring and during the rainy season spent a large portion of its time half buried in the mud. "Frog" was a more appropriate moniker than "jeep."

Late one afternoon the frog emerged from its hibernation in the shop and embarked on a hunting trip. The mission needed fresh meat and the frog was the vehicle to get it. Two natives sat on the hood as guides, their ever-present spears in hand. In the belly of the frog sat "Uncle" Harvey Hoekstra (in those days every missionary was called "uncle" or "aunt") and Dad. Both were armed with rifles. The frog croaked its way through the Sudanese bush, guided along paths familiar to the individuals on the hood. It surprised a herd of *tiang* (a member of the deer family), the long tongue of the rifles flicked out, and two of the *tiang* were hauled into the frog's belly. Mission accomplished, meat for the mission was on board.

But now the frog had to make its way home. Darkness had collapsed around it as it croaked along. The bulbous eyes did what they could, gathering what little information the darkness had to offer. It was not much, and what there was became instantly terrifying. Two glowing, yellow eyes flickered briefly through the frog's tunnel vision. Lion.

The Africans were instantly on their feet, struggling to balance on a bouncing hood, brandishing their spears, and shouting warnings and instructions in words not fully understood. The lion was the one that responded to their shouts. He veered off to one side, and then continued for a short distance behind the frog. When that happened Uncle Harvey yelled at Dad, "Turn this thing around! Turn this thing around!" But Harvey was the one behind the steering wheel!

When this story is told in mission circles it is usually interrupted at this point by the laughter of those who know Harvey Hoekstra's confusion in the midst of an adrenaline rush. I do not know the exact details of what happened next. What I do know is that Dad shot the lion and put him into the belly of the frog alongside the *tiang*.

The fading Kodachrome slides indicate he was a fine specimen of a lion. He had a dark, thick mane and large padded paws. He was so fine, in fact, that people came from miles around to see the lion that had been slain through the cooperative efforts of natives and missionaries. Among the visitors were Ethiopian police from a border post five miles away. They wanted to buy the lion's skin and send it as homage to Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie who bore the title, "Lion of the Tribe of Judah." (Ethiopia's emperors claimed ancestry

from a tryst between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, cf. 1 Kings 10:1-13.) Dad told the police the lion's skin was not for sale and they left without a word. About a week later, sometime during the Sunday morning worship service, the lion's skin disappeared. Kodachrome slides and the memories of missionaries are all that remain of that confrontation between the frog, its occupants, and the lion.

And yet the story wends its way into my consciousness whenever I contemplate missions. Perhaps it has become symbolic of how missions have introduced "modern" technology and yet are often dependent upon the guidance, warnings, and instructions of the people to whom they are sent. This story also symbolizes reactions when two glowing yellow eyes flash through the tunnel of vision of some missions returning from their "hunting" trips. "Somebody, turn this thing around!" Whom do we tend to put behind the steering wheel when the Lion confronts us? The frog and the lion folktale (or should I say "mission tale") may also be indicative of what so often happens when a "Lion" has been defeated. Hard, tangible evidence of our encounters and victories disappear all too quickly. In spite of elementary desires for "take home" trophies and indulgences we are left only with small, faded Kodachrome images and the stories of the saints to pass on from generation to generation. Could it be that the real "trophies" are maintained in the throne room of another who holds the title "Lion of the Tribe of Judah"? Perhaps he will reveal them when, surrounded by the elders, he breaks the seals on history's final scroll (cf. Rev. 5:5).

Restless Nights and Fearful People

If there is such a thing, this was an "ordinary" Christmas card. It was a Hallmark card with nothing on its front but the words, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above. . . ." James 1:17. Inside was the message, "Wishing you joy, peace, and love—the most beautiful gifts of Christmas."

But on this card, quite literally engulfing the inner message, my sister, who lives in the village of Mbesa in Tanzania, had written the following:

Two weeks ago lions started visiting the village at night killing sheep, pigs, and dogs. Restless nights and fearful people. I even heard a large animal go past the bedroom! No prints 'cause it rained afterwards. They shot one and the others left, for now.

When I read the card I was immediately taken with the juxtaposition of the two messages. Restless nights and fearful people intersecting with, and almost totally engulfing the message of joy, peace, and love. Yet it seems to me that the Gospel according to Matthew portrays a similar intersection. When the

Magi come asking the question, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?", Matthew reports that Herod "was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." The message of Christmas, the ultimate mission message, is not one that produces love, joy, and peace for all who come in contact with it. There are times when it produces restless nights and fearful people.

A few verses later Matthew records one of the results of the message brought by the Magi. "When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under." A direct consequence of the coming of Christ into the world was that "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

The card I received from my sister was an "ordinary" Christmas card, mass-produced by Hallmark. It took a message about restless nights and fearful people, about lions slashing and killing, to turn it into a realistic Christmas card. It came from a country where the fear during Advent was produced by the haunting roar of real lions. If one *listens* closely, one can hear the "lions" roaring in this country as well. Their haunting cries are producing restless nights and fearful people. With these cries echoing in our ears, I wonder if we can afford to announce a glib, mass-produced message of love, joy, and peace? I wonder, can we afford *not* to announce the message of the coming of the Christ child? The gospel can never be the good news, and the mission work of the Reformed Church will never be effective, unless it is announced with eyes and earlids open, accompanied by hearts that are supple enough to be quivered by the roaring lions of the world.

Leaves from a Kenyan Notebook Jeffrey Neevel

We were still very tired from the long, bumpy drive in. The introductions seemed to go on forever. "*Habari*," "*Karaam*," "*karaam nyoman*" . . . so many people, so happy to see us, so much change all at once. Friday night was movie night for the teachers.

"Movies? In the bush?"

That evening, the Kenyans sat in our living room and watched the movie. We sat and watched them watch the movie. At the end, I turned off the VCR, turned to face them, and nervously asked if they liked it. Quiet. Tension.

"Do you see many movies?" More quiet. More tension.

The tension nearly cracked when the headmaster stood up and said, "Let us pray . . ."

He prayed and I thought, "Let us pray? It's Friday night. We just watched a movie! "*We don't need to pray!*"

We did not, but they did. I wondered if they even have a word for "secular" in their language.

* * *

It was unlike any church we had ever attended. In fact, amid the noise and smell of goats, cows, and open-pit fires, we were not really sure it was church at all. "Church is not a building. It is people," our Sunday School teachers had reassured us. Then Sasak, this small village of extended family, must be a church.

We finished the worship service, shared a cup of *chai* and gathered our walking sticks for the long journey back to the mission station. "When will you return?" the elder inquired. Our translator told him to put seven stones outside the door. "Each day you must take away one stone until you reach the seventh. When that stone is removed, that day I will return."

Before Susie and I turned to go, we both took one last look at the beautiful people standing before us, draped in goat skin, decorated with colorful beads, and with so much spirit. And high above, we noticed a tiny, glaring speck of light, with its long white tail quietly dividing the giant, blue, African sky. How could these people possibly imagine that 250 passengers would be landing half way around the world before they removed the first stone?

* * *

Back at our own mission church, the people began to gather, packing themselves in for another three hours of worship. Some wore suits, some wore *shukas*, some wore nothing at all. This seemed more like church. At least we were in a building! The benches were a bit decayed, but they were as comfortable as any wood pews. The floor was dirt and a chalkboard served as the bulletin with the morning's text sketched in two languages. Lord, could these people sing! The "liturgy" was simple: an hour of singing and praising God, a message from the Book, some prayers, and more singing.

After the service, we went outside to greet everyone. We watched as those who were admitted to the Lord's table returned to the building for a communion service. We also went back in, sat down, and observed the pastor bless the elements: "This is my body broken for you," he said, as he handed out the tiny pieces of spiced cake. "This is my blood shed for you . . .," and the cups of Orange Fanta were distributed. I found myself thinking back to seminary and those serious discussions about the theological "correctness" of wine versus grape juice. Here, with neither wine nor grape juice, I experienced one of the most meaningful Lord Supper's of my life.

* * *

A few weeks passed, and time began to dull the sharp edges of contrast we were seeing in everything—until that knock on the door. A two-year-old girl had swallowed medicine meant for her family's cattle. She died before they could bring her to the clinic.

"Pastor is not here. Would you please do a burial service?" Because this was not my first pastoral crisis, I knew enough to bring a Bible and a shovel. We began to dig the grave, easier this time because of its size, but at the same time harder, because of her size.

The sweat that soon dripped from my nose dulled the smell of rotten flesh left by the hyenas, an odor only intensified by the scorching heat. I can still smell the memory. Even more vivid, however, is my mental picture of that innocent child, resting in the freshly dug hole, then disappearing beneath the earth, one shovelful at a time. I thought, for a moment, of debates over whether we should leave the smoothly contoured mahogany casket with its freshly scented ruffles open or closed during the funeral service. "Death smells here," I thought, as we covered her grave with thorn bushes.

* * *

Sunday morning came again. The alarm clock screamed 6:00 a.m. even before the rooster had a chance to yawn. Water containers were full, snacks were packed, shoes tied, and off we went to Kalabata. Three hours later, we huffed and puffed our way to the familiar place of worship, lush with green grass, a glimpse of the dry lands stretching north far below. The liturgy was similar to that of the church at the mission station. The heavens were our sanctuary.

It was my first opportunity to preach there and I had spent the normal preparation time on the sermon. I stood, faced the crowd that had gathered on the hill, opened my Bible and read: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven." My translator echoed in Pokot. I finished the Scripture reading, closed the Bible, looked up at the crowd, and searched for a word . . . any word.

"What can I possibly say to these people? Why do I think they need to hear about Jesus? How do I explain the kingdom of heaven to them?"

"I want you to have faith in Jesus because he died so that you might live."

Jesus. Who is Jesus? Do I really know who Jesus is? Is Jesus the same for them as for me?

* * *

Back at the mission I read a Kenyan newspaper. "Eight people burned for practicing witchcraft." "Mob justice: a man is bound by a car tire and set on fire for stealing." As I read I can hear gunfire nearby—more raiders risking their lives for a few starving cattle. Susie and I sit down for dinner and ask the

Lord's blessing. The hills begin to echo the jubilant voices of the school children singing Pokot choruses.

* * *

The "Reformed" faith in Africa looks very different from the "Reformed" faith in America. Only by the grace of God have we been able to find meaning in the Christian faith across cultures. The theologies that we develop as part of our daily lives and worship (theologies of prayer, communion, burial, and preaching), are characteristic of the culture in which we live. Thus the vivid contrast between Kenyan faith and American faith.

But in spite of the many differences between two cultures separated by a few thousand miles and as many years, are we really any different from the Sasak elder who believed, "When that stone is removed, that day I will return"?

Uganda: From Poster to People **Kate Jellema**

Before going myself, I held many images of Africa in mind: the vast, open expanses of *National Geographic* specials; the exploitative post-colonial labor markets I learned about in economics courses; the baobab tree silhouetted at sunset in a photograph on my sister's bedroom wall; the thick jungles of "Gorillas in the Mist"; the tiny huts organized according to kinship patterns mapped out in anthropology textbooks. And, perhaps most potent, I held a mental picture of the Africa of magazine fund raising appeals: a dark-skinned girl in a tattered dress, her stomach distended, arms dusty, legs spindly, eyes wide and sad. She waits, alone and unmoving, for someone to reach out and help her.

After college, I spent one year in Kampala, Uganda, as a volunteer with an American organization called Visions in Action. Uganda is a small, East African country on the north shore of Lake Victoria, split in half by the slow and stately beginnings of the River Nile. My trip to Uganda originated quite naturally as a continuation of my academic studies of Africa and anthropology, but I believe in hindsight that it was also motivated—on a deeper, less conscious level—by a desire to find that dusty, little girl and offer her a hand.

Upon arrival in East Africa I was immediately swept into the daily lives of two Ugandan families, each for about a week—a crash course in the local language (*Luganda*), pit latrines, sponge baths, and *matooke*: the plantains that we ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I then moved into a house in a Ugandan neighborhood outside of Kampala. The ten Visions in Action volunteers in that house were the only *muzungus* (whites, or literally "people that move around") in the village. Every time I left our compound, dozens of children chanted at me, "*Muzungu! Muzungu! Bye-bye, muzungu!*"

I became friends with our neighbors across the path: a large extended family headed by a warm, wise woman named Joyce. Joyce lost six siblings to AIDS and now takes care of numerous nephews and nieces. I slowly learned the names and personalities of each of the children living with her: Lydia, a defiant and sassy tomboy; Pross, her cheerful and dependable cousin; Inspector Derrika, a roly-poly toddler named after a German cartoon character; and Gorretti, a hard-working thirteen-year-old, Joyce's trusted helper. Gorretti and Joyce knew quite a bit of English and with my beginning *Luganda*, the three of us could converse.

Over the year, I took many photos of Joyce and her family. When they came back from the developer, we would all laugh over Gorretti's funny expression, my white hair, Derrika's fistful of sweets, Pross tickling her brother Beka, and little Chaku Sabe's camera shyness.

Activity and crowds of people filled every snapshot. To me, the photos showed the love, happiness, and energy in this family, and provided clues to the personalities of its many members. However, it struck me one day, as I prepared to send copies of the photographs home to the United States, that with their ragged clothes, dirty bare feet, and distended stomachs, my neighbors looked like poster children for impoverished Africa.

This realization shocked me. Absorbed in the excitement, color, and charm of daily life in Uganda, I had forgotten all about the grim magazine photo and was stunned to find that I had been living across the path from it all along. How could it be that the magazine picture showed me desperation and despair when the same little girl in real life showed me love and happiness? The fund raising appeal reveals only a part of the story; it leaves out all the details that transform the tattered little girl from something silent, still, and pitiable (in the magazine photo), to someone active, colorful, and lovable (across the street from me in Uganda).

To see a child dirty and in rags in the United States means abject poverty and neglect. A child dirty and in rags in Uganda is just a normal child, in the midst of a day of chores before the evening bath. Torn clothes do not imply neglect, just different priorities. In Uganda's consistently warm and pleasant climate, clothing does not hold much life-or-death significance. Joyce reserves the "small-small money" she raises from selling pineapples and beer for more pressing household needs like cooking oil, matches, school tuition, and books. For daily wear, each person gets by with just four or five items of what Ugandans call "dead-muzungu clothes," clothes that begin as donations to American relief agencies and are shipped in one-ton bales from the United States to be sold cheaply in village markets across Uganda. (Most Ugandan buyers shop for color, size, and price, paying little mind to other details. I once saw a handsome teenage boy wearing a "Baby Below" shirt with an arrow towards his navel. A girl all dressed up in a pretty skirt for a ceremony honoring the

Ugandan vice president wore a matching pink T-shirt emblazoned with "Life Sucks.")

Funding appeals for Africa are designed to provoke compassion, and therefore tend to focus on children in ragged, dead-muzungu clothes. What these appeals rarely reveal is that most children have one or two other outfits kept in reserve for dress-up: a starched and darned school uniform, and a neat, formal church outfit. When Ugandans dress up, they do it to the hilt, with beautifully polished shoes, elaborately done hair, perfectly pressed shirts, and carefully creased trousers. In fact, Ugandans have a great talent for ironing. In my second homestay, I came home one day to find that the grandfather of the family had ironed not only my socks but also my shoelaces.

In an attempt to stir up compassion by emphasizing her need for outside help, the little girl in magazine appeals always stands alone. However, I did not meet a single lonely child during my one-year stay in Uganda. The Ugandans I knew lived close together, in lively clusters where tasks could be conveniently shared across households. Even when sleeping or doing chores, a child was always among family and neighbors. Most Ugandan women have several children, assuring plenty of playmates, baby sitters, and friends within each family circle.

The supportive family community is, however, suffering under the onslaught of AIDS. While most women continue to have five or more children, an estimated 13 percent of the adult population is HIV positive, and the parents of young children are demographically most vulnerable to the disease. Until recently, orphans were simply absorbed into the households of relatives or friends, but as the AIDS death toll reduces the number of healthy foster parents and increases the number of orphans, this solution becomes less viable. A few orphans have been unable to find help and have become street children in Kampala. This handful of street children shocks Ugandans and they struggle to find solutions that will allow all children, including orphans, to live in a large family environment.

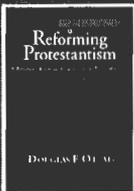
Especially when accompanied by a "You Can Help!" form to return, magazine appeals on behalf of African children suggest that Africans are helpless, waiting in a freeze-frame for American assistance. I found nothing of the sort. The Ugandans I knew met economic hardship with resourcefulness. In Joyce's household, for example, all members contribute to its success. The children help Joyce farm. They sell her extra produce. They wash clothes and dishes and younger siblings. They draw water from the nearby stream. They walk down the red, dusty road to buy eggs or cooking oil. Joyce's older sons earn some "small-small money" to keep the household afloat by digging well holes for neighbors, repairing hoes, making music tapes, and running bicycle loads of charcoal or *matooke* to nearby villages. Those in school, like Gorretti, study hard, often working late into the night after chores are finished. In one

of my homestay families, the seven- and nine-year-old girls stay up past midnight doing their homework in front of an oil lamp, only to rise at dawn to draw water and cook breakfast before they walk to school.

Life in Uganda is never easy. A Ugandan playwright recently characterized the country's course since achieving independence from the British as "Thirty Years of Bananas," a phrase which captured the public imagination because it so well expresses the uninspired national politics of the last three decades. In part because of political turmoil and in part because of its unfavorable position in the world economic system, Uganda is one of the poorest countries in the world. The people have inadequate access to health care, education, clean water, and basic technology. Most Ugandans welcome help from the outside and almost all of their elected leaders believe that Western aid is essential for improvement of the national economy as well as the day-to-day lives of people like Joyce and Gorretti.

However, I question whether we do Africans a favor by imagining them to be helpless, tattered, and alone. I went to Uganda with the malnourished, lonely girl from magazine funding appeals in my mind, but what I found were Joyces and Gorrettis: people of strength, good humor, warmth, energy, and creativity. This is the enlivened image of Africa I now carry with me. After my experience, I see Africa in color and motion, peopled by women, children, and men who confront harsh conditions with determination, cooperation, and ingenuity.

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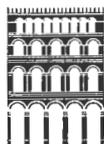
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