Nkuba Kyeyo: Stories from America

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Source: *Transition*, No. 106, Side B: Reflections from Contemporary Uganda • A selection of writing, artwork, and photography (2011), pp. 72-87

Published by: Indiana University Press on behalf of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/transition.106b.72

Nkuba Kyeyo

stories from America

Rodney Muhumuza

On a recent trip to Uganda, the kind he takes at least once a year, Angelo Kaggwa carried a backpack and three suitcases. The backpack contained everything he needed for the few days he would be in Kampala, and the suitcases, heavy with an eclectic mix of goods, contained nothing that really belonged to him. The suitcases would stay in Kampala, empty, their contents distributed among relatives and friends for whom he had carried Christmas presents. The backpack would return, only less heavy.

"I never came back with my watch, my shades, and a pair of shoes," says Kaggwa. "Someone would come to me and say, 'That's a cool shirt. Can I have it?' I managed to bring my shirt back. I also managed to bring my blazer back. At the end of the day, I don't really care. I am privileged to be in a position where I can share with friends and family."

Kaggwa's tale is typical of immigrants who, once they arrive in America, find themselves caught between taking care of themselves and fulfilling their obligations to their families back home. Satisfying such obligations can be both gratifying and painful. For Kaggwa, a humble man who speaks in the polite language of "sacrifice" and "help," it is a burden to be accepted with humility, which is to avoid saying no to those who expect to hear yes. This is not always easy.

In Kampala, people have been conditioned to think of overseas workers as the *nkuba kyeyo*, a Luganda phrase that immediately conjures up images of fortune and misfortune, envy and resentment, all at once. The term is a sad, painful reminder of the indignity suffered by Ugandans who make a living overseas—a powerful, if inaccurate, depiction of life abroad. The name imagines a conversation in which a Ugandan, recently returned from overseas, is asked what he does for a living, how he makes a lot of money. The answer is abrupt.

> "*Okolakyi e Bulaaya*?": "What do you do overseas?"
> "*Nkuba kyeyo*": "I sweep the streets."

Bu Kaggwa, 28, doesn't do menial work in New York. He sits in a neat cubicle on the seventh floor of a high-rise building in lower Manhattan, where he works for a nonprofit called the AIDS Vaccine Advocacy

Migrant 7. Black and white photograph. ©2009 Caroline Kaminju.

Coalition (AVAC). Kaggwa coordinates some of AVAC's work in Africa, and the job takes him on trips that were once unimaginable. He may be the youngest of five children, but in Uganda, where his mother and many relatives live, his success has put him firmly on a pedestal. Kaggwa frequently swirls in his office chair, his gaze directed at the ceiling, giving the impression that he is constantly looking back.

Before the Christmas trip to Kampala, Kaggwa tagged, as he always does, most of the gifts he would carry, making sure he had something for all those who mattered, in the process spending at least $600 of his own money. Still, he left behind a few disgruntled faces. "I can't afford to bring something for everyone, but it is very difficult to explain this to them," says Kaggwa. "The last two years I have been in school. My work contract was such that I had just enough to be in school and stay alive."

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THE FACT THAT immigrants often don't earn enough to meet the wild expectations of those who depend on them was long ago obscured by popular belief in Uganda. The phenomenon of *nkuba kyeyo* is grounded in fantasy as much as reality, a story more complex than the name suggests. Many of these immigrant workers lead poor lives in America, struggling to make a very modest living, yet they are wealthy by African standards and are perceived that way in Uganda. Paradoxically, while they are envied for the relative wealth they can display at home, they are not always admired. The

only constant is that they find themselves pulled by two sets of responsibilities here in America and back in Africa, a struggle both practical and emotional. They must survive in America, but they must also do something to help needy relatives in Uganda. "They face pressure both ways," says Karamagi Rujumba, an American journalist of Ugandan origin. "There is always that immediate suspicion that their life is better. With suspicion comes expectation. There is always a tug of war."

In the great scheme of things, all Ugandans living overseas, whether they are working or not, have at least some responsibilities back home. Whether they like it or not, whether they are able to help or not, it is their fate to be relied upon. The Ugandan experience in America differs from person to person, from poor Ugandans toiling at menial jobs to moderately successful ones, and from illegal workers to students with dreams of success in the U.S. But all are faced, to some degree at least, with the burden of high expectations and multiple demands from relatives and friends at home.

Over the years, especially since the turn of the twenty-first century, remittances from Ugandans working overseas have been rising sharply, so much so that the government now takes their contribution seriously when making budgetary forecasts. A World Bank report estimates that more than 700,000 Ugandans working overseas sent home $773 million in 2010, up from $694 million in 2009. The figure was just $299 million in 2003.

These remittances are impressive in any currency, but the money is a lot heavier in Ugandan shillings because of the vast differences in the economies and standards of living between the United States and Uganda. A servant earning $2,000 a month in New York makes far more money than a professor in Uganda. If just $500 is sent home, it amounts to $6,000 at the end of the year, enough to buy a small plot of land in a distant suburb of Kampala. This—and more—is what some overseas workers are doing, acts of self-improvement whose unintended consequences make a mockery of traditional paths to personal success. A money order for $500 fetches upwards of Shs1 million in a Kampala bureau de change. That's four times more than what a primary school teacher takes home in a month.

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The money is remitted mostly from Europe and North America, where thousands of Ugandans live, legally or illegally, employed in mostly odd jobs of the kind that gave them the unfortunate *nkuba kyeyo* name. Nonetheless, their dollars contribute upwards of five percent to Uganda's gross domestic product. Some return home during the holiday season, a time marked by fantastic tales of exotic accents, designer wear, bling, and even inflation in downtown Kampala. But the fleeting glow of such moments can overshadow some hard facts about the life of an immigrant.

Migrant 1. Black and white photograph. ©2009 Caroline Kaminju.

To understand the power and limitations of Ugandans working abroad, it helps to ignore the money for a moment and focus instead on their unique experiences, for their stories are as varied as the homes in which they live. Kaggwa may be able to return home at least once a year, but it is a luxury some only dream of. The man is unmarried, has no girlfriend, and can afford to indulge in frequent trips to movie theaters. Kaggwa is unlike Susan Kitakule, a grandmother who has sustained her family in Uganda since coming to America, but who now hangs on precariously to her job as a home caregiver.

One January afternoon in Brooklyn, Kitakule put Esther to bed and went to the living room to take care of personal business, the ticking sound of a nearby monitor offering proof of the patient's life. In her dreadlocks and gray pajamas, Kitakule looked much younger than her fifty-six years.

Migrant 5. Black and white photograph. ©2009 Caroline Kaminju.

Now she was animated by her computer, which displayed sample questions she was likely to face when she eventually took a test that, if passed, would make her a certified nursing assistant. When a telephone suddenly rang, Kitakule reached for it in a panicked moment that took even her by surprise. It was Esther's son calling to order a prescription for his mother, but the way Kitakule responded said a lot about patient and caregiver alike: they desperately need each other.

"This is my job," Kitakule said moments later. "If she's gone, she's gone. If you are a caring person, you can stay in one job for a very long time. You have to be very responsible." Kitakule, whose agency may or may not find her a new assignment if and when her patient dies, needs her patient alive for as long as possible. Esther is ninety-five.

Kitakule arrived in New York in September of 2001, a poor woman determined to forget Uganda—where she was born, raised, and married with seven children—and start a new life in America. A veteran of home care, Kitakule is devoted to her current job because Esther is not a difficult patient, because her family buys food for both patient and caregiver, because they allow her to watch television, and because, of course, the job supports her and the many people who depend on her.

"I send home at least $100 every week," Kitakule said, staring thoughtfully into the air. "Sometimes I will send more, but at least I send $100 to my children. I am a born-again Christian. I don't go to the disco. I don't drink. I don't smoke."

Kitakule rushed to her room, returning with two stacks of DVDs and CDs, most of them with a Christian message, and proudly flipped through her collection. There was everyone from the American evangelist John

Hagee, whom she likes, to the Ugandan gospel singer Judith Babirye, whom she adores. A homemade copy of "Slumdog Millionaire," which her nephew gave her, seemed an oddity. "This is how I enjoy my life," she declared.

Kitakule's achievements are remarkable: four children educated through college, her own house in Uganda, and the adulation of her children. "I thank God because I managed to educate all my children," she says. "I don't want them to go to the streets and run after men. When I don't send them anything, they understand. They never bug me for money."

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For those Ugandans who make it to America, the journey is littered with countless hurdles, but the adventure is thrilling nonetheless. Because U.S. policy assumes that foreigners seeking to enter the country don't plan to return home, it is left to the visa applicant to prove otherwise. The visa refusal rate for Uganda was nearly thirty-nine percent in 2009, according to the U.S. State Department.

Fred Guweddeko, a Makerere University social researcher, has a theory about the *nkuba kyeyo* phenomenon that is steeped in Uganda's moribund politics, arguing that Ugandans who seek menial work abroad are merely drifters, not dreamers; that they personify the lack of opportunity in President Museveni's Uganda. "The *nkuba kyeyo* was a sort of desperate person seeking anything that came along," says Guweddeko. "So when one said that '*nze nkuba kyeyo*,' it meant more or less that he or she was gambling for work. This lowered expectations from the person."

In December of 2003, shortly after arriving in Manhattan, Timothy Kalyegira, a noted social critic, filed a peculiar report from his hotel room. "You enter a shop or cross the avenues and streets and see or hear these Nigerians, Kenyans, Senegalese, Ethiopians, Liberians, or Ugandans," Kalyegira wrote in Uganda's *Daily Monitor*. "That sight really hurt me and I found it difficult to maintain eye contact with them. They don't look triumphant and don't look anywhere close to even the start of page one of the American Dream.... I feel sorry for them and I hope they are well paid to do these shop attendant jobs. Most of all, I hope that, if it is poverty and despair that drove them 3,000 miles to America, then at least at the end of the month they have something saved to send home."

This contempt has entered popular culture, in everything from comedy shows to songs, the sum total of which is a stern verdict against the *nkuba kyeyo*: the money isn't worth their dignity.

In the years since, similar critiques have become commonplace even as the contribution of overseas workers to the Ugandan economy becomes more measurable, and even as their remittances play a profound role in

strengthening the social fabric of their communities. This contempt has entered popular culture, in everything from comedy shows to songs, the sum total of which is a stern verdict against the *nkuba kyeyo*: the money isn't worth their dignity.

But priorities such as pride and self-worth, while satisfying to ponder, command no price. Rather, they hint at a complex matrix of questions as to why these people are leaving Uganda: Are they leaving behind riches? How do they spend their hard-earned money? Do they plan to return home at some point?

"There is the feeling that, 'I came here to make it. How can I go home empty-handed?'" says Rujumba, formerly of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

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IN THE SUBURBS of Kampala, the houses built by overseas workers stand out, especially when they are unfinished, when it is possible for intruders to stray into a compound and admire. The properties are often so ambitious, so spectacular, that passing motorcyclists delight in telling strangers which native son built that house. "To cut a long story short, having a *nkuba kyeyo* family member is still a measure of success and welfare in every home and family in the villages, particularly in Buganda," says Guweddeko.

If overseas workers are doing well to improve their lot, why, then, are many Ugandans slow to show them more respect? Part of the answer may be found in the spending habits of overseas workers, public displays of wealth that inevitably attract envy. Often they are quick to buy luxury cars, which then rot in garages or suffer abuse by relatives, or build extravagant homes, which they rarely occupy. With all his strengths and weaknesses, the overseas worker has emerged as a character worthy of awe as much as scorn, a wounded hero in an epic narrative of survival.

Moses Wilson, a businessman who heads the Ugandan North American Association, blames this mixed reputation on youth. "I know people who used to drive expensive cars—Mercedes and BMWs—and wore flashy clothes but who are today parents of families, drive simple minivans, and dress conservatively. As such, I believe it is a matter of simple progression that everyone outgrows at some point," says Wilson, who was born and raised in Uganda.

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THE UGANDAN STORY in fact reflects the standard experience of immigrants, infused with a narrative of sweat and some tears. They all work desperately hard, driven by a desire to survive in a demanding workplace and the

Migrant 4. Black and white photograph. ©2009 Caroline Kaminju.

prospect of improving their circumstances. The expectations of relatives, while they can be infuriating, are also a stimulant, prodding them to prove their assumed success. Still, every immigrant group faces special burdens and demands based on its cultural mores. This is certainly true of many Africans. "For most Africans," the British journalist Michela Wrong has written, "the weight of the extended family serves as ballast, tethering their ambitions firmly to the ground."

Muftau Maazu, thirty-four, is a college-educated Ghanaian who came to the U.S. in 2007. He lived like a monk in his first four months, quickly amassing the $4,000 needed to send his mother on a pilgrimage to Mecca. "My father never took my grandmother to Mecca, but he went there twice," Maazu told me. "Man, I wanted to cry after I had [sent the money]. My prayer was always that I should be able to take this lady to Mecca. It's a place for spiritual cleansing. It had always been part of my dreams."

Maazu's kindness is all the more impressive since he himself, an observant Muslim, has never stepped foot on holy ground. But there are moments when Maazu, a guard with Summit Security Services, feels overwhelmed by the demands made on him. He is building a large house in Kumasi, the lively city in Ghana where he hopes to retire, but his wife, two children,

and other relatives still live in a village somewhere in the region of Brong-Ahafo. They torment him with importunate requests from afar.

"If my wife is pregnant and [my brothers] have not even gone to see how she is doing, then what the hell are they talking about? What do they want from me?" said Maazu, upset that his brothers have been aloof to the needs of his immediate family. "They are failing in their own duties as African brothers. In the African context, she is their wife." As he launched furiously into the troubles of a man upon whom ungrateful souls depend, Maazu got lost in the moment and pointed to his head. Then he started shaking it slightly. "The African," he started, "I don't know."

Maazu has visited Ghana once since arriving in New York, a trip that was memorable for a reason he wants to forget. The village saw that he was dressed snappily, that there was a RAV4 in the compound, and that there was enough food and drink, but some keen critics noticed that he had forgotten to buy his daughter a new dress. "I made a very big mistake," Maazu told me. "I bought two pieces of cloth for my brother's daughter but nothing for my own. I did it to satisfy others. I will never make that blunder again."

This appetite for flattery—what Guweddeko calls a tendency to "pretend that they have arrived financially"—has been manipulated by those who depend on overseas workers to milk them for what they're worth. Like all weaknesses, of course, it begs to be exploited. Maazu agrees, but insists people back home have concluded that life in America is privileged. "I am not the kind of person who tells people about my situation here," says Maazu, who makes about $500 each week. "Do you know why? They don't understand. The African mind has been so polluted that no explanation can change things. They can't understand how you can be in America and still complain about lack of money. But we are going through hell here."

"I bought two pieces of cloth for my brother's daughter but nothing for my own. I did it to satisfy others. I will never make that blunder again."

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One of the themes in Kalyegira's essay on the lives of overseas workers was his sense of frustration that educated Africans had the audacity to seek menial work abroad. "Actually, if I was a racist consular officer at any American embassy worldwide and I wanted to see Africans suffer and be further degraded, I would happily grant all who apply for that immigrant visa," Kalyegira wrote. "If you wish Africa bad, that is the best and most effective thing to do; give all her young, talented people visas to stay in America for no less than ten years and watch with glee as they wither away."

Migrant 9.
Black and white photograph. ©2009 Caroline Kaminju.

Kalyegira, roughly speaking, is the Julian Assange of Ugandan letters, a clever conspiracy theorist. Time has only hardened his gloomy view of the *nkuba kyeyo*, and now he believes that the tales of impressive remittances are fictional—that, in reality, this is the loot of launderers working for well-connected thugs in Uganda. "I asked that if the diaspora Ugandans were all this prosperous and sending in all this money, how come most of them complain about how much their relatives back home pester them for financial assistance?" Kalyegira told me, referring to an article he wrote for the *Uganda Record*, his digital newsletter. "Talk to most Ugandans abroad and they will tell you that they can only afford to send money to their relatives in bits and pieces, usually between $50 and $300 at a single MoneyGram or Western Union transaction. It is never in the thousands."

Kalyegira's dismissal of overseas workers ignores some facts. The United Nations Development Program estimates that thirty-one percent of Uganda's population lives on less than $1 a day. Uganda's colleges produce about

400,000 graduates each year, young professionals who then compete in a notoriously corrupt market for the few thousand jobs available. It follows naturally that some of them want to go away.

For those Ugandans who imagine life in America, the city that looms large is Boston. It is hard to say precisely how many Ugandans live in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts—one estimate puts the number at 10,000—but certainly they are far more organized than any other community of Ugandans living in North America. Waltham, in Middlesex County, has been referred to as Little Kampala, home to about 1,500 Ugandans. Many of them work as nurses of some sort, and many of them also are students, working and studying. "Their culture and their entrepreneurship," the *Boston Globe* reported in 2009, "permeates their new home—from Karibu, a Ugandan restaurant serving up cassava and matooke (green bananas), to Sisters, a hair salon that caters to the Ugandan community." There, in a close-knit society, the Ugandans have cultivated a *joie de vivre* that is sometimes worthy of Kampala. "If you go to Boston and see how Ugandans live, you will be amazed," Kitakule once told me.

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A BUS RIDE from downtown Boston to the suburb of Waltham is unspectacular in winter. The snow is piled high, the height of a four-year-old child, and people are rarely seen moving around. Walking down Brown Street was like going on a journey to nowhere, alone among shards of ice. A white woman shoveled snow from her driveway, never looking up. There were no black faces in sight. Where were the Ugandans?

Little Kampala, in the deceptive way of first impressions, was a disappointment. It lacked the energy of the real thing; perhaps the cold was to blame. The next morning, though, driving around in a borrowed Lexus by a jolly Ugandan named Dennis Kwesiga, a different picture of the town slowly began to emerge. Women could be seen speaking Luganda on the street; Karibu, the Ugandan restaurant, was alive with customers discussing the recent elections in Uganda; and once, during a tour of the town, Kwesiga slowed down along Moody Street and proudly pronounced it Kampala Road. It is said that Asians arriving here make sure to learn Luganda and to befriend the Ugandans, who have lived in Waltham long enough to earn linchpin status. Now each black face in a car seemed Ugandan, but there was no way to confirm it. I had to visit a Ugandan church to get a sense of the community—and not just any church, as there were several.

The Global Evangelical Church's new home is a squat brick building in Burlington, not far from Waltham, that was never intended to be a house of prayer. It looks like a warehouse from afar. The choir was practicing on

a cold afternoon, singing in Luganda. The church's pastor of many years is a charismatic Ugandan named John Baker Katende, who confesses a weakness for fedoras and keeps one on his desk. In his office, Katende looked solemn in a black turtleneck and gray jacket. He had the piercing gaze of a minister when you face him with a notebook. When I asked him if he was helping any people in Uganda, a ridiculous question to ask of any immigrant, he smiled briefly, hardened his face, and joined his hands together in a memorably bold pose. "Lots," he said, "lots of people." Then he leaned forward on his desk and started to tell his story.

Katende, fifty-four, came to the U.S. as a student in 1992, staying in Michigan until he moved to Boston in 1999. Along the way, he had worked as a painter and repairman, doing any kind of odd job he could find. After arriving in Boston he set out to start a church for born-again Christians of Ugandan extraction. His church has grown from the eight original members to about three hundred men and women—the largest house of prayer for Ugandans in Boston.

The building in which Katende now sat had been acquired through his parishioners' generosity, the same charity that these Ugandans were replicating on a personal level, in their families, at home. The church regularly shipped clothes for orphans back home, and Katende himself supported the two children of a brother who had died of AIDS. One of them is now a nurse in Tanzania and plans to visit her uncle very soon. "She is not even asking me for a ticket," Katende kept saying, emphasizing his niece's success. "When you help somebody, thank God you could. We tell our members to be a blessing unto others, that they will not be blessed until they bless others. In these hard times, people are not as helpful as they used to be. There was a time when they used to have a lot of money. That picture is drastically changing; the Boston of today is very different from the Boston of yesterday." The next morning, Sunday, Katende would lead the house in prayer.

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IF YOU ARE a nonbeliever, the hard logic behind selflessness is not for you to grasp. It is for the faithful, the types of people crammed inside the basement of Northeast Elementary School, in Waltham, the facility Katende's flock will soon vacate to head for Burlington. I took a seat between a friend and a stranger, among hundreds of people in a place that had the quality of Kampala's born-again church scene. The choir performed in Luganda, and a young man contorted his face and shouted into a microphone as he welcomed Katende to deliver the sermon. The pastor had a young woman by his side to translate English into Luganda. She followed him around the stage, raising her voice when he raised his, smiling when he smiled, and even freezing when he did so.

Migrant 3. Black and white photograph. ©2009 Caroline Kaminju.

The first thing Katende did was invite a woman in a traditional *gomesi* to give a testimony that was remarkable in its detail. They called her Mama Gift, and she was said to be generous in spite of her poverty. Now she had found a job and wanted to rebuke Satan, who once had been "spewing dust in my face." Katende took the microphone from her and drove her point home in a booming voice. "God is with the hungry, the needy, the hopeless," he said. "So when you help the needy you are right there with the Lord."

It was the perfect start to a sermon that would focus on how not to worry when dealing with the Lord, how it is sinful to doubt God's providence. "Just look around you and consider yourself blessed of God," Katende said, inviting shouts of Amen. "How many people at home wish they were you even with all your problems, with all your credit and debt? There are millions of people out there that wish they were you."

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A FEW UGANDANS go out of their way to offer help on an unusually ambitious scale. One of them is a soft-spoken woman who came to America in 1988, earned two degrees, and, with the help of a good lawyer, secured American citizenship. Margaret Tumusiime is over fifty, married with three children, and lives in upstate New York. She has an American accent. In 2009, after a decade spent at IBM, she was laid off from her job as a financial analyst, ending years of professional stability. Still, as treasurer for the International Community of Banyakigezi, Tumusiime remains a tireless fundraiser on

behalf of her people. "Banyakigezi" derives from "abanyaKigezi," Runyakitara for "the people of Kigezi," a territory in southwestern Uganda whose green terraces inspire comparisons to Switzerland. It is also among the poorest parts of Uganda, with many of its children ending up in technical schools—to become plumbers and carpenters—instead of proceeding to college.

Tumusiime's organization holds an annual fundraiser. Only about three hundred people usually attend, but together they might raise $20,000, enough to transform the character of a rural school. "I see myself as a member of the community," says Tumusiime. "Being there for others when they need you is very fulfilling." She reckons that upwards of $100,000 has sent to community projects at home over the last five years. One of the projects she is proud of is an information and technology facility built at Rukungiri Technical Institute, deep in the country. "You have to know the group you are helping," says Tumusiime. "We usually see pictures of before and after. We know when we have planted a seed."

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THERE IS AN organization called the Ugandan American Association of New York, which has about three hundred members. Pius Bugembe, a teacher who once aspired to the priesthood, is its chairman. Bugembe has been teaching religion at Cardinal Hayes High School in the Bronx since 1999. He has an office at the back of a classroom decorated with images of black liberation heroes and several crucifixes, including one depicting a black Jesus. A Ugandan flag is pinned crudely on the wall behind his desk. On the afternoon of January 6, his birthday, Bugembe was in his office when his phone started to trill. "Hello, lovely," he cooed. His wife was asking him to come home. "She is a very good cook," he said, laughing.

When Bugembe first came to America in 1995, he was thirty-one, alone, and celibate. He had won a scholarship from Manhattan College on the recommendation of his church in Uganda, after which he was expected to return home and move up the chain of command in his small brotherhood until he was ordained a priest. Once Bugembe settled in America, however, he no longer wanted to go home. He was also in love. Catholic authorities back home were unhappy when they heard that he was living with a woman, but they refused to let him go. Several years later, though, he got his wish: in 2007, Cardinal Hayes, the Catholic school where he was teaching, supported his decision to "leave the congregation," as he put it. Two years later, in December of 2009, he entered into a civil union with Hedwig Tushabe. Now there is a baby at home. But Bugembe has obligations in Uganda that far outweigh his responsibilities in New York. Crucially, he says, he is paying tuition for ten children—his own siblings, as well as the sons and daughters of dead relatives—who

attend different schools in Uganda. "That's a huge sacrifice I make," says Bugembe. "Some of them understand; some of them don't."

The image of overseas workers as reliable benefactors in their communities, and of their beneficiaries as the aloof recipients of aid, is one that Bugembe is passionate about. It goes straight to what frustrates him among those he helps, but it also touches on what he hates to see in Ugandans abroad. In Bugembe's telling, the flamboyance of the *nkuba kyeyo* reinforces wild stereotypes about life in America. "These people"—the overseas workers—"they don't want to go home and look small," says Bugembe. "Someone wants people to look at him as if he is a millionaire. He goes to Uganda and feels that he is too big for his old house. There is much you can do with $2,000 other than spend it at the Sheraton."

In fact, $2,000 is what Bugembe says he sends home in tuition every school term. "Education is the only key I could give them," says Bugembe. "I don't live a luxurious life here. I can say that I live comfortably, but it is a life full of sacrifice."

Bugembe believes overseas workers often are not savvy enough to detect the lies of their sources in the homeland. He spoke of workers who had been defrauded by unscrupulous partners in Uganda and of his own experience with a father who once let him down. In 1999, when he was living in a church-run dormitory and paying just $200 in rent, Bugembe started sending his father money to build a family house in the village where he grew up. When he visited Uganda a year later there was nothing to contemplate. "I was shocked," Bugembe recalled. "The house had not moved from the foundation. I didn't have the guts to ask my father what happened."

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A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER of Ugandans come to America to study, usually for an advanced degree. The problem is that many of them, after spending a few years abroad, don't wish to return home. They think of Uganda like a yuppie might regard a rural hometown. The erstwhile students then create a Ugandan culture abroad that is, in the main, detached from the usual instability of overseas workers. That's how Sarah Nakintu, twenty-eight, who attended Columbia University and is now aiming for a job on Wall Street, sees it. "I want to be a professional," says Nakintu. "I want to work in corporate America. I will go back to Uganda when I have my own money, when it works for me. I am not going to go back to beg."

Nakintu was the only Ugandan abroad who used the *kyeyo* word in an interview. She tried to walk it back, citing fairness, when I asked her what she meant. Her awareness may have been triggered by a sudden realization that the word is far-reaching in its taint. Nakintu, who is jobless in New York, said of trips to Uganda: "You go there and spend a lot of money, and

they expect a lot from you." She intends to negotiate the transition, so to speak, from student to overseas worker—a delicate move that sometimes has no happy ending.

It seems that the need to work in America drives many Africans to extremes, often putting them at the mercy of others, frequently because they have to deal with the great expectations of those who look up to them for support. Even students feel the weight. "There is a belief that everyone in the U.S. is minting money," says Peter Muzoora, twenty-two, a junior at Baruch College in midtown Manhattan. "I was recently asked by my cousin to send money back home to support a project of his. Strange, I thought. If anyone knew my situation it would be my cousin."

Muzoora returned to Uganda for the Christmas holiday, taking care not to act like certain Ugandans who "go home with the intention and the means to keep pushing this image" of a perfect life abroad. Muzoora's observation recalled a popular page on Facebook created simply to ridicule Ugandans working abroad. The profanity-laced page has more than 1,800 fans whose complaints range from to the comical (one man despises the exotic cravings of Ugandans visiting from overseas) to the absurd (someone rails against those who tinker with their last names). One young woman, Sylvia Namutosi, had a curious complaint, and this is how she made her point: "They think kampala gals will give in to them coz they are from abroad...stop wumanizing...gals here have their dudes."

According to Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, a Makerere University social scientist, *nkuba kyeyo* exhibitionism is expected of the nouveaux riches. "It is like someone who has been starving for much of their life," says Golooba-Mutebi. "Put plenty of food within their reach and within a short time they would have added several kilos simply out of unrestrained eating." The most important thing, he says, is that their money is a force for social transformation "in a country led by a government whose management of social services is defined by incompetence and neglect."

Whatever you think of the *nkuba kyeyo*, they have done for themselves and for their families what many Ugandans never accomplish in a lifetime. "I have respect for those Ugandans," says Celestine Katongole, who runs Adept, a small-business consultancy in Kampala. "It's much better than being unemployed locally."

As the U.S. economy has suffered, of course, so have the Ugandans. Some of them will be unemployed for a long time, and their ministers will have to give hopeful sermons of the kind Katende gave in Waltham. On that Sunday morning, his sermon over, the pastor put on his fedora and stood at the church's entrance shaking hands with the faithful. It was cold outside, and denuded trees towered miserably above the parking lot. Many of the Ugandans beamed smiles as they filed past Katende and got into their cars. Some were heading straight to work.