

## Thursday July 5th

We had a couple of additions to the breakfast fare today: cassava, a starchy, somewhat bland root vegetable that's very common here, and odi (oh-DEE) — peanut butter. I took along the red plum jam I bought at the market, too. The best part was the fresh pineapple and bananas, washed down with chai tea.

After a stop at the Internet cafe, we went to find Isaac Omony (Oh-MOIN) one of the former soldiers who told us yesterday about his violent life in the L.R.A. Now the leader of the support group for returnees, he earns a living with masonry, a skill he learned from a friend. We found him at a house construction site and Andrew got lots of great video of him working, to support the powerful interview he gave us yesterday. In every way, Isaac's job is highly symbolic. He builds his new life, one brick at a time. Showing that sort of thing is important. One of the things we want to do with this documentary is put a human face on the victims and perpetrators, to make it easier for people to relate when they talk about their experiences.



Not far away was the home of John and Grace Ochola, and their three children. Now 27, John told us in chilling detail about the grim and unforgettable events of June 2, 2003 when he was attacked by the rebels. At about midnight, the insurgents kicked in his door, tied him to a rope and carried him off, stopping periodically to kick and beat him repeatedly. The rebels accused him of being with the Ugandan military. Making matters worse, a young abductee from the same village as John, lied and told them he was a soldier

After thrashing him all through the night, the rebels released all the other abductees at daybreak. Shortly after, the Ugandan army attacked, which infuriated the L.R.A. commanders who believed they were trying to rescue John. After calling for a knife and axe, one of the rebel leaders ordered him to lift his face.

The man cut off most of John's nose, sliced away his upper lip, and severed both ears.

Bleeding terribly and weeping from the shock and excruciating pain, John was ordered to place his hands on a small piece of log. With one swift blow, the left one was cleaved from his wrist. John pleaded with his captor to spare the right hand so he could at least earn a living, but the commander showed no mercy. Left with two bleeding hand stumps, the young captive was released with three female abductees who were to deliver John and a letter to the nearest military detachment. The letter warned that John was an example of what would happen if the rebels encountered any other soldiers in the area.



Immediately after the attack, John lost all hope. His face was mangled, he had no way to support himself, and Grace's friends were encouraging her to leave him because he was "ugly" and unable to care for her needs. In fact, her parents removed her from John's home because he wouldn't be able to finish paying her wedding dowry.

When things looked the blackest, Grace wrote him a beautiful love letter, pledging she would find her way back to him; that she would never leave him; and telling him that, had she been the one mutilated, he would never have abandoned her. When Dave and some friends from the Canadian Food Grains Bank kicked in enough money to pay the bride price, Grace was returned to her grateful husband. John says the only way he got through his ordeal was with the love of Grace, the unflagging support of William Oketta (our guide and translator) and his newfound faith in Jesus Christ.



"I took a lot of time meditating on why someone would do this to me," he told us. "I realized a normal human being couldn't do that. Second, I learned I couldn't change the results, so I consoled myself by abandoning the whole idea of anger and revenge because it doesn't help."

“Forgiveness has set me free,” he added. “Before forgiveness, I had a lot of evil in my heart. I also wanted to mutilate the young man who lied about me. Now I’m at peace and... if the man who cut me were to move close to my house, I would tell him, ‘I have forgiven you, so do not fear me. I would want to show him love, eat with him and stay in the same area with him.’”



Today, John and Grace have three children: Alfred, 4; Sunday, 2; and Samuel, 9 months. He’s taking computer classes and eventually hopes to find an office job. Meanwhile, he sells jerrycans of water to construction workers for use with cement, delivering the loads on his bike. Grace digs sand for those same workers and, together, they get by. Their life is hard, but it testifies to the lasting power of love, forgiveness and perseverance.

After lunch at Oketta’s, where we ate with our fingers in true Acholi fashion, we went back to the Ochola’s to get supporting video. We photographed them preparing a meal and eating as a family. As we were getting ready to leave, some of the small boys who lived around John and Grace were chasing the nearby chickens and roosters, making me angry with the way they were terrorizing the birds. I was relieved when one of the boys picked up a black rooster and handed it to Oketta, causing the others to abandon the pursuit — until I discovered the rooster was a gift for us. He’ll likely grace our dinner plates tomorrow.



I admit to being a bit unsettled by the impending death of a chicken, which later seemed absurdly inconsequential because of what we heard in Mucwini (Moo-CHWEENIE.) A small camp 14 miles northeast of Kitgum, it was the scene of a massacre on July 24, 2002 in which almost 60 people were slaughtered. Despite

everything we'd already been exposed to, this round of testimonies was, on many levels, the most painful yet.

To get to this remote place, we left the familiar red dirt road and drove the Padjero along a single path that snaked its way through a sea of lush, green spear grass taller on both sides than a human being. We eventually came to a clearing that opened up onto a collection of circular huts.



As villagers sat before us, the women and children on a woven mat to the side of the men, they recounted the events of what started out as an ordinary Wednesday evening. At 11 p.m., rebels slipped into the camp and systematically began rounding up residents, dividing them into groups of five and sending them off in different directions with L.R.A. escorts. In the morning, they were all found dead.

Remaining captives were told to lie facedown on the ground, a soldier armed with a heavy club behind each of them. On command, the soldiers began bashing the heads of the prisoners. But the child soldier attacking George

Okongo missed, hitting his shoulder instead. George struggled to his feet, managed to overpower his young assailant and ran into the bush where he heard screaming and crying until everything ended in eerie silence.

What he didn't know was that his daughter, Flo, was among those caught up in the madness of the carnage. Captured by the rebels, she and her baby Dicbee (DEESE-bay) were in a group of other women that included her friend, Esther Achan who was with four children of her own. Esther's baby daughter, Irene,



was coughing repeatedly. “Throw that child away — it’s too noisy!” barked a female rebel commander. At gunpoint, the mother was forced to drop her daughter and walk away. As Esther stood weeping at a distance, a rebel began to kick at the baby but the commander intervened.



Instead, she turned to Flo and ordered her to kill her friend’s child. Following instructions, she grabbed the baby by a leg and swung her, slamming her head into a tree. Already numb from the fear and shock, she was then forced to do the same to her own baby. Six other women were forced to do the same, crushing the skulls of their own children, weeping uncontrollably during the ordeal. One of those women, Betty Achan, told me she’s still full of bitterness; that if the commander who ordered the murders lived nearby, she’d find a way to exact revenge..

In all, the rebels left 56 bloodied bodies in their wake. But before they withdrew, they told the people of Mucwini they were attacked because an abductee from their village had escaped and stolen a gun. The raid, they said, was revenge for the gun. That boy was unable to return to the community because of fears for his life. As for George’s daughter, Flo, counseling did little to soothe her guilt and seething anger. She joined the Army, intent on finding and destroying the rebel commander who ruined her life.

Out of respect for the villagers and their dead, we trekked through the long, tall grass for quite a ways to visit the graves of those who died in the massacre. We passed the crumbling ruins of mud huts long abandoned for fear of the rebels, crossed newly-cultivated fields that foreshadow a return to normalcy now that peace is in the offing, and made our way to several mounds of red clay bricks that mark the graves of those lost in a night of blood and insanity. The grass, and time, threaten to obscure the senseless loss, which is why the locals want a proper memorial to



commemorate the massacre.

After our interview with Betty Achan, one of the mothers who murdered their own children, we finished our workday with pictures of the smoldering African sunset that painted the sky with fierce and fiery colour. We can only pray the blood-red sun of Uganda's violent past is finally fading, clearing the way for the rise of peace and reconciliation once the blackness finally lifts.



As a result of fatigue and the emotional fallout from the last few days, the ride back to Kitgum was pretty quiet. We had supper at the home of Oketta's brother, where the women served us then went back to the porch while we men talked inside. They did come in for a few minutes before we left. One of the women said they were honoured because this was the first time they'd been blessed with white guests in their home. As for ending the evening, the Acholi have a marvelous tradition that signals when it's time for everyone to go home. I've seen it every place we've been for an evening meal. The host says some kind words about the esteemed guests, someone offers a prayer, and everybody starts to leave as soon as the Amen is spoken.

Back at our Guest House, I worked on these notes while the other guys

showered. When everybody else was asleep, one of the dozens of bats we've seen flying around the compound found its way into our quarters. I opened the front doors wide then continued to write while he darted around the room and veered around my head. Eventually, my cape-shaped company let himself out.