

# Asylum Seekers in Uganda

Clement Jewitt

Étienne is about eighteen, of medium build and quite good looking. He is from the D.R.Congo. He is trying to finish his schooling, and to learn English, at which he is slow. He lives now in the home of my brother Nick in Kampala, following a robbery which left him destitute. His story, says Nick, has been slow to emerge, a slowness which is typical of the trauma laden refugees who enter Uganda from most countries bordering: Burundi, Rwanda, Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia. I believe that Uganda accepts far more refugees proportionately than do we, here in Britain.

Six years ago Étienne was witness to his entire family being butchered, and that is, seemingly, not a metaphor but the correct word for the atrocity that happened. He will smile at you now, shyly, pleased perhaps to be noticed, particularly if you speak French to him, however haltingly. The effort is appreciated. But always, even through the smile, there remains behind his eyes a profound darkness. Even in our country, comparatively rich with care resources, such abiding suffering too often fails to find the appropriate therapeutic treatment: in Uganda, one of the poorest countries in the world, for the vast majority of the needy such possibilities are vanishingly remote.

We know, don't we, that asylum seekers/refugees with similar stories are also in this country. The appeals from various charities tell us this, antidotes to the sweeping dismissive generalizations propagated by biased media. Stories of torture and other abuses set down in deliberately calm language, careful to remain within the boundaries of verified fact, can nevertheless be very moving, touching our hearts, for "no man is an island, but each a piece of the main".

Such feelings, though, are generalised, remote, compared to the experience of meeting face to face with such suffering people. To feel, if we are open to it, underneath the verbal content of discourse, the very palpable atmosphere of despair, the bottomless abyss which opens when a life is torn apart, is to be touched in a yet deeper place, and to take away something of the hurts and aches carried by these displaced souls, and so be in need of healing ourselves, as some of the Hall Green Methodists (Birmingham, England) have been finding recently, trying to aid asylum seekers who are attending their church.

I was privileged to receive such experiences during a visit to my brother in Uganda last month, for he is involved with a charity, Agape, which seeks to aid asylum seekers by giving them shelter and food, minimally, while they await application processing. Neither UNHCR nor the Ugandan government offer any support at that time, thus leaving seekers

destitute—men, women, families, young, old.

At the house maintained by Agape we met, among others, Tidila, probably aged fourteen, and his elder brother Ditali, from the Congo, who had also lost the rest of their family, and didn't speak much. At least they have each other. The euphemism 'lost', I now perceive, emerged unconsciously in that sentence as my defence against the associated feelings: how quickly we can cut ourselves off from empathy!

Two Ethiopians, smiling desperately, also didn't speak much, but helped a little with the translations as did Nicks' adopted son, now grown, visiting from his work in the North, who came with us, whose parents died during the Ugandan troubles of nearly twenty years ago. There was talk of a man from the Sudan who was on his way to the house, a victim of torture in leg calipers ...

There was a very frightened lad, Maledusa from Rwanda, whom we in comfortable Europe might have been tempted to label as paranoid. He too, some years before had witnessed the literal butchery of his parents and siblings. He was told that he was spared so that he could tell others what had happened ... This seems to open a door into very murky regions of the human psyche, raising painful questions which are far from easy to answer. He is convinced that those who had murdered his family were now in Kampala, searching for him. Making the trip to town for his asylum interviews is a terrifying ordeal. But he could be right: Nick remarked later to me that "the hate network is very wide" and he has asked me to change all the names in this article, which I have done.

I was touched most of all by the Reverend Nbele from the Congo, a middle aged man with a gravitas which struggled to transcend his obvious pain, clutching the tattered remains of a Bible in Ki-Swahili, his only remaining comfort and support. He had been, as we understood it, escorted to the frontier and made to cross, his family kept behind. He had, apparently, little idea of why this had happened, and no idea what may have befallen them since, and asked us, quietly and with no emphasis, could we help him find them, or news of them?

This utterance hung in the air, heavy with the combined weight of all the silent cries for help from those dozen or so others standing in the yard of the house with us five visitors, and there was a long silence, pregnant with the tremulous possibility of hope, longed for but feared lest it prove hollow. Then Nick said, almost inaudibly, clearly feeling helpless, "Can anyone answer that?" Gradually, haltingly, a painful phrase or word at a time, we collectively managed to explain that Agape had only sufficient funds to barely maintain the house which gave them shelter. The Reverend bowed his head, a small collapse from the blow we had reluctantly delivered, but after a moment collected himself and said with immense dignity: "Il y a seulement prière".

---

Agape Pendo la Mungu (which means the Love of God in New Testament Greek *and* in Ki-Swahili, the *lingua Franca* of East Africa) was founded in 2001 following the discovery by Fr Anthony Musaala of some forty five refugees, including women and children, sleeping in an abandoned bus within Kampala city. The city council were about to clear it away, which would leave the people destitute on the streets. Recognising that this was indicative of a wider problem, Fr Musaala approached four people he knew for help to do something about the situation, including Nick, who now acts as Treasurer. All five take no remuneration, and inevitably expend personal funds.

Their mission statement: 'Agape works for the continued integration into society of displaced people living on the margins of society, thereby promoting justice and peace, and enriching the human resource base of society.'

To date they have managed to acquire the house for asylum seekers on the outskirts of Kampala, and are repaying the loan for its purchase. The Jesuit Refugee Service sends clients to Agape, and at the moment supplies basic food, as Agape's funds are stretched to pay for water, electricity and sometimes medical bills and transport (up town for asylum interviews, partly). Currently Agape is discussing with UNHCR the referring of suitable clients via the Jesuit RS.

© Clement Jewitt, 2004

A version of the above was published in *Quaker Notes*, Autumn 2004, pp11-13.

UPDATE 2009:

My Brother Nick has now returned to live in the UK and so has resigned from his active role. The Roman Catholic Church has taken over the Agape house, administered by the Jesuit Refugee Service. Fr Anthony Musaala remains closely involved. The house still receives refugees from adjacent countries.

CJ