

# Peace Corps Uganda

NOTES AND  
MUSINGS FROM  
AMODING

Days spent in Uganda: 680  
Homesick level (1-5): 3.0

This is Sister Florence Imalingat. She lives with me in the convent and works as the Deputy Headteacher at St. Francis S.S. for the Blind. Sr. Flo has become one of my best friends. In this picture, she is learning how to use Facebook.



Issue No. 6  
June 2012

## Dairy Diary: Bacterial Cultures in Another Culture

With a last name like Milko, I was always destined to ply my way into milky profundity.

The Iteso have a cattle-centered culture. Cows equal wealth. In generations past, cattle ownership was treated as a right of passage into manhood. When a young boy was given his first bull, he and the beast would carry the same name. Because of the cattle-rustling Karamajong and years of economic neglect, this region has seen an erosion of its bovine heritage. Fortunately, Teso still breeds thousands of dairy cows that yield a boundless supply of milk, yogurt and a milk-yogurt combo called bongo. I'll explain what bongo is in a minute. For now, allow me to walk you through my *Lactobacillus acidophilus*-filled life.

My multifarious milky ways began when I first came to site in October 2010. One of my first experiences was a trip to Soroti Dairy. In this country, dairy shops, commonly misspelled and mispronounced as "diary", are plenteous. And Soroti Dairy is the king of them all. Farmers haul in giant galvanized steel jars of fresh, unpasteurized milk and sell it to the

dairy. Then milkmaids pour the milk into giant vats where it is kept cold or stored for processing into bongo. There is no fancy equipment for pasteurization. If you want to make sure mangy microbes are killed, take your milk home and boil it. I visit Soroti Dairy at least once a week and sit under its giant mango tree, sipping bongo and reading a book. I've even made good friends from my visits there.

In addition, I drink inordinate amounts of yogurt. Yes, I said *drink*. Yogurt in Uganda is described as "slurpy" and packaged in plastic bags. To drink, you tear a hole in one corner of the bag, insert straw and slurp the thin, runny liquor-*au-vache*. I hope that one day drinking liquified food from bags will become the global norm. Yay for the future!

Now back to bongo. First, erase that mental image of a shirtless Matthew McConaughey playing bongos. That's not what this is about. So what the H-E-double machetes is bongo? I recently posed this question to my neighbor, Epolon Erumet, and received a befuddling answer. The process of bongo beings by pouring day-old

milk into a crudely-made clay pot. Stir to oxygenate. Cover and let sit. Stir some more. Strain. Stir. Sit. Sit. Stir. Strain. Twirl. The recipe was delivered in such a maelstrom way that Julia Child would have come back from the epicurean beyond to say some witticism like "Ooooh! You can't say 'Bon Appetit' to that! Add butter!" Alright, I guess the best description I can give of bongo is this: semi-thick non-yogurt sweet-sour milk cream.

While Ugandans have figured out milk, yogurt and bongo pretty well, other value-added dairy products are rare and expensive. Whipped cream? I haven't tasted that for 2 years. Cheese? Thankfully, there is a Dutch cheese maker 3 hours south of me. And sometimes I can find frozen slabs of cheese in Soroti town that taste like Kraft singles mixed with craft glue. Ice cream? I don't even wanna talk about that, girlfriend.

You're probably thinking: "Gee golly. My dearly departed U.S. tax dollars go to support some broad's dairy habits?" Uh, yeah. Indirectly, I suppose. But I work too!

(continued on next page)

Needless to say, the bacterial flora of my digestive track are reinforced and ready for action. In fact, all those gut soldiers could probably replace the U.S. troops leaving Iraq in 2014. So, don't imagine this African lady blighted with worms or wrenched over in dysenteric pain. Instead, picture me under the sublime shade of a mango tree, the sun smelting like a hot orange in the distance, slurping fresh dairy products with straws and watching a goat eating a tire. All the while, my G.I. system is being replenished by new bacterial G.I.s.

Next time you reach for that carton of milk, may you see my beaming face plastered on the side. In a throwback to the pleasantville Americana of Ovaltine commercials, I will smilingly nod in approval of your dairying deeds.

Finally, if I ever write my Peace Corps memoirs, a fitting title might just be "Somebody Give Me Some Cheese!" •



The newly trained micro-franchise entrepreneurs who will manage the VSLA's solar venture.

## Whoopie Cushion

I got my mits on a whoopie cushion and I've been using it to bring semi-inappropriate laughter to the school ever since. One teacher responded in feigned embarrassment, "It's like somebody is having difficulty at the toilet". I think that is the most moving cultural breakthrough moment I've experienced yet.

## Yesterday

### April

- Northern Camp G.L.O.W. (Girls Leading Our World) was a tremendous week. I was a counselor for 10 newly-empowered young leaders. 6 of the girls were deaf. The week was challenging but I really treasured my girls. It's amazing to see communication barriers diminish when both parties are willing make it so.
- We painted the maps of the world, Africa and Uganda and malaria prevention messages on blind school's walls to honor World Malaria Day. Dozens of visually-impaired artists + paint + a blank wall = beautiful chaos. The kids thought it was rad. And it gave me the rare chance to yell imperialistic phrases like "You color Madagascar blue while you take Mongolia!"

### May

- The grant for the blind school's "Turkey Income, Sanitation & Demonstration Unit" was approved! As soon as those sizzling shillings drop into our joint bank account, construction will commence. Look out for a pictorial spread in an upcoming newsletter.

## Today

### June

- Barefoot Power Uganda Ltd. gave a micro-franchise entrepreneurship training to 6 of our most proactive VSLA (village savings and loan association) members [see photo at left]. Those 6 will become the core management team in charge of the daily operations of group's solar enterprise. It was so cool to see them get inspired by the opportunity to lift themselves up economically through the delivery of a social good. Why wait for someone else to eradicate poverty? They already have the tools and talents at their disposal to create for themselves a more prosperous future. So far, they have already sold several solar units just by talking to their friends and sporting their new orange-colored swag. Gee golly, empowered Ugandans are my anti-drug. Check out out Barefoot Power Uganda's website: <http://www.barefootpoweruganda.com/>

## Tomorrow

### July

- Trip to Rwanda....sylvan vistas of Lake Kivu, cosmopolitan Kigali, genocide memorials, Primus beer and Belgian food!
- Close of service (COS) conference in Entebbe. All remaining PCVs from my training class will attend. It's supposed to guide us on how to wrap up our last months of service. But really it's a chance check-in with your crew for one last time, drink heavily, throw each other in the pool, and reminisce about that one time someone pooped their pants.

### August

- Co-directing Peace Camp Greater North 2012. Look out for more information in the next newsletter.

## TESO CULTURAL CHOW

*a little about the tribal region where I live*

- Teso is the ancestral territory of the Iteso tribe, a people group who speak the Nilo-Saharan language of Ateso. The letters F, H, Q, V, H, X and Z are not part of the original alphabet and only appear in loan words.
- Historically, the tribespeople were peaceful cattle keepers who migrated from Abyssinia, modern day southern Sudan and Ethiopia, about 1,500 years ago.
- The word "Ateso" literally translates to mean "language of the dead". Teso was the place where forefathers from the north relocated and eventually died.
- When a woman marries, her husband pays her bride price (dowry) in the form of cattle and other livestock. The more fetching a woman is, the more cows her family can demand. Dowry among the Iteso is considered an appreciative gesture to the girl's parents and an authentication of a new kinship bond. When pressed for my opinion, I point out the less-common tendency of the bride price tradition to function as form of trafficking of women. And I always tell people: "arai eong epol etiai" (I am very expensive). Any prospective suitor will need to cough up at least 300 head of cattle.
- At birth, a child is given a drop of *ajon* (millet beer) to impart the wisdom of the tribe.
- According to bygone lore, an arm of a dead person was used to brew *ajon*.
- Before the entry of Christian missionaries 120 years ago, the Iteso believed in a supreme being called Edeke (God). Their monotheism served well when most converted to Catholicism 100 years ago. Today, God is known as Edeke or Lokasuban.
- The birth of twins is viewed as very lucky. The first-born twin is always named Apio (f)/Opio (m) and the second to arrive is named Acen (f)/Ocen (m).
- The Iteso cultural leader is titled Papa Emorimor (King Father).
- When people die, they are not buried in a cemetery. Instead, they are laid to rest at the ancestral home, somewhere in the back corner of the family's land.



## Muzungu for Hire

A few months ago, I met a nice bride-to-be named Carol [pictured second to the right]. She invited me right then there to "march" as a maid in her May wedding (read: be the token white lady). I unhesitantly said yes. If there's anything I love more than crashing Ugandan weddings, it's being in them, even if I'm a trophy. She arranged to secure me a *gomezi* [dresses in photo], voluminous yards of colorful fabric wrapped around, synched in by a stiff, obstructive belt, and topped off with pointy shoulders. All I had to do was show up on the day of the nuptials. I journeyed all the way down to her village of Mela near the southeastern border town of Tororo. I was so close to the border that my phone network switched to Kenya Safaricom. Most of the morning was spent napping on a mat inside the bridal hut or being fawned over by the maids. Then, very abruptly, I was packaged into my *gomezi* and shepherded into the maid formation. Twelve female friends, relatives and I marched 'round n' round, ceremoniously knelt on mats once in a while, then got right back to into our shimmy procession. I'd like to say I strutted with grace and aplomb but I just kept tripping over the yards of my *gomezi* fabric. Finally, I was given a seat of honor next to the bride and groom, from where I endured the 4 hour-long ceremony. I was fed at some point but I can't remember because of heat-provoked bouts of unconsciousness. At the end, I gave the customary muzungu speech in Ateso and danced for everyone's enjoyment. I'm really considering getting business cards printed that read "Muzungu for Hire: Entertainment for Any Social Function".



## Ugandan English = Uganglish

Short call = toilet visit for No. 1

Long call = toilet visit for No. 2

Break tea = mid-morning tea break

Escort = snacks that accompany break tea

Shore! = pronunciation of "sure"; a favorite exclamation

Let us move together = Let's go

You are lost! = I haven't seen you for awhile!

You are smart! = You look well dressed!

Slash grass = cut down grass with a machete...no lawnmowers here!

Slope down = walk downhill (*directions*)

Branch = turn left or right (*directions*)

Extend = move over a bit

## Martyrs Day: Uganda's Way of Remembering the Dead Blokes

The late 19th century was a tumultuous time in pre-colonial Uganda and the dominant Buganda kingdom. Kabaka (King) Mwanga II ruled with a suspicious, capricious temperament and struggled to keep control of his splintering kingdom. He harbored a deep distrust of the region's Christian missionaries and new converts. His rage led to a series of beheadings, eventually culminating at Namungongo on 3

June 1886. On this day, 26 Catholic and Anglican converts were roasted alive for refusing to renounce their faith. In remembrance, every June 3rd is their feast day and a national holiday. Pilgrims journey from all around East Africa and descend upon the martyrs shrine outside Kampala. They camp out for days so they can take part in mass. Pope John Paul II canonized the 22 Roman Catholics in 2002.

### Over-Used Development Buzz Words

- Sensitize
- Way Forward
- Mobilize
- Capacity building
- Sustainability

I will never eat here.



Spotted in Madera. Africa is where all those tourist tees go.

### I wish I had....

- children's books
- posters/pictures of America
- postcards of Las Vegas
- DVD films with a good message
- head lamps for the nuns
- Sharpie pens and paint pens

- magazines (New Yorker, Economist, Time)
- copies of Las Vegas Sun
- any snacks from Trader Joe's or Whole Foods
- quinoa
- easy cheesecake mix
- Taco Bell sauce

Teacher Amoding  
St. Francis School for the Blind  
P.O. Box 603  
Soroti, Uganda

To deter tampering: Write only "educational materials for the blind" on the customs form, "par avion" on the outside and cover with Christian symbols.