

## The Politics of a Mother's Heart

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Pausing on a hill during an early morning walk in the Summer of 2000, I gazed at a horizon of green rolling hills and long stretches of fertile fields. The timelessness of the beauty, enhanced by the sounds of nature's ever-active song was a comfort to my spirit. It was this quiet walk that served to remind me of how much had changed for the surrounding community in just one year. A year earlier in Uganda's Lira District, the secure blanket of this morning's calm would have been ripped apart by occasional gunfire.

### A Peacemakers Heart During Transition

Uganda's Lira District nestles south of the long and windy West Nile River. Yet, it is near enough to South Sudan to catch hints of the chaos and cruelty that were ravaging that land. For ages, Lira was a land where peace was the norm, but recent political upheavals had fermented waves of violence and unrest. Fortunately, the morning walk was a pleasant reminder that the period of confusion was passing into history. The fresh and clear air, blue sky and open vistas offered a perfect setting to reflect on how the recent transformation came about. It was fascinating to me to realize how at critical times special people have risen up to help shape events. The efforts of these individuals, even just their timely presence, can provide a calming impact and shed light on possible alternatives to conflict.

I carry with me the experience of that early morning walk and warm memories of my time spent with the people of Lira. When I recall the peaceful transition that occurred in Lira, it is Momma Betty Okwea's image that comes to my mind. Minister Betty Okwea was one of those special people whose presence could calm a distressed community and present constructive opportunities for it to move forward.

Minister Okwea—or Momma Betty as we affectionately called her—embodied a heart and character that could placate the angry, stimulate the listless and offer hope to the hopeless. One key to understanding Momma Betty's leadership was that it was in substance shaped by her deep love for the people and her endless willingness to serve.

Stories about Momma Betty are better understood if you have a sense of the nation and people of Uganda during the political and social period that she and her countryman lived through. So, if you are willing, I would like to share briefly with you events that played a part in shaping her life.

### Uganda's Tears



*Flag of Uganda*

Uganda is a land blessed with many natural and human resources. Located near the center of Africa, it borders no ocean. In a way, her geography was part of the reason the region was largely spared from the harshest aspects of slavery, otherwise so prevalent along coastal regions of Africa. The world's largest river, the Nile, finds its origin in this region and Lake Victoria covers a large part of its southeast border. The nation spans lush tropical forests, temperate mountain regions and semi-arid plateaus filled with cattle, herders and the occasional poacher. It is also the home of some of the most beautiful sights in the world.

The capital city of Kampala with well over a million residents was built on the wooded "Hills of the Impala." The city's elevation spares it from the harsh heat that often bakes cities in such close proximity to the equator. In 1962, British colonial rule ended and the nation was spared from the violence that preceded neighboring Kenya's journey to independence. Uganda was then a nation of promise and hope. Unfortunately, promises are too often broken.

Many of the early dreams for the newly independent nation of Uganda swiftly turned to nightmares. A series of despotic rulers left as their legacy war, violence and misrule. During his two periods of governance, President Milton Obute earned the reputation of being one of world's worst violators of human rights. Following a coup, there were eight years where "President" Idi Amin imposed his brutal sovereignty over a deeply divided nation. Under Amin, more than 300,000 citizens of "questionable" loyalty were executed. Rumors circulated that he literally ate some of them.

Amin as a person was cruel and often foolish. Jealous of the success of Uganda's large East Indian population, he pushed for laws that seized their property, forcing 580,000 members of that vibrant community into an exodus. The ethnic Indians, Ugandan citizens, had been a critical cornerstone of the nation's economy and they also provided fine examples of family cooperation. With their departure, some precious life force seemed sent into exile.



*Coat of arms of the Republic of Uganda*

During these two decades of turbulent misrule, the good people of Uganda shed many tears. Fortunately, the 1990s marked a period of transformation and greater stability as a former rebel leader, Yoweri Museveni, became the nation's president. Museveni has remained in power since those days and has helped rein in much of the violence that riddled his nation. During his rule, though Uganda has been involved in some level of conflict with ethnic rivals in neighboring Rwanda and Congo, it has otherwise been a period of relative domestic calm and economic development.

While the fighting had subsided within Uganda's borders, another killer began to take away the nation's young and most promising—the killer known as AIDS. The AIDS virus struck across tribal lines and fighting its spread required cooperation between the civil society, the government and all tribal groups. Fortunately, Ugandans rose to the challenge, with religious leaders,

health workers, educators and non-government organizations all working cooperatively to find ways to hold back the spread of the deadly virus.

The Uganda that Momma Betty Okwea knew was a society that had strong religious sensitivities and an almost universal acknowledgement of a Transcendent God. While 85% of the population followed Christianity, a substantial Muslim minority often lived and worked side by side. With the arrival of the large Indian migrant population, Hindus and Sikhs found the freedom to express their religion, and the Bahai religion chose Uganda as one of its worldwide centers. While some traditional African forms of worship have faded into historic memory, other aspects of those teachings (such as ancestor worship) are very much directly expressed in both Muslim and Christian families. The nation's strong spiritual foundation, highlighted by its respect for religion, has afforded its people a remarkable resilience.

### **The Uganda We Met**

When a greater stability began to take hold throughout most of the country, the Religious Youth Service (RYS) and the International Relief Friendship Foundation (IRFF) were invited to take part in a variety of service projects that spanned several years. Some of those efforts involved repairing schools, while other efforts were aimed at improving medical facilities and substantially enhancing local agriculture techniques.

When I first arrived in Uganda in 1999, I discovered among the people a vibrancy and freshly distilled optimism. The fear that had gripped the nation for two decades, oppressing many aspects of daily life, had largely dissipated. A nationwide restructuring and decentralization of authority had served to empower local communities, restoring a sense of hope and promise. Many citizens were feeling that their voices were being heard and that they, once again, had the power to shape destiny.

The resurgence of greater political freedom was accompanied by a revitalization of the economy and renewed sense of national pride. Uganda began to lay out the welcome mat for those who had fled the nation during its troubled times. A clear example of this change came through the passage of new laws encouraging and facilitating the return of the exiled East Indian population. Substantial efforts were being made to heal and repair past damage.

The RYS began its postwar work in Uganda by implementing several projects relatively close to the more developed capital region. In time, as RYS decided to bring its work to less developed rural areas, the Lira Region was selected. The Lira region proved to be a good choice in that it was emerging from a period of

local conflict and was investing in projects to build stability and a foundation for a more lasting peace. When we first arrived in the district, we would occasionally see military trucks patrolling the roads. However, we eventually discovered that their presence was more a precaution than a necessity.

We also noticed that in the local villages of the Lira District, in the early morning of school days, children in bright uniforms would be making their way to the local school. Laughter and conversation could be heard as they walked, often in small groups down paved and unpaved roads. These sounds of lively school children in the mornings were a clear sign that people's daily life was settling back into a natural and carefree routine.

With normalcy reasserting itself, preserving the peace was a foremost concern of those living in the District. It is during such times that good leadership is critically needed, for a true leader will transform the environment in ways conducive to peace. An absence of good leadership can create a vacuum allowing chaos and conflict to return. The Lira region, however, was served well by a special leader—Momma Betty Okwea.

### **With a Mother's Listening Ears**



Momma Betty was a big lady—she stood almost six feet tall and her big-boned frame was assuredly helpful for carrying the extra love she held in her heart. Mrs. Betty Okwea was the Minister to the Vice President of Uganda and she was a true people's politician. Her efforts, often carried out quietly behind the scenes, were part of the reason people in the district were turning their back on violence. She was working to help the community regain a positive vision for the future. It was also through her strong encouragement that our

group chose to work in Lira.

Minister Okwea understood much that is basic to human nature. She realized that each of us needs to be listened to and that all of us have a yearning for recognition. Ignoring people can have very regrettable consequences. A leader's attitude of indifference may serve to generate resentment and frustration in those who are being governed. It is the frustrated people—those who see no hope in the future, those who hear the daily crying of hungry children—who become most liable to lash out.

The frustrated anger of men in a house is often unleashed on those close to them, vulnerable family members. The release can be violent and hurt the family, making an already difficult situation worse. Minister Betty understood that frustrated people are much more prone to pick up a weapon and turn against their government than those who feel respected.

The Minister approached people with a natural concern that enabled each to feel that he or she was important to her. All the people were, indeed, very important to her. She paid attention to each person's needs, bestowing upon each the respect he or she deserved. Her style was to comfort those approaching her rather than confront them with their shortcomings—to first listen sympathetically.

As a leader, dealing consistently with people's problems is extremely stressful. For some, an ease with people comes more naturally than for others but it is something we all can work on. To meet the needs of her often demanding constituents, Minister Okwea had to model patience and a down-to-earth humility. Yet, this quality of humility went far beyond passive acceptance, for when the situation required, she would act forthrightly, taking dynamic initiative to serve the people's needs.

### **Traveling to Communities**

Momma loved traveling through the various districts in Uganda but her home base in the Lira District was where she was most free. I was fortunate to join her in traveling with a small group that included the nation's two national ministers for youth. A young man and a young woman were nationally selected to represent the youth of Uganda and they served as active members of the nation's parliament. In my eyes, this was an exciting advance in governing because it gave young people a clear voice in the debates and decisions of the country.

Our small team moved from village to village meeting groups of people—a youth meeting at one stop, a

gathering at a mosque at another. Visits to schools and clinics were also part of her busy daily schedule. The travel on the roads was sometimes smooth but on most occasions, it wasn't. Within a day of my traveling and meeting people with Minister Okwea, I began developing a deep appreciation of her work with constituents. This meeting and greeting is a normal part of the lives of most elected officials and it is something that should be appreciated.



Momma (as we liked to call her in private) listened to people's stories and heard their requests, promising to address the issues that struck her as critical. I was amazed at her patience as she listened to the many requests and complaints. My reaction to what I saw was very different than Momma's. I wondered almost out loud, "What did those people questioning her expect from her? Did the Minister look like a magical parent, a Santa Claus-type figure? Why were they asking for so many things that they could take responsibility for

themselves?"

Each culture carries within itself its own strengths, weaknesses and peculiarities. This can at times make it is easy for an outsider to misread a situation. From my perspective, many of the people that were making requests to Momma Betty were simply not taking personal responsibility for their own lives. Often whole communities seemed to be awaiting a magic wand, a wand waved by an outsider, with the power to transform the life of a community. I have come across this attitude in other parts of the world, so it may have a universal expression but, to me, it was strange and it felt unprincipled.

I wondered as we drove the dusty roads to the next village if the people we were about to meet would ever realize the power that lay within their grasp. I wondered if they were going to realize that they had the ability to make much more of a difference in their lives than the government ever could. This was for me an important issue, though it was not Minister Betty's primary concern. In time, the Minister would help me see things from another perspective, but first I had to endure more visits and meetings.

### **The Weight of People's Complaints**

When we arrived at the next community—one somewhat poorer than the previous ones, we were guided to the local mosque. The light blue sky was painted with clusters of white clouds as we met outside a simple mosque with an almost exclusively male audience. The men approached Minister Betty as if pleading a case in front of a judge. They complained about various things but the highlight of the grievances focused on the fact that the new, modern mosque had been left three-quarters finished across the field from the old mosque. The specific complaint was that the foreign donors from a Gulf country were no longer regularly sending money to the community, which was having considerable difficulties finishing the new mosque.

Those gathered were vocal and upset, demanding that the Uganda government finish the job of building the mosque. I saw Momma nod and listen and, while she was listening, I was growing more and more aggravated. I felt like shouting at the people, "If this is your mosque, then work together and finish it on your own! Stop being irresponsible! It is nearly finished and, if you spent less time complaining and more time working, you could finish the job. Why should the government do what you can do?!"

Fortunately, I was not asked to speak. I held things inside until after the meeting adjourned and the men had made their way back down the dirt road toward the village. I did tell Momma what I felt and she nodded at me patiently. The nod had become familiar since she used it often when the villagers addressed her. I was being given a dose of Momma's medicine. When the proper time came, she addressed me in her clear, convincing voice.

### **Momma's Wisdom and Heart**

"I have to listen to these people because no one else does. They may be trying to get something from us that we cannot give, but at least they know we came and showed an interest in them. This is what most people need. They need to know someone is listening to them, that someone cares, and that even though they really don't expect you to solve their problems, they appreciate anything you can do to help."

Momma Betty looked drained from all the travel and meetings, but she continued. "I often feel like a

mother with so many children. As a mother I realize that the food in the pantry is not enough to fully satisfy the children. I simply have to do my best. I listen to their dreams, encourage them by saying that things will get better, and I do whatever little I can. She suddenly smiled with her whole face and laughed out loud. "We are fortunate that we Ugandans are a hopeful people!"

Hearing this important government minister share her heart of concern was a lesson I needed to witness. It is a lesson that should not be lost among our own political leaders inasmuch as it is indeed what most of us hope for. Seeing her in action, it was clear that Momma was a much bigger person than I was. Part of her special legacy is that she has helped me and others grow in our hearts to become bigger and better people.