

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

YOU KNOW WHEN your family is the poorest in the clan but you have these wheezing-rich cousins whose father sometimes helps out with your education, medical care and upkeep but sometimes threatens to withdraw his help if you don't do as he says? You think to yourself, hmm, if I lived with them, my prospects would improve, I'd be successful, help pull my family out of the hole and the world would be boundless. You approach Uncle. *Can I come and live with you?* He hesitates: he has heard your story before. He's impatient with your 'lazy', 'incompetent', 'backward' father who shouldn't have had so many children. But you're lucky; Uncle takes you in, and when you arrive at his home you join other relatives living with him and make a world. But Uncle's children, fed up with sharing their home with cousins from all over the clan, cry out, *We're squashed, Dad.* You shrink and try not to take up too much space, but it hurts when they presume things about your family. For you, the situation is more complex than an incompetent father.

Often, when things are not going right, cousins' resentment flares up and tantrums are thrown: *Get them out of here.* You shrink again, but privately you question their belief that your father should have had fewer children. After all, the cost of bringing up one of your cousins, the pressure their needs put on the earth, could have brought up six, maybe even ten, of your siblings. Their childhood is long and indulgent; so is their old age. Still, when Uncle complains about the number of your siblings, you twist your lips and keep quiet. You also swallow the stories your father told you about Uncle's wealth. You keep your head down and try to make the most of your situation. You keep closer to the other relations Uncle is looking after—some of whom sneaked in after he said no, some of whom escaped abusive relatives, some seeking respite from strife, some who came to study but refused to go home. When we call this phenomenon extended family you people at home insist that family is family, no one is extended. I

thought, maybe I should let you see for yourselves? So, here are a few unfiltered snapshots of our world.

*[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)*

## The Nod

WHEN I ARRIVED at the party the guests were so natural around me I forgot myself because I didn't see myself in their eyes. I was just another person. It's true we see ourselves in the eyes that look at us. I didn't realise this until I came to Britain. When they look at you, people's eyes are mirrors. The problem is you're always looking at yourself.

Out here, especially when you've just come from your home country, whenever you arrive in an unfamiliar place, your eyes can't help scanning the guests, the crowd, the seminar group for someone like you. It's reflex. I guess we do it because there's warmth in numbers. Your way of being, your behaviour on that occasion, won't carry the burden of representing your kind.

Once you've identified someone, you wait to catch their eye. In most cases, when you do, you smile or nod. Sometimes, however, you catch an eye that panics *Oh no, not one of you*, or one that flashes *Fuck off*. Some will avoid catching your eye intentionally and stay well clear of you. In most cases there is a flicker, an acknowledgement of *I'm glad you're here too*. Someone gave this acknowledgement a name; it's called the nod.

But when I arrived at the party I was made so comfortable I didn't look around for others. And that's when things went wrong. You see, I didn't see her; I didn't give her the nod.

Looking back now, I suspect that even if I had I might have not identified her. I think she saw me arrive, tried to catch my eye but I glanced past her. She must have thought I was one of those *Fuck off* types. And in terms of slights within the nation, that's one of the worst. They'll call you Oreo. Unfortunately for me, she was not the kind of sista you blanked and got away with it.

## Something Inside So Strong

*Airport Diaries, 2006*

POONAH MANOEUVRED HER VAUXHALL CORSA into a parking bay in Area 20 reserved for airport staff. She turned off the engine and stepped out. It was 5.30 a.m. but there was no cold breeze, no wind and the sun was already comfortable in the sky. The weather was so perfectly warm you would think Britain loved tropical migrants. Perhaps the rain was taking a break.

She opened the rear door and picked up her rucksack. Armed with her customary *I came to work—Britain is not my home* attitude, she headed for Terminal 4 of the airport. She anticipated the usual inconveniences of a twelve-hour shift: aching feet, fatigue, clueless passengers, rude ones, ditzy ones, entitled celebrities and—courtesy of insufficient sunshine on African skin—the niggling pain in her knee. In her bag were painkillers, two cans of Red Bull and, if the worst came to the worst, Pro Plus, her turbo boost.

As she walked, a smidge of self-satisfaction fleeted across her face. Poonah was a success story. She had mastered that perfect combination of sheer hard work and stinting frugality that an immigrant with a deadline needed. Even when she visited home, Poonah dressed like she was visiting from Masaka. She did not carry gifts for relations except her children and her mother. She did not flash money helping this one, that one with their problems, reinforcing the idea that in Britain money grows on trees. She had bought two houses back home—one rented out, the other occupied by her mother and her children. She had accumulated savings in an ISA account in the region of £30,000. She had concluded that Ugandans who failed in Britain were the ones who came as an alternative. The idiots who had jobs back home but thought, let me try Britain and see. They came expecting to get similar jobs but ended up as cleaners. Those rarely recovered. But if you had hit rock bottom and cried out to Uganda *Help* but

it sucked its teeth, saying, *You can die if you want*, no matter what Britain threw at you, you thrived.

Mpona Watson was the name in her passport but she introduced herself as Poonah. Her mother had named her Mpony'obugumba. Her father, Ssenkubuge, added Nnampiima, one of the most beautiful girls' names in Buganda. That made her name Mpony'obugumba Nnampiima. Add Ssenkubuge when the West demands a 'family name' and she would be Mpony'obugumba Nnampiima Ssenkubuge. Poonah clipped it. Who cared about her mother's sentiments on barrenness or what the Ganda consider a beautiful name? She had not come to Britain to showcase Uganda's naming creativity. And if you challenged her on altering her name or questioned her loyalty to African culture she would ask *What has Africa done for me?*

Poonah was not one of those middle- or upper-class Ugandans who, having grown up in the posh suburbs of Kampala and fed on middle- or upper-class British images paraded on TV, in cinema and magazines, arrived in London's Peckham or Manchester's Rusholme and—because they had imagined that all of Britain was Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, the Savoy and skyscrapers—whined in dismay *You mean this is England?* Or who on hearing the Mancunian dialect ask *But these people; what happened to grammar?* Those privileged types did not realise that, despite their cushioned upbringing back home, they arrived in the roughest parts of Britain, to which Ugandans, rich or poor, tended to gravitate.

When Poonah arrived in Britain, she was in awe. Carl lived in Urmston, an upmarket area in Manchester where you asked for pumpkin and were told, 'Pumpkin comes out once a year, mate—Halloween.'

She was suitably intimidated by the absence of people in the streets, the orderly life, the silence of the world, the obsessive timekeeping, the hyper-politeness and the fact that though she spoke English well enough, she did not understand one word that was said.

Poonah would tell you that Carl had fished her out of Nakivubo Canal dripping with need. To her, Carl was a brave Briton who came to Uganda looking for his ancestry but afterwards did charity work. Some British people start charity organisations in Uganda, some adopt children; Carl Mpiima Watson defied British immigration laws, omitted Mpiima from his name in church (he had had no idea that no church in Buganda would marry a boy called Mpiima to a girl called Nnampiima) and brought her to Britain

as his wife. When she met him, Poonah still used her proper name, Mpony'obugumba Nnampiima. In fact, it was the Nnampiima that got Carl interested.

'You mean we're brother and sister?'

'Same clan: we can't fall in love.'

Unfortunately, Carl could not say Mpony'obugumba. When she said *M-po*, *M-po Mponye*, he said *Pony*. She said *nye, nye*, he said *niye*. Try *Mpona*. He said *Poonah*. She became Poonah.

Carl brought her to Britain with the enthusiasm of a British subject giving the British establishment the middle finger. For three and a half years he looked after her like an older brother but held her like a wife in public. Three of those years, Poonah worked and saved. When she was ready to hunt for herself, Carl let her out in the British wild. By marrying her and guiding her through the maze of British systems, Carl raised Poonah, her three children and mother back at home out of necessity. That was far more than what the G20 achieved in a year.

Poonah left her children back home because British Ugandans warned that to take children to Britain was to tether yourself to the doorknob. What is the use of going to Europe if you can't leave the house to work? And if you do, childcare wolfs down your earnings. Besides, children used to African strictness get to Britain and, because they can't handle the kind of freedom Britain gives them, run wild. You chastise them, they call the police—parents' hands are tied: you either dance to your children's ntoli or Social Services takes them away.

Poonah did not need to be told twice. She told her children, 'You know what, stay here with your grandmother. I am going with Uncle Carl to find work so we can have a good life. Be good, be grateful and study hard because this world is tough. I'll come back as soon as I can.'

But there were people who brought kilemya, the kind of negativity designed to dishearten. *We hear you're going to Bungeleza, but do you know what they think of us over there?*

Poonah asked them one question: 'Are their thoughts bullets? As long as their thoughts don't take food off my plate or the roof off my house, as long as when I work I get paid, I don't care what they think.'

That attitude saw Poonah rise through the ranks. In the beginning, she sorted apples in a factory-like building—Gala from Pink Lady, russets from

circumcision was really like before he committed to doing imbalu when he came of age.

By the end of the second week, Masaaba was saying things in his interviews like *I've even been to Dad's former school...Now Mum is talking about buying a house here...England is green, but this place is out of this world. The soil is red; never seen anything like it...I grew up with images of a barren Africa like sheer poverty, you know, in those humiliating charity organisation ads of skeletal children drinking dirty water cows are pooing in and people are washing in at the same time, or fat mothers holding starving children, that made you think what is wrong with these people? Until you realise the nature of editing. I mean there is poverty, obviously, but I've seen poverty in New York...I know what I signed up for...*

By the time the family set off for Mbale, Masaaba's ngeye crown and the monkey skin to drape over his back had arrived and he had learnt to dance with them on. A picture of him in full regalia had been put up on the website. And then the Ministry of Culture had casually informed the family that dignitaries from other countries might be coming to what they had dubbed the 'Imbalu Special': *Don't worry, we'll take care of everything.*

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It had been such a busy fortnight that Masaaba only started to catch up on social media on the way to Mbale. Mbale was 120 miles from Kampala but the boys were so busy on chats with friends back in Britain, they did not see the journey. Occasionally, they broke out in laughter as they shared a comment on social media. An academic had somehow connected Masaaba's imbalu to Trump. Mwambu read out the title: 'Masaaba's Imbalu and the Rise of Traditional Masculinities in the Trump Era.' He passed his tablet to his mother, who could not believe it and afterwards passed it to Poonah. The article was illustrated with an image of Trump, chin up after shoving the Montenegrin president out of the way.

Critical material had accumulated on the internet. The most worrying came from animal lovers. Someone had taken Masaaba's image in full regalia and written 'Another colobus monkey dies in vain!' Another wrote, 'This nobbit did not cringe at wearing an imitation of the barbaric killing of beautiful defenceless animals.' In another place, CENSORED had been

stamped across Masaaba's picture. Mwambu uploaded everything. Jerry had told him not to discriminate among material. But Wabuyi was angry. He found the article and typed a response: 'Shaka Zulu's leopard prints are in vogue, mate.' He attached Theresa May's shoes and tapped Enter. Then he went to another item, typed, 'The rug in our living room is a zebra skin,' and attached an image from some website.

Previously non-existent consultants—university professors and researchers—on adult circumcision in Africa had popped up online, offering insights, promoting their blogs and vlogs. Then there were the anti-circumcision groups—especially the one with the imagery of blood-soaked crotches—preaching doom and gloom. They accused Masaaba of gentrifying genital mutilation. They brandished statistics of deaths from adult circumcision each year. They called it MGM, an acronym quickly acquiring the notoriety of FGM. It talked about how boys in Africa were coerced, how women were used to spy on uncircumcised men who were captured and forcibly circumcised. Then this headline, CONSERVATIVES FAIL TO CONFIRM THEY WOULD BAN IMBALU IF IT HAPPENED IN BRITAIN. Mwambu uploaded everything.

Napule had become a stranger. Occasionally his Aunt Nambozo brought him to visit the family, but he lived across town in Bunga with Khalayi. Kayla had surprised Poonah. She did not bat an eyelid at being separated from him, even when Napule chose to stay in Kampala with Khalayi while they travelled to Mbale.

The earlier plans to hold the rites at Masaaba's grandparents' home had been thrown out. Anticipating international attention, the mayor of Mbale, the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities, and regional MPs had remapped the route for Masaaba's kadodi, taking in the major features of the city. Wakhooli's Ugandan family was all for it; the bigger the better.

Meanwhile tension was building between Poonah and Nabwiile, Wakhooli's eldest sister. To her, Poonah was a hangeron. Her attitude sneered *We can ease Kayla into our family, thank you very much*. She had started by arranging visits to all Wakhooli's siblings' homes. Then she hijacked a visit to Nakivubo. Poonah had arranged to take Kayla shopping for bitenge gowns when Nabwiile said she knew someone who had the best and cheapest on Kampala Road. Apparently, her someone brought lovely shirts from Ghana too; Wakhooli and the boys would love them. Poonah

kept quiet; she had planned to give Kayla a local market experience, besides, she knew how expensive shops on Kampala Road were and Kayla and Wakhooli were not exactly rich. Kayla sensed the tension and asked what was going on.

‘It’s me arriving into *their* world to ease *their* sister-in-law into their family and *their* culture like they can’t do it.’

Kayla gasped. ‘I didn’t realise.’

‘Neither did I! Add to that, I am Ganda: don’t even speak Lumasaaba.’

She held her mouth. ‘Do you want to leave?’

‘Wakhooli paid my fare for a reason. You carry on being you and I’ll be discreet.’

They arrived at Hotel Elgonia around six and checked in.

Poonah did not join the family until midday the following day. By then the boys had gone to meet Masaaba’s kadodi band and check out the dance route. Local MPs, the mayor and people from the government had been to welcome the family to Mbale and talk about the programme on the twenty-second. In the afternoon the family went to Wakhooli’s parents’ house. They had supper there.

Kayla’s sisters, Athol and Freya, arrived in Kampala that night. So did Masaaba’s British friends. Wakhooli had arranged for them to be picked up at the airport at the same time and be taken to the Kabira Hotel in Kampala, then to Mbale the following day. But he had put his foot down against Zoe, Masaaba’s girlfriend, coming to Uganda for imbalu. *It’s common sense*, he said. Jerry the agent was staying in Tororo with his grandmother and would commute to Mbale. He was to handle post-op interviews, and he had handled the insurance in case Masaaba needed emergency repatriation to England. Masaaba, his dancers and the cousins who had arrived spent the following day rehearsing with the band.

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Time in Mbale ran too fast. After lunch on the first day of the kadodi a group of elders came to whisper with Masaaba. It was excitement, happiness and pride. By 1.30, members of the press had started to lurk. At two o’clock, Masaaba came down dressed. You heard the rattles first as he walked and turned. That ngeye crown would transform a toad into a prince;

*Don't beg to help, pack your bags and go back to Kampala. If she needs you she will call.* Then she relented. *Kayla is British; brushing you off does not mean she's being rude.* She walked back to her room. But it hurt. All the years she had known Kayla, she had never known the sisters to show interest in their nephews. At the boys' birthdays they tended to nip in and nip out, but now that there was a camera they were displaying concern. She sent Wakhooli a text: *We need to talk. Urgently. Give me a call.*

When they got together, Poonah told him, 'Something's been going on with Kayla since her sisters arrived. I don't know why, but twice, you know that BBC woman?'

'Julie?'

'Twice she's interviewed them, and both times Kayla's come out upset.'

'Why were you not with her?'

'Her sisters are here.'

'I know what they're doing. Ever since they started this documentary business, Julie's been trying to tear-jerk her and Masaaba. Like, *Oh, it must be terrifying for you as a mother... knowing your baby is going...?* They need her to cry. That's what they do. With Masaaba I had to step in and say, "Do not introduce fear into my boy's mind." Now they're trying to milk Kayla through the sisters.'

'Problem is showing Kayla crying on TV. They'll edit it to seem like she's regretting... you know what they're like. They edit their programmes to show this fragile white woman who married an African now traumatised by his barbaric culture. Can you imagine the backlash online when Africans see it?'

Wakhooli sighed exhaustion. 'I'll talk to Julie.'

'Also tell them you want to see the final edit. Tell them you don't want your wife to be shown crying.'

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On Saturday the eighteenth it rained. A loud, gusty rain that brought everything to a standstill. By the time Poonah got downstairs for breakfast, the hotel lobby was packed. People stood everywhere, some fretting because preparations were held up, some waiting to escort Masaaba to face the knife. For the first time Wakhooli was not running around. He and his

brothers sat with Masaaba plus some other elders. A bunch of men, suspicious and menacing, stood around them, watching. Dr Wafula had warned them back in Kampala that on the last day, things would turn dark. Masaaba would not be left on his own in case he bolted. Mwambu and Wabuyi sat away from everyone. They stole worried glances at their brother, then at the menacing gang.

Poonah's eyes fell on Jerry. He had gone to whisper with Masaaba, but the menacing gang pushed him away like he would help Masaaba escape. Thankfully, he had left his lord-of-the-manor look in England. As he walked away, two white men approached him, shook his hand and he led them to a table. Poonah wondered what they wanted. The day before, Jerry had arrived at the hotel with three items in his hands. First, there had been film offers. 'But I said to them, it's early days. Let's wait and see how Masaaba's circumcision pans out and then decide who will do my man here'—he shook Masaaba by the shoulders—'justice.' The second item was a project with CNN, something to do with the spectacular landscape in Eastern Uganda, bringing it to the attention of the world. 'It's in the future; if Masaaba is interested, let me know.' However, the major issue was the dare money. 'It's become toxic. Public opinion has changed. It was about £625,000 last time I checked—'

'£642,545,' Mwambu corrected.

'There you go. It's too much money. Ugandan kids get circumcised all the time without money or fanfare. The presumption is that because you're British you're rich and privileged and shouldn't make money out of an African ritual.'

'Let me speak for once.' Poonah stood up, gesturing Ugandan. 'This has nothing to do with Ugandans. Masaaba, Ugandans don't begrudge you your money. They don't care because it's not their money. It's the rich, white middle-class people in the West who, disgusted with their own wealth, are trying to guilt-trip everyone—'

Mwambu joined in: 'Bloody leftists; they do my head in.'

'We call them *We Are the World*,' Wakhooli laughed. 'They consider themselves the conscience of the world regardless of the circumstances. And they impose their conscience ruthlessly.'

'We're not touching that money,' Kayla interrupted. 'End of discussion.' But her outburst said *You're not the white ones; all that shit will be aimed at*

my face. She turned to Jerry. ‘What do you suggest?’

‘I was thinking of perhaps a clinic for imbalu initiates here in Mbale. Somewhere they can go for seclusion with good medical facilities, good meals, peace and quiet. The circumcision season is very small and happens every two years. The rest of the time, the hospice would serve the community. Any profit would fund the initiates’ wing. I think Dr Wafula might be useful. *We must be seen to be doing something.*’

Silence fell as the performance of *We must be seen to be doing something* sunk in. Images of Western celebrities, *The X Factor* and shows which had been ‘seen to do something in Africa’ flashed in Poonah’s mind and she clicked.

‘We’ll discuss it when we return home,’ Wakhooli said softly. ‘There’s no hurry.’

Now, Poonah’s eyes travelled to where Kayla sat playing Scrabble with her sisters. Kayla could win an Oscar so far.

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Rain stopped like god had plugged it. Bang at midday. People rushed outdoors. Men carrying tools, others loading plastic chairs onto a lorry, mops drying the entrance. Thirty minutes later, reporters were setting up in the garden, some speaking into mics, staring into cameras and pointing at the hotel. Next time she looked outside, a crowd had built up outside the gate. Poonah’s heart fell into her stomach. Then she chided herself: *You’ll jinx the boy if you don’t stop worrying.* She walked to her room and picked up a Bible from next to a table lamp. The Old Testament. Psalms. She thumbed to 23 and read. ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...’ She put it down, closed her eyes and recited in Luganda, ‘Mukama ye musumba wange, seetagenda...’ It was still as calming as it had been when she lived with Mutaayi. When she finished she sighed, ‘Masaaba, you’re in god’s hands now.’ She reached for the TV remote control. Rice screens. CNN. A religious channel. Football. She settled on a Nollywood film.

A band struck up and she woke.

Masaaba’s kadodi band had come to the hotel? She jumped out of bed. The music filled the place. She had heard that Masaaba’s band was a combination of two bands—one that Wakhooli had paid for before the