

The everyday feel of death

♦ *MUKONO, Uganda*

It's the other evening, and as we drive through the darkness, two things are out of place. One is the furry moose head, complete with maple leaf, dangling from the rear-view mirror. The other is Roger's talk about forgiveness.

From Entebbe International Airport, we motor at Highway 401 speed towards Uganda's capital, Kampala. Roger, my driver, explains that the moose head is from a Canadian friend. I smile.

People are everywhere. On motor scooters. Bicycles. Foot. The odd truck tries to make three lanes of two. Lights come at us. Everything whizzes past. The moose head swings.

Roger talks about wanting a better life. About his car. His family. The West. The "circus" of government. How entire towns, including much of Kampala, are dark due to power outages.

I ask him about a certain Ugandan ghost, Milton Obote.

"Obote," he says, "is irrelevant." He then adds, "We need to forgive and move on."

Forgiveness.

Obote, exiled in Zambia for the past 20 years, is a two-time Ugandan president. His first rotten government gave rise to Idi Amin, a devil who liked to kill people, among other ways, by bludgeoning them with sledgehammers. Some 300,000 Ugandans died during Amin's reign of terror.

After Amin, Obote returned in 1980 as elected head of state, only to keep Uganda on its knees. A military coup in 1985, led by today's president, Yoweri Museveni, forced him out for good. But not before hundreds of thousands more Ugandans died.

Now Obote, at a ripe 81, plans to return. Within weeks.

It's an African thing. Amin also tried, unsuccessfully, to leave his exile in Saudi Arabia to die on Ugandan soil. In this case, Ugandan's government initially said Obote, by law, could indeed return to a furnished home, chauffeur, security guards, secretary and domestic staff. Museveni has since said Obote must first explain his crimes. Obote says he's coming anyway.

Forgiveness.

The papers here are full of the story. Obote, in fact, is writing the entire history in his own words for one national daily. The other competing story is Museveni's push for a constitutional change allowing him to run for the presidency. Again. Twenty years of power isn't enough. He wants it, apparently, until death.

Not that Museveni has been bad for Uganda. He's been good. Brought stability. But in 53 years, since the British gave independence to what Churchill called the Pearl of Africa, Uganda has not seen one peaceful transfer of power. Power madness is the disease of African leaders.

So there is unrest here. British rock star Bob Geldof, echoing western donors, has even weighed in on the need for more democracy. Political parties are still banned in Uganda. That's because, when drawn along tribal lines, they have their own demons. Ugandans

know. They've memorialized Rwandans whose body parts have washed onto Ugandan shores, via Lake Victoria, long after Rwanda's 1994 tribal genocide.

Forgiveness.

Recently some Ugandan religious leaders travelled all the way to The Hague, asking the International Criminal Court (ICC) not to indict Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) leaders. In the north, the LRA has kidnapped some 17,000 kids to make into child soldiers. It has terrorized countless Ugandans. Now these thugs might be simply re-integrated. My future neighbours, maybe.

Nigeria, meanwhile, wants the ICC to let Africans, not outsiders, deal with Darfur, Sudan, where 180,000 have been killed since 2003. And, of course, South Africa handled apartheid's crimes against humanity through its Truth and Reconciliation Commission. All examples of how, unlike the west which focuses on the crime and punishment, African justice focuses on restoring community balance.

It sounds very fine. And restorative justice has its place. But I've seen Uganda before. And as Roger talks about forgiveness, I know the morning will reveal the many coffin-makers on the roadsides. Their coffins, largely for AIDs victims, come in all sizes. For kids too.

In this land of uncommon beauty, and life, this is the everyday feel of death that Ugandans have. So while, like other Africans, they're telling the world they can handle their own justice, I wonder what that might really mean. And that scares me.

Because already, even prior to my family's move here later this year, this place has captured my heart. And I fear it will be broken. Forgiveness or not.