



JANE E. BUCKINGHAM

Drop-off in Nairobi

An African Homestay

Dedicated to Elizabeth Achieng
(1951–2006)

“Plunge right in and enjoy the music.”

*“When you take your bucket shower,
remember to wash your hair first.”*

“Don’t drink the water.”

“If you see a giraffe, say hi for me.”

SUCH WAS THE RANGE OF PRE-TRIP ADVICE from family, friends, and other well-wishers prior to my trip to Kenya. As the director of counseling services at the School for International Training (SIT), I was the recipient of a grant to research the Kenyan perspective on mental-health practices and psychological healing. As it turned out, the best advice was from Donald B. Watt, founder of the Experiment in International Living, when he wrote: “Expect the unexpected!”

Kenya is a beautiful and resilient country. It has faced many challenges, and the situation during my visit in fall 2000 was no exception. When the seasonal rains did not arrive as expected, an extended drought ensued. Because electricity in Kenya is largely produced

Opposite:
E.S. Kirtu.
Six Mamas, 1994.
Batik from Kenya.

by hydropower, the water shortage required electricity to be rationed. Power was only available on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and every other Sunday. In parts of Nairobi, residents were forced to buy water and cart it to their homes in big plastic containers balanced on wheelbarrows. A three-month garbage strike left mounds of uncollected refuse along roadsides. Additionally, a sugar shortage created an ongoing hardship for a culture that takes tea several times a day! Nairobi had already experienced the impact of terrorism through the 1998 bombing of the American embassy. Massive government layoffs of civil servants along with general lack of economic opportunity resulted in the proliferation of small business enterprises. Vending goods in open-air markets, producing homemade ice pops to sell to neighborhood children, or raising and selling chickens were just some of the ways people found to sustain themselves.

I was ushered into this unfamiliar world through the portal of the homestay experience, the foundation of Donald Watt's original vision for the Experiment. Watt believed that through intercultural exchange, people "learn to live together by living together," and the homestay experience fosters peace through understanding. As it turned out, my homestay "parents" and I were exactly the same age. Elizabeth Achieng had a long career as headmistress of a Montessori school and also coordinated SIT's Study Abroad homestay program. Samm Rabbette, as managing director of Joint Educational Services of Kenya, worked in the field of educational and intercultural exchange. My first introduction to Samm was a pre-trip phone call in which I asked if there was anything I could bring him from the U.S. He answered enthusiastically, "Yes, how about a suit? I'm a size 44!"

When I arrived in Kenya and met Samm and Elizabeth in person, it was clear they understood the true meaning of hospitality. They were kind and warm, greeting me with handshakes. *Karibu*—Swahili for *welcome*. Their house, located in a district in Nairobi called Kibera, was accessible only by navigating a series of narrow, winding dirt paths. Kibera is a section of the city with virtually no street names and no home delivery of mail, just a maze of footpaths and kiosks intermingled with residences. It contains what is considered to be the largest slum area in East Africa and is bordered by the Toi Market, an immense open-air market.

Samm and Elizabeth's home was actually a collection of rooms organized around a central, open courtyard. The courtyard contained a papaya tree, clotheslines for drying laundry, a charcoal fire for heating water and cooking, and a row of wall-to-wall cages for Samm's chickens. Selling poultry was one means of earning extra money for the family. In addition, it was Samm's annual tradition to kill and eat a rooster on his birthday. One day when nephew George

was plucking chickens in the courtyard, Elizabeth's three-year old granddaughter Joy became inconsolable as she watched feathers coming out by the handful. She scolded George, "You put that chicken's clothes back on. I'm going to report you to that chicken's mother!" Poor Joy—the plucking continued.

Although not wealthy in terms of material possessions, this family was rich in their connections with people. Visitors regularly dropped by to say hello, even if just for a few minutes. No appointments were necessary, with the customary handshaking all around. People stopped in to buy a chicken, borrow sugar, or exchange some news. Guests were automatically invited for dinner if their visit happened to coincide with the meal being served. One evening Elizabeth's daughter was scheduled to fly to the U.S. where she was to join her husband. Fifteen of her friends arrived at the house to say goodbye and caravan together to the airport to see her off. Because it was dinner time, all fifteen were invited to share in the meal. Whatever food was available was simply stretched to accommodate the number of guests.

My typical day in Nairobi started at dawn with the crowing of Samm's rooster and the melodious call to prayer from the nearby mosque. Tucked safely under my mosquito net in my half-awake state, I knew I had another hour or so before I would start my day. When I did arise, a tray was waiting for me with bread, jam, and tea. Following a bucket shower, some phone calls, and a review of my list for the day, I was off to conduct my interviews and explore Nairobi. Mornings were cool and cloudy, but soon the day became clear and sunny. By four o'clock in the afternoon it was boiling!

Most days I had some kind of appointment, visit, or task lined up. I interviewed herbalists, administrators in the city's psychiatric hospital, Western-style counselors, teachers, local people—anyone who would talk with me about mental health. Getting used to the concept of time in Kenya was an adjustment. The pace of life felt unhurried, and things always took longer than I anticipated. If I accomplished just one thing during each day, this was success. For a person who is usually punctual, I found it unsettling to be late so frequently, but my African colleagues did not seem fazed in the least. Even email access at the internet café was slow—it usually took an hour or more just to get through new messages in my inbox.

In the evenings, the family gathered to eat in the living room—fried chicken or vegetables in a sauce, ugali (a starch made from ground maize), whole potatoes, and sukumawiki (a dark green vegetable similar to kale). Sukumawiki literally means *push the week* in Swahili and translates as stretching the food budget for the week. We sipped water mixed with cocopine (a coconut and pineapple syrup).

Eating without silverware was customary, so meals were preceded by the ritual washing of hands as George stood before each of us with a bowl of water and a towel. If we had electricity, the TV blared throughout the entire meal, with people talking over the sound. When I bought something in the Toi market, Samm and Elizabeth always wanted to know how much I paid. Invariably, they howled with laughter, because despite my attempts at bargaining, I, of course, paid too much for everything. Without refrigeration, leftover food was stored in the pantry till the next meal, despite the daytime heat. Overcooking the food next time around seemed to destroy any accumulated bacteria—I never got sick.

During my first week in Nairobi, I was overwhelmed by the prospect of finding my way around, by the crowds of people, the open sewer system flanking the footpaths and streets, and the piles of burning refuse along the roadsides of Kibera. As the only Westerner most everywhere I went, I was the frequent beneficiary of comments such as “Hey, mzungu” (white person)! This was not done in a malicious way, but merely a statement of the obvious. At first I got lost every day trying to take a shortcut home through the Toi market. Not wanting to appear confused or disoriented, I avoided backtracking at all costs and learned to find my way home by following the sound of the generator near Samm and Elizabeth’s house. Eventually, I grew to feel more comfortable making my way through the neighborhood and other parts of Nairobi on foot, riding city buses, or hopping on crowded matatus (privately-owned vans providing public transportation). Each matatu had its own personality, sporting such names as “The Jazz Quartet,” “Born to Suffer,” and “Soul Strippin.” As the saying goes, “A matatu is never full”—always room for one more passenger, even if it meant hanging off the side of the vehicle.

For me, the lessons of Kenya were deep and wide. My research showed that as in all cultures, there is depression, anxiety, alcoholism, and work and family conflicts. These conditions were simply referred to as “stress” or were manifested as physical problems. Malaria or malaria-like symptoms, such as headaches or muscle and joint pain, were not uncommon. Life included suffering, but there was great joy as well. The Kenyan people seemed to maintain a different attitude toward problems in general. As U.S. Americans, we embrace a constitutional right to happiness—as soon as a problem is identified, it must be “fixed.” In contrast, the Kenyan attitude suggests that life can still be good even in the presence of difficulties. Without the challenge of hardship and loss, life would be like a smoothly paved, flat road to nowhere—safe and comfortable, but dull and utterly pointless. This view was reflected in the philosophy of Dr. Moshoeshoe, an herbalist I interviewed at his roadside stand on a busy street in the

outskirts of the city. Surrounded by an array of roots and bark next to remedies in colorful bottles, he emphasized, “Everything in life is natural, including problems. Even Jesus didn’t have it easy.”

A HALLMARK FEATURE OF THE SIT STUDY ABROAD CURRICULUM is the “drop-off” experience, an assignment in which students are deposited somewhere within Nairobi, or a nearby village, and are asked to research an aspect of the local culture. They are given a crash course in the language and enough money to secure transportation and food. The drop-off takes the better part of a day, and students’ survival skills are tested, along with their capacity for observation and reflection. My time in Kenya evolved into an extended drop-off, since my survival skills were certainly put to the test on a daily basis! But beyond mere survival, I learned to embrace a different worldview and to expect the unexpected. Returning to my homestay family after each day of research and exploration provided an anchor for what I was experiencing. Soon after I arrived in Nairobi, Samm and Elizabeth gave me the name Atieno, meaning *born in the night* in Luo, the language of their tribe. “When you visit our home, you are born into our family.” Karibu.

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