

He Love That Goat!

July 2006

It had been an exciting day in our home neighborhood of Namungoona. It was the venue for a National Festival of Song, Drama, and Dance organized by the local Mother's Union, the Ugandan version of a women's organization. The theme was "Together, Let Us Fight Domestic Violence." Nine finalists emerged from regional competitions that were held throughout the country three weeks ago. In addition to our local entry, eight teams representing six tribes began arriving the day before. Vehicles large and small brought Acholis from Gulu, Langis from Lira, Tesos from Kumi, Batoro from Ngombe, Basoga from Nsinze, and Baganda from Degeya, Vumba, and Kampala. As night fell, we listened to the different groups camped around our rooms practicing their songs and dances. It was a marvelous cacophony of singing and drumming and this added to the atmosphere of mounting anticipation.

The program was underway by 8:30 a.m. as each group offered the first item in the competition--a choral song based on the theme of the day. The other categories included religious and folk songs, original compositions, poetry, and drama. By nightfall we had one event remaining: traditional dance. Dances from seven different tribes were presented, including the ever-popular Bagisu circumcision dance. The costuming, choreography, and performances were outstanding. It was dark by now, and the single floodlight created an ambience of light and shadows that called forth echoes of an Africa long lost to modern civilization. Complex and passionate drumbeats animated barefoot dancers dressed in traditional costumes of colorful cloth, grass, and animal skins. For the first time since our initial arrival in Uganda four years ago, I felt like we were in a National Geographic Special.

The dancing ended all too soon and we abruptly returned to the 21st century. It was time for the obligatory speeches while the adjudicators tallied up the results. Shortly before the oratory began, the executive secretary of the Mothers' Union approached Sharon and asked if she would be agreeable to stand in as the Guest of Honor. The local big shot, suffering from a bout of flu, had retired early and there were no other guests of sufficient stature to qualify for the role. Before I knew what was going on, Sharon had been placed in the seat recently vacated by the departed Honorable. So now each presenter began his speech by acknowledging the Guest of Honor (with a nod to her husband) before moving on to his or her prepared remarks.

As the last to speak, Sharon gave an excellent impromptu talk commending the day as a good beginning toward ending the cycle of violence in homes and families. She encouraged her audience to build on this foundation by teaching our children and teens to prepare for a marriage of mutual love and respect. She also emphasized the unifying effect of this event, bringing together people of diverse tribes and languages to achieve a common goal.

It was time for the results and I didn't want anybody to lose! But every contest has a victor and the final positions were announced, beginning with ninth place. When the winner was declared, the place exploded in an outpouring of cheering, clapping, and general pandemonium. The organizers of the event thoughtfully had provided gifts and certificates for each participating team, and these were individually presented by a series of minor notables, including yours truly.

Second prize was a goat, which was mysteriously absent. After considerable delay and no little agitation, the goat was found in the possession of its keeper who, in a mildly inebriated state, said, "It's my goat and I'm not giving it up!" The chairperson wisely decided to deal with that problem in the morning.

The Guest of Honor had the privilege of presenting not only a really nice trophy, but also the first prize--a rather scrawny-looking bull. The bovine was none too happy; it was late and he was ready for bed. Fortunately a sturdy young man grabbed the short end of the tether while Sharon took her place literally at the end of her rope, which she handed over to the winners as multiple flashing cameras recorded the momentous event.

At least for this one day the participants and the audience were able to forget the cares and struggles of everyday life in Uganda. The informal celebration continued long after the formalities were complete, while Sharon and I made our way home amidst widespread merriment.