

Welcome to **Perspectives from Africa**, a newsletter by University of Notre Dame students for elementary, middle, and high school students. Through this newsletter we hope that you gain new insights into the countries of Africa from the experiences of those who have lived or traveled there. This issue features articles written by students who have studied, interned, or traveled to the region. Their articles cover unique experiences they have had in Africa and inform you about the culture, people, and politics of the region.

Once you begin reading and learning about Africa, we hope you will want to learn more about the world. The Kellogg Institute for International Studies has several services available for students and educators, including more articles, traveling trunks, a global speakers program, a video library, and discussion groups for teachers. To learn more about our programs, explore our website at [kellogg.nd.edu/outreach](http://kellogg.nd.edu/outreach).

## The Diversity of English

by Melissa Yisak, History and Peace Studies major

When you know that someone speaks English, you automatically assume that he or she uses the same phrases and words as you do. This summer I worked as a teacher at a primary school in Namibia, an African country that borders South Africa and Botswana. When I learned that English was the official language of Namibia, I automatically assumed that I would not encounter a strong language barrier with Namibians. However, once I arrived in Namibia, I quickly learned that my assumption was false.



*How do you say "rhino" in Namlish?*

What I realized was that the type of English I spoke was "American" English. My host told me that one characteristic of American English is speaking quickly. Additionally, the type of English Namibians speak is often called "Namlish" because Namibians use English words, but slightly change their meaning. For instance, instead of using the word "really?" to describe surprise about an action or situation, they use the phrase "Is it?" as a response. I first experienced this confusion when I told my host family a story about how the taxi driver made me wait ten minutes before leaving. After I fin-

ished my story, she replied, "Is it?" This confused me at first because my first thought was to respond, "It is," but after much repetition, I became used to this expression. Another difference between their use of English and ours is the words they use for certain objects. While we call drinks like Coca-Cola and Sprite "pop" or "soda," they use the term "cool drinks." Other differences include referring to students as "learners" and using the phrase "and what what" instead of the word "etc."

However, my favorite and most confusing Namlish term dealt with the word "now." When Americans use the word "now," it means that a person or event is going to occur very soon. However, Namibians do not use the term "now" to mean something is going to happen immediately but that the action will occur sometime in the future. If a Namibian person says that she is going to the store "now," she probably will not leave for another hour or so. The phrase "now now" means that something will occur within the next ten to twenty minutes. Then, if a person says that he will complete a task "now now now," it means he is doing it within the next five minutes. Interestingly, saying "now now now" in Namibia is the equivalent of just saying "now" in the United States.

Hearing my learners and other teachers use these words and phrases made me realize that the English language comes in many forms. Instead of viewing their version of English as weird or incorrect, I tried to adapt to the Namibian culture and began speaking Namlish. The other volunteers and I even joked around that we could continue saying, "Is it?" without thinking when we returned to the United States. By the time I finished my internship, I had become close with my learners and host, learned Namlish, and "what what."

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# The Wheels on the Bus Go ‘Round and ‘Round

by Jenny Heil, Psychology and Anthropology major

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I walked into the taxi park, where all of the buses and taxis congregate before leaving for their destinations. Unlike most bus stations in the US, there was not a schedule in sight. Not a single person was rushing to catch a bus. In fact, not a single person knew at what time his bus was leaving! Buses simply leave for their destinations when they are full. This means that when you arrive at a taxi park and get on a bus, you might leave right away or you might have to wait several hours. You never know.



**Jenny in the farmers' market**

Sometimes, relying on transportation that has no schedule was difficult. If I knew that I had to be at a meeting at a specific time, it would be hard for me to know what time I should leave in order to arrive on time. After all, if I was the last person to get on the bus, I would leave immediately. On the other hand, if I was the first person to board a bus, I might have to wait hours.

As I adjusted to being in Uganda, I began to realize some of the benefits of the bus system. Waiting for the bus to be full meant that you used less gas to transport more people, which was good for the environment. In addition, not knowing what time buses left was liberating, as it was part of an entire cultural model that put less emphasis on sticking to rigid schedules. Not having specific times that I needed to be somewhere made me more present to the moment.

One day, I boarded a bus and noticed a chicken in the aisle. Having farm animals on the bus was not uncommon in Uganda, so I was fairly used to this. Another American on the bus turned to the Ugandan man next to her and remarked, “You know, in America, we don’t bring chickens on buses.” He nodded and said, “That’s because in America, you have to put your chickens in boxes when on buses.” As the American tried to explain that there are not any chickens at all on buses in the United States, the man became confused. “What if,” he asked, “your friend gives you a chicken and then you have to travel with it?” Just as it is sometimes hard for us in the United States to understand a subsistence farming economy in which many people own a small number of farm animals, it was also hard for this Ugandan man to understand a country where the closest contact that most people get with chicken is in the freezer section at the grocery store.

This simple conversation made me more mindful of the fact that sometimes, other cultures might think of the way that I do things as just as strange or different as how I might think of theirs. It served as a reminder to always look at other cultures not from a place of judgment, but from a place of understanding. Thanks to my experiences with the public transportation system in Uganda, I learned a lot about being flexible and adapting, and that if I ever want to bring a chicken on a bus, I might want to get a box.



**The family cowherd**

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# The Game that Transcends All Cultures

by Meaghan Rubsam, German and Preprofessional Studies major

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*Village boys doing laundry*

Did you know that you could make a soccer ball out of a few plastic bags, rocks, some leaves, and maybe even a bit of rubber, if you are lucky enough to find some? Once you make the ball, find some stalks of sugar cane or corn, chop them and strip them down with a machete, and you have the makings of a soccer game. Now for the players. You need some kids, young and old, who have a love for the game, will chase the ball down the river, in the pricklers, and out of an old pit latrine. Find a field that is relatively flat, most likely with a few cows and goats grazing, and you can finally play the game of “football!”

During my summer in Uganda, I stayed in a rural village in the mountains near Kenya, and playing soccer was my favorite pastime. It was a game that overcame the barriers of language and allowed the villagers and the visitors to come together and enjoy the most widely played game in the world. My first day in Uganda, I heard some volunteers say that they were going to “the field” to play soccer. They grabbed an old soccer ball that we kept at the house, and we jogged through the hills, over a stream, and came out of the woods in the clearing of the field. During my entire summer, it was uncanny to me how the villagers could spot a *mzungu*, or a white person, from seemingly miles away. The children had seen us coming, bringing our actual soccer ball, and once we emerged into the clearing they all ran to us, giving us high fives, thanking us for coming, *Wanyala!*, and splitting themselves into teams. The second that play started, I knew that this game was way out of my

league. Still, I kicked the ball whenever I could, eventually dribbling around a few children, kicking the ball through the legs of a cow, avoiding a hole of standing water, and scoring a goal! I have played soccer my entire life, but seeing all of the children running to congratulate me, happy but also surprised that I, a *mzungu*, had scored a goal, made it my favorite goal by far.

For the rest of my ten weeks, I went every day that I could to play soccer. I brought many groups of volunteers as they arrived and left, each time to the complete and utter joy of the children. As time went on, although we couldn’t understand more than hello, I started to become close with many of the young boys who always came to play. I really looked forward to seeing them and I loved playing with all of the children that would gather to watch. These soccer games came to involve running around cows, being chased by goats, falling in cow dung, trying my best to avoid all of the holes and hills that were on our soccer field, and basically just loving life.

Playing soccer with the villagers was by far my favorite pastime of the summer. It just goes to show that so much can transcend the boundaries of language and culture; you just have to try.



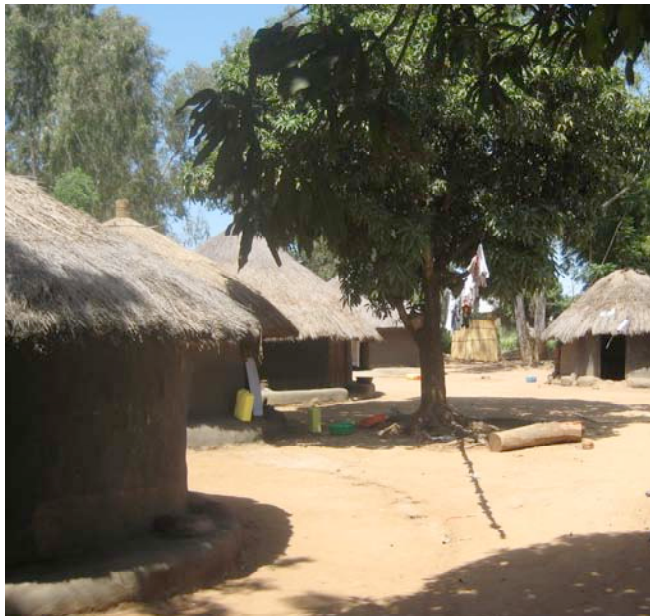
*Meaghan teaching a universal language*

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# My Bed in a Mud Hut

by *Tim Reidy, Architecture major*

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***A Ugandan village***

If given the opportunity, most American children would choose to sleep on a mattress that could bounce them to the ceiling when jumped upon or a sleeping bag that could transform into a giant caterpillar to best attack their friends. Would any of them choose to sleep in the dirt? Would any of them choose the ground over a comfy mattress?

I spent the summer of 2009 in Northern Uganda, living with a tribe of people called the Acoli. On the 4th of July I sat around a camp fire in the center of several mud huts, drinking sodas and telling stories. One of my neighbor's kids climbed into my arms and as the fire died down, he fell asleep. I carried his tiny body into his home, but could not find his bed. His mother pointed to a mat on the floor (half as thin as the "welcome mat" you put by your front door) and told me to lay him there. I thought surely the cold hard ground would startle him awake, but it didn't disturb him one bit. I laid a thin blanket over him, and he remained there, dreaming until morning.

Most Ugandan children do not have a choice of where to sleep. Families average around seven children, which means that while the adults have a bed to sleep on, there usually aren't enough beds for the kids. So they sleep on the floor. A typical house for the Acoli people looks like an ice cream scoop. Its walls are in a circle, and its grass roof forms a dome on top. The floor is made with dirt, and the walls are made with mud bricks. While

it sounds unbearable to the average American teenager, it is a reality for most Ugandans. It wasn't until I spent the night in one of these houses that I realized just how "bearable" it was.

The spider webs I have feared all my life helped catch the mosquitoes that give people malaria, and the dirt floor beneath me felt softer and warmer than the concrete I slept on at Boy Scout camps. When I was sweating from the heat, I found the hut was very cool and comfortable. When I was cold at night, I found the hut needed just a tiny lamp to warm it until morning. I fell asleep peacefully and woke up the next day only when the rooster beckoned.

Am I still afraid of spiders? Yes, but at least I know why God made them. Am I likely to force my children to sleep on a dirt floor? No, but at least I know that it's comfortable. The mud hut has always been the home for Acoli people in Northern Uganda. Even rich businessmen will tell you that their first house was a mud hut that they built themselves. The Acoli aren't poor because they live in mud huts. They're poor because of violence, war, drought, and poor infrastructure. In fact, the greatest asset they have is their home. Even the richest businessmen will tell you how much they miss their home in the country and how comfortable they felt when sleeping on the floor.



***Tim teaching local men***

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# The Joy of *Foo-foo*

by Gregory Cruess, *Architecture major*

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“Thunk, thunk, thunk...” Pounding *foo-foo* is hard work. A starchy mass of pounded cassava root, *foo-foo* is the staple dish in Putubiw and the favorite food of anyone you might venture to ask about it. Every evening the women get out their mortars



**Pounding *foo-foo***

(*djoma*) and pestles (*wodul*) and set about the task of making dinner for a host of hungry mouths that cannot wait to swallow the gooey stuff. I’ll be the first to admit that the first time I tried *foo-foo* I did not like it and couldn’t force myself to actually swallow it whole in the manner that one is supposed to eat the dish. But as I witnessed the ritual day in and day out of making this extremely labor intensive meal, I began to see that *foo-foo* was about much more than mere food. I learned for instance that one of the best ways to get a difficult concept across to my students in class at the Junior High School was to somehow relate it back to *foo-foo*. I might have gone overboard with this method sometimes, but more often than not, relating everything from chemical energy to the definition of technology back to that staple dish made sense. It was what they all understood, something that they all loved, and when they heard an *Obruni*, or white person, like me, talking about it, they perked up and listened. Although I didn’t think about it as such at first, I now realize that *foo-foo* worked as a teaching aid

because it was one of the shared cultural traditions that bound this small group of people into a cohesive community.

But it was obviously not just *foo-foo* that made Putubiw a community. Other threads such as the Mfantse language, the chief, farming, and even the brewing of *Akpeteshie*, a strong local gin, were woven together into a fabric that gave the people and their lives meaning and purpose. Everyone lived his or her life according to this structure that, although wracked by the modern world, was still thriving and working to create a vibrant community full of men and women, farmers and teachers, young and old.

When I originally accepted my internship in Ghana many months before, I mentally prepared myself to seek not so much to teach, but instead to be taught by the experiences that I would have over nine weeks during the summer. Still, I could never have prepared myself for the amazing community and culture that I would encounter in Putubiw. Culture in Putubiw is always alive and adapting to the new and constantly changing world in which we live. Things change, but what is good is always passed down, and the *foo-foo* continues to be pounded. I hope to return to my village, sooner rather than later, and I cannot wait to hear the sound of the pestle as that “thunk, thunk, thunk...” leads Putubiw forth into a sound future grounded in the shared traditions of an amazing people.



**Paramount chief being carried through the streets**

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# Welcome to Paradise

by Shannon Coyne, Political Science major

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My first days in Ghana were a whirlwind of spicy market smells and piercing vendor shouts, mixed with layers of humidity, city dirt and nervous anticipation. “Welcome to paradise.” We were caught in the Accra Market by the temperamental weather. Fleeing a storm of dust and rain mixed with the trash and little black plastic bags ubiquitous in Accra, my tour guide’s greeting seemed a bit ironic to me. Certainly, we did seek shelter at a beach-side restaurant overlooking the colorful and lively Accra Harbor. If the day were calmer and I had seen fewer open sewers and heaps of garbage, maybe his greeting would have resonated differently. Despite my desire to see and experience all of Ghana, I felt far from paradise.

A few days later, I found myself in the peaceful village of Putubiw, far from the frenzy of Accra. “You are welcome.” On my first tentative walks on the red dirt road through Putubiw, this greeting calmed my nerves. I heard these words on countless occasions, usually on my way to and from the Putubiw Junior Secondary School, where I taught for nine weeks.

Over time, my steps became less tentative and more confident. I found my stride as I began to feel at home in Putubiw. And I kept hearing the same greeting: “You are welcome.” I soon realized that no matter how long my stay in Putubiw, I would be welcomed in the same way by each individual who crossed my path. Even if she heard her neighbor greet me in the same way last week, the old woman passing me on the road, balancing a basket of cassava on her head and a baby on her back, would take time to pause and utter the same words. Always with a smile, “You are welcome.”

This kind greeting was not unique to Putubiw. I heard the same words walking through the crowded, chaotic streets of big cities and riding a rented bicycle over miles of empty roads through quaint and quiet villages. Even in the sweltering and overcrowded public buses, or *tro-tros*, I found the phrase made me feel at home.

On one particularly memorable *tro-tro* ride, I found myself crammed up against a window as men and women maneuvered, stretched, and climbed over each other to exit and enter the vehicle. A lively young woman sat down almost on top of me. Eating a loaf of freshly baked bread with one hand and texting her friends with the other, she suddenly turned my way. “You are welcome.”

Once again, I was caught by the temperamental weather. Flashes of lightening illuminated the chaotic scene in the *tro-tro* as sheets of rain pounded the roof and flooded the road outside. Gazing out the window, I noticed a group of men sitting in a doorway nearby. Despite the bone-rat-

tling thunder, they all looked perfectly at peace. To my astonishment, I realized that I shared their feeling. I saw the beauty and comedy in this moment of chaos, discomfort, and fear. I felt completely happy and at peace. I glanced at the men once more as the *tro-tro* jolted forward. Above the doorway was written the phrase “This is paradise.” I finally understood the greeting my tour guide had given me on my first days in Accra. Paradise was not to be found on a pristine, sunny beach. I found paradise in the kind greetings of strangers and the peaceful acceptance of chaos and fear.



**Shannon and her students**

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