

Welcome to **Perspectives from Africa**, a newsletter by university students for elementary, middle, and high school students. Through this newsletter we hope that you gain new insights about the countries of Africa from the experiences of those who have lived or traveled there.

Perspectives features articles written by University of Notre Dame students who are from Africa or 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. Since the authors are students at Notre Dame, **they are available to visit your classrooms**. If you are interested in any particular article and would like to meet the author, let us know and we will help arrange that meeting.

Perspectives also lists upcoming local events related to Africa. Once you begin reading and learning about Africa, we hope you will want to participate in as many activities related to the region as possible.

Enjoy the articles and we look forward to seeing you at our events!

Bridging the Gap

by Patrick Kibbe, Program of Liberal Studies

The day before we left our base camp in Fort Dauphin to go to the mountain village of Farafara in the southeast corner of Madagascar, our guides told us that a bridge outside the village was broken and might not be fixed. As an intern for the Malagasy NGO, Azafady, I was working with a group of fellow volunteers to promote sustainable development in the Anosy region of Madagascar. Our specific project was to build a school, well, and latrine in Farafara. The people who live in Farafara are part of the world's extreme poor who live on less than \$1 a day. The closest school is an hour walk away and most kids are not even able to make this trek if they wanted to because they are needed to work in the rice paddies or cassava fields. Worse still is the fact that a staggering one out of every ten children does not live past the age of five. A school, well, and latrine would help ameliorate the dire situation in Farafara and were part of the necessary investments in human capital and infrastructure for the villagers of Farafara to begin the climb out of extreme poverty. But in order for us to make these investments in Farafara, we had to get there first.

We woke up at sunrise the next day – the light, heat, and roosters will not let you sleep

much later – and began to pack a giant diesel *camion* (truck) with all of the building supplies, food, and gear that we would need for our first three weeks in the bush. By the time all of the volunteers, Malagasy guides, and construction team leaders were on the truck, it weighed easily over eight tons – a heavy load for any bridge, least of all a broken one in the middle of rural Madagascar.



The camion on the trek to Farafara, Madagascar

The ride out to Farafara was slow and bumpy. The dirt road was so full of giant potholes that we could not go faster than ten miles an hour. But this was actually a blessing in disguise as the scenery along the way was beautiful. Madagascar is home to some of the most unique plant and wildlife in the world with nearly 80% of its species endemic, or not found anywhere else. We passed giant baobab trees with thick, round trunks five feet in diameter that shot straight up into a crown of tiny branches at the top, carnivorous pitcher plants that eat insects, and jack fruit trees with spiny, swollen fruits the size of a football dangling precariously from branches. Within these forests even stranger creatures were to be found including ring-tailed lemurs, giant hissing cockroaches,

continued on page 4

Using the Pause Button

by Sarah Miller, Political Science & Peace Studies major

Sometimes a shower comes from a passing cloud, a dark spot in a daunting blue sky. Other times the layers of gray clouds stretch to the horizon and the sky pours for hours. In the village of Putubiw, there are no raincoats, no umbrellas, and few working windshield wipers.

Rain can cause everyone's plans to be postponed: rain is Ghana's pause button. Precipitation turns the dirt roads to mud; it is impractical to walk around the village's hill in the rain. Travel to work, meetings, and classes are postponed until the weather improves. At school, teachers cannot talk to their classes because of the noise of rain hammering against the tin roof above.

The pace of life in Ghana is very different from what we know in the United States. The concept of time is fluid and the clock is more suggestion than law. A meeting scheduled for 9 o'clock could start at 9:15 or 10 o'clock. Buses leave when they are full of passengers, not according to a schedule. Events occur when everyone involved is ready, and not before.

I walked to school at 8:15 each morning, but my students rarely began before 8:45. Imagine what it would be like if your school day always began 30 minutes late.



Taking time to blow bubbles

Wouldn't it be great to take your time walking to school, to talk to your friends? But what if your class schedule was shortened by a class or two daily; how much would you miss? There are both drawbacks and advantages to losing the rigid adherence to time that we have in the US.

Everyday life feels more relaxed in Ghana. People take time to greet each other in the mornings. If someone is delayed in arriving to a meeting, the others wait for him or her. It is inefficient to drive a taxi when it is not full so drivers wait until all the seats are filled before leaving.

Learning to be patient and enjoy the new rhythm of life took time. Though occasionally frustrating, I eventually began to like the calm that I felt when I let events happen in their own time. Part of adapting to Ghanaian culture was knowing that my tasks would be completed even if they weren't finished as quickly as I had hoped.

On the days that it rained, plans changed. Sometimes I waited at school for hours before the rain ceased. Sometimes I braved the downpour and was soaked despite my raincoat. Often I saw other women walking home with palm leaves sheltering them from the drops. I enjoyed the spontaneity of my ever-changing schedule. I enjoyed using the pause button.

Students Like You in Uganda

by Jenna Knapp, Anthropology & Peace Studies major

Did you know that in Uganda there are over 50 different languages? This summer I worked for an organization called *Building Tomorrow* in Kampala, Uganda. At the high school where I taught, most of the students spoke 6 or 7 languages! While many people in the United States speak only English, it is necessary here to know many languages so that when you meet people from different parts of the country, you can understand them and become friends. I taught at a primary school as well, and learned from the students at the school that many of them come from different tribes. They each have a tribal name to distinguish their totem from the others, and they each have a tribal dance. They kept asking me what my tribal dance was and I was sad to say that I did not have one. Many were surprised to learn that I grew up speaking English, because they thought English was everyone's second language.

The students taught me so much about their lives. Due to the AIDS epidemic here, most of my students in 1st through 7th grade are orphans. They have lost both of their parents at a very young age to either malaria or AIDS. The majority of them live with other relatives in small mud homes with grass thatched roofs. When they are not in school, they have to dig with hoes on their family farms to cultivate food for their families to eat. They plant foods like sweet potatoes, yams, Irish potatoes, *matoke* (plantains), groundnuts, and cassava for their families to eat throughout the year.



While the students in this area now have a school to attend, most children in the surrounding villages attend school under mango trees outside. They

don't have desks, books, or a water supply nearby. It is difficult for them to pass exams because they are taught in English, which is not their native tongue. Many of the girls as young as 5 years old are responsible for taking care of their baby siblings throughout the day. Can you imagine having such a responsibility at such a young age? I certainly cannot.

While the students in these rural regions experience much more hardship and have many more responsibilities than I did when I was young, they are in many ways just like you and me. They love to learn and play soccer and netball (which is similar to basketball). The girls jump rope with grass reeds at recess and sing songs to hand clapping games. They love singing and dancing, and as soon as they can walk they learn to dance.

To Walk in Another's Clothes. . .

by Jon Kennedy, Political Science & Peace Studies major

Mzungu is very smart.” Whispers and awestruck stares followed me as I walked through my home village of Bugembe. I am a *mzungu*, someone from Europe or the U.S., but on this day I was no ordinary *mzungu*...

Some of my best experiences during my time in Uganda occurred at moments like this when I was wearing a *kanzu*, a traditional Ugandan garment usually reserved for special occasions. People were extremely grateful for my small attempts at integrating into Ugandan culture, and during my 9 weeks in Uganda I had the privilege of wearing my *kanzu* twice: once during an introduction ceremony and then during my farewell dinner at my host organization.



Jon sporting a traditional Kanzu

In Uganda, an introduction ceremony is a pre-wedding event where the groom and his family travel to the bride's home village to meet her family and friends. This may sound like a minor formality, but the ceremony is nearly as important as the wedding itself! Naturally, I was ecstatic when I learned that the program coordinator of my host organization had invited me to join him at his sister's introduction ceremony. The event took place in his home village of Musoli, near the shores of Lake Victoria. I arrived in the village the evening before the ceremony, where the bride's family and friends had already gathered for a night of music and dancing. I crashed around midnight, falling asleep to the sounds of Ugandan feet dancing in the night. The following day, the groom and his family arrived and an elaborate ceremony and delicious food followed. It was fascinating

to watch but the entire event was in the local language of Lusoga, a language in which I know about 15 words. Fortunately, a kind man next to me translated some of the dialogue so I was able to follow along and appreciate an integral part of Ugandan culture.

The second time I had the honor of wearing a *kanzu* was during my farewell ceremony at my host organization. The organization invited friends from the surrounding community and planned an elaborate dinner during my final week in Uganda. The event consisted of short remarks by my co-workers, a delicious meal (including a freshly slaughtered hen for the occasion), and an opportunity for me to practice my Ugandan English. It is tradition for speeches to be made and I hope I did not disappoint anyone with my farewell speech. Numerous digital photographs were taken throughout the event and later that week my organization presented me with a CD of a slide show they had created of my farewell dinner. Words can't describe how grateful and humbled I felt by their kindness.

Ultimately, wearing a *kanzu* provided me with a window into Ugandan society and culture. And I will never forget the view.



Bridging the Gap. . . continued from page 1

terrestrial leeches, and flying foxes – some of the largest bats in the world. The village of Farafara is located in a valley surrounded by mountains on three sides with the Indian Ocean far in the distance on the other. As the *camion* drove slowly into the valley, I soon realized that there was no central “village” like I had been imagining in my head. Rather there were simply scatterings of three or four wood and palm huts grouped together, hardly enough to protect from the wind, rain, and cold nights.

As we continued to roll through the valley, I could see some commotion up ahead – it was the bridge with hundreds of villagers around it. We slowed to a stop and got out of the *camion* to see what would happen. The bridge was not fixed, as the villagers simply did not have any materials to fix it with. But they had carried large rocks down from the mountain and piled them across the stream, creating a makeshift bridge/dam. Although it

was an amazing effort, I was skeptical that the heavy *camion* would make it across. The driver decided to risk it. We crossed the stream on foot and stood there – twenty white *vazahas*, or white people, interspersed between two hundred Malagasy – and watched with bated breath as the *camion* began to rumble over the rocks. It seemed to take forever as it slowly moved across the stream, as two tires and then all four put the *camion*'s massive weight on the

rocks below. I thought for a moment that it would give way as the *camion* teetered to one side, but then, with a wild shout from the crowd, the front tires and then the back reached the other side. I found myself lost in a wave of villagers jumping, shouting, singing, and dancing as the *camion* lumbered past. I looked back to the bridge and saw an old woman on her knees being looked after by one of our guides who later told me that she was simply over-

whelmed because she did not think we would make it to Farafara.

As we got back in the truck to continue to our campsite we were followed the whole way by a group of villagers running, singing, and clapping behind us. I knew before going to Farafara that the work we were going to do there was important. I knew the facts, demographic statistics, and Azafady's plan for sustainable development in the region,

but it was not until seeing the faces of the villagers, the old woman on her knees, and their singing and dancing welcoming us to the village that our work had full meaning. Our arrival in Farafara is something that I will never forget and hope that the work we did there will continue to bring as much hope to the people of Farafara as it did that day.



The view from the newly constructed school house

Africa Events

Fall 2008

11/7-11/8

Human Development Conference: Innovation in the Service of Human Dignity

Hesburgh Center for International Studies, University of Notre Dame
For more information visit <http://kellogg.nd.edu/ford/>

11/8

Visiting Artist Series: Angélique Kidjo

7:30 pm, DeBartolo Performing Arts Center, University of Notre Dame
For more information visit <http://performingarts.nd.edu/>

For more information, contact:

Holly Rivers, Assistant Director, 130 Hesburgh Center (574) 631-6023, hrrivers@nd.edu

Juliana de Sousa Solis, Program Manager, 201 Hesburgh Center (574) 631-8523, jdesousa@nd.edu

<http://kellogg.nd.edu/events/calendar/index.shtml>