

Batuzaala mu Baala

Seeking Connection and Flow in Kampala's Bars

BATUZAALA MU BAALA

In the days surrounding Uganda's 2016 presidential election, the Ugandan musician Daxx Kartel's newly released song "*Baatuzaala mu Baala*" (We were born in bars) was enjoying widespread popularity.¹ Its danceable rhythm was used to call potential supporters to campaign rallies of all political parties, and it served as an apolitical compromise song that could be played in bars otherwise divided by patrons paying to play President Museveni's "*Tubonga Naawe*" (We stand with you) or, alternately, Besigye's opposition song "*Toka kwa Barabara*" (Clear the way). During these tense days of conflict and anticipation, "We Were Born in Bars" afforded temporary opportunities for release and served to create patches of common ground.

In this chapter, we use this song and the role it played in the 2016 election as a starting point for thinking about the historical, social, and experiential aspects of drinking in Uganda. While we would not want to take a functionalist stance, understanding the role that alcohol plays in daily life allows us to better comprehend the stakes of certain forms of sobriety in Uganda. To appreciate what it might mean to try to stop drinking, we have to first come to terms with what, beyond the alcohol, is at stake in movements toward sobriety. With this in mind, in this chapter we put recovery to the side, and focus on the bars themselves and the opportunities they provide for friendship, connection, and movement.

In contemporary Kampala, bars serve as the primary public site for social connection, and this is especially true for men. Bars are spaces of pleasure, friendship, and possibility. They are places for mobilizing social projects and talking politics. They are also crucial sites for connecting to job opportunities—a point that we've found to be equally important to brick makers and business lawyers. It would be easy to see a group of men seated at a roadside bar as embodying

stasis and subject them to the same forms of judgment that afflict the youth who sit in the tea *fadas* of Niger. There, elders describe the lives of youth who sit and drink tea together with the evocative phrase “*kaman kasha wando*,” “the sitting that kills the trousers” (Masquelier 2019, 1). In this chapter, we follow Adeline Masquelier in showing how spaces that seem to be shaped by forms of endless waiting, immobility, and powerlessness can figure as important spaces of belonging and experimentation which enable people “to carve provisional spaces of existential possibility in the face of severely narrowed futures” (4). We show that the bar is experientially and pragmatically seen by these drinkers as a place of movement and flow. It is not only the pleasure that follows as beer and *waragi* flow from bottle to glass to body, but also the pleasure of the flow of money itself in a world where a strict logic of economizing dominates most other spheres of life. There is also the flow of people, friends and strangers alike, who have found themselves there at the bar, looking to get out of the house, to breathe some different air for a while. Between these people, words, ideas, and opportunities flow and people are released—if only for a few hours—from the pressures and tensions of everyday life.

DRINKING HISTORIES

Before moving on to discuss the contemporary place of alcohol in Ugandan society, it is worth pausing for a moment to see how the political, economic, and social history of Uganda shaped patterns of production, sale, and consumption over time. Historians and anthropologists writing on the place of alcohol in precolonial Africa have often described systems that largely restricted access to a limited supply of alcohol to a group of male elders and ancestors who were in turn responsible for ensuring well-being (Willis 2002; Colson and Scudder 1988; Akyeampong 1997). Across much of East Africa, male elders drank in age-restricted groups. Women and youth were only permitted to drink with their permission, and in some cases literally through their straws (Willis 2002, 71).

While beer was still tightly linked to power, the situation differed in the kingdoms of Buganda, Bunyoro, Toro, and Nkore, where multiple forms of power and methods for ensuring well-being were in simultaneous operation (Hanson 2009). Here, beer made by men from fermented banana juice called *tonto* was not limited to groups of elderly agemates. Instead, young kings (*bakabaka*) and other leaders (*batongole*) used beer to recruit and maintain armies of young men, allowing them to use coercive force to expand their kingdoms (Willis 2002, 80–86). The emergence of caravan routes in the nineteenth century provided opportunities for multiple forms of trade and ran alongside the trade in slaves and ivory; it similarly created new possibilities for power and for the sale and distribution of beer. *Tonto* was available as barter for cloth by 1891 and available for cash purchase as early as 1906 (Willis 2002, 91–94). As new sources of power and drink emerged over

the decades that followed, questions concerning who would be allowed to drink became even more acute.

Understanding the dynamics of alcohol production, consumption, and sale in the first half of the twentieth century in East Africa also requires that we understand that East Africa lay in a region delineated as an “uncontaminated zone” in the 1890 Brussels Act. This situation can be contrasted with the situation in much of West Africa where European liquors known as “trade spirits” had been introduced as a form of currency during the slave trade and where the colonial state depended heavily on revenues generated through import taxes on spirits produced in Europe and North America (Akyeampong 1997). While the introduction of imported trade spirits was prohibited in Uganda, colonialism brought with it a host of changes to the material culture and legal system; this had unintended consequences for local practices related to the production, consumption, and sale of alcohol.²

Over the course of the first decades of the twentieth century, brewing for sale became an increasingly popular strategy for people who had to meet colonially imposed cash expenses like taxes and school fees. While *tonto* produced and sold by men would remain the most popular form of alcohol for some time to come, the distilled spirits known as *waragi* and *enguli* would eventually come to take its place among both male and female sellers. Distilled alcohol was unknown in Uganda before the mid-nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, small scale production and distribution among soldiers was tolerated, but after the British accession to the Treaty of St.-Germain in 1919, the protectorate government passed new laws that aimed at not only more tightly regulating the production and sale of *tonto* but also at prohibiting Africans from consuming any spirits (Willis 2002). This law had unintended effects on the market in *waragi*. As the colonial government increased its ability to enforce the regulations and licensing fees they had put into place to control the production and sale of *tonto*, *tonto* production gradually became a less profitable enterprise. People began to look for a better option, and many, especially women, found an answer in *waragi*. As opposed to *tonto*, which spoils after a few days, making it unsuitable for storage and long-distance transport, *waragi* is highly concentrated and can be moved easily over long distances. These same qualities also mean that it can easily be hidden and smuggled, making its illegality less of an issue. Finally, since women could not legally produce and sell *tonto*, they largely left the *tonto* market to men and instead chose to take up the illegal production and sale of *waragi*. During this period, distilled spirits, including the *waragi* that these women were making and selling, were also becoming an increasingly important symbol of power, status, and modernity among local political and economic elites. Their consumption of imported and locally distilled spirits also became an issue of increasing concern to the colonial government,

leading to new ordinances, higher fines, longer prison sentences, and more frequent raids, but these initiatives had little effect, and the market for informally distilled waragi continued to expand (Willis 2007).

After the Second World War, colonial governments in East Africa began to shift tactics with regard to alcohol. In 1947, the government of Uganda granted Africans the right to buy bottled beer in an effort to create a stable black elite that would simultaneously replace Europeans as the consumer base for commercially produced beer in the colonies and, more importantly, steady British control in East Africa. In the following years, colonial rhetoric increasingly cast bottled beer consumption as an important sign of modernity, relegating traditional fermented drinks like tonto to an unhygienic backward past. Through their consumption of European style bottled beer, a small Ugandan elite was being courted by the British and being encouraged to further distinguish themselves from other Ugandans through these new drinking practices. While bottled beers were generally sharply distinguished from spirits, imported spirits also came to play a similar role in lubricating carefully orchestrated rituals of racial mixing among European and African civil servants in the 1940s. In these spaces of privileged consumption, Europeans sought to create narrow openings through which a small number of Africans could use their enactment of European definitions of cultural refinement to access a certain form of modernity and power.

Yet, the new laws around bottled beer and the meticulous staging of multiracial sundowners did little to address the ever-growing colonial concerns over informally produced waragi, which offered access to “a kind of modernity not mediated by Europeans” (Willis 2002, 226). In 1949, the government of Uganda charged a committee with the task of investigating the waragi trade. Their report, produced in 1951, fundamentally redefined the nature of the problem by narrowing the focus on the toxins and fluctuating potency of illicit distillates and by carving out a new possibility for modern formally-produced distilled spirits that went far beyond the gradualism of earlier regulatory attempts. In this way, Justin Willis writes, the “report was firmly located in a new debate about how the developmentalist post-war state should manage African contact with modernity, in which alcohol played an important part” (2007, 82).

The recommendations of the report were carried forward by Andrew Cohen, who became governor of Uganda in 1952. In 1955, and in violation of both the Brussels Act and the Treaty of St.-Germain, Cohen succeeded in his attempts to change the law prohibiting Africans from buying spirits in Uganda. Yet, given the price of European spirits, this change in the law did little to change illicit distillation practices or drinking patterns. Given the limited impact of this legal solution, Cohen went on to propose a local distillery capable of producing “a clean spirit at a competitive price” (Willis 2007, 83). Cohen also thought that commercial alcohol production could boost the sugarcane industry. The government in Kenya,

however, feared that domestically manufactured spirits would threaten the colonial economy due to the loss of import duties. This opposition made it impossible for Uganda to move forward with its plan.

Following independence in 1962, Uganda was free to put these disagreements with Kenya aside and established a new committee of inquiry under the leadership of Eriya Babumba. In an effort to balance his desire to provide people with a safe alternative to informally distilled waragi with the need to avoid alienating the vast network of Ugandans involved in the waragi economy, Babumba, inspired by models in Ghana and Sierra Leone, devised a system whereby informal enguli producers would be able to sell their product to a central distillery for redistillation and bottling. This system was codified in the 1965 Enguli Act, a document that redefined Waragi, capital W, as a commercially distilled spirit that was fundamentally different from the informally produced distillate enguli.

While the first bottles of Uganda Waragi were shipped out for sale in May 1965, the system ultimately did little to quell the informal trade in enguli. There were few licenses available, and the amount the distillery could purchase was very limited. Further, producers found they could charge local consumers less than half of what they would be charged for a bottle of Uganda Waragi and still make more than they would if they sold to the distillery; also, there was little enforcement of the prohibitions against the sale of raw enguli directly to consumers. By 1989, the central distillery was no longer buying from local producers, opting instead to use industrially produced sugarcane distillates.

Questions of temperance and treasury remain important in Uganda today. There is little doubt that part of the state's interest in more tightly regulating the sale and production of alcohol stems from their interest in capturing the 172,000,000 USD lost each year to the "fiscal leakage" of untaxed informal production (Euromonitor Consulting 2016). In this aim, the government is joined by lobbyists working across sub-Saharan Africa on behalf of the multinational drinks industry who would very much like to capture a larger share of the market by forcing people currently drinking informally produced alcoholic beverages to shift to their bottled beers and spirits (Bakke and Endal 2010).

Indeed, the lack of interest in the problem of alcohol in the early 2000s, discussed in the introduction, was something of an outlier, with the regulation of the production and sale of alcohol again becoming a matter of heated debate during the years we were conducting the research that informs this book. This debate was complicated by the range of stakeholders involved, with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Cooperatives on the one hand, and the multinational alcohol industry and civil society organizations on the other, squaring off. While measures were proposed, and even passed by some local governments that would restrict drinking hours and regulate the sale of alcohol to minors, the majority of the debate centered on the production and sale of the small cheap plastic sachets of waragi known as tot packs. Concerns over tot packs

and informally distilled waragi were not simply related to their popularity among heavy drinkers. Rather, these concerns focused on the accessibility of this form of alcohol to schoolchildren—because of its low cost and the ease with which it can be concealed in a pocket or school bag (Edyegu 2009)—and on the frequency with which the methylated spirits that sometimes found their way into the tot packs were resulting in death and blindness (Okungu 2010; Ahimbisibwe 2010; Anguyo and Masaba 2012). Bills aimed at developing national alcohol policies were proposed in 2009 and 2016, but battles between the ministry of trade and the ministry of health prevented them from becoming law. In 2019, Uganda passed the National Alcohol Control Policy.³ This policy banned the tot packs and restricted the hours that bars could be opened. While the ban on tot packs has effectively removed them from the market, people have shifted toward unpackaged, informally produced enguli, which producers pour from jerry cans directly into bottles brought by their customers.

GOING OUT

In Uganda today, bars are crucial sites of sociality. It might even be possible to say that they are the primary form of public space. While one might chat briefly with friends at the market or on the cement veranda of a small shop, bars are virtually the only place a person can go for any kind of leisure or sustained social interaction outside of the house, workplace, or religious institutions. Given that the world of the house and compound is largely dominated by women and children, bars are especially important places for men, a fact essential for understanding the specific challenges faced by men who decide to stop drinking.

One would be hard-pressed to find tonto for sale in a bar today. While tonto can be found for sale in some villages, in the city its role is largely limited to its place as one of the few required items found among the bride-wealth offerings brought by the groom's family to the bride's during the increasingly elaborate *kwanjula* ceremony. Its rarity is not due to a complete urban rejection of traditional drinks. Rather it is the extreme scarcity of the specific varieties of bananas, primarily *kisubi* and *kayinja* (*musa*), that are used to produce it, most of which have been attacked by banana wilt. While some brewers are experimenting with adding sugars and other types of genetically modified bananas, it remains a comparatively expensive beverage.

By contrast, the freshly brewed grain beers historically drunk in the eastern and northern regions of the country are readily available in many outlying neighborhoods in Kampala. Located off the main roads, behind the other stalls and shops, one can find groups of people drinking *malwa*, warm and thick with millet, out of communal clay pots through long straws made of dried reeds. The bars smell faintly of dried millet and urine, as there are no toilets. Shaded by a tarp or a small, thatched hut, seated on wooden benches, the drinkers are served by the woman

who is both the brewer and seller of the drink. These drinkers are usually older people, at least in middle age, and mostly Bateso, Acholi, and Luo. Together they can meet at these bars to talk and enjoy recordings of traditional music played loudly on the speakers. Some *malwa* bars are organized around more formal drinking clubs, and larger *malwa* bars may be divided into named sections, often named for the English premier league teams, where different groups of drinkers sit with their pots on a regular basis.

Closer to the road one finds small bars in blocks of one-room *muzigo* apartments that share an outdoor toilet and bathing area with the apartments themselves. These bars are usually managed by a single woman and “the girl,” an attractive young woman who will have been hired to serve the drinkers and attract them to the bar. The drinks include bottled beer, plastic tot packs of waragi, and sodas served from a small refrigerator. These small bars might also sell any number of domestically produced drinks. These might include tonto, *kwete* or *umkom-boti* (brewed from maize), *kaliga* (brewed from yeast and sugar), and *omunanasi* (brewed from pineapples, tea, and ginger). These bars might also have enguli or crude waragi available for purchase. There are usually two or three plastic chairs for seating, and a TV and DVD player might be placed in a corner, with Ugandan music videos playing most of the time. A small foam mattress and blanket, the bed for the girl, are rolled up and hidden in the corner, to be taken out and unrolled once the bar closes. The customers, almost exclusively men—*boda boda* drivers taking a break, small-time land brokers arranging a sale—usually come alone. They come for the drinks, but mostly they come to see the girl, hoping that they might finally get a chance with her. If the girl leaves the bar to return home or work somewhere else, they will stop coming and find another place to drink. Everyone wants to buy for her in hopes of winning her favor. This she may use to her advantage, allowing the men to pay for her beer and then drinking from a beer bottle that she has refilled with water in advance, allowing her to keep the money the men have spent on the beer for herself. This additional income is crucial as these girls might only be paid 50,000 UGX a month, plus meals and “lodging” in the form of that thin rolled-up mattress in the corner.

Slightly larger bars have more amenities. Besides the chairs and the TV, there might be sofas, a pool table, or even a jukebox. A much larger refrigerator will be filled with a larger selection of bottled beers and sodas, and there will also be bottles and tot packs of formally distilled waragi for sale. There may even be a few rooms for people to stay the night. Since they are more spacious, patrons can easily move the chairs around, sometimes carrying them outside, to sit wherever they wish. Most of the people who come to these bars are men. They also have more customers, making them important places for the forms of movement and sociality discussed later in the chapter. Some might come alone, but such bars also serve as meeting points for groups of friends, coworkers, and local government officials. A few women might also come, in hopes that someone will buy for them, but these

women are largely taken to be people with serious drinking problems, and they are rarely successful in their requests for free drinks. The women who own these bars also serve as counselors and confidantes to men who have come to the bar seeking solace and advice when they are having trouble at work or at home with their partners.

Closer to the center of town and near the universities, one finds bigger bars. These enormous and sometimes elaborately decorated spaces are typically quiet until late at night, their customers still at work or preferring to start their night at the smaller, cheaper bars on the back streets. Along the suburban highways there are also large bars and pork joints, some with occasional concerts and elaborate thatched shades overlooking the lake.

The colonial signification of bottled lager-style beer, as the drink of the modern wage laborer, has remained true across all of these spaces and is incessantly pointed out on billboards and other advertisements for beer. This is especially true of the higher-end brands like SABMiller's subsidiary company Nile Breweries Limited's flagship brand, Nile Special, whose enormous billboards featuring slogans like "The True Reward of Progress" cover the pedestrian bridges spanning Uganda's main highways. In 2015, an especially memorable Nile Special campaign featured a lineup of male workers, each in distinctive attire—a judge in a curly white wig and robe, a construction worker in a hard hat, a businessman in a suit. Above the men, the billboard proclaimed, "Here's to the men who do an honest hard day's work. . . . We salute you. You've Earned It." The association between wage earning and beer drinking is also true of entry level brands, like Nile Breweries' Eagle, brewed from local sorghum, sold for approximately half the price of a Nile Special, and targeted at people who might be lured away from cheaper locally brewed drinks like *malwa* and *umkomboti*. Eagle's ads replicate the lessons about the relationship between beer, time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism (Thompson 1967) found in Miller's iconic American slogan "It's Miller Time." In Uganda, the ads for Eagle depict wage-laboring construction workers, hard hats prominently positioned on the table, pointing to their watches (which read 3:59 p.m.) and toasting their day's work as an eagle soars over a sunset (which is occurring three hours early), all emblazoned with the slogan "*Saawa ya Eagle*" (It's Eagle time). Bell, humorously said to be favored by grandmothers given its low ABV, won favor in China with its 2007 ad campaign, which promised that "Bell evenings are followed by clear mornings"; these words were sung to an energizing pop melody played over a video showing middle-class news broadcasters enjoying a drink together at night and getting up to produce the early morning program the next day without a hangover.

In the final years of this project, this pictorial discourse around bottled beer and modern middle-class identity was taken in a new direction with ads for Club and Nile Gold that featured images of young cosmopolitan women and slogans that pointed to the originality and superior taste of the beers in question. The

Black Bell billboard depicted a young man dressed in red sneakers abstractly flying through a cloud of golden dust. Its slogan promised consumers the chance to “Go Full Flavor, Go Next Level,” inviting well-educated young people to try something new and to further distinguish themselves (Bourdieu 1984) from their parents and from drinkers of the now commonly available brands.⁴

Waragi and enguli also remain popular. At bigger bars, one might find drinkers buying bottles of nationally branded Uganda Waragi, but the hotly contested tot packs were more common during the period of our research. These were certainly drunk in bars, but they could also be bought at nearly any shop, supermarket, market, or even from roadside sellers. As noted above, these tot packs are small and cheap and could easily be slipped into the pocket of a jacket, to be taken later or on the go, a practice said to be common among *boda boda* motorcycle taxi drivers as they pass the time waiting at their stages for customers. Enguli is available for sale in both urban and rural areas. It can be bought by the bottle (usually a 350ml Fanta bottle) in small bars or from the homes of a small number of older women who are known to keep a 5L jerry can of enguli for sale. These older women sell mostly to men, or to the children who are sent to buy for them.

WOMEN

Women are not expected to drink in the way that men are, but women in Uganda do drink on occasion, and in some cases drink quite heavily. That said, women’s relationship to alcohol, and more specifically to the social institution of the bar, is complicated. Unmarried women and girls are admonished by their families to avoid bars, and married women are advised only to visit them with their husbands’ consent. While men do bring women to bars to demonstrate their prestige, or look for women in bars who they might be able to buy for and thus secure as a sexual partner, to go to a bar in hopes of meeting a man who might buy for her puts a woman in a potentially dangerous situation. Women who frequent bars are stigmatized due to the assumption that their drinking is made possible by their willingness to have sex with men who will buy for them. Mockingly called *malaya* (prostitute), *gaali ekozeeko* (used bicycle), and “football”—that is, kicked by whoever finds it—women in bars face a series of reputational risks that men do not. Women are also at real risk of being raped or killed if they pass out before reaching home (Wolff et al. 2006). For all these reasons, it is more common for women to drink at home or at large family celebrations where they can feel free to enjoy themselves.

That said, there are some women, especially female university students, who do go out to bars more frequently, often hopping between multiple bars in the same night in hopes of finding men with resources, jokingly referred to as “sponsors” in current slang, for a night or for a lifetime. Women looking for men might also pose as bar attendants, taking men’s money and buying their drinks for

them at the counter, in hopes of striking up a financially beneficial relationship. They also go simply to have fun. During her student days at Makerere, Sarah often went out in the company of friends. Heading for a bar or a house party where at least one person in the group has a personal connection—"my friend's friend's boyfriend has a bar where we can go"—they would rely on the links of an interpersonal chain of trust for some measure of security and confidence that there would be someone to help them if things were to go wrong. One of the women would also avoid drinking until they got home, serving as the security for the rest, making sure they got home all right. While women often buy the first round of drinks themselves, when they go out to a bar there is also a hope that one of them will meet a man, usually an older man, who will buy not only for her, but for the whole group of friends. The aim of hooking a man who will make such purchases is less to actually drink the drinks in the bar than it is to secure alcohol and cash that can be taken home and shared in the privacy and comfort of their own rooms. Being savvy university women, they might engage two men in this way at the same time, with one being instructed to fund a "standing order" by giving a lump sum of money to the bar attendant and the other ordering drinks for the women as they need them. While both men think they are the one purchasing the drinks the women are holding, the women collect the money given for the "standing order" from the bar attendant as they head for home. Alternatively, they might order two beers at once, one cold and one warm. Since only one of these beers will be opened at the bar, they can easily carry the second home with them.⁵ Women employed in sales might also visit bars with possible clients in the hopes of closing business deals. When Sarah was working in a corporate sales job, men who had failed to give her business during the day could be lured to the bar after work. There, as they thought they were in the process of poaching her, she could get them to break a business deal while drunk.

This said, outside of the narrow range of contexts where women can drink with minimal reputational risk, women who frequent bars endure a great deal of physical and emotional pain, and this can lead them to drinking even more as a way of numbing this pain. Safe in their homes and beds, they might drink what they have brought home from the bar or what they have stocked in their "mini-bars" of tot packs and bottles of waragi stashed secretly and out of sight. The stigma of drinking can also make it more difficult for women to seek treatment. The experience of being ostracized by their families and by society as a whole can lead them to retreat further into isolation or into the small bars where they have been able to find a measure of friendship and acceptance. When they do seek treatment in formal rehabilitation centers, they are further stigmatized by the men in those centers. They are treated as if their lives are wasted, unrecoverable, and their stories are treated as gossip. Women who are also celebrities have even more to fear as their admissions to rehabilitation centers are hot topics for tabloid journalists.

OGULA OMWENGE?

At the bar, it is not only the drinking, but also the experience of spending, that is the pleasure. People buy for themselves, and they buy for each other, setting aside the tensions and pressures of economizing that rule in everyday life. *Malwa* pots are refilled, bottles of waragi are shared, and rounds of beer are bought for the table, or even for the whole bar. In contemporary Luganda slang, to go out on the town is signified by the phrase *kulya kaasi*, to eat cash.⁶ When one finally has a job or otherwise finds themselves with money, they might go out drinking “to wash off the dust of poverty.” As this phrase indicates, treating oneself and one’s friends to a drink is especially important in moments of transition out of difficulty. In a world where money is usually carefully budgeted, resources painstakingly conserved, the bar provides a unique site for the enjoyment and enactment of indulgence and unchecked generosity. As the anthropologist Gregor Dobler writes about Namibia, bars enable “self-assertion in the context of economic deprivation,” providing “one of the few experiences of detachment from the plight of everyday life” (2010, 188). While an analysis of consumption might have us focus on the pleasures people take in the items consumed, the Ugandan bar helps us to focus on the pleasure of spending itself, the bar providing a moment of relief from the ever-pressing need to economize.

While one might enjoy the occasional drink purchased by another and might very much hope to be in a bar when someone with means is buying for the table or even for the whole bar,⁷ the ability to buy for oneself and for others constitutes an important marker of status. Sarah fondly remembers having thrown a party on her twenty-first birthday at which she spent more than one month’s salary buying crates of beer and large quantities of roasted meat for her workmates. They danced the night away, and Sarah basked in her newfound esteem. Some of the friendships that were started that night are still important sources of support and joy in her life. Indeed, the status marker of being able to purchase alcohol for others is so widely understood that when children refuse to do something for their parents, their parents might ask the rhetorical question “*Ogula omwenge?*” (Do you buy alcohol?). While this question might seem like a strange one to ask of a child who has just refused to help with the laundry, it is intended in the same way that an American parent might ask “Who do you think you are?” of a child who has similarly refused to bow to their authority. In the question “*Ogula omwenge?*” and in the negative answer that is sure to follow, the parent both asks the child to reflect on their relative unimportance and reveals the reach of this way of reckoning social status. Indeed, the much-mocked figure of the *kanywa mugule* is ridiculed precisely because he asks others to buy for him, the name literally meaning “Buy and give it to me.”

While there are no doubt questions of status tied up with buying, we also want to highlight the pleasures and forms of relief tied up in the spending itself and the

ways that these pleasures are connected with larger dynamics of tension and flow. While money certainly does allow alcohol to flow, it is also the alcohol itself that makes the pleasurable flow of money possible. As the iconic *kadongo kamu* musician Paul Kafeero put it in his song “*Dipo Nazigala*” (I closed the depot), in which he sang about his own efforts to stop drinking, “The one on the head buys the next bottle,” highlighting how the effects of alcohol loosen one’s purse strings. While the effects of alcohol might lead one to forget one’s problems, the spending itself is also a form of relief from the ever-present need to worry over money. Importantly, while the pleasure of spending was at one point limited by what one had in one’s pocket and what the barkeeper was willing to sell on credit, mobile money apps have now made it possible for a person to drink through a more substantial portion of their savings.

PULEESA, STRESS, AND TENSION

The strain from which one might seek relief in the bar most often takes the form of mounting demands and misfortunes. In both city and village, people refer to this feeling with the English cognate *puleesa* (pressure). In the city, this feeling may also be referred to with the English word “stress,” whether the conversation is occurring in English or Luganda. This is the feeling of the press of demands, usually for money. It may come when you have gone to collect a child from school who has been chased home for lack of fees and while you are there, you get a call from the school of another child threatening to do the same, all the while thinking that your landlord may soon be coming to evict you. “*Oh, nina puleesa*” (I have a lot of pressure on me). Your boss at work may be demanding many things from you. Or the bank is calling you about the loan you’ve failed to pay back. While this experience of pressure and stress is often caused by a lack of money, people sometimes seek relief from it by letting the last of what is in their pocket enter the flow of the bar. Men escape from pressure, escape the air of the house and compound, dense with women and the ever-present reminders of their unmet responsibilities to them, escape the office boss and his constant demands, escape the pressures of upcoming exams, to the friendship and flow of the bar.

Poverty and inequality clearly play major roles as sources of these forms of pressure. Understanding the historical roots of the economic problems that shape life in contemporary Uganda requires understanding the impact of many historical factors including the precolonial trade in both slaves and ivory, the cash crop export economy imposed during the colonial period by the British, the destruction of this fragile and highly unequal economy by the governments of Milton Obote and Idi Amin, and the economic impacts of neoliberalism as it has been embraced by Museveni’s government (Mutibwa 1992; Reid 2017; Brett 1972; Greco, Martiniello, and Wiegratz 2018). While a full review of this history is beyond the scope of this book, it is important for readers to understand that the economic

difficulties experienced by those whose stories we tell in this book are part of much larger historical processes and not of their own making.

Given the limited opportunities for formal employment in the public and private sectors, many of Kampala's residents support themselves and their families through work in the informal economy. They drive *boda boda* motorcycle taxis, hawk used clothes, sell snacks, and work other petty jobs. While these informal microenterprises may have been heralded by neoliberal development organizations in the 2000s (Mallaby 2004; Elyachar 2005; Scherz 2014), the establishment of the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) in 2010 put these informal vendors at risk. Seeking to transform a city "littered with vendors," the KCCA enforcement officers arrested and impounded their wares in the name of order and cleanliness (Doherty 2021). This situation has compounded the precarity of Kampala's youth by further narrowing the available options for securing a livelihood and amplifying the *pulesa* and stress of everyday life.

Tension is something quite different. As opposed to the pressure and stress created by a series of mounting and all too certain demands, tension is the feeling of facing an uncertain future. It is the feeling of waiting for news about a job application. Waiting for an upcoming visa interview. Waiting to know the results of a medical test. Where stress and pressure might call for a night of distraction and forgetting, tension suspends. The appetite is gone. Music is annoying. You want to be alone and wait it out in silence, with your goosebumps (*olutiko*) and racing heart. The moment for the bar is after, once the news, good or bad, has come; the bar is what draws a line between the suspended time of tension and the life that still lies ahead.

The situation during the 2016 Ugandan general election was tense. The Democratic Alliance (TDA) campaign slogan "*Omusajja agenda*" (The man is leaving) spoke of the TDA's determination to see the NRM government, which had been in power since 1986, finally go. In response to these ambitions, government security forces marched through the streets of Kampala armed with AK-47 rifles, claiming to protect traders from would-be rioters. At the same time, foreign companies were said to be taking their capital out of the country, and many Ugandans with means and families abroad left for short-term work or holidays.

While there was less concern about violence in regard to the district, sub-county, and parliamentary elections taking place during the same month, the outcomes of these elections were also less certain, and they likewise generated a great deal of effort and anxious waiting. This state of anticipation was shared by one of this book's coauthors. In February 2016, George campaigned for a second time for a post as a district councillor, which would allow him to represent his town council to the district. George and his team campaigned hard, pinning up posters and hiring a truck with a loudspeaker to broadcast his campaign speeches. Many supporters promised to vote for him, and it seemed possible that he could win.

During the time of vote counting on election day, he was “on tension” awaiting the results. His heart panicked as he worried about receiving bad news. He worried about the money he had invested in the campaign. He worried that he might come to know what people really thought about him. He decided to leave the counting place until the votes were tallied. He bought a bottle of water and went to the home of Sarah’s mother, a longtime friend and confidante. He told her that he wanted to sleep while he waited for the votes. She sympathized with him and gave him a mat to lie on in her sitting room. She even gave him a radio and advised him to listen to results from other places. He only told one person on his campaign team where he had gone and asked the man to come for him if he emerged as the winner. He switched off his phone. The water helped a little bit, but the radio did not; he heard but never listened to any of what they said.

Thinking after a while that the counting might be done, he reluctantly switched on the phone. His heart was beating so hard that if there had been anyone near him, they could have heard it beating. He was glad that Sarah’s mom had gone away to feed her animals. After twenty minutes, he didn’t hear his phone ringing. He checked the signal, and it was on. He wondered, “What might have happened? Is it that everyone fears to call to tell me the bad news?” He tried to call the person at the tally center, and he didn’t pick up. This was a bad sign. The man at the tally center eventually picked up the phone and told him, “George, the results from other stations have not yet come to me.” George asked, “What about where you are? How has it been?” The man said “Here, the other man has beaten us. But don’t worry; we may beat him double in the other voting areas.” George called another man from a very rural place and the man said, “We have been beaten. But I am sure that we shall replace them at the center!” The man had not heard what had happened at the center. George knew he had lost.

Wanting to put the tension behind him, George called his *boda boda* driver to come for him. Reaching the bar where he had always held meetings with his friends, people cheered and told him, “You are our hero, despite the results.” Then each one asked the bar lady to give him a bottle. Eventually, it felt like they were the winners. The owner of the bar put on high music and asked George to dance. He did because he felt good, knowing that he had done all he could. He called his mother and when she heard his happy voice, a heavy burden was lifted from her; she had been so worried about how he might feel if he lost. He felt like a free man, released from the tension that had held him in a state of paralysis as he lay on the floor of Sarah’s mother’s house waiting for the results.

The tension, the anxious state of suspended action, began to break as soon as George knew he had been defeated. But it was the cheering crowd at the bar, the alcohol itself, the music, and the encouragement to dance that allowed for his reentry into the normal flow of movement and connectivity. While George’s story represents a major moment of his life, the role of the bar as a space for relieving paralyzing states of tension through the flow of alcohol and money occurs in more

mundane ways as well. As people sit with the tensions of uncertain futures and the pressures of landlords knocking at the door demanding rent, the bar provides a space apart where those worries recede from view.

MOVEMENT

The movement found in the release from states of suspense and tension is joined by a second kind of movement that is perhaps even more central to the role that bars play for people in Uganda, and especially for men. This is the way that bars figure as spaces for movement, possibility, and the generation of new ideas and opportunities. Like the tactics of those involved in the opportunistic *kukiya-kiya* (zig-zag) economy in Zimbabwe, economic life in Uganda depends on constant movement (Jones 2010). As Jeremy Jones writes of Zimbabwe, “There is no guarantee of finding money in a given time and place . . . [and] this in turn requires movement. . . . [T]he more a person moves around, the more opportunities he/she encounters, the more people he/she meets, and the wider his/her network grows” (292). While many of the *kukiya-kiya* activities Jones describes involve more of a “setting aside” (294) of rules than those activities we are interested in here, his point about the necessity of movement and the value placed on mobility itself (cf. Melly 2017) is what resonates with so much of what we have heard from Ugandan men about the necessity of getting out of the house and putting oneself in the path of opportunity.

Bars not only figure as spaces where one can conjure plans with friends or come to feel like a winner in the face of defeat; they also serve as concrete sites for creating other forms of movement and belonging. This was certainly true of the small roadside bar called Kafene where we spent many long afternoons and evenings over the course of this project. Kafene lies on the edge of the Kampala-Entebbe highway, in what was a village and is now a rapidly gentrifying suburb. While the tiled bottled-beer bar and pork joint is primarily frequented by middle-class commuters and *matatu* drivers, who park their cars and *matatus* at the roadside as they stop to enjoy the expertly prepared banana leaf-bound bundles of brothy pork *luwombo*, the most regular customers are casual laborers working in construction and brickmaking for the posh new bungalows that increasingly cover the hillsides south of Kampala.

The outdoor seating area is calm and shaded by mango and jackfruit trees. Under the trees are a pair of rough wooden benches fixed together in the corner to make a long L, along with white plastic chairs and tables that can be moved and arranged as needed. Two one-room bars open onto this packed dirt patio. The first sells bottled beer and tot packs and bottles of waragi. The women who sell from this bar circulate among the drinkers on the patio and in the pork joint taking orders for drinks. When addressing the customers they drop back on their heels so that their knees nearly touch the floor in the traditional gesture of respect.

The other bar is furnished with low tables and low wooden armchairs with wide, sloping backs. To one side of the room are shelves and cabinets with containers of different locally made drinks. While the *umkomboti* drinkers often bring their liter-size yellow jerry cans out to the tables under the trees to sip the thick contents through plastic straws, at night the small enclosed *umkomboti* bar also fills with younger men and women, bathed in the green light of overhead bulbs and enjoying the music played loud on the speakers in the adjacent beer bar.

But now it is still afternoon, a beautiful sunny Saturday afternoon in mid-March 2018, and George is stopping by for a visit. George used to come here with his wife Agnes years ago to eat pork before they married, when she was still teaching at a nearby nursery school. Now living in a different part of town, he hadn't returned in years, but as we began this project in 2015, he began visiting again on a regular basis with the hope that Kafene might help us to think about the place of alcohol in Ugandan life.

The open window of the pork butchery is filled with big pieces of freshly slaughtered meat hanging on thick metal wires. There is also some being roasted, mostly hooves and ears, and the place is filled by the strong smell of roasting meat. Two women are busily tying *luwombo* while another is preparing a fire for their steaming. Cars and trucks are packed together by the roadside, their owners stopping in to grab roasted, fried, or fresh pork to take home with them.

There are men seated around a table sipping Ngule beer and a few taking *umkomboti*. Among them is Willy Ssali, whom George has come to know well over the years since we started the project, and George easily takes a seat next to him. Despite George's protests, Ssali flips open his small black flip phone to make a few quick calls to let his friends Sam Ddamba and Phillip Kayongo know that George has arrived. These three men sit with each other at Kafene nearly every day. Ssali was born and grew up in this village, and Ddamba and Kayongo came from villages in Masaka in search of work in the 1990s.

Bricklaying was their primary employment, but since the village is near the shores of Lake Victoria, they also learned to fish. It was in fishing where they made the money that allowed Ddamba and Kayongo to buy their plots of land. Ssali did not need to buy land because his family already owned a big *kibanja* on which they have a family graveyard, and Ssali was allocated a part of the *kibanja* for himself and his growing family.

Ssali, the most talkative of the trio, says that by the time his friends came to stay, the area was a typical village, with thick forests and swamps. They fetched water from wells. There were wild animals that destroyed the food in their gardens. The population of the area was low, and each family knew each other, supporting one another in times of both sorrow and happiness. Many families had graveyards around the village because they had long held large plots of land. Ssali recalls being frightened by the darkness at night as a child as he passed through forests and banana plantations.

Now, twenty years later, the area has drastically changed. Given the village's proximity to both the capital and the airport, it is considered an area of prime land, and many people have come to settle in this place that was once a village. Ssali says that a day cannot pass without land being bought in the area. Those who buy are mainly government or NGO workers willing to pay any price. "They never bargain because they have the money to spend," says Ssali.

In the past, this land was mostly used for subsistence and commercial farming. Now it is mostly residential, with huge bungalows lining the road. The dirt roads are rutted from the posh cars moving to and from the main road. Some of the new houses are imposing two- or even three-story mansions. At the same time, the small older houses remain alongside, inhabited by their original owners, even as those owners have sold parts of their plots to the new people in the area. There are also landowners who refuse to sell, mainly because they do not want to part with their family's land. Because of this, it is not uncommon to find a garden of beans neighboring a three-story house.

All of this new construction has also created jobs for builders and providers of local building materials, including Ddamba, Ssali, and Kayongo. Bricks are in high demand and every morning site owners or their brokers are out looking for bricks to buy or people to hire who can make them on-site. These three friends now make bricks to sell to the new landowners to earn a living. Each of them can make bricks individually, but most times they are hired as a group to make them at the site. They dig and pile the earth, then mix it with water and soften it using their feet. Then they heap the soil into a mound and leave it for a week or two to cure. Then they mix it again with water and put the wet soil in wooden molds of their desired size. They all say that the most difficult part is firing the bricks in a furnace. This has to be heated with firewood, which, due to increasing population pressure and the production of bricks like these, is becoming less available.

For brickmakers like Willy Ssali and his friends, Kafene provides a crucial site for connecting with people who might hire them. As Ddamba put it, "Drinking helps me to get useful friends and job opportunities, which I wouldn't get if I was a *mulokole* [born-again Christian] who sat at home. . . . One day I came here to pass time. I had not worked on that day and decided to have a walk. As soon as I reached here, my friends told me of a house that needed a new roof. We negotiated about the payment, and I earned 150,000 UGX. I had come here just to pass time but went back with that money."

Bars also figured as sites for business opportunities for those not involved in manual labor. Mark Ssekandi is a corporate lawyer who was a patient at the exclusive Lakeview rehabilitation center, discussed in the following chapter. He was the son of one of the first Ugandans allowed to join the all-white Kampala Club in the last days of the British protectorate and now, being himself a member of that private club, conducted his business of helping entrepreneurs formalize and register their enterprises from a seat beneath the shade of a tree in the club's lush

gardens or from the back of a passenger van that he had outfitted “like a board-room” and which he parked on the club’s premises.

For all of their differences, these men all saw bars as putting them in the pathway of opportunity and removing them from the dangerous stagnation of the house. While proverbs like “the one who does not settle down never gets chance to eat a miser’s chicken,” and “the one with two homes dies of hunger” warn drinkers against spending so much time loitering in bars, men are also admonished to get out of the house so that opportunity might find them, and often the only place to go is the bar. There are many Luganda sayings that work along these lines. “Avoid sitting in one place.” “A free goat feeds better than one on the rope.” “The one who does not travel thinks that his mother is the best cook.” “An opportunity is like the wind”—meaning that it blows through quickly, so you must be prepared and in the right place at the right time. These proverbs speak to the value placed on movement, experience, traveling, and putting yourself in the pathway of opportunity more generally. While bars may sometimes be spaces of excessive loitering, they also figure as precisely the kinds of places where such opportunities might be found. While we might think of drinkers, and especially daytime drinkers, as retreating from work and movement, here the potential for connection and conversation allows for the real or imagined possibility of work and forward momentum.

FRIENDSHIP

Bars like Kafene are also central sites for building and maintaining friendships between men. While they work together, Willy Ssali, Sam Ddamba, and Phillip Kayongo drink with each other at Kafene nearly every day. Whether or not they have money to spend, they know that they can come and either buy for others or let others buy for them—trading rounds not just in a night, but over months and years. As they sit, they exchange ideas about work, politics, and women. They swap stories of funny things that happened to them in the past. And they come together to support one another both emotionally and financially in times of celebration and sorrow.

While this is particularly true among men, the bar also serves as an important site for care and friendship among women, and particularly for those women who feel excluded from more typical sites of female friendship. Glenda, a woman whom we followed over the course of a long series of engagements with inpatient rehabilitation programs, lived for years in the cramped one-room bar of a woman named Deborah. Marginalized by the prosperous relatives who raised her after her parents died, Glenda found a home in this bar and a true friend in Deborah. Deborah looked after her in the ghetto, stayed with her in the hospital as she lay in danger of dying from tuberculosis, and visited her regularly while she sought inpatient treatment in the drug and alcohol unit at the national psychiatric hospital.

In the following chapter, you will hear these friendships trivialized as people are encouraged to avoid their former “partners in crime,” to change their “people and places.” While spending time in bars might indeed prove difficult for some, we do want to highlight the implicit assumptions that little of worth will be lost in this transition and that there will surely be other places where the ex-drinker can go to rebuild a different set of social connections. Thinking about bars not only as spaces of recreation, but as sites for opportunity and for building of productive connections and deep friendships, helps us to understand why the advice to avoid bars and old friends might be quite worrisome.

In Uganda, one cannot simply pick up and start over again. Finding a home, a job, or even someone trustworthy enough to repair one’s car fundamentally depends on being positioned within a dense web of trusting relationships. While relationships forged in bars, like all relationships, are not universally positive, they are indeed relationships and cannot be severed without cost. These relations and the forms of mobility they enable are put at risk when someone decides to stop drinking. With this in mind, we ask how and in what ways the therapeutic pathways explored in the chapters that follow address this situation. Do they allow for the continuity of old friendships on new terms, or do they demand a complete cessation of these relationships? Do they create opportunities for the creation of new ties, and if so through what means? If we know that well-being in Uganda, and perhaps everywhere, depends on connection and that bars are the primary public spaces in Uganda where connection occurs, especially for men, what happens when the life sustained in the bar becomes one’s undoing? What happens when one must turn away from this singular space of sociality, movement, and trust?