



BY JOSEPH BATTE

HOW I FOUND OBOTE'S MALWA JOINT IN KISENYI

Back in the early 1970s, when Uganda was still trying to find its feet after independence, there was this wild, almost unbelievable tale that refused to die quietly.

President Milton Obote — the sharp, suit-wearing intellectual who was running the whole country — had a secret watering hole tucked deep inside the chaotic, muddy belly of Kisenyi slums. There, he would sneak away for *malwa*, that thick millet brew that feels like warm porridge, but with a kick in the stomach.

The old newspaper from January 4, 1971, that I still keep, tells it all so perfectly.

The front page of *The People* shouts "President takes a New Year 'malwa' sip" in bold letters. But the real star is the inset picture: Obote leaning in comfortably, drinking *malwa* straight from a huge shared pot with two other men, all three sucking through long tubes like it was the most natural thing in the world.

No presidential airs, no bodyguards — just the ruler of the nation happily sharing saliva and brew like any ordinary Ugandan on a Sunday afternoon. Who would have guessed the president was out here living his most relatable double life?

HOW IT STARTED

It all started one evening in 2003 while I was having a drink at Blue Room, that lively downtown Kampala spot on Namirembe Road that later got demolished to make way for a new shop. The place was always buzzing with journalists, small-time politicians, and loud army men.

This tipsy Lt Col Okello — not the famous one, just another officer with loose lips after a few beers — leaned close, his breath heavy with crude waragi, and whispered: "Kisenyi is full of secrets, my friend Batta. Did you know that former president Milton Obote had his own favourite *malwa* joint there? And that *malwa* was one of his go-to drinks?" My reporter instincts lit up immediately. *Malwa*?



Obote (left) at his most ordinary — leaning forward, tube in hand, no titles. Just a man and his brew

The president? In the middle of the slums? This had to be a killer feature story.

The next morning, I pitched it excitedly to my *Sunday Vision* editor, Joachim Buwembo. He looked at me over his glasses, raised one eyebrow, and said: "Go for it. But do not come back with malaria or a missing wallet." But Kisenyi was no joke. Right in the heart of Kampala, yet it felt like stepping into another world entirely.

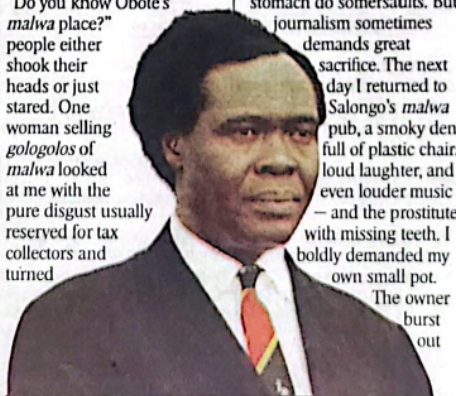
Narrow muddy paths squeezed between mud-and-wattle shacks, leaning on each other like tired drinkers. Open drains carried thick sewage that smelt like it had been cooking in the sun for days.

Men roasted *sala wano*, that infamous low-grade meat made from cow throats, lungs, spleen, heart and fat, with customers pointing wildly: "Cut here! No, there! More fat!" Drunk fellows would wolf it down while the pieces still dripped fresh blood, looking

like they were in heaven.

My first big mistake was showing up dressed smartly like a proper journalist. The moment I stepped into the slum, eyes locked on me from every direction like I was an alien from Mars. I clearly did not belong.

When I started asking, "Do you know Obote's *malwa* place?" people either shook their heads or just stared. One woman selling *gologolos* of *malwa* looked at me with the pure disgust usually reserved for tax collectors and turned



Ex-president Obote sometimes mixed with the 'wretched of the earth' at a *malwa* joint in Kisenyi



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away. Another refused to speak and continued pouring the brew like I was invisible.

I was sweating and ready to quit when a civil servant called Masaba from the finance ministry — clearly a seasoned regular of Kisenyi *malwa* joints — pulled me aside.

"You do not belong here, brother," he chuckled. "You look too clean, too much like police or a spy. These people do not trust strangers. If you want the real story, you must blend in. Become one of them."

"How do I do that?"

I asked, already feeling nervous.

"Simple. Learn to drink *malwa*. Sit with them. Laugh with them. Be patient."

SHARING A DRINK

The idea of sharing one long *luseke* (tube) with 10 sweaty strangers, all sucking the same brew and happily swapping saliva, made my stomach do somersaults. But journalism sometimes demands great sacrifice. The next day I returned to Salongo's *malwa* pub, a smoky den full of plastic chairs, loud laughter, and even louder music — and the prostitutes with missing teeth. I boldly demanded my own small pot.

The owner burst out

laughing but gave it to me.

Then came the hot water ritual. They poured steaming hot water over the fermented millet dregs, and the moment that hot, frothy *malwa* hit my throat, it felt like liquid fire mixed with sour porridge exploding in my belly.

Within minutes I was sweating buckets, my shirt stuck to my back like wet tissue, and my stomach bloated so badly I looked three months pregnant. Every sip made that shared-tube nightmare feel even more real as I watched others gulping noisily from the big communal pots, cheeks pulled out, eyes half-closed in pure *malwa* bliss.

When the greasy matooke and offal arrived, I could not touch a single bite. I generously donated everything to one of the *bayaye* (street boys) hovering nearby like vultures at a fresh kill. That single act of food charity became my lifesaver. For the next full month, those same *bayaye* became my personal bodyguards.

They would wait eagerly for their free plate, eat like kings, and then escort me safely through the dangerous dark alleys, past roaming thieves and the toothless smiles of the prostitutes, right up to the old taxi park. Slowly but surely, I stopped being "that strange man" and started becoming part of the furniture. I learnt to sit on those wobbly benches for hours, laughing at the dirty jokes while the hot *malwa* kept coming — pot after pot — making my head spin and my legs feel like cooked spaghetti.

THE DAY I DISCOVERED THE JOINT

After weeks of this sweaty, stomach-churning dedication, I asked the same woman again. This time she grinned widely. "It is right next door, over that wall!" My jaw dropped so dramatically. All that time, struggle, hot *malwa* torture, and shared-saliva anxiety — and the famous joint was literally next door! She laughed at my shocked face. "We did not trust you at first. Strangers in Kisenyi can be police, thieves, or worse. But now we know you are just crazy."

That magical day I finally met Mzee Kizza, a slow-walking elder with a full head of dignified grey hair and eyes that had seen everything. He welcomed me into his humble compound like a long-lost son.

"I started serving Obote *malwa* in 1953," he said with a mischievous twinkle, "long before he was president. He was just a smart young man with thick hair and the most beautiful smile. He spoke English like the British themselves and sometimes came with Adoko Nekyon."

Kizza disappeared into a back room and returned carrying a small, well-worn folding wooden chair.

"This is the exact chair he used to sit on," he declared proudly, dusting it off. Then he produced an old drinking tube. "Even after becoming president, Obote still sneaked back for his beloved *malwa* when he could," he said.

Looking at that 1971 newspaper photo again — the relaxed Obote enjoying his New Year *malwa* sip from the huge pot with two others — it all fits perfectly. The powerful leader who controlled the country could also sit humbly on a simple wooden chair in the slums, sucking brew through a tube for hours and talking big ideas with the common man.