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**katine** it starts with a village  
Project goals: Education

# Katine village holds first university graduation party

Brenda Achao celebrates her graduation from Makerere University at home in Katine. She hopes her success will inspire other villagers to educate their daughters

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- **Richard M Kavuma**
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Brenda, left, with former classmate Anisha, speaks at her graduation party in Katine. Photograph: Richard M Kavuma

Brenda Achao's surprise phone call was brief: she was graduating in commerce from Uganda's prestigious Makerere University the following week and planned to throw a party in her home village in Katine. The family would be happy if I could join them to celebrate.

Since arriving in Katine more than two years ago, Guardian journalists have interviewed Brenda and her parents several times. Her father, Naphtali Okello Elepu, a retired prison officer in his 70s, is sophistication and eloquence personified. A model farmer with crops and livestock, he has solar electricity and cable television, which are extremely rare in Katine. Brenda's mother, Loyce Achao, who runs a pharmacy in Katine, is a former nurse and local politician and a very respected and influential woman, passionate about health and gender issues.

In my two years here, I had not heard of a graduation party in Katine, so I agreed to make the time to go along. When I arrived, around 20 guests were already seated on white plastic chairs on the lawn. A tent, decorated with orange ribbons, was erected and two tables with bouquets of red, pink and white roses were set. Music played through a small loudspeaker.

As the local church minister arrived to lead the prayers, so did a jolly Jorem Eboku, the elected political head of Katine sub-county. "This is the first celebration of its kind in this village," Eboku told me excitedly. "That is why I had to come." No one could remember attending a university graduation party in the village. Seven of Brenda's siblings and cousins have graduated, but they held their parties in Kampala, where most of their friends lived. So when Brenda and Anisha, her friend and fellow commerce graduate, dressed in university robes, emerged from behind the tent accompanied by Loyce and her sister, Betty, they were received with prolonged ululations and delighted faces.

## Inspiring girls

By holding her graduation party in Katine, Brenda, 24, and her parents hoped to inspire other girls and their families to aim high. During speeches and prayers, each speaker emphasised that girls – just like boys – need all the education they can get. The Rev Richard Ewicu particularly challenged parents to sacrifice the little money they had to support their children's education – a message that was received with nods of approval.

Elepu said his daughter's graduation was important particularly in his community. "In [the] Teso region in the past, even in very rich families, people only cared about educating boys," he told me. "We hope from this, more people can see that even girls can be educated. We hope it works as an example for others."

Later, while addressing his guests, Elepu admitted that it was not cheap seeing his youngest child through school. But expense should not be an excuse to dodge parental responsibility.

"Education is expensive, even in Europe and America; but we need to change our attitude and consider education as a priority. We need to be determined and to sacrifice so that our children can study," he told the guests.

Brenda herself knows something about determination. She gave birth to the first of her two sons during her first year at university, but she persisted with her studies, living with her baby in a hostel in Kampala. Her mother later helped to raise the baby, who is now in kindergarten, while Brenda continued with her studies.

"I am so excited that Brenda has made it," said Loyce, wearing an outstanding red floral flowing busuuti (type of dress). "I really hope our girls, who often get lured into early marriages, will see her and get inspired."

Brenda is looking forward to finding a job and saving enough money to study for a master's degree. She also harbours dreams of taking a PhD. Although jobs for new graduates are not easy to find in Uganda, Brenda believes she will find a suitable marketing and branding job.

"I have always believed I should wear three graduation gowns – bachelor's, master's and PhD," she said. "So this is just the beginning."

After the prayers and speeches, the party meal of rice, chicken, millet bread, green bananas and vegetables, along with several other dishes, was served. As they departed with the setting sun, many guests stopped to thank Elepu. He will be hoping the party will awaken within them a passion for education.