

Letter from Okulonyo 08

Dear Friends,

We're gently gathering round the fire for night prayers when there's a cry of alarm from across the quarry, immediately followed by a phone call. Suddenly everyone's up shouting, grabbing sticks and running. I assume somebody's seen a snake and stay put, only after the usual time delay in translation realising that an intruder's been spotted going into Pussi's hut. I run quickly across the moonlit quarry fearing that a burglar could be taking a beating. As I arrive I see my fellow workers for peace have already befriended a 'mad woman' and are seeking to gently coax her out of the house. She's offered food and before she eats she prays a blessing, the only intelligible thing she says all night. I'm humbled and ashamed at my capacity to think the worst of the people who I live with who daily display an amazing capacity for generosity and kindness. In the morning she's gone, disappearing into the bush from which she came.

Sadly here there is an undercurrent of violence here, running just below the surface. Everyone here has a memory of being threatened, hiding from or fleeing the men with guns. Recently Boaz, our local smiley army commander, came over for help and for once his expression was serious. A woman had fled to the barracks after a severe beating by her husband. I quickly delivered first aid to a large, bloody but thankfully not deep head wound, as she sat dazed on the ground, her only dress covered in coagulating blood. Her guilty husband stood nearby, guarded by a soldier, swaying gently and in that sickening state of drunken remorse. My colleague Sam as a fellow Karamajong was ashamed of the man 'my people he said, look what they do!' and began berating the man. 'Don't waste your breath he's drunk I replied he won't remember a thing in the morning'. I replied. And in the morning she too had gone to the safety of her parent's home.

Drunkenness, like in most parts of the world, is a problem here, perhaps exacerbated by poverty, lack of work, and a culture of people sitting under trees in the afternoon sipping the local beer and liquor. It was late one afternoon that we were called to a meeting with a new councillor from the district. The chair of the meeting was the new councillor, standing in the shade of a huge tree, dressed in baggy bright orange checked trousers and shirt, surrounded by villagers, the men on stools and branches and the women sitting on the ground together. One by one people stood up and entered the ring they'd formed to speak, and the councillor listened and then replied often theatrically, waving his arms or rolling his eyes. He danced around the ring weaving and swaying, waiting for the next question, rather like a boxer or clown in the ring. Like many of the men there I soon realized that he was far from sober, and when faced with a difficult question he suddenly called for a bottle of beer, paused, took a long swig, then launched into argument again. Quickly the mood of the meeting began to change and suddenly the space was full of shouting people and it looked like the politician might take a beating. I quickly slipped into the melee, grabbed him by the hand and led him in the direction of the barracks. We suggested he return in the morning when things were calmer, and he gladly acquiesced.

Back at the calm of the base, as we once more gathered around the fire to pray and our songs and prayers drifted over to the camp, I realized once more the importance of a community of peacemakers to be here in this place and indeed in so many parts of our fractured world.

Jonathan