

## Letter from Okulonyo 02

Dear Friends,

I'm sitting 'in church' under the shade of a huge tree, 4 metres or so in girth, and as I write the hot wind blows dry crackling leaves across the ground. In the distance I can see Napak Mountain, which looks a little like Table Mountain, flat topped but without the cloud and the skies not blue, but a rather dusty haze. In the foreground, 3 little children play in the dusty compound, running up and down piles of sand and aggregate, getting dustier and dustier as the wind continues to blow. The dry season has arrived.

Last week we gathered under this tree for Sunday worship. It began with a few of us sitting on wooden perches under the edge of the tree's canopy. A large desk was placed in front of the mighty trunk and behind it sat our preacher Samuel Emuron and the leader of worship Simon Peter. For the taking of the offering Simon opened the drawer in the desk and one person stepped forward to deposit a grimy note. By the time the story of the prodigal son had been acted out, and translated from Karamajong to English there were 40 or so people present. The service concluded with handshakes and introductions and we continued talking in the trees shade.

Trees are vital for life here; for shade, food, building materials, medicine and firewood principally for cooking, but also to create a fire around which to gather in the evening. Each evening as night falls, we gather round the fire at the centre of the compound. It's a time to watch the big African sky change colour, darken and then become starlit. Then it's time to eat, always the same meal, pasho and beans, with occasional additions like sweet potato or cabbage. Then it's evening devotions, someone starts clapping a song starts and people gather around the fire for simple prayers and more song. It's simple, natural and deeply elemental, with the earth between our tapping feet, the sky above and the glowing fire between us.

Then the stories begin. Ancient, oft-repeated tales of hunting, about being chased by rhino, about shape-shifting people who turn into leopards and monkeys. A young man tells how he killed that most dangerous of beasts, the unpredictable Buffalo, just with an axe. More recent and disturbing tales of cattle raiding and night time army attacks are also told.

One of the compound workers tells his story how he had led many cattle raids and seen much death and violence. It was when many of his fellow warriors and then his uncle had died that he decided to renounce this life of violence. Formerly he'd ridiculed groups of Christians sitting clapping, singing and praying and at times actively sought to disrupt them. When he heard of some casual work going at CHIPS, he applied. Here he found he had regular food and security for the first time for years, and a new sense of peace and a quality of relationships, and felt able to renounce his past life and turn to Christ. Now he leads the singing around the fire.

'That tree' he points out 'was the tree we often met under during cattle raids, and now it's our Church'. He laughs and grins contentedly.

Jonathan