

Letter from Okulonyo 04

Dear Friends,

As I fall stiffly off the motorbike where I've been wedged between its driver and my rucksack, the red dust I shake off my shirt tells me that I'm back in Africa. 'How were things over there?' Pussi Luca asks me and I struggle to reply with any real meaning and can only say. 'My people are well and I was very happy to see them, but it's a very different world over there'

Later in the week I try to describe my English Christmas and how I'd struggled with its excess even in the radical simplicity of Hilfield Friary. I told people 'I had different food 3 times a day and it was too much for my stomach, oh how I longed for posho and beans'. Twice a day here we eat posho [a polenta type mix of sorghum and cassava] and beans occasionally supplemented by wild meat such as warthog or antelope. For me, the event that bridged the gap between worlds was the Friary Nativity, involving a torch lit procession to visit the sheep and a shepherd on the hillside and then kneeling simply before the crib on the floor of the cowshed converted to a chapel

Here in the 3 weeks I've been away, things are different. The constant sun and hot wind have dried out the bush and everything is a little flatter and browner. New buildings have also been rapidly constructed and every day the built environment changes a little. A new wooden frame appears, a new thatch or cluster of mud bricks drying in the sun, such is the desire and need of people to settle here. I was glad to help one of my neighbours build his lattice-like roof frame, lashing horizontal lathes to vertical poles with dampened lengths of bark fibre. After 3 days' apprenticeship, I feel qualified to thatch a hut and I'm taken with the simplicity and beauty of the buildings here. Nothing is brought in, all materials are very local and it will all return to the earth when it's served its time.

Later on the week I find myself in a quite different structure, sheltering from the sun under an immense blue and yellow striped marquee, with a plastic roof metal poles and nylon guy ropes. At the invitation of Revd Sam, some of us are visiting an annual evangelical conference in our nearest town, Iriri. 600-plus people are sat behind scratched and inky old school desks listening to Jane, an evangelist from Kampala. She's slick and polished and ends with a call to repentance and to accept Jesus as Saviour and over 60 people come to the front and are prayed over, then suddenly the tent erupts in a great cacophony of singing, dancing clapping and praise. Next up is Pastor Sam, local Archdeacon and organiser of the conference. He's small but powerfully built, exuding energy and purpose and there's something of the warrior about him. I first met him in Iriri over several games of pool in a local bar and we beat all comers, me with the benefit of my years playing on the much bigger Pilsdon snooker table and he with his unique one handed style- holding the cue like a spear accurately potting balls and intimidating his opponents. The force of his personality and faith comes through in his preaching. In spite of a powerful PA system he can't resist shouting, exhorting and amusing his huge congregation all at the same time. Half way through he decides it's time to sing and everyone bursts into song and traditional Karamajong dancing, which involves leaping on the spot with the elbows jutting back and your chest stuck out. It's strangely reminiscent of the pogoing of punks in the mid 1970's: a wonderful merging of local culture and Church.

For me, the whole event is exhilarating, but also exhausting and it's due to go on 5 more days! We bid our farewells and I'm glad to return to the quiet of the bush at Okulonyo and the no less Spirit-filled evening prayers as we gather around the fire and commend the day to God. It's here I can listen to echoes of the gentle singing of Compline at Hilfield Friary and, for once, all seems united.

Jonathan