

Letter from Okulonyo 09

Dear Friends,

'Then were our mouths filled with laughter'- Psalm 126

Everybody's laughing as usual as we sit around the night fire, telling stories of hunting, raiders and food- the usual themes. Tonight it's food and people are laughing about the deaf man who's been turning up for the last 3 nights in a row expecting the pizza he had 4 nights ago. Word has been getting round that there's this special 'mzungo' food that's delicious. Someone says that if we fed the camp next door on pizza, they'd soon stop complaining about us and trying to sell us food and building materials at highly inflated prices. There's a great truth here, that when people start eating together, they start talking, trust builds and real relationships can grow. Sharing food brings people together, breaks down barriers and is a real tool for peacemaking.

Here we have a fairly open table. 3 hungry trouserless little boys usually turn up for breakfast when the smell of chapattis drifts over to their hut. The deaf man is often with us to eat along with an assortment of casual visitors and peoples relations. Food's simple, usually posho and beans or rice and beans, but no one goes away hungry. Occasionally we buy a couple of chickens or groundnut sauce to add a little protein and variety to our diet.

4 nights ago I cooked pizza or as near as I could get in a land with no cheese or pepperoni. Returning from a trip to the bank I managed to buy onions, garlic, tomatoes and peppers in the lovely indoor market at Soroti. We fired up the newly built oven with wood collected from the bush. I'd designed it from memory and for a tense few minutes it failed to get going, great clouds of damp smoke poured out as assorted nosey children and others looked on. Then to my delight the smoke dried up, leaving a hot red glow of embers. We tested it with bread rolls for tea time smothered in groundnut sauce. I said 'the Americans have this thing called peanut butter, but it's nothing compared to this'. As darkness grew around us the oven glowed more brightly and we loaded the pizzas in atop an old tin saucepan lid wedged in the split end of a bamboo pole. I gave the first slice to a teenage boy, instinctively knowing he'd like it. 'In my country boys your age live on this food ' I told him. And in the darkness there was a contented munching of hand rolled slices and appreciative finger licking.

The arrival of the pizza was good but as ever the journey was the best bit. Constructing the base with square walls of mud bricks and mud cement back-filled with rubble, casting and firing small bricks for the oven entrance and then building the dome of the main oven using the old Ottoman trick of creating the dome of sand, plastering it then later removing the sand. All ages joined in creating the dome, slapping a wet mixture of clay, cow dung and grass on to its sides, then lovingly caressing its curves smooth. In fact, it did slightly resemble the magnificent Ottoman Turkish baths in Nablus. Earlier, as we'd been mixing the clay from a termite mound, dung, soft grass and water I'd watched Pussi trampling it together to elasticise the mix. I watched in 2 minds whether to join in, and then like running into the sea in January, I abandoned my sandals, rolled up my trousers and jumped in. Trying to run on the spot, through clay and breathe through tears of laughter was almost impossible. Yes this was it, glorious, uproarious mud. As I looked at Pussi's smiling eyes I knew that this was a moment to treasure our friendship bound in this muddy joy.

Jonathan