

## Part of the Tribe

About two and a half weeks into the trip, Rev. John and I stopped to visit an English immersion primary school in Dodoma. I stopped outside one of the classroom windows (there were no panes) and talked to some of the students inside.

“Can you guys speak English?”

The boys, fifth or sixth graders, said, “A little. We just know how to say hi.”

“Well, kid, you’re doing better than me.”

I can think of nine Swahili greetings that I learned to respond to, and I know there are at least four others people said to me that I never did figure out. But it wasn’t until I learned the Kigogo greetings that people were really impressed with me:

“Mihayeni!” I would call to a group of people talking outside one of Makang’wa’s shops as Obed and I walked to choir practice. They started laughing so hard that they could barely respond back with, “Misaa.” (I have no idea what either of those mean, but I know they are only used after noon. In the morning, the Kigogo greeting/response is “Bukweni”/“Bukwaa.”) As we continued on, I heard the group of people continue to laugh and talk about how funny it was to hear a Mzungu speak Kigogo. Obed nudged me and pointed to the next group of people we were about to pass.

“I just said hi to *those* people, Obed. Can’t I skip these ones?”

“Mihayeni,” he urged fiercely, nodding toward the people.

“How about ‘Habari?’” I asked. “What’s wrong with Swahili greetings?”

“Mihayeni!”

“Alright, alright.” I called out, “Mihayeni” again. The next group of people exploded in laughter. “There, now can we stop greeting people?”

Obed might have been my age, but he looked a few years younger. There was something wrong with him; I had guessed mild retardation, though I’m not terribly adept at identifying things like that. One of the Amani Center workers had described him to me as “a little crazy, but good.” He turned out to be an enormous help to me, even though he didn’t speak a word of English. Everyday that he saw me walking into the village (his house was on the way from the Center), he would follow me in. Along the way, he would teach me the Kigogo greetings by repeating them over and over. Then, anytime

we passed somebody, he would pester me until I greeted them in Kigogo. It was embarrassing, but I learned the greetings better than I ever would have otherwise. By the end of the trip, I had fun knowing I could make people laugh just by saying hello. Many of them would give me high-fives for being able to speak Kigogo, and one man even said I was part of the tribe.

The other greeting I enjoyed immensely was “Shikamo.” This is a Swahili greeting that is reserved for older people as a sign of respect. I said it to every kid that walked past me on the road. Some of them laughed in embarrassment and walked past. Others practically stopped in their tracks with jaws open, wondering what I was thinking by greeting them like that. The children who responded would either be very confused or very entertained. The former would reply with, “Shi..ka..mo?”, wondering what else could be appropriate for a time like that. Others would play along and reply with the response that an elderly person would give to that greeting: “Mara haba!”

I can only imagine what they might have said to me if they could speak English. I suspect that many of them thought I was a very confused Mzungu and that someone hadn’t explained when it was appropriate to use shikamo...they probably blamed it on Obed.



## St. John's Church

Our third Sunday was our longest drive. We drove through Mvumi Misheni, out past the airport (we could tell it was an airport because it was the only grassy strip with a windsock next to it), and to a smaller village to the south of Mvumi Misheni. The church we arrived at was not the right one...but a few side roads later, we found it. The parish for this Sunday was called St. John's, and it was the liveliest of the churches we visited during my stay there. As the Landcruiser approached the pastor's house, the women's choir stood in the road in front of us and paraded us onto the church grounds. Each of the women in the choir was dressed in matching dresses, and in a group of twelve singers, they had five drums and four whistles.

The parade ended anticlimactically in the pastor's house because we (as usual) had arrived before the start of the service. The wait was much shorter than the previous week at St. James', but I was still extremely uncomfortable. I got out my journal and wrote until it was time to go to the service. The church was the most elaborately decorated one we visited. A little smaller than St. Andrew's had been, there were wires strung back and forth across the church. Foot-long pieces of fabric were hung over every inch of the wire like fabric streamers. The people of the church added their individual decoration to the small room: many colored dresses filled the pews, including the green and blue dresses of the women's choir, the plain blue shirts of the children's choir, *and* the non-uniform clothes of the youth choir. St. John's Church had a good reason to be building a new, much larger church next door. During the service, there were even people standing outside, listening to Rev. John's sermon through the windows.

The end of the service at St. John's was the highlight of the weekend. Members of the congregation presented Rev. John with a gift. They peeled off the foil wrapping paper for him (which made me wonder why they had wrapped it to begin with) and revealed a Maasai spear. A few minutes later, I looked down at the children's choir, which was crowded in the front between the pews and the altar. Several of the girls had grabbed pieces of foil and were chewing on them.

Next, the offering basket was brought to the front of the church. There were some people in this church who did not have any money at all to offer. Instead, the offering bowl contained two eggs and a sack of flour. The deacon of the church auctioned these

off to the congregation, turning the farmers' contributions into monetary tithes. Following the tithe, the deacon handed a letter to our interpreter (Caleb could not make it this week, so a young man named Frau was taking his place). The letter that Frau read to us (written in impressively good English) talked about the church building project that was occurring in the congregation. St. John's had raised the money to build a new church that would hold their entire congregation, but as soon as they had begun construction, the cost of materials rose sharply. The church had finished the walls of the church but needed an additional \$5,000 to put on a roof. Knowing how much Rev. John already given to the community, I asked him for a copy of the letter to bring home to my church.



St. John's, waiting for a new roof

After this, the deacon waved for Bibi and me to join Rev. John in the center aisle. A photographer came down the aisle brandishing a manual-wind 1970's-esque camera, and members of the congregation were invited to get their pictures taken with the Mzungus. (Gordon wasn't at church with us because he had decided to attend St. John's in Makang'wa with several of the men he worked with at the Center.) A few of the more shy people even approached me after church for a picture. After that, we piled into the Landcruiser for the drive home.

"Oh, be careful about sitting on that spear," Rev. John advised the boys sitting in the way back. "I don't want any blood on it when we get home."



## Makulu Secondary School, i



Albert insisted that the first light of dawn could be seen over the eastern mountains.

“I don’t see it, Albert.” If anything, the spot I expected the sun to appear looked darker than the rest of the sky. Maybe that’s what he meant.

It was 5:30am, and Albert and I were off to school. I had taught my share of kindergarten but wanted to keep working in the schools. Albert offered to take me to his school. In fact, he had told his friends I was coming, and they were excited about seeing a Mzungu. So we took Albert’s bike down to Juma’s house to borrow a bike for me. We arrived at the house to find that Juma’s bike had a punctured tire, and there was no way to fix it in time to ride to school.

Flat tires were a *constant* problem in Africa. Rev. John had cautioned me a few times when we were out on walks that everything in Africa has thorns. He was barely exaggerating. I found some of the toughest, sharpest pieces of plants I’d ever seen before, often poking through the sole of my tennis shoes. The roads were clearer than the brush, but even that was no guarantee of tire safety. After one series of four consecutive days in which Albert got punctures in his tires and had to walk his bike to the village to get them fixed, Rev. John suggested, “We’ll get you a donkey, Albert. Donkey’s don’t get punctures.”

But since Albert and I had neither bikes nor donkeys that morning, our only chance of getting to school on time was to catch the bus to neighboring Makulu. The bus stop was about a mile from the Amani Center, so we had to hustle and barely caught it. I had never liked riding the bus to school as a kid, but after this bus ride, those trips didn’t seem so bad. At least those buses had seats for everyone. Albert and I piled onto the already full bus, squeezed our way into the back, and were bottled in by another fifteen passengers who boarded the bus after us. This was in great discord with the fact that Albert and I had to get off the bus before anyone else. Albert warned me about a kilometer before our stop, and I still barely made it. I had to squeeze through the narrow

aisles around one and sometimes two people who were already crammed into the same space I was trying to walk through. It was a little aggravating, but my mood lightened when I looked down and saw something tucked beneath one of the seats. It was tied up and lying very calmly, but still...

“Albert, that’s the first bus I’ve ever been on with a live chicken.”

“Oh, yes, haha. Cheekens.”

We walked to the secondary school, checked with the headmistress to make sure it would be okay for me to observe Albert’s classes for the day, and went to math. The lesson for the day was about sets. Rev. John had told me that secondary schools were taught entirely in English. I was surprised how few people in the country were fluent in the language if that were the case...until I spent time at Albert’s school. While the teachers taught in English, they were all native Swahili speakers, and none of them were proficiently bilingual. Even the students who outperformed their teachers at our language would still only have rudimentary English skills.

The math teacher, after finishing his instruction, split us into groups to work on some example problems. My group struggled with the concepts, so I thought of a few more example problems to help reteach the concept of sets. We spent almost twenty minutes talking about the concept (they knew just enough English for us to communicate), and during that time, more and more students gathered around our desk to watch. I looked around, wondering why the teacher was having them wait so long to try something else; most of the class was already done. But after looking around for several minutes, I realized the teacher was gone. He had just left during the middle of the lesson!



## Makulu Secondary School, ii

“You’re not even going to tell me if I take a wrong turn, are you, Albert?”

Albert laughed. He always laughed at jokes. I’m not sure if he laughed because he understood the jokes and thought they were funny...or because he thought it was funny that he didn’t understand the jokes. This one he understood because he kept it going.

“You go right, I say, ‘bye-bye’!”

“I know,” I growled.

The people of Makang’wa who wanted to take the bus had to walk to “The Corner,” which was as close as the bus ever got to our village. This was where Albert and I had hurried early in the morning to catch the bus to school, and this was where we had to walk home from. Since we weren’t in a hurry, Albert decided to be a little adventurous. We left the main road because Albert said he thought there was a shortcut to get back to the Center. I hoped that “thought” was the Swahili word for “knew.” I tried to ask Albert if he was sure this shortcut wasn’t going to take longer to get back to the Center than the regular way. He laughed.

Then he “let” me take the lead. I continued my light-hearted accusation: “You’ll get back to the Center just fine, and I’ll end up spending the night with the hyenas.”

There were hyenas that lived in the hills behind the Center. Well, during the day they lived in the hills behind the Center. Nighttime was a different story. We had found out from Rev. John the day before that the hyenas had chewed through some hoses during the night – hoses that were just outside of Frau’s house. I was excited and disappointed at once. I really wanted to see a hyena, but I wasn’t about to go look for them with my \$1.58, AA battery-powered flashlight. That would have to be an adventure for a better-equipped person.

“Haha. Yes – you ask them what’s for dinner.”

“I wouldn’t have to ask, Albert; the answer would be *me!*”



Albert

I don’t think Albert has ever had a bad day at school. He always returns to the Center happy and energetic. I felt pretty happy too, but I was also mulling over what had happened during the school day. In Tanzania, the students all

stay in the same classroom, and the teachers move from class to class to teach their different subjects throughout the day. At least, that's what a school administrator would tell you if you asked. In Albert's school, this wasn't always the case: sometimes the teachers just didn't show up. Of Albert's four classes scheduled for that day, only the math teacher had shown up. In fact, when I was shocked that he left the room in the middle of the class, I was wrong. He had been perfectly responsible and left at the end of *his* class; it was the chemistry teacher who had failed to arrive, leaving the classroom teacher-less.

But a teacher-less high school classroom in Tanzania was nothing like a teacher-less high school classroom in America would be. The most rowdy it got during the entire day was when the majority of the class had gathered around my group after the math lesson to learn more about sets. When I had finished giving example problems, the students returned to their seats and worked quietly on homework. They had a short break after their second class (it was at this point that I found out we had finished two class periods without knowing it). Albert and I went to a local shop to have breakfast: chai tea and jipatis, a delicious Tanzanian food that is a mix between pancakes and tortillas. When the next class started, one of the girls in the front row walked up to the chalk board and began copying notes from her Swahili Language book. Since not all of the students had this book, many of them began to copy them down. Those who weren't were once again – to my astonishment – working on homework quietly at their desks.

