

## Newsletter Uganda February 2018

Kampala is about 70 miles north of the equator on the edge of lake Victoria. I am wearing a coat! Why?! Lake Victoria feeds the Nile which is 6853 km long. That means that Lake Victoria and Kampala have to be fairly high up (about 1200 meters) or the water wouldn't make it to the Mediterranean. I didn't think about that when we left Oslo and as a result wasn't expecting chilly weather so close to the equator – ergo the coat.

We live on a hillside that looks out on a valley. The view is pretty much blocked by a big fig tree. This is not a bad thing as the figs attract a plethora of life. There is at this very moment a magnificent Great Blue Turaco prancing along one of the limbs. It is about the size of a small turkey with a nice hairdo. They are quite gentle creatures as you can see by the pleasant look on his beak.



In all this tropical beauty there is a dark element: Our cleaning lady, Monica, is from Rwanda and her family were all murdered during the genocide. She was 12 years old at the time, but managed to escape with some adult help. Two of the English teachers, Bush and Adolphe, and many of the students at the center are from the Democratic Republic of Congo and escaped from the very casual violence that killed members of their families. My understanding is that these are not warring factions within the country but an every day violence by brutal individuals who will kill for money. The country seems unable to provide security for its citizens.

Our center is called HOCW (Hope Of Children and Women). It is a place for educating adult refugees and also Ugandans down on their luck. The educational level is not high - not like our students in Livingstonia. Therefore, it is not just a question of teaching English, but general education, punctuation, parts of speech and the like. On the positive side, the students are eager to learn and it is inspiring to teach people who are trying to improve their lot in life (which does not have a "lot" in it).

The students' ages are between about 14 and 40. One of the young ladies asked Karin if she had a brother of marital age. She said 'no', but I said I had several grandsons who were unattached. I said to a 14 year old girl (Mary) that she would need to choose between Aksel and Jonatan. A 19 year old Benedicte) could have Linus. He is quite tall, but nothing standing on a chair couldn't solve. Anyway, they seemed quite pleased by this information. The oldest, Isaac, I told them, was unfortunately already taken (sighs of dismay).

We eat our main meal with the teachers and staff and it is quite friendly and lively. The discussion today was the coming debate which is held each Friday. The topic will be 'Should the custom of *bride price* be abolished.' Already I get the impression that it is a hot theme with well-entrenched opinions. This could be fun. Stay tuned.

This is the next day. We have had the debate. It took place in a large shed with a corrugated iron roof and no door. The room was filled to capacity and was divided into two sides: those for bride price on one side and those against on the other. Karin chose the side against 'bride price' and I

chose the side 'for'. Nearing the finish they wanted us to defend our respective sides. This caused some excitement. They called me first and I went to the front. I said that we on our side understood and respected (to some extent) the emotional arguments of those for abolishing bride price. However there are practical concerns. Unfortunately, it is easy for a man to say he loves a woman, but what if he finds some new woman and skips town. Where does the wife go now? She comes home ... maybe with two kids. Her parents would need the bride price money to support her. We who are for bride price are not cruel. I suggest, should the marriage be a success, we gradually give the money back. Call it 'grandchildren price'. It's negotiable.

I got lots of boos from the opposition and resounding applause from my side.

After thanking the honourable opposition, Karin made an appeal for gender equality. You couldn't have equality if brides were sold. (Someone on my side had unfortunately compared women to a good pair of shoes.) 'Shoes!' Exclaimed Karin. 'Are you comparing women to shoes!!!'

Damn, even my side applauded her. It was a *metaphor!* 'Shoes' was a metaphor.

After each appeal, the chairman of the debate asked the audience. 'Was she/he clear?' At least half the audience thought so. At this point the speaker would leave the stage to polite applause. It was quite frustrating for those who only speak a little English. Still, just about everyone had their moment on stage if only to say they were against or for.

After the debate, the 14 year old (Mary) wanted to know more about Aksel. I explained that Aksel could do back flips into the ocean from 6 meters up (I pointed to the top of a palm tree to demonstrate the height. He is also quiet but very clever. Overcome she exclaimed, 'I love Aksel!' Realizing she may have revealed too much, she hid behind her girl friend.

Some people say that the last animal left alive on the earth would be a cockroach. On the contrary, I think it would be a bird. They are quite hard to catch (except by other birds). Everywhere we travel there seems to be a vast supply of them. Because of their inaccessibility you would imagine that they would develop friendly, caring personalities. That's true to a certain extent, but the Eastern Grey Plantain Eaters are an exception and are always chasing the aforementioned and much larger Great Blue Turaco. They are the bully boys in the feathered realm.



Hey Joe, you see that Turaco. He he he.

On Sunday morning it is not peaceful. There are a lot of churches who compete for the best amplified sound system. The sermon is in Lugandan, and can often sound like a Formula One race – **Solomon is coming round the corner, Judas has increased his speed, they're neck and neck, the finishing line is coming up, Solomon has spun out, Judas is forced off the track, desperate dash for the finish line, Noah crosses first with Methusaleh a close second. Hallelujah.**

No school today. One of the students went home to South Sudan in an attempt to help two brothers escape to Egypt. All three were murdered. There will be a day of mourning at the school. The students say that if word gets out that someone has money to travel, then they are at risk. So it is not a case of warring factions, but, as in the Congo and Burundi, the society has become lawless and brutal, and the government is either uncaring or helpless. Uganda is on the frontline when it comes to receiving refugees. It is surrounded by disaster countries – Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan. These countries are where our students come from.

The students have varying abilities. One lady from Rwanda is shy, cannot read or write and as far as I can tell does not speak any language other than her own. She repeats what we say with a very small voice. I'd like to tell her Helen Keller's words – 'Either life is a great adventure or it is nothing'. You choose. But how do you say that in Kiswahili.

We really do enjoy the classes. I tell them that when I tried to sing a song in French I couldn't make the words come out fast enough. It was like pulling teeth - 'Goû...tons...voir...oui...oui..oui'. My mouth muscles and tongue would not move fast enough. We need to repeat and repeat until the words come out smoothly. If you are South Sudanese, you shouldn't say 'habout' but 'about', or if you are Congolese, you should say 'happened' instead of 'appened', and if you are Ugandan, you should say 'clothes' with one syllable – not 'cloth-ses' . It just takes time and effort for your mouth and tongue to form the words naturally. Especially the South Sudanese have a challenge and would have much rather that the dialogues had been written in Arabic script and from right to left. You really have to appreciate what they are up against. We encourage them to not give up.

The Ugandan vervet monkeys drop in now and then.



Nobody around?



Dear me! What's that?



Looks like a yam.



Tastes good. Thanks.

In some ways our center is a little like walking in the rainforest in Madagascar. You never know what's around the next bend. Today we we're doing greetings and family – which in Africa are much the same thing. How are you? How is the family? This can go on for quite some time. We asked one of our South Sudanese students,

'Do you have any brothers and sisters.'

'Yes'.

'How many brothers do you have?'

'I don't know.'

'Oh, well, do you know how many sisters you have?'

'105.'

'I've never met anyone with so many sisters.'

'My father has 25 wives.'

'I see.'

I would have liked to continue that discussion. I immediately begin to wonder about the logistics. How many beds do you have? Do you each have specific jobs to do? Are you a village? How old is your father? Is he a really happy guy or does he take long trips? It starts to get too personal though.

We asked the students to come with suggestions for our discussions. They suggested that we talk about the divorce rate in Europe. In African countries there is a strong influence of the church and getting a divorce is taboo. I guess with 25 wives that wouldn't be a problem (for the man). There is

a gradual change in society. For one, before 2004 a woman could not initiate divorce proceedings. There has been a change in attitude toward women and a recognition that they have equal rights.

The guys can no longer commit adultery without repercussions. So the times they are a changin'.



Dancer

We had a children's day for all the smallest ones who would be going back to primary school. Prizes in shiny pink and silver packages were given out to the older ones who had excelled in some way or other. Then there was entertainment which consisted of dancing.

A week has gone by and it is time for a new debate. This week the topic is: Has Technology Done More Harm Than Good?

The students talked mostly about mobile phones and facebook; either how important they were or how bad they were for having supplanted real human interaction. One of the students pointed out that technology wasn't only phones. Without technology we would be sitting here with no clothes on. I was prepared to present about 10 different human-extinction scenarios

caused by technology, but then Karin chose that side. Darn.

When I was called to the floor, I pointed out that the title was 'has technology DONE more harm' which is past tense. It obviously has done a lot of good. There may be dangers in the future, but we will tackle those too - when we technologists see a problem, we don't get hysterical. If you are driving your car and the steering wheel comes loose, what do you do? Scream? No, you put on the brakes.

You can win a lot of kudos if you throw a little theater into your performance. It was quite funny when one of the guys pretended to get run over while talking on his mobile phone.

Living here is like living in a Samoan fale – open and airy – a definite shortage of walls. We hear every baby crying and every 'pass the sugar please' (or worse). The truth couldn't be more naked – even the speaker at times is naked. Maybe that's how the animals feel.

The End of the Tale for now.

Much love,

B&K



The End of the Tail is here.

## Newsletter Uganda March 2018

It is early morning. There were ants in the kettle again. A cool wind is blowing into our open living space. The rain has started rattling on to the corrugated iron roof. I am wondering if our car will make it up the muddy hill to the refugee centre. I am sitting with a cup of coffee after breakfast. That is the setting for this, our next newsletter.

Remember the Turacos? The other day there were two cuddling on a branch of the fig tree not far from where I sat. They were rubbing beaks together. At this moment the infamous Eastern Plantain Eater landed 5 meters away. I waited for him to go into his usual screeching attack, and to see the larger Turacos make their whimpering exit. But no! The male Turaco straightened up, jumped over his mate and strode down the limb. He stopped a few meters away from the plantain eater and stared him straight in the eye. I had the camera ready and took his picture. The look on his face says it all: “Hey squirt, you got a problem?” The Plantain Eater flew clumsily away. It is as if the Turacos suddenly realized that they were the stronger force.



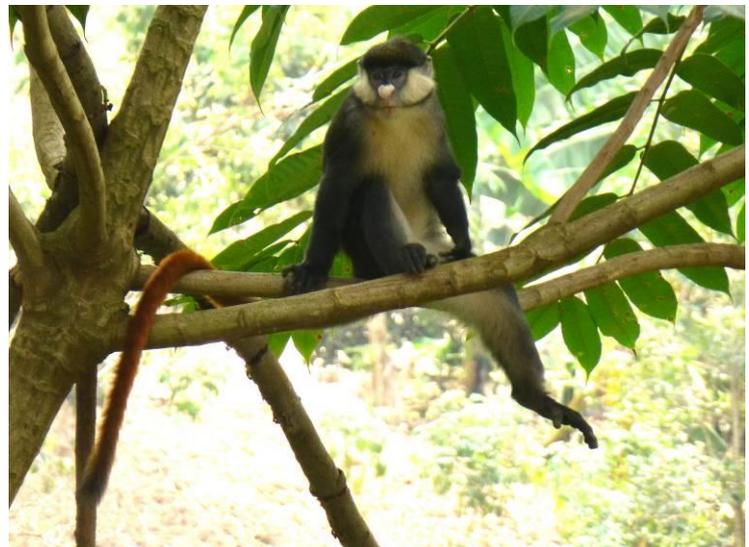
Today is Valentine’s Day so we spiced up the class dialogues with romance. It may seem odd to be introducing silly conventions like Valentine’s to a fairly traumatized assemblage. For the most part our students seem unaffected by their past but occasionally you get a glimpse: In one of the weekly debates we discussed whether Capital Punishment Should Be Abolished. One of the South Sudanese ladies stood up and with a shaky voice declared ‘When they come into your village and murder people or cut off your arm are you not supposed to respond? Suddenly it wasn’t an academic discussion but a picture of real hurt.



*Do you love me?*

We had a new visitor in our fig tree this weekend. At first I thought it was a vervet monkey carrying a red rope. But Karin said no, it’s his tail. In fact it is called a red-tailed monkey. They have a quite comical blue face with a triangular white nose.

Shortly after, two hornbills came and put on a gymnastic display, swinging on a branch, breaking off limbs and tossing a nut around and catching it. Eventually they settled down on a branch and stared at us soulfully. The hornbill has only one word.



Which is a little like rubbing your finger on a balloon: “WHAENN”. We tried to say it back, but didn’t get much response. There may be nuances here that we are not aware of - “WHEANN” and “WHAENN”.



*Broaden Your Scope (Ankole Cow)*

One of the teachers asked me to come to his class to teach for an hour. I started the lecture by asking them where the energy in a light bulb came from. They said, ‘electricity’. Where does the electricity come from? The river. Where does the water in the river come from? The rain. Where does the rain come from? The clouds. Where do the clouds come from? The evaporation in the sea. Why does the sea evaporate? Because of the sun.

Sooooo ..Where does the energy in a light bulb come from? The sun.

So when you broaden your scope, you come up with a different answer. Think about it.

Instead of a mustard seed of faith, we try to plant a mustard seed of doubt – that there are things that we think simply because we are looking from too narrow a perspective.

Every culture has a few unfortunate quirks. Like the USA has its right to bear arms that is provided for in the 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment to the constitution. In Uganda it is the right to make noise. Freedom of noise. It is Sunday today the sun is shining and there is a breeze wafting through the fig tree. There is also a bulldozer about a half kilometre away which is filling the valley with a deafening roar. This does nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of the church where, at the moment, they sound like the despairing souls in Dantés *Inferno*. We all have our version of freedom I guess. How about Elvis’ version – *I wanna be free oh yeah, free oh yeah, freeeeeeee eee ee. I wanna be free like a bird in a tree*. And, hold on to your chair, look at what just landed! Speakin’ of the devil. A Crowned Hornbill!

No Johanna. He doesn’t have a crown.... He makes up for it by having a big nose.



Freedom to Eat Figs. Now!

This week's debate topic was: *Polygamy is Better Than Monogamy*. As usual Karin and I were on opposite sides. Honourable Karin (see blackboard), who was opposed to the proposition, was well-prepared and said that in the past there have been good reasons for polygamy: When there was a lack of men due to the slave trade in Western Africa, polygamy blossomed and recently, due to the war in Sudan with so many men being killed, the government has encouraged polygamy. However in normal times it makes no sense. Nature has endowed us with an (almost) equal number of male and female births and therefore polygamy is unfair to the men who do not get to have a wife and the many women who must share one (worn out) man.



### Monogamy is Better Than Polygamy

The side defending polygamy came with some respectable arguments (larger families are happier) and some hopeless ones (when a wife misbehaves then a husband can go to another one of his wives!).



### Polygamy is Better Than Monogamy

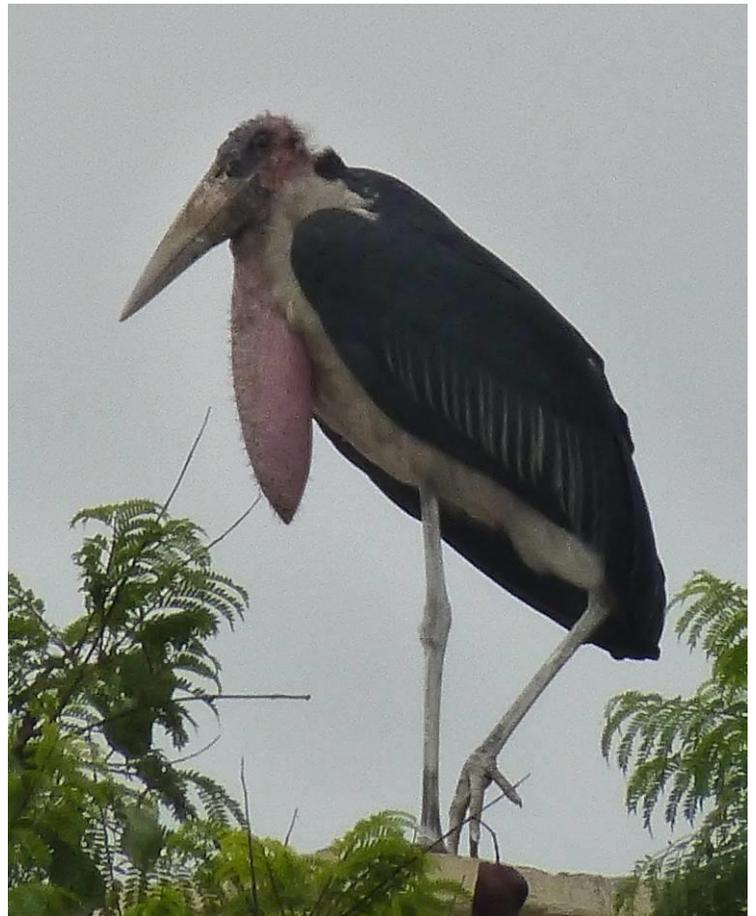
Eventually they called on me to defend that polygamy was better than monogamy. My argument was that as long as you are not hurting anyone else, you should be free to live the way you want.

There are over a hundred countries in the world that have made polygamy illegal. There are 58 countries in the world where polygamy is legal. None of the polygamous countries said it was illegal to be monogamous. Who then has the more open mind?

Clearly it is the polygamous one - therefore they are better.

(This argument did have its flaws – the polygamist couldn't make monogamy illegal or they would all be in jail after marrying wife #1)

We made a trip into Kampala for supplies and also to peruse the local craft markets. Francis, our driver, heard of our plans and said that we might be interested in visiting a place that was unusual for the ordinary tourist. After visiting the craft centres and having a milkshake (special treat), we decided to try the driver's suggestion. It turned out to be The Kampala meat market. This is where the butchering of cattle takes place. Not very appealing. There is however, one interesting feature quite unique for Uganda. The Marabou Stork. It has a wingspan of 3.2 meters (although there have been claims of up to 4 meters). Getting back to our story: the Marabou is a carrion eater. Like a vulture or buzzard, they will be attracted to any dead animal. The meat market is therefore a veritable paradise and they are present in the hundreds.



The example you see on the right is not dying or sick. This scabby creature is a Marabou in his prime. They have two air sacs: one hanging down in front and one on the base of the neck in the back. When on the internet, Karin came across a picture of a Marabou and next to it an ad had accidentally been placed that said, *Have you tried online dating?* Your eyes then drifted over to the marabou and you thought, *No, and I never will.*

So we wandered around the meat market. The storks were landing and taking off or just hanging out. The



workers and storks, who had lived shoulder to shoulder for so long, completely ignored one another. The animals will stand in large groups on the roofs of all the buildings. They are best friends with vultures who are more adept at tearing into hides, and you will often see the two together socially.

If you are wondering about the air sacs, they have a lot of blood vessels and will cool the animal off. During

mating, both male and female will inflate their sacs – thereby becoming more attractive.

We have been very impressed with our students who despite a devastating past and an uncertain future maintain a light-hearted attitude. It is such a luck of the draw. They did nothing wrong to land in the muddle they are in. In South Sudan about 30% of the population can't read or write and they get by on subsistence farming. So they are used to a tough life. However, it is the addition of violence and the unravelling of the society around them that is unfair.

Our final days are approaching and when the entire student body was assembled, they thanked us for having come and asked us to say a few words.

I told them that when we first came to the refugee centre, I did not know what to expect. I knew that they were escaping from violence, but how bad was it? Were people on crutches? Did they have a bandage on their forehead? Were they missing an ear? Instead what we met were smiles. They were all friendly. They were eager to learn. How did they manage to be so positive? Well, I thought I knew their secret. They were young!

Janis Joplin, a singer from the '60s, sang: **Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose.** Well, a refugee has nothing. Nothing but freedom. Perhaps with that freedom they could build a new world upon the broken pieces of the old. Build a better world.

And with those rather grandiose (but heartfelt) words, I guess it's ...

Bye until next time,

B&K



Splendid Starling

Students finding words in boggle.



**Inhabitants of our fig tree (and surrounding bushes) in Uganda**



African Grey Woodpecker, African Paradise Fly Catcher, Willow Warbler, Beaudouin's snake-eagle, Beautiful Sunbird, Black and White Casqued Hornbill



Bronze Munia, Brown Throated Sunbird, Double Toothed Barbet, Great Blue Turaco, Hadada Ibis, Harrier Hawk



Lizard Buzzard, Orange Breasted Sunbird, Red Billed Firefinch, Red-cheeked Cordon-Bleu, Red Chested Cuckoo, Ross's Turaco



Scarlet Chested Sunbird, Yellow Billed Kite, Crowned Hornbill