

The Beauty of a Barren Land

Last summer, a trip to the African country of Namibia changed my life. I spent my time with a missionary moving from place to place, seeing some remarkable country and very unique people. Most importantly, I found an unexpected treasure.

Three months earlier, at a mission conference in Dallas, Texas, I was walking past a table where two men sat. One was Abel, a suntanned missionary from Africa, and the other was Bob, Abel's mission director. Abel's work in the remote deserts of Namibia fascinated me, but I'd never met him. Bob had preached at my church the previous year, so we knew each other. As I walked by, Bob jokingly introduced me to Abel as "the guy who wants to go to Africa with you." That, of course, was not true, but Abel thought he was serious. He said he would like to have someone visit him in Namibia. I did not really want to go at first, but as the conference went on, I saw that it was something I should do. Abel needed some help, and I needed the learning experience.

Things snowballed from there. I was able to get my tickets and passport quickly. Three months after meeting Abel, I found myself sitting in a 747, high above the deserts of Namibia. I vividly remember my first sight of Kaokoland. I had just awakened, and the sun was glaring through my window. The ground five miles below was reddish, sun-baked desert: nothing but rocks, dust and heat. No buildings, no roads, not even any plants. The sun was beating down so harshly that even looking at the ground hurt my eyes. Shocked, I looked away; never before had I seen anything like it. Abel was somewhere in that desert. "How could anyone live in such a harsh place?"

Abel met me at the tiny international airport in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. After three long days of traveling by myself, it was good to see a familiar face. We stayed the night in Windhoek and drove to his house the next day. On the way, there was plenty of time to observe this formidable land. After driving north eight hours to his house, the barrenness of the landscape was still striking. The rocks were so jagged, the trees were so small and twisted, the air was so hot and dry.

Kaokoland is the Northwest region of Namibia. It contains the largest wilderness area on the continent of Africa. It is a thirsty land, where rain falls only a few times a year. Kaokoland is a mountainous desert, with valley of red sand and dry grass cutting through it. The rolling hills are sparsely covered with tenacious little shrubs and trees, some of which are called ironwood trees. When rain does fall, rivers surge through the valleys. The fertile river beds wind through the desert creating narrow ribbons of dark green foliage that contrast sharply with the dusty brown color dominating the landscape. The taller mountains are steep and rocky ridges jutting out of the desert floor. They have almost nothing growing on them, except an occasional tuft of grass that somehow found shelter from the sun and wind.

The only people who live in this desert, with few exceptions, are the Himbas, a group of semi-nomadic shepherds. They are as tough and tenacious as the ironwood trees. Himbas, some of the most untouched people in Africa, live almost the same way as their

ancestors lived hundreds of years ago. They raise goats and cows and live on boiled goat meat and soured cows' milk. Their nomadic lives are spent herding livestock from place to place in search of water and grass. They traditionally wear very few clothes. A man usually wears a shirt and a loincloth, while a woman wears only a goatskin skirt. The kids sometimes wear a loincloth and sometimes wear nothing. Men, women and children wear intricate ornaments. A typical Himba house is a group of mud huts where the patriarch, his wives, and most of his kids live. He usually owns hundreds of cows and many more goats. All the people in his area look to him for leadership.

Abel lives in Kaokoland and works among Hillbas. He lives in the heart of Kaokoland, near a small settlement called Etunga. When we arrived at Etunga, I got my first look at the place that would be my home for the next five weeks. Abel's camp consisted of a few ragged tents, a horse corral, and a small A- frame hut. I was going to stay in the hut, which was Abel's "guesthouse." After being crammed into a small pickup cab with two other people, it was nice to have a place all to myself.

The first few days of living in Etunga were fun. We slept in huts and tent and ate and cooked outside. Local Hillbas went through the camp all the time. Abel introduced me to many of them. We would shake hands, I'd tell them my name, and they would tell me theirs. The first man that I met told me his name was Kowitawarwa. He expected me to repeat his name back to him, but I could not. He was very amused by my clumsy attempts to pronounce his name. I didn't like introducing myself after that, but I did enjoy seeing and hearing these very different people. I especially enjoyed seeing the kids. One little girl would wave shyly as she went by every day, and I'd smile and wave back. I wanted to be able to talk to her, but I could not speak the Hillba's language.

In a few days, the fun started to wear off. I was so nervous around some of those people. I was one of the few white men they had ever seen. They would point and stare at me and talk and laugh. I didn't know if they were laughing at me, but it sure felt like they were. Being their new alien on display became unnerving.

The slow pace of life in Africa was very hard to get used to. Being a typical American, it was very difficult for me to sit around camp that first week with almost nothing to do. Abel was the only English speaking person within fifty miles. I really enjoyed the long visits we had, but we could not visit all day. Abel spent a lot of his time visiting the neighboring Hillbas. He rode a horse to the nearby houses since the roads were so bad. He didn't want me to get hurt riding the horse, so I would stay at camp and read or work on different projects with Domingo, Abel's native assistant. We built an outhouse, a rock wall, and a few other things while I was there. We didn't speak the same language, but we learned to communicate well enough to work together. It was nice to feel productive and useful, but I knew it was only a temporary feeling.

I was glad to be there, but I wasn't enjoying myself. The boredom was driving me crazy, and I felt very awkward everywhere I went. I can remember sitting in the only place I could escape the awkwardness, my hut, wondering, "What I have gotten myself into?" Awkwardness crept into my feelings like lizards crept into my hut. Those lizards

were amazing. They found gaps in the walls where there were no gaps. It was impossible to keep them out; they invaded the hut at will. My first reaction was to hunt them down and kill them. At least they were silent, unlike the flies. All the time I heard the constant, inescapable drone of flies. There were hundreds, thousands of them. They were in my hut, on the pages of my books, and on my food; they were everywhere. Their hypnotic, monotonous buzzing seemed to typify the sleepy boredom that permeated Etunga's atmosphere.

My first Sunday with Abel, I went to his weekly church service. It was good seeing those Himba people singing songs and listening to the Abel's preaching. They really seemed to enjoy it. Although I could not understand much of what was going on, I could participate in a way by singing a few of the songs with them. But I still felt awkward around those people and it was frustrating to not understand anything that was spoken. My thoughts drifted back to home where my friends and family were. I missed being at my own church service, where I could talk to people and understand the sermon. It seemed like there was a wall between me and those Hillbas. It was always there, distancing me from their lives.

After the service was over and the people slowly trickled back to their homes, Abel and I had our usual peanut butter sandwich lunch, with the usual swarm of flies accompanying us. We talked before retreating to our huts to escape the afternoon heat. Abel told me that we would go to Osana later that afternoon. He said the man who lived there had three wives and lots of kids. I welcomed the opportunity to get out and see some new country, but the thought of having to go through the awkward ritual of meeting new people didn't thrill me. As I sat in my hut that afternoon, I watched the lizards creep along the walls. By this time I had given up on killing them.

A few hours later, we climbed out of Abel's Land Cruiser at Osana. It was a small valley surrounded by rugged, dusty green hills. A group of mud Hillba huts occupied a small clearing in the middle of the valley. A few half-naked Hillba kids came running toward us, excitedly calling Abel's name. Soon, more kids came running up to us. I could see they were all very happy to see Abel by the big smiles on their faces. After enthusiastically greeting Abel, they politely greeted me. I answered back the best I could, feeling awkward and conspicuous. One of the older girls gave Abel and me some wrinkly little brown berries. Abel thanked her and ate them contentedly. The kids looked at me. I looked down at my berries. The flies buzzed around my hand like undecided vultures, wondering about this food. I was thinking, "I'm supposed to eat *these* things, out of this dirty Hillba's hand? Who knows when she last washed her hands?" Well, I choked them down, and thanked the girl. Soon, everyone started walking toward a small grove of trees, the kids chattering excitedly as they went.

The grove of trees turned out to be a makeshift church. The important man of the house, Raputu, had been one of the first Hillbas Abel met when he began his missionary work two years before. They became very good friends, and Abel's Bible teaching changed Raputu and his family for the better. He taught them that all people have sinned against God and will be punished for their sins unless they repent and call upon Christ to

forgive their sins. They understood the Bible and believed in Jesus.

Raputu's family was different from the other Hillbas I had met; they seemed to be happier. Their behaviors were different as well. Hillba men often abuse women and young girls. Raputu learned from the Bible that immoral behavior is wrong, so he began protecting his daughters from abusers and treating his wives better than they had ever been treated. Raputu wanted more Bible teaching so he asked Abel to come and preach at his house every Sunday. Raputu was not there that day, but his fourteen children (ranging in age from one to sixteen) and his three wives were present, as well as a few neighbors. Abel led them in some songs he had taught them. I was learning a few of the songs, so I sang along with them, trying to ignore the lizards that darted across the dusty "church floor." Raputu's family listened attentively as Abel preached to them about Jesus Christ.

After the church service was over, I walked back to the pickup to get the clothes we brought to hand out to the kids. Hillba children love to wear clothes when they can get them. Abel had told me he gave out clothes when he had them to give, so I had brought two suitcases of clothes and blankets from home. The hot days turn to cold nights in the dry Namibian air. We gave each of the kids a T-shirt and helped the younger ones put theirs on. They were so excited with their new clothes. Even though they politely thanked Abel and me for them, I still felt like an outsider, like there was a wall between those kids and me. It seemed I could not escape that awkward feeling. Time was passing and it was getting late, so we started walking back to the pickup. The flies buzzed about me as I walked alone, ahead of the group.

Suddenly, I was surrounded by those smiling little kids. They were all so excited with their new clothes they could not contain themselves. They were pointing at their clothes, jumping and dancing and almost singing their thanks to me for them. "Okahepa! Okahepa! Perri nowa!" (Thank you, thank you, very good.) I felt them tugging on my arm and heard them saying those beautiful words to me and saw their sweet smiling faces looking up at me. The wall that I, in my own pride, had built between us disintegrated, and my awkward feeling disappeared. I no longer noticed the flies and lizards.

I spent the next short minutes on my knees, "talking" with them. The few words I knew and the creative hand signals that they made were all we needed. Face to face and heart to heart, their eyes and smiles, their laughs and words outshone all else. One smiling boy was fascinated by the hair on my arms. He looked up at me in wonder as he felt it with his fingers over and over, saying, "Perri nowa, perri nowa!" Another young girl excitedly showed me her new shirt, as though I had never seen it. Her eyes shone as she held it up for me to see. A quiet little boy with big brown eyes affectionately held my hand as we slowly walked back to the pickup.

As I looked at the lithe, dark kids with their bright, white smiles, and at the beautiful scenery around me, I saw the most picture perfect African scene. The big orange sun was just starting to set, casting a warm orange glow on the valley through the wisps of dust that hung in the air. The children laughing and playing around the mud huts, the softly bleating goats, the smoking fires, and the silhouettes of the few twisted

ironwood trees left an image in my mind that I will never forget.-My heart had opened. The forgotten wall was down now.

I quickly grew to love that land, and the people in it. I especially grew to love Raputu' s family. The next four weeks were some of the most precious in my life. After that day I could see the true and invisible beauty, which before had been buried by the harsh land and hidden by walls. I could now see the most important treasure of that land: the people, with their eternal souls.