

## **ARE WE THERE YET? ROKON AND BACK**

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*by James A. Hubbard*

When my children and their parents were young, and we were on a car trip, the frequent question was, “Are we there yet?” I’m confident that no one else has had that experience. Yesterday, many around us were saying, “Rokon is coming. We are nearer it now. It is coming soon.” Let me tell you it was never coming. Oh, we finally arrived, but we did all the ‘coming.’ Rough dirt roads, not unlike what we see right in Juba, but with a difference. It is a long road, 53 miles, I think I was told. Fifty-three miles is nothing. I ought to know. I drive 70 to work! Oh yes, you haven’t driven this 53 miles. No major traffic, the road was wide, the day was beautiful, the car was air conditioned, the company was congenial and it took three hours plus maybe 143 miles bouncing up and down and left and right and back and forth to cover those 53 miles.

Well, we met at the Bishop Gwynne College with the Rev’d James Aruma Ilarios, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs for The Episcopal University to be built on the foundation laid by several college level institutions throughout South Sudan. But we were going to visit the site of a proposed new campus for all of these schools on a two kilometer square site in Rokon—yes, 53 miles outside of Juba. Vice-Chancellor James introduced us to the University staff, a very impressive and committed group of individuals. And then he prayed for safety and a blessed day. Only seven of us were privileged to go. Now I realize that the other half-dozen folks breathed a sigh of relief as we climbed into the Land Rover and drove away.

I’ll introduce you to the others according to their seating position. Our driver, Joseph, an amazing driver who would be bored out of his mind driving in the U.S. after what is required and what he is so good at in this country. I doubt if he could imagine driving in straight lines and all in one direction. He would have to see it to believe it. Bp. Jackson Arifa, Assistant Bishop for Juba rode shotgun. Dane was behind him, Joseph Agang, who is about 6’4” was behind Joseph the driver. He is the Examination Officer for the Episcopal Church’s 3000 students. I sat in the middle, we all know why, because I’m short. And in the privileged fold down, no comfort here, jump seats were the uncomplaining, but painfully aware, Engineer, Moses Mauwa and the University Operations Manager, Joseph Uyikuru.

We left pretty close to 9:00 A.M. and arrived pretty close to 1:00, but who’s counting? At our first security checkpoint Dane and I were wondering what the inside of a South Sudanese prison looks like since we were told we did not have a CID clearance. Of course, they had done the same at the airport on Tuesday via computer, but this little policeman was not having any of that, nor that a CID clearance is not needed for a tourist, but only if you a citizen and taking a government job. Bp. Jackson and Joseph Agang talked the young fellow down and the Bishop

promised to bring some bibles for him and his colleagues the next time he came through. Fortunately, Bishops are seen as equals to government officials in this country, even if they are far superior, and the young man could not get from Bp. Jackson any kind of agreement that he, the policeman, knew what he was talking about. With the promise of the bibles, he told us we could go and then welcomed us cheerily. Later we were told that these men, military and police, when they are out of cigarette papers have been known to use pages out of the bible to roll their smokes! So back into the Land Rover only to be stopped immediately at the road blockade and told that we needed to see the young man's superior. So Agang climbs back out and stalks over to see the superior. The Bp is muttering, "We are not paying them anything, not now or ever. Soon Agang was back, muttering a little himself. No, he had not paid them anything. I think every other security point in the, yes 53 miles, waved us through. They knew the car or saw the Bishop or who knows, but no problems.

The bush is beautiful in its own way. Many species of shrub, grass, trees and a few birds are present. A small dove was very common and a blackbird about the size of a starling I saw a few times. I did see a committee of vultures in a tree. There are frequent streams, but for the sake of my grandson, Loren, they are not trout streams, not any more. Actually, they were probably never trout streams, we are too close to the Equator. They are filled with erosive material and look horribly polluted. We began encountering herds of cattle, owned by the Mandari tribes people in this region. Like the Nuer and the Dinka, they are pastoralists and traditionally keep cattle. Cattle are their wealth, part of their family, used to pay dowries to the brides family, and were traditionally part of their religious life. I asked Joseph Agang if they marked the cattle to tell them apart, because I knew that families treated them family. He said, 'No need' they are so familiar with every marking, every shade of color and in many other ways, that they know them as individuals, and even in large community herds have no problem identifying their own. Each is given a special name, in fact. This reminds me of Jesus's assertion that the Good Shepherd knows his sheep and they know him. Well, it is true for the good herder and the cattle themselves in this very rural pastoral setting. The horns on these cattle are probably three feet long. The white cattle are the preferred color and Joseph says that after a rain they are *beautiful*.

About 1:00 we arrived in Rokon, drove by Saint Joseph's school that only a few years ago had 330 students, but now is closed for lack of money and teachers. The students have gone to Government schools although Saint Joseph's was originally far superior. The Headmaster told us that the schools, there are two, the other is Saint Mary's but is a little distance away and that region is under the control of rebels presently, have for years been the identity of the Rokon community. They feel lost without them. The ladies ululated us into the Diocesan Office area as their way of welcoming us. They extended us the hospitality of tea which only one of us accepted and then we had a report from the headmaster/Archdeacon of the church, a complete report on the use of some \$7,000 raised by Sebastian whom you and we met back at Salisbury at breakfast on our last morning there. Sebastian is a Frenchman who works for the Chunnel

Authority in France and is committed to the Episcopal Church in South Sudan. This little out of the way community was one of the recipients of monies he raised to drill a borehole and buy a pump and help pay teachers at Saint Joseph's and Saint Mary's. And he was trying to assess where the monies had actually gone. We heard the entire report in detail. Obviously, these folks wanted us to know exactly how it had been spent and that it had gone for that for which it was purposed. The pump is now broken, the schools are closed and the community no longer has any of the money. It was touching somehow to see their concern that we understand. Dane has already sent the report off to our friend, Sebastien. It is marvelous to see how God works with his people to meet needs around the world.

The new university, when built will bring new development to Rokon, much new development, jobs and training for students, of course. We were fascinated to learn that Joseph Bilal, the Primates assistant and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for the new university, grew up in Rokon! Agang pointed out a cluster of tukuls (houses with thatched roofs) as we passed them and noted that Joseph Bilal had grown up there. Those who attended the Diaspora conference which was held at Grace Church, Lexington in 2019 will remember Joseph well. A blind man from the community of Rokon who is quite wealthy has given the land for the university. Surely it is not too great a stretch to see a connection between this gift and a local boy who has succeeded amazingly well. There may even be a second gift of land as large as the first if needed after the university is built.

Finally, we went to the university land and walked through the bush to the three boreholes that AFRECS helped fund. We felt as if we really were at the beginning of something great. The issue, as it is so often, is money. The entire planning for the campus has been done by EMI (Engineering Ministries International). Most of the engineering and architectural team was North American. The complete on-site evaluation, electricity, water, waste water and sewage, architecture, drawings, with cost estimates have been published this year. And their work has been approved by the Church. Phase One A and B estimates are roughly \$26,000,000.00. It is a daunting amount of money, but U.K. participants have begun the search for large sums and intend to do so in the U.S. as well. On one hand, we might say that our God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, *a propos* our earlier discussion about cattle. On the other hand, a lot of money is needed and an entire nation will eventually be the beneficiary. Governments and large companies, even large charitable organizations are used to thinking in terms which exceed the experience of many of us in the Church. Still a large vision is needed for South Sudan and for the Episcopal Church in South Sudan. There will be a time not too many years down the road when this initial sum may seem small indeed, and if it is given that time will come more quickly than if it is not. Christians can pray together to hold out this vision. God can prepare hearts and minds. And there is an urgency about this, because a security fence is needed before the present land and perhaps the boreholes are raided. Security will diminish some of the urgency. Much praying and the planning have been done, initial steps have been taken. Let us take up the

praying and an offering networking that may make much more possible a reasonable calendar for construction. Money for the security fence has been identified and the holders, Christians all, are thinking, praying and studying the practicality of it. Let us pray with them to accomplish this first essential piece, about \$1,000,000 of the \$26,000,000 mentioned.

This is a worthwhile vision.