

Rwanda, Kenya, Italy: Bridging Landscapes and Realities

Beatrice Spadacini (October 21, 2009)



Moving from one African reality to another and then landing in Italy. How to make sense of it all? How to relate to people and to bridge such contrasting realities?

Three weeks ago I was on the back of a motorcycle riding up and down the hills of Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda. I was on a reconnaissance mission, trying to figure out whether or not to move my family there and start up a private business. A week later, I was stuck in a traffic jam in Nairobi, a jam caused by a herd of cattle crossing the highway and grazing on the sidewalk, the only



patch of green in a sea of dry land and dust. The cattle looked bony and emaciated. A young Maasai boy pushed the herd towards the side of the road to avoid the cars and ease up the jam. This week I am in

Milan, Italy—my hometown—where everything looks pristine and sanitized. There are rows of glittery shops, herds of people (instead of cattle) on a mission to buy the latest trendy item on sale and a never ending choice of fashionable outfits. A pair of shoes costs an average of 200 Euros. I am after all, in one of the fashion capitals of the world.

It generally takes me at least one week to come to terms with the different landscapes of my life and the emotions I feel as I travel from one country to the next.

Rwanda is rapidly growing, with a 7% annual gross domestic product. It is a central African country ripe with opportunity but still dealing with the ghosts of the past;

Kenya is once again experiencing extreme drought and a minimum of three days of power rationing in the capital city where I live.

Italy is caught up by endless chatter about the sexual habits of our Prime Minister. Even a Kenyan newspaper picked up on this story and made fun of PM Berlusconi through a political cartoon. Some of the people I meet here in Italy are more interested in what so and so said about their PM than the fact that today is World Food Day and that, truth be told, there are more than one billion people on the planet who go hungry every day.

So, I ask myself, is it possible to bridge this reality gap between Africa and Europe or Africa and the West? Connecting the dots is, in my opinion, challenging. I often feel like a participant observer, a traveling anthropologist, engaged but at the same time detached. I cling to what connects me to each and every one of these cities; these countries. It is only by writing that I am able to pull together some thoughts and to create the time to reflect. I don't have the ambition to arrive to a conclusion, least of all, a solution on how to bridge this gap. There are few people in Europe who have the time to listen to what is happening in Africa. But the mental gap is often too large to bridge it through a casual conversation. When curious individuals want to know more about Kenya, Rwanda or Africa in general my goal is to provide brushstrokes of a far away reality, at the risk of oversimplifying and stumbling upon clichés. Sometime, I dare to suggest books or websites that they can turn to for more information.

I admit that I have a similar problem when I return to Kenya and talk to Vicky, the young woman who works in my house or to Nelson in

Rwanda, the student who keeps a photo of our family hanging on his bedroom wall. How can I explain

Italy? What it is like to walk through the streets here, stroll into a store and listen to what is on people's mind? This remains a challenge for me.



Links

[1] <http://iitaly.org/files/11547nairobicows11256145135jpg>