

## BEHIND THE MOUNTAINS OF THE MOON

### *An African travelogue*

*Ili: An African Journey / Tales of Africa / From the Depths of Africa / A Journey through Africa /*

Once again, I leave the South Sudan embassy empty-handed. “You have to have a letter of invitation,” they told me, “Without one, you cannot enter the country”.

Generally speaking, someone in South Sudan would have to guarantee that I would not step outside the bounds of what they consider acceptable behaviour, meaning that every step I took would be watched. In a war situation, few would take on such a risk. No officials working for a non-governmental organisation would jeopardise their reputation for a curious foreigner, a journalist from an inconsequential country for them, as relevant to South Sudan as bushmen or whale hunting. But I refused to give up. I would seek out a way into the country through some other channels, even if it meant taking one of the many goat trails crossing the border with Uganda.

Instead of paying for a motorcycle ride, I opted to head back to the flat on foot.

From the hot centre of Kampala, the road becomes an overpass over the railway line constructed by the British to connect Kenya and Uganda, their two most important colonies in Eastern Africa. Once the aorta of the entire region, it has since fallen into disrepair and lost its function, turning into a walkway taken by people to avoid vehicles as they come into and out of the city. They walk in a row, like well-organised ants, dressed in colourful shirts dominated by the typical colours of Africa: yellow and red.

The wooden railroad ties, soaked in centuries of tropical humidity and scorched by the equatorial sun, have since become a habitat for insects and rats, and a depository for small plastic waste that compactly describe the state of the modern world. A Chinese company is currently planning to revitalise the railway, little remains of the once grand colonial splendour, as the ideas of imperialism are difficult to explain to the people here, convinced of the mighty prophecies of their ancestors. Even before the white man started to take the colonial story seriously, the prophet Masaka envisaged the arrival of “the red people” as he called the Europeans, and spoke of his visions of snakes chasing away the livestock and causing great changes in the community.

It was strong, fast and massive, and it was said that a “snake of iron would start from the salty lake to the large inland sea”.

As I dragged my feet along the pavement, with all the energy of an elderly man, watching the people swarm around me, in my mind I saw a black and white map of Africa, with the eastern part of it ripped out. A region celebrated through stories of great discoveries, both in literature and on film; the region that Europeans first think of upon mention of the Black Continent.

Africa: safaris, lions, giraffes, a slender black man holding a long stick, long-horned cows, a dozen men bearing weapons in the back of a truck, noise in the city, bustle, endless sun, and malaria. Nights with a symphony of sounds.

The iron snake had difficulties finding its way to Lake Victoria, the inland sea around which entire series of communities have been intertwined; one society in particular, in every sense of the word, too weak and technologically dependent on more advanced and progressive peoples. A people who accepted with ease the greedy march on the world, packaged in the myth of expanding civilisation. Since they could not find a sufficient labour force in the tribal areas that they occupied, the British brought in some thirty thousand workers from their colonies on the Indian subcontinent. Two and a half thousand men perished, and the remainder decided to stay in Africa and make it their home, assimilating into the life of the community of East African Indians who would later raise Hindu temples in every city, take over a majority of trade and enrich the region with the work of their hands.

Before Member of Parliament, great imperialist and warrior Winston Churchill shot a zebra from the train, criticism from home swelled, calling the entire project insane and calling the line itself *the Lunatic Express*, as it was not known who the train would transport, what it would carry and when the investment would ever pay off. It also meant that the thousands of carriers, formerly the main means of transport connecting the coast with the inland, would lose their jobs.

A battle with the warrior Masai tribe would leave 500 workers dead in one day, following the rape of a girl from a local tribe. Revenge is fast and fierce here, and leaves no time for contemplation. Pierced with spears and left to bleed out on the African soil. But it was though everything had decided to conspire against the success of the railroad; as the year 1900 approached, two lions decided to attack humans, dragging them out of the sleeping cars, their final breath mixing with the breath of the lion's roar. A hundred people were killed by the sharp teeth of the King of the animals, which according to the prophecy only tried to stop the snake, tear it apart and save Africa from the plague. They failed. The completion of the railroad coincided with the start of a new century, and it changed the face of the continent forever. Advances in communications were brought in by the cynically emphasized civilisation, though ivory continued to be carted out, even more so now due to the ever growing hunger for this white gold in the decadent West.

Here it is difficult to get away from the forests of concrete blocks swimming in smog, and yet very rarely can you come across a tree to take shelter from the sun. Further down, the city spills into the borough areas, which are all, without exception, positioned on the hills, with little houses built of locally baked bricks, and small clapboard shops lining the roads. Buildings line the main road, but the real life unfolds behind them. The *boda boda* drivers transport passengers on their motorcycles, pedestrians walk along the edge of the road to buy what they need for the day, while little workshops – carpenters, metalworkers and automobile repair shops – are in the full swing of their daily rhythm. It's loud.

Near one of the half-opened workshops was a little parking lot of compacted red soil. The site was not remarkable in any way, just a space over which people walk, park their cars or motorcycles, people coming in and out, shoppers dragging themselves in the tropical sun, holding their sacs containing perhaps a few pieces of fruit.

All at once, there was a sharp sound, like the blow of a large and wide shovel, or like a bag of cement dropping from a first-floor balcony onto the ground below. People began to swarm quickly around what seemed at first to be a street fight between two or more men, in which one had been injured and was left lying on the ground. Shouting started, and pushing. A slender man raised his voice and yelled at the driver of a motor-taxi who had stopped for no other reason than to see what was going on. The driver was agitated, waving his arm to show that he wasn't sure what he was guilty of, and drove off. I directed my gaze, like an arrow shooting through the forest of colourfully dressed people, stopping on the victim. I felt as though I could touch him, that he was spinning in my head, as though I was experiencing his suffering. He continued to cramp and bend like a run over lizard, grabbing first for his right leg then his left, then his arm, releasing a squeaking noise, as though he was suffering from a nightmare. His mouth was foaming on the dusty soil, and his situation was only made worse by human footsteps, the dust swarming around his head. The people stood helpless around them, guarding them until the attack passed. What else could they do? His tomatoes had spilled everywhere on the ground. A young man had collected them back into a bag and was hold them, believing that the man would awaken from his surreal dream. But I could not wait any longer for the outcome, because I thought that I would finally put on my heavy boots and breathe up in Mujengi. Where the air is clear.

I have been staying here for years. This is a hotel with just one floor, tiny rooms and a large courtyard in which a gigantic sycamore tree spreads out its branches, as though they were arms, to caress the wooden chairs on the grass where guests take their breakfast. All in all, the hotel looks more like a larger house with a flat roof, a long and narrow hallway with rooms on both sides, and bars on the windows. The owner, the elderly Mr. Arun, a second-generation Indian born in Africa, reserved this room for me several days in advance. I have since become a house guest to the staff who have worked here for years, they know all my habits.

“Were you approved?” asked Angela the receptionist, head of the staff.

“It looks like that is not an option for them,” I responded, disappointed, as I take a seat in one of the wooden chairs in the lobby.

This was a signal for Obama to bring me today's edition of the *East African* and a cold Nile beer to shake off my failure and forget that I was wasting time. The newspaper reported that the conflict in the Sudan had now officially been characterised as genocide against the tribal peoples. *Villages are being burned, women raped, food is used as a resource of war. More than a million refugees are now in neighbouring Uganda, and the camps are increasing in size every day. This*

*war is completely tribal, tribal to the core. The nation leaders in the region can no longer sit on their hands, they must call upon President Kiir to do more.*

South Sudan slid into war at the end of 2013, just two years after its proclamation of independence from the Sudan. At the time of the outbreak, Kiir, a member of the Dinka tribe, accused his rival and then Vice-president Riek Machar, a member of the Nuer tribe, of attempting a military coup using two significant modern commodities: firearms and oil.

I had to decline yet another beer that Obama was bringing, seeing that I had already finished off my bottle. He is my favourite waiter, and I was sad to learn that after a month, he would have to return home to Kenya. He comes from a large ten-member family and decided to try his luck in Uganda, but a job that pays only forty dollars can hardly secure prosperity. Obama is a man with a broad smile and black skin, so shiny it appears to have been polished with some secret cosmetic product. In his early twenties, he dreams, like most youth, of education. *Scholarship, scholarship*, repeating it as though this would be enough to employ them anywhere but in the civil service, and the civil service is full to overflowing. In the end, all that remains of a higher education are the dreams that too often sink on the shores of the Mediterranean. Obama broadens his smile like an accordion, and he elegantly carries his tray, like a ballet dancer. If you order your breakfast from him at nine, you can be absolutely sure that it will be ready by ten. If you order coffee too, you can't be completely sure that it will come at the same time as breakfast. But a person can get used to this rhythm. Two Americans, however, a married couple in their 40s, who have strangely wandered into this hidden corner of Kampala, are not so satisfied. They have no idea that the act of ordering breakfast launches an entire mechanism, like cogs with teeth that catch upon one another, turning with one holy aim: the guest must receive what they ordered at the table and that everything will be just fine, though of course one must consider that the cogs turn somewhat slower here.

That morning, like every other, and with every other new guest, Obama was exactly the same. He would elegantly stroll over to the table, holding the tray under his arm, and start listing off the breakfast menu: sausages, little spicy sausages, chapati, scrambled eggs, Spanish omelette, French fries, coffee, tea. He knew the menu by heart, and I wouldn't be surprised if the poor man dreamt it at night. These two Americans ordered everything, but the tea. I observed them from my table on the other side of the courtyard. He in his khaki safari pants and a blue tartan shirt with trekking shoes; his scale must read at least a hundred kilograms. The wife was dressed in a light khaki coloured dress, with a hat not unlike Meryl Streep's in *Out of Africa*.

Obama went into the kitchen where the chef was sitting idly, waiting for an order. With three gas hobs on a table, and several pots and pans, he managed just perfectly. The dough for the chapati is first kneaded, salted and then fried; the potatoes peeled, sliced then fried. The rest in between. And when everything is done, the plates are heaped full, arranged by colour, and breakfast is served.

The man and woman sat completely calmly, chatting about birds. After about twenty minutes, they started to turn around and wonder where the waiter, and rest of the staff, had gone. Had they forgotten their order? Were they hiding in their rooms, attending to other business? Sounds and smells were emanating out of the kitchen. The gentleman got up from his chair and approached the chef, followed by Obama, who was telling him that breakfast was just about done. The man could not believe the system he had fallen into; he had a schedule and this was his time. He gestured towards his wristwatch, nervously tapping on the glass with his index finger.

And how could this black waiter understand his time? Doesn't the white man know that breakfast is always made on time, because how could it possibly be made before time? When it is done, it is time to eat. Not before, because that time simply doesn't exist.

The gentleman took his seat at the table, and explained to the woman that it would be another ten minutes. She nervously and angrily threw looks towards the kitchen, and fixed her hat. In those few minutes, it really seemed as though things had fallen into place. However, the minutes started to become longer and longer, the situation heavier, and the temperature was rising, causing sweat to bead on their white foreheads, raising their anxiety to the boiling point. In one of these protracted minutes, the woman stood up, took military strides towards the counter in the kitchen and started yelling at the cook.

“Call the manager!”

Her shrill voice danced at the edge of a nervous breakdown; she waved her arms about as though trying to scare away birds, while the skin on the bottom of her upper arms waved left then right, like limp sails.

“Don't you understand that we are on a schedule?” she shouted, pointing at the clock on the wall. “Call the manager, this is unheard of!”.

Birds took flight from the tall sycamore tree, and the flapping of their wings could be heard off in the distance, quieter. Mr. Arun came running out and listened carefully to the woman. To avoid being considered a poor hotel manager, he had to make amends and promised them a free breakfast, punishing the cook by revoking his pay for the day, and ensuring that the woman heard him and that the man saw these actions. This calmed them somewhat, but they still didn't eat their breakfast as their schedule had already been overstepped and they left. Armed with patience, I showed no sign of anxiousness, instead I called Obama and told him to bring me their breakfast. Mr. Arun saw this, but didn't charge me.

And that is how our mutual respect came to be; we had stepped over the threshold where a person is no longer just passing through, but instead starts to feel somewhat at home in that place.

Angela was filling out forms at the reception desk, and certainly thinking about her small daughter, waiting for her while being watched by grandmother in their rented flat. Angela's husband had left. Didn't matter where to. She was likely thinking of her daughter this morning too, as she left for work, looking at the first morning fisherman entering their wooden boats, and pushing them into what their ancestors thought looked like an endless sea. A dozen kilometres later, among the tall skyscrapers, the *boda boda* drivers were waking, ready for the day when they skilfully manoeuvre through the city traffic. The minibuses had already started travelling, and the traffic had begun, and would last all day long.

"Did you bring us photographs?" asked Angela, raising her gaze and smiling as though she had just remembered an old joke.

Her curious look got to me, as I couldn't remember what she was referring to, with her elbows on the reception desk, like a real woman of authority: mild natured, but clearly spoken. It was difficult for me to imagine her yelling at someone, or reprimanding them. She never hurried, moving from one side of the lobby to another with a calm stride, in her knee-length wine-coloured skirt and white blouse with an orange scarf around her neck. Orange was the colour of the hotel, which is no coincidence; this is the brilliant colour of Hinduism, proudly indicating the origin of the owner. Angela treated the waiters and housekeeping staff as though they were family members. None of them had a salary higher than the amount that would secure a meal of rice and lentils and a few extra shillings to ensure a working cell phone. This had since become an essential item in Africa. Rice, cell phone, beer: the world is waiting. But Africa was there long before the world, she had only been forgotten. This is the lost continent. Her essence carried out on the black sweaty shoulders in caravans stretching kilometres in length.

"I don't think I brought them," I answered.

"OK. No problem. You can bring them tomorrow. One for each of us."

I was surprised that certain events were so quickly falling into oblivion, I promised her with my entire being that I would bring them the requested photographs as soon as I was back from my trip. She and her three female colleagues, one for each, and there would be no trouble.

"When will you be back?" she asked.

"When I'm back. I don't know which day," I answered.

"Tomorrow?"

"No".

"Day after tomorrow?"

"I don't know".

The year was 2017, and I had planned to re-enter South Sudan and then return to Congo. As time would prove, Congo would find its way deep under my skin, while Sudan would have to wait.