

Kenya: diversity is the key

by Chris Wilson

Recently a competition was held in Kenya to design a “national dress”. Unlike countries in west Africa, the Ghanaians with their famous Kente cloth for example, or Nigeria, Kenya does not have a distinctive costume that people all over the world recognise instantly as Kenyan, and many people feel that it should. This, however, proved to be more difficult than foreseen - the simple reason being that Kenya is so diverse, and there are so many different tribes, each with their own language, customs and, of course, way of dressing. They finally had to settle on the Kikoi - a colourful rectangle of cotton worn in all sorts of ways - wrapped round the waist like a sarong, draped over the head or shoulders or both, or tied over one shoulder like a Masai tribesman. But no one could come up with a single style that suited everyone.

Diversity, it seems, is a key word. It is a useless exercise to try and pigeonhole Kenya and Kenyans. They spill over, whichever category you put them into, with their different languages - Gikuyu, Swahili, Luo, religions - Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, tribal and urban traditions, food, music and styles of clothes.

Geography may have much to do with this. Kenya is on the equator and the coast is hot, humid and tropical. Moving inland it rapidly becomes dry and arid. The north east, particularly along the border with Somalia, is desert, inhabited by nomads and camels. In the south is the Masai Mara, vast, open savanna, teeming with game. Just over the border in Tanzania, but floating in the sky and dominating the landscape for hundreds of miles is Kilimanjaro. To the north of Nairobi it becomes higher, more and more rugged and greener until you get to the jagged peak of Mount Kenya, a completely different shape from the famous volcano but also capped in snow. Splitting the country right down the middle is the Rift Valley, that runs from the Red Sea to the Zambesi, with its string of long deep lakes. Lake Turkana, surrounded by desert in the north, is one of these but the biggest lake of all, Victoria, in the east, is not.

What a fantastic, incredible part of the world this is!

One of the best ways to understand a place is to read what writers have to say about it.

Binyavanga Wainaina, winner of the Caine Prize for African writing 2002, tells, with good humour, how astounded he is, when reading literature by Europeans in his country, “by the amount of game that appears for breakfast at their patios and the snakes that drop into baths and cheetah cubs that become family pets. I have seen five or six snakes in my life. I don’t know anyone who has been bitten by one”.*

Karen Blixen or Isak Dinesen, was, of course, the most famous European writer with her novel *Out of Africa*. Both the book and the film were heavily criticised for over romanticising the colonial way of life. This in reality was not nearly so “noble and dignified” but in fact extremely debauched and sordid, full of racist, small minded people. Nevertheless many loved it, and those who know Kenya know that the beautiful photography was no exaggeration. Some also hold on to that vision of African nobility, dignity and beauty, maintaining that it is not something patronising or elitist but indeed still something worth striving for.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s books are set in that same fantastic landscape, yet focus firmly on the people and the characters are as wonderful or nasty as in real life. He is famous for writing in his own language - Gikuyu - and for telling the story of the fight for independence as it really was, not simply heroic black stereotypes against the nasty, oppressive British. The traumatised characters in “*A Grain of Wheat*” are victims of atrocities by their own people vying with each other for power. His later books, particularly “*Petals of Blood*”, speak of the post independence slide into corruption, nepotism etc. and he ended up in exile in the USA for many years.

So no, black writers, it seems, do not have to shoo elephants off the veranda or lie in bed listening to lions roaring outside the window. Their preoccupations are entirely different. While whites yearn for vast, empty landscapes, blacks love their kith and kin, their extended families and close knit communities. Whatever this says about their differences Kenya is certainly big and accommodating enough for all.

Or is it?

As the population expands the country seems to shrink. It is increasingly difficult to get lost in the vastness of Africa. Wild life habitats are shrinking as people take up more and more space and pressure is increasing from all directions. Nairobi, aptly nicknamed Nairobberry, is a sprawling, chaotic, dangerous place with its famous

mutatus (mini buses), prostitutes, armed gangsters and flying toilets. (If you don't have a proper one you just do your business in a plastic bag and fling it as far as you can out of your yard into some else's). Some complain that lack of physical space also means lack of mental space. There is less room for new ideas. The poor don't have time to think at all. People in power use fundamentalist rhetoric to keep themselves in power, ganging up on critical diplomats, homosexuals, journalists, the Anglican church in Britain and the USA etc. Many may not like what they see but are afraid to stick their necks out.

Dr Richard Leakey, the renowned paleoanthropologist and environmentalist who later became head of Kenya's Wildlife Department and embarked on a crusade to save its natural resources, particularly the African elephant, came into conflict with all sorts of powerful people and ended up losing his legs in a plane crash that many say was no accident.

A BBC headline recently read "Little to celebrate as Kenya turns 40". December 12 is "Jamhuri Day" and lavish celebrations are being planned but there has been a fierce row over this. The government plans to spend a million dollars on 12 days of ceremonies but many say the money should be spent on other things - drugs for Aids patients for example. Only two years ago, in December 2002, there was dancing in the streets as the new National Rainbow Coalition under Mwai Kibaki took over from Daniel Arap Moi who had been in power for 24 years. Yet so soon after disillusionment has set in. Many say he has not done enough to get rid of corruption. Unemployment and crime continue to rise, basic infrastructure such as roads, phones, railways and electricity continues to deteriorate.

Looking on the bright side, Kenyans have recently played a very important role in both the Sudanese and Somali peace processes with, it seems, some long awaited success.

And there is Wangari Maathi! To her complete surprise she won the Nobel Peace Prize this year for her environmental and human rights work, the first African woman to do so. She is the Deputy Environment Minister and is known as "The Tree Woman" because of her campaign to plant trees. The Green Belt Movement has done much to slow deforestation and so long as Kenyans have people like her perhaps they need not be so pessimistic.

But, then, Kenya has so many people like her! There is so much talent - writers, musicians, sports people, business entrepreneurs, wild life experts, farmers, teachers, the list is endless. And there are probably even more in the Diaspora. It is hard to imagine how so many clever people cannot succeed if they work together. Now is the time to start really moving ahead, for all the qualified and talented people abroad to come home, for everyone to get on with developing the country. Kenyans, on their 40th anniversary of independence, need to unite in celebration of their vast human resources – talent, knowledge, expertise and, above all, diversity.

*Discovering Home, Binyavanga Wainaina.