

Eating, observing, and surviving Africa: A Swiss diplomat's captivating outing

In the course of his diplomatic service, Dominik Langenbacher worked in many places around the globe, but from his book *In and Outside Africa*, it appears that Africa impressed him most.

TITLE: In and Outside Africa: A Story of the Human Condition in Africa and the West

AUTHOR: Dominik Langenbacher

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REVIEWER: Mbugua Ngunjiri

Sometime in 2008, a publishing executive recommended me to a business tycoon who wanted to write his memoirs. The recommendation meant a lot to me and my writing career.

I had done some background research on the man, who had held influential positions and had interacted with Kenyan presidents since independence. This was going to be interesting, I told myself.

When we finally met, it dawned on me that the man had a totally different idea of how he wanted his story written; remarkably different from how I hoped to approach the assignment.

"I want this book to be my expanded CV," he said rather mysteriously. Clearly, he knew what he wanted and wished it to be done his way; after all he is the one who had lived his life.

But I digress.

This particular memory came to mind when I found myself reading *In and Outside Africa*, a book written by Langenbacher, a retired Swiss diplomat who lives in Kenya.

In the course of his long and, I dare say, eventful diplomatic service, Langenbacher worked in many places around the globe, but it would appear that Africa had the most profound effect on him, probably due to the fact that his first posting was to the continent, in the early eighties.

Although the book contains details of his life and work experiences, I would be hesitant to call it a memoir; it is much more than that, and less than that at the same time. Confusing, right? Stay with me.

The book opens with a narrative on crocodiles, or rather the evolution of that reptile.

"My smallest crocodile is golden and only 13 millimetres long," opens the book. "It is actually a pin on the

head of a Zairean fetish, holding together a piece of real leopard skin with a synthetic ancillary."

With such a dramatic introduction, rest assured that you are now embarking on a wild ride across Africa, parts of Europe and the US, but mostly Africa.

Then there is the humour, of the gallows variety, I must add, injected liberally throughout the narrative. Sometimes it hits you out of nowhere and so you must be prepared for the abruptness of it.

For example, in the course of his research on crocodiles, he discovered that some female crocodiles could develop embryos from an unfertilised egg, without the input of the male species.

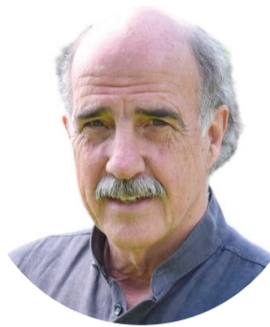
"This rare natural phenomenon is called parthenogenesis, virgin birth or asexual reproduction. No sex," he writes.

Now, diplomats when not in their stifling suits and ties, conducting sometimes boring official chores, tend to be pretty interesting chaps. They can hold their own in a discussion on almost any topic on earth. They have been to many different places and interacted with a wide variety of people.

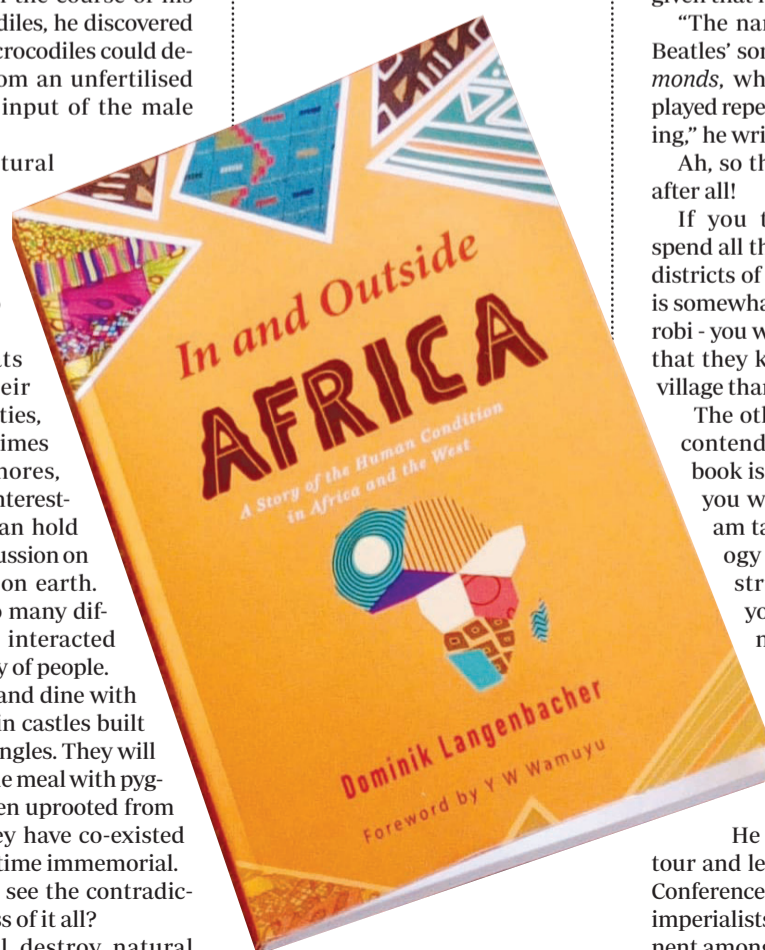
They will wine and dine with corrupt dictators in castles built in the middle of jungles. They will also share a humble meal with pygmies who have been uprooted from forests, where they have co-existed with nature since time immemorial.

Do you start to see the contradiction and unfairness of it all?

A dictator will destroy natural



The story goes that when Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon, she somehow found herself on the King's bed, a liaison that resulted in the birth of Menelik, whom King Solomon made the king of Ethiopia. Haille Selassie comes from the lineage of Menelik. **Mbugua Ngunjiri, Reviewer**



habitat, to build unsightly castles in the jungle, whereas people who have taken care of jungles and forests, living harmoniously with other forms of life, are removed and forced to beg for cigarettes in the concrete jungle.

In short, diplomats have seen things and know things.

Like I said earlier, the author writes his book the best way he knows how. While the common practice in memoirs, the author starts from the beginning, say when they were born, or slightly before that - their parents' existence - Langenbacher opts to start from the VERY beginning; the evolution of man. The reader should thus prepare themselves for history lessons on early man, the homo erectus, homo habilis, and homo sapiens.

Not a chapter ends without reference to those.

Oh, and if you thought that these are just idle musings of a diplomat with so much time on his hands, you would do well to know that he has actually visited the area, north of Kenya and South of Ethiopia, which are known as the Cradle of Humanity.

These are areas where archaeologists discovered the earliest known human remains, Lucy in Ethiopia and Turkana Boy in Kenya.

And speaking about Lucy, the author provides an interesting anecdote about how that particular fossil was given that name.

"The name was derived from the Beatles' song *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*, which the excavation team played repeatedly during her unearthing," he writes.

Ah, so these scientists are human after all!

If you thought that diplomats spend all their time in the diplomatic districts of Muthaiga and Gigiri - this is somewhat true of their time in Nairobi - you would be surprised to learn that they know more places in your village than you do.

The other thing you will have to contend with while reading this book is the amount of geography you will have to absorb. Here, I am talking about the terminology your geography teacher struggled to hammer into your head during hot afternoon lessons, when you were battling with drowsiness.

You get to learn the countries that lie in the Equator, Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn.

He also takes a historical detour and lets us reflect on the Berlin Conference of 1884/5, where European imperialists divided the African continent amongst themselves, like a piece

of pizza.

The effects of those boundaries were communities that were torn apart, forced to live in different countries, despite shared heritage. He gives the example of the wildlife ecosystem that straddles Kenya and Tanzania, known as Maasai Mara National Park in Kenya and Serengeti in Tanzania. While there used to be a border post for tourists to cross to either side of the border, it has since been shut down, effectively ensuring that human traffic can't cross to the other side of the border.

"Fortunately, the wildebeests, gazelles and zebras that cross the border between Tanzania and Kenya, every year, during their great migration, remain unburdened by the imaginary line on a map and the machinations of the human brain around it," observes the author ruefully.

Another thing that features prominently in the book, is the diverse cuisine of various African communities.

A case in point is conversation Langenbacher had while in Ivory Coast and where he was given the definition of meat. Meat, he was informed, was 'everything that moves but is not one of us.'

As an aside, and with a twinkle in his eye, the host told him that cannibalistic communities use the same definition for humans that are not 'one of us'.

East Africans, on the other hand are picky in what they eat; wild animals for Maasai pastoralists are off the menu. Donkeys 'move and are not one us', but are off limits.

Oh, and there is something for Rastafarians, who consider Ethiopia their spiritual home and Haille Selassie, their spiritual head.

In his visit to the Shashamane village in Ethiopia, which has a sizeable number of Jamaican immigrants/pilgrims, he tells the anecdote of how the former Ethiopian emperor traces his roots to King Solomon.

The story goes that when Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon, she somehow found herself on the King's bed, a liaison that resulted in the birth of Menelik, whom King Solomon made the king of Ethiopia. Haille Selassie comes from the lineage of Menelik.

Due to the sheer amount of information packed in this book, be advised that this is not the kind of book you read in one sitting. You read a chapter at a time, let the knowledge sink in, before reading another.

I got the distinct feeling that the writer enjoyed himself immensely when writing this book.

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