

Thirty years of life and 'school' in Africa

# An intercultural training ground

Marina (Else) Castellitto

*"... To see things in this way brings the joyful realization that no one people, culture or individual can achieve everything on its own: to attain fulfilment in life we need others."  
(Fratelli tutti n. 150)*

In the late 1980s, my African adventure began when I arrived at Fontem in the Dschang district of the Cameroonian forest. Prior to this, I had been fascinated by the lively story of a priest who bore witness to the powerful experience of traveling to assist an entire people in the Cameroons, a tribal people in danger of extinction due to sleeping sickness. This priest had mobilized many of us, young people of the Focolare Movement, to assist by organizing a worldwide communion of goods.

Then, during my studies to be a midwife, the calling I felt from God to follow him as a consecrated member (focolarina) of the Focolare Movement grew stronger. It was a deep determination to follow God wherever He would send me in the world, although I never could have imagined that this "Yes" would bring me precisely to Fontem, to a place that bore witness to fraternal love among all. This place had made collaboration and the sharing of riches possible between men and women of different nations and cultures.

## The Unknown

The images of my arrival at Douala airport at the beginning of what would mark nearly three decades spent on the African continent still come to me in rapid succession. I remember arriving late at night. As I left the plane, I found myself enveloped in a vortex of indescribable sensations, different lights, new colors, and a lot of noise. There was traffic and people everywhere, smiling and busy. Everything captured my interest. I felt in my heart almost like an excited young schoolgirl starting a new grade at school.

After the first two years in Cameroon, my adventure took me to Kenya, where I would spend a total of fifteen years, and to Tanzania for eleven more. Those first years in the forest, where I found myself in totally new and adventurous environments, with such different rhythms, were especially challenging. There was certainly no lack of nostalgia for my family, for the beautiful Ligurian city in Italy where I was born, nor my old customs and habits. Yet even stronger was the life experience of being part of a beautiful, larger "family" that had already become mine there.

It is said that "everyone has a home in Africa". I, too, felt this. Quite simply, I felt at home ... more and more, moment by moment, year after year.

## **Learning from a different culture**

At the root of everything was my commitment to live for the unity asked of the Father by Jesus. It was a commitment to put the Gospel into practice, striving to have Christ's same spirit and mentality. And I was helped by my local sisters and brothers in each country, whose guidance was invaluable. They accompanied me as I learned to insert myself into new cultural contexts and even how to approach the profound and delicate issues challenging the African countries where I lived.

It was a learning to "make myself one", maintaining respect for diversity even in tiring, powerful or challenging moments. There were encounters with realities that I could never have imagined: difficult life situations, conditions facing women, problems of motherhood and so many abandoned mothers. There was extreme poverty, disease and lack of adequate care ... It all impacted me in powerful ways. And it often required profound changes in my own mentality and above all a fidelity to the choices I had made.

But it was also a good "training ground" for simple things, too. It is enough to think of the value of time, for example. I was accustomed to "exploiting" every moment in order to "do something". But instead, I slowly discovered the beauty of concretely living in the present, even in the small things such as learning to prepare a certain dish or how to properly peel a mango!

I also learned the importance of greeting people without haste. In encountering another person, each one offers you his or her personal "*Karibu*", shakes hands, and asks aloud: "*habari za leo*" (how are you today)? I would sometimes instead enter immediately into a topic of conversation with someone, without saying this. But I soon realized that it was better to start over and apologize for my mistake... which always brought with it an immediate, heartfelt welcome.

## **Encounter: A continuous discovery of values**

How many beautiful and amazing gifts came each time that I entered into a diverse set of customs and mentalities! It was important to study languages and deepen my knowledge of local history, including the arrival of Christianity. Each moment was an opportunity not only to listen and learn, but also to share experiences of life, culture and religion.

All this not only changed me, but I discovered that the simplest of gestures could also turn into opportunities to grow closer, to know one another better and understand, and to enter more deeply into the reality in which I now lived.

Two African expressions seem emblematic of the experience lived on this immense continent. The first is the expression, "*Mungu yupo*", which translated means "God exists". The second is a Swahili proverb: "Mountains do not meet, people do." Both reflect the overflowing hospitality that fills one's heart, the keen sense of solidarity and community life, the love and respect for the elderly and others, and the tremendous value placed on family... It is a lengthy list, one in which everything is centered on the gift of encounter with another.

Thus, it could be said that my years in Africa were years of intercultural formation. The formation came in the form of everyday relationships, of ways of living and modes of speaking, and through continuous discoveries of values so tied to this continent's religious sense and deep awareness of God's existence.