

Korogocho

Think of Kenya, and automatically the mind envisions beaches along the Indian Ocean or the vast expanses of the savannah.

At the gates of the capital city Nairobi, private villas surrounded by gardens and swimming pools come face to face with another world, close at hand yet altogether different: the world of poverty. According to the latest statistics, there are 199 shantytowns, home to some 2,500,000 inhabitants. Korogocho, located in an area that is one kilometre long and 1.5 kilometres wide, holds approximately 120,000 people; nobody knows for certain exactly how many people live in what is perhaps one of the most violent shantytowns, judging by the stories to be heard. The other, Kibera, when seen from above, writhes outward from the city like an endless serpent. The most densely populated and one of the largest in the world, this shanty town houses a million inhabitants! After 25 years of ex-president Daniel rap Moi's regime, the new government, coming to power in 2003, has frustrated yet again the already frail hopes of those who dreamed of having a plot of land to live on. And yet again another blow has hit: increased fares for the matatu, the only means of transport for the poorest of the poor, as well as demolitions.

Seen throughout Korogocho, as elsewhere, the large red crosses (which have nothing to do with the symbol of the Red Cross) signify impending evacuation. According to the bureaucrats, many shanties are condemned as dangerous because they stand beneath high-voltage wires, others, as in the case of Kibera, because the shanties lie alongside the railroad tracks that run right through the shantytown. Other shanties, too, are destined for demolition because they block the planned construction of a ringroad.

Korogocho is the Kiswahili word for "chaos." Here everyone has problems, too many problems for any mind to put in order and think its way through. Instead of solutions there is only a reality too harsh to comes to terms with. Stories such as those of the children at the St John's Primary School have become the rule rather than the exception. Most of the children at this school are orphans. Grown siblings or other relatives living nearby look after many of the children, but often there is no money for food, clothes, or medicine. This is how things are for Sophia, 12 years old, who says, "My life has been a nightmare. I lost both my parents. My grandmother is sick, but she takes care of my brothers and me. If I lose her, I won't have a future."

Father Daniele Moschetti has been in Korogocho for three years. I attend the Mass for the Sick which Father Moschetti brings to the shanties every evening. An all-embracing sense of peril descends as the curfew falls over the night. Lively and noisy only moments before, the streets we walk along turn dark and deserted, lit only by the vague glow of the sky and the weak beams of the occasional streetlamp.

The humanity, simplicity, and devotion of these people is heart-rending. They open for me the hearts of their "homes." Appearing grateful for the visit, they lay bare the drama of their existence. Once, a woman dying of AIDS gave me her blessing. I, a healthy and financially comfortable mogongo (as they define the White Man), find myself disarmed. Here we are in the 20 square metres where entire families live. 1,500 shillings each month for rent (approx 32USD) is how much the inhabitants of these scrap-metal boxes have to pay. Plus water expenses. The land and shanties here are government property. The owners, who live outside of Korogocho, think they've hit on a lucrative business deal.

Problems such as alcoholism, drugs, AIDS, violence, prostitution and corruption are part of daily life here, creeping amid the shanties and the open sewers. Taking a walk here means running into vacant-eyed youths who sniff glue so as not to feel hunger pangs, or drunks who drink chang'aa, a kind of liquor produced illegally but with the tacit consent of the police. People drink it before going to the local dump or in the evening to forget a day spent among the rubbish. You'll find the drunks lying on the ground or at their usual spot while they reach up to shake your hand.

Life here does not have much value. The poor steal from the poor. People steal or kill in order to live, or, more precisely, to survive. God help the person who gets caught. The law of the slums is merciless.

Today Father Daniele Moschetti, assisted by lay volunteers, follows in the footsteps of Father Alex Zanotelli, the first to come and work here, staying on for twelve years. Rebuilding human dignity is Father Moschetti's great challenge, offering hope, something to make life worth living.

Moses paints murals on the metal walls. With his talent, he makes the immense slum of Korogocho a little less grey. A large painting near his doorway shows the Nairobi that everyone dreams of.

Colour is in everyone's soul. It is the fruit of the recovery of people who have found a way to live through art, work and sport. There are a few establishments, such as the Mukuru Recycling Centre, where paper is transformed into fuel, the Bega Bega where handcrafted products are made, and Boma Rescue, a centre for homeless children. Sport is the latest news here: boxing, weightlifting, athletics, karate and football associations are springing up.

St John's Church along with the school is a focal point for the Catholic and non-Catholic communities alike in Korogocho. The value of the church's policy of not isolating itself but of developing a good neighbourly relationship with other religious orders, with Muslims, with followers of the religion of Maria, with Protestants and with Seventh Day Adventists serves as a lesson in coexistence. An explosion of colour can be seen on Sunday mornings when the children, wearing festive clothing in pastel hues, mingle with eccentric characters from who-knows-where.

Inhabitants often say there are more churches than bathrooms here.

School provides the only hope for change. May the children express this message loud and clear.

Going to school allows the younger generation to dream of a future. Schooling educates people who will be able to build a better society. What a pity that here, in contrast to other schools, the backdrop is the largest garbage dump of Nairobi.

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