

Institutions Matter, Or, What I Learned Sleeping with Lions in Kenya

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, APR 6 2017

When I was between my M.A. and Ph.D. programs, in the early-ish 1990s, I spent a year-and-a-half doing study and research on Arab-Jewish relations in Haifa. While I was there, I took a one-month break and went to backpack in Kenya.

I learned many things in my travels to Kenya. For example, I learned not to drink three pints of freshly squeezed limeade in a remote, rural place with no access to medical care.

In Mombasa, I learned the beauty of *chapatti* and that even I can get a sunburn in equatorial Africa. I learned that the coast of Africa has amazing coral reefs, and that the fish off Kenya are more brightly colored than those swimming around the waters of Hispanola, where I spent a bit of time snorkeling as a child. I also learned that, when there is a famine (it was the time of the great famine in Somalia), one must eat far away from windows or even, preferably, in restaurants placed high on rooftops so that the eyes of people who are literally starving do not make their way to your dinner table. I was not eating in fancy restaurants. Even simple restaurants had moved to rooftops to account for the famine.

In Malindi, I learned how to play Roulette and funded two, one-week, guided camping safari trips to the Maasai Mara with that newfound (and quickly thereafter forgotten) skill. It is not an option that I recommend, but it did work on that one occasion. In the Maasai Mara, I learned that lions really are Kings of the African plain. And I learned that there are Peoples who live among them with ease. I learned that I am not so easy with a family of lions sleeping several feet from my tent. When a family of lions slept outside of my tent on my camping & camera safari in the Maasai Mara (coterminous with the Serengeti Plain in Tanzania), I was definitely outside of my comfort zone. I was a bit more fierce when baboons were encircling a much sought-after and posh restroom at a lodge in the Maasai Mara (a rare treat, as we really were camping-it and only went into that one lodge). However, the lead baboon took one look at me, as though I were painfully unschooled in what it means to be in Africa, showed his talons to me, and walked away. Nomenclature aside, I assure you that they looked far more like talons than claws. So, I learned that both lions and baboons – the latter appear so small – are quite dangerous when they want to be.

I learned that Kenya's significant Muslim minority lives peaceably with other communities, including ancient animists such as the peoples of Mount Kenya. I had read an ethnography of the religious rituals of the peoples of the Mount Kenyan region during my M.A. program, and my major M.A. advisor was a specialist in Ismaili Islam, so I was aware of some of the vast differences between these religious traditions. I was impressed with the way that people lived together in Kenya across such differences.

I learned that Nairobi was, at the time, the most dangerous city in the world. It had organized crime. It had non-organized crime. From what I saw, to relate it to the terms of work on social movements, I suppose one might differentiate them as "bureaucratized" versus "grassroots" types of crime. I got to experience the latter, but not the former. I can say that the latter looked plenty organized from a recipient's point of view. Let's call it, epistemic mobilization.

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By way of example, I went to a soccer match in the stadium just outside of the city of Nairobi. There were about 20,000 fans watching a very fun soccer match (my preferred type of “football,” Florida Gator though I am). A friend who I was traveling with brought a set of binoculars to watch the match. Before the end of the game, we looked around and noticed about 12 different guys had gathered a reasonable distance from us, on all sides, and were casing the binoculars. This, again, was during the time of the famine in neighboring Somalia. We decided to leave early. The men followed us openly, although at a slight distance. We began to exit the stadium through a usual exit, but the walk to the bus back into Nairobi was a mile and a half. It became clear that we would be caught up and beaten by these guys if we chose that route.

We turned and walked the circle of the stadium, underneath, looking for a different exit. I spotted a parking lot, underneath and inside the stadium, with National Guard men guarding it. It was clearly for Kenyan elites and no one else. My friend did not want to go that way, as we were not Kenyan elites. However, I had learned once in backpacking in Portugal a similar skill: sometimes, feminist agency is turned on most smartly by asking for help – from men – in this case, men in uniform! My childhood religious training came in handy: preservation of life is the First Principle, even above ideology.

I went up to a Kenyan National Guard gentleman who looked particularly nice. I explained that we were being cased by 12 or more men, who had begun to gather around us during the match to look at the binoculars. The officer looked at me seriously, looked back at the men, and smiled. He said that they could not protect us all the way to the bus stop. He talked with another National Guard officer. Suddenly, they nodded to one another and gestured to a car that was passing by. It had a smartly dressed man and woman, both in expensive running suits and very fancy sneakers. (I never had very fancy sneakers, but it was all the rage at the time.) The man and woman looked at the officer, who gestured to us. They all looked at us for a moment and looked at the men gathering behind us. The couple nodded to the officer, who gestured for us to get into the car. They, ultimately, let us off in downtown Nairobi at our (rather shabby but perfectly serviceable) youth hostel.

I also learned in Kenya that political institutions are different in different places in ways that matter to daily life substantially. Kenyan institutions allowed the Peoples of the Maasai Mara to live peaceably with lions and African buffalo unmolested by the state. The towns of Kenya seemed to work in an orderly and supportive way. Public transport and city markets functioned without major visible conflagrations, at least for that one month in Kenya. City life, however, had, at least then, a kind of “civil society” much more of the type that Samuel Huntington warned in *Political Order and Changing Societies* – that type more akin to epistemic (and sometimes organized) crime. Let’s call it, Tammany Hall in the bad part of town.

The last place that I went in Kenya was a game ranch outside of Nairobi the night before I flew out. I learned that one can, indeed, get *Fettuccini Alfredo* at the game ranch restaurant outside of Nairobi.

About the author:

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