

Bad news is good news – Reporting from Karamoja.

Some critical reflections after a journalistic trip to Kotido in September 2008

“Why would you want to go there?” - Isaak A., our host in Kitgum in the central north of Uganda, didn't think much of our travel plans. Karamoja was a place he would never recommend to visit. “They will shoot you. They have a saying there: ‘one man – one bullet. Don't waste anything’”.

The human zoo

On the next morning, we still went. A tiny little Cessna plane flew us from Gulu to Kotido. There we were, Jörg Böhling, who is a photographer, and myself, a reporter at missio magazine based in Munich. We had arrived in the “human zoo”, as the Karamoja region in northeastern Uganda used to be referred to by the rest of the country. In the 1950s and 60s, a few documentary films were produced which set the framework in which Karamoja people have been perceived for quite a long time. One of these movies was simply called “Karamoja!”. It promised to present “The Land of Naked People” to Western viewers, with “blood rituals” and savage sacrifice, produced by the first “White man ever to return alive”.

Since then, there have been a few more sensitive representations of Karamoja in film, photography and written accounts. A BBC documentary was among the first ones to point towards the manifold difficulties which Karamojong people have to face. The basic message was: “Karamojong have won civilization, but they have lost a way of life.”

For filmmakers and photographers, the region is a true delight. Seldom do you see so many colourful, exotic images set within a spectacular landscape. In the course of nearly a decade, Swiss-based photographer David Pluth has produced a series of pictures that show almost all aspects of Karamojong culture: cattle herding, farming, initiation rites, marriage celebrations, everyday life.

It is not a museum

The Karamoja region, however, is not a museum. You cannot simply walk around from one object to another, look at them, discuss their artistic value, take pictures, leave the place and think you have been given a definitive account of Karamojong culture. Almost by definition, culture is subject to change. Although the general layout may stay stable, certain elements, values, customs adapt to factors from both outside and from within. As a journalist, you will hardly ever be able to cover more than a depiction of a status quo at a certain point in time. What seems true in today's article, may be wrong, or at least only partly true tomorrow. This means of course: texts you read about a place like Karamoja which were written several years ago, might have to be handled with care. Under which circumstances, in which contexts were they produced, who was the author writing for?

You and your imagination

Why would you want to read other people's articles, look at other photographers' pictures, watch anybody else's film, if you are allowed to produce something with your own pen, your own cameras? Because the notion of journalistic reporting as a linear process from doing research, interviewing people, observing, taking notes and then writing a text out of a selection from collected material is nothing but an ideal. In practice, half of the story is already written in the mind before you actually arrive on location. Unfamiliar with a place like Karamoja, journalists have to rely on material produced by others. They will look up newspaper articles from the archives, borrow academic research from the library, watch a documentary film, browse resources provided by NGOs, consult people who have been to the place before. Thus, they will get an idea about what they have to expect.

On top of that, a trip to Karamoja is expensive even for the most well-equipped publishing house. Consequently, the amount of time journalists can spend in the area will be very limited. Missio magazine usually allows two or three days. In Karamoja, it was four. In order to get anything done, you need to pre-arrange your research trip, make appointments even from your office desk, ask partners in the region if they can recommend interview sources and whether they can prepare to meet them. This means: you have to tell them what you want to see, and who you would like to meet.

At the end of the day, a reporter might be looking for a story which he has already in mind. He will search for elements that fit into his story, and he might neglect others. There are elements which almost every story from Karamoja will feature: The Cow. The Gun. The Climate.

Translation means interpretation

In order to fill a story with life, a journalist will try to collect as many different voices as possible. Ideally, these will be mainly the voices of people which the report will be about. As obvious as this may sound, many texts write about Karamojong without giving them an actual voice. At first glance, it seems easy to conduct interviews, since people in the area are very hospitable to strangers, if they are introduced in an appropriate way. Many Karamojong speak good English, they are able to tell their stories to a foreigner. But what about the many others, who will have a whole lot to tell in their own language so difficult for Western ears?

A journalist unfamiliar with the local language needs to rely on a translator. Any act of translation, however, is also an act of interpretation. Remember the German kids game called "Flüsterpost": whisper a word or phrase into your neighbour's ear. He or she will listen, and then turn to the next neighbour, whisper into that one's ear what he thinks he has heard. Then the next one passes the word on to the person sitting next to him. By the time the word has reached the end of the line, it will almost certainly have lost some of its meaning. "Banana" might have changed into "Turkana".

Of heroes and villains

Not only is such a story from abroad always mediated through several acts of exchange and translation, but it is also constructed by the writer's motivation. Idealistically, a journalist will aspire to find out the truth about Karamoja. He will be in search of "real" life and "real" people. Even in only four days, you can certainly talk to some 20 or 30 people who might all have interesting stories to tell. A writer's selection of material will depend upon the assignment which his medium has given. A travel magazine or the travel section of a newspaper might have offered to print a piece of travel writing – a safari through the human zoo.

Missio magazine with its focus on stories from the Catholic worlds in Africa and Asia, might be interested in the Mission Story – featuring western european missionaries as protagonists, and activities of the Catholic church at the center of the story.

This goes for any story concerned with issues of poverty and development. An "NGO story" might replace priests and sisters with aid workers, doctors, medical staff, teachers, food distributors. Most likely, the story will focus on successful development projects and their positive effects on the population.

It is at this point, at the latest, that a member of the Karamojong people might ask: What on earth do these stories have to do with us?

Articles produced within Uganda usually seem to concentrate on incidents of cattle raiding and disarmament. In the international media, these incidents are represented only very rarely, if not at all. The reason why they do appear from time to time, is simple: Bad news is good news. Many media have a tendency to concentrate on the negative rather than the positive. As they say, journalists are not interested in the trains that arrive, they are only interested in the trains that do not arrive – because of an accident, a shortage of fuel or electricity, etc.

Expect the unexpected

Although having said all this, for a report in a publication like missio magazine it will be impossible not to fulfill these expectations at least in some part. There cannot be a story from Karamoja without cows and conflict.

Yet one could try to leave a little room for the unexpected.

If so-called modern telecommunication has by now reached even some remote manyattas and kraals – why not show people who use mobile phones?

If there is somebody like rap-singer Lopeta, why not tell his story?

If there are aspects to life which do not fit into a story about noble Karamojong warriors, they should still be mentioned. If alcohol is a problem, talk about it. If rituals of child sacrifice seem brutal and inhumane, there is no need for false tolerance – mention it.

And if there is no gun – then there is no gun. No need to search for them everywhere, just because your magazine urgently wants you to provide pictures of an AK-47. If they are not part of the reality at the time of writing, then leave them out.

Journalists wish to raise awareness of the evil in the world – that is why we look for bad news.

NGOs and churches need donations, that is why they promote their cause by using the media.

Readers, viewers and listeners love to think that there are “good” people who try to change the world for the better – that is why they enjoy consuming mission and NGO stories.

Most Karamojong do not watch TV or read newspapers.