

Forget Africa 24: Memories of Malawi

Deborah 2

Sorry for the delay in giving you the promised second chapter on my visit to Malawi with Deborah Stratman. In the future I will think twice before I announce a sequel. I moved on to Tanzania where I met one of oldest friends, the German filmmaker Uli Schueppel and had quite something to do right away.

To control our budget we moved into a modest hotel with the slowest internet connection thinkable. It looked like nice idea to make a blog mainly based on pictures, but the uploading of them requires more speed than the net most of the time can offer here. Anyway. Back to Malawi. Back to Deborah and all the nice music people she found.



Filming is small township recording studio in Blantyre, Malawi.

We visited the sound studio of the energetic Lionel. A singer and show man himself. And a real entrepreneur. He operates from a small building in the middle of a township. Guarded like a fortress. In the same place he has a sewing shop. The tailor and music producer clearly has a flourishing business. At the day of our visit he was making a cd for a local church choir. The studio has the size of a living room so not all the member could fit in, but also with just half the choir is was a steaming place. Every now and then Lionel threw half the choir out to have some air in the room. Electricity and streaming water is very rare in townships so it was not just body heat in the air. The mostly young choir members were singing their lungs out. It was a real touching situation. When Deborah (in a way that is typical for her) asked the choir during a break to sing outside whe could hear the real dedication and the real gospel. Hallelujah.

Deborah's interest in recording and sound does not limit itself to music. She is also interested in radio as a social instrument. In a country like Malawi a radio on batteries is often the only contact with the outside world and radio making has still another meaning and relevance than in societies where everybody has electricity (in Malawi only 4% of the population has electricity) and even internet. We met Rafiq Hajat. Rafiq is of Indian decent, but his family is living in Malawi for many generation. Rafiq is a colorful character. He enjoys life and his Jack Daniels. He is a political activist without a party and a radio maker without a program (since

his Lazy H political music show was banned). Rafiq knows everything there is to know about and Deborah sent him out in a mission. To find the Blantyre Zoo (those who know me better will know the mission was in fact mine).



Malawian political activist Rafiq Hajat while being interviewed by Deborah Stratman.



Deborah Stratman interview activist dj Rafiq Hajat in his car.

It looked like the Zoo finding mission would fail. Few people had heard of the Zoo and those who remembered said the Zoo was no longer there. But people like Rafiq are not easy to stop. So he found the Zoo. When we entered it was not immediately clear that the Zoo indeed was no more. The whole terrain and the animal cages were well maintained, Only no sign of animals. Somebody looked over a board on a cage and smiled. Have a look. The Zoo was converted in a school and the cages were changed into classrooms. The son of the headmaster gave us a guided tour.



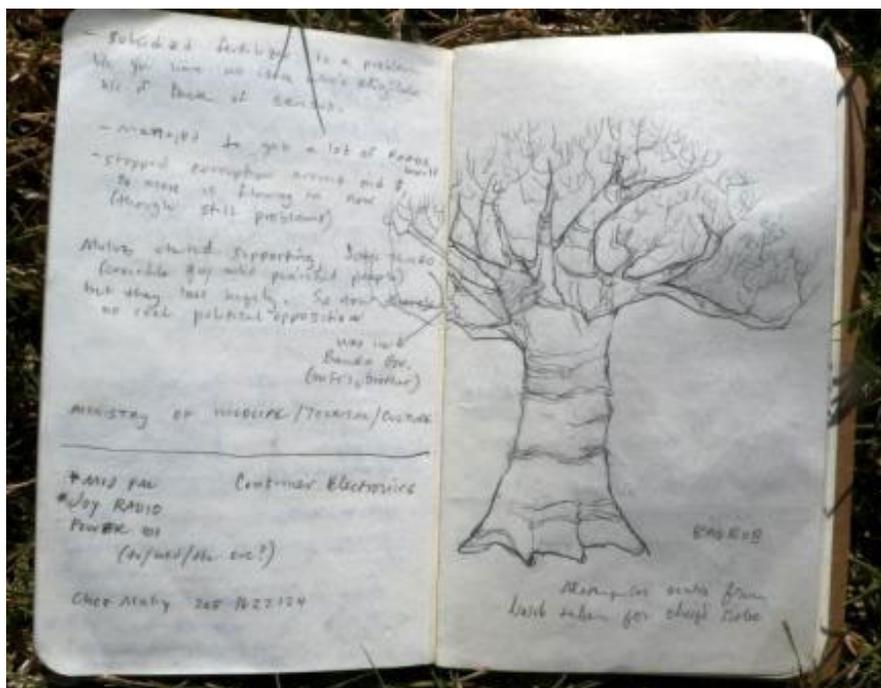
Deborah Stratman and son of headmaster in former animal cage.

The metaphorical quality of the place was overwhelming. Old fashion school furniture in Python cages. The heavy door to the lions cage in the math room. The whole colonial set up - the Zoo clearly a heritage from the British time, for most Africans wild animals are walking meat - and the conversion into a kind of private school for parents who wants their children to learn English, but who's mean are limited. I have seen my share of Zoo's but the Blantyre Zoo is something special. There are not that many filmmakers active in Malawi, but the ones that are there we met. We had a really nice dinner in Chez Maky, in my nice hotel restaurant driven by a music lover from Cameroon. But they did not have a lot to show. Filmmaking in one of the least developed countries in the world is obviously not that easy. Eldson Chagara is running a small company making corporate video's and commercials, but together with his editor-cinematographer he Wyson Black he was busy to make a personal feature film project on the side. He invited us to have a look at the rushes in his studio.



Blantyre filmmaker Eldson Chagara (right) and his cinematographer-editor Wyson Black.

Consciously or not Eldson and Wyson appeared to be on their way in inventing a Malawian version of neo-realism. Without any irony they tried to show Malawian life in a true to life story. The attempt is for sure to be appreciated. Unfortunately my stay with Deborah in Malawi was a bit short, but she was an inspiring guide and her little sketch book was full of useful notes and nice observations. As a goodbye I give you a little peak in it.



Boabab Tree in notebook Deborah Stratman.

FORGET AFRICA

Notes and travel diaries from programmer Gertjan Zuilhof researching a programme on African cinema with the slightly paradoxical title Forget Africa. Click here for [previous entries](#).

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