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So You Left Your Heart in Africa

"I just fell in love with Africa, and I can't wait to go back."

"I felt at home there, as if I had found a part of myself."

"There's something about Africa that completely enchanted me."

Over the course of thousands of interviews for field placements, these statements and sentiments are perhaps the ones I heard the most from Western applicants looking for a way to get back to their beloved continent. At face value, the sentiment is sweet, innocent, and innocuous. I, for one, identify with it completely. But could there be something below the surface of this westerner-turned-Africa-lover phenomenon that is worth examining? My experience tells me yes.

I remember vividly my first experience with Africa. Wide-eyed and freshly 17, struggling to reconcile the combination of poverty and wealth I saw before me, I remember thinking I had entered a whole new reality. There was so much about that reality that was ugly, unjust, and just plain wrong. And yet...I walked away loving it. I pined to return. Why?

The answers to that question lie deeper than I can even understand, let alone explain. People's passions and motivations are far too complicated to boil down to a singular cause and effect. Nonetheless, there is one central influencing phenomenon that I think goes all-too-often unnamed: being a Westerner in Africa can feel really, really good.

At home in your daily Western life, how often do people say hello to you on the streets? How often do they go out of their way to help you or find you what you need? How often do they treat you with unnecessary deference and respect, ask you questions and listen as if you were an expert, or want your address so you can be best friends? How often do they propose marriage to you, tell you you're beautiful, and like it when you gain a few pounds? How often do you enter a school and get treated as royalty, get invited to a stranger's home and find a feast prepared just for you, and have people jump to give up their chairs when you go to sit on the ground?

The truth is that being a westerner in the vast majority of African countries comes with both a whole lot of perks (power, influence, deference, respect), and also a big ego boost. Some of the way that Westerners are treated is just because of a different socio-cultural construct; much of it is specifically because of their color and relative 'status.' It takes either a very experienced or a semi-robotic person to be immune to the psychological

boosts that being a westerner in Africa often provides. Especially as a young girl, and still on through the years, I know that these benefits have influenced the way I perceive my experience of the continent. It feels good to be liked and to be respected. And I know that my experience is not unlike that of hundreds of people I've heard from throughout the years.

As any good manager or psychologist will tell you, understanding our emotions, motivations, and psychological weaknesses is critical to sound and just decision-making. In the highly emotionally charged world of aid and international development, this is even more true. I cannot pretend to understand the complex multitude of factors that combine to form Africa's mysterious allure. And yet as insecure and egotistical creatures, we must at least be willing to accept and examine one of the most obvious. If we don't, we'll never mitigate its effects. We are, after all, only human.

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