

Beauty and Conflict

Beauty and Conflict

A Flying Pharmacist in Congo

Jordy van Enkhuizen

Disclaimer: Please note that this book is based solely upon my own views and opinions and not necessarily of the organisation I worked with. Throughout the book, I represent myself and some of my experiences may therefore not give a complete and comprehensive representation of the story.

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*To Kipe Kambere Ndungo, who always
smiled and eagerly taught me a Swahili
word or two.*

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Introduction

The following story is one of Congo and its people and of those who work in the humanitarian sector attempting to make a change. The book contains observations from and reflections on a period working as a flying pharmacist with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Throughout the book, I will refer to the DRC simply by Congo, which is not to be confused with its similarly named, but much smaller neighbour the Republic of the Congo or Congo-Brazzaville.

The story in front of you does not contain literal day-to-day descriptions of events that occurred throughout my stay in Congo, because this is likely not something that interests you, nor am I interested in writing about it. Many parts do contain descriptions of events and observations from my work in the projects, which I supplemented with context and relevant background information. My goal is to provide a narrative with different perspectives about the beauty as well as the problems of Congo, and about my experience of working with an NGO as a pharmacist in a difficult and remote place.

The scope of this book neither includes the entirety of Congo, nor is it an exhaustive overview of working with an NGO. Instead, it contains a bit of both. The setting is predominantly the problematic province North Kivu in the northeast of the country, while the interactions are mainly between the Congolese inhabitants and expats working for the NGO. Although the bulk of the story deals with wide-ranging topics from children to broken water pipes, there is the

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inevitable focus on medical events (being a flying *pharmacist* after all).

During my time in Congo I made notes in the form of blog posts or records for myself, but the idea of turning these into a book came later when life back home continued and everything back in Africa seemed again so far removed physically, but not mentally. The media sporadically inform us about increasing turmoil in Congo, potential upcoming elections or a recent Ebola outbreak, but the news is limited and bypasses the fact that there is so much more going on in this impressive and diverse heart of Africa. Ever since I did my PhD in psychiatry in California, I have been passionate about making observations and writing about them, so I decided to put some thoughts about this impactful period in my life on paper. For many people the interiors of Congo remain unknown and foreign, which I hope to somewhat change by telling a story about it.

My account could be of interest to you if you wish to understand more about Congo, but also if you consider, or are experienced in, working in the humanitarian sector. It could help overcome doubts or answer any questions you may have prior to applying for a job with an NGO. However, even if you do not have such desires, but simply wish to learn more about life and conditions in a place in the interiors of Africa, this book could leave you better informed.

The narrative is divided into five parts and starts in Europe, where I made preparations and anticipated my stay in Africa. Before heading off to Congo, I visited a city in Germany with like-minded people from the organisation for a preparatory course prior to departure and afterwards stayed in Brussels to improve my basic French skills, which besides an intense language course also informed me about the bleak colonial past of Belgium and its role in Congo.

The second part describes my arrival in East Africa and the overwhelming smells, colours and rhythms, which are so vibrantly present there. Driving along the green, curvy hills of Rwanda, I reached the border with Congo where the asphalted streets finished and continued into rougher, unpaved roads. The city of Goma is the central hub in North Kivu from which many humanitarian organisations operate, but it is also a

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platform for many entrepreneurs. In the background of an active volcano, a dangerous lake full of gasses and armed militia roaming the city, many artists are using music to spread messages and openly criticise politicians. To better understand the complex environment of Congo and the ubiquitous unmet needs that forced the NGO to start operations there in 1981, a brief history of Congo, from the early Kingdom of Kongo to the malicious regime of King Leopold II of Belgium, is also provided in the second part.

The third section revolves around my stay in one of the projects in the sweltering village of Walikale, a destination reached by descending a small aeroplane on a long stretch of dusty, unpaved road. The Walikale area is rich in natural resources, which include several elusive minerals found in electronic devices such as mobile phones and computers around the world. Unfortunately, this richness in soil is cause for much conflict and poverty among the growing Congolese population.

The next part continues with my period working in another, larger, project situated in the mountains in a village named Mweso. When the project reopened its doors after four months of suspended activities and an abrupt evacuation because of an unacceptable incident, the urgent situation that ensued required everyone's full attention. From sustained malaria peaks and sexual violence among the population to the outstanding beauty that engulf some of the most remote villages, there were few uneventful moments throughout my stay in Mweso.

The final part goes beyond the conflict and concludes with a look at current developments, including how the future may possibly influence different aspects of life in Congo. The vast country possesses a tremendous potential to make impactful changes for not only the Congolese, but also influence developments reaching across the continent. Simultaneously, the magnificent biodiversity with its flagship species such as the mountain gorillas and the forest elephants have the potential to expand ecotourism, thereby boosting Congo's economy and creating job opportunities for the population, while conserving nature and perhaps even protecting some of the jungle's endangered species.

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Although I have tried to give the most up to date information on current issues in Congo as of this writing (February 2019), some of it will inevitably be outdated by the time you read this. The volatility of the country makes that certain matters such as politics, disease outbreaks and humanitarian aid presence in the country for instance, are unpredictable and can rapidly change. Where I deemed it relevant, I have inserted footnotes throughout, providing sources to retrieve more information. However, as this is not an academic account, but more a memoir written from the heart, the footnotes are not exhaustive and provide random bits of information, including thoughts and descriptions that can go off on a tangent.

Africa is a fascinating continent, which, despite its corruption, deprivations and disease, has touched numerous outsiders who report nothing less than an emotional encounter with the continent and its people.¹ I have tried to elaborate on the conflicts in Congo, but at the same time discover why it is that people fall in love with Africa.

1. Words fall short in describing this feeling. It may be better to plug in your earphones and listen to a song like *Palea* by Dobet Gnahore or *Wililé* by Fatoumata Diawara.

PART I

Europe

Time for Change

How did a pharmacist with a PhD in behavioural pharmacology end up in the heart of Africa? The short answer is that it is irrelevant what education you have received or what courses you have followed, because there are different paths that can lead to a job with a humanitarian aid organisation. We often mention our educational backgrounds as a starting point, identify ourselves with it and mistake them for our individual personalities. A better-phrased question would therefore be: how did a 29-year-old guy with an adventurous spirit, a passion to discover more of the world and a wish to use his knowledge in the best way possible land in the Congo?

The circumstances were that I did not see myself continue to work as a hospital pharmacist trainee in a Western hospital, but instead required some change in my life. Several years earlier, as part of my pharmacy degree, I had spent a few months working in a hospital and associated healthcare structures in Tanzania, East Africa. Ever since that moment, there remained a kind of longing in me to return and practice healthcare somewhere in Africa. The warmth of the people and overall happiness I encountered there had somehow never left me. Hence, I was thrilled when I stumbled upon the website of a well-known NGO as I was surfing the internet in a coffee shop in search for another position, somewhere else to go, weeks after I quit my pharmacist job in the Netherlands. Eagerly, I browsed through the different webpages of an international humanitarian aid organisation

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that provides medical aid in countries which are often war-torn, face endemic diseases or are hit by natural disasters.

Going through the background information and personal stories on the website touched me deeply and literally made my heart pound faster. All puzzle pieces fell into place and it felt as if I found the forgotten key I was subconsciously looking for. What made it more realistic was that they were looking for pharmacists and that an information evening for medical personnel aspiring to work with the NGO would take place in Amsterdam two weeks later. The website mentioned that in order to work as an expat pharmacist, at least two years of professional experience was required, preferably in a hospital. Check. In addition, a few months of work or travel experience in developing countries were required. Check again. With flutters in my stomach, but without hesitation I sent an email and signed up for the information evening.

During the information evening in Amsterdam, I immediately felt the like-mindedness between everyone attending. Except for one unprepared medical student without work experience who thought he could start helping people in Africa tomorrow, everyone seemed to be well informed, passionate about the organisation and full of questions. There were all kinds of individuals with different professional backgrounds, male and female, young and old, single and married, nurses, doctors, laboratory technicians, midwives and me as the only pharmacist. Different stories within different circumstances, but each of us had some reason why our work in the Netherlands could be put on the back burner for now, which was why we were in Amsterdam. Experienced aid workers presented different topics and provided an overview of the NGO's activities, where they operate and what it means to work for them. After all organised talks finished, I stayed to chat with one of the women in HR who gave me more detail on the application process and time it would approximately take to go somewhere. I left Amsterdam with a burning enthusiasm and realised I would likely be filling in my application over the next few days.

Not long after my online application, the office invited me for an interview in Amsterdam and about one week later, I received a call that I was now officially part of the pool of

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expat pharmacists. More information would follow, but HR warned me that it could take up to several months before the next position was available. On the contrary, I received another phone call a little less than one week later, informing me that there was a suitable mission available. Location? The Democratic Republic of Congo or DRC. When? The projects needed a pharmacist as soon as possible, so most likely I could go there in the next two to three months. Earlier would be impossible due to the necessary preparations, filling out required paperwork, a mandatory briefing prior to departure and a refresher French course in Brussels. The first of these preparations was a weeklong pre-departure training required for anyone leaving on their first mission with the organisation. And so, I was on my way by train to a city called Bonn in Germany not more than three weeks later.

Preparation and Anticipation

Being in Bonn with around 60 like-minded people, receiving trainings on the NGO and sharing stories until late in the night, was an intense experience. There were people from all over the world and with all kinds of backgrounds, but ultimately with one and the same goal; to use our knowledge and experience in places where people are suffering the most and in great need of medical attention. There were Germans, some fellow Dutch people, English people, girls from Brazil, Canadian people, a dude from Rwanda, a tall, lanky guy from Sudan, people from Italy, the US, China and most likely some other countries I forgot.

We were among nurses, doctors, one older experienced trauma surgeon, midwives, pharmacists (not only me this time), logisticians and people working in HR. Some were young and had just acquired the two years of required work experience in order to start their life-long dream to work in the humanitarian field, whereas others were further down in their career and had come to the realisation that something was missing from their lives. A cheerful, experienced doctor explained me how he was tired of the healthcare setting in England where the majority of his work consisted of routine procedures, dealing with chronic diseases caused largely by an unhealthy lifestyle and old age. Other non-medics felt unfulfilled by their jobs in different industries, which increasingly revolved around making more and more profit, changing into well-lubricated machines with human cogs as

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time passed by. There were also those who had gone through events in their personal lives that led them to reconsider life and make changes. Some were guided by idealism, whereas others were more realistic and considered working with an NGO simply a beautiful opportunity to experience.

While we listened to the different talks throughout the day, but perhaps even more during the evening and well into the night, we learned each other's motivations, reasons and stories. It was refreshing and inspiring to be surrounded by a large group of individuals who were so much on the same page as me. Realising that I was standing on the brink of a new and exciting period, I headed back to the Netherlands by train, still a bit overwhelmed and intoxicated from the previous night's end party, but full of good energy.

A period of preparation, of anticipation, and of saying goodbye to friends and family followed. As soon as I mentioned that I was heading to Congo, people initially reacted with worry, but also excitement for what a beautiful experience this would be. It is clear that most people have heard of Congo and know it is a country somewhere deep inside Africa, struck by poverty, hurt by war and conflict. As the days went by peacefully and undisturbed, I received several vaccinations, the following of which were recommended:

- Diphtheria Tetanus Polio (DTP)
- Hepatitis A and B
- Meningitis (types A, C, W-135 and Y)
- Rabies (pre-exposure)
- Typhoid fever
- Yellow fever.

Luckily, I was already vaccinated for some, so my arms were not completely punctured. Together with a stamp stating, 'cholera not indicated', my vaccination booklet was up to date and started to look and feel like an actual passport.

Another medical precaution was to take malaria prophylaxis, since expats working in Congo are advised the same as tourists traveling to any country where malaria is prevalent. Most of my required tablets could be collected in

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the projects in Congo, but as the pills ideally need to be taken a few days or weeks (depending on the medication) before departure, I picked some up from the local pharmacy in Rotterdam. Malaria prophylaxis consists largely of a choice between one weekly tablet of the cheap drug Lariam (mefloquine) and one daily tablet of the more expensive Malarone (atovaquone/proguanil). For me, the choice was obviously Malarone, since I had taken Lariam before in Tanzania and experienced some of its notorious side effects such as vivid dreaming or hallucinations and panic attacks. Walking around sweating, not feeling quite awake but not asleep either, with the ominous sounds of African animals lurking in the dark night is not fun, trust me. In fact, neuropsychiatric adverse reactions such as anxiety, paranoia and depression get a separate black box in the product information of Lariam and presumably affect up to one in ten people. Not surprisingly, negative publicity around the use of this drug is increasingly appearing in the news. Recently, several soldiers have even taken legal steps after suffering severe neuropsychiatric symptoms while being deployed abroad. Why this drug is still on the market is a miracle to me. Its cheap price is likely the main reason.

In addition to medical preparations, there were numerous forms to go through and send back to Amsterdam. They were mainly formalities but filling in an insurance policy form in case of my death did briefly make my heart skip a beat. I quickly scribbled down the names of my parents and brother as my beneficiaries and continued to skim through a briefing package, which contained security information of the area I was going to and background information on the situation. Since my entry into Congo required a visa, I sent the last forms to the Congolese consulate in Brussels and knew that I would follow soon for a French language course.

Meanwhile, I gave my notice for the rental place I had stayed in for the last two years – an amazing, beautiful and spacious loft – and I did it with pleasure. In fact, I did many things with pleasure and joy. It became clear during this period how impactful it can be to find something in life that you truly love doing. I am not the first person to say this. On the contrary, we are increasingly told to find our passion, find

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something that makes us happy and stop conforming to the system's rules. At this moment though, I understand there is criticism to this, because the fact is that people have always performed labour and still the majority of people fulfil jobs they do not necessarily love, but need to do in order to provide enough money for the family to eat and sleep. This is how it has been ever since we human beings picked up agriculture, which then sped up by the industrial revolution and remained that way until now. Some of us are trying to escape the rat race and a few succeed. Having the means in the form of money currently helps a lot.

However, with enough technological advancements in the future, automation of labour by robots, artificial intelligence and, critically, correct economic and political implementation of all this, perhaps in the future we can all do something in life that we thoroughly enjoy doing. Note that although for the particular choice to join the humanitarian sector not a large amount of money is necessarily needed, some smaller organisations do require you to book your own flights and pay for your own expenses. Moreover, indirectly, many people find working in humanitarian aid unsustainable in the long-term because the low salaries can usually not afford a life back home. Nevertheless, I now experienced an immensely positive feeling and I was curious what Congo and its people would do with these thoughts.

Finally, I made a list of items to bring with me in my backpack for my nine-month stay. Packing as light as possible was my goal, as my flying position would likely require me to travel between different places. From experience, I knew that carrying a heavy backpack around is not the most fun. In the end however, my bag turned out heavier than I wanted, but oh well. Roughly, my bag contained the following pieces:

- Trousers: A few pairs (jeans and more comfortable ones)
- Shorts: It would likely be warm, and I love wearing shorts
- Shirts: The NGO provides t-shirts for daily use, but I preferred to have my own ones as well