

**Manx Links** is a series of profiles of people living in the developing world. Their stories have been told to me by Manx residents who have lived and worked alongside them.

### **A life in the day of Arafa Omar from Kenya told to me by Arafa herself.**

Arafa's face lights up at the sound of an approaching vehicle. We have been sitting together talking in the shade of the banda for the last two hours and this is her first visitor. She straightens her kanga, puts on her guiding badge and heads out to meet her first clients for the day. She has been here since 6 am this morning, the sun is now well established in its impenetrable track of heat. Not the best time to take tourists out onto the mangrove walk to observe birds, but she isn't going to be the one to tell them that!

I first met Arafa two years ago when working in Kenya, she was responsible for feeding a dozen local people working on a community based project to develop eco tourism. Her sense of responsibility mixed with a continual ready humour made me presume she was nearer my age than her twenty three years. She is unusual in these surrounds, a young woman well educated and able to converse in three languages, her mother tongue, Swahili and English. Arafa has lived all her life on the edge of the creek on the East coast of Kenya. Her father's family originate from there. They have always fished in the creek, always tended their shamba. Her father's advantageous marriage meant that her elder brother received schooling and his successful career enabled her to attend agricultural college. They are a prestigious family, with their own goats and dug out canoe, looked upon as leaders in their community.

Their family compound is just back from the creek, a series of small family homes built from local wood and plastered in mud, with overlaid palm leaves for a roof. The dwellings stand around a courtyard where washing dries, hens scratch and children play on the cleanly brushed earth. Her Father is dead; her only brother is in the US. As a single female she lives with her mother, and her widowed and unmarried sisters; an all female dwelling. Her mother's house, at the entrance of the small courtyard, is built from stone, with a corrugated iron roof. It's in here that the cooking for the extended family is done over a wood fire, the traditional cooking pot balanced on three stones. The meal is always Ugali, ground maize and water that makes a porridge consistency served without salt or sugar, eaten for breakfast or with vegetable stew, or beans for lunch.

Arafa's day starts early, before the sun is up her younger nephews and nieces collect water from the stand pipe, carrying 20 litre plastic cans the 15 min walk across the dried up fields at the edge of the creek. Last year the rains did not come, in Northern Kenya they are facing a drought that is reaching epidemic proportions. Her 64 year old mother works in the shamba from 6am until midday, every day, preparing the dry sandy soil in anticipation of the next rains, there is nothing else she can do.

Arafa's own experimental crop growing aimed at extending the diet of local people has come to an end. Her experimental irrigation system, the beds of tomatoes and beans from the poor sandy soil that withstood marauding elephants from the forest, has not been able to withstand the relentless sun. Her income is now dependant upon her guiding.

Two years ago she was chosen, along with five men who had thorough local knowledge, to be trained by A Rocha Kenya to become guides for an eco tourist project set up to assist families in the region. The admission fees to the suspended walkway across the mangrove swamps, that leads to a bird hide over looking a tidal estuary, go directly into a secondary school bursary fund to assist families in the region to send their children to school. For her 12 hr. day Arafa earns £1.50 plus whatever guiding fees she can make

When not guiding she has taken the initiative to form a local conservation and awareness group, mobilising the other guides and young men who congregate in the area awaiting the tide, or the tourists,

or whichever should turn up first! The area is pristinely clean, the collage of plastic that usually lays strewn among the villages has been collected for recycling where the woman clean and crochet the plastic back into bags! They have planted over 20,000 mangrove saplings to regenerate the mangrove forest that is so vital to safeguarding their fishing grounds, and she is now developing an HIV awareness schemes within the community.

With the privilege of education she carries responsibility. When asked what drove her on to work selflessly for her community she told me the ancient legend of the humming bird, one of the smallest and most fragile creatures of the forest. One day the forest was set alight and all the creatures ran for safety, the lions, and elephants, the giraffes and rhinoceros fled, but the little humming bird flew directly to the waterfall filled its beak and dropped the water over the raging fire. The other creatures of the forest mocked its attempts, but the hummingbird continued.

The creatures mocked even louder, saying what could she, the smallest and most fragile of creatures in the forest possibly achieve. The hummingbird stopped in her labours, for but a brief moment, to say that all she knew was that she was doing all she could do.

I wonder how many of us can say that?