



## REVIEW

# “AFRICA, ANDATA E RITORNO”: A MANY-VOICED STORY

Thirty CUAMM volunteers – from diverse backgrounds with diverse aspirations – tell us about their experiences in Africa in the form of letters. “Africa andata e ritorno” is a book that shines a light on many facets of Africa through genuine, vivid stories of volunteers who worked and lived in Africa to improve health.

TEXT BY / FRANCESCO VLADIMIRO SEGALA / UNIVERSITY OF BARI

*The local scents. First, there is the scent of the earth, the red earth that comes in the windows and gets in your eyes and sticks to your skin, yours, and that of your patients. The earth you breathe in when you go jogging and that runs down the shower drain at night. Then there is the scent of grass, which is different from our grass, and the sweet scent of burnt brushwood, the small fires lit every day out of boredom and to prepare the fields for rain. There are few flowers, and they are red, like the sky and the earth, every now and then they blossom on dry branches like wounds, and they are beautiful. There is the scent of cattle and manure. At home, there is the smell of insecticide, cleanser, and the things that Polly cooks: beans, rice, black tea, coffee, mango, avocado, river fish, and stew. Then there's the hospital, with its smell of dirt, urine, feces, and sweat. Sweat smells like open air and something like dirty leather and hay, or it smells like mud and standing water, and that is the scent of malaria. The scent is not strong because the windows are always open, patients are washed daily by family members (who are always by their side), and because in the hospital, too, the earth dominates, taking up the two lower swaths of air and coloring the sun red every morning. Since I arrived, it has rarely rained, and when it has there were different scents. In the evening there was the scent of grass. This is the scent I smell as I'm writing you now.*

(from *Africa andata e ritorno*, Editori Laterza - Laterza Publishers, 2023)



my work in Aber, which I had long wanted to do. But soon after, the doubts came: should I talk about the hospital, the operational research, the places, or my experience? And what tone should I use? Africa – especially when it comes to health – is a place of life and joy but also one of suffering and injustice.

My letter was one of the 30 letters written by 30 doctors, volunteers, and aid workers who have come to Africa with CUAMM over the years, gathered in the book *Africa andata e ritorno* published in 2023. This collective portrait alternates multifaceted, diverse points of view: some wrote of illness, others of family, travel, fragility, and culture. This let me choose to talk about just one aspect of my experience, and the others would do likewise. One episode, one idea, or one feeling that could convey to the readers, even those not already involved in CUAMM, what it had been like for me to live and be a doctor in Aber.

### DIFFERENT VOICES TO TELL ABOUT AFRICA

The theme of my letter ended up emerging on its own: I would write about malaria. In Uganda, this disease is everything, part of the ecosystem itself, filling the pediatric and medical wards in the rainy months. It is a disease that one in three pregnant women contracts. During my time in Uganda, this was my subject of study and research in the field. My letter talks about this, in the form of the pain of a hospitalized child, a study, and a run at the end of the day.

*Africa andata e ritorno* is a mosaic of experiences like mine. In all of them, there is an aid worker, a volunteer, or a doctor who immerses themselves in Africa with their eyes, their heart, and their doubts and recreates it for us with sincere words. This book succeeds in a mission that is anything but easy, conveying one the most complicated and beautiful things about Africa: that it is not one, but many Africas.

### THE ORIGIN OF A PROJECT

Tell about my experience as a doctor in Uganda and do so in the form of a letter. When CUAMM asked me to do this, my first reaction was gratitude. The invitation was a chance to write about