



LETTER TO THE EDITOR – THE KOOBI FORA CHRONICLES

## My Koobi Fora experience

Liliana V. Carvalho\*

\*Corresponding author: [verissimo.liliana@gmail.com](mailto:verissimo.liliana@gmail.com)

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**M**y experience at the Koobi Fora Field School (KFFS) dates the year of 2011. My colleague Catarina Coelho and I were at the time attending the Master of Biology and Human Evolution at the University of Coimbra. We went to KFFS through our primatology professor Susana Carvalho. The word that best sums up this experience is “exciting”, even now. It is the kind of journey that leaves its marks in the life of any student, regardless of its interests or research field.

I can summarize the importance of the school into three main arguments. First, it allows you to know a country extremely rich

in culture and landscape, since the school gives the opportunity to contact directly with both. The students land in Nairobi, in the south of Kenya and then go to Lake Turkana, near to the border with Ethiopia. The journey is made by “road” which allows you to contact with the people, costumes and Kenyan landscapes.

Nevertheless, and besides Kenya being attractive enough on its own, the school of Koobi Fora is unique, especially to those who desire to proceed their careers focusing on the study of human evolution, because that is the right place to see the whole picture. The school is designed for students to have a global view of what was the evolution of

humanity and how it is now reconstructed. In classrooms, the various disciplines are taught inside their own limits, despite the fact that the common objective, i.e. understanding human evolution, is the same. However, these barriers do not exist in Koobi Fora. The school allows us to understand the evolution of material culture in parallel with anatomical and environmental evolution, resorting to multiple sciences that help us putting together a complete puzzle, such as ethnography and primatology.

The experience begins by spending a week in a place that is very similar to the one that the extinct primates of the *Homo genus* inhabited in the light of what we know today. This location includes some of the wild life of Kenya and the participants can then put themselves in the shoes of the hominins that roamed that environment. This experience gave us a new understanding of human evolution. We, in some way, were able to put the theory running in the background and started living it in practice. This experience was important to allow that when we moved into the next phase at the school, we were able to make an environmentally contextualized examination of the fossils and tools remaining from these extinct hominin species. This granted us an insider look into the history and importance that they carry.

This reading was made with a scientific look that we learned in this final stage of our journey at the East shore of Lake Turkana, one of the most fruitful archaeological sites of the world. The graduates had then the possibility of participating actively in archaeological diggings, surface surveys,

geological readings, thus acquiring a more enlightened understanding on how this data are processed and which methodologies are applied by the scientists both at the field and at the laboratory. All of this learning is complemented with lectures given by the scientists and with visits to emblematic sites that we visited and revisited so many times by leafing through the pages of books about human evolution. I am sure that when a student finally leaves Koobi Fora, he or she knows for sure what human evolution is.

The third argument is connected with my own particular experience. Giving an opportunity like this to a Portuguese student is nothing less than tremendous. Portugal is located in a peninsula that contains very important remains of several extinct species of hominins, as shown for many years. However, most findings are concentrated in the East side of the peninsula. Despite Portugal's theoretical big potential for the study of human evolution, the investigation so far did not result in considerable findings of hominin remains although large assemblages of material culture have been found. Since a Portuguese student may not have many chances to examine fossil remains, participating in this type of schools is an excellent opportunity despite all the expenses that this brings. Surely, it is very rare for an average Portuguese student to participate in a field school as the one at Koobi Fora. And because of this I have to thank all the investigators who received us so well. Most of all, I have to thank Susana Carvalho who provided me with such an opportunity.

I cannot say that it is an easy experience. The conditions are precarious, there are cultural issues that shock us, there is a permanent concern with diseases and injuries that may come from anywhere and anything which forces us to be in a constant

and exhausting state of alert. Despite all these difficulties, Koobi Fora presents its Students to Science and provides them with tools so that they can improve their scientific thinking and better apply it to the study of human evolution.