

Poems out of Africa

The two poems in this section are dated 14 years apart, but they reflect a connected theme, related to Kenyan society. The first was written from the eye of an itinerant worker and while it addresses themes of wealth and related poverty in a very practical sense, it is the second poem which confronts the nub of the problem: greed!

I went to a village

*I've been in a house
That looked like a palace,
In luxurious cars
And felt like a king.
The ladies I move with
Wear fine woolen suits,
While the male of the species
Does the normal male thing:
Dominate, that is!*

*In contrast to this
I went to a village,
A rickety truck
Had taken me there,
To share 'nyama choma'
Neath red-hot tin roof
And talk with a doctor
On the state of healthcare.
Or lack of, perhaps!*

*The broad, dusty street
In this oven-hot place
Told stories to make
A western mind numb.
How simple diseases
Claim folk of all ages
And the worst of them all,
Like a loaded shotgun:
AIDS is the word!*

*My memory tracks back
To a young man I met:
One Evans Ohoura,
Who seemed OK then;
His ambitions cut short
By a chronic disease,
So tragic to lose
Such a leader of men.
Malaria that was!*

*But the uppermost thought
That remains from that day,
Is of time that I spent
In a hut filled with hope.
Young people, broad smiles,
Had joined in as one,
With focused endeavor
That helped them to cope:
With life, that is!*

Rumuruti, Kenya
December 2004

I went to a Village was written a few years before I started living in Kenya, its main thrust being to recount the extremes of life there. I found it embarrassing to arrive at a poor village in an enormous vehicle, preferring to travel much as the locals did, by public 'matatu' (mini-bus) or as, on this particular occasion, in an old rusty car. Thus, it was in such a graceful manner that I arrived at Rumuruti, a small market town, at the end of the sealed highway and start of lands which are home to the nomadic *Samburu* tribe.

In oven-hot conditions, over *nyama choma* (roast meat) for lunch, I learnt from James, the only local doctor, (who in truth was qualified as a nurse) about the range of diseases, including Malaria, TB and AIDS, that with very limited resources he had to do his best to treat. My work at the time focused on schools and youth, and after lunch I went to meet a very enterprising young man, leader of the local youth group. I was impressed by him, but when I revisited the place a few weeks later I was told he had died ... of malaria!

On that second visit, my friend took me, in his old rickety vehicle, to meet another group of youths, who were operating from a small cluster of dwellings on the side of the highway. Members of the group gave me a tour and showed me the sustainable-living projects they were working on. The thing that stayed in my mind most from that day were the smiles on the faces of those young people, as they worked together to give themselves support.

The five verses depict the various stages of this story, but the poem was also written as a plea for young people to be heard and the dire conditions that exist for the poor, to be taken considered ...and improved. The poverty gap in Kenya is enormous: the rich are fabulously rich, while the vast majority of poor remain unemployed or grossly underemployed, and thus extraordinarily poor!

Trusting in Greed

*Greed is the upmost value
As trust descends the abyss.
The lords of greed
Are the ones on high,
Admired by the others way down below.
And the pyramid of greed
Flows from bottom to top,
Growing the seeds
That the high ones sow.*

*Trust is a value that's stated
To rank above all its mates.
In personal terms,
Or the public sphere,
It underpins all the values we show.
Those known marriage vows,
Business deals that are straight,
Depend on the value
Of trust that we show.*

*Greed and trust are locked together
Like opposite-ended souls.
The weeds of greed
Undermine the seeds of trust,
Cast into the air for winds to blow.
Those stated ideals
Bewitched by the pull:
The glitter of coins
And the powers that glow.*

Mombasa, Kenya 2018

‘Trusting in Greed’ follows, in more abstract fashion, the central theme of the first poem. It was committed to print after more than two decades of getting to know Kenya. As a resident of the country from 2007, I admire its wide-ranging beauty, life-friendly climate and optimism of its indigenous people. But there’s another less palatable issue which often rears its ugly head: the unsavory topic of greed, clearly demonstrated for all to see, by people at or near the pinnacle of the wealth triangle, in both public and private sectors. The results of this very visible greed, is that it tends to trickle down as an ambition for those on the lower rungs to emulate ...and as a formula for success in society. Even in the family home, this greed turns to a lust for greener pastures, leaving a million single mothers behind in its wake.

The poem explores the idea that greed and trust are values coming from opposite ends of the spectrum, while at the same time being values which are very closely related. More greed induces less trust... whether it be greed for money or for sexual partners!

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