



## Poems out of Africa

Two poems in this section are dated fourteen years apart, but reflect a connected theme related to Kenyan society. The first was written from the eye of an itinerant worker and while it does address themes of wealth and poverty, in a practical sense, it is the second poem - penned after living in the country for ten years - 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!*

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Rumuruti, Kenya, 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 a huge vehicle, preferring to travel as the locals did, by public *transport*, or (as on this occasion) in an old rusty car. It was in such a fitting manner that I arrived at Rumuruti, a small market town, at the end of the sealed highway and the start of homelands for the nomadic *Samburu* tribe.

In oven-hot conditions, over *nyama choma* (roast meat) for lunch, I learnt from James, the only local doctor (in truth a qualified nurse) about the range of diseases, including Malaria, TB and AIDS, that with limited resources he did 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 leader of the local youth group. He impressed, but when I revisited a few weeks later I was told he had died ... of malaria!

On the second visit I visited another youth group, where members gave me a tour and showed me the sustainable-living projects they were working on. The thing that stayed with me from that day, were the smiles of those young people, as they worked together to give themselves support.

The five verses depict the stages of this story. The poem focuses on the dire conditions that exist for the poor and is a plea for young people to be heard, as they strive to improve their lot. The poverty gap in Kenya is enormous: the rich are fabulously rich, while the vast majority of poor remain unemployed or grossly underemployed, and 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.***

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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 resident of the country I admire its wide-ranging beauty, life-friendly climate, and optimism of its indigenous peoples. 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. The results of this clearly 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, greed turns to a lust for greener pastures, leaving a million single mothers 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 inducing less trust... whether it be greed for money or for sexual partners!

PS: Note the cartoon at the head of this section is equally accurate whether related to global wealth/poverty, or in-country wealth/poverty. In either case, the small, insanely greedy few at the top keep the large majority of people poor. As a consequence, trust is totally eroded, between rich and poor, between rich and rich and even between poor and poor.

This cartoon (right) tells the same story and again can be global, or it can be in-country. And the rich and poor faces do not necessarily have to be black, or brown, or white; they can be any colour that fits the circumstance.



Image: [pinteresty.com](https://www.pinterest.com)