



Adapting to my African world

I knew they were serious when I saw the street light glinting off the knife blade! Four boys in rags. One grabbed my watch; another was at my back trying to snatch the pack. I wouldn't be the first to succumb to the street kids of Nairobi, and definitely not the last. Suddenly a guard came bounding out of the shadows from a nearby bank, yelling and waving his truncheon: Batman to the rescue! The boys scattered. A few moments later I retrieved my watch from the gutter.

An early memory of Nairobi in the late years of the Moi era. Why on Earth was I walking alone, in the shadows after dark? I was pretty green; so green I gave the guard a 500-shilling note, when 100 (\$1) would have been ample to enrich his meagre salary, in return for saving my skin! I would learn. I had assumed naively that I would not be accosted just 50 metres from the revolving door of *The Stanley*: a top hotel in town, where I was heading for a nightcap. It was the shadows that mattered, not the hotel.

I arrived in Kenya in the late '90s, after numerous forays over the preceding decade to India, Bangladesh and South East Asia. It wasn't as if I was unaware of other cultures; how best to integrate and adapt. Nonetheless, Africa was a different proposition, with a new set of characteristics and values. Through those early visits I would learn, as they say in Kiswahili, to progress '*pole, pole*' (slowly, slowly).

There were numerous and alarming learning incidents: two involving ingenious thefts of my backpack and a couple relating to disappearing laptops; one where my hotel room door was jemmied open, which instigated a sort of banana court enquiry amongst staff and visits to local police. Nothing came of it of course. Through those initial years, a steady increase in understanding corresponded to a gradual decrease in losses. A symptom of poverty, I kept on telling myself: I was the one with the problem, not them.

In the early days my pack held a camera for still photos, along with a small camcorder. As a novice in the region, I was enthralled when the gabble of *Luo* tongues turned up on a video, taken in the heat of the day, crammed into a minibus including chickens as passengers, as we wound our way through knobbly hills, on route to an outlying school near Lake Victoria, in the west of Kenya. The next day, energized by the vibrant colours and distinctive sounds of a crowded market in the central square of Ahero - a small provincial town not far from the big lake - I sat inside a local café, mesmerised, as my camera focused on events outside the wide-open doorway: a moving window to an African world. Similar to Asia in many ways, but with enormous differences too: both exhilarating experiences.

The school children were the ones to keep motivation alive when I was starting to surrender to the pressure of squirrelled away backpacks and laptops. It's hard not to be motivated when facing a sea of seven-year-olds, sitting cross-legged on a dirt floor, bare footed and clothed in rags, the walls of the classroom tumbled down as if the result of bombings in Bagdad. For those kids in the class I have in mind, over half were affected by HIV Aids: either they had it, or had lost one or both parents to it!

Some schools were deprived beyond belief: makeshift wooden poles held up leaking rooves; a roughly painted section of wall became an almost unreadable blackboard; solid roof, windows and doors in place not for kids, but only when necessary to protect theft of valuable goods. And though on occasions I met enormously dedicated teachers, the standard of education in general was something less than mediocre. Tutors ruled with an iron rod, or to be more exact, a long, thick bamboo cane. I recall sitting in a principal's office, with background screams of a 10-year-old

girl drifting in through the window, as a male teacher's stick ripped into her skin, at least a dozen times! This was a young child's lot in life!

None-the-less, working with Kenyan kids became amazingly invigorating as I came to realise they had an innate ability to rise to the occasion, despite the debilitating backdrop. Their individual talents shone through, perhaps because of an emphasis within the broader curriculum on music, dance and drama; something that many western countries have all but forgotten. I recall during a video hook-up to students in England, how the Kenyan youngsters appeared to rule the roost, able to speak with comparative confidence and exuberance on quite challenging subjects; lacking inhibitions and overruling their European counterparts. The contrast was so startling that I had to step in, calling my African pack of hounds to heel, before they tore the British foxes apart!

The initial work with schools around Lake Victoria was coming to an end when I ran into Kevin: a thinly-built, twenty-something Briton, with a long sharp nose that seemed to descend to his upper lip. He was an itinerant worker, there for a two-year voluntary stint, in charge of the I.T. facility at the local technical institute. Kevin also dabbled in developing a website to market African artefacts, and for this would often wander out and about to meet village artisans. He had a wily sense of humour and I remember on one of our earlier night time forays to see who could consume the most *Tusker* (Kenyan beer), when I proudly produced my very first mobile phone. His was a typically dry British response:

"It's a bit of a brick George," he quipped. "Some of my guys in the village have better kit than that!"

Sometimes, after such nights out, Kevin would give me a lift home to my hotel on his pushbike. Locals still around at the ungodly hour would stand and stare, as we rode past, both three sheets to the wind, me on the back carrier, him upfront trying valiantly to keep the whole assembly upright. He told me that on occasions in the daytime, he would stop to give locals a ride (especially if they were female and beautiful). If they accepted, he would charge them the customary 10 or 20 shillings

(cents) just like the local bicycle taxis. The pillion passengers were usually rendered speechless; a *mzungu* (white man) doing such a job was of course unheard of.

About a decade after first touching down on the Kisumu Airport tarmac, I opted for African residency, to concentrate my accumulated experience on the management of a new programme that focused on climate change. During the 10-year probationary period I had operated out of Britain, with frequent expeditions into Kenya. From then on there were no recurrent escapes to the north; I was firmly attached to Africa. Paradoxically this was also the point when the blinkers of curiosity and ideology were removed, and initial elation gave way to long-term frustration.

During the same intervening decade, Kenya had been negotiating a significant upheaval in terms of political change, moving from the somewhat despotic rule of Daniel Arap Moi, to a more people-friendly alternative which looked a bit more like democracy, under Mwai Kibaki. I look back with some disquiet to one of my early visits, when our car unexpectedly drew into the side on a country highway. I was told to disembark. *"Quickly, quickly, our president is approaching!"* my host announced. So we both stood there alongside the driver, as the 20-car convoy of black Mercedes came over the crest and swept past, in the middle of the road, at incredible speed. They stood to attention, saluting their leader. I did not. That was the nearest I got to Moi, for which in retrospect, I am thankful.

But perhaps rather naively, and along with many others, I had thought the change in 2002, to an elected leader and legitimate two-party system, heralded a new dawn and significant change: true democracy. As things turned out, we (myself plus the millions of others who had similar thoughts) could not have been more wrong. After the next election in 2007, tribal-infighting descended into incredible violence. Then, I began to realise that miracles withstanding, Kenya may never overcome the elements that most impede its progress: graft, corruption, and tribalism. A beautiful country, with legions of young people who have enormous talents, sadly frustrated and downtrodden by the inequities and inabilities of the elders: their leaders.

Thus it came to pass that the beginnings of my residency, aimed ostensibly at facilitating management of a new programme, happened to coincide with the most violent period in Kenya, since independence. However, and to be truthful, part of the drive to live in-country was due to a new relationship with a diminutive but adorable Kikuyu lady. I was definitely attracted to Kenyan women, with all their strident beauty, but it was generally a fleeting thing. The lady who captivated my attention was quite unlike the others; with enormous Intellect and bucket loads of charisma, she could draw people to her like a magnet: worker bees to the queen, male or female. At a friend's party in Nairobi, I remember being outside on the balcony, looking through a window, watching as in animated fashion, she ran some sort of word game; a dozen others around, eating from her hands.

Up to that point in time, I had become familiar with areas to the centre and west of the country, but the eastern seaboard remained a complete blank: a mystery. So it was decided that casting our work net to incorporate the coast was long overdue. I made an initial reconnaissance visit and was immediately captivated. The area reminded me of a place I had known in younger days - beach Australia - with lots of greenery and a million palm trees, low rise buildings and casual lifestyle. It was the environs I had come to recognise as the trademark of the tropics. With very little persuasion, the work team agreed in unison that expanding eastwards was necessary. Secretly, I was extremely wary of the overbearing heat and humidity.

Working in Mombasa schools turned out as I had thought: a considerable challenge. For nine months of the year the heat was indeed oppressive, with brief respite in the June to August (so-called) winter season. One day, half-way through a multi-school seminar, I remember dousing myself with a bucket of cold water, to help maintain some cool, in front of a hundred startled onlookers. It was all in vain, but we battled on in sweaty co-existence. Despite all this, I still loved the place; so much so that I decided to visit for a vacation over Christmas.

As a result, a year or so after first travelling to the coast, I found myself sounding out a local teacher regarding holiday prospects:

“Kamau,” I said, “I would really like to come back to the coast for a holiday, but over Xmas the hotels are charging two or three times the normal rate. What can I do?”

“Hakuna matata bwana (no worries sir)” came the reply. “Let’s meet tomorrow.”

The following day we travelled by tuk-tuk a few kilometres along the coast, away from Mombasa, turning off the main road and arriving at a coastal enclave I had not visited before: *Serena Beach*. Our three-wheeler spluttered to a stop outside a small hotel, across from the beach. It was reminiscent of an Italian scene: shuttered windows and small tables with chequered cloths, adorning a bricked courtyard.

Kamau looked at me inquisitively. *“What do you think? You like it?”*

“Hey! Do I like it,” I replied. “If the inside matches the outside, I’ll take it without even looking!”

This was my first glimpse of *Sonia*, a small hotel at the centre of the village: quaint to look at, but, as I realised later, running on borrowed time. In fact, the hotel’s fall from grace was in many ways symptomatic of the surrounds. As chance would have it, I had missed the hay-day for *Serena Beach* by a decade or two. Back in the 1990s – so I was told - a group called *The African Safari Club* ran a flotilla of fine hotels, dotted along the coast to make the most of the sun blessed beaches, and tropical marine delights. All through the peak summer season in Kenya, when Europe was freezing, the *African Safari* resorts were packed. Any small hotel like *Sonia* caught the overflow and reaped the benefits.

But like life in general, after the boom comes the bust. This was influenced both from without and within; the downturn set in motion by Al-Qaeda’s devastating 1998 attack on the American Embassy in Nairobi, killing hundreds. Since then, spasmodic terrorist assaults have continued, with consequent impacts on tourism. Adding fuel to the fire, *African Safari* pressed the self-destruct button: arguments between owners causing the final demise of the chain. All those once-marvellous hotel buildings fell into disrepair and in the end became gutted ruins: mementos to the good times. I was happy in a sort of selfish way, because the result meant more solitude for meditation, plus a wider swathe of beach for evening walks under the retiring sun.

Today, Serena Beach is on the rise again, promising to return to the top of the pile: the jewel in the crown on the Kenyan coast. But when I stumbled on the place a few years back, Serena was still very much in the doldrums, and though we first stopped outside what my brain equated to a rustic little spot in the backstreets of Naples, on closer inspection it became apparent that both hotel and its locale had seen better days. To counter this, the receptionist was charming and the room she showed me enormous, with two adjoining balconies. A bit of peeling paint and some chipped tiles, but who cares, when the going rate is 20% of the trendy places down the road.

Thus *Sonia Hotel and Apartments* became my home away from home, whenever work took me to Mombasa. I insisted on the same room, shown to me on that first visit, which I later came to discover was in fact the best in the house. Over three or four years I came to know the people well. Liz the receptionist became a good friend, while James the barman, along with housemaid Vivienne were also firm favourites. But perhaps more intriguing was my coming to know the owner, a Kenyan who seemed to have made a total mess of running the place since day one.

It started one morning over breakfast in the courtyard, when Liz happened to mention that the hotel was in receivership. As it turned out, the small guy with ill-fitting clothes and sickly grin I assumed as the manager, was in truth employed by the bank as their overseer in situ. Liz confided that any profits went into the guy's pocket, and from there, paid for addiction to drink and young ladies. There was no hope of the business ever returning a profit, and it seemed likely that receivership would convert to bargain-price resale in the near future. The situation awoke my long-smouldering entrepreneurial instincts, with visions of an Italian-style boutique hotel, arising from the decrepit ruins.

On a subsequent visit, when told the owner – like Elvis - was in the building, I organised to meet him. His office was palatial: better decorated and equipped than any other I had seen to that point in time. And not unlike experiences of meeting senior civil servants as part of my work routine, I now faced the owner of Sonia across his voluminous desk. Then, similar to doubts I often had with government

heads, I began to wonder if he was the major reason for Sonia's fall from grace. Converting the pool into an underground water tank had probably not helped.

We met three or four times over the next month or two, and I went to see the receiver manager, plus the bank, in Nairobi. After that I invited Norbert, a German friend - builder-electrician by trade - to take a closer look. We stayed in adjoining rooms and enjoyed evenings together, but during daytime I was out doing my work, while Norbert was firmly fixed on revealing Sonia's secrets. He took a full three days and came up with a long list of items to be fixed: rust encrusted water pipes, leaking rooves and failed electrics. There were a host of challenges.

Norbert's estimated cost of renovation came in at a massive 25 million shillings (\$250,000). My subsequent offer of half the asking price was rejected out-of-hand, which in glorious hindsight was probably extremely fortunate, as I would have had to go into enormous debt. That, plus the oncoming Covid-19 pandemic, would have meant final ruin for Sonia ... and yet another business debacle for yours truly!

Interestingly, the bank did accept a similar offer from another (Kenyan) buyer, though I suspected underhand dealings. A year after that the hotel was sold on again, for not much more than half the price I had offered: something less than land value! Today, at the end of a corona virus year, Sonia sits in a half-renovated state, boarded up behind rusting iron sheets, looking distinctly forlorn.

Not long after the failed bid for Sonia and hotel ownership stardom (or downfall) I was feeling so much at home there, I decided to buy a small place, a kilometre or so away from the main village: one of several apartments surrounding a communal pool. I was drawn to the place with its pleasant terrace, encircled and camouflaged by tall Neem trees and exotic palms. I loved the district, and the outdoor living style. And so it was, that in 2016 I acquired my first Kenyan property.

One advantage of my coastal home is its location at the centre of a small peninsula, just a few minutes' walk from ocean beaches on one side, and the beautiful mangroves of *Mtwapa Creek* on the other. A small cluster of fisherfolk work on the banks of the creek, so fresh *Taffy* fish is plentiful, while at low tide I can wander down

to the beach side, and walk along (past Sonia) to Serena village, for my everyday needs. It's been a few years now, but I still love the relaxed environment, with early morning walks along the sands of *Mtwapa Creek*, before the heat of the day.

But there again it probably pays not to get too carried away by this situation of eco-friendly bliss; for every silver cloud there is a darker lining. I have just described a world as if viewed through rose-coloured glasses: a calm and clear millpond. Closer inspection reveals an underbelly of discord: turbulent waters, which come largely as the result of disparities in income, between the rich (which for the sake of this example includes myself) and the majority of others, who are wretchedly poor. The rich live in gated communities, behind high walls, electric fences and razor wire, driving out in their *Prados* and *Land Cruisers*; the cars alarmed, occupants unseen behind tinted glass. In stark contrast, the poor live in squalor, and exist for a month on what the rich consume in a day. Many of the poor live in a world of drugs and prostitution ... and of course, intertwined with that, a world of crime.

That world of crime is the one which impacts – or has potential to impact – on my own existence in the area. So far nothing serious has happened, apart from minor theft, but I am always very aware that with white skin and hairy legs, I stand out like a flashing beacon to anyone from a nearby slum, who might wish to fund their never-ending cocaine habit. Not long ago a good friend of mine was accosted in his bedroom by machete-wielding thieves, intent on stealing whatever they could find. On a somewhat calmer level, I know that I am fair game for the corrupt policeman who wishes to add to his daily allowance, by catching the *mzungu* (white man) on a technical issue, while other drivers flash past, breaking road rules in all directions.

I guess what I am trying to say is that life is seldom perfect; there is almost always a risk factor. I appreciate my current lifestyle in Kenya, which I know comes with built in risks, but on balance it is for me, better than the alternative.

“And what is the alternative?” I hear you ask.

“Well,” I would have to say, *“The alternative is to return to those places I inhabited in the past: the UK where I grew up, or Australia where I lived a large chunk of my life.”*

Quite frankly, these alternatives - both possible - scare me. Last time in Australia I was driving in the city, on a very broad, comparatively car-free dual carriageway, where 10 or 20 cars flowed along, exactly on the speed limit and in waves that accorded with the previous traffic light. Everything - the road, the cars, the speed limit, the timing – everything was perfect. That’s what scared me: Utopia! Give me a bit of Kenyan chaos anytime (but perhaps just not too much of it!).

Another element of liberation relates to age. While often regarded as over-the-hill in Britalia, in Kenya I can go about daily routines as though a middle-aged stripling. I drive out to cafes and shops, or the beach in the daytime and an open-air pub at night, mixing with an age range of people, both black and white, and all skin tones in between: there is no age or colour bar. I have seen the alternative of segregated old age in the West, which terrifies me. I am lucky I know to have the choice. Some day of course my choice might all come crashing down. That I guess, is the risk!

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Looking back over the past couple of decades, I could sum up my major frustration with life in Kenya as the disparity between rich and poor; a disparity that seems to highlight the diametrically opposed values of trust and greed. Kenya is not bracketed with the poorest nations of the world, such as Burundi or South Sudan, yet more than 50% of its people live in abject poverty, on less than two or three dollars a day. It has one of the largest income gaps between rich and poor of any nation, and yet its political leaders are willing and happy to let this continue. I remember some years ago, meeting one of the Ministry of Education heads in Nairobi, who appeared – on the surface - to be a fine lady good at her job. Later this same person was identified as part of a high-level clique that stole large amounts of money, donated from UK to supply millions of textbooks for primary school children. At the time I thought: *“How on earth could you do that? You have money and power, yet you are still content to help impoverish your own country’s children. Unbelievable!”*

This is the aspect that has frustrated me most - more and more as each year passes by - and could indeed be the reason I leave Kenya, if I ever do. It could be passed off as a different psyche, or an opposing set of values, but to me it just seemed all about

people more concerned with themselves than others. More recently I wrote a poem on the issue, where I attempted to summarise these frustrations:

Trusting in Greed

***Greed is the upmost value,
As trust descends the abyss.
The lords of greed
Are the ones on high,
Admired by 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 know.
Those known marriage vows,
Business deals that we make,
Depend on the value
Of trust that we show.***

***Greed and trust are entwined,
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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Frustrated by people's values,
Mombasa, Kenya, 2018.

This is a frank and rather dark aspect to end on, but it's a vital truth that cannot be avoided, as one delves deeper and deeper into Kenyan life. Unfortunately, this truth masks the beauty underneath: the varied landscape and resilient people of such a wonderful equatorial country, with untapped potential yet to be realised.

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