



A place named Rumuruti ('remote area')

Illustrious Wang'ombe stood on the roof of a clapped-out Toyota, hands cupped above eyebrows to shield his gaze from the scorching sun. In freshly laundered safari suit, he and his car presented a vision in white (embellished by brown rust spots).

"I'm sure that school is around here somewhere," he called down to me in his deep baritone voice ... "Or at least it used to be."



Our mission was to visit a small outlying primary school, prior to lunch in the local market town. After a further half-an-hour we had to admit failure, arriving late for the lunchtime appointment.

Rumuruti lay at the end of the bitumen, the start of the dirt road leading to *Samburu* country. We were there on a Tuesday, the busy day of the week, when *Samburu* tribesmen came to town to trade their cattle, sheep and goats. The sights and sounds were a glorious spectacle, as the nomads in traditional dress, some brandishing spears, haggled over prices, while traders did business on food and drinks.

We had arranged to meet James, the local doctor, and Evans, a youth group leader, for nyama choma (roast meat) luncheon. *'Why bother with fire?'* I asked myself. *'The meat could have been roasted on the hot tin roof which shielded us from the sun's glare!'* I felt a cool garden salad would have been more appropriate, but meat was the much-preferred tradition in these parts.

It turned out that *Doctor* James was in truth a qualified nurse, tasked with covering medical needs in Rumuruti and surrounds; no mean task, with malaria and HIVaids rampant in the area. Later we visited his 'surgery' looking on as he advised a young mother of two ... soon to be three! She was just sixteen and in Samburu tradition would be through with bearing babies by the time she was twenty.

Later that afternoon we found Evans and his youth group members at the local community hall; together they demonstrated their latest street theatre production, highlighting crucial issues that locals had to deal with. There was an equal number of males and females, who impressed with their sheer vitality. They knew the challenges for those living in poverty; their task was to help people tackle them.

Returning to the town a few weeks later, I was stunned to hear the youth group had lost its leader. During the short time I was away, Evans had died of malaria, despite efforts by James to save him. It made me think about the value of life. At about the same age as Evans, I had escaped cancer, through surgery in a good hospital. If the youth leader could have availed similar medical attention, he would probably have dodged the jaws of death.

After that second sobering visit, Illustrious and I did manage to find the school which had gone AWL first time around. Coming away from the school, I asked him what people were doing walking with heavy-looking sacks over their shoulders. "They've discovered a dead elephant," he told me. "That meat will keep their families going for some time."

Eating recently deceased elephants; roast meat in the hot sun; succumbing to malaria, and three kids before seventeen. The cultural gulf was suddenly enormous!

Duncan Gregory

www.whittlingourniche.com

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 it 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 Okay then,
Hi 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 endeavour
That helped them to cope:
With life, that is!***

Duncan Gregory,
Rumuruti, Kenya, 2004