

From Darfur to Nairobi: a glimpse into Nairobi slums

By David Morse

Only hours after my arrival in Nairobi for the first time, I was taken to Mathare slum, its rusting shanties lining a valley that gouges into the heart of Kenya's capital. Mathare is a metaphor for the poverty that underlies Kenya's vaunted stability.

I was with an American journalist named Keith and two strapping Kenyans, Patrick and Vinny, one from the dominant Kikuyu tribe, the other a Luo, who served informally as our bodyguards.

Recent television footage showed Mathare and its huge counterpart, Kibera, erupting into bloodshed and flames-fueled by an anger that is not so much "tribal," as our mass media tend to portray it, reinforcing the worst stereotypes of Africa, but rather political and economic - an anger that was touched off by an election that might have ended the Kikuyu monopoly on power, had it not been rigged.

For me, Nairobi had been just a jumping-off place for getting to South Sudan. The Mennonite Guest House, where I stayed, offered an ever-shifting kaleidoscopic view of Americans and Europeans drawn to East Africa for reasons as intense and enigmatic as my own, and some for pragmatic reasons: an African family from Tanzania was there for the ancient patriarch to have surgery; a Methodist woman from the Midwest was trying to retrieve the body of a missionary who had been struck by a coal truck while jogging in Nairobi's difficult streets.

Never did I expect Nairobi itself would make a claim on me. But I spent a lonely birthday and a Christmas there, and got word of my father's death, all within the span of December 2005. And that walk through Mathare was my first hard look at Africa. It collapsed all the myths layered in my consciousness, and brought me up against the very bones of African poverty.

When does a leading become a calling, and a calling a ministry?

I felt called to Darfur by something so deep within me and so far beyond me that I was swept along by it. I don't pretend to understand it. I am only its agent. But it feels like love, and after three years it still feels like love.

What love is free from pain? The question was posed by Inazo Nitobe, a Japanese samurai turned Quaker who was an under-secretary general of the League of Nations during the years leading up to World War II. Show me a love that is devoid of sorrow and pain, and I will show you a false and shallow love.

In the beginning, my calling was tightly focused on Darfur. Gradually it opened onto something larger and more complex.

I began to understand the region beyond - South Sudan and the other regions of Sudan struggling for existence, and the countries bordering on Sudan that are experiencing their own chaos and that bear their own deformities left from colonialism, like Kenya.

Genocide raises the most basic questions about who we are - as individuals, as members of a religious faith, as a species.

Who are we?

What values do we want to see prevail?

What do we do with our complicity?

Within my own DNA there are Irish chasing Cherokee from their lands in North Carolina; there are Cherokee being chased, and chasing. And further back, there is Africa.

In the distant past we all came from Africa. Some of us migrated north and across the broad Eurasian land mass, and finally across the ocean.

Now we in the global North have to deal with the damage wreaked for the past four hundred years by white people returning to this ancient cradle of humankind to plunder it—to kidnap Africans, to take ivory, gold, rubber, and now uranium and oil.

What do we do with our complicity?

Virtually ever human population has been the victim or the perpetrator of genocide, or both.

Is this what is meant by original sin?

Perhaps the greatest gift of spirit we can receive is to discover a loving place in the whole.

In May and July of 2007 I returned to Nairobi, bracketing a trip again to South Sudan, this time with three "[Lost Boys](#)" visiting their Dinka villages for the first time in twenty years.

While in Nairobi I visited Kangemi slum, with my friend and filmmaker colleague Jen (<http://www.rebuildinghopesudan.org/>). We visited the [Hamomi Children's Centre](http://www.hamomi.org/) (<http://www.hamomi.org/>), a volunteer operation struggling to get by on donations.

The children it serves are mostly orphans and street children. It addresses as best it can the almost total lack of educational opportunities and medical care available to poor children in Nairobi.

"We bring them here," explained its founder, Raphael Etenyi, who showed us a dark classroom. The day was sunny and the children were meeting outside, sitting at rough desks. What impressed me was the light in their faces and the perseverance of the adults working with them. Raphael started out with seven children and now serves 100, with a

teaching staff of four volunteers. With the help of Susie Marks, an American living in Seattle, he hopes to raise money to purchase their own building and pay at least modest salaries.

I also visited Kibera slum, home to perhaps a million people crammed into an area three quarters the size of New York's Central Park. My host was David Ochola, a Luo who had grown up in Kibera and was now a pastor whose ministries included supporting two schools, a program for the disabled, and a program for matching AIDS orphans and street children with adult caretakers.

David seemed to me at the time unduly wary of potential violence. After I'd gotten permission to photograph some men holding fish, he pulled me away, saying they were "becoming hostile." We talked to children, a prostitute, a seller of herbal medicines, a fixer of appliances with a little shop cobbled together from scrap plywood, a volunteer registering voters for the coming election.

At his urging, we kept moving — he a sometimes elusive figure darting between corrugated shacks or scampering across ditches of foul gray water.

As he led me from one ministry to another, I felt my own ministry enlarge further. The last line of the poem, "[Taking](#)," reflects this ambiguity.

Within the ugliness of Nairobi's slums I found the human spirit alive and vital. As always, children whose smiles lit up my heart. Dedicated teachers working on the sketchiest of salaries. Pastors like David Ochola struggling to keep hopes alive, asking me to carry that message to Americans.

If these photographs suggest the disturbing inequities underlying Nairobi's vaunted stability, I trust they also capture the struggle for dignity, the commonality of the human dream.

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Poems

Taking

He takes your hand in the fashion of African men
because you are white and in his charge, and
the natives as he calls them are hostile.

A woman brightens: "Good morning, pastor."
You do not feel their hostility except through him
a fuse sizzling somewhere unseen, a dark look
of feigned indifference, fear dazzling off
his white shirt like the sour gray pungence
of garbage wafting from ditches and heat
corrugating off scab-streaked roofs, buzz
of flies grazing on blackened cow shanks
stacked on the Happy Butchery counter.
"Let us move on," he says. "They are becoming
hostile." You want to experience their hostility.
But he protects you, tows you away from
whatever seems ominous, groups of men,
leads you through wet gray canyons
taking you from one ministry to another.

Green Nairobi

Green Nairobi
in hand-me-down funk
T-shirts that say Dallas,
& Fly Arab Emirates.
Foraging old sow Nairobi,
scarred with cob-strewn
footpaths, ancestral bones,
you eat your farrow,
heave your swollen
pink clay udders
leak toxic gruel
through rusty slums.
Cruel Nairobi,
whose name once
meant water, now means
Kikuyu matatus & stolen
elections, you leaf out
in green cell phones
Safaricom billboards
and City Hoppa buses
spewing capitalist
schemes.

Song of Kibera Slum

Mzungu! How are you? Their little hands grasp
your finger. *Fine, thank you. How are you?*
Grasp your finger not softly, from present curiosity,
but with hard grainy palms of future pain. Hold fast
as if you might carry them on your shoulders
bear them away on snow white wings. Only way
to release them gracefully is say bye-bye and wave.
How are you? Fine, thank you. How are you?
The hardness of childhood outgrown too soon
a future scavenging trash, surround you
with an intensity you cannot afford to grasp.

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