

Why Are Poor Kenyans Happier than Rich Americans?

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Report #109

I have just finished reading "The Working Poor: Invisible in America" by David Shipler (father of Laura Shipler Chico). It is the kind of book I like because, rather than start with a theory and prove it, he interviews in depth over time many of the working poor and lets them tell their stories. The lessons then arise from their stories.

Shipler writes (page 8), "By global or historical standards, much of what Americans consider poverty is luxury...Most impoverished people in the world would be dazzled by the apartments, telephones, television sets, running water, clothing, and other amenities that surround the poor in America".

So, as I have written about in previous reports, when Americans come to the rural areas of western Kenya they are concerned by the poverty here. But then they are also amazed about how happy and cheerful the Kenyans seem to be. Chapter seven (pages 174 - 200), "Kinship" ("If we have nothing, we have each other") gave me the impetus to record two days of my normal adventures here in Kenya which indicate why Kenyans are happy.

Since we are returning to the US for two months, starting June 12, Gladys and I decided that we had to visit Gladys's father, David Okwemba, before we left. So Friday about 10:00 a.m. we set off. In the back of my covered pick-up truck are two 200 pound bags of corn (maize) which we are taking to him. We had bought this on Tuesday from Gladys' cousin who lives nearby. We were also given a hen, pumpkin leaves, and millet as presents.

Our first stop is Alfred and Florence Machayo's place about 10 miles from our house. There we get three banana plants – they had given us a bunch of the ripe bananas last time we were there – so we want to plant our own.

We stop at the junction of the Uganda road where it turns towards Kakamega and stop to buy onions and tomatoes. The young women all come running up and say, "Mama, buy mine. 100/-". That is \$1.50 USD for about 5 pounds of tomatoes. These are for Gladys' father. They are also selling some Irish potatoes so we buy some of these for ourselves. All of this is grown nearby on Mt. Elgon.

Next we drive to Lubao where we have a small plot which is being taken care of by Geoffrey, one of Gladys' nephews. His wife, Priska, just gave birth to their third child – a girl whom they named "Kamonya" after Gladys (whose African name, "Kamonya", came from her great-grandmother). Their first girl, Imali, had been named after Gladys' mother. We drop off the banana plants and continue to Kakamega where we go to the "supermarket" and Gladys buys some basics – bread, jam, sugar, tea – to give to her father.

We continue to Viyalo where Okwemba lives and Gladys grew up. As we drive on the narrow roads to Okwemba's house, Gladys is waving and calling out "mirembe" ("peace", the usual Luyha

greeting) to many of the people whom we pass. She's known many of them and their families, their joys, their births, their marriages, their deaths, their sorrows, their hopes, and their failures for decades.

Okwemba's house would be considered a poor one in the United States. He has two mud and wattle 4 room houses plus a thatched roof kitchen behind. The second house is really for us and other guests to stay in when we come since a son-in-law should not sleep in his in-laws house. There are two pit latrines (male and female) and a washing bay, since there is no running water. There is also no electricity. He has about an acre of land which he plants two or three times per year together with two cows (his pride and joy) and chickens. He used to keep wild quail, but recently stopped; he is 86 years old.

We find that Betty, one of Gladys' cousins who lives in Arizona, is there because she has come to pay her respect to Okwemba for the death of his daughter, Rose. Shortly thereafter three of Gladys' sisters, who live nearby, arrive. One has a hen and another has six quail. They all greet each other with great shouts of "hello" and laughter as if they hadn't seen each other for years (rather than days or months). All of Gladys's siblings are sisters and they all live elsewhere.

Okwemba had two wives and the second wife lives on the next plot up the hill with a good number of her children and grandchildren. So the place is swarming with people and kids. I can't even figure out which kid belongs to which parent. Neighbors drop buy to say "hello" and if someone comes from the Friends Church nearby, there is an extensive prayer where everyone stands up and bows their head and the one praying is rewarded with "Amens" and other expression of assent. Today the woman who praying talks a mile a minute (in Kiluhya so I can't understand it anyway) but the speed of her talking does not shorten the length of the prayer. Everyone is covered in the prayer including Gladys and me since I can hear our names.

We soon get the tea, bread, margarine, and jam that we just brought. Everyone continues talking, although us men, Okwemba, his grandson John who is the main person looking after him, and I don't talk near as much as the women. I find that I forgot the cord to the modem for the laptop so I can't do internet. But I do some work on the Lubao Peace Centre accounts and then read Shipler's book on the working poor.

Dinner is about 7:00 PM and there is the usual ugali (corn mush) with either beef stew, chicken stew, or quail. This is two more options than usual but because everyone brought something it needs to be served. There is no TV of course but Okwemba does have a battery powered radio. Today it is off, either because there are no batteries or there is too much talking.

Okwemba is happy. Happy because so many of his daughters are there at one time.

I go to sleep shortly after 9:00 p.m. but the ladies talk and laugh and carry on until almost 1:00 a.m.. If there is anything of importance Gladys will tell me later. One of the reasons for this gathering is that Gladys wants her sisters to rotate visiting Okwemba while we are in the U.S. This is done, although one of the sisters, Eunice, is going to be in charge of the AGLI workcamp in Lubao in July and another, Florence, will stay at our house most of the time while we are gone. (One cannot leave their house or property vacant without someone staying there because

when you come back everything will be stolen; maybe including the corrugated iron roofs and the windows and doors.)

Even though the women have gone to bed late they are up by 6:30 or so. They heat water so that we can bathe in the bathing room. I'm first up. Then there is tea, bread, and hard boiled eggs for breakfast. About 11:00 a.m. we head out after the prayer for the journey. We take all the women to Chavakali, the town on the main road. Here we drop them off and go to a hotel where I am meeting the accountant from Kaimosi Friends Hospital. I am teaching him how to do QuickBooks. We are also meeting with Duncan, Gladys' nephew, whom we put through the local college and who is now a secondary school physics/math teacher. He was going to visit us in Lumakanda but when Gladys told him we were going to Viyalo we decided to meet in Chavakali. Gladys goes with him to his house nearby. She comes back with a hen, some millet, and a big wad of money. Since 1000/-, about \$15 USD, is the largest bill in Kenya, it doesn't take too much to make a wad of money. This, he says, is a thank you for sending him through college. We appreciate this. The funds will, in essence, go towards the cost of the primary teacher training course that Jacki, his younger sister, is taking nearby.

We head on home, about 75 miles away, in time for me to get on the 6:00 p.m. AGLI working group conference call.

So what is the lesson here? It is clear to me that Kenyans are joyful and happy because they are a cohesive group of people who know about, care about, and interact with each other extensively. It is not a lonely society but a communicative and demonstrative one. Isn't this really more important than how much "stuff" you have?

Peace,
Dave

PS: Since my report on the death penalty, I have learned that Kenya has not executed anyone since 1982 – 27 years ago – but there are almost 5,000 people on death row in the country. Almost every day one reads in the paper that another person has been assigned to the "hang-man's noose." There is talk about abolishing the death penalty.