

# Ekwee's transaction

Scholarly sources:

Watkins, Tammy (2012) Turkana children's contributions to subsistence and household ecology in Kenya. In Marisa Ensor (ed) *African Childhoods: Education, development, peacebuilding, and the youngest continent*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan. Pp 61-77

Pavitt, Nigel (1997) *Turkana*. London: Harvill Press.

## Meet Ekwee

Ekwee Ekai was a sixteen-year-old Kenyan youth in 2015. He was a member of the Turkana ethnic group. Like many Turkana boys, he shaved his head. Also like most Turkana boys, he had a great deal of freedom.



## Ekwee's world

Ekwee lived in a pastoralist society. Pastoralist societies relied on a lot of livestock for their living. They moved the livestock around weekly to watering holes. They also moved the livestock around seasonally to get the best weather and grasslands for the animals.

Turkana boys began accumulating livestock as very young boys.



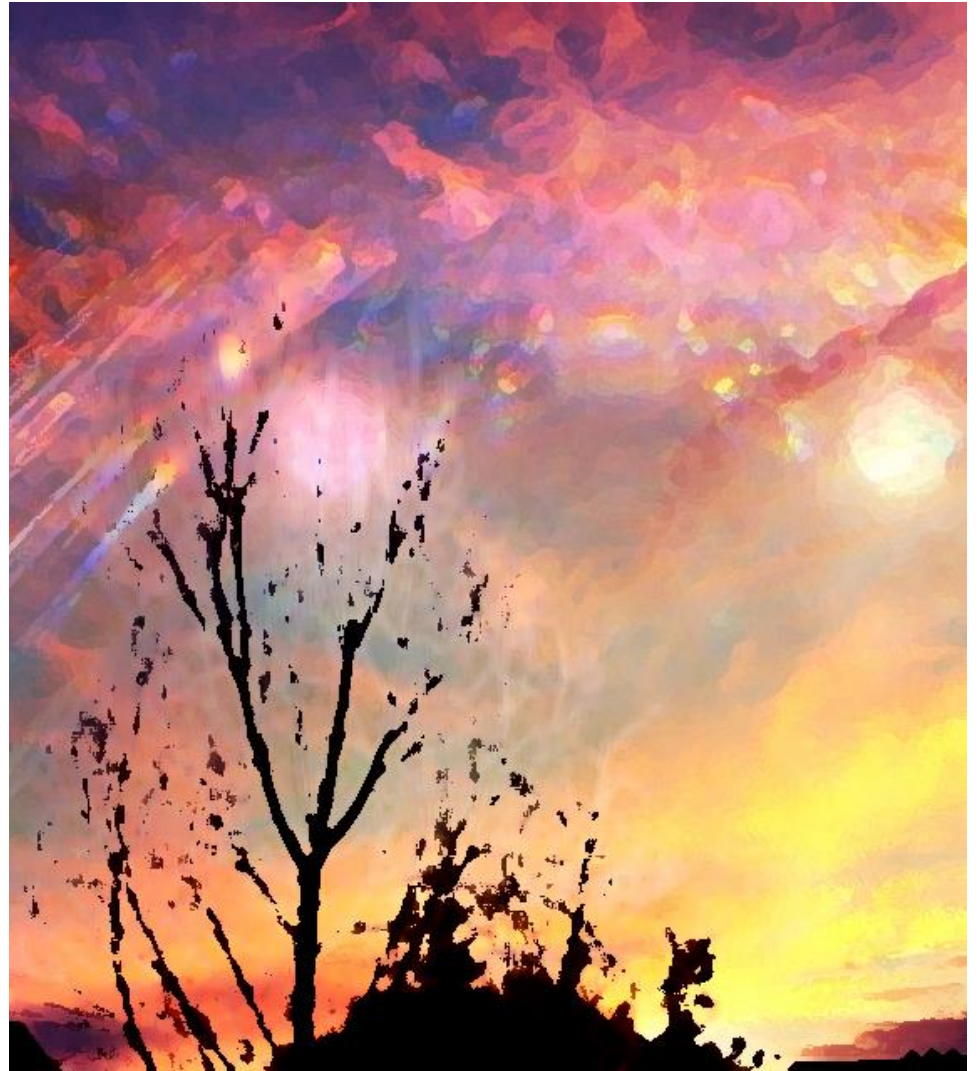
Ekwee was from a village of related families. They lived in temporary huts so they could pick up and move if it was necessary. Each hut could accommodate about six people who would sleep on straw mattresses and usually eat sitting on the floor.

The Turkana always built their villages near water sources.



People in Ekwee's village practiced their traditional religion. They believed in a creator god known by the name of Akuj that is associated with the sky.

Like most Africans, the Turkana also sought help from their dead ancestors. They gave blessings to their ancestors daily and tried to please them.



Ekwee went to school. Most Turkana boys left school when it suited them, as they had a lot of responsibilities with their livestock. But Ekwee was adamant about staying in school. He studied in the Turkana language and also learned Swahili and English. It was very important for Ekwee to be able to converse in English.

You see, he had a plan.

But we'll get to that in a minute.



Ekwee's daily job was to care for his livestock. At least once a week, he and other village boys took their animals on long trips to distant watering holes. They'd also take along jugs of milk and other things to trade along the way.



In traditional Turkana society, livestock animals were the medium of exchange—they were money. The people used the animals and their products to trade for other things they needed, such as clothes, grains, sweets, fruit, vegetables, anything.





While Kenya had a medium of exchange that was actually money—the shilling—usually only the city people and foreign traders used that.

Country dwellers like the Turkana still enjoyed trading in livestock.



Ekwee, like most Turkana young men, loved his animals. He gave every one of them names and even wrote songs for them.

However, Ekwee was a little limited in the livestock he owned. According to Turkana traditions, a father would give a boy one or two animals when the boy was old enough to care for them (see right). It was then the boy's job to use their products to trade for more animals.



But Ekwee had failed to make a trade for any camels. And these were considered the most important animals to own.

See, camels were most often used for bride wealth. Bride wealth was something provided to the families of the women the Turkana men married. The camels were given to make up for the loss of the young women's work in the households.

This is where Ekwee's plan came in.



## Ekwee's plan

On one lovely morning in February, Ekwee began to work his plan. That morning he was due to go out with other village young men with their livestock. It was the dry season in Kenya and they needed to go in search of a better watering hole.



Ekwee's oldest sister Ajuma had just returned to his family with her only child after divorcing her husband, who had beat her. She offered Ekwee a solid breakfast of porridge with milk before he went out.

Together they sought the blessings of life from their ancestors.

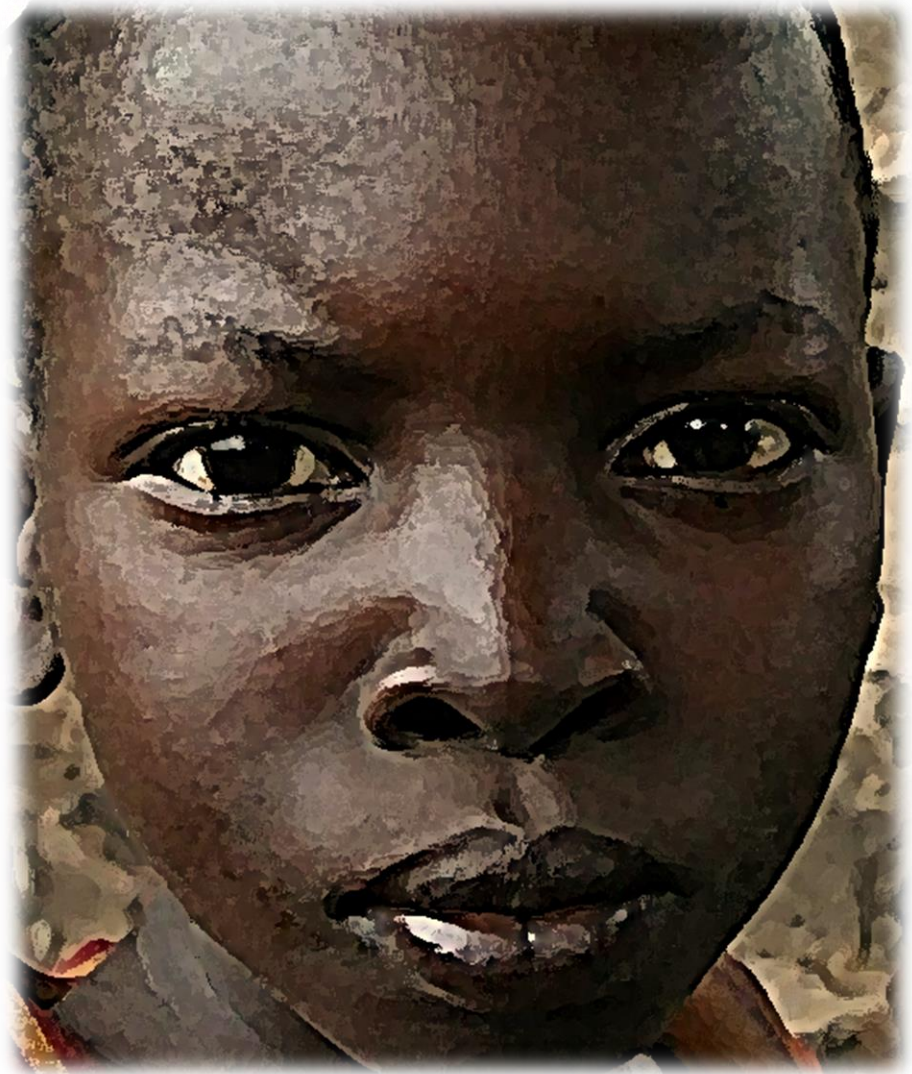


When Ekwee was ready to leave, Ajuma handed him one of her highly-acclaimed, hand-carved wooden bowls.

"Now am I sure I can trust you to carry out the plan?" she asked.



"How could you doubt me?" Ekwue exclaimed. "You know how long I've been preparing for this."



Ekwee left with his puny herd of livestock to join his cousins. They intended to be out all day seeking water for the animals and also visiting a Maasai market. The Maasai was another Kenyan group living near the Turkana.





As soon as his older cousins Waga and Ndegwa saw him coming, they began with their usual cat calls.

"So where's all your camels?" Waga taunted.

"Are you going to be a feeble old man before you can afford to marry?" Ndegwa added. "You can't come up with thirty camels unless you begin with one!"



And this went on for miles.  
Ekwee didn't flinch. He knew  
what he was doing. He'd known  
what he was going to do for a  
long time now.

They continued their journey.



When the cousins were tired of taunting Ekwue, they stopped for a rest.

"So how is your sister Ajuma doing, now that she's back home?" asked Waga.

Ekwue told the cousins that his parents had given her the camels from her bride wealth and she was just waiting to trade them so she could support herself and her child.



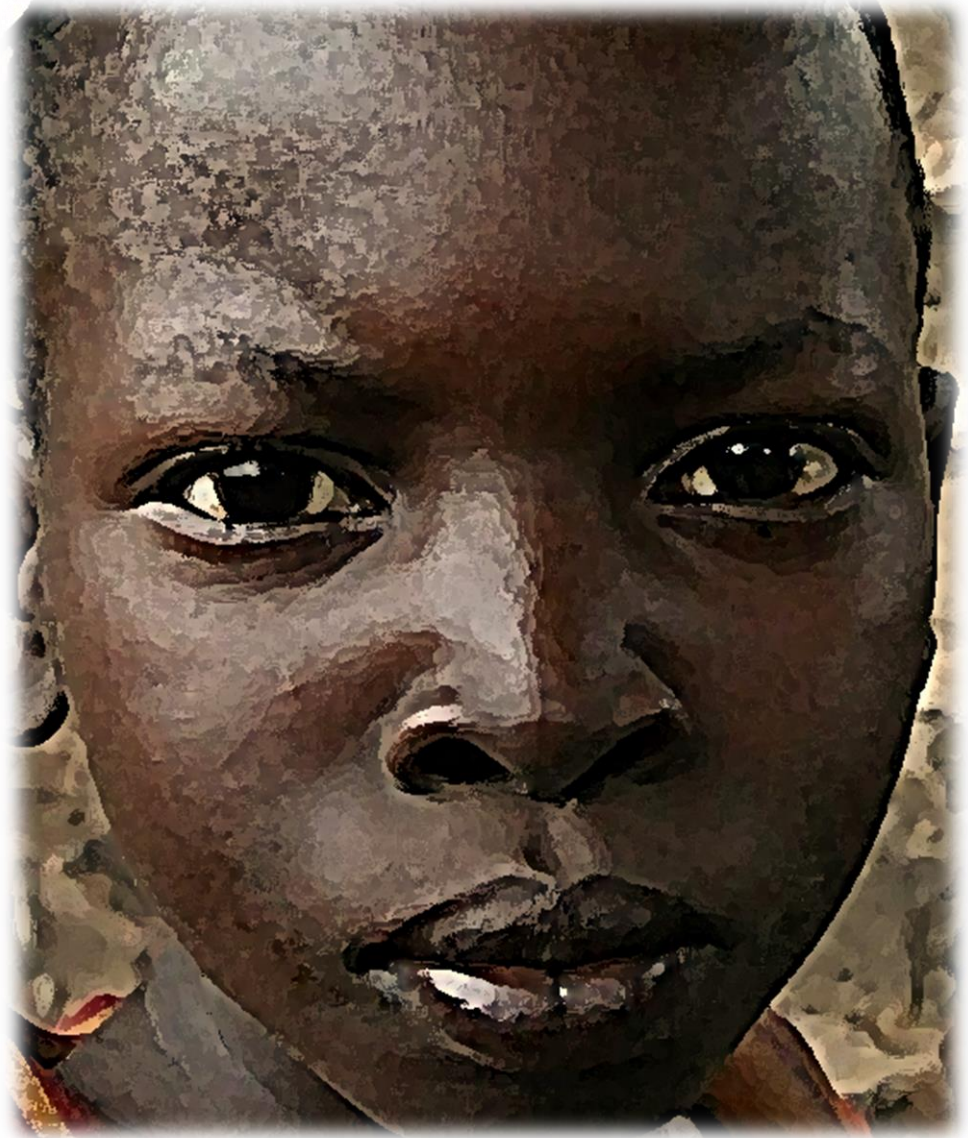
“Ah, the blessings of bride wealth,” sighed Ndegwa. “The woman can always get it back if things don’t work out. Pity you don’t have enough goats to trade for them.”

“Yup,” agreed Waga, “it takes a whole lot of goats to get a camel.”



"You might be surprised what it will take," responded Ekwue.

The boys got up and continued their journey.



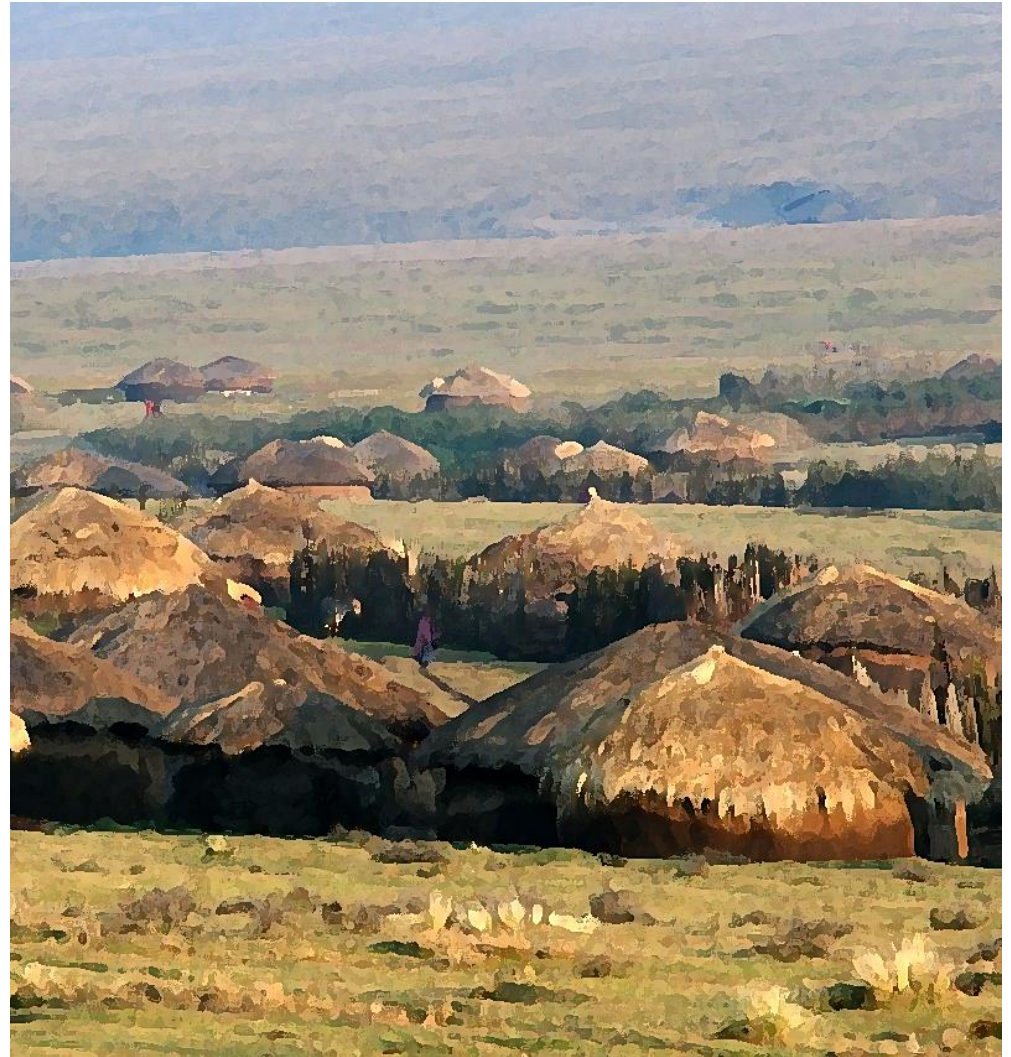
On the way they approached a Turkana village of a different clan.

"Let's trade them some of our milk for lunch," Waga suggested.

Ndegwa laughed. "Oh sure—and this has nothing to do with a certain young lady in the village that you fancy marrying?"

Waga blushed. "I don't fancy marrying anyone until I have thirty head of cattle and camels."

Ekwee said nothing, for he had an interest of his own in that village.



The boys stopped and enjoyed a meal of porridge stew in exchange for the milk. Waga's love interest, Aluna, stopped to chat. She had her younger sister Adia with her.

The cousins noticed the light in Ekwee's eyes. "Oh, you've already picked out your wife, camel-less boy!" Ndegwa teased. "Good luck with that!"



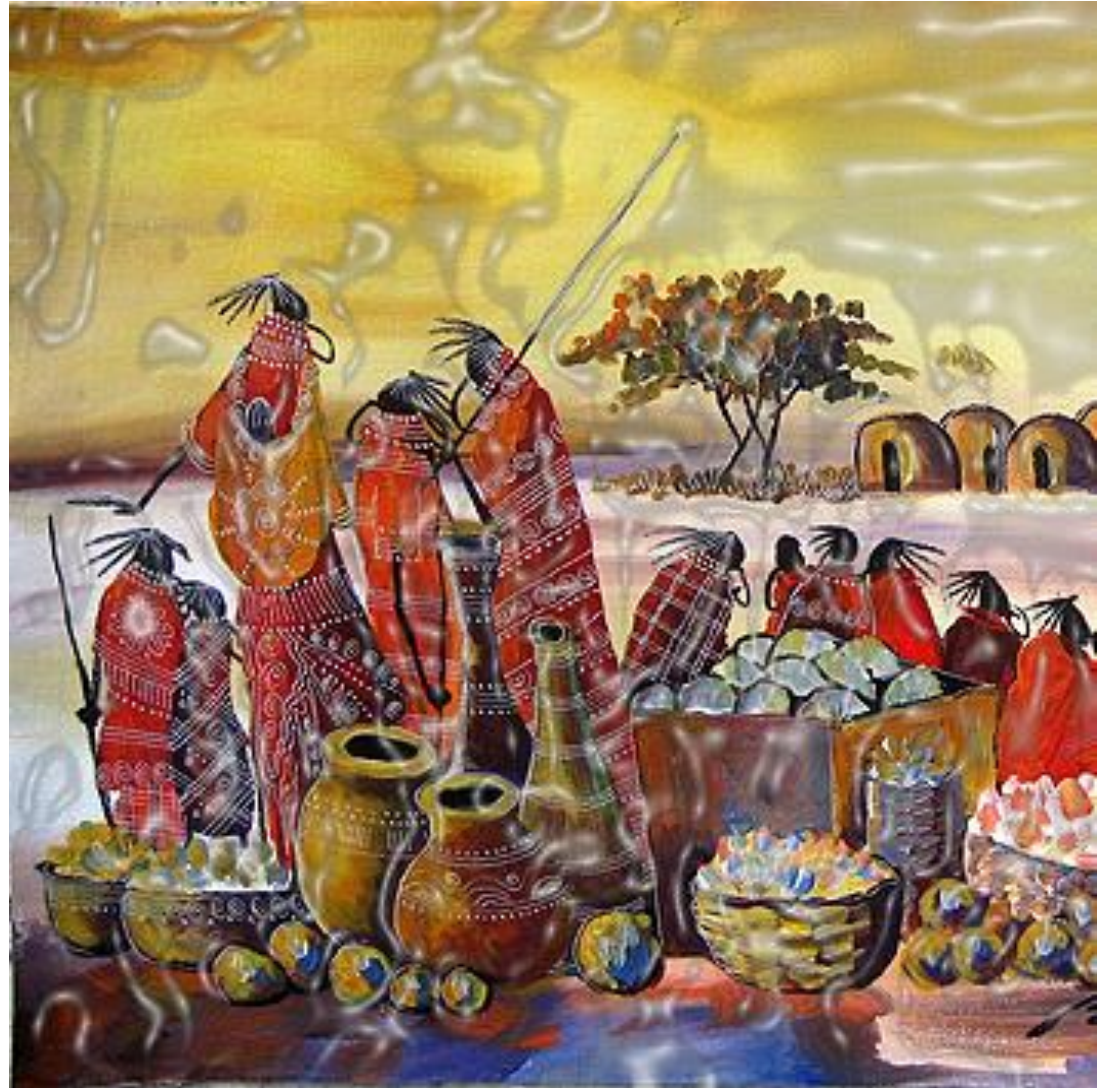
The boys left the village in an hour and made their way to an elephant watering hole . They waited until the elephants moved on. Then the boys' herds drank until they were satisfied.





Two hours later they found the Maasai market.

Waga traded a cow for fruit and sweets for himself and a package of maize flour for his mother.



Ndegwa traded two goats for Western-styled blue jeans.



But Ekwee asked the Maasai traders for the whereabouts of the Englishman's tent.

"Why do you want that?" Waga asked. "He's just looking to buy baskets and stuff—not cattle. And he doesn't speak Turkana."



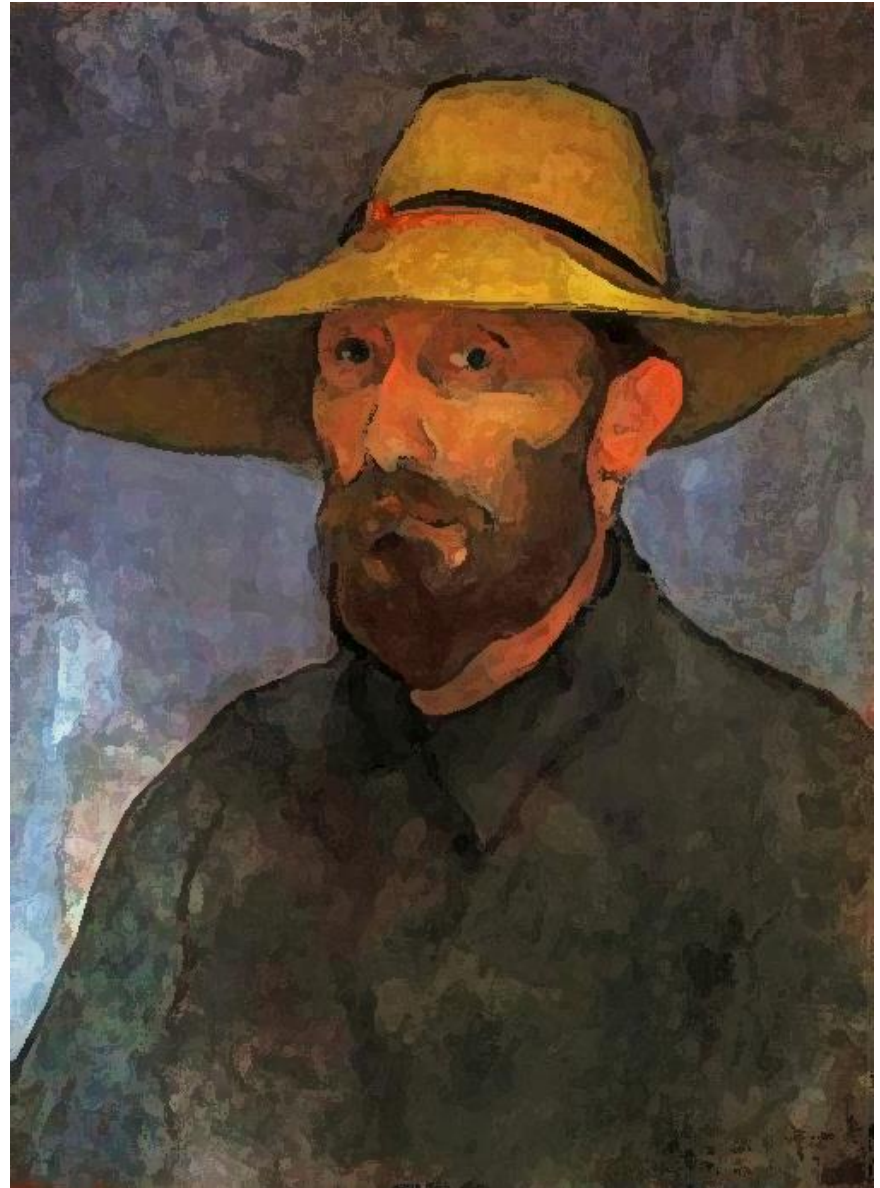
But Ekwee found the tent. He entered.  
It was dark inside.

He got the man's attention when he held  
up the carved wooden bowl. Not knowing  
that Ekwee spoke English, the man  
quickly held up a 1000 shilling note.

"No Sir," Ekwee responded in English "I  
want to point out the quality of the wood  
and the craftsmanship."

The Englishman scowled at him and  
began bargaining for a price.

Ekwee eventually left happy—very  
happy—that day.



On the way home Ndegwa put on his new blue jeans. Both cousins drilled Ekwee about his meeting with the Englishman. But Ekwee said nothing.



When Ekwee returned to his sister he unpacked no less than 60,000 shillings!!

Ajuma shrieked in joy. They had agreed to split the amount that he would get.



"Now I want my camel,"  
Ekwee stated. "That will  
be my share. But it must  
be a female so she can  
increase."



"My little brother," said Ajuma. "You learned English and bargained for so much more than I expected to get. You need to begin saving for your bride. I will give you two camels—one male and one female."

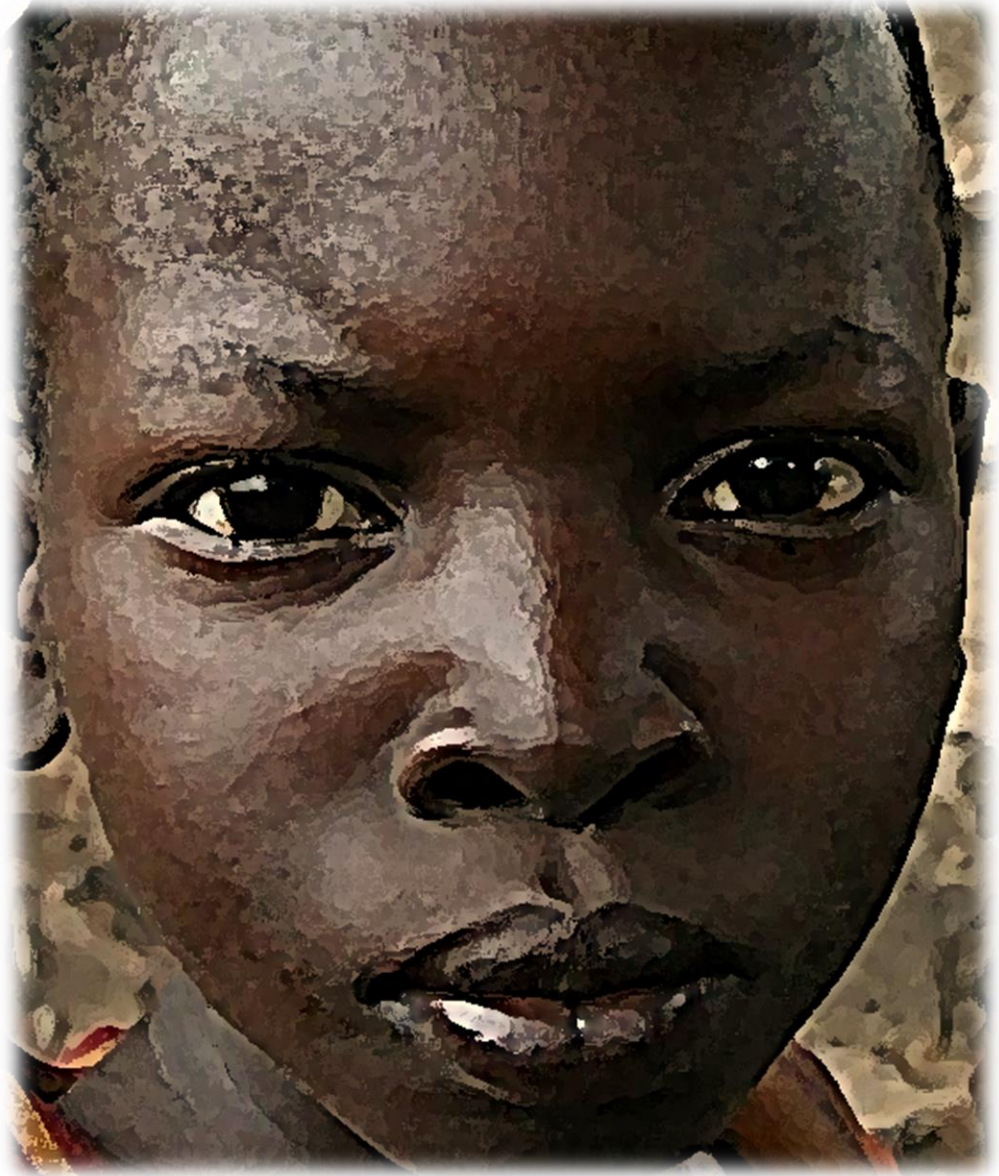




And so it was that Ekwee's schooling paid off. He began with two camels and by age twenty-one had thirty and was able to bargain to marry his beloved Adia.



Ekwue ended up being one of the most admired men in his village.



The end

Let's talk!!!