

The Child with the Withered Hand

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WRITER'S COMMENT: *This essay was written as a term paper for my UWP 101 Advanced Composition class. Our assignment was to choose a published photograph, which we found personally meaningful, and write an extensive research article on the topic. I decided to base my paper off of Mike Well's photograph of a starved Ugandan child holding the hand of a Christian missionary. I chose this picture, because despite its horrifyingly graphic nature, it stands as a symbol of the eternal love and friendship characteristic of the human race. In this monumental photo, all barriers of wealth, race, and age are tossed aside, and we are left with a single universal truth: that at our core all individuals desire and deserve nothing more than the nourishment of compassion and care.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *In 2003, Esquire magazine published Tom Junod's "The Falling Man," which was an in-depth research article that attempted to identify a man who perished on September 11, 2001 after falling from one of the burning towers. Page one of that article included a photograph of the falling man as he plummeted toward the ground, and Junod built the piece around a vivid and powerful description of the circumstances surrounding that image. For the term project in my Advanced Composition course, I ask my students to use "The Falling Man" as a model to write their own research article on the circumstances surrounding a published image that speaks to them. My student Moksha Patel selected a captivating image for this project, and he uniquely crafted his piece in a way that puts readers face to face with the victims of the famine of Karamoja. In his article, Moksha provides the context necessary to begin to understand the nightmare through which so many Ugandans suffered, and he uses vivid imagery throughout to give his readers a sense of the devastation. Moksha conducted extensive research to complete this piece, and the result is a thoughtful yet painful glimpse into the lives of an impoverished people.*

—Ken Andersen, University Writing Program

The scorching African sun vibrates through the dry air, the wind whispering of pain and death. Hundreds of bodies, human and animal alike, lay rotting on the parched gravel. The skeletal remains of what were once mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, clutter the savanna like a child's forgotten toys. Yet within these jaws of hunger and devastation, a universal bond is acknowledged.

The year is 1980 in the Karamoja district of Uganda. Mike Wells, a photographer from the United Kingdom, pulls out his camera with hesitation. What he sees is disturbing, and he is embarrassed for being the man who would immortalize such an image. Still, to spread awareness of the disaster, Wells steadies the camera and snaps the shot. Amidst the arid savannah, two people from worlds apart meet in a symbol of love and unity, as the trusting hand of an African child reaches out to rest within the confines of a Christian missionary's palm (Iconic Photos).

The two arms couldn't be any more different. The child's arm is withered, as if in its hunger, his body had digested its own flesh. Beneath the skin, outlines of frail bones are visible, twisted like the remains of a burnt tree branch. On the top left corner of the photograph, a hint of the Child with the Withered Hand's baggy, salmon-colored tunic can be seen. From within the tunic, the dark arm reaches out helplessly, threatening to crumble into powder under the force of gravity. At the end of a pencil thin limb lies a hand more corpse than human. Five fingers, thinner than toothpicks, swim within layers of dying skin. In contrast, the Missionary's hand appears young and thriving. Emerging from the top right corner of the photograph, the large hand encompasses the majority of the image. The Missionary's pale white skin is pristine, with hardly a hint of dirt on it, each of his fingers surrounded in more flesh than his companion's entire hand.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, young Tommy comes home from a hard day at school. For starters, the cafeteria lady had given him applesauce instead of the fruit cup he'd wanted. On top of that, his parents had decided to embarrass him by picking him up in the minivan. At home, he found that his brother had broken his favorite action figure, leaving the plastic limbs scattered all across the room. Exasperated with his misfortune, Tommy decided to use his allowance to buy himself the newest GI Joe figure.

That evening, while Tommy's parents were watching the nightly news, the shrill sound of a crying woman caught his attention. Turning

to the television, he found hundreds of ragged children, thinner than scarecrows, staring up at him with helpless eyes. Immensely disturbed, Tommy packed up his things and marched off to his room just as the reporter was urging viewers to donate money to the starving children. The next morning, Tommy's parents woke up to find a piggybank on the dining table. Taped to the piggybank was a scribbled note, which read, "Please give to hungry kids in Africa."

The New York Times depicts the 1980s famine of Karamoja as one of the worst disasters of the 20th century. Over 20,000 people were estimated to have lost their lives as a result of starvation ("African Apocalypse"). In fact, with mortality rates at an astounding 21% for adults and 60% for infants, over a fifth of the region's population was wiped out within a few short years (Iconic photos). According to *The New York Times*, the famine was caused due to a series of droughts, which led to a two-thirds reduction in crops (The New York Times "A Relief Team Arrives in Uganda"). This, along with the political instability caused by the fall of long-time leader Idi Amin, fostered a social environment ripe with disorder and hunger (The New York Times "African Apocalypse").

The famine prone region of Karamoja is a district in northeastern Uganda, located on a high plateau surrounded by four mountains. The land is a desolate savannah with a dire climate, inhabited primarily by nomadic tribes. The annual rainfall is often less than 800 millimeters, a mark well shy of the 1,000 millimeters needed to support a rural community. The region has also suffered from years of civil war in the nearby nation of Sudan (Karamoja). In contrast to Karamoja's bare landscape, *The New York Times*' "African Apocalypse" describes the rest of Uganda as having a much fairer climate, more suitable for the production of crops. Furthermore, most other Ugandans consider themselves too modern for the primitive warriors of Karamoja. As a result, wealth and trade is unequally distributed, even within the nation's borders. Thus, while the child in the picture was starving to death, his countrymen in neighboring districts continued on with their lives, well fed and supplied (The New York Times "African Apocalypse").

In spite of the apparent disregard of Ugandans for victims of their own country, the international community provided enormous amounts of medical and monetary support provided for victims of the famine. *The New York Times* reported that the American government donated over \$25 million in aid, while sending 5,000 tons of food to Karamoja

weekly (“African Apocalypse”). Nor was the United States the only foreign nation to assist in the disaster relief. According to “A Relief Team Arrives in Uganda,” Sweden sent teams of officials specializing in disaster relief to help with food distribution and local farming in the afflicted area (The New York Times “A Relief Team Arrives in Uganda”). In addition, the Associated Press explains that many nations participated in relief efforts by financing The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), which focused on providing medical treatment for children suffering from the famine. In fact, some officials estimate that UNICEF’s medical actions decreased the child mortality rate by a factor of 30 (Associated Press). Thus, for every child that died, 30 more were saved as a result of worldwide humanitarian aid.

Yet drastic inequality in wealth distribution can still be found in present day Uganda. Statistics from *NationMaster* affirm that currently, 29.8% of the nation’s income is earned by ten percent of the population. Contrast this with the dismal 3% of income held by the bottom tenth of Ugandans. In other words, a fifth of Uganda’s population controls 44.9% of its total wealth (*NationMaster*). Nor is this skewed pattern of wealth confined to the borders of Uganda. According to Wahome’s “Nation in Top Ten Income Inequality,” an even greater disproportion of wealth is found between the elite and bottom tenths of the population in the neighboring nation of Kenya (Figure 1). The effects of this unequal distribution are clearly evident in the health disparities between various subgroups of Kenyans. An estimated 15% of the Kenyans within the poorest fifth of the population don’t have access to safe drinking water. Poorer areas of the country also have less access to appropriate healthcare. In the Central Province, 20,000 people share a single doctor, as opposed to the 120,000 people that must share a physician in the North Eastern

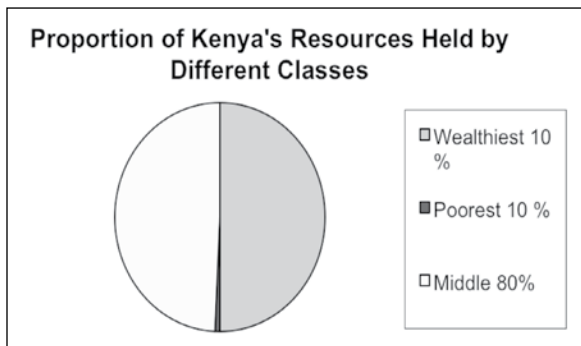


Figure 1: A graphical Representation of the distribution of Kenya’s natural resources amongst the highest and lowest tenth of the population (Source: Wahome)

province. Furthermore, there seems to be a strong correlation between an area's wealth and its average lifespan. Kenyans in the poor province of Mombasa are estimated to have a lifespan half that of those from the wealthier region of Meru (Wahome).

Nor is this unequal distribution of wealth found only among developing nations. In fact, estimates of total world income show that the top 1.36 billion people make eight times more money than the other 5.4 billion combined (Figure 2). Furthermore, in "The World Distribution of Household Wealth," Davies and his team demonstrate that the amount of wealth held between various nations is also unequally split. Consider this: the United States of America is home to 4.7% of the world's population, yet controls a whopping 25.4% of the world's net wealth. Contrast this with the populations of India and China, which together form 37.35% of the world's population, but only own 12.91% of the total world wealth. Thus, the amount of world wealth held by the United States is larger than the combined wealth held by all of the nations in South America and Africa combined (Davies et al). Furthermore, comparative statistics from *Nations Encyclopedia* indicate that the per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Americans in 1998 was \$29,683; almost a hundred times larger than the Ugandan value of \$332 (Nations Encyclopedia).

In the forlorn wastes of Karamoja, however, these numbers are worth no more than the inedible rocks on the ground. Measurements of GDP and per capita income simply reiterate what the Child with the Withered Hand has known all along: that he is starving. The lopsided distribution of world wealth is a phenomenon well beyond his comprehension or interest. For him, life is a never-ending quest for the next meal. Thoughts of GI

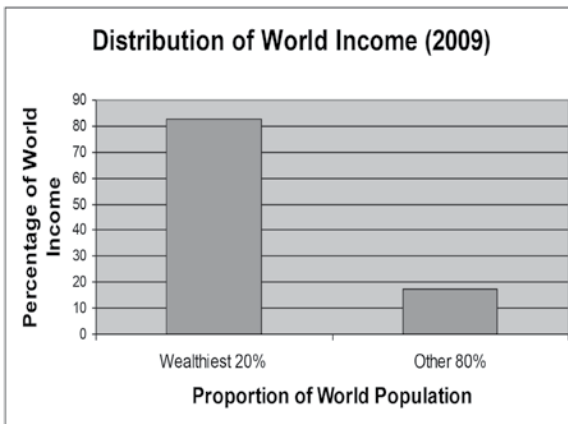


Figure 2: Demonstrates the immense disparity in world income between the top 20% and everyone else (Source: Conley)

Joe action figures, applesauce, and minivans are luxuries he cannot afford. Yet even now, on the brink of death, The Child acknowledges his innate identity, reaching for the hand of his fellow human in a gesture that would someday captivate the attention of the world.

Unfortunately, *Iconic Photo's* "Famine in Uganda" explains that the photograph of the Child with the Withered Hand, which Wells intended to use as an urgent call for aid from the rest of the world, was never printed in any newspaper. For reasons never disclosed, the publishers refused to print the picture. Instead they entered the photo into the World Press Photograph of the Year contest, where it won first place. Despite the prestige of the award, Wells was ashamed of his victory (*Iconic Photos*). Somehow, the exploitation of poverty stricken children to win awards violated the timeless bond he'd captured on the savannahs of Karamoja. The deliberate misuse of the photograph, and the refusal of printers to distribute it, was unethical on many levels. Not only did it violate Wells's rights to control his own photograph, but it also abused the plight of the Child with the Withered Hand. Furthermore, it defiled the underlying universal connection prevalent between all humans.

Sadly, the Child with the Withered Hand is not a figure of the past but one that continues to haunt us today. Despite huge advances in many aspects of society, severe poverty is still predominant in our world. Anup Shah's "Poverty Facts and Stats" estimates that 48.6% of the world's population makes under \$2.50 cents a day (Shah). That is, half of the world's population makes less money in a day than many of us spend on a single cappuccino at Starbucks. A report by Dailymotion estimates that today, over 12 million people in East Africa are at a risk for severe starvation. Like the famine of Karamoja, this disaster is attributed to a combination of droughts and political instability. The pursuit for food has driven many Africans to abandon their homes in search of a refugee camp. A single camp in Somalia houses 400,000 starving refugees, half of whom are children under the age of eleven (Dailymotion).

Yet even now, through barriers of class and distance, a tremendous wave of international support has evolved for the victims of East Africa, motivated by the same human bond that existed between the Child with the Withered Hand and his missionary. Dailymotion's report, "East Africa Famine Relief Draws \$20M from Canadians," indicates that the Canadian government alone is projected to donate 40 million dollars in supplies and aid. Even more remarkably, ordinary citizens from Canada

have donated over 20 million dollars of their own money through private organizations, such as World Vision or The Red Cross (Dailymotion). Furthermore, a recent report by Natalie Angley declares that, in addition to providing monetary aid, hundreds of groups and volunteers have traveled to the afflicted areas to provide assistance in a variety of ways. The Islamic Relief Worldwide has provided 200,000 Africans with safe drinking water, by installing fresh water pumps. The United Nations Refugee Agency is working on building additional camps to meet the needs of the increasing number of people fleeing their homes in search of food. They have also distributed emergency assistance packets containing essential supplies such as blankets, cooking utensils, and fuel. Other organizations aim to provide medical and nutritional attention to the starving children. Volunteers from Doctors Without Borders have set up numerous programs, providing medical consultations to thousands of people each day (Angley).

In spite of the widespread disparity of wealth around the world, there is an undeniable connection between humans everywhere. It is this bond that urges missionaries to leave the comforts of their homes and travel across the world to a continent ripe with disaster. It is the same bond that fuels billions of dollars in international charity and famine aid every year. And it is this bond that motivated Mike Wells to capture the iconic picture of the Child with the Withered Hand.

At the center of the photograph the two hands embrace, the child's shriveled flesh finding solace within the spacious folds of the Missionary's palm. This is no ordinary handshake, but a conjunction of two worlds, a connection that transcends the boundaries of wealth, race, and religion. Here, on the plains of hell, the Child with the Withered Hand and a complete stranger forge an eternal relationship of unity and friendship. Together they have discovered



“A Starving Boy and a Missionary.” Source: Wells

the underlying essence of all human beings: the unyielding necessity for companionship. For ultimately, it was neither food nor water that the Child had needed most, but rather the unfamiliar embrace of a human's loving hand. In that moment, when Mike Wells's camera clicked, and the child's hand touched the Missionary's skin, the world changed. The Child with the Withered Hand was no longer the impersonalized symbol of a distant famine. In that moment, he, like Tommy, was simply a child.

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