

SALT OF THE EARTH: GREEN SHOOTS OF HOPE IN HOT, ARID TURKANA

by Dimitri Mignard

Summary: *A villager is taking part in a field trial of a new irrigation technology. Both researchers and villagers dream of a future where the devastating droughts that decimated the village's livelihoods and lives are mitigated by this technology.*

Characters:

RESEARCHER (Juliet) (f), *late 30s or early 40s.*

ASEKON (f), *early 30s, Kenyan.*

EKAI (m), *early 30s, Kenyan, married to Asekon.*

DIVERS GOATS (-)

In the field:

RESEARCHER: Good afternoon Asekon, how are you today?

ASEKON: Good afternoon Juliet. I am very well, thank you.

RESEARCHER: And your family?

ASEKON: My Ekai¹ is good, he's taken the children to help his brother with his goats. And you?

RESEARCHER: Very good, thank you. I have visited nearly everyone in the village today. And how are your vegetables in our irrigation experiment with salty water?

ASEKON: They are good. The greens are growing, the tomatoes are getting red. I keep refilling the bottles as needed, every other day.

RESEARCHER: How long does it take you now?

ASEKON: One hour to go through the whole field, with thirty bottles to check. It can be a bit hard to see where the water level is, even through the clear plastic. Then I turn the tap on to fill them all up with salty water, until it reaches the mark below the holes in the nearest bottle.

RESEARCHER: That's hard work for you under the blazing sun, isn't it?

ASEKON: Yes, but collecting freshwater is harder! You should get in the house, I'll give you a drink.

¹ Pronounce E - kah - ee with the 'E' as in the Italian vowel 'e')

RESEARCHER: Thank you, but I must get back soon! I love it inside your house though, it feels so cool and fresh.

ASEKON: Our huts are much better than the brick houses or metal shacks.

RESEARCHER: Yes, we foreigners find even your nights here in Turkana to be very warm, I struggle to sleep. How do you keep your house so cool?

ASEKON: We have to pour precious water on the ground in the morning, but it's worth it.

RESEARCHER: How clever! The water keeps your house cool by evaporating throughout the day! It's a bit like our bottles - the sun evaporates the water inside them, and the vapour escapes through the holes to reach the plant roots, leaving the salt in the bottle.

ASEKON: Ah! I had not thought it was the water *evaporating* that also kept the house cool!

RESEARCHER: We are both learning new things every day...

ASEKON: I hope that this system will work. Freshwater is expensive to just pour away. Salt water – there is plenty of it and it is free. If we can grow vegetables that way and sell them, we can make a living again. It gives us hope.

RESEARCHER: We need to see how well your vegetables are doing compared with your neighbours who are watering as usual. Our scientific tests were useful and the results were good, but only people using this technique can say if it benefits them or not. People like you, Asekon!

ASEKON: But still, even if that didn't work, at least now we know we can do something different like growing vegetables. We are in charge. We can try to make money in other ways beside raising goats.

RESEARCHER: I like it when you talk like this.

ASEKON: But I think it will work... and if it does, I imagine what it might be like in a few years' time...

Fast forward to the future, in ASEKON and the RESEARCHER's imagination.

Television noises, some reality show in kiSwahili

1st GOAT: Meeeh

ASEKON: Ekai, I told you to shut the door! There is this goat watching television with us again... Can you get it out please...

EKAI: Sorry my love... It is one of our new goats that you bought yesterday, maybe she thinks you are its mother...

EKAI *slowly gets up with a 'humph' from a creaky chair, shuffles his flappy sandals to the door, which he opens with a creaking noise.*

EKAI: Away! Shooooo! Out

1st GOAT: Meeh...

Creak and soft wooden thud of the shutting door, followed by muffled "Meeh" from outside.

EKAI: Well, aren't new goats a nice problem to have, after the desperation of losing so many of them to the drought?

ASEKON: Yes indeed, we were brought to our knees.

EKAI: Thank goodness for the Rains, we had to wait so long for these!

ASEKON: But now at least we have the Salt Bottles to help us even through the drought.

EKAI: Ah yes, but I do miss burning all our plastic bottles in a big fire in the yard.

ASEKON: Well, I don't miss the smell of it! And anyway, I've seen you punching holes through the plastic with that red hot metal rod. You seem to enjoy yourself doing that!

EKAI: Ah yes, very satisfying. And very important. The bottles would not work without these holes, right?

ASEKON: Yes, that's right, and also I thought "here is a job that did not come down to me".

EKAI: You're doing a good job at arranging these bottles in the garden and watering them.

ASEKON: It takes a bit of time. I must be careful. If the salty water overflowed through the holes, then it could hurt the vegetables. Fortunately, the children do it for now, and we don't need to collect so much freshwater from the other village.

EKAI: It's well worth it. We saved a lot of money from using this salty water for growing the vegetables.

ASEKON *(getting into a rhythm)*: And we made some too by selling the vegetables,

EKAI: Which is how we bought the two new goats.

ASEKON: Yes, only two for now but... **(Beat)** Two!

EKAI (*realising*): Two!

2nd GOAT (*a different pitch from the first one*): Meeeh...

ASEKON: Aaagh! You've locked her in! And she's eating the tablecloth! Do something! Hurry!

EKAI: All right my dear...

He sighs, reluctantly getting off his seat again.

Noises made by EKAI scrambling to get the 2nd GOAT, the two running around the table, slightly panicked, protesting

GOATS: Meeeh!

ASEKON & EKAI: Out, out!

Zoom back to the present, back to the field. ASEKON and RESEARCHER laughing their heads off.

ASEKON: It would be so nice if it worked.

RESEARCHER: One way or another, you will make something work for you.

END