INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Detribalized African

c/o Barclays Bank
Queensway
Nairobi, Kenya
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Joshua Thomas is a "detribalized African." When I asked him his attitude toward the coming of the Europeans to his country, he said, "You have showed us civilization, Sir, but you don't give us a chance to practice it. You have taught us to eat good food, but we have no money to buy such food."

Joshua has had some schooling, but not much by Western standards. He is tri-lingual. In addition to his own tribal dialect, he speaks Swahili and English. His English is fairly good, but now and then he gets all tangled up in a sentence.

Most of his education was in mission schools. The missionaries played a big part in making him what he now is. They even gave him his Biblical name, which he prefers to his old African name. But what the Europeans didn't give him was a place in the world in exchange for his old one. Today Joshua Thomas is rootless culturally.

He has rejected life on the reserves and has come to live near Nairobi. He strives intensely toward the world of the Europeans although he knows full well that the color bar is impassable. He is bitter sometimes and lonely always. He has given up the gods of his forefathers and clings to Christianity although he dislikes the missionaries who brought him his new religion.

He has no trade, other than that of clerk, and, like so many other semi-educated Africans, looks to government for employment. He is paid much less than a European would make for a similar job.

He says he is opposed to Mau Mau, but adds quickly that he believes they have valid grievances. He distrusts and fears the Europeans, but admires them and wants to be accepted by them. He lacks the cleverness and sophistication of the Europeans. He appears to be very sincere, his words rush out in unchecked torrents sometimes and he seems to be painfully self-conscious.

It took several talks with Joshua before he relaxed somewhat. He said he had never met an American before, but had met a Canadian once who had been nice to him. He had only a vague idea of America, but one of his first questions was, "How do you treat the American Africans?"

Joshua is 32 years old. Unlike most Africans I have seen, he is tall and husky. He is rather handsome by Western standards. His skin is deep brown, not blackish. He is a Maragoli and was born on a reserve in North Nyanza---in western Kenya not far from Lake Victoria. He was one of eight children---five boys and three girls. Three of his brothers are older than he. His father's shamba consisted of three acres.

The only white men Joshua came into contact with as a boy were missionaries and, occasionally, colonial officials. There were no settlers in the area.

The first missionaries had arrived there in 1902. Joshua's father was an adult then, but Joshua does not know just how old. As in other tribes, men reckon their age by their age-group and not in terms of years. "When the missionaries first came," Joshua told me, "our people feared them, so the missionaries used to play tricks on them to get them to come to the mission station. They used to leave salt, sugar, beets and other things along the road and our people would be attracted to the mission station, picking up food. In that way, the missionaries would get to talk to them. Our grandfathers came to know the missionaries well and they came to think that the missionaries were not bad men, but good men. Our forefathers were taught Christianity. My father is still a very keen Christian."

Among many tribes here there is an almost pathetic belief that education automatically will unlock all doors to the white man's world. Joshua's father, with only a three-acre shamba, sent all his sons to school. Joshua got the most education---seven years.

Joshua's education began when he was 13 years old. He was enrolled then in a day school operated by American Quakers, whose missionaries had Christianized his family. He stayed there two years, then went to a government primary boarding school. His father had to pay fees---small by European standards but large for Africans---at both schools and Joshua helped out at each place by doing odd jobs on the school grounds after class.

After three years in the government school, the principal got Joshua a partial scholarship to another mission school, this one operated by the Church Mission Society of England. He stayed there two years, or until he was 20 years old.

"I didn't leave the school a happy man," Joshua recalled. "The boys had a strike because of the food they were giving us. There was not enough of it and it was not good food. We talked to the principal about it, but he didn't bother so the boys went home. I'm not very good at causing trouble, but I didn't want to be the only boy at school, so I went home, too. When the boys were called back, I was in Nairobi working. My father could not afford any more education."

That was in 1941. Joshua became a policeman and was assigned to clerical work. He earned 32 shillings a month, or $4.48. When he left the police department two years later he had had one promotion and was earning 40 shillings a month, or $5.60. "Was that enough?" I asked. "It was not enough to buy a shirt," Joshua said.

He then took a government job paying £5 (100 East African shillings) a month, or about $14. He stayed there seven years and became the head of a department, in charge of 15 Africans and seven Asians and earning £10 a month. "A European would make much more," he said. He then took a different public job to make more money and now earns £15 ($42.45) a month, one-third of which he sends home to the family on the reserve.

The family is having a hard time of it. The aged father divided the shamba among the five sons. From years of overwork, the land has become more and more unproductive.

One of the sons recently sold his share and with his wife and baby came to Nairobi, jobless and ill. He now is in a hospital with a serious stomach ailment. "I do not know what will become of him now," said Joshua. Another son earns 48 shillings a month as a tailor in Eldoret. ("A European tailor makes a lot of money, but an African tailor is nothing," said Joshua.) The other two sons and the parents, along with an unmarried daughter, continue to eke out a living on the shamba, now dwindled to 2-2/5th acres.

Joshua said he finds it difficult to get along on the £10 ($28.30) left him each month. He dresses in European clothing---usually a corduroy jacket, sports shirt or regular shirt, slacks and shoes---but these are of the cheapest grade and a bit threadbare.

His living quarters, provided by the government, consist of two connecting circular huts, each 15 feet in diameter. They are of a type seen throughout Kenya---walls, in this case concrete, extending to shoulder level and topped with a peaked thatch roof, which Joshua himself put up.

One hut is for sleeping; the other is a parlor-dining room. A 15-year-old neighbor boy cooks Joshua's meals and keeps the huts clean. Joshua pays him 32 shillings a month.

There is a small table in the parlor-dining hut, two cots along the wall which serve as couches, an overstuffed chair, several wooden chairs---and a bookcase. The bookcase contains about 75 volumes, all cheap novels, travel books, school texts and such items as "Teach Yourself Better English." Atop the bookcase are copies of the East African Standard, Nairobi's daily newspaper, and copies of illustrated English magazines. Joshua reads by the light of a kerosene lamp.

Along the circular wall of the hut hang a dozen water color paintings done by Joshua. I consider them first rate. The largest is a painting of Adam and Eve in a tropical garden with the serpent coiled around a tree. Adam and Eve are Africans. The other paintings are scenes from the reserve---landscapes, native villages, women carrying water jars, warriors hunting lion and people working in their shambas. Joshua said he was introduced to painting in school and has kept it up ever since. He had no formal art lessons. He would like to paint in oils, but he cannot afford to do so. The water colors are done on stray pieces of cardboard and on cheap drawing paper.

Joshua is unmarried. Like most Africans he wants a wife and many children, especially sons. He would prefer an educated wife, but he says he would find it difficult to support her on the $28.30 a month. An educated wife would not submit to becoming the economical beast of burden that uneducated African wives are.

Joshua has saved nearly £70 ($198.10) and he wonders whether he should go ahead and marry anyway, using some of the money for bride-price, or whether he should use the little fortune on some more of that old white magic. "I don't think a man can get anywhere without education," Joshua said. He would like to study art. "Do they let American Africans go to school in the United States, Sir?"

Joshua is lonely. He lives on the far outskirts of Nairobi. He does not find companionship among his neighbors. "They are all laborers. I don t enjoy talking about the things that laborers talk about. They cannot read or write and they know nothing. You wouldn't enjoy talking to laborers, would you Sir?" He frequently gets a ride into Nairobi and there he talks with friends from many tribes who like himself do not enjoy talking with laborers.

While he continues to believe in Christianity, he has left the Friends' church and is bitter about all missionaries. He had not, however, joined the new African Independent churches. Joshua was reluctant to discuss his reasons for rejecting the Europeans' Christianity, but finally gave several, including that he feels that Europeans do not practice the religion they teach to Africans. He also said he feels that instead of teaching his people the arts of modern self-government, the missionaries helped to impose white domination.

"My people have come to realize that the missionaries come to pave the way for the British government," Joshua said. "The missionaries are in front of the government. When the settlers come, they do not speak our language, so the missionaries talk for them. The missionary tells us, 'This man wants to build a house here and do this and that for you.' In the Kikuyu Reserve, they have given up helping the missionaries. The missionaries should be on the Africans' side, but most of them are not."

Joshua also is bitter about fees charged by mission schools, although he realizes that expenses must be met somehow. "Now at most mission schools you pay much more than you do at government schools. Some mission schools charge a little; some charge much. Some don't build good schools but still charge much money. Even for little totos you have to pay maybe 20 shillings each term and there are three terms a year. The fathers don't have that much money, so the totos don't get education."

What about the future?

No, he doesn't want the white men to leave Kenya---not yet, that is. "It's no time for us to chase the Englishmen away. I don't think we have come up to the standard where we can rule ourselves. If we both cooperated and they taught us what we need to know, it would be fine." But, he said, Europeans are not teaching the Africans these things. "I've met very few Englishmen who have the spirit of teaching. There are very few who want to help my people. But it makes no difference. If you are singing a hymn all the time and I am sitting in the same room, even if you don't want to teach it to me, still I can pick up the tune and one day you will hear me singing it,too. Most of the things you see Africans doing are not what they were taught to do. They are just imitating. If an African sees a European doing something, he tries oh so very hard to imitate it."

Right now, though, "it pains us very much when the Englishmen shout at us and say we are stupid. If an Englishman should come in here now and find me seated he would shout 'Get up, you.' But if he sees you sitting with me, he wouldn't say anything. I know why he shouts---I think I understand it---it's because he thinks I can't do anything by myself."

There are all sorts of difficulties in bettering race relations, Joshua said, and he told a little story to illustrate this.

"An African wanted to invite a European to his home for tea because this European had been good to him. But the African had only calabashes for drinking tea and he could not afford three shillings for a tea cup. He was ashamed of the calabashes, so he did not invite the European for tea and the European thought the African was unfriendly."

What did he think of Mau Mau?

"They have grounds, but it's silly because they go about it with pangas.* The Englishman is a very tough man and he has guns and bombs while they have only their pangas. But a lot of people think they will be shot anyway by the police, so they think they have nothing to lose by going off with the Mau Mau. The European farmer, for instance, has plenty of money. He can buy all the firewood he wants. But the African has no money and he must go into the forest for his firewood. The police see him there and they shoot him.**

"But if I were the Mau Mau, they should just have appealed to the British government. If the British government doesn't listen, I think the U.N.O. would. Don't you think the U.N.O. would? Of course the British government would not have listened, but now they can go around saying the Kikuyu should have gone to them first."

Mau Mau will never be extirpated until the Kikuyu grievances are settled, said Joshua. These grievances are land hunger ("Some people have only one acre; some have none.") and low wages ("How can a man live on 50 shillings a month?") Idle land in the white highlands must be parceled out to landless Africans ("Some of those settlers have thousands of acres!") and wages must be raised substantially if peace is ever to come to Kenya again, he said. "Even if things pretend to be better and they get the Mau Mau, as long as there is bad feeling with the Kikuyu it will start all over again."

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* A cleaver-like sword used by Africans for numerous farm and household tasks.

** The security forces have declared the mountain forests---Mau Mau strongholds---to be prohibited zones. Forest squatters have been removed and Africans told they will be shot on sight in these areas. The security forces defend this policy by pointing out that Mau Mau wears no uniform and there is no way of telling at a distance whether an African is a terrorist or not. Mau Mau must be exterminated and military operations cannot be carried out if loyal Africans, among whom terrorists could mingle and set up ambushes, are allowed into the fighting areas.

"What will happen when the Africans start singing the hymn, too?" I asked Joshua.

"If they are federating these territories, the African will not have a chance of ruling himself. The trouble is: The Englishmen, more and more are coming out every day and they are taking every responsible job. I don't see how the Africans can ever work to the top." But then, "Even if the Englishmen do not want the Africans to progress, we can still carry on. If my son is well educated, he will want his children to have more and in this way we will progress."

No, he didn't regard the Indians---who hold a large number of the skilled and semi-skilled jobs---jobs that otherwise might go to Africans--- as a bar to African advancement. "The Indians havn't done anything against us and they havn't done anything for us." He said he does not know much about the Indians, that he never thinks of them and that he really doesn't care much about what they do.

I had tea with Joshua in his hut the other day. I was late getting there and he said, "I thought you might not come." When I left, he said, "Sir, do you know what the Egyptians are doing now? I havn't read the paper for a couple of days."

Sincerely,

David E Reed

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