

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Dini ya Msambwa
Introduction

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

c/o Barclays Bank
Queensway
Nairobi, Kenya
August 1, 1954

Dear Mr. Rogers:

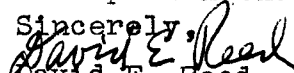
In the next three newsletters, I would like to acquaint our readers with Dini ya Msambwa, an anti-white religious movement that has been operating in Kenya for a number of years. I spent some time in recent months looking into the Dini ya Msambwa situation for purposes of comparing it with Mau Mau. Dini ya Msambwa (it means "The Religion of the Spirits") is similar in some aspects to Mau Mau and an understanding of the nature of Dini ya Msambwa is useful for an understanding of the more complex and troublesome Mau Mau.

The first newsletter deals with the two tribes that were affected by it---the Bukusu or Kitosh, and the Suk. Both are interesting in themselves. The Suk are perhaps the most backward of all the tribes in the colony and the Bukusu, a Bantu tribe with pastoral traditions, have only recently begun to make any progress along western lines. The first newsletter deals, too, with the fanatical prophets that arose in each tribe to preach the gospel of Dini ya Msambwa, and how the career of each man ended only after violence and bloodshed.

In the second newsletter, three of the many people I met while gathering material on Dini ya Msambwa are presented. One is Jonathan Barasa, a Bukusu chief and one of the most progressive chiefs in Kenya. Barasa is not the happiest of men. Like his people he is torn between the West and the Old Africa, but he has chosen his job and he is doing it. The second person is the American-born Earl of Portsmouth, president of the Electors' Union and the owner of a large estate in the Trans Nzoia. The Trans Nzoia, part of the White Highlands, figures into the Dini ya Msambwa story as the leaders of the cult say it belongs by right to the Bukusu. The third person in the newsletter is the Rev. Lawrence Totty, one of the many zealous missionaries who, some people will say, unwittingly assisted in the rise of Dini ya Msambwa. The Rev. Mr. Totty would dispute them hotly on that point.

The third newsletter presents a few conclusions about the origins of Dini ya Msambwa and of Mau Mau. Are they the same or how do they differ? Can they be avoided? What lessons can be learned from them? These are some of the things considered in this newsletter.

The story of Dini ya Msambwa is but one aspect of an upheaval going on all over East Africa as millions of Africans cut themselves loose from the old tribal state. As is often remarked, a Sorcerer's Apprentice has been at work here in the form of the colonial administrator, the settler and the missionary. They have unleashed a force as powerful in its own way as a hydrogen bomb and that force can be seen in the ambitions, fears, disappointments, fumbings and progress of East Africa's black millions as they hurry to catch up with the white race.

Sincerely,

David E. Reed

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DER - 20
Dini ya Msambwa - I
The Bukusu and The Suk

July 6, 1954
c/o Barclays Bank
Queensway
Nairobi, Kenya

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

The highland home of the Bukusu tribe is one of the best areas in Kenya. The Bukusu Reserve is on the southern slopes of 14,000-foot Mount Elgon, along the Uganda border. The land is good, there is plenty of it at the moment and the Bukusu are in a better financial position than many tribes.

Bukusu, with altitudes ranging up to 7,000 feet, is cool and invigorating. In the higher parts, the land is broken up by hills, deep valleys and streams that tumble down from Elgon's heights. Lower down, at around 5,000 feet, the land levels off to gently rolling bush.

Unlike other Kenya tribes, the Bukusu are not overcrowded. Considerable portions of their Reserve, in fact, are not used. Tribal traditions have it that the Bukusu, a Bantu people, originally were semi-nomadic pastoralists. Now they have settled down and while they still prize their herds with a passion no white man can fully appreciate, they till the soil as well.



Jonathan Barasa, a Bukusu Chief,
In His Coffee Shamba

A cultivator's labor is well rewarded in Bukusu. Maize thrives in those highlands and the Bukusu contribute their share toward making Nyanza Province the maize granary of Kenya. Nyanza exports a million bags of maize a year (100,000 tons) to help feed Africans in less-blessed areas. There is money in the pockets of the Bukusu and the North Nyanza African District Council, the local government body for the Bukusu and the other tribes in that district, is the wealthiest in the colony. Its 1954 budget totaled £250,000 (\$700,000).

Now even better things are in store for the Bukusu. The government is introducing coffee, tea and other high-priced cash crops. In Kimilili, the most prosperous of the three Bukusu locations, the average income per family is estimated at £26:17:0 (\$75.18). As prices now stand, an African farmer receives £250 (\$700) per year from one acre of mature coffee.

On the surface, the picture is one of prosperity and contentment. But this surface impression is deceiving. Beneath the impassive Bukusu peasant faces smoulder deep resentments and anti-white feelings. Dini ya Msambwa, an anti-European religious sect, erupted in Bukusu only a few years ago and resulted in violence and bloodshed. Administrative officers say they no longer regard Dini ya Msambwa as an active threat to the peace. But it has not died out, either. Dini ya Msambwa has gone underground and the administration and the police, fearful of having another Mau Mau on their hands, are keeping a close watch. There is a fat "DYM" file in every office in the area. And in the Reserve, if you ask a Bukusu about Dini ya Msambwa, he glances around to see if anyone is listening. Then he scrutinizes your face, shuffles his feet and says, "Oh, I don't know anything about that!"

What caused Dini ya Msambwa? Why should it have broken out in Bukusu? There is no land shortage there---the usual source of discontent ---and, compared with many other tribes, no poverty. Yet Bukusu seethed, and still does to a degree, with bitterness and anti-European feelings. From Bukusu, Dini ya Msambwa spread to the Suk tribe, where it again led to bloodshed and where it again remains as an underground headache for police and administrative officers. The primitive Suk had been touched only slightly by European influences, yet they too were in a frenzy of anti-white feelings. More than 200 miles away, the Mau Mau, another anti-white movement though on a much larger scale, is attracting widespread attention. Do they spring from the same causes?

Looking back into the history of the Bukusu and of their contacts with Europeans, one finds that although they have been peaceful for decades, the first contact was marked with warfare and sporadic fighting.

The first European to reach Bukusu was Joseph Thomson, who arrived in 1883. The explorer found the Bukusu living in fortified villages surrounded by moats. These were a protection against raids from the Uasin Gishu Masai* and the Teso tribe of Uganda. British administration was established in North Nyanza in 1894. The following year the Bukusu killed 25 soldiers of the Sudanese garrison and a punitive expedition was undertaken against them. Their fortified villages were stormed by

* Properly the Il-Wuasin-kishu Masai. They occupied what is now the Uasin Gishu European settled area, but were broken up during the period of about 1840 to 1850 as a result of Masai internal warfare.

Sudanese troops and Africans from other tribes and the fighting ended when the Bukusu acknowledged British rule and promised to abandon their villages. (Today they live in scattered homesteads.) Unrest prevailed in the next few years, though, and the Bukusu bought firearms from Somalis and Swahilis. Police actions were undertaken and after 1908 there was no more trouble.

The Bukusu are commonly known as the Kitosh, a name said by some to have been given them by the Masai and by others to have come from the Nandi. Whatever the origin, the Bukusu resent the name. There seems to be no agreement as to what Kitosh means. Some Bukusu say they think it means "the enemy" in Masai and some administrative officers say they think it means "those who run away from a fight" in Masai. It is easy to see why the Bukusu prefer the former interpretation. Then, some Masai and Nandis, and some Masai-speaking Europeans say they never heard of the word.

One morning I spotted a Masai striding imperiously down Delamere avenue in Nairobi, barefooted, wearing an Army greatcoat over his red blanket and carrying a spear. In Kiswahili, I asked him the Masai word for "enemy." "Kitosh!" he said, banging the tip of his spear on the sidewalk. In Nanyuki recently I asked a Samburu woman---the Samburu are a branch of the Masai---the word for "those who run away from a fight." "The Uasin Gishu," she said, haughtily.

Kitosh, if it has a definite meaning, might have been a term used chiefly by the vanquished Uasin Gishu Masai. At any rate, the British picked it up and Kitosh appeared on all maps and writings. Finally the Bukusu got the Government to issue an official proclamation that they would henceforth be known by their own name. (*1) But to their exasperation, Europeans and Africans alike still call them the Kitosh.

The Bukusu, according to Huntingford, speak one of the "two most archaic Bantu languages so far recorded." Huntingford says: "Sir Harry Johnston thought that the Bantu peoples after their formation in the west (somewhere to the south of Lake Chad) crossed over to the Elgon area and there 're-grouped,' so that Elgon became a secondary focus from which the main body of the Bantu set out on their migrations southward." (*2)

The Bukusu Reserve is bounded on the west by the Uganda border, on the south by the other Abaluhya or Bantu Kavirondo tribes of North Nyanza and on the east by the Trans Nzoia, which is part of the White Highlands. Above Bukusu, on Elgon's wind-swept moorlands, is a small tribe of Nilo-Hamites called the Elgon Masai who are regarded by some as a Nandi group.

The westerly neighbors of the Bukusu, the Bugishu of Uganda, are said to have practiced cannibalism in the old days. It is rumored that even today when a Bugishu dies, particularly an infant, the meat is not always allowed to go to waste. The Bukusu are closely related to the Bugishu. They regard themselves as the same people---though not the same in their eating habits of at least the old days.

The Bukusu claim that the Europeans took at least parts of the Trans Nzoia from them. They say that their tradition has it that they and the Bugishu once circled the mountain. The Suk also make a claim

(*1) In Lubukusu, the language of the tribe, Bukusu means only the country. The people are the Babukusu and an individual is an Mubukusu. Due to the impossibility of using phonetic letters, Bukusu is often spelled Vukusu, Vugusu or Bugusu. To be even more correct, a pre-prefix can be added. Thus: Ababukusu, etc. It is this pre-prefix, now disappeared from modern Bantu languages like Kiswahili, that establishes it as archaic.

(*2) Huntingford, "The Eastern Tribes of the Bantu Kavirondo," Nairobi, 1944.

for the Trans Nzoia and if the Uasin Gishu Masai were still around, there might be a third claim as well. If the claims are valid at all (and, in memory, tribal boundaries have a way of expanding in time), it would seem that the tribes grazed over parts of the Trans Nzoia. Their experience in losing their grazing freedom to the encroaching agriculturalists is by no means unique in this world.

At any rate the Bukusu have plenty of land at the moment, though population increases may alter the picture in the future. The only exception to the general abundance of land is the fertile upper slopes of Elgon, where tiny, closely-packed holdings are found. Meanwhile in the 5,000-foot "lowlands" vast expanses of land are not used.

Bukusu is divided into three locations, Malakisi, South Bukusu and Kimilili, for a total of 726 square miles. The population totals 128,511, or 171.5 per square mile. Government agricultural officers say that 45.1 per cent of all useable land in South Bukusu is idle. For Kimilili they give a figure of 15.7 per cent and for Malakisi, 21.3 per cent. Estimated per family income ranges from £10:15 (\$30.10) a year in South Bukusu to £25 (\$70) in Malakisi and £26:17 (\$75.18) in Kimilili. Most of their needs are supplied by the land.

By contrast, the population density in Bunyore, the most crowded of the North Nyanza locations, is 1,008 to the square mile. Only 7.7 per cent of the useable land is idle and the average per family income is only £5:6 (\$14.84) a year.

In former years the Bukusu were resistant to European influence. Now, under the guidance of administrative officers and educated tribal authorities, they are making considerable progress. However, to cite but one example, the Bukusu still have not reached the point where they have enough schoolteachers of their own. They have to draw on the other tribes, chiefly the well-advanced Bunyore and Maragoli, for teaching staffs.

The abundance of land undoubtedly worked against Bukusu progress. The most advanced tribes are those with not enough land for everyone. The Kikuyu, Maragoli and Bunyore are examples. Large numbers of them have had to leave the Reserves and seek European employment, where they acquired a knowledge of and liking for European ways.

The pastoral background of the Bukusu might also account for their former lack of progress. Pastoralists are usually highly resistant to acculturation, or the borrowing of aspects of another culture. They have little in common with Europeans; hence there is little they would want to imitate, at least initially. The pastoral tribes are the warriors, too, and they tend to hold all other cultures in contempt. Hence on that score, too, they are less apt to want to imitate someone else's ways. Though the Bukusu had already taken to agriculture and village life when Thomson found them, their passion for cattle still colors much of their outlook.

Pastoral resistance to acculturation does not hold true in all cases though. Among some agricultural tribes---the Giriama of the coast are an excellent example---there is tremendous resistance to change. At the same time, two Nilo-Hamitic pastoral tribes, the Kipsigis and the Wandi, have taken to cultivation and while they still retain their love for cattle, they are making rapid progress.

The catalytic factor, if there is one, is all but impossible to isolate. The late Prof. Ralph Linton, in discussing this point, said: "In the matter of culture transfer the old adage that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink is very much to the point."*

The Bukusu had the usual contact with European administrative officials. Along with this, a large number of Bukusu have worked or are working for the European settlers in the Trans Nzoia. More important than these, though, was their contact with the missionaries.

As elsewhere in Kenya, the missionaries had a monopoly on education in former years and still control more than 90 per cent of it. The Bukusu did not manifest the eager desire of the Kikuyu to emulate the Europeans, but they still were interested in European education. Again as elsewhere, this gave the missionaries a wedge for prying them loose from their old customs. Those who attended or taught in the mission schools were expected to embrace Christianity and to behave as the missionaries thought they should.

Along with this, the old authority of the tribal elders had been undermined with the advent of colonial rule. It was the elders in turn who had lent authority to the old tribal religion and hence it too was undermined. Left in a spiritual vacuum, many Bukusu, insecure in the rapidly-changing world, gravitated naturally into Christianity.

The missionaries are a zealous people. As elsewhere in Kenya, they imposed their own idea of what should constitute African morality. What was banned varied from mission to mission, but there were certain major targets of missionary zeal. Drinking native beer and smoking were disallowed. Native dances and songs, which previously had played an important role in tribal life and which had provided an outlet for pent-up emotions, were banned as "sinful." ("Why," said one missionary, "at those native dances it's just catch as catch can between the boys and the girls. Oh, they're disgusting.") Only hymns, dreary except to the approving ear of the missionary, were permitted.

Polygamy and female circumcision were banned. As far as polygamy was concerned, some missions would not allow a man to become a Christian until he had gotten rid of his extra wives. Others allowed him in, but drew the line on any more marriages. Like fundamentalists in America who lash out at the modern evil of cosmetics, some missionaries campaigned against the custom of Bukusu women wearing beads and removing the lower center teeth. Some missionaries disapproved of the playing of the Bukusu harp. While they permitted male circumcision, some forbade the slaughter of an ox to celebrate the occasion.

The missionaries opposed all aspects of the old religion. The Bukusu used to worship a Supreme Being whom they called Were.

* Linton, "The Processes of Culture Transfer," Chapt. 9 of "Acculturation in Seven American Indian Tribes," New York, 1940--- cited previously in DER - 17, dealing with the Kenya Coast Arabs.

As with other tribes, the spirits of the ancestors played a major role in the old religion. The spirits were regarded as having a control over events and hence it payed to keep them placated. Near each Bukusu hut was a tiny hut that served as an ancestral shrine. It was called the namwima.* Food, beer and the blood of slaughtered animals were placed at the entrance to it regularly as an offering to the spirits. In times of stress, the Bukusu would offer prayers and the blood of a sacrificed animal at the namwima. If a child were sick, the Bukusu might pray to Were as follows: "Take the blood of this animal, not the blood of the child."

In primitive societies of this sort, the individual draws comfort by regarding himself as part of a continuum of ancestors, the living and the yet-unborn. In the old animistic world of the African, a man was surrounded by powerful forces of good and evil and he desperately needed any comfort and security he could find. This need for individual security could even be regarded as heightened by the arrival of the Europeans and the collapse of the old tribal culture. As it was, though, ancestor worship was forbidden by the missionaries.

When several different and even conflicting religions are offered for the individual to choose from, the force of any one religion is inevitably weakened. If Missionary A forbids something that Missionary B tolerates, the African convert has only to switch his allegiance to be allowed to indulge in it. Hence even though the missionaries were able to exact obedience in certain matters, Christianity as a whole carried less authority than the inflexible and invariable religion of the past.

North Nyanza is heavily missionized and a number of denominations are offered for the individual's choice. The Friends African Mission (American Quakers) are the largest. Others include the Roman Catholics, the Salvation Army, the Pentecostal Assemblies of East Africa (Canadian), the Church of God (American), the Church Mission Society (Church of England) and the Seventh Day Adventists (largely American). Just recently two young Americans have arrived in North Nyanza and have announced that they are going to establish another mission, to be called the Gospel Revival Crusade mission. Though the denominations were many, all were opposed to some or all of the old customs. The Roman Catholics, though, are considered by administrative officers to be more tolerant and this is an opinion held by officials elsewhere in Kenya, and in Tanganyika.

It was against this Christian mission background that Dini ya Msambwa arose. Dini ya Msambwa had a prophet by the name of Elijah Masinde. Masinde was born in 1910 and lived in Kimilili location. He was evangelized by the Friends and he received only a few years of education. Other Bukusu describe him as knowing how to read and write---"bas" ("that's all.")

Masinde was an exceptionally strong man with a great talent for British football. It is said that he was so strong that no one could wrench the ball from his grasp or from under his foot. Other African players say they did not like to play with him because he would never

pass the ball to anyone else. He wanted to do it all himself. He used to quarrel with the referees and the other players. Despite this, though, he was so good at the game that he played on the colony-wide Kenya team against Uganda in 1930, at the age of 20.

When Masinde was 25, he decided to take another wife. The missionaries put polygamy in the category of "lust" and when Masinde went ahead with the marriage, he was expelled from the Friends' fold. To an African, polygamy carries much prestige as a sign of wealth---perhaps it could be regarded as "conspicuous consumption." It had its economic side, though. As women do most of the agricultural chores, two or more wives mean that more produce can be raised and more wealth accumulated.

After his expulsion, Masinde worked as an askari in an African court. He was becoming increasingly anti-missionary and anti-white in general. He was fired because he would refuse to stand up and salute visiting European officials. A Bukusu who knew him well says, "Elijah used to say, 'Why should I stand up and salute them? They should stand up and salute me. I am the man who owns this country. They are just strangers.'"

Masinde became an avid reader of the Old Testament. Like the Kikuyu mission rebels, he found Old Testament accounts of battles, sacrifices and plural marriages much to his liking. Old Testament doings had their parallels in the old tribal life. Then, in 1943, Masinde formed his own religious sect which came to be known as Dini ya Msambwa. The name combined the Kiswahili Dini ya (Religion of) with the Lubukusu Msambwa---Ancestors. Masinde's new Religion of the Ancestors offered a rich blend of religious customs.

The Bible and Common Prayer Book of the Protestant Churches were used. The Cross was given great significance, as in the Roman Catholic missions. Dini ya Msambwa followers, presumably imitating the Salvation Army, would march up and down singing songs and pounding on drums. Finally, some wore beards and turbans, possibly in imitation of Islam, which has some African converts around Lake Victoria Nyanza, site of the old Arab slave and trade expeditions.

Masinde was not alone in the separatist field. North Nyanza has several sects formed as a result of rebellions from mission discipline. These include Dini ya Roho (Kiswahili for "Religion of the Spirits"), Dini ya Israel ("The Religion of Israel"), the African Divine Church and the African Interior Church. The latter is thought to have had some connection with the Kikuyu independent church movement.

North Nyanza administrative officers give this description of those four sects: Dini ya Roho, which has been going since 1927, is composed of ex-Friends. One of the planks in its platform is free love. It has a High Priest and he submits annual reports, printed in a fancy brochure, to the Provincial Commissioner at Kisumu. Dini ya Israel and the African Divine Church are both composed of ex-members of the Pentecostal missions and the African Divine Church is fairly unimportant. The African Interior Church picked up its following from ex-members of the American Church of God mission. All four are allowed to operate, though the government, with the bitter experience of the Kikuyu independent schools in mind, refused a request from the African Interior Church, the one suspected of Kikuyu connections, for permission to open a school.

Masinde went unnoticed at first. Then, in 1944, the government embarked on a campaign to eradicate a certain noxious weed in the district. A European agricultural officer led the drive and, according to some Bukusu, used to twist the ears of those who wouldn't uproot the weed. Some Bukusu were fined. Masinde jumped into the affair. He refused to allow an agricultural inspector onto his land to look for the weed and he urged others to do the same. The agricultural officer's home burned down one night---arson is the traditional Bukusu way of airing jealousies and grievances---and the weed campaign finally was dropped.

The war was still on then and the government was recruiting labor and askaris. Masinde urged the people not to sign up. "It's a European war---why should Africans fight in it?" he said. The District Commissioner told him that if the British lost, the harsh Germans would be back in Tanganyika and, probably, in Kenya as well. "No," Masinde said flatly. "God will stop them from coming here."

A summons was served on Masinde and he drove the servers away. He was arrested, tried and ordered to sign a 500-shilling bond (without sureties) to keep the peace for one year. Masinde refused to sign the bond and in February, 1945, he was sent to prison for one year or until he signed. It is said that the strong man made life miserable for his African warders.

While in prison, Masinde was certified as insane and packed off to Mathari Mental Hospital on the outskirts of Nairobi. One educated Bukusu, who has no love for the Kikuyu, said, "Elijah met a lot of Kikuyu there. He fell under their influence." Masinde remained in Mathari until 1947 when the doctors released him despite protests from the government.

Back in Bukusu, Masinde was soon addressing large crowds. Bukusu informants of mine quote him as saying, "Why should the Europeans own land in Kenya? Why should they interfere with our religion?" He declared that the Trans Nzoia had been taken from the Bukusu by force. But, he said, the tribe was not strong enough to regain it that way. "The best thing to do is to pray to God to send the white men away. God will send his power through the Angels and they will appear on Mount Elgon. If you want to speak to God, you must go to Mount Elgon."

A Government Commission appointed to look into the subsequent disturbances among the Suk said in its report: "For a month or two he (Masinde) kept quiet, but in July he was addressing a crowd of about 400 at Kimaliwa, telling them that the Europeans must be turned out and an African King appointed. In August he was instructing the Kitosh to make guns to drive the Europeans out. In September he led a crowd of followers---estimated to number 5,000---to the Old Fort near Lugulu where Hobley (*1) fought his final battle with the Kitosh. One of his objects seems to have been to exorcise the ghosts of the men killed in the battle; a sheep was sacrificed and a small piece given to every man. Then Elijah addressed the crowd, telling them he was going to ask God to show him how to get rid of the Europeans.(*2)"

(*1) C. W. Hobley, who established British administration in N. Nyanza

(*2) Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Affray at Kolloa, Baringo, Government Printer, Nairobi, 1950.

The authorities were out to arrest Masinde, but he kept eluding them. Then, on February 7, 1948, about 800 Bukusu, believed to be Dini ya Msambwa members, demonstrated outside a Roman Catholic mission, saying they would burn it down if the priests did not leave. One of the priests fired several shots in the air and the crowd dispersed.

The next day another crowd, this one of about 500, gathered in another area, stripped off their clothes and rolled on the ground in a frenzy. Police and tribal elders dispersed them peacefully.

Two days later, a crowd gathered in front of the Malakisi police station, where three Dini ya Msambwa members were being held. A European police officer ordered them to disperse and was struck over the head with a stick by a Bukusu man. He fell and a woman jumped over his prostrate form as the crowd cheered. The policeman ordered the African askaris to open fire. Eleven persons in the crowd were killed and 16 were known to have been wounded. The crowd fled.

Masinde was not in the crowd. In the next few days, Dini ya Msambwa members were rounded up, but Masinde could not be found. Then on February 15 a large meeting was held on a European farm in the Trans Nzoia presided over by a man who may have been Masinde. Hymns were sung and prayers were said while facing Mount Elgon. The leader said he was being hunted by the government and that Africans must unite to get rid of the Europeans and all things European.

The following day the police finally caught up with Masinde and he was deported to the Northern Frontier Province, where he remains today. Dini ya Msambwa was proscribed in Kenya and Uganda, alarmed about the spread of it to the Bugishu, took the same action.

For some months there was a lull in Dini ya Msambwa activity. Then, toward the end of 1948, it flared up among laborers in the Trans Nzoia. Dini ya Msambwa ceremonies were held and, in 1949, 16 cases of arson, involving schools, churches and European farm buildings, occurred. One settler, while investigating the presence of a strange Bukusu on his farm, was struck on the head with a panga. Police went into action and scores of Bukusu were sent to prison for being members of an unlawful society.

Since then there has been little overt activity by Dini ya Msambwa, but it still smoulders below the surface in both Bukusu and the Trans Nzoia. The die-hards still refuse to have anything to do with articles of European origin and still eat from wooden plates, wear animal skins and grow beards. Cases of arson occur periodically, but these may just be ordinary Bukusu hut burnings. Although government is watching the situation closely and although it arrests suspected Dini ya Msambwa leaders from time to time, officials say North Nyanza seems safe from any further large-scale violence.

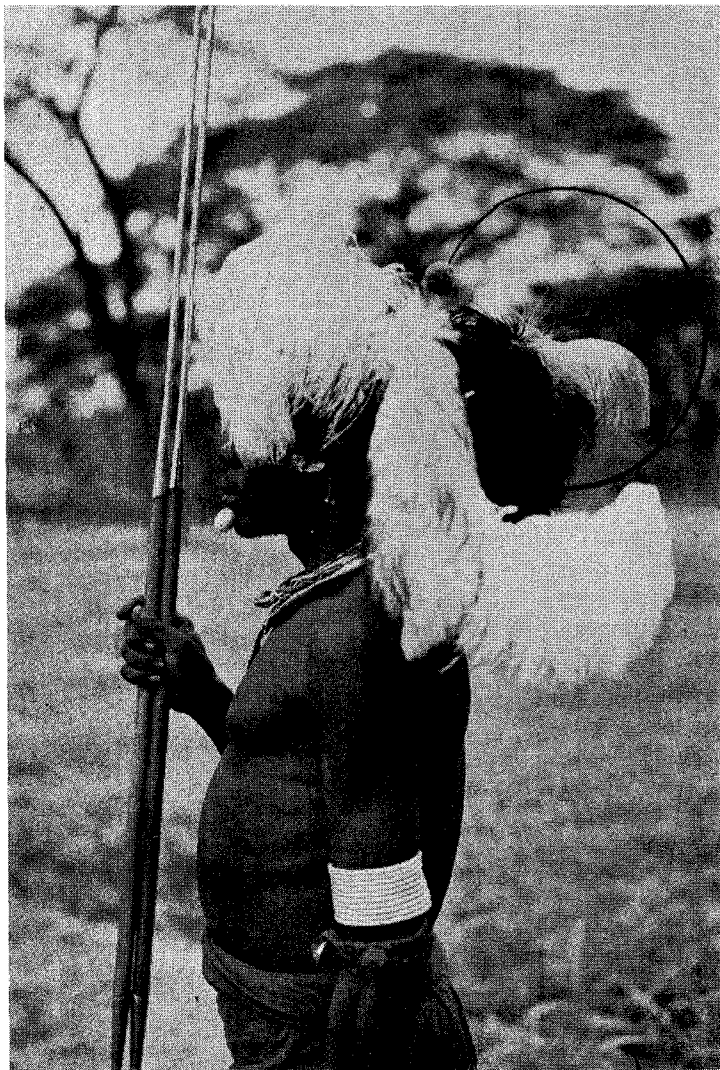
* * *

The Suk tribe, to which Dini ya Msambwa spread, is one of the most backward tribes in the colony. There are adults in the mountains of Suk who have never seen a white man---not even one of their nominal rulers, the District Commissioners. Until recently the incredibly varied terrain of the Suk country---forested mountains, fertile hills and scorching lowland deserts---were shut off from the outside world. There were no

roads and when a District Commissioner went out to check up on his charges, he had to walk, laboring up and down many a hill or mountain and followed by a long line of weary pack animals and porters.

Now, since Dini ya Msambwa, roads are being built in the Reserve so that officials can keep in closer touch with the tribe---and, presumably, make their existence known in the more remote areas. A small number of Suk children are coming to school, but, still, Suk has a whole has undergone little change since Thomson reached it in 1884. Some of the men, still, wear not a whit of clothing.

Kapenguria, the headquarters for West Suk District, consists of a few dukas and a handful of offices and homes for West Suk's colonial administrators. The only time it received any attention was when Jomo Kenyatta was tried in its little school-house. Kenyatta, the learned judge, the learned counsel and the reporters have long since departed and Kapenguria has reverted to the status of a sleepy and remote outpost of Empire. In the event of atomic war, though, Kapenguria might acquire some importance as a refuge. No one would waste an atom bomb on it.

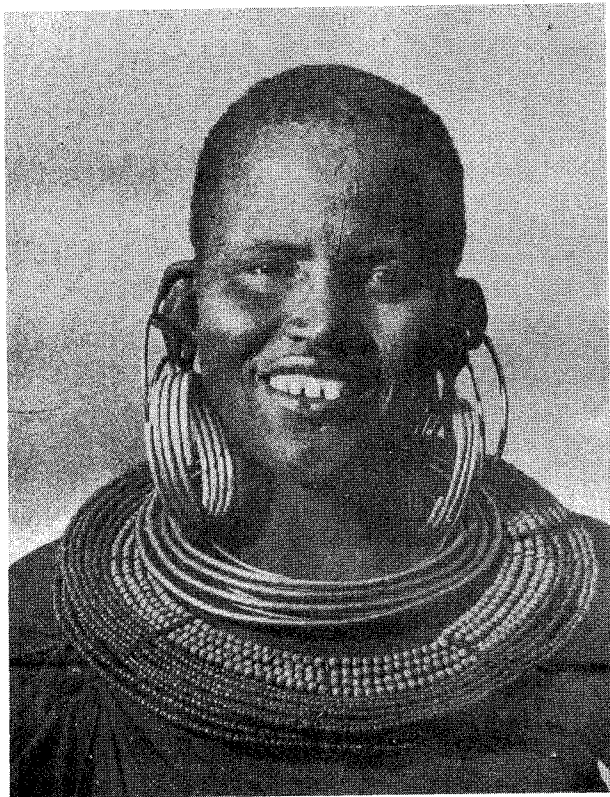


Suk Tribesman, With Lip-Plug
and Ostrich Feather Hair-do.

Most Suk---an estimated 38,000 of them---live in West Suk District. Approximately 7,000 others are in Baringo District to the East, bringing the total Suk population to 45,000.

West Suk itself lies along the Uganda border, to the north of Elgon and the Trans Nzoia. The Trans Nzoia separates it from Bukusu. Originally West Suk comprised more than 5,000 square miles, but in 1932, for administrative reasons, nearly 2,000 square miles were handed over to Uganda, leaving more than 3,000 still in Kenya.

To the north is Turkana, a barren desert country that stretches up to the Sudanese border---and home of the Turkana tribe, the traditional enemies of the Suk.



Suk Belle

While the lowlands are deserts and semi-deserts, the hills receive a good rainfall and have a number of watercourses. Still higher, on the moorlands of the 9,000 and 10,000-foot Sondany Mountains, frost appears at night.

Huntingford describes the Suk as "a composite people composed of two Nilo-Hamitic elements>(*1). One group, the present day hill-dwellers, are regarded as of Nandi stock. It is thought that they broke away from an early Nandi group on Mount Elgon and that these people provided the Nandi-like language spoken by both groups.

The hill people hunt game with bows and arrows, engage in agriculture and maintain intricate channel irrigation systems on their slopes. They keep goats and subsist on grain, vegetables and meat. Missionaries and administrative officers say that in the old days, the hill people, waiting for a harvest, sometimes turned to roots, berries and even rats and baboons for food. The government has been trying since 1931 to improve agricultural methods and although

some success has been had, the conservative Suk are reluctant to make changes. Totty and Chaundy note that some of the hill people are quite short of stature and have spread noses.(*2)

The other branch of the Suk are the pastoralists of the lowland plains. They comprise perhaps one-half of the tribe and they live off their cattle, consuming milk, blood and meat. These days their diet is supplemented somewhat by purchased grains. The plains Suk are nomadic and they live in tiny mud and wattle huts that they put up wherever they happen to be stopping. Turkana tradition has it that they drove these people out of an area to the northwest. For a long time they tried to enter the Kerio Valley to the east---in the Baringo area---but they were kept out by the Samburu. The Samburu, though, were finally so weakened by Masai internal fighting that the Suk were able to descend into the valley. Totty and Chaundy suggest that the tall, handsome and aristocratic Hamite is found more among the plains Suk.

(*1) Huntingford, "The Southern Nilo-Hamities," London, 1953.

(*2) Totty and Chaundy, "The People and District of West Suk," Nairobi, 1952.

Like the Bukusu, the Suk owe their present day name to the Masai. They call themselves the Pokwut. The Masai hung the other name on them because they used to carry a chok or short, curved bill-hook.

The Suk have borrowed many customs from their enemies the Turkana. Among them are those of inserting a plug in the lower lip and of wearing a small disc over the mouth. The disc is suspended from a hook in the nose. Suk men pack their hair with clay and some mount ostrich feathers atop this "skull-cap." The Turkana do this as well, but the Suk say they borrowed it from the Karamojong of Uganda.

The system of irrigation practiced by the hill Suk is sometimes regarded as of Egyptian origin, but Huntingford and Bell, discussing the whole question of Egyptian influence here, say:

"The similarity which certainly exists between a number of ancient Egyptian and modern African practices is much more likely to be due to their having a common African origin than either (a) to parallel development without any direct contact, or (b) to Africa having borrowed from Egypt. The similarity is found in a number of religious, social and technological practices, and is too marked to be due to anything but either a common origin or borrowing from Egypt. Against the latter is the fact that there was an impenetrable barrier of river and 'bad lands' between Egypt and Africa which effectively prevented direct contact. The Egyptians certainly found it so, for though they tried to get through, they never succeeded, the Nile sudd (swamp) being their chief stumbling-block."

Huntingford and Bell also remark:

"The basic stock of the Egyptians, being of Hamitic origin, and going from Africa into Egypt, took with it many ideas, customs and practices of African origin... The route by which the early Hamites went to Egypt from Africa was probably to the east of Lake Tsana (in Abyssinia), avoiding the Nile Valley; and the same route was probably followed by the Gala-like Hamites who conquered Egypt in the XIIth dynasty."(*1)

Among the more unique Suk customs is one connected with child-birth. After certain rituals are observed, "general rejoicing follows and the family and neighbors celebrate the occasion, each of those present adding his blessing to the newly-arrived infant by expectorating on its face."(*2)

The old Suk religion had much in common with that of the Nandi and those of the other Nilo-Hamitic tribes. The Suk believed in a Supreme Being they called Tororut. Ancestor worship figured into their rituals and among the deities was one called Asis, who was

(*1) Huntingford and Bell, "East African Background," Longman's, 1945 and 1950.

(*2) Totty and Chaundy, Op. Cit.

associated with the sun. Asis is found in the related tribes, too, and it is often suggested that Asis has an Egyptian origin, having been derived from Isis, the Egyptian goddess of motherhood and fertility. Again, though, Huntingford and Bell's explanation may be closer to the truth. The Suk also believe that when a man dies, his spirit goes into a snake and that he uses the snake as a means of locomotion.

Among Kenya's Nilo-Hamitic tribes there are legends which have their parallels in Christianity. As these legends were in wide circulation when the first white men arrived, having been handed down from generation to generation, there seems to be little possibility that they were borrowed from Christianity.

Totty and Chaundy describe one as containing "in essence the Gospel story of Jesus," and recount it as follows: "...A spirit...sent his son on a long journey to become a sacrifice for a section of the Suk who were afflicted badly by disease and misfortune. His errand completed, he returned to his father as an exalted spirit."*

Several weeks ago, while spending some time with the Nilo-Hamitic Kipsigis tribe, I was told by them that their legends include one of a river parting for some Kipsigis warriors who were being pursued by enemies. The Kipsigis got across safely, but when the enemies tried to follow, the waters rushed back and drowned every last man.

Some might argue that the early Hamitic invaders of Egypt carried these stories with them, and that they ultimately found expression in Christianity. At the same time, this argument would go, other Hamites carried the stories into Kenya where they appear today in the legends of the Nilo-Hamitic tribes. Or others might argue that such legends can arise independently in isolated cultures because of their appeal to the basic psychology of man.

Thomson described the Suk as "very warlike," but until Dini ya Msambwa, the administration never encountered any trouble from them. Totty, who has worked in Suk as a missionary since 1931, told me that the Suk did practice "spear-blooding" though. A man had to kill someone before he could achieve full adulthood. Totty said even today men can be seen in the Reserve with chest tattoos that indicate whether the victim was a man or woman.

The Suk are apathetic about education and Christianity. The first school was opened in 1929, but today the vast majority are still illiterate. Some of the chiefs do not even speak Kiswahili and the administrative officers have to use Kiswahili-speaking interpreters. Only about 800 children are enrolled in school and it is only in the last three years that any girls have been enrolled. Totty estimates that he has gained only a few hundred converts in his 23 years with the Suk.

A few Suk go to the Trans Nzoia to work for a few months as herdsmen on the European farms---usually for the purpose of raising tax money---but then they return home. The Suk are regarded as

* Op. Cit.

"impossible" house servants. "You have to tell them all over again each day how to do every little thing. They never can remember---or want to remember," said the wife of an official. "They just want to be left alone," the official added. Some years ago the Suk traded a piece of their Reserve for a piece of the Trans Nzoia. Now they want the original piece back---but without giving up the piece they received for it.

This, then, was the background from which Dini ya Msambwa arose. As in Bukusu, it had a prophet and he bore a resounding name that sounded like that of a Chicago janitor---Lukas Pkiech.

Pkiech was born in about 1915 in West Suk and was a Roman Catholic. He entered the government school at Kapenguria at the age of about 17. After two years there he was sent to an industrial training school at Kabete, near Nairobi, where he stayed four years training as a tailor and as a blacksmith. Then he returned to his home near Kapenguria where he tilled a shamba and worked as a blacksmith.

In 1946, Pkiech went to Bukusu where he met Elijah Masinde and was converted to Dini ya Msambwa. On returning to Suk, Pkiech began to gather a following. The District Commissioner twice warned him to stop and in August of 1948 he was arrested while holding a Dini ya Msambwa ceremony. Dini had been proscribed six months previously following the Malakisi police station incident. Pkiech was convicted of being a member of an unlawful society and was sentenced to 30 months in prison. A year later he escaped.

Pkiech returned to Suk and for the next several months successfully eluded all police attempts to capture him---not too difficult a task in that wild and mountainous country. The government commission reported that during that time Pkiech was holding Dini ya Msambwa meetings. The commission said he promised his converts: "(1) eternal life, (2) freedom from European control, (3) reversion to primitive customs, (4) immunity from sickness and relief from blindness, (5) immunity from gunfire, (6) immunity from capture and (7) increased fertility for old men and no sterility for women."

"On the other hand," the commission added, "if the proposed converts would not follow him, Lukas threatened that all their cattle would die. After the address, the converts would be encouraged to dance until they had whipped themselves into a state of frenzy, by which time Lukas considered conversion complete."

The climax came in April of 1950. One evening a missionary found a dance in progress near a trading center in Baringo District. He was told by those present that they were praying in accordance with the religion of their ancestors which, they said, was better than Christianity.

The dance continued all night and when the missionary went back the next day he heard their leader---he turned out to be Pkiech---say: "Who is the enemy? Is it not the white people? Even this white man is teaching us wrong. You should not listen to him. We have our religion. We worship Jehovah. The white people teach us of Jesus, but who is he? He is dead." The missionary greeted a young Suk he recognized. The Suk replied, "There is no greeting between us."

Later an African reported that Pkiech was telling the crowd that he was the son of God. He had been put to death by the government, but he had risen again, Pkiech was quoted as saying.

The missionary reported the meeting to the District Commissioner, A. B. Simpson, who happened to be in the vicinity. Simpson was due to go on home leave soon and he was showing his successor around the district. Simpson concluded that it was an outbreak of Dini ya Msambwa and sent for reinforcements. With four Europeans (Simpson, the incoming D. C. and two police officers) and 40 armed Africans, Simpson set out to arrest Pkiech. Pkiech and the crowd had been moving westwards and the armed party caught up with them near a village called Kolloa, not far from Lake Baringo. The following is the official account of what happened:

A chief was sent forward to urge Pkiech to surrender. Pkiech refused. Simpson started to write a letter to be handed to Pkiech, making one last surrender demand. As Simpson was completing the letter, a crowd of 200 to 300 Suk emerged from the bush, carrying spears. They began dancing toward Simpson and his party.

One of the European policemen ordered the askaris to open fire. Simpson countermanded the order. The Suk were performing amomor, the war dance. At barazas (meetings) they traditionally came forward to greet the D. C. in that manner. Then they would sit down.

Simpson ran forward, ordering the Suk to lay down their spears. The policeman gave another order to fire. Simpson again countermanded it. Then the Suk began to fan out in a semi-circle around the D. C. He took this as unmistakably hostile" and ordered the police to open fire.

The police laid a fusillade into the Suk, but the warriors overwhelmed the police line. Many of the policemen broke and ran. Others fought hand to hand with the Suk. Some of the African policemen were using bayonets. Simpson himself shot and wounded two Suk with his shotgun. When the affray ended, 33 men lay dead. The new D. C., the two European policemen and one African policeman had been speared to death by the Suk. Twenty-nine Suk had been killed. One of them was Pkiech. (That ends the official account.)

It would seem that not all of the Suk intended to attack the police. Of the 30-odd spears picked up later on the battlefield, one-third were still sheathed. Perhaps, whipped up in a religious frenzy, they had no notion of what they were doing, let alone a plan.

Subsequent investigation showed that a few of the men in the mob had never seen a white man before. Most of them had, though, and one man captured in the battle said Pkiech had promised him a white man's automobile.

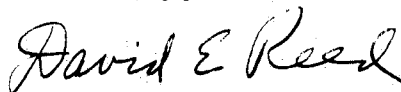
Investigators found it difficult to get much information from the participants, but it is thought that the mob was moving toward that holy of holies for Dini ya Msambwa---Mount Elgon. Pkiech is said to

have told them: "If we come across any white people, we'll kill them." Previously a frenzied Suk had thrown himself off a 300-foot escarpment after saying that he would return in three days and that this would prove he was a prophet.

Dini ya Msambwa has simmered down since then, but, as in Bukusu, it is not dead. Clandestine meetings are still held. One was discovered by the police only last February. The police station at Kapenguria is ringed with barbed wire. Nevertheless there appears to be no danger of an outbreak.

For their part, the Suk say that neither is Pkiech dead. He is touring Suk country in a snake, they say.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David E. Reed". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

David E. Reed