

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dini ya Msambwa - III  
Nativism

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:

"Future historians will say, I think, that the peak event of the twentieth century was the impact of the western world upon all the other living societies of the world of that day. They will say of the impact that it was so powerful and so pervasive that it turned the lives of its victims upside down and inside out---affecting the behavior, outlook, feelings and beliefs of individual men, women and children in an intimate way, touching chords in human souls that are not touched by mere external forces, however ponderous and terrifying..."

Thus Toynbee has described the collision of cultures that is seen so vividly in Kenya. It is a process that does not always go off without trouble, without strains, creakings and, sometimes, violent eruptions. Dini ya Msambwa and even Mau Mau are born of the fears, confusion, frustration and bitterness that sometimes results from the impact.

In this newsletter, both Dini ya Msambwa and Mau Mau will be considered in relation to a social phenomenon known as nativism. A classic definition of nativism is, "Any conscious, organized attempt on the part of a society's members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture."\* A classic instance of nativism is the Ghost Dance that was performed by some American Indian tribes. The Indians, shaken by the encroaching white civilization, believed that these dances would recall the spirits of the dead. The dead, the Indians believed, would drive away the white men. Then the good old days would be restored---or rather a measure of them. Certain items like cloth, guns and manufactured cooking utensils would be kept by the Indians. But the menacing whites would be gone.

No suggestion is made here that Mau Mau in particular is explainable to the last letter as nativism. Mau Mau is a highly complex phenomenon ---it was, for instance, preceded by years of western-style political activity, and this changes the situation somewhat. Yet there still is enough in Mau Mau that smacks of nativism to merit consideration of it in that light. Dini ya Msambwa, on the other hand, seems to present a more clear-cut case of nativism.

Just as the Indians wanted to get rid of the white Americans, so

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\* Linton, "Nativistic Movements," The American Anthropologist, Vol. 45, No. 2, April-June, 1943.

Dini ya Msambwa and Mau Mau want to get rid of the whites in Kenya. They too would return to something approximating the good old days, before the white men intruded on the scene, reducing them in their own estimation, as well as in that of the white men, to the status of an inferior group. The means chosen by the three movements are radically different, though, and this points up a basic distinction in types of nativistic movements.

Anthropologists divide such movements into rational and magical ones. Few nativistic movements are what a non-participant would call rational, but some are rational at least when compared with others. Thus Mau Mau is more rational than either Dini ya Msambwa or the Ghost Dances. While Dini ya Msambwa followers expect that God will chase the white men away, and while the Indians expected their dead to do the job, Mau Mau goes about it with the more realistically chosen spear and stolen Sten gun.

Cases of "pure" magical or "pure" rational nativism are rare, though. Thus Mau Mau invades the magical field with its killing oath. At least the unsophisticated members are convinced, whether they took the oath voluntarily or under duress, that they will be struck down by a supernatural vengeance if they renege on their sworn obedience to "The Organization."

It is thought that the oath has less of a supernatural hold on the more educated Kikuyu and that their fear is directed more toward the Mau Mau executioner and his always-handly strangling rope. But it should be remembered that they too grew up in a society where the arogi, the evil medicine men, were either believed in or had only recently fallen into decline.

While Mau Mau invades the magical field, Dini ya Msambwa, though believing that God will chase away the white men, still is not above giving Him a realistic hand by firing a Trans Nzola farm building. Considered as a whole, though, Mau Mau would fall into the rational category and Dini ya Msambwa into the magical one.

Nativistic movements arise when two cultures come into contact. In the case of the Kikuyu, Bukusu and Suk, certain aspects of their old cultures were revived and these were given great importance. It would appear, though, that Dini ya Msambwa and Mau Mau revived these past phases of culture for different reasons.

Linton suggests that items are revived in magical movements because the members feel that by behaving as their ancestors did, they will somehow help to recreate the total situation in which their ancestors lived. This may be true in regard to Dini ya Msambwa. The whole atmosphere of the movement, with its prophets and the expected return of the disappeared rock, is highly irrational. A Dini ya Msambwa follower may well think that anything can happen as a result of his behavior and prayers.

The situation is different with Mau Mau. It, too, attempts to revive certain of the old customs---among them the shaving of the heads of the women and, in the oath ceremonies, some of the old religious rites. Kikuyu political leaders, in the years preceding Mau Mau, made an attempt to resurrect the old age-group system, under which

every Kikuyu male belonged to an organization corresponding to the year of his circumcision. But it would seem that these revivals were attempted for the purpose of restoring the tribe's self-respect and self-sufficiency. A feeling of frustration contributed in large measure to the rise of Mau Mau. It seemed to the Kikuyu that they were trapped forever in a position of hopeless inferiority. By reaching back to the past, to a time when the tribe seemed to be happy and great, they thus could grasp at a claim to importance and worth. No longer were they "boys" to be shouted at by the nearest Bwana; they were the worthy sons of Gikuyu and Moombi,\* members of a strong, durable and proud society. No longer would they cower; now they would be psychologically equipped to fight.

In nativistic movements, no attempt is made to restore the totality of the old culture. As such they are not atavistic. Both Dini ya Msambwa and Mau Mau would keep certain European items such as autos and houses. Dini ya Msambwa, too, would retain the Cross, the Bible and the Salvation Army drum and Mau Mau presumably would retain the distorted version of Christianity practiced at some of their meetings. In all nativistic movements, certain aspects of the rejected culture are recognized as clearly superior to the earlier equivalents and would be kept. The baby would not go with the bathwater.

Why did Mau Mau arise among the Kikuyu and Dini ya Msambwa among the Bukusu and the Suk? What was the catalytic factor that touched them off? Why did it fail to happen in other tribes? Linton remarks that although most nativistic movements arise in a situation of inequality between two cultures in contact, the immediate causes are highly variable and in some cases none have arisen in those circumstances. "The reasons for this seem to be so variable and in many cases so obscure that nothing like a satisfactory answer is possible."

There is a pattern, though, under which rational revivalistic movements have arisen and Mau Mau developed out of the same situation. This is as follows: An inferior culture is brought under domination by a superior one. The inferior group at first shows a "great eagerness to assume the culture of the dominant society, this eagerness being accompanied by a devaluation of everything pertaining to its own." The nativistic movement erupts when the inferior group finds that the superior group is preventing it from assuming the superior group's culture. "These movements," says Linton, "are a response to frustration rather than hardship and would not arise if the higher group were willing to assimilate the lower one."

No other tribe in Kenya has yet shown the same eagerness to assume the white man's culture as have the Kikuyu. This may answer, at least to a degree, the question "Why not some other tribe." The eagerness to learn of the Kikuyu may be due in part to the geographical proximity of their lands with the European settled areas. It also is possible that a uniqueness in the culture of the Kikuyu, who were hill and forest dwellers, with a resulting uniqueness in the psychological make-up of the individual, produced an exceptional willingness to learn.

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\* The "Adam and Eve" of the Kikuyu tribe.

Of all the Africans who passed the secondary school examination in Kenya last year, 44 per cent were of the Kikuyu and the related Meru and Embu tribes. Yet they together total only 30 per cent of the African population. Employers in Kenya say that Kikuyu workers are the best. In spite of Mau Mau reprisals, Kikuyu parents still send their children to mission schools in the Reserve. Education, the white man's education, must be had at any price.

Along with this eagerness to learn, there occurred a "devaluation" of the old culture. Despite Mau Mau and earlier attempts to revive Kikuyu "patriotism," one still finds young Kikuyu men with some education who will scoff at their parents as "ignorant savages." Others cannot tell you the name of their father's age-group.

The noose of frustration tightened around the Kikuyu when they found that they could not live in the white man's world. The educated Kikuyu with the Oxford degree was kept out by the color bar. Others encountered a different sort of barrier. Nairobi was, and still is, full of young men with only a few years of education. They can read and write and they can speak English, but that is all. Compared with their parents, though, they have come a long way. Yet by modern standards they are suited only for minor jobs. They had expected their precious few years of education to bring them white riches and white power. When it brought little or nothing, they blamed it on the color bar and the malevolent Europeans. Actually the color bar did not affect them.

The Kikuyu did not get into the Europeans' world, so they would reject it. Later the rejection became more violent. The living symbol of the closed-shop white culture, the white man himself, would be ejected from the scene. Other factors served to embitter the leaders and facilitate the acquisition of a following, of course. Among them were real and fancied grievances, low wages, land shortages and vigorous leadership. The frustration factor was a major one, though, and one has only to meet a Kikuyu with some education to appreciate just how strongly it colors his whole personality.

The Dini ya Msambwa situation is of another sort. It is only recently that the Bukusu have shown any "eagerness to assume the culture of the dominant society." Perhaps, at that, "eagerness" is too strong a word. At any rate, whatever eagerness exists in no way approaches that of the Kikuyu in intensity. Most of the Suk on the other hand are eager only to be left alone. What then was responsible for the rise of Dini ya Msambwa in those tribes?

It is said that hardships can cause magical movements. Leadership ---even when there have been no hardships or previous discontents---can also succeed in stirring up these movements. Chief Jonathan and other educated Africans would argue that the missionary attitude toward the old customs imposed a severe hardship on the tribe. Many administrative officers share this view and unhesitatingly blame Dini ya Msambwa on "maladroit missionary activity."

At the same time many government officials in Kikuyu country will privately blame the missionaries for rendering unwitting assistance to early Kikuyu nationalism and Mau Mau. They refer to missionary efforts to stamp out female circumcision and polygamy, which resulted in mission rebellions and the formation of the Kikuyu independent schools and churches. These churches and schools are regarded by the government as hot-beds of Mau Mau.

The missionaries' unrelenting attitude toward the old customs undoubtedly played a role in the rise of all of the Dinis that flowered forth in North Nyanza. In face of missionary intransigence, Bukusu like Chief Jonathan's old man with the two wives would gravitate easily into a Dini.

Along with this is the fact that the missionaries, as well as the government, have made life rather boring for the African. In the old days there were the excitements of warfare, dances and sessions of the governing elders. The government abolished warfare and took away the power of the elders. The missionaries ended the dancing and decreed a rather puritanical life for the African. The African, meanwhile, saw that the Europeans had no intention of ever giving up their drinking, dancing, smoking and fighting and got the idea that he had been selected as the goat. Then along came a prophet, offering a new and tolerant religion, one that had no white missionaries to call the tune. Its attractiveness was enhanced by the fact that it offered excitement and the opportunity for a little devilment.

In any consideration of Dini ya Msambwa, the force of leadership must be reckoned with. In comparatively unevangelized Suk, the success of Dini ya Msambwa could be due in great measure to Pkiech's personality. A tribal policeman who talked with Pkiech just before the affray returned to the District Commissioner and "was very agitated when making his report; he said that he had been almost bewitched by the power of the leader's eyes."\*

The type of mumbo-jumbo preached by Pkiech and Masinde would not be difficult for the African masses to believe. As Carothers remarks,\*\* the African, in transition from the old tribal outlook to a modern one, still persists in entertaining magical modes of thought.

Once underway, the Dinis acquire something of political significance as a symbol of opposition to the whites. They become, as it were, a symbol of African independence. You ask an educated African about the Dinis and he often will reply in a pained voice, "Why shouldn't Africans have their own religion?" He probably does not believe in one word preached by the local prophet, but he is tired of having the white men---government officials, missionaries and employers---ordaining every aspect of his life for him.

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\* Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Affray at Kolloa, Baringo.

\*\* Carothers, "The Psychology of Mau Mau," Government Printer, Nairobi, 1954.

In discussing the question of dealing with the Dinis, and of Mau Mau as well, many government officials say they feel that controls should be placed on the missionaries. Ideally, education should be taken out of their hands, these officials say. A start has been made in this direction with the opening of a number of District Education Board schools---they are really government schools---and with the implementation of the Beecher Plan for African Education. Under the Beecher Plan the government is gradually taking over the financial responsibility for mission schools.

The number of DEB schools is small, though, and the missionaries still operate more than 90 per cent of all education. The government is reluctant to open any great number of DEB schools at this time. The idea of the Beecher Plan was that the government, by paying the piper, could call the tune in the mission schools, some of whom had very low standards. But the policy acknowledges that the missionaries will play a major role in education for a long time to come.

The policy of government grants to mission schools has not always been successful from an administrative point of view. Some missionaries have refused to submit accounts. Others have handed in reports that auditors regard as unsatisfactory. Officials say there is no question of dishonesty. Rather, they say, it appears that bookkeeping is too much for some missionaries. In other cases, they add, it appears that some of the funds went into the general church expenditure. Efforts are being made to get the missionaries into line.

Under present policy, control of education will eventually pass into the hands of the District Education Boards, as the executive committee of the African District Councils. Bit by bit the missionaries and the government will relinquish their controls. "We're following roughly the English tradition of a gradual transfer of authority to the local bodies," one top-ranking education official said. "In the old days in England, the church controlled education, but now the responsibility has passed to the local government." No date has been set for the ultimate devolution, though, and all officials say "it's a long way off."

There are many missionaries here who are thoroughly dedicated to their work and whose lives have been spent in the best tradition of Christian sacrifice. They have brought great benefits to the Africans and they are highly qualified to impart both academic learning and character to their charges. But there is another type on the scene as well, and he has stirred up ill-will not only among the Africans but among officials and settlers.

Many local people of all races are resentful of the fact that some American missionaries use their missionary privileges to import duty-free Chevrolets, only to turn around and sell them for a fat black market price. The standard of living of some missionaries is above that of many Europeans, and the Europeans often ask whether the missionaries are more interested in high living than in evangelism.

Government officials complain that many of the fundamentalists

possess little or no qualifications for teaching Africans. Quite a number are ordained by no church and their own education is slight. One high education official said to me, "Do you know what one denomination has out here? An ex-burglar, another man who used to run a speakeasy in Chicago and the speakeasy chap's wife, who used to play the piano there. It's all very fine that they've seen the light and we're very, very happy for them. But that doesn't qualify them to teach African children."

The racial attitude of some missionaries is a sore point for Africans. One American fundamentalist mission, for example, maintains a school for the missionaries' children alongside an African school. The children are rigidly segregated.

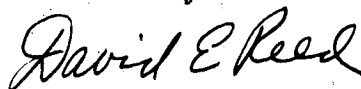
It is unlikely, though, that any considerable controls will ever be placed on the missionaries. The government is too fearful of being accused of violating religious freedom. Hence whenever anyone shows up in a Chevrolet and announces an intention of spreading the Word in Africa, the government merely nods.

Feelings of superiority and inferiority between Europeans and Africans will not change easily, if at all. Attitudes of mutual superiority exist between the Masai and the Europeans, but this is the exception to the rule. It is extremely unlikely that the other tribes will ever change their ideas and regard their old cultures as superior. The lid is off the Pandora's box and all the planning in the world is not going to get it shut again. Most tribes are rapidly severing all ties to the past. They want to assume the new, superior culture and it seems that nothing could ever turn back the oncoming wave. The Europeans started out by ridiculing and undermining the old customs and institutions. Now they have created an uncomfortable situation for themselves.

The abolition of the old color barriers that kept even the highly educated African out of the European world might lessen frustration and serve to deplete the ranks of the embittered agitators. European hotels are now admitting Africans, albeit grudgingly, and government is talking about abolishing racial pay scales. But at the same time friction and bitterness still is generated over the White Highlands, political representation, personal slights and low wages.

For the masses, advancement on their own initiative and with their active participation, as in Chief Jonathan's location, would seem to offer a hope for future stability. The point there is that the Bukusu are developing a new self-respect from having done a good job themselves. Their new school has weakened the missionaries' power over them, but, more important, it has strengthened their self-esteem. It may not lead to feelings of mutual superiority, but it does lead away from feelings of hopeless inferiority.

Sincerely



David E. Reed