

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DER - 6
Makueni...
Kenya's Black Settlers

c/o Barclays Bank
Queensway
Nairobi, Kenya
September 30, 1953

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The Kenya government has tackled one of the colony's biggest problems---land shortage in the native reserves---in a bold new way at Makueni in the Wakamba Reserve. There, a new area is being opened to black settlers from elsewhere in Ukambani* where an expanded population and destructive agricultural practices---with resulting erosion, soil depletion and poverty---go hand in hand.

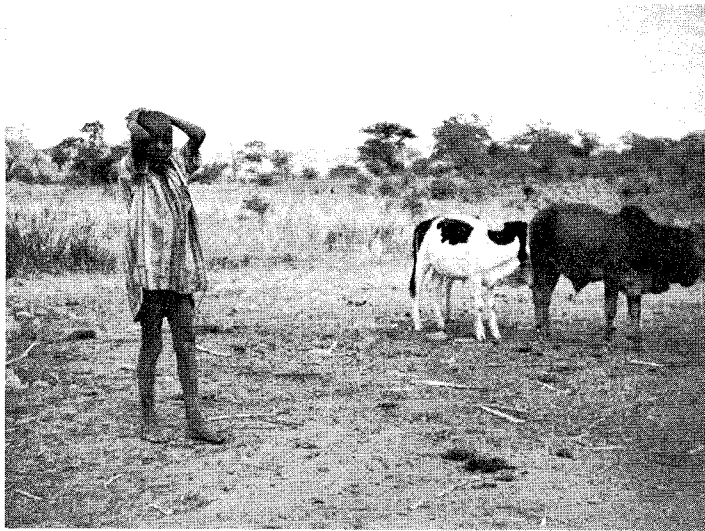
But Makueni is more than just a bigger place in the sun for the Wakamba. In opening the area, the government went to the heart of the native agricultural problem. It put a price tag on land offered for settlement. No money was involved, but at first there were few takers. The price was that the traditional destructive agricultural practices of the African had to be abandoned. Otherwise, the government said, Makueni would provide nothing more than a temporary breathing spell before it too sank toward the level of rural slum. Getting the settlers to adopt modern farming methods was no easy task. Yet despite this and other obstacles, the Makueni venture is regarded as having been highly successful.

Makueni is situated in the dry rolling hills of Machakos, the administrative district for the Wakamba. The settlement itself is about 100 miles southeast of Nairobi, at altitudes of 4,000 sloping down to 3,000 feet. Water is a big problem throughout Machakos and dust hangs heavily in the air along the dirt road that winds through the eroded hills on the way to Makueni.

* Ukambani, the locative, is generally used in referring to Wakambaland. The tribe is the Wakamba or Akamba, an individual is an Mkamba and the language is Kikamba.

The Union Jack flies above the boma or headquarters of John W. Balfour, District Officer in charge of Makueni. The boma is on a hill at 4,210 feet in altitude and the immediate slopes are dotted with government buildings and homes of the half a dozen European officials in charge of the scheme. All the buildings have thatched roofs and brick walls, plastered white. A tennis court has been laid out, and along toward the end of the afternoon, as throughout the Empire, Makueni's British expatriates gather and wash down the dust in their throats with a cup of tea.

Sloping off in the distance are the shambas or land holdings of Makueni's settlers, each dotted with mud and thatch huts and marked off with fences of piled up brush wood. Cattle and goats graze in separate paddocks, guarded by tiny children, men till the soil and women wend their way along the roads on their daily journey for water, often several miles from their homes.



Before 1947 it was a different view seen from the hill. Dense bush---thorny scrub trees, bushes and weeds---a type of vegetation seen much in Kenya, covered the landscape then. Except for a few isolated families eking out a scant living, there was no settlement. Makueni belonged to the tsetse fly and rhino.

The fly was of the type that does not cause sleeping sickness in humans, but it quickly brought debilitation and death to cattle. Hundreds of the jittery and quick charging rhino had a different effect on humans. They made life uncomfortable and in cases short for Wakamba who ventured into the area.

There was little or no water available the year around. Rainfall for Makueni is given at 33 inches a year, but as elsewhere in Kenya the figures fail to tell the story. Rains may come all at once, cutting deep gulleys through the parched earth, then disappear as quickly as they came. While one area may be inundated, an adjoining area may get nothing. Yet when blessed by rain, Makueni was amazingly fertile. "If you've got your foot on it, it'll lift you right off the ground," said Balfour.

The Wakamba, living in more hospitable parts of the reserve, were undergoing a process familiar to East Africa. In earlier times, these good-natured people had enough land for their needs. They practiced a shifting cultivation, using a small area intensively for a few seasons, then moving on when the land began to be depleted. The population was much smaller than it is today*, so there was always enough land for moving on.

The British brought an end in some cases and a sharp reduction in others to the factors that had kept the population in check. Vaccination, inoculation, medical care and preventive measures ended the great decimating epidemics. Locust control and famine relief ended periodic starvation. Pax Britannica halted tribal warfare. Maternity and child care lowered the infant death rate.

With a larger population, shifting cultivation no longer was possible. The land had no respite from destructive use. Shambas dwindled to uneconomic patches because of the custom of dividing the land equally amongst all the sons. The plains and ridges of untouched Makueni looked inviting to the hard-pressed Wakamba. But it was death for their cattle and water was a big problem.

* The Wakamba population was reported to be 350,000 after the 1948 census. No reliable figures or estimates exist for tribal populations before that time, but it is known that a considerable increase has taken place.

In 1936, the government first became interested in opening up the area. At that time a "fly barrier" or strip of cleared land was cut through the bush to keep the fly from encroaching into the occupied parts of the reserve. But World War II interrupted these plans. During the years 1939 to 1945 the Wakamba served with distinction in the Army and are said to have formed the backbone of the first-line Kenya battalions in the King's African Rifles. The Mkamba needs little urging to join the Army. He is a capable warrior and has a strong wanderlust. It is said that the tribal name derives from "he who goes on a journey."

To reward the returning Mkamba Second World Warrior and to relieve the overcrowding in the reserve, intensive planning for opening up Makueni was started after the war by the African Settlement Board. Balfour, a World War II lieutenant colonel in the K.A.R., worked on the scheme from the early stages and later was appointed a district officer to administer Makueni. Four Europeans who own nearby farms helped in the planning and Balfour says they were of great assistance in advising on agricultural possibilities. Asked what he thinks prompted these men, Balfour said they wanted only to help the Wakamba, whom they had employed as farm labor for years and for whom they had developed a strong friendship. Despite doubts from some quarters as to the fitness of the land for the envisaged development, work began.

One of the first steps, which brought howls from some wildlife lovers, was to eliminate the danger of rhino. J. Hunter, Kenya's famous white hunter and now game control officer, was called in and he picked off 1,000 rhino with his rifle. The government defended this as absolutely necessary. It was impossible at that time to walk even a short distance in the bush without meeting up with one, or, worse luck, two rhinos. Another reason for eliminating them is that they would eat up any crops grown by Makueni's forthcoming settlers.

Bush clearing began. In some places the area was like a solid hedge. Not only did this open up the land for cultivation and grazing, but it was a start in the process of eliminating the fly. Tsetse dies when deprived of bush, but the fly is never gotten rid of completely until there is human occupation of an area.

Boreholes were drilled, some to depths of 400 feet, and earthen dams constructed on seasonal watercourses. These would provide drinking water for man and beast. What rainfall Makueni receives would be utilized for cultivation. Roads, bridges and "drifts" or concrete fording places on the seasonal watercourses were constructed.

All this was on the physical side. More important to the future success of the scheme was the paper work that went on at Makueni.

Rules of good husbandry, carrying the force of law, were drawn up. As the set-up now exists, fines can be imposed for overstocking, negligent and destructive agriculture and other such practices that were commonplace elsewhere in Ukambani. For serious and persistent offenses, a settler can be evicted.

Each settler is limited to eight adult cattle and 15 goats, but temporary increases in goat herds are allowed while a father is collecting bride price for a son. In practice, the authorities are not adamant and if a settler can show that he can exceed the limits without injury to his land, he is allowed to do so. Extra stock can be grazed in the nearby Simba Grazing Scheme, developed by government in an area too dry for cultivation.

New settlers make application on the basis of land need and report to Makueni for interviewing on the first of each month. If accepted they are told to return with a panga or cleaver-like sword on the 15th. They are not to bring their families or stock at that time.

On the 15th, they are put to work "paying their passage" by clearing the bush with their pangas. They receive only rations. This work lasts from three to five months and even to a year in some cases. Each group or "details camp" clears the land that members of the group eventually will take over. Then shambas are marked out under a grid mapping system developed by the Makueni authorities.

As each man is given his shamba, his name is entered in the registry book. This is the equivalent of a title deed, but with certain important provisions, designed to prevent the fragmentation of shambas that goes on in the reserves.

In the reserves, in addition to the custom of dividing shambas amongst all the sons, another practice exists which is regarded as harmful to security and good long-term husbandry. The principle of ownership there is that any person or any member of a family that ever cultivated a piece of land remains the owner in perpetuity. Descendants---grandsons, for instance---of original owners can and do turn out the present tenants. All that is needed is the concurrence of the tribal elders that the ancestor tilled that particular piece of land.

At Makueni, only the man whose name is in the registry book has claim to the land. If he dies, only one member of his family may take over the registry, although the others may continue to live on the shamba. Land can be sold, but only in its entirety. No man can own more than one shamba. A buyer must be registered, too, and if the authorities are not convinced that he would make a good settler, they can refuse to register him, which would block the sale.

Persistent violators of Makueni's rules can be called before the Advisory Committee of Elders, composed of old men representative of all parts of Makueni. The violator is ordered to show cause why his name should not be expunged from the registry book---which would deprive him of his land. If the Committee and Balfour disagree about expunging a man's name, the case goes to the Provincial Commissioner for a final ruling.

Each shamba consists of 35 to 40 acres. Only five acres can be cultivated; the rest is for grazing. Each year one acre of cultivation must revert to grazing land and an acre of grazing land must be ploughed up and cultivated. Pastures must be fenced to control grazing. For new settlers, the government ploughs the five acres and cuts contour terracing by machine, but after that the settlers must keep this work up themselves.

During 1947, the first efforts to attract settlers were made. The government met with almost solid opposition, including from the Local Native Council (now the African District Council) for Machakos District.

Jomo Kenyatta, at the time a member of the African Settlement Board, came to Ukambani to campaign against Makueni. Kenyatta's Kenya African Union, largely a Kikuyu affair, at that time was trying to organize the Wakamba. One of Kenyatta's lieutenants was Paul Ngei, an Mkamba, who later was sentenced with Kenyatta as a Mau Mau leader.

Kenyatta and others told the Wakamba that Makueni was a trick. The Europeans want you to develop the land so they can take it away from you later, the Wakamba were told. Makueni is yours---it's part of your reserve---therefore why should you have to obey the white man's rules to live in it?

The government remained firm and what Balfour calls a "war of attrition" began. Only 12 families accepted Makueni's conditions in 1947, but the government was helped by good rains. Experimental crops flourished. Cattle grew sleek and fat. Wakamba paid labor for the bush clearing work carried home stories of Makueni's marvels. And the Mkamba back in the dusty eroded hills of the reserve had only to gaze at Makueni's distant greenery for confirmation. Especially for those in desperate need of land, Makueni was a tempting morsel.

Late in 1947, the government won a victory in the war of attrition. A direct question was put to the Local Native Council---"You need not approve of Makueni, but if the people want to go and settle there, are you going to try to stop them?" The council replied no.

Another 66 families arrived in 1948 and 47 more followed in 1949. The time had come when applications exceeded the rate that Makueni then could handle new settlers.

In 1950, 151 families poured in and in Balfour's words, "It was clear that it was becoming a big show." A five-year plan was worked out with the Development and Reconstruction Authority, Kenya's central planning and coordinating body for post-war development. DARA has been financing the scheme with funds from the Kenya government.

The five-year plan called for the establishment of 1,250 families at Makueni by the end of 1955. As 276 were already on the land, this meant nearly 200 more for each year of the plan.



Daudi Muthungu,
27-year-old Makueni
Settler

In September of this year---three-fourths through the third year of the five-year plan, the geographical line of advance at Makueni was at the point envisaged for the end of all five years. A total of 53,000 acres are intensively settled at present. The five-year population goal of 1,250 families will be reached next March, the third month of the fourth year of the plan.

By the end of 1952, total costs had risen to £189,000, or \$534,870. With nearly 1,000 families at the time, the cost per family was about £189 or \$534. Since much of the cost is capital expenditure, the per family average is expected to continue its decline.



Muthungu's home. Object next to the door is a maize grinder. The interior walls are decorated with full-page ads from American magazines.

For the five-year plan itself, an outlay of £124,000 or \$351,000 was anticipated. But by the end of next March when the final step is completed, expenses will have mounted to only £86,000 or \$243,000, according to present estimates.

The end of the five-year plan will not mean an end to Makueni's advance, though. Plans are being made for pushing out during 1954 to an adjacent belt of 37,000 acres. Another 925 families would be brought in, boosting Makueni's overall total to 2,175 families, a total of about 12,000 persons, or nearly 3 1/2 per cent of the Wakamba population.

Balfour believes that after that area is opened up, it will not be possible to advance the line of cultivation very much. Land beyond that has a lower altitude and hence less rainfall. But thought is being given to opening up 170,000 acres of it for grazing only. This area would be linked with the Simba scheme.

Makueni is designed so that each settler will be self-sufficient. Peter Ghersie, the Kenya-born agricultural officer who was educated at Natal University in South Africa, recently made a study of 46 shambas selected at random to see how they were doing. Rains were not good this spring and the first of the two annual harvests was rather meager. Yet the 46 settlers reported that the sale of surplus crops from the spring harvest netted them an average of 525 shillings or \$73. Surplus crops were those left over after the settler had fed himself and his family for six months. Ghersie cautioned that there is a human tendency to conceal one's assets, particularly when talking with someone connected with the tax hungry government. Africans, incidentally, pay no income taxes, but rather a flat rate. At Makueni, taxes are 27 shillings or \$3.78 a year.

Even though the scheme as a whole has been successful, the settlers, the authorities report, have not taken wholeheartedly to the new agricultural methods. Ghersie said only two or three out of the 1,000 settlers have been genuinely "converted." The rest, he said, comply in various degrees to the rules only because they must.

Educated settlers who work as clerks in the boma while their wives and relatives take care of their shambas are the worst, Ghersie said. He said he often has taken a shovel or axe and has performed some job for a settler to set an example. But instead of profiting from it, the settler has looked upon it only as so much free work, Ghersie said. He and the other officials said the settlers have no gratitude for what has been done for them, but they agreed that ingratitude is no African monopoly. Roger Coryndon, Balfour's second in command, said, "There is an inclination to sit back and expect more, but I think the majority are beginning to realize they're in for a good thing."

Makueni and other agricultural betterment drives have been hampered not only by customs and practices that the African is reluctant to part with, but by a general distrust of the European as well. Some of this distrust may stem from bitter experiences, but some also stems, I suspect, from a "have-not" jealousy on the part of an emergent but still backward people toward a more historically privileged race. The situation has not been helped by some African politicians, eager to capitalize on discontent, nor by certain fire-eating European leaders.

Commendably, Makueni's European officials have not soured in disgust from the opposition they have met and continue to meet. While it is true that Makueni is a livelihood for them, it is equally true that they could find jobs elsewhere. But, like so many other officials out here, they have a strong sense of public service. They are deeply interested in their work, if not in the African himself, and discuss their work enthusiastically with visitors. Meanwhile, they continue to urge and prod the African along.

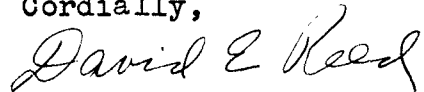
Sometimes their efforts are rewarded. On the way to Makueni I gave a lift to a middle-aged Mkamba who was going to Makueni for a group tour of the agricultural marvels there. He owned a shamba in a nearby village and he said proudly that he had been carrying out all the innovations suggested by the agricultural officer. He had sent his children to school and education seemed to be such a wonderful thing that he went along with them. He is in the primary grades and I was told later that while he is a whiz at mathematics, English is a stumbling block for him. Yet he managed to converse with me, throwing in a few Swahili words from time to time.

While agricultural betterment drives go on continually in this man's village and elsewhere in the reserves, they cannot hope to enjoy the success that Makueni has had. It had been new land and the government could enforce sound farming as a condition for possessing land. No such club exists elsewhere in the reserves and unfortunately not all Africans, at least yet, are like my hitch hiker.

Makueni has shown the way for one approach to the land problem. While no large numbers of Africans are involved, it first of all certainly has benefited the ones who have been able to settle there. But more important it is a start. Vast areas of Kenya are unoccupied or sparsely occupied because of tsetse fly or lack of water or both. Schemes for their development are in the planning stage and Makueni serves as a model.

The importance of these projects to the future of Kenya can be seen from the fact that land shortage was one of the factors, though not the only one, that led to the Mau Mau uprising.

Cordially,



David E. Reed

Received New York 10/5/53.