

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JBG-12  
Handicraft Impressions

Silver Springs Hotel  
Kampala, Uganda  
East Africa  
20 November 1950

Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
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522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 18, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

An African was bending over at the side of the truck, trying to replace the cap of the gasoline tank. He gripped the cap on one side only, his stubby fingers curling as though throwing a discus. He pressed harder and harder and kept turning it, but the motion was not concentric to the circumference of the cap and the lugs of the interrupted thread would not engage. He was doing all the turning with his wrist, and not shifting his grip on the knurl. The European owner of the truck, seated behind the wheel, had been looking back over his shoulder while the fumbling continued for a full minute. Suddenly he jumped out of the cab, slammed the door, grabbed the native by the back of the collar, and jerked him away. Then he picked the cap from where it had fallen into the dirt and replaced it himself, easily, in half a second. As we drove away he told me that for some reason the natives of this part of East Africa have seemed unable to understand the simple principle of the spiral thread, whether on automobile, gas or water tanks or on the friction caps of jars or bottles.

Some weeks later I was parked near a traffic block, waiting for a washout to be cleared on the Jinja-Kampala road. A section gang was working, shoveling away at a mass of silt blocking a culvert. A variety of shapes and sizes of spades were in use, and they were being plied - under the eyes of a European straw boss - with considerable energy. But there was no such thing as putting full weight behind the shovel blade, or utilizing the full leverage of the handle for jockeying large bites out of the mud-bank. Even allowing for the disadvantage of bare feet, so that the conventional American method of foot-thrusting against the shoulder of the blade could not be used, it was as awkward an exhibition of earth-moving as I had ever seen. The laborers were well-muscled, stout Baganda, with the glistening black shoulders which Negley Farson and other authors have esthetically admired; but as ditch diggers they were considerably poorer than some ill-fed Chinese coolies, some Indian laborers, and the city-bred American draftees which I have seen. By the rough measuring stick of brief, visual observation I would estimate that - inch for inch and pound for pound - six of these African laborers would be worth about one good Japanese infantryman, the latter being my nomination for the title of the World's Best Spade-User.

Here in Kampala, along the main street of the town, beyond the post office and administrative buildings, there are numerous small shops employing African labor. Almost invariably the shops

are owned and managed by Indians, but the majority of the workmen are natives. In a walk of a few hundred yards along the north side of this street (unimaginatively named Kampala Road) you can see African hands operating the basic tools which an American grammar school boy would associate with his manual training classes: the saw, the hammer, the plane, the brace and bit, and the screw driver. The products of these shops range from rough packing boxes and crates to reasonably well-made cabinets and chests of drawers.

You see the African workman doing a good job with one, two, or three tools. He may work all day matching edges or joints with a plane; or he may drive nails with a hammer or even operate a band or circular saw. But as soon as a particular job becomes more demanding of versatility or exactness, as in the case of cabinet making or fitting mirror frames, the portion of African labor involved becomes smaller - or supervision by Asians becomes much more intensive. If you order a packing box, the chances are that it will be made by natives; if you order a hinged strong box, with screws and metal fittings, it will most likely be made by Africans closely watched over by Indian or Goan foreman. A cabinet or a chest of drawers will almost surely be jointed and fitted by Indian craftsmen, with only the preliminary sawing and planing, and the tedious sanding and polishing done by Africans. In all of these crafts-shops, an observer will see the gesture of the white truck-owner repeated: An Asiatic straw-boss, angry and impatient, will jerk a plane, hammer or chisel from an African's hand, shove him away from the bench, and ply the tool himself. "Hapana! Mjinga! Velevele!" - No! Half-wit! Like this! is the standard ejaculation.

Throughout the part of East Africa I have seen native housing is roughly uniform - mud-and-wattle walls, thatched roofs framed with green-bent branches, mud floors, small ventilating port holes. Raised flooring, windows, and stilt-type foundations (where exceptionally moist earth would suggest) I have not seen. Sleeping mats, generally animal hide or woven grass, are laid directly on the dirt floor. Beds, even the simple, easily made Indian charpoy, are not used. Furniture consists chiefly of small, round stools, tediously but undexterously carved from solid sections of log.

The utilization of iron by tribal and village people in the areas I have visited shows a two-fold inferiority to some Pacific islanders and some North Burma inhabitants seen during the war. First, there is no characteristic knife or axe, well adapted to peculiar local needs - no counterpart of the Philippine bolo, the Nepalese kukri, or the Kachin dah. The few locally fashioned knives I have seen were varied in shape, poorly hafted, and generally rusty and dull. Though I have picked up stones in these same areas which have texture and composition suitable for grinding and honing, I have only once seen such a stone shaped and adapted for easy sharpening; and even the few hand-wrought razors were stropped on the palm or burnished against the back of an English-made machete. Secondly, there is no evidence of great dexterity in the use of either knife or axe.<sup>1</sup> In the Kachin Hills I used to spend hours

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1. With notable exceptions when the instrument is being used in hunting or fighting.

watching tribesmen deftly building stilted houses, river bridges, beds, flooring, litters, packsaddles, and other items, all out of bamboo and with a single tool - the long bladed, long handled, always-sharp dah. Gurkhas could do almost as well with the curved, heavy bladed kukri; and Solomon islanders could do the same with machetes. The Guadalcanal houses, platformed and with decorative gables, seemed far advanced compared to any native housing I have seen in East Africa.

Apart from the interesting facts regarding the absence of skillful sleight of hand and juggling abilities (in a society which places a high value on magic) this locally general manipulative inability seems very significant. Along with the unfamiliarity with good metal work it forms the chief distinguishing feature between African and Asian. It does not take long to see how well or poorly a man can use his hands and simple tools; fumbling and awkwardness are almost as quickly-detectable as skin color, and much of what is called "color bar" in East Africa could more correctly be called "distinction on the basis of manipulative ability." It is difficult for one who has seen the incredible performances of Japanese jugglers and Hindu magicians to avoid the assumption of a racial relationship, when nothing in an African area seems equal in its expression of hand-skill.<sup>2</sup> Skin color affords a ready explanation to observers who for various reasons choose to disregard environmental factors, like endemic diseases and their damages to nerve tissue.

Even when much of the inability is anthropologically explained, and the poor handicraft of round-handled, bulging axe-heads, which force the woodsman to chop directly across the grain is understood, there are yet other questions. One wonders why a good method of tanning animal hides has not been discovered and applied, for instance. In the places observed, admittedly few natives were wearing skin clothing; but these crudely-scraped hides had none of the softness or cloth-like qualities of the buckskin which American Indians learned to process with no chemicals other than the brains of the animal itself. The clothing I saw was made of crudely-scraped hides, with the fibers improperly loosened so that they had the stiffness of wadded parchment.

Village-manufactured footgear, where it is used at all, seems usually to be the crudest of skin sandals, with ankle bindings which will not hold if the wearer moves faster than a slow trot. Old auto tires are used for soles in areas near the roads, with inside tire-ply cut to make the ankle straps. Nothing that I have seen even approaches the handicraft quality of American Indian moccasins, thong-sewn of buckskin or elk hide.

The case against the African native along the west side of Lake Victoria, for failing to provide himself with the more essential of

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2. The error of such an assumption is obvious, of course. The tap-dancing and juggling of American negro entertainers, for example, renders the racial aspect ridiculous; but it does not make the prevalence of the assumption less real or less harmful here.

primitive comforts, can be endlessly documented - and apologized. The environmental and sense-of-values concepts constitute the greater part of the apologia. Comfortingly, it is claimed that this lack of craftsmanship is rather local in tropical Africa - that it is limited to the northern areas where the Hamitic nomad influence has been strong. Dr. Audrey Richards, head of the East Africa Institute of Social Research, has told me that the true negro, found further south, is the craftsman of Africa. Naturally, a cattle-keeping people with nomad habits and energies for learning absorbed by their herds cannot be expected to fashion fine furniture or other non-portable items. And the lax concepts of property-tenure among a traveling and warring society offer little encouragement to the accumulation of smaller handicraft items.

It is also held that craftsmanship does exist, even among the west-shore tribes, in the skillful manufacture of skin-and-hollow log drums, bows, arrows, and spears; and there is no doubt that these items are often well-finished and attractive to the eye. But the drums I have seen (leaving out the fact of their Arab origin) were inferior to most of the island tom-toms previously observed; the bows are markedly second rate, being round instead of semicircular in cross section and therefore lacking the resilience and direct-pull qualities of bows and crossbows seen in north Burma and Yunnan. The arrows vary a good deal from tribe to tribe, but the shafts are not especially true, the featherings are often crude and ineffective, and the iron heads were shaped less uniformly - in iron - than some of the better American Indian ones of chipped stone. The spears seem designed more for the eye than for war; the blades are large, beautifully symmetrical, but generally thin-bodied and of soft iron, which bends or peens on striking bone. As tools, these spears are inferior to the smaller, stouter pig-sticking lance heads developed in India; as art objects, they are mediocre because their finish is generally poor; as proofs of metalworking skill - forging, tempering, and shaping - they seem infinitely crude alongside a 400 year old Japanese sword.

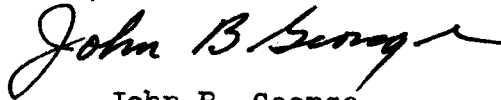
The broader explanations and arguments in favor of the native, however effective they may be in proving that he is not inherently inferior or unadaptable, do not alter the fact of his profound unpreparedness for receiving - or withstanding the impact of - the modern outside world. The economic and commercial criteria of today, by which a population is measured and categorized as a "low grade" or a "high quality" entity (and accorded a commensurate standard of living), do not take into account historical excuses or moral rationale. It was a short and simple process for the Japanese swordmaker to become a first class tool and die maker, or for the craftsman working in fine laquer ware to switch over to commercial ceramics or even to lens grinding. In a matter of three generations the craftsmanship of the Japanese successfully embraced western technology and applied itself to the manufacture of first class binoculars, cameras, infantry weapons, field artillery, naval ordnance, and even military aircraft of high quality.

Of course it is not "fair" to compare East African natives with the infinitely more advanced people of Japan at the time of Commodore

Perry. Neither is it fair to base judgements or conclusions on the cursory and dilettante observations made during wartime travel, or made by a man in a foreign area while he is occupied with a full time job.

For my part, I hope to discard the judgements and conclusions held now as I learn more about this area and its people. The other non-natives, however, are not so fortunate. They have other things to do besides studying, observing and understanding. Tasks of building, supervising, administering are very time-filling, and I doubt if most of the European key figures can find time to even read the apologia of anthropologists and take their considered advice. For this reason conclusions will continue to be made and held on the basis of the unfair comparisons and superficial observations listed in this letter. With regard to the particular handicraft deficiency, the conclusion it inspires can be expressed in the words of Bill McGuinness, a young architect who has been working in East Africa for a year: "How can these people ever learn to use their minds? In thirty years they haven't learned to use their bloody hands."

Sincerely,



John B. George

PS: A discussion of this same subject, along with the broader sociological and physiological aspects of native labor, is given in Northcott, C. H. (ed.), African Labour Efficiency Survey, London, His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1949, two shillings.

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