

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Indian Weekend

Kikuletwa River
South of Moshi
Tanganyika, East Africa
16 September 1952

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

It takes money, and the risk of losing money, to extract the limited wealth of East African land. The handlers of this cash, some bringing it in from other countries and some having squeezed it out locally, are motley. A number of conservative Britishers, some wilder British younger sons, some Greeks, Swiss, Germans, Poles, Americans and many Indians vie with one another. The Indians, for a variety of reasons including their earlier arrival in the territory, greater numbers, their energy and ambition, their ability to live in the tropics at small cost and thereby accumulate capital which the living expenses of a European would currently consume, are predominant. From time to time in workaday contacts with small storekeepers and in social relations with professional types, I have tried to find an explanation, beyond the cliches of "amorality", "Asiatic dishonesty", and "no business code or ethics" for this success - more so because I have seen it, in smaller samples, in such far flung places as Fiji and Gibraltar.

I had heard of the Sheikh Brothers, a firm of Indian investors in sisal, lumber, hotels and other projects, shortly after arriving in East Africa in 1950. Their offices in Nairobi, unpretentious and even ramshackle in appearance, on one of the side streets, were said to be the headquarters for the manipulation of millions of pounds of capital. It was known that they controlled hotels, large sisal holdings in Kenya, lumber operations in Tanganyika.

A younger one of the Brothers, who has simplified his name to Abdul, had gone for a higher education to the United States, and was in one of the classes I lectured at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration. Abdul asked me to contact his brother Rashid when I returned to East Africa. I did, leaving a note at the Nairobi offices, when I was told Rashid had just flown to Tanganyika in his light plane. Some weeks later, while in Tanganyika, a local advocate, Zaffir Ali, called on me and asked me to bring my wife and join him as a weekend guest of Mr. Rashid Sheikh. The weekend was to be a combination of sightseeing and shooting - partridge, guinea fowl, and antelope on the Sanya plains - with food and shelter at the board house at the Sanya Sawmills, a concession on Kilimanjaro operated by Sheikh Brothers. Another guest would be Mr. Thompson, a Jamaican now practicing law in Moshi. I accepted, knowing I would see my Western hunting code violated in favor of a baronial, Maharaja-type game-slaughter, but also certain that I would have one whale of a time. It had been seven years, and half way round the globe, since I had enjoyed the rollicking hospitality some Indians can provide.

We were picked up in the early afternoon in a Chevrolet truck, and while Betty rode in the dust-sealed front compartment with Mohamed Ali, another guest and a trader in Moshi, I shared with Thompson and Zaffir a bench in the monkey cage rear. The floor of the truck held our guncases, banging up and down with the road's corrugations, and there was two inches between the top of my bent head and the body-ceiling. This was just enough space, when we struck a good rut, to rebound me evenly, top and bottom each striking twice. Thompson, being shorter and built more on the order of a rubber ball, felt better.

The most impressive feature of the ride was the speed. Mohammed, who boasted he was - and indeed turned out to be - one of the more careful drivers of the party, kept the truck barrelling just fifteen miles per hour beyond anything I would have called a sensible rate. This smoothed out the effect of the corrugations, tires touching only the high points, but one could feel the underpinning of the car gasping under a series of sharp, metal-tearing blows. The tires, over inflated in the heat, kept up a continuous rumble, spewing out a cloud of dust and gravel, part of which was sucked up behind the cab and into the lungs of Thompson and myself. We arrived safely at the sawmill two hours before dark, where I saw Rashid Sheikh for the first time.

He was medium size, compactly built, with the stance of a man who would be more at home on horseback. He was round faced, thick shouldered, and very healthy looking, with a flashy grin which on the slightest excuse would rip into a loud laugh. He wanted to go shooting before dark, so we loaded into a jeep and headed back towards the plains. As we went down the ridge, astride its knife edge with our four wheels, Mohammed drove. This was due to the polite insistence of Zaffir Ali, who, while appearing to make a joke of the matter, was seriously concerned that Rashid should not take the wheel. Mohammed, however, could only be the lesser of two blights. Over the undulations, around swervy turns, he stuck to his policy of speed, speed. Where 20 m.p.h. would have been a sane rate, he drove at 35. Where 10 would have been bumpy and tolerably uncomfortable, we gyrated along at 25.

We arrived down at the main road, in one piece, the other passengers each making discreet comment about the speed of driving, but Rashid, perched on one of the wheel arches in the rear, was silent, as unconcerned and smiling as could be. We drove north for a bit and then turned west moving across the flats towards Mt. Meru. We passed through the farm of a Major Yates, Rashid letting it slip that Yates owed him money, some £150, and saying that there was no excuse for the delay in repayment. The farm was a good one, partially irrigated and extensive, but Yates "had no ideas." We drove on along the rutted track, past the Northern Province (Veterinary) Stock Farm, past the airdrome where Rashid's light plane was parked, and onto the wider Sanya plains.

The game animals here, for Africa, were fantastically wild. The little Thompson's gazelles kept an even 450 yards between themselves and a car, flattering to local marksmanship, one might think, until he learned that these automobile-hunters aim their rifles at the center of a herd and empty the magazine, letting the law of averages eventually produce a hit on male or female. Guinea fowl, or kanga, were everywhere. And the Roman holiday I had expected was not long getting under way.

At the first sight of game, Rashid's Polish sawmill mechanic, who had been following us in another jeep, gunned his vehicle and bounced out to our left, circling wide, racing the motor, and shouting to frighten the game. He ran a herd of tommies around in circles, somewhat skillfully, and when they were tired brought them across our front. I had left my rifle in its case, and fortunately the tired tommies were out of ^{shotgun} range. The Fole mechanic looked disappointedly at us and said to Rashid, "Bwana, why didn't you shoot? They were close." Rashid grinned. The mechanic, he told us, was down here every weekend after meat. He had had another Fole mechanic at the mill, but had shifted him to another post - the two of them were too fond of hunting together.

Attention then was turned to guinea fowl, and the shotgun, a 5 shot 12 gauge Browning automatic, was handed from Rashid to Ali to Zaffir while they changed places at the wheel. They would roar along after the heavy bodied, ground-clinging birds, put them repeatedly into the air until they were tired. Then they would pull up close and rake the flock on the ground with the scatter gun. I have seen slaughter as outright, but never more so, and I commented to my wife that a description of this "hunt" could aptly be entitled "the Rape of Diana."

At my suggestion, my wife and I got into the other jeep, and the mechanic took us into a nearby wooded spot, some distance from where Rashid was still shotgunning guinea fowl with wild abandon. I parked the jeep in the edge of the cover and then enjoyed a nice hour's stalk, shooting a young male tommie and a large impala buck. We did not rejoin the other car until dusk, and had a nice ride back - nice in terms of excitement, I mean. We were taken back into Rashid's jeep, which he drove in a way that certainly justified Mohammed's fear. At one point, when he turned to hand a shotgun back to Ali, he looked away from the road, and we plunged into a culvert and ended up a mass of tangled firearms, legs and bodies against the windshield. Fortunately, no broken bones. Amazingly enough, we got back to the house alive.

In relays we bathed, enjoying in the 7,000 feet chill the warmth of an improvised brazier. A large drinks cabinet was opened, with a thorough assortment of wines and spirits; and for non-drinking Rashid there was a store of Pepsi-cola. While pouring for others, he was reminded of a story of another trip, and shared its telling with Zaffir Ali who had been along. This was a trip to the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater during the dry season. No one had thought to bring water. The radiator of the truck gave away, lost its water and had to be driven for three miles and then cooled for half an hour. The driver of a jeep, left behind when it turned defective, was missing for more than a month - almost forgotten and written off by the time he finally came back. A case of Pepsi-cola, they said, had saved the party from dying of thirst. Zaffir Ali, who had been grinning as the Serengeti story was told, now brought up the subject of Rashid's piloting skill, and of his feats with aircraft as well as automobiles. Rashid modestly claimed to be inept, but told of forced landings, of flights in the updrafts over sisal fields, of flying over his own farmland near Voi and spotting "his" elephant herds. Zaffir intolerantly shook his head during the telling, and Rashid, noting, told a story of how he had taken Zaffir driving in a jeep, planning a long trip beyond Moshi. Zaffir had gone round Moshi's "Piccadilly Circus" on two wheels, then

skipped along the corrugations at 60 m.p.h. for some fifteen miles. When they approached another car coming in the opposite direction, Zaffir casually asked Rashid to stop, he wanted to talk to these people. Rashid did, and Zaffir got out and without speaking further to Rashid arranged to be driven back to Moshi. He had left his luggage with Rashid, and Rashid was unwise to the trick until the other car started to move on with Zaffir in it. Once you ride in a jeep with Rashid, said Zaffir, one can understand this action. I certainly could.

Then the story telling was interrupted for dinner. A guinea fowl curry with salted, fresh fried chapatis, a center plate of heaped partridges, extra guinea fowl breasts, could not have been better. The chapatis were fried in butter and salted in the pan, by Rashid himself. More talk, then bed, and a cold restful night on the mountainside.

The next day, driving down to the plains after breakfast, was much the same. More guinea fowl slaughter, more coursing of animals in a jeep. I had one enjoyable stalk, taking another Thompson's gazelle, an animal with exceptional horns, when with the connivance of my wife I was able to halt the jeep and conduct a half hour stalk on foot. Betty would sit in the jeep and hold it stationary to keep it from being used to drive the game.

In the shade of an acacia on the banks of the only stream for miles, we enjoyed a nice lunch. The constant plains wind kept blowing, picking up fine dust from the overgrazed Masai cattle range and depositing it on the food. It was a clean dust though, sterilized by sunlight, and did no damage to the flavor or wholesomeness of sardines, tinned sausages, fruit and biscuits. It was a lazy day, the Masai-steppes at its best. The sun was blazing, but the shade felt cool.

In the afternoon we had one motoring adventure. On turning, with the customary wrench of the wheel, the lock on the hinged half door of the jeep gave way. I saw my wife fly out of the jeep, but then return in a sharp curve because she had kept a grim grip on the swinging door. Mohammed had jerked the wheel in the other direction, and she moved back, on the end of the swinging gate, safely inside the vehicle. I touched a palm to my cheek, while she brushed off some dust. "It's nothing," she said. "I used to be an acrobat." Mohammed accepted this explanation and drove on, I now reaching across to grip the door shut.

Beyond this the day passed somewhat routinely; and at night, declining with thanks Rashid's offer to drive us home tomorrow morning, we drove back to Moshi with Mohammed, Zaffir, and Thompson. Thompson had to be aboard a chartered aircraft early to Mwanza. He had been retained as defense counsel in a manslaughter case. Our ride, again, was fast and bumpy, with head-loaded natives, startled from their slow roadside walking, jumping out of the truck's careening way, indignantly turning to shout from the safety of the bush. My wife and I agreed it was good to get back to Moshi alive.

Apart from the outing, whose recreational benefits were reduced somewhat by a steady fear of death by auto accident, the trip was rife with sociological import. For one thing, the racial composition of the party was, for East Africa, uniquely variant. Black, in the person of Thompson, the Jamaican lawyer, brown in the case of Rashid, Zaffir, and Mohammed, and white were together for social enjoyment. I had long been aware that Indians could invite either race into their homes, but it is not so often realized that their intermediate position can be used as a device for getting black, white and brown convivially together. Rashid, of course, would be less likely to bring a local settler and a local subchief together so readily, but this is the next step. The strict off-duty hours color bar, formerly firm throughout so much of Africa, is being breached here and there by this means. Wealthy and influential Indians - though not the great mediators between black and white that an enthusiastic inter-racialist would think logical - have often provided, through hospitality, a means of bringing the two together in an unofficial atmosphere.

Another point of inter-racial interest, clearly illustrated by the attitude of the Polish mechanic, is the elevated position of Indians vis-a-vis some of the newer Europeans here in East Africa. The Polish mechanic called the wealthy Indian Rashid "Bwana" - or "sir" - in a tone of serious respect. He performed, willingly, the menial tasks of chauffeur and mechanic for Rashid and his Indian guests; and at the end of the hunt he accepted - much in the manner of a bell boy taking a tip - three of the pot-shot guinea fowl. The mechanic had come here as a refugee; he had not been screened in London or Mombasa by any of the boards set up to maintain the status of all resident Europeans at an officer or professional level, above servility if not above occasional work with the hands. This is a new concept in East Africa, where any admission that a white man may work for and under a brown man - even as a skilled laborer - has been squelched. The refugee migrations of the war and the need for larger numbers of mechanics and minor technicians, has dispelled the most significant of all illusions held by natives. This illusion was their logical inference, from experiences up to 1930, that all Europeans were of officer caste; professional experience, and ability.

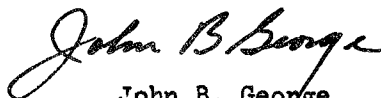
Still following along the same line, there is the matter of a loan (confidential, no doubt) of money by an Indian to one of the higher, original gentlemen. While most Europeans are solvent and many prosperous, others - less able to support the expensive European living standards, the real white man's burden - have been unable to live within their means. The acceptance of loans from Indians, the occasional employment of an officer class Britisher by an Indian, create new relationships. An example is provided by my Scot friend in Uganda, who supervises an Indian coffee and rubber plantation. His relations with his employer are friendly. They visit one another's homes and spend weekends together. Though it would be unthinkable that members of their own generation would intermarry, it is very conceivable that their children may. One can sense the first whispered hints, here always denied in public, of an inter-racial melting pot. Already there are a number of Eurasian marriages.

But the paramount impression of the weekend was seeing Rashid - the experience of looking a local Indian financier between the eyes. His tremendous vitality, his physical recklessness - the gambling carelessness with automobiles,

airplanes, rifles and shotguns - gave an impression of "show" and superficiality. But he spent three hours surreptitiously inventorying his cut lumber supply, carefully deciding on the relative costs of planking mahogany here or shipping the logs to England to be veneered. His remark about Gates' farm ("no ideas") was meaningful. As I continued to watch and listen it became clear that he was clever as well as reckless, perhaps just the sort of gambling-spirit-and-common-sense combination which the development of this raw country demands. His personal disregard of the game laws (much broken by others, of course) and of the nice Anglo-Saxon rules of sportsmanship hinted that his financial operations would not be impaired by concerns of legality or worries over employee welfare or any definition of "exploitation."

He is an "operator," I think, in the best and worse sense. His tremendous good humor, always wide grinning, mark him as a very likeable rogue. In this unknown area, where facts and statistics - like the number of hollow butted logs on a mountainside - are vague and the outcome of an investment generally impossible to predict, his kind are needed. Their principle is to pour money into the near end of a project, squeeze and massage the middle, and hope that more comes out the other. From the sisal holdings, saw mills, with their trucks and hauling equipment, and airplanes to play around with, I think that Rashid has the knack of making more come out than goes in.

Sincerely,


John B. George

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