

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Contact Man

Safari, Kijungu
Masai District, Tanganyika
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Often I have heard, especially at popular levels in the United States and England, a simple summation of the relations between European residents and the natives of tropical Africa. The Europeans are the sometimes impatient teachers; the Africans are the often reluctant pupils. Equally often, mainly in scholarly and business circles, I have heard the suggestion that the relationship of Europeans and Africans is a matter of individual contact - the interchange and contrast of implements and ideas between blacks and whites whom economic and religious motivations have, willy nilly, cast together. This notion, usually expressed in terms of "contact" presumes no acceptance by European or African of responsible roles of teacher or pupil. Also it allows for the possibility that Europeans who travel to Africa may not represent true Europe and that the particular Africans who respond most quickly to European ideas (and who provide from their ranks the African visitors to the European capitals) may not represent true Africa.

All this came to mind two weeks ago when I visited Naberera some 100 miles into the Masai steppes, and met Mr. Arthur H. Anderson, an American, and the single representative of Western civilization residing in that broad area. He is the very friendly and hospitable male nurse in charge of the local mission medical dispensary and the mission school as well. He called while I was settling in at the small brick rest house and my first day there was spent following him around, seeing the Naberera wells, the Masai watering their cattle there, and his hospital and school. I had come to see the Masai and the dry-season oasis of Naberera, but soon became as interested in Anderson as in the exotic qualities of the area.

He is a thin man of some 35 years, moderate height, with darting, energetic eyes, crinkled at the corners. Always, while I was at Naberera, he wore an air corps poplin flying suit, torn, threadbare and patched, and a cotton army overseas cap. The cuffs of the overalls sloped over the equally frayed toes of tennis shoes - the best compromise footgear in the African thorns and heat, where no type of shoe can be fully satisfactory. The flying garb, too, was practical; it kept off dust and chill during long drives in his windowless Chevrolet truck. As we bounced in this truck from site to site - he twisting the wheel and jerking the gearshift lever with nervous, uncoordinated movements - I heard a nice running commentary on the Mission and government installations.

The hospital, or more properly the dispensary, he said, did a thriving business. The Masai came in readily for medical attention, and brought their

babies in to be weighed. The most frequent adult complaints were gonorrhoea, treated with sulfa, and ulcers, which responded quickly to external applications of glycerin and Epsom salts. I asked about snakebite and other wild animal injuries and he said there were not many here, and made a special point of saying he himself did not fear snakes. The hospital compound consisted of three huts with four beds each and an outpatient clinic. The only assistance for him was one dresser and a sweeper, both paid by the government. The government, he said, also paid for the medicine. While he got out some medicine which I wished to buy from him, I noticed that there were, where faint auto tracks led up to the dispensary, large "in" and "out" signs (in English, not Kimasai or Swahili) to route the traffic properly. "Got to keep things straight here. When a truck driver goes in the wrong way we take him right over to the Jembe (Chief) and fine him 15 shillings." Naberera is reached, during the favorable dry months, by perhaps two or three trucks per week.

The church, a small tin-roofed brick building has wooden benches, a very austere altar, and an organ, which, he said, had been installed originally by the Germans. I was introduced to the Masai "minister" and school teacher who wore European clothes and had - like many newly educated Masai - removed the traditional copper pendants and looped the stretched, dangling lobes up over the top of each ear. While the children were singing in the church Anderson showed me through the two-room school building and told me that this was one of the two full primary schools with four standards in Masai District from which students could go on to the only middle school at Monduli. He had 60 students now, about 80 percent of them Masai, who lived with a few of the mothers in the mud and cowdung boma behind the school. In back of the school building was a mud-walled and tin-roofed kitchen area. I noticed it strewn with feathers of guinea fowl, and was surprised to hear him say the Masai (popularly understood to diet exclusively on meat, milk, and blood) ate the birds. But it was even more surprising to hear Anderson add, casually, that he often chased full grown guinea fowl and caught them in his hands. (I have clocked them, running, at 25 m.p.h. and of course they can fly.) He then mentioned again that the snakes here were deadly, but they did not frighten him, and began to describe some of his past biography and current operations.

He had lived all over the world, and had been in every one of the 48 states "many times." He felt himself an army man, having been in the army for three years; and in fact the overseas cap he was wearing was the one he had worn as an aid man in Normandy. He had boxed regularly with a sparring partner of Jack Dempsey. He always had been interested in business, and said frankly that he sold goods and traded items of general merchandise to the Masai at a profit, his mission salary being too small to live on. One of his largest selling items in the store was Lux Toilet soap and he asserted that the Masai - once they had used it - returned in droves and asked for it by brand name. "You have to charge them a shilling a bar rather than 90 cents. They don't have any use for the change. They have more money than they know what to do with. Some of them have herds of three to five thousand head of cattle and each head sells for about 270 shillings." (The government dresser and clerk told me the next day that the number ranged from 5 to 100 but about 50 was the usual number of heads in a herd.)

The next morning I bought from Anderson some 12 gallons of gasoline, willingly paying, here in the bush 33 1/3 percent above retail price. Then he guided me to a local native hut-shop to buy some corn flour. Here the twice-weekly truck was waiting, having just come down from Moshi. A crowd of blanketed Masai were there, loitering around the store front. He entertained them by doing a series of knife tricks (a fake stab, and a toss over the left shoulder and catch) and by juggling very adroitly several eggs.

He was obviously fond of the Masai and their country. "They're more like Americans than any other people I know. I admire them. We got things here you don't see anywhere else in the world." He was convinced the Masai regarded him with equal affection, citing that the local Moran (warrior age-grade) frequently invited him to their stag parties and meat feasts out in the bush.¹ He told me he was leaving the area in a few months and that the only way his superiors had been able to arrange for his safe departure was to tell the Masai that he was physically exhausted and need a rest. Without this explanation, the Masai would have used force to keep him there. They felt their taxes, collected by government, were paying for his services.

The completeness of my camp medical kit was discussed again the day I left. He told us we should have snakebite serum, then added, as if saying it for the first time, that he was not in the least afraid of reptiles. While we checked to see if he had some peroxide, rummaging through his store of bottles, he reiterated, making it very definite this time, "I fear no snake." Because I had just stoned to death a second large puff adder while walking with my wife near the rest house I was especially interested but I only listened. Curiosity got the best of my wife, however, and she asked him, "Just how do you cope with snakes?"

For a moment he ignored the question, darting to the subject of vermin destruction, telling us we had been careless in shooting three wild dogs (the wolves of Africa) which we had seen on the road. He continued. "You got to watch out. They always run in packs of ten. Not nine, or eleven. Ten. The other seven were hiding in the bush ... Snakes? O yes. Me? I just keep out of their way. Now, as I was saying, these dogs are the worst killers in this whole country ..."

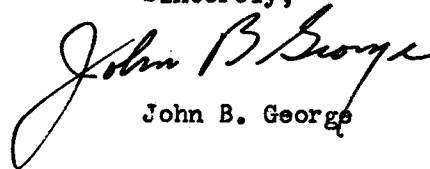
This was while we were walking to our jeep, the day we left Naberera. We said goodbye, and truthfully told him he had made our stay in Naberera interesting and enjoyable. Thinking about it since, it is a little difficult to place him in my listing of personalities - a private catalog of European personalities, described as I think African bush natives would describe them to one another, and including: (a) Red faced men who come to grow large tracts of corn, but who also waste their time growing lots of silly plants with big white, red and yellow blooms which only goats will eat - and these men keep

1. The quantity of meat which a Masai or other native can eat at a sitting is unbelievable. I have since seen one down a whole haunch of antelope (despite the tribal taboo against eating game), and an administrative officer at Mbulu, near Masailand, tells of a Masai dying after eating more than half of a leg of beef. His companions at the feast later told this officer they were not surprised. "We knew his stomach was weak," they said. "Before when he ate half a debbe of meat, he had stomach disturbances and was unable to sleep." A "debbe" is a tin holding four imperial gallons.

no goats. (b) Red faced men who come and spend weeks climbing mountains, just to get to the top. (c) Men of the same color, talking about their own Mungo (God) who come, tell the natives it is sinful to build special small huts and silly to sacrifice goats and food but entirely proper to wear crucifixes, medals, and keep special statues (and the Book of these men itself tells of many sacrifices of goats!). (d) Red faced men, understandably enough, who come to kill animals, but who give nearly all the meat away, and then hurry off to shoot another animal. (These men keep only the horns and the head part of the skin, which is useless as a blanket or for clothes; and except for the elephant tusks which are sold the horns are not even to be used as trumpets, only to look at!) (e) Red faced men, who seem not to realize that everything is bought with numbers of cattle, and who say that herds should be reduced to fewer fatter cattle. (f) Red faces who listen to their own red faced women, who allow their women to tell African men to do menial work around their houses, and who let their women in on all their men's affairs (even including hunting ...') and so on ...

Anderson cannot be added to this list. The knife tricks, juggling, impromptu boxing instruction, selling of trade goods, his ready willingness to jump in and assist natives with his hands, and his friendly readiness to go out with the Moran for a meat feast are reactions which are entirely too comprehensible to the Masai. He is not nearly so queer as the rest of the red people.

Sincerely,



John B. George

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