

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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No Safety Valve

P.O. Marangu
Moshi, Tanganyika
17 December 1952

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

In much of East Africa, native feelings have been somewhat bottled up. The present setup does not provide a wide opportunity for the native to blow off steam. Most East Africans I know are extroverts; they love singing, dancing, pageantry and story telling, and they have a special energy for those festive gatherings which anthropologists frequently describe as held for "ritualistic breaking of taboos." Administrative officers are generally aware of this native need, and anyone who has seen a Scottish dance or the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace knows the British themselves have a strong sense of festivity and pageantry. But the overworked colonial official can hardly be expected to allow unrestricted native gatherings in his area, especially when he is the person responsible for law and order. Particularly after he has dealt with the aftermath - in hospital and courtroom - of a large native dance and beer-drink, the young administrator tends to lose any sympathy he may have had for primitive festivities. For good reason (from the administrator's immediate standpoint) large meetings and dances cannot be held without the written consent of the local District Commissioner. There is no "bughouse square" in Kenya - no place where radical orators can legally ascend a soap box and lambast the government. When I recall the incessant, loose chatter of natives on safari, the often meaningless "happy talk" about any topic which comes to mind, it seems almost cruel that natives are denied the amusement and satisfying din of political gatherings, protest meetings, and an occasional harangue by a powerful lunged demagogue. Missionaries too have used their influence to tame down the tribal gatherings, feasts, and dances (so often termed "orgies") which traditionally have provided outlets for native ebullience.

The Colonial Secretary recently cited this blocking of outlets of native expression as a causal factor in the conception of secret societies such as the Mau Mau. Besides engendering secret activities, such restriction encourages devious forms of expression among the educated natives; and among the lower classes it sets people to writing social insults - like little boys chalking the backyard fence or writing on the inside walls of lavatories or concealed pieces of paper. The enclosed plate provides an example. On reading it, some will protest that it should not be passed off so lightly, as the mere vaporings

1. An example. Paramount Chief Thomas Marealle, in his anthropological article, "The Wachagga of Kilimanjaro," in Tanganyika Notes and Records, January, 1953, recounts the legend of the two peaks of Kilimanjaro, the sisters Kibo and Mawenzi. According to this legend the cleft in Mawenzi's peak was created by a blow, struck with a ladle, by her sister Kibo, who was outraged by Mawenzi's constant "sponging." Chief Marealle inserts a moral, "Too much spoon feeding is a bad thing for anyone." To all who know the situation in Chaggaland this is a back-handed slap by Thomas Marealle at the District Commissioner, Mr. Stubbings, and at the hovering posture of the local British administration.

of an insecure personality.

"The Africans Government the Truth

We are now teaching the place of having our self government, because when Europeans was not present in this Country we were kepted cows, goats and gardening but in this time we are very angry for Europeans to give the Africans much disturbing: and to aim us with the guns as a target mind you we are the human being. Europeans are strangers in this country, no doubt we say in sooth. This is the Africans country. The Kenya Europeans government has no (United Nations Charter) we leaved Albalita Hill and the other crowds are leaving Mega Abyssinians boundry. We are ready to reach in every directions in Africa. We wait to be visited by every one who wanting us. Who goes after a person does not miss him. We are wanting a dozen of heads for the Christmas in this month. We are Africans Communist Unit."

The photostatic copy of this note¹ was given to me by my acquaintance, Jack Yowell, who keeps a photographic shop in Nairobi and also runs around the country taking photos to sell to various newspapers. He had recently participated in a police raid on a small village near Rumuruti, halted a fleeing African by firing a revolver over his head, and found this paper in the man's pocket. The African, a young Kikuyu, wearing European clothes, was suspected of membership in the Mau Mau society and of illegally possessing a rifle.

I think the note, with the strange expressive power that only broken English can produce, is as revealing of dissident Kikuyu feelings as anything I have seen. Subject to correction by psychologists, I would like to interpret a few points.

The letter was most likely written by a man with some schooling, probably in a mission school, and certainly with missionary contact. The use of the archaic "sooth" and the consciousness of Christmas time are sound hints. He knows labels, but my guess is that even in his own language he could not satisfactorily define them. There is also a crying for attention, for being noticed, for attaining a greater identity as an individual - and, I suppose, a dozen other implications of characteristics not unlike those of primitives emergent in other colonial areas

The outstanding context, of course, is the writer's heavy resentment and sense of grievance towards the Europeans, and perhaps the note was

1. The original paper was turned over to the police, who have not, to my knowledge, passed it on to the East African Standard. A copy, however, was transmitted, with photographs, by Yowell to the London press and it may have been published there.

written in English as a psychological alternative to the preferred form of shouting the words into a European's face. The writer subscribes to the popular belief that Europeans have restricted Kikuyu land, though it also may be possible that his inference that present reductions of herds and farming was caused by Europeans may be based on the recent punitive confiscations of livestock. The Government of Kenya is spoken of as a "Europeans" government, and the Europeans are accused (possibly because of the holding by the military of public firepower demonstrations) of being entirely too ready with their guns. The United Nations Charter he will have read of in various vernacular and English papers - with the association that the United Nations has sometimes taken the side of tribesmen against the Europeans. The term "communist", most likely, is identified primarily as an object violently hated by the Europeans and therefore favorable to the Kikuyu. The threat of wanting a dozen heads for Christmas (and the related mutilation of bodies and hamstringing of cattle in some recent violences) would be adjudged by many Europeans here as carefully calculated to horrify the European mind, like the little boy who once pulled a frog in two in front of his dominant-natured elder sister. "We are reaching in every directions ..." and "We wait to be visited by everyone..." shows the desire to gather other Africans, other tribes, into the movement against the Europeans.

Although I believe this letter to be spontaneous and individual enough itself - by no means an organizational pamphlet - it indicates the basis for a spreading and rather uniform anti-European movement. Once granted the uniformity of reaction, the only problem in coordinating separate terrorist groups is one of communications. Anyone who has witnessed the lightning travel of news through tribal villages and who knows the doubtless efficiency of the grapevine telegraph in East Africa, can visualize an alarming degree of coordination among terrorists - a real ability to "reach in every directions." Within a single tribe like the Kikuyu the scattered groups of dissidents - when they have such uniform objectives - could seem on the surface to be coordinated and disciplined from a single headquarters. Like guerrilla movements in occupied countries each operation of a terrorist group in Kenya can be undertaken on the basis of perfect intelligence - exact knowledge of police and protective dispositions.

In view of the Mau Mau murders and violence in Kenya the threats contained in this letter are not empty and should be treated with full respect and regarded as criminal evidence. I wonder, however, if some at least of the secret society violence is not partially or even basically caused by the present closure of avenues of loud native complaint and invective. I feel this letter is similar to the murderous anger of a safari porter, who said he was going to kill a local headman, the chief porter of the safari, for having denied him a share of meat from a recent kill. He came before my tent with his spear, and I (with my thumb touching the butt of a concealed revolver) watched and listened attentively while he danced in a small circle, leaping into the air some twenty times, shouting, jabbing with the spear and then maliciously twisting the shaft as he withdrew it each time from the chief's

imaginary prostrate body. All Acholi (the headman's tribe) were tiny little birds, they each had six fathers, and to kill them was the great joy of all good men, he shouted. Then he walked away from my tent, lay down and rested by the fire. The next morning he was obeying - in the qualified but cheerful way in which East African natives obey - the orders of the offending headman.

Sincerely,

John B. George
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The Africans judgement the trial

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