

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dilemma in Kenya

P.O. Marangu
Moshi, Tanganyika
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

The initial excitement of the Kenya emergency has waned, though scattered violence goes on. I left the trials at Kapenguria eleven days ago and was envied in departure by the weary newspapermen whose original high interest had given way to boredom. A spirit of impasse - miniature of the larger racial-political deadlock within the colony - had entered the courtroom. More recently the judge has reacted to the repetitious protests of the defense counsel and has adjourned the court for fifteen days ending 30th December; during this period it will be decided whether Mr. Pritt's message to four British M.P.'s constitutes contempt of court. The African Information Officer, Nairobi, will wire me when, by his best guess, he thinks the trial is in its last ten days. This should enable me to return to Kapenguria for the final week. I would like to hear Kenyatta and others of the accused take the stand. Meanwhile, from here at Marangu I can follow developments by radio and newspaper and in this more sober atmosphere I can reflect on the revelations of the emergency and the trial - the large amount of dirty linen now being aired.

The front page of the East African Standard scans as before. The bodies of two elders have been found north of Nairobi. The search for murderers of an Asian merchant continues. A chief and his wife were attacked and shot, the wife dying since in South Nyeri reserve. The bodies of two askaris (soldiers), missing with their rifles and thirty rounds of ammunition from patrol since Tuesday, have now been found in a river.

Remedial actions by the government have been critically discussed in Kenya Legislative Council. Several members deplore the mass movement of some 3,000 squatters from European land around Thompson's Falls into the already crowded Kikuyu reserves. One member suggests the evicted tribesmen be employed in an enlarged public works program. In the Nakuru area the Europeans are moving to terminate the squatter problem, considering the introduction of concentrated villages for farm labor and the immediate reduction of squatter-owned livestock, measures calculated to cut down law-breaking and make policing easier. Inside the reserves with the help of the African leader in Legislative Council, Mr. Mathu - who has recently switched from his wavering line and strongly condemned Mau Mau - and other favorably disposed African leaders "resistance groups" and "home guards" are being recruited and organized. Mr. Mathu has complained in Legco that this "very effective" method of combating Mau Mau is not being properly exploited by government. The old requirement of carrying identity cards, much condemned in the past, is now reinstated for the Kikuyu. A new identity card or the top half of the old kipande must be carried by every adult Kikuyu at all times.

Many here are mindful of the larger context of this emergency - its world-wide racial political implications. One gathers from Mr. Pritt's statements in court that the international consideration of treatment of constitutional minorities and racial groups are paramount in his thoughts. There is also the aspect of pan-African nationalism - even Afro-Asian nationalism - when one considers the composition of Kenyatta's defense counsel. The counsel includes two Asians, a local African, a Nigerian lawyer, a Jamaican, and a European whose name has been linked with the defense in previous subversive trials in several parts of the world. The interest evoked in the press all over Africa is a further hint. The legal issue of the trial - the fact of guilt or innocence of association with a subversive terrorist group - might well be submerged in this welter of larger political considerations.

No racial group in East Africa is concentrating on the purely legal issues of the trial. Over and above the consideration of legal innocence or guilt are the thoughts "What will happen if they go free?" and "Must every political ambition of these natives be appeased?" and, from the other side, "Are the Europeans using this emergency as an excuse to blot out the last vestige of native political rights in Kenya?" Local politics, as well as influences from the outside, tend to creep into the most objective minds involved in the trial or the emergency.

At the vortex of this whole political mess is a fairly uncomplicated conflict between two groups, the permanent European residents in Kenya and the Kikuyu tribe. The real issue is confined to a million blacks and 30,000 whites inside an area smaller than the State of Indiana. Practically speaking, the whites have been here less than fifty years. In this short time - and this is the kernel of all misunderstandings - the two tremendously contrasting peoples have blended in no way, have compromised only bitterly, and have had only scattered and tentative success in gaining sympathy with one another's divergent values. My opinion is that no person or group on either side is to blame for this failure to blend or even compromise. The tremendous gap between the two cultures has been beyond human understanding to bridge.

With a brief explanation I think the European residents of Kenya, settlers included, can be understood by Americans. They are similar in many ways to most Americans I know and their reaction to broad contact with their black employees and neighbors has been considerably less violent than the reactions I have observed of American troops to natives of China, Burma, and the Pacific islands. In general the British have been less shocked by native customs such as the ritualistic killing of twins than my American overseas companions were by Kachin head-hunting practices. Instead of recoiling from primitive tribal practices the East African Europeans have usually tolerated, sometimes attempted correction, often tried to persuade the natives to another belief.

There has been surprisingly little strong arm action, considerable non-interference, and only minor punitive actions against the Nandi and one or two other tribes to compare in violence with our nineteenth century treatment of the remaining American Indians. The British who first came here in sizable numbers carried modern rifles, but in contrast to the Germans immediately south they very seldom used them on natives. Naturally, the settlers here have

varying degrees of tolerance and there have been scattered instances of Simon Legree behavior with natives. These few instances - plus the wide failure abroad to realize the vast gulf between black and white cultures - have created in some quarters the impression that the Kenya settler is a whip-carrying brute. At the same time they have blinded much of the outside world to the fact that the Europeans (particularly the British) in East Africa are the only torch-bearers of western civilization, and nearly all of its cherished values, in this area.

Superficially, the most damning evidence of European exploitation is the possession by Europeans of large tracts of fertile land, enormous compared with individual native holdings. In the face of a united protest by all Kenya tribes, particularly the Masai who were driven off, the European landholders would have few historical legs to stand on except that much of the Masai rangeland was not physically occupied when they moved in. But only a tiny portion of present European holdings can be claimed as stolen from the Kikuyu. Many Europeans, especially those who weathered out the depression in East Africa, have faced real pioneer difficulties here. Many of them today have calloused greasy hands from repairing tractors and farm fences and other farm tasks.

Let me describe some aspects of the Kikuyu tribe as it has been described before by Europeans and as I have seen it. The tribe numbers a little over a million natives of Bantu stock, people with short kinky hair and features commonly described as negroid, unlike the hamitic or nilotic blacks who have caucasoid features. They live in a circle some 200 miles in diameter touching Nairobi on its south perimeter and encompassing some of the best watered and most fertile land in East Africa. In this area they have broad contact with Europeans. The borders of the reserves often touch European farms, and many Kikuyu are employed by Europeans on their farms and in the city of Nairobi.

As a tribe the Kikuyu have been accused of being spineless, incapable of self help. Negley Farson begins a chapter on the Kikuyu with a reference to the way they work their women, making them carry the heavy loads and do all of the village chores while the men sit and drink beer. It is easy to verify this by driving through a Kikuyu area and counting the load-carrying and field-toiling women and the much smaller number of working men. My experience is that the ratio usually is better than ten to one, with nearly all of the men walking empty handed, or sitting idly near the huts. Yet the men run the affairs of the tribe. The traditional route to wealth among the Kikuyu men is to have many cattle and goats, many wives to work the fields, many sons to provide old age security and many healthy daughters to bring high bride-prices. There was no indigenous concept (in the western sense) of hard work, fruitful labor, or industry and it has been very slow in developing. Most Kikuyu men resort to labor only if they have been crowded off the land, and they tend to revert to the land as soon as their savings are large enough to satisfy minimum demands for land, livestock, and a wife to do the farm work.

The comfortable, relaxed hours in the shade of the grass eaves of a hut, sipping beer and eating food brought by a woman, have a doubtless tropical charm. And the loss of this life, coincident with and thought to be caused by the arrival of the white man, cannot be condoned by the gift of any tremendously

raised standard of living, if that standard of living demands that the Kikuyu male live the life and work the hours of an American factory worker. The "spinelessness" of the Kikuyu, in fact, could be described from a sympathetic point of view as an unprogressive but understandable refusal to abandon his priceless leisure and climb aboard our Western treadmill. The flaw in this refusal is that now there is not enough land. The Kikuyu male refuses to face this reality; in the past he has been getting something for nothing, and the discontinuance of this largess has made him one of the most discontented people in the world.

The further background of this discontent follows an old pattern. With the law and medicine brought in by Europeans death from tribal warfare and disease declined, as did deaths from famine because the Europeans could haul grain from one area to another. The reserves became crowded and more Kikuyu were forced out to employment in Nairobi and on European farms. At the same time native desire for European goods emerged. Clothes were the first item, beds similar to the European's might have been second, household goods, pots and pans, bicycles followed. Through missionary education a larger number of Africans learned English and became able to read the many books in that language on human rights, liberty, democratic government and the arguments for universal suffrage. Gradually by the processes described in Mrs. Huxley's anthropological novel, Red Strangers, a number of natives took on limited European ways and began to appear anxious to accept a European way of life and achieve European standards of living. This caused considerable confusion and disagreement within the tribe and clans, the two extremes advocating on the one hand the absolute retention of the old tribal ways and on the other the adoption of European customs as well as tools. The latest step in this process and perhaps the most dynamic was the travelling abroad of numbers of educated Kikuyu and their exposure to the ideas of receptive peoples in London and, in at least one case, Moscow. With the emergence of a group aspiring to European ways and rewards came the first serious threat that the hermetic seal between the tribal and European worlds might be cracked. Larger numbers of Kikuyu were swayed and under the educated leaders growing political associations were founded aiming at the attainment of political freedoms and economic amenities.

Although the earlier Kikuyu Central Association was proscribed as a dangerous society, the post-war Kenya African Union (KAU) appeared to be seeking greater political and economic rights by constitutional means. The question of land and self-government became the center from which all demands, appeals and pronounced objectives radiated. Like nationalistic movements anywhere the demands of KAU were often irrational and its actions (labor influences, strikes) often deliberately obstructive. But the pronouncements of the KAU leaders were not in complete discord with European ideas of progress and uplift. There was no hint of a desire to revert to a purely tribal way of life or to use the tribal devices of terrorism and murder to gain their ends. The feature encouraging to so many was the apparent abandonment of primitive paganism and the desire to achieve western if not Christian goals.

KAU's westernized, evolutionary appearance made it seem distinct from atavistic contemporary organizations such as Dini ya Msambwá and Mau Mau. This distinction has become questionable in view of the events leading up to the emergency in Kenya, the arrest of the KAU leaders and the evidence thus far presented at the trials. The Mau Mau was described by the crown prosecutor as the militant wing or the Stern Gang of the KAU. I believe this may be true.

The crimes attributed to Mau Mau at the present moment could occur I believe with a certain degree of spontaneity - it is not as though someone pushed a button in a Nairobi cellar to cause a murder in North Nyeri - but the growth of the Mau Mau and the uniformity of the oaths in different localities demanded a certain degree of organization and leadership as well as widespread resentment and grievance. I feel reasonably certain - from what I heard at the trial - that the KAU leaders now under trial were in fact closely associated with the Mau Mau movement and that certain branches of KAU protected and nurtured Mau Mau recruitment and organization. This means either (1) that KAU leaders have never seriously envisaged a gradual non-violent attainment of a greater political role in a western government or (2) that they have abandoned all hope of attaining any of their goals without a reversion to tribal methods of terrorism to force the Europeans to terms. In martialling the support for the Mau Mau program there has been a complete - though possibly expedient and temporary - reversion to traditional tribal goals as well as to the use of witchcraft, primitive superstition and terroristic methods.

In the minds of the optimistically inclined, especially those observers abroad, KAU's apparent westernization built up a framework of an altered African society which could absorb and utilize the best things Europe could offer. This structure too has been shattered by these recent transpirings in Kenya.

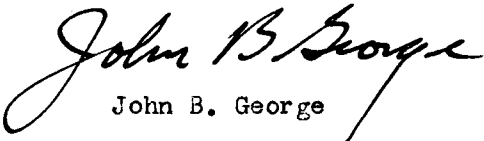
Some few onlookers, again principally in England and farther away, went so far as to assume The Tribe - superstition and adherence to primitive ways - was losing its grip on a large proportion of the Kikuyu people. The emergency has illustrated the complete fallacy of this notion. The fear of witchcraft and tribal sanctions still dominates the Kikuyu mind. The belief in the efficacy of traditional ceremonies of oath taking, like the Mau Mau ritual with the arch of banana leaves and the contents of the goat's stomach in a leaf-lined hole in the earth, is the outstanding illustration. To an extent this aspect of tribalistic superstition can be utilized by the government, which has sponsored similar ceremonies to cleanse Mau Mau members of their oath. But the medium is primarily Kikuyu, and only a few Europeans would know whether a cleansing ceremony were genuine or faked. Some Kikuyu have told me that they would not consider a cleansing ceremony really effective if a European were present or even near the site.

Overlapping The Tribe in the minds of the natives, both Kikuyu and outsiders, is the broad feeling of terror. This is not quite the same as fear of sanctions within the tribe, and it has prevented non-Kikuyu from giving testimony and may have forced some to cooperate with the Mau Mau. Some time back, when a local chief and his tribal police escort were murdered, the area for four miles around was deserted. This may be partly due to a reputation of the Kenya police for strong arm methods, but it also was caused by the fear of Mau Mau revenge. The body of Tom Mbotela, dead most of the night and morning, was found in Burma Market, Nairobi, by a European. This was after several hours of daylight, and according to the coroner's verdict the African leader had been killed not later than 11:00 the previous night. Hundreds of Africans must have passed the body, yet none mentioned it to the police. Again this is partly fear of gangster revenge - a fear which is more than justified in view of the number of witnesses against Mau Mau who have been killed afterward.

I did not attempt to sum things up in this fashion in the seven letters preceding this regarding the Mau Mau but as I made the observations and clarified them in my mind by writing the letters the one point which I am attempting to make in this one seemed crystal clear: the wave of optimism regarding the possibility of westernizing all East African tribes through processes of persuasion and education, which I felt in classroom and cocktail party in England and the United States, is unjustified. The Kikuyu, while they have not had such a polite tendering of our civilization as have certain other tribes, are by no means prepared to accept it, and the killings and terrorism of Mau Mau are, in my opinion, a more honest expression of Kikuyu feelings than any of the arm chair colonists I know in England are willing to admit.

Solutions? I have none to offer. But I can visualize three possible courses. Two of them I mention only academically, the realities of the moment making them impractical. The first of these impractical courses would be to appease all Kikuyu demands at once - that is, to the extent physically possible - split up the Kenya white highlands and all other European holdings and hand them out to the Kikuyu, evict the European farmers and set up a native government with only such European advisers as the native leaders would wish to retain. The second theoretical course - the other extreme - would be to empower the European-dominated government of Kenya to go ahead and take any steps necessary for the solution of the Kikuyu problem including, if they deem it advisable, the deportation, enslavement, or even the extermination of the Kikuyu tribe. Either of these two courses would be more understandable to natives - or so I have been told by several Kikuyu - than present policies. The third course - and really the only course - is to continue as at present with a persistent, heart-breaking attempt being made, piecemeal, to reconcile Kikuyu and European irreconcilabilities.

Sincerely,



John B. George

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