

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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A White Man Explains

Poste Restante
Arusha, Tangan.
East Africa
10 January 1953

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Different people of East Africa have different ideas regarding the causes of Mau Mau violence in Kenya. These conflicting notions do not correspond strictly to either racial or economic distinctions: Africans, Europeans, and Indians are by no means split into definite camps. However, the more intelligent and lucid of all three races are clearly divided on the basic question "Are there genuine economic grievances behind this movement, or is it simply the work of a few ambitious and unscrupulous native political leaders who are using tribal superstition and atavistic tendencies to obtain selfish advantage?"

Mr. F.S. Joelson, founder and editor of the authoritative London weekly, East Africa and Rhodesia, has taken a firm stand on the issue. Repeatedly he has editorialized that the Mau Mau movement is led by selfish, dissident leaders who capitalize on tribal barbarism, and that it has no economic basis whatsoever. Many resident Europeans and many Asiatics and non-Kikuyu natives as well, shocked by the series of murders and atrocities, concur. The result has been a general if tacit outlawry of the Kikuyu tribe throughout East Africa, every member now being regarded as a potential murderer. Validly enough Joelson has praised the Europeans for their "restraint" during this period of high anger, and with sound reason he has condemned the London Daily Mirror for having printed an article referring to the Kenya settlers as a "trigger happy minority howling for Kikuyu blood." There has been less trigger touching here than an experienced observer would expect - from an armed European population burdened with a complex of fear and indignation.

With the publication of a timely 115 page book entitled Mau Mau and the Kikuyu (London: Methuen), Dr. I.S.B. Leakey, the tweedy, gray haired curator of the Coryndon Museum, Nairobi, clearly denies the "no economic causes" argument. His background of a childhood spent with Kikuyu playmates, later status as a member and elder of the tribe, and intimate knowledge of the Kikuyu language (he is the interpreter I met at the trials of the alleged Mau Mau leaders) makes him the most knowledgeable white man regarding the tribe.

Dr. Leakey explains the Kikuyu psychology with respect to land - how these natives cannot avoid thinking that much of their land was stolen by the whites, though from the settlers' point of view it had been legally purchased and paid for generously. Leakey explains that the land in Kiambu, the district just north of Nairobi, had been bartered for by the Kikuyu under tribal "law" from the Wanderobo before the arrival of the settlers. It was not held on a communal or tribal basis but was "owned" by members of the sub-clan descended from the original purchaser. Later when the settlers arrived, they found the land almost vacant (due to intervening invasions of rinderpest, smallpox, drought, and locust) and they paid the few inhabitants for land rights. Not knowing the Kikuyu tribal law which forbade the sale of land except between "brothers" the Europeans failed to sanctify the purchase by ceremonially making blood brotherhood with the Kikuyu, or to fulfill other requirements such as the demarcation of boundaries accompanied by a religious ceremony and the securing of agreement by all members of the sub-clan. The Kikuyu since have been unable to regard the transactions as binding in any way. They devoutly believe the Kiambu lands stolen - as by tribal law they had been. This particular area was only a small part of Kikuyu land and constitutes but a small portion of the Kenya white highlands, but native leaders have found it convenient since to propagandize that most of the European highlands had been "stolen" in similar ways.

While these claims are preposterous, the Kikuyu land today, because of an increase in population through the introduction of European medicine and hygiene and the abandonment of traditional methods of birth control, is grossly over-populated. Many landless men have found work in Nairobi, though they most often regard the city residence as artificial and devoid of future and security.

Leakey then describes the breakdown through contact with missionaries, administrators and white civilization in general of Kikuyu education, initiation and marriage customs, and religion which in the early days moulded the young tribesmen and instilled a respect for (tribal) law and order. While the pagan, but stabilizing religion and the respect for tribal law, were gradually eroded, they were not fully replaced by Christian morality or reverence for the new government. Leakey feels the changes in marriage customs are responsible for much of the discontent among Kikuyu youth. He explains how, after easily expendable money had largely taken the exchange place of cattle which normally were held in keeping after the marriage by the bride's family, the bride price has ceased to be a guarantee of good faith between in-laws and has become only a burden on the young Kikuyu. He also describes the Kikuyu as a naturally "religious" (or, if you will, superstitious) people and feels that a non sectarian form of Christianity must be found to replace the needed spiritual allegiance. The desire of many

Kikuyu for European clothes, bicycles and other items generally beyond their incomes has also contributed to basic discontent.

A few educated Kikuyu have emerged, absorbing European ways, and some have traveled abroad. These leaders (often called "demagogues" and "spivs" by Europeans) found the land issue a good theme, and by harping it have been able to marshal huge followings for various associations pledged to restore the "stolen" land. Even louder than demands for higher wages or self government is the unceasing cry for Land, Land, Land.

The Mau Mau Society, Leakey agrees, did not rise solely out of economic grievances, and it is fundamentally a terrorist organization intended to drive the Europeans away by violence. He thinks that its activities became overt much earlier than the leaders intended, and that had the actual violence been timed as intended, the attacks on Europeans would have been much more serious and widespread.¹ But he strongly opposes the "no economic grievances" point of view, saying that the Mau Mau "could never have achieved its present position if the genuine grievances ... had not existed in the minds of a large part of the Kikuyu population."

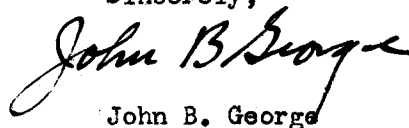
Dr. Leakey suggests several measures to ease Kikuyu discontent. The first is a program of water development and land reclamation, to bring permanent water to the considerable areas of land in Kenya which could be productive during seasonable rains. This would enable Kikuyu to resettle permanently on the new land. He suggests a fearless attack on the problem of population increase - which he spells out as the setting up of birth control clinics. In the final chapter he enlarges upon the need for religious faith among the Kikuyu. "Agnosticism is not for them ... real Christianity is the answer and not all the plethora of confusing doctrines and dogmas of the various churches ..." He goes on to touch the matters of color bar, discriminatory rates of pay, and the very serious barrier to understanding of language. Very few Europeans know Kikuyu, and the standard medium of Swahili is not satisfactory. The answer is to speed up the teaching of English.

The book is successful in more than its intent to provide a background for understanding current events in Kenya. Its sketch of Kikuyu tribal ways is more concise than Elspeth Huxley's novel Red Strangers and should replace that book for readers who wish a quick familiarization with an East African agricultural tribe, or with the breakdown of tribal

1. Mr. Pritt, defense counsel in the trial of Jomo Kenyatta and other alleged Mau Mau leaders, has recently requested that Dr. Leakey be replaced as trial interpreter, because the book hints that Dr. Leakey believes the defendants are guilty.

ways after the arrival of the white man. Its principal limitation is that the proposed remedies are thought out in the narrow frame of Kikuyu-European relations, when in reality no solution can be sought without considering the whole Kenya and East Africa picture. The Kikuyu are one of many tribes in East Africa. Other tribes are overcrowded and have historic land complaints (against one another as well as against the Europeans) as legitimate as those now put forward by the Kikuyu. After a similar amount of contact with Europeans these other peoples could become fully as vocal as the Kikuyu. The appeasement of all native land hunger in East Africa would not be possible even with the forced departure of all land holding Europeans. A program of "appeasement" of Kikuyu demands for land now, so timed as to appear in response to terrorist threats, could persuade dissidents of other tribes that violence pays.

Sincerely,



John B. George

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