

JBG-7  
Across Kenya

~~NOT FOR PUBLICATION~~

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

The Border Inn  
Busia, Uganda  
British East Africa  
25 July 1950

Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 18, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Last night I crossed the Kenya-Uganda border, customs inspection consisting of a sleepy native guard glancing at my licence plates and securing my signature on a rough sort of registry sheet. The Border Inn, some few yards from the road barrier, is the only hotel for many miles. It is a good place to rest for a day and let one's spine recover from the jarring of the last hundred miles of Kenya "highway" - a road surfaced at intervals with earth, anthill pilings, and crushed rock and tar, each with corrugations, wrinkles, and washouts equally unkind to tires, springs, and backbones.

This marks completion of a trip across the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, road distance some 630 miles. Accomplished at a leisurely rate and in several easy stages, this trip has given me a good first look at the unbelievably varied land and peoples - a glance at the "face" of Kenya. And, like ulcers and lesions on the skin of a diseased human, this face bears some ugly sores - obvious symptoms of social and economic pathology. I mean, by our standards they are sores. By the present day norms of much of Asia and the Pacific islands, similar manifestations are accepted as routine and inevitable.

The first thing I noticed was the absence of any signs of Kenya nationalism: no flags, no patriotic activities by Kenyans wishing to identify themselves as Kenyans. But there was sign galore of at least three other types of nationalism: Kenya settlers proud of being British, Indians proud of being Hindus or Moslems, an endless variety of native tribesmen proudly wearing their tribal emblems, gazing with stoic dislike at the Indian and the native of another village. The mosques and Moslem schools built by (and in outspoken honor of) the Aga Khan, the whitewash and tinsel-glitter of the recent British-led celebration over the Crown grant of cityhood to Nairobi, the prevalence of mud huts and native poverty nearby - all attest to the highly fragmented state of human society in Kenya today. It requires no anthropologist or sociologist to see that Kenya, practically speaking, has little or no common-denominator spirit of nationalism.

These separate nations within Kenya seem not only anxious to retain their own identity, but wherever possible to do so

at the expense of one of the other groups. A marked example of this is provided by the Indians, who display in shopwindow and home the color-print portraits of their national heroes. Quite often Subhas Chandra Bose, pictured in a Japanese officers uniform with no insignia but with the prefix "Field Marshal" in the caption, appears on display alongside the portraits of Jinnah and Nehru - the memory of an Allied war criminal lionized to spite the British. It is easy to generalize that a variety of cultures within a larger society can actually promote cooperation in a democratically governed area; but it is hard to carry this concept into the East Africa scene where the variety is so very, very great.

The second point of note seemed to be the constant picture of "contrast" - the New and the Old always alongside one another, and stepping on one another's toes. In the cities there is a degree of technological development which Americans would like to call "American" cramped for space with a way-of-life in the city native quarter which no one would care to lay claim to. It may be an oversimplification to speak of the Iron Age native and the 20th Century white, but right before your eyes is the native porter with his heavy load, breathing dust from the tires of huge diesel trucks. In one field a tractor drags a gang-plow; across the fence a native digs with a hand-wrought hoe. One can shrug off this sort of sight until he sees a man from one culture striking a man of another across the face with a whip of hippo hide. "Never strike a boy with your doubled fist; their teeth always come through; always septic in the mouth, they infect and die. Better use a hippo whip."

The man who gave me this advice is a man to whom you would take an instant liking, a British war hero, young, energetic, intelligent. By every standard he had built up during his life, in the army and before, the natives he would beat were sub-human, malingering; and the whip was his only tool for urging them to earn their own bread. What he was by the standards of the beaten laborers I do not yet know; but to me the obvious point is that the difference in cultures or "standards" is enormous, and must be thought of in terms of a power struggle, rather than a process of synthesis. The impression I have after this first look is that it cannot be resolved by uncoerced agreement, even over a long period of time. The present (but perhaps rapidly altering) power situation in Kenya is definitely in favor of the representatives of European culture, but British public opinion (in U.K.) always threatens to reach out and put a finger on the scales in favor of native interests, whenever the Europeans discard the whip in favor of the club or gun. It seems a matter of subjective opinion as to whether this policy of reaching out to touch the scales is "good" or "bad". My own interest in the matter is in trying to form an accurate and realistic assessment of the power factors - both physical and moral - involved. This would enable me to give a seasoned opinion as to whether it is good or bad from the standpoint of United States interests, or British interests, or Kenya Settler interests, or Native interests, or Indian interests.

The only thing of which I am presently certain is that this opinion would have to be segmented into five different and conflicting answers.

One important aspect of this double standard of cultures is the economic side - the double standard of living now so evident in nearly every town of Kenya. The natives live, from choice, often, in hovels while Europeans live in regular European-type houses, often very roomy and large. The Indians live in both styles, dependent upon individual socio-economic status. Years ago this was accepted by the natives, but now, with longer contact and with many natives having traveled in the exalted status of Allied soldiers during the recent war, native ambitions have been stirred. Some of them want what the white man has got. This is evident in the tremendous increase in theivery, attested by bars or protective metal mesh across every window in the urban areas, and by continuous reports to the police. Everything, it seems to the newcomer, has "expanded metal" - a diamond-mesh screening processed from steel plates - nailed across. Car windows, doors, all openings for ventilation are screened, so that one gets the feeling that all the air you breathe is strained through the stuff. The rural areas are not so bad, and the overall picture is not so bad as immediately after demobilization, but in many quarters it is felt that another war would surely have the effect of increasing crime in East Africa to a point beyond control.

Many Europeans give the native ex-soldiery credit for stirring further trouble. The recent Nairobi strike, they say, was caused by the "unreasonable" attitudes of service men returned. In general, however, it would appear that the soldiers have successfully readjusted, some returning to the reserves and perhaps buying more wives with their demobilization pay, some few working at a trade learnt during the war, some attending the government-sponsored schools, and a large number earning wages as private askaris, or guards, watching over European homes, auto-parks, and factory yards at night. The universal mark of the Kenya ex-native-soldier is a service overcoat, generally uncleaned and worn regardless of the temperature with bare legs and feet beneath.

Just how much American influences, such as the films and commercial advertising, have had to do with increasing native political consciousness is hard to say. Most Europeans object to the showing of Hollywood gangster movies, on the basis of "monkey sees, monkey does." Also, they say, the continuous portrayal of the "American Way of Life" by these same media has served to unduly stir native desire for material things. The effect of this is not lessened by the eternal presence of American-made automobiles and home conveniences, which are often preferred by the British to their own. The streets of Mombasa, Nairobi, and Kisumu are plastered with American trade marks; placards and whole window displays are present in such volume that I am ready to deny the sparse figures I searched out last month on American investment in East Africa.

In Nairobi especially, it is clear that the European resident, too, has been much influenced by American ideas, manners, and machines. A lot of this is second hand, having crept up from South Africa, but it is none the less still recognizable as American. Clothes and manners have been affected to a point so extreme that you have to hear a man speak before you can say with surity that he is not an American. Haircuts shorter, the absence of stiff winged collars with dinner jackets, sportcoats longer than at Oxford and without the hourglass effect; and the women wearing makeup and dress as on the west side of the Atlantic. It is so very deceptive that after watching a man at another table for a good part of the evening, placing him definitely as from Texas or Oklahoma, I was finally prevented from saying howdy to him only by the way he ate - heaping spinach on the back of his fork, knife in right hand. Except for the last he would have fooled a Texan in Texas.

If it is true that these diverse impressions of a mixed, clashing, multi-racial, multi-cultural society are symptoms of a fatal disease, it is equally true that it is an active and interesting disease, much more entertaining to the observer than some of the "healthier" societies. East Africa, at first glance, appears to have plenty of strife, plenty of discontent and disorder - but also plenty of virility, vitality, and fresh air...

The people and places seen since my last letter have included Mr. Groth, the Consul General in Nairobi, who had me to several meals and who introduced me to a number of people including Mr. Scott the Administrator to the High Commission; a game warden of the Tsavo National Park, whose two-thirds-grown lion cub scared Mr. Groth stiff when the Consul walked into his camp; the National Park itself, where I spent two hours watching herds of impalla, zebra, warthog, and other animals; Mr. Ronald Adams, a Kenya Settler who introduced me to several other settlers; their large, grassy farms - especially that of Bruce McKenzie who showed me around during a whole morning, pointing with pride to his prize holsteins, some of which were flown as calves from Holland; and, just to make things complete, I lunched one day at the consulate with the Reverends Hopkins and Steele, of the Nairobi Churches of England and Scotland, respectively. (The conversational ingenuity displayed by these two - in reconciling Christianity with what is happening in East Africa today - was splendid to hear. Both seem to be highly competent men, kept keen and alert, no doubt, by constant trial in this agnostic-pagan land.)

I also was shown around the coffee plantation of a Mr. Doddington, near Nairobi, seeing and hearing explained all the hulling and drying machinery and the layout of the trees on his land. An impression here was of the rather heavy

gambling involved in most Kenya farming. One year there is rain enough for a fine crop; the next the trees and plants remain parched and brown through 12 months. One year there are locusts, whose control demands a program going back two years before the expected invasion, with scientific installations in the breeding grounds as far north as Asia Minor; the next year the locusts are gone but the price of coffee may have plunged. Today the price is high, and Mr. Doddington has a good crop. But only twenty miles away - rainfall being a very local matter in parts of Kenya - other farmers have had too little rain for a crop worth harvesting. Again, on this farm too, I saw the natives living in the same mud huts, clothed in scant rags...

The High Commission Administrator referred me to a Mr. Martin, chief of his statistical branch, as being the key figure for me to approach for all sorts of information. I spent the morning of 21st June chatting with Mr. Martin in his office, learned that he had been doing research at Princeton last year, and made friends with him. He stated his willingness to do anything possible for me, and referred me in turn to a Mr. Gare, a sort of greeter and itinerary-fixer for official visitors to the High Commission. The latter offered to arrange my travelling plans, have me go on a number of semi-official tours, and to arrange for accommodations for me in housing-crowded Nairobi. With appropriate thanks, I declined all these offers, for the time being at least. I did, however, avail myself of his kind offer to write to an official in charge of a fisheries research agency at Mwanza, on Lake Victoria near the district I will soon be visiting. It sounded like a good example of the scientific services being given by the High Commission in outlying areas. After my first trip around, when I begin to dig through documents in the High Commission library at Nairobi, Mr. Martin and Mr. Gare will be very good people to know. (Mr. Darling, the official to whom Mr. Rogers of the Colonial Office had given me a letter of introduction, is now on leave.)

The drive from Nairobi was as scenic as any stretch of highway, road, or trail I have known. The east bank of the Great Rift Valley, seen from the hairpin-turning road, has a breath-taking quality. The valley can be seen laid out, scrub, with patches of dry-brown, and green in the lower areas. While I watched an airplane, looking like a child's toy, moved through the big trough - at a safe enough altitude, but a mile lower than the ledge I watched from.

I left Nakuru with Mr. McKenzie pulling my sleeve and begging me to stay a few days longer - "white hunter coming up tomorrow...herd of buffalo tearing up north part of my farm...get some real shooting..."

This was tempting, but I wanted to get on to Kampala, and I had already broken a ten-month's fasting from all kinds

of game shooting. In three hours one afternoon at Mr. Adams place I shot 23 (yes, twenty-three) quail, walking them up without a dog, and losing a number of downed birds in the heavy weeds. (With a shotgun on such fast-flying, angling birds, it is nobody's business but my own how many shells I blazed away.) In one hour towards evening, in the same grass and corn fields, I fired the little .375 rifle four times and collected four buck (buck being a widely-used term for an enormous number of species of antelope and gazelle). The last shot was especially lucky - through the heart of a very large reed buck, an animal about the size of a small New York white tail. The reed buck was bounding across the field at more than a hundred yards, in high grass. But I walked slowly up to the carcass, casually ejected the fired case without troubling to shove in another round, and affected other mannerisms of extreme nonchalance, while Mr. Adams looked on. I don't know whether he was smiling in amused suspicion, or whether he was simply happy over the killing of the crop-destroying animal. Buck are regarded as vermin in the farm country north of Nakuru...

The 200 miles of road from Nakuru onward, though running parallel to (when not actually on) the equator, was never so warm as Michigan Avenue in the summer. I had lunch at the Moro Hotel, 8,200 feet - and huddled near a fire in a sweater. A few miles beyond the level got back down into the tropics, at about 4,000, but still not nearly as hot as Chicago in August. This is winter, here, though; even at 4,000 feet the December temperature sends the whites scampering to shade, swimming pool, and hill stations. Here at Busia it is just comfortably warm during the day, and cool enough for sleeping after sundown. From Kisumu westward, along the north side of Lake Victoria, the road passes through country of heavier rainfall: things are greener in general, trees are taller and lacking the flat appearance of the semi-desert varieties, the corn grows higher, banana and pawpaw trees appear, and - the inevitable result of greater soil fertility - there are many, many more people. Where one could drive through miles of Kenya and see only an occasional cattle herdsman, the same amount of road on the Uganda border is so thronged with natives that you drive with a foot constantly on the brake pedal. The natives here, like the Yunnan Chinese peasants, have little or no road sense; when a car comes at or behind them they are very slow in getting out of its way...

This is the general or "tourist" side of my observations. Notes for my thesis on Regionalism are accumulating, but are too fragmentary to be at all presentable - in terms of newsletters which might later become chapters. But I have a feeling that I am now learning something about East Africa which will give substance to what I later write.

Tomorrow I drive on to Kampala, where I will meet some of the Makerere College staff - associates of Ned Munger and some acquaintances I made in London and Oxford. On the 30th

the journey will be continued, south along the west shore of Lake Victoria to the Tanganyika, Lake Province District of Biharamulo, where it is planned for me to spend a few weeks at the side of a District Officer (a friend made at Oxford). I will go his rounds, watch him administer, advise, hold court, etc. I have a feeling that this will be a valuable and necessary experience.

If he is not delayed in taking me around, my next letter will deal with the affairs of Biharamulo. Otherwise there will be another one or two of this travelog sort before I get down to brass tacks.

Sincerely yours,

John B. George

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