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Reflections of a Generalist

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

There are a number of social scientists in Kenya this year. Some are anthropologists and for them there is a rich field. Despite more than half a century of British administration, next to nothing is known about many of the tribes in the colony. Another researcher, an economist, is working on certain hitherto-unexplored problems in his discipline. Still another, a political scientist, is delving into an important period in the political history of Kenya's European community. The findings of all these researchers ought to be highly important as original contributions to the funds of knowledge in their respective disciplines and will be of use also to British administrators and to others interested in East African affairs.

But while one man is in the best position to discuss one tribe and another to report on his specialty, the question arises: "Who is going to talk about Kenya?" Who is going to present a unified picture of the people, problems, conflicts and trends at work in that colony? A paper on anthropological findings and another on economics are certainly valuable, but to persons both in and out of the particular discipline and to non-academic people, they are pieces of a living whole called Kenya. Whether the reader is an academic person who wants to find out the background against which his special interests should be viewed, a journalist or editor who needs to know how things shape up in a particular part of the world, a government official who must formulate policy or a businessman who wants to know more before he invests--- all would find it impossible to obtain the full picture from what has been reported, piecemeal as far as our friends our concerned, on various topics within various disciplines.

They turn, then, to the generalist. The generalist may or may not be a specialist in some discipline at the same time, but, qua generalist, he devotes himself to understanding the people in his area and then to understanding the important issues affecting their lives. Naturally he cannot effect the specialist's penetration of depth into all important situations in his territory or area. The orientation is different; he is trying to come up with reports on the broader forces at work in the territory or area. This does not mean that he pieces together the work that others have done. He does as much original work as the specialists do, but on a much broader scope. His aim is to fill the need for knowledge and information about the whole in operation.

In the case of Africa, there is a particular need in America for more generalists. There is a dearth of information and understanding here as to what is going on in that continent. Few commentators have had close acquaintance with African affairs and, for various reasons, the attention of the nation's journals has been kept on top priority areas like the Far East and Europe. But at the same time, Africa rapidly

is moving into a new position of importance for the western world and the need for informed discussion and judgment is increasing. As Africa continues its rapid strides toward modern civilization, new markets are opening for western goods and the question of more economic aid arises. There are military and strategic considerations in Africa. And, perhaps overshadowing all other matters, there is the tricky question of colonialism and its discontents. We Americans are apt to condemn colonialism flatly, but it has its good side as well and this must be taken into account in judging colonialism. The issues created by colonialism in Africa and America's attitude toward them may become crucial matters in years to come. At stake are the loyalties of Africa's millions. To date Communism has made practically no headway in Africa. Its emergent people are still firmly oriented toward western culture and western political institutions. But a danger exists that continued discontents would prompt them to look elsewhere.

The generalist would have a difficult time if he tried to study all of Africa, or even all of sub-Saharan Africa. The latter is nearly three times the size of the United States and conditions vary as much as on another land mass called Europe. Six European nations speaking five languages either have colonies or administer United Nations trust territories in sub-Saharan Africa. In size they range from Britain's tiny Gambia, a strip of territory along a river, to a million-square-mile area like the Sudan. Politically they run the gamut from the "black state" of the Gold Coast, to experiments in multi-racial government as in Tanganyika and finally to white supremacy in South Africa. There is even variety in what is called an "African," with Negro, Bantu, Nilote, Hamite and tribes like the Bushmen all found in sub-Saharan Africa.

At least as far as his initial tour is concerned, the generalist has to pick one particular territory in Africa, or one closely-allied group of territories, such as the mainland ones of British East Africa. His aim is to study it and know it well. Later, of course, he will be in a position to apply his training and insights to examining situations in other territories.

The method used by the generalist is not basically different from that of a good journalistic reporter: get out and find out. In my case, I stepped off an airplane in Nairobi in July of 1953 without knowing a single person there. I had a few letters of introduction, but that was all. (Most of the letters were never used; I met the people concerned on my own.) Having come straight from Egypt to the chilly equatorial highlands of Kenya, I shivered in the late afternoon breeze, boarded an airport bus, passed through the African locations and saw the worst slums I had yet seen and then wound up in downtown Nairobi hunting a hotel room. I had previously read what few books I could find dealing with East Africa but otherwise I might just as well have been plunked down on the moon. It was so totally strange from anything in my experience that I thought I could easily have been dreaming.

During coming weeks I spent a great deal of time getting acquainted with Kenyans of all races and all economic, social and educational levels. They were not selected in any eclectic fashion; I just wanted to meet as many of them as possible and, in the unforced course of social conversation, find out what they were like, what they were thinking, what they wanted and how they lived. In one sense, my approach was like that of a novelist.

I sat in the dining room of the posh Muthaiga Club and talked with members of the colony's Legislative Council and people in the European Electors' Union. I propped my chair against the walls of crowded downtown offices and talked with lawyers and businessmen. I sat in bars and gossiped with journalists, and I tramped around the rich red earth of coffee plantations and chatted with sunburnt, .45-toting white farmers. I tagged along with tense, sometimes-trigger-happy young Kenya-born policemen as they combed Nairobi for Mau Mau suspects. I went

horseback riding with British Army officers and I met District Commissioners, Agricultural Officers, Veterinary Officers, teachers, engineers and merchants. We talked about the weather, the horse races at Nanyuki, where to go on leave and how So-and-So bent the chassis of his new car on that shocking road to Mombasa; then we talked about Kenya, about white settlement, the Mau Mau and the Kikuyu, about themselves and about their jobs.

Other times I went to lavish Indian parties, nibbled at samoosas and listened as neat young Indian lawyers just back from school in England complained about the color bar, about settler political domination and about how you just can't get a good curry in a Nairobi restaurant these days. I talked with Asians in run-down little shops, waited every few minutes while they darted away to sell a penny item to a suspicious African, then listened again as justice, common sense, heaven, tears and rage were invoked because the speakers' skin color kept them from owning land. I dined with Indian diplomats in their homes, with obsequious Indian servants in constant attendance, and I lunched around dirty tables in back rooms of Indian shops miles out in the bush.

I sat around campfires at night and under the meager shade of thorn trees by day and talked with African chiefs and African peasant farmers. I dined with educated Africans in Nairobi restaurants and there was always the European gent or lady who found it necessary to stare in rage at us all through the meal. I had District Commissioners tell me that I should meet So-and-So because here was one African who was the constructive type and not cheeky, and then I was introduced to a yassuhing junior official. In two such cases I invited the African to come to my rest house for a beer that night and each soon was praising Jomo Kenyatta to the skies. With all Africans there would be arch-politness at first and the nervousness that comes from talking with white men. But then, maybe because you are not British and maybe because you treated him as another man, not another species, confidence grows and soon he is pouring out his feelings to you.

And at other times, on the palm-tree-lined Kenya coast, with the Indian Ocean breaking gently on glistening white sand, I would go to an Arab's house for a meal. Sometimes there would be a rustle as a black-veiled wife, or wives, withdrew to the sanctity of purdah and then the host, maybe as black as his African neighbors, would serve fruit drinks and I would sit down on the rug to hear the laments of a fallen aristocrat.

The foregoing account of how I got acquainted with the people of Kenya perhaps is overlong for a report of this sort (even though it represents only a few incidents), but I felt I had to give some idea of all of the hundreds of relationships over a period of many months that must go into acquiring an understanding of the people in your area. More time was spent like this during the introductory months of my tour---later I was busy with specific research problems---but, though to a lesser extent, it was a process that continued till the day I left East Africa and, by means of letters from European, African, Asian and Arab friends, continues still.

Places have to be known too. During the introductory months I traveled around Kenya a great deal. Most of the trips were in pursuit of specific information, but either way they were opportunities to know the country first-hand. I toured the Kikuyu Reserve, sometimes alone, sometimes in military and police patrols. With an Army unit, I spent three days in the wild Aberdare mountain range that rises at the western edge of Kikuyuland. Other times I explored the lower altitudes of 17,000 foot Mount Kenya, another traditional Kikuyu boundary. I traveled to every town in the White Highlands and know the roads up and down the panoramic Rift Valley by heart. I made three trips to the northern frontier desert and often camped out at night, listening with no great composure to hyenas howling just beyond the rim of campfire light. I bent the chassis of my car creeping down a boulder-strewn escarpment road in the remote Baringo area, and I toured the length and breadth of the fertile

Nyanza province. I visited all the towns of the Kenya coast: first the ancient Arab city-state of Lamu, near the Somalia border; then Witu, once under German suzerainty; then Malindi, another old Arab town, now a holiday resort as well; then Mombasa, the thriving port where ships await their turn to pour the goods of western factories into Africa; then finally the lagoons and forgotten Arab and Persian settlements of the south coast. All in all, I covered 30,000 miles by car in the last two years; 1,500 by plane, 1,100 by river boat, 600 by ocean vessel, 400 by African bus and, finally, 300 blisterous miles on foot.

During periods in Nairobi, I kept up with all the local newspapers and magazines---no great task, as there aren't very many of them. I spent much time in the library reading works on Kenya and, to a lesser extent, on the other East African territories. These included the journals of early explorers, historical accounts, studies by anthropologists, political scientists and others, and general works by journalists, academic people and colonial servants. At this point I would have a number of specific questions and I would seek out and talk with people in government and elsewhere---who often, by now, were personal friends and acquaintances. Inevitably these conversations would provoke further readings.

The introductory period over (no date can really be given as the introductory and later phases overlapped considerably), I devoted my time to examining specific topics. These were three in number---the Kikuyu and Mau Mau; white settlement and settler politics; the Arabs and Islam. The first two subjects have always been so closely intertwined that one cannot be studied without the other. It has been the relationship between the Kikuyu and the settlers that has produced many of Kenya's major problems and crises---including, in recent years, Mau Mau---and has given the colony its peculiar characteristics. In studying all three topics, I read everything that I could find in any way related to the subject, visited the areas concerned, talked with as many knowledgeable people as possible and, much later, began to form conclusions of my own. Some of the later newsletters were based on such conclusions.

The writing of all of the newsletters was in itself a rewarding activity. The researcher can be helped greatly in clarifying his ideas if he subjects them to the rigorous discipline of putting them down on paper. As a journalist, the newsletters gave me valuable experience in writing---a task that gets easier, but never easy. And I was grateful for the opportunity that the newsletters gave me to pass along my ideas and observations to others back home.

During the first eighteen months of the tour, I made some trips to the other British East African territories. I spent a month tagging along with a District Commissioner in a remote and backward district in central Tanganyika. There I was able to observe the day to day operation of colonial rule at the "grass roots" level, and in a district uncomplicated by such things as white settlement, urbanization, rapid progress, African nationalism---or Mau Mau. I made two visits to Zanzibar and on the second visit I spent three weeks as the house guest of the leading Arab nationalist there. What I learned in Zanzibar was valuable in itself and useful also when it came to studying Kenya's Arab community and Islam. The Kenya coast, it might be added, is nominally a possession of Zanzibar and there is close and continuous contact between the two places. I also spent several weeks in Uganda, comparing its completely different historical development with that of adjacent Kenya.

The last six months were spent inquiring into conditions in territories outside British East Africa. These included Somalia, a backward ex-Italian colony due to receive independence under United Nations auspices in 1960; Nigeria, a more developed territory where Britain's "West Coast policy" of self-government is being implemented, and the Congo, where a strong, vigorous and policy-minded government is determined to avoid the problems that have bedeviled other colonial powers.

"Outside" studies of that type are extremely beneficial after one has made intensive studies in only one territory or area. Using methods and insights developed in the "home" territory, the generalist thus can become acquainted with basically different conditions and, even where conditions are more or less similar, with basically different policy approaches. The experience helps to shape new insights and gives the man new perspectives for considering both matters in his own area and African colonial problems in general. I was particularly interested in what I saw in the Congo because even though it, like Kenya, has a white settler element and a rising group of exceptional Africans, it copes with them in an entirely different way and has a chance of avoiding the troubles into which Kenya has fallen. Thus, in a sense, the Congo presented the rare opportunity of seeing the historical "might have been" of Kenya.

To sum up: I feel that these last two years have been richly rewarding to me in a number of ways. It has given me training in how to go about examining social conditions. It has been the start of what will be a continuing process of building up a fund of knowledge about Africa. It has given me intensive writing experience. And it may have helped in broadening my own outlook.

My thanks and deepest gratitude go to the Institute of Current World Affairs, to you, Mr. Rogers, and to the Ford Foundation.

Sincerely,


David E. Reed