ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Kenyatta

Jeremy Murray-Brown



Routledge Revivals

Kenyatta

Originally published in 1972 and as a second edition in 1979, this widely acclaimed biography of Africa's first modern statesman tells the story of Kenyatta's extraordinary and enigmatic career. It is the story of a life punctuated by dramatic twists of fortune which closely reflects Africa's emergence from colonial rule. In the preparation of this book Jeremy Murray-Brown used a variety of unpublished sources. He pieces together the background of Kenyatta's childhood as a 'mission boy' in the days when Nairobi was a raw frontier settlement; of his way of life as a young 'de-tribalized' African in the 1920s; of his role in the controversy regarding female circumcision; his sixteen years in Britain; his visits to Russia between the wars; his trial and long years in a desert prison charged with managing Mau Mau.

The result is a rounded portrait and its objective approach to the enigmas which have surrounded the African leader places him firmly in his historical context. Set against the background of the rise and fall of British colonialism the book also makes an important contribution towards an understanding of the revolutionary forces which have moulded the shape of modern Africa.



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1. Kenyatta as president



2. Kenyatta wearing a monkey skin presented by Kikuyu tribesmen after his release from prison in 1961

KENYATTA

By

Jeremy Murray-Brown

Second Edition

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Preface to the Second Edition

When Kenyatta died in the early hours of 22 August 1978, western news media reacted as if it was an event of great international significance. His funeral in Nairobi drew an impressive crowd of distinguished mourners, the Prince of Wales, heir to the British throne, among them. The *Times* of London ran an obituary of two and a half columns; fulsome tributes to the dead president came from all quarters.

There is no obvious explanation for this sudden outpouring of respect for a man who had made little impact on the world scene since the day when he became head of an independant Kenya. In 1978 his country was not in the headlines; the storm centres of African politics lay elsewhere. Despite his own experience of dealing with white settlers, Kenyatta was unable or unwilling to take a lead in trying to resolve the Rhodesian issue. He made no public pronouncements on the spectacle of Soviet-backed Cuban forces entering the continent in large numbers. Perhaps because he felt the security of his own country was so precarious, he confined himself to its affairs, where he ruled as the modern equivalent of a benevolent despot. If the erratic and bloodthirsty General Amin in Uganda made a troublesome neighbour, the ideological pretensions of Tanzania were equally irksome. When the Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown in Ethiopia, Kenyatta lost an old and valued friend. Thus towards the end of his life he found himself in pan-African matters, as he had always been in his own affairs, a loner. His Kenya was surrounded with régimes with which he had little in common. He knew only too well how quickly the kind of order he had given Kenya could be destroyed by pressures from within and without.

His death took place six years after I finished this book. In the interval no new sources of information have come to light to make me wish to revise any part of it, nor have there been fundamental changes inside Kenya. The murder of J. M. Kariuki, a flamboyant Kikuyu critic of Kenyatta's government, raised a brief storm; but in the general context of official corruption and political mayhem which prevail throughout black Africa, it was unexceptional. Kariuki's violent removal from the scene, deplorable by western democratic standards, followed a pattern which was already apparent. There could be no rival to the hold on power exercised by that small group of Kikuyu leaders who came from the same region of Kikuyuland as Kenyatta and were his closest associates. Pinto, Myboya and Kariuki were murdered. Ngala, who had once led a political party in opposition to the Kikuyu dominated KANU, died in

mysterious circumstances. Murumbi was forced to quit politics altogether. Oginga Odinga, the Luo leader and Kenyatta's greatest rival, was imprisoned. It is unthinkable that these moves could have been made without Kenyatta's approval, although he may have regretted the manner in which they were carried out. But Kenyatta's style was always pragmatic and, in his life-time at least, it worked. The language and tools of western political theory did not apply in Africa; with independence, all the terms of reference changed.

To my regret I never saw Kenyatta after this book was published. Had I done so, I am not sure that it would have served a useful purpose so far as his biography is concerned. Maybe he could have corrected some details and added others. But this was not an authorized biography; I had no privileged access to Kenyatta's private papers, even supposing such papers exist. The documents which were taken from him when he was arrested in 1952 have apparently disappeared, though it is doubtful if they would add much new information about his life up to that point. The colonial government was unable to make significant use of them at his trial. Now, the Kenya government is endeavouring to recover all such documents in order to build up its own historical archive. But in my view it will take a long time before Africans will feel able to write objectively about their own history, and I am doubtful whether an accurate documentary record can ever be made of the evolution of events in Kenya or any other of the new nation-states of Africa. In any case, the changes taking place throughout the continent are so rapid and so potentially catastrophic as to make it doubtful whether the fifteen years of Kenyatta's Presidency will be seen as part of the dawning of the new era, rather than as a hang-over from the old.

Jeremy Murray-Brown
London, 1978

Author's Preface

My interest in Jomo Kenyatta was roused when I made a film about him for the British Broadcasting Corporation. The material available seemed to me so thin and unreliable that I found myself delving ever deeper into new sources, and so was finally drawn into writing this book. I must therefore first of all express my thanks to the BBC for that initial impetus. The responsibility for this work, of course, is entirely mine.

The underlying theme of this book is provided by the clash between two great forces in history – those of British imperialism and African nationalism. Kenyatta was born into Queen Victoria's empire and lived to dine at Buckingham Palace with her great-great-granddaughter, when he was the most respected leader of independent Africa. His life story is the embodiment of a historic drama which is what makes it such a fascinating study.

It is too soon to judge what will be the final result of the clash of these two forces. Africa did not, in the words of Bernard Shaw, 'die of discouragement' through contact with Western civilization; but neither has she yet produced anything authentically new according to Toynbee's formula of challenge and response. Of Kenyatta's claim to greatness, the reader must judge.

I was born on the north-west frontier of India when it still seemed as though the sun would never set on the British Empire. My parents and grandparents believed unquestioningly in the civilizing mission and gave their working lives to its fulfilment in India. I have relatives and friends who have done, and are still doing, the same thing in Africa. I should like to think this book helped to promote understanding between those who still cherish the past and those who are looking for a new world order.

It could not have been written without the assistance of a great number of people. I have acknowledged my many debts at the end of the book and I ask forgiveness from anyone whose name appears to have been forgotten. I alone am answerable for its blemishes.

I must, however, acknowledge with warm thanks help I have received from members of the Kenyatta family, in Kenya and in England, in the use of letters and in information freely supplied. But I should make it clear that this is not, in any sense, an authorized biography and the decisions over the use of material have remained mine throughout. No portion of the manuscript has been read prior to publication by a

member of the family or by anyone acting on behalf of the President of Kenya.

I have not wished to load the text with detailed notes and these are therefore placed at the end of the book with page references, together with a list of the principal sources on which I have drawn.

East African specialists will notice that I have used African names in their commonest anglicized form. Thus I have stuck throughout to Kikuyu, Kamba, Luo, Swahili, etc., rather than the correct Mu-Gikuyu, singular, A-Gikuyu, plural etc. Exceptionally I have retained the form Gikuyu for the name of the legendary founder of the tribe. The Baganda (plural, Muganda singular) speak Luganda and live in Buganda. Uganda is the European version of what the Swahili called it.

The name 'Swahili' itself derives from an Arabic word meaning 'those who live on the East African coast'. They are not strictly a tribe, but they all speak Kiswahili. Usually they are Moslems and they may or may not be of Arab descent.

There are certain words which are so much a part of everyday speech in Kenya that to put English equivalents to them strikes a false note. Most originate from Swahili, such as:

askari – an African soldier, policeman or prison warder

baraza – a meeting, from 'veranda' where the discussion took place

boma – originally a fort or stockade and so an administrative centre

posho – a day's ration of food for porters which was often included as part of their wages

safari – a journey, of any distance

shamba – the peasant holding on which the majority of Africans live, consisting of his homestead and cultivated vegetable plot, often called gardens by early writers

shauri – a discussion, affair or dispute.

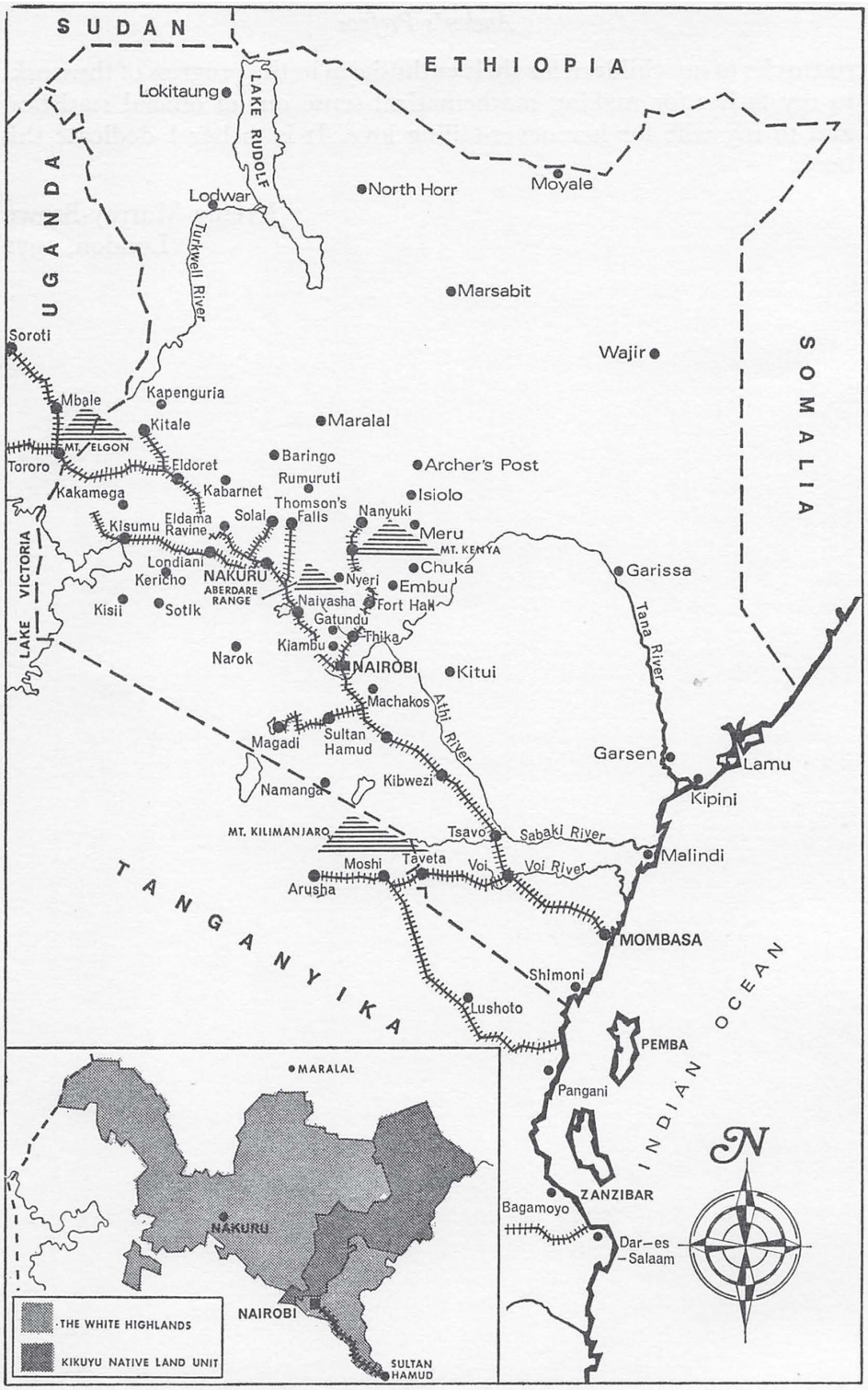
Africans usually pronounce words with open syllables, i.e. each syllable must end with a vowel sound, thus: Na-i-ro-bi. Readers must imagine English words like King George spoken with two syllables each, thus: Kingi Georgi.

For simplicity I have used the word 'Kenya' throughout the early part of the book, though the country was not designated Kenya Colony until 1920. Before then it was in theory a Protectorate and called British East Africa.

My thanks are specially due to Peter Leek, my editor at Allen & Unwin, and Michael Sissons, my agent, for their help and encouragement; to my friends in West Kensington for their constant support and for assistance in typing the manuscript. to my bank manager for his understanding handling of my lengthening overdraft; to Mrs Katharine Makower and Miss Antonia Raeburn for help over particular items of

research; to my children for their enthusiasm in the progress of the work; to my father for making mathematical sense out of official statistics; and to my wife for her never-failing love. It is to her I dedicate this book.

Jeremy Murray-Brown
London, 1972



1 Kenya at the end of the colonial period

Inset shows Kikuyu Native Land Unit (dark shading) in relation to the White Highlands

PART I

CHAPTER 1

A World Outside History

Once there were pigmies living in the forests. Where they went to nobody knew for certain. Some said they fled in terror before the hornbills, those birds with huge beaks and a hoarse cry which the Kikuyu magicians bewitched, and vanished beyond the mountains; others believed that they just disappeared into holes in the ground where they now still lived as a race of goblins; others again maintained that a Masai woman went to live among them when she could no longer stand her husband's beatings, and that her offspring gradually outnumbered and outgrew the pigmies until they took over the forests themselves and became the Kikuyu people.

Whether through the magic spells their medicine men had been able to place on the birds or through the gift of God to Gikuyu, the father of the race, the Kikuyu regarded the forests as their promised land. Mwene-Nyaga, the Creator of all things, the Divider of all things, willed it so. Rivers sparkling in the sun, grassy plains and rich woodlands, herds of animals, olives and bamboos, and all that lay within the protecting girdle of his mountains were the birthright of Mwene-Nyaga's people. To Gikuyu, his chosen son, he gave a wife, Mumbi, and his blessing on their decendants.

'Within these walls your sons and daughters shall roam and multiply, enjoying at the same time the beauty of the country and the fruits thereof, and always remembering that it is I who have bestowed them upon you. My blessing shall be with you and your offspring wherever you go.'[1]

No one really knew when this had happened, as no one among Gikuyu and Mumbi's descendants thought in terms of history. For them eternity existed in the endless passing of the seasons, the divine rhythm of planting and harvest, drought and plenty. As the moon waxed and waned, so did the heavy rains follow the time for planting and the lighter rains the time for watching the millet grow. The stars by night and the clouds by day moved under the will of God. Mwene-Nyaga inhabited the

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unapproachable brightness of mountain peaks, and gave the land to his people as he gave the air to the birds and shadows to the spirits of the dead; his smile lit the sky with warmth and his frown brought terror on his enemies. How the thunder rolled across the heavens when he cracked his mighty fingers! No one then dared look up into the sky. Men lying on their backs in their huts turned their faces to the wall, and children were told to fix their eyes on the earth in case they caught the glance of his anger in the lightning's flash.

The Kikuyu world was closed and self-sufficient. It stretched as far as the horizon where it was bounded by the four mountains on which God resided – to the north, Kere-Nyaga,[2] the greatest and most awe-inspiring, the 'Mountain of Light'. whose alternating black precipices and dazzling snow-covered peaks seemed like an ostrich's plumage, and on whose slopes ghostly herdsmen might be encountered calling softly to their sheep; to the east, Kea-Njahe, the 'Mountain of Beans', from which came the rains; Kea-Mbiroiro to the south, the 'Mountain of Blackness', and Kea-Nyandarwa to the west, the 'Mountain of Hides', where God stretched himself flat. Beyond these sacred hills the sky came to an end on supports of huge tusks of ivory.

But though defined in space by these high points the world had an infinite dimension in time. Forwards it reached into the generations yet to be born, backwards to the countless generations who had passed into the abode of spirits. Somewhere among those who had departed were the earliest children of Gikuyu and Mumbi, the nine daughters from whom the separate Kikuyu clans were named and for whom God provided nine husbands; the generations – age groups, the Kikuyu called them – who first entered the forests and cleared paths for cultivation, those who followed and began the settlements and built the first homesteads, and those who followed them to establish laws and customs for the tribe. The spirits all lived on in the shadows and were ever on the watch to see they were not slighted by those who lived in the day. They lived on in the names which fathers gave their children and after them their children's children, and so in the names of children not yet born and in families not yet raised. They lived on in the soil itself, and in the sacred groves where the elders retired to eat meat and sacrifice to God. The spirits of the ancestors knew what was good for the people and what was bad, when evil had been committed and must be cleansed and when it was time for the finger of death to summon one of the living to join their number. But where the tribe's destiny lay in its pilgrimage through life and through death was a question no one asked.

The Kikuyu were agriculturalists. They had fire and they knew how to make iron. But they had no knowledge of the wheel or the plough or the sail. They were the most northerly of the Bantu tribes in what is

today Kenya and like most African tribes they did not originate where they were living in the late nineteenth century. Some say they migrated northwards along the costal plain, turned inland along the Tana river and so swung round until they faced south again.[3]

Whatever their origins, the Kikuyu infiltrated into their present sorroundings in the highlands of East Africa some five hundred years before the arrival of the white man. It was a region of sharp ridges succeeding each other in a seemingly endless series of waves, each as much as 500 feet in depth and extending up to twenty miles along the streams which separated them. One after another the ridges traversed the landscape which rose gradually from the plains to the mountain ranges. Above 5,000 feet, where rainfall was high, the countryside was then covered with natural forest – camphor on the east and south slopes, a species of giant juniper on the north and west. These trees gave way at 8,000 feet to bamboo, and at 9,500 feet the bamboo itself gave way to mossy heath and the winds which blew around the shoulders of the snow-peaked mountains.

The slow process of clearing the land of trees gave way to cultivation. Prosperity increased and numbers grew. As further land was required, families reached out deeper into the forest, and moved to new ridges. Gradually whole areas were cleared and family by family, ridge by ridge, the tribe acquired its settled ways.

When they entered the forests the ancestors of the Kikuyu had no means of knowing their extent. Expansion northwards was barred by the 17,058 foot mass of Mount Kenya, westwards by the range which the British called the Aberdares after a president of the Royal Geographical Society; southwards the forest stretched in a wedge for some fifty miles until the ridges gave way to the plains again. Beyond roamed the Galla and the Masai, fierce nomadic people who herded their cattle in the plains and killed any who ventured across their path. They had no use for the corrugated terrain of the Kikuyu.

With the cultivation of new ridges generation after generation, century after century, the Kikuyu slowly filled out this wedge. They successfully ousted the hunters who inhabited the forests before them, both the pigmies and the shy Wandorobo. Though the latter were more formidable with bow and arrow, the Kikuyu were better organized. Whether they bought their land from the Wandorobo, as they later asserted, or simply annexed it, as the Europeans believed, the Kikuyu represented a more advanced social organism than anything which had existed in their part of the world before them.

Soon after Trafalgar and Waterloo, when Britain secured her position as the greatest imperial power in the world, sections of the tribe moved into the most southerly tip of the wedge. By the end of the nineteenth

century only a thin curtain of forest, no more than five miles wide, separated them from the Masai. The families which had reached the frontier faced a new crisis in their pilgrimage. At this moment History broke into their world with the arrival of the first white man.

CHAPTER 2

The Coming of the White Man

Until the nineteenth century Africa was a vast mystery to the civilized world known only to scholars by a Latin tag or a reference in Greek writings, and to sailors by bare landmarks along its coastline. In the course of time Persians, Chinese, Indians and Arabs touched its shores, and in 1487 the Portuguese rounded the Cape of Good Hope and brought the presence of Europe into the eastern seas. In 1652 the Dutch planted colonies on the southern Cape while on the western seaboard, along the so-called Slave, Ivory and Gold Coasts, the white man maintained depots for supplies of black gold – that hellish trade in slaves which cast such grim shadows across mankind's dream of progress. But of the interior, of the world beyond the Niger and Congo estuaries, beyond the Portuguese garrisons and Cape colonists, nothing was known. Africa was a continent of legend where, in western imaginations, lay the haunts of basilisk and unicorn, the home of Prester John and even, thought some, of the lost tribes of Israel.

In 1848 and 1849 respectively, two German missionaries working for the Church Missionary Society near Mombasa, Rebmann and Krapf, saw for the first time the snow upon the peaks of Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya. At first their reports were ridiculed in Europe, and like the mist which hung about these great peaks, veils of unbelief threatened to shroud the continent from the interest of the civilized world. But explorers, notably Burton and Speke, were stimulated to follow up their information. Gradually in the next half-century the veils were stripped away, and the truth, when it was known, came with a rush of astonishment on a Europe emerging in smoke, fire and steel from the Industrial Revolution. Africa lost her innocence and appeared the scene of horror which far surpassed the imaginings of earlier centuries. By 1900 her face was laid fully bare.

The first veil was stripped by David Livingstone, whose explorations from 1842 from South Africa gradually extended into the region around the lakes of the centre and revealed the extent of the Arab slave trade. Nominally subject to the Sultan, who in 1840 had moved from Muscat

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to Zanzibar, Arabs were reaching further into the interior in their search for ivory and the slaves to carry the ivory to the coast. Livingstone spoke of the inhuman sufferings of the natives, and in the flood of emotion which followed his death in 1873 the conscience of Europe was at last moved to take the Arab threat to the people of Africa seriously.

The shock of realizing what was happening on those sinister caravan trails was followed by another, when it was found how brutally the people of the interior treated each other. Even before the appearance of Arab slavers, fierce warrior tribes like the Ngoni, an offshoot of the Zulu, were tyrannizing their neighbours as they cut a bloody path north towards Lake Nyasa. Here the Scottish missionaries who followed Livingstone's call to Africa found them massacring entire villages and threatening their own existence as well. Stanley wrote vividly of the savagery of the tribes in the Congo; and in 1891 Lugard found the Manyuema cannibals roaming far from their own base in search of victims. All over Africa it was found to be the same: the stronger killed the weak without compunction and sold their captives to the Arabs.

Yet another shock came from the north-east as explorers from the Somali coast reported Ethiopian raids across the deserts which stretched from Mount Kenya to Lake Rudolph. In these wide, dry lands tribes were always responding to a desire to escape something unknown which lay behind and to find something unexplained which lay ahead. Now it was the Galla in the ascendant, now the Somali. The Boran and the Rendile fought over the waterholes where the desert roads crossed. The Pokomo drove the Giriama southwards to the coast and were driven south themselves by the Galla. The Ethiopian raids were concerted and devastating; they left a grim trail of mutilated corpses and villages burnt to the ground, with the women and survivors enslaved. King Menelik of Ethiopia, who was crowned in 1889, appeared to catch the imperialist fever of Christian Europe as he extended his rule in a determined thrust southwards. What was to stop him or, for that matter, the forces of the Mahdi from reaching Uganda?[1]

Africa in truth had not been left behind in history, she was her own history. As waves of movement had surged across the continent throughout the centuries, how many tribes had gone under, and how many ridden the tide of bloodshed to attain their present dominance? The Kikuyu had pushed out the Wandorobo, but where now were the Gumba pigmies?

Why the scramble for Africa, as it came to be called, should have taken place as suddenly and as completely as it did cannot easily be explained. The fact remains that at the time of Livingstone's death in 1873, and apart from the Portuguese and Cape colonists, no European state laid serious claim to any extensive area of African soil south of the

Sahara. Within a quarter of a century only Ethiopia and Liberia remained nominally free from European influence. On the maps the continent was divided up like a patchwork quilt in the different colours which represented the separate national interests of European powers.

The story of this process belongs to the wider history of European imperialism, that strange mixture of humanitarian, commercial and strategic motives which went into national ambitions in the late nineteenth century.

As far as Kenya was concerned the decisive factor was competition between British and German interests for Uganda. In 1888 the granting of a royal charter to the Imperial British East Africa Company sanctioned the appearance of the British flag on the mainland of East Africa.[2] The directors of the company were fired by Livingstone's philosophy of 'Commerce and Christianity'. They believed that Britain's imperial mission was to civilize the world through her industrial might. Commerce first (a later generation would call it 'development') and the arts of civilization would follow. None doubted it would be a Christian civilization.[3]

Before the entry of the IBEA Company no regular caravan route was known to reach into the interior of the modern Kenya. The earliest missionaries followed Livingstone's path – up the Zambesi and Shire rivers, across to Lake Nyasa and north-westwards to Lake Tanganyika along the 'Stevenson road', so named after the Scottish businessman who floated the company to support his countrymen's missions at Livingstonia and Blantyre. From Lake Tanganyika routes branched, some westwards into the Congo, others northwards *behind* the backs of the Kikuyu to Lake Victoria whence Uganda was reached west of the Nile. Baker had come up the Nile from the north, but came nowhere near the future Kenya.

The Arabs were said to avoid the direct path inland from Mombasa for fear of the Masai, though some believed this was bluff to protect their supplies of ivory and slaves. Their regular caravan route from Bagamoyo, on the mainland opposite Zanzibar, ran due west to Tabora which was the central point from which all the great lakes could be reached.[4] But as the supply of slaves further south grew more scarce, and the search for ivory more intense, no doubt strongly armed Swahili caravans in league with the Masai would soon have struck out from Mombasa through the Kikuyu's protective forest belt if the Europeans had not forestalled them.[5] Up to this moment the Kikuyu proved they could hold their own in their territory. The reports about them which filtered down to missionaries and traders on the coast were discouraging. They acquired a reputation for xenophobia and treachery.

In consequence the first white men to attempt to reach Uganda from

the East Africa coast aimed to skirt Kikuyuland. Their problem was one of supplies – of water and food. The natives did not easily yield food and in the dry seasons water courses were infrequent. From Mombasa, which only became a safari centre with the establishment of the IBEA Company, explorers had the option of following the coast northwards to Malindi and then striking inland along the Sabaki river, which was a lengthy detour, or of cutting directly across the burnt-up Taru plain of vicious thorn trees. After two hundred miles they reached the highlands and a friendly chief of the Kamba tribe lent his name to their depot, Machakos. Here they picked up guides before setting out across Masai territory.

The next landmark was the Ngong hills, the highest point on the plateau on the lip of the Rift Valley. In the highlands water was plentiful, though the tribes were less friendly. A clearing near the edge of the forest was used as an open market. On arrival a caravan fired its rifles in the air to attract attention. From their villages inside the forest the Kikuyu then sent out women with provisions for exchange with the goods brought by the caravan. Known as Ngongo Bagas, it became a regular resting place on the long haul to the interior.[6]

It was here that in 1883 the first European explorer to encounter the Kikuyu, a geologist called Joseph Thomson sent out to report on the terrain, found them to 'have the reputation of being the most troublesome and intractable in this region. No caravan has yet been able to penetrate into the heart of the country, so dense are the forests, and so murderous and thievish are its inhabitants.' Thomson's own experiences confirmed their reputation.

Four years later in 1887 a Hungarian, Count Teleki, was forced to shoot his way across the southern corner of Kikuyuland through being constantly harassed by the 'excitable' and 'restless' natives. He avoided them altogether on his return.

In 1890 there arrived on the scene a penniless, love-sick adventurer, Frederick Lugard. Lugard was a soldier on leave from his regiment in India who was down on his luck and trying to extricate his fortunes with some hard trekking in the bush. He had applied for service with the Italians against the Ethiopians and been rebuffed. He had then volunteered to lead an ill-assorted band of traders, hunters, missionaries, and their native hangers-on, against a force of Arabs who had cut the Stevenson Road and were holding the Scottish missions under siege. The attempt was a fiasco, though Lugard had shown personal bravery and been severely wounded for his trouble. Next, he offered to serve Rhodes. Now he was in the temporary employ of the IBEA Company with orders to reach Uganda as fast as possible to forestall the Germans under Karl Peters.

Lugard's caravan was well armed and well stocked with provisions. His instructions from the IBEA Company included the making of treaties with local chiefs wherever he could on the company's behalf and the establishment of a series of forts along his line of march. With small garrisons of men and supplies these would then become the staging posts along the regular caravan trail which the company hoped to open to Uganda.

Lugard was a controversial figure and he appeared at a decisive moment for the Kikuyu. He was a good leader of men, of an earnest uprightness of character and a sincere Christian. He did not doubt his role as an agent of Britain's mission and when he arrived in Uganda he acted with courage and firmness in a situation made impossible by sectarian quarrels between Roman Catholic and Anglican missionaries and their rival bodies of converts.

Through a career of writing as indefatigable as his trekking, Lugard went on to establish himself as one of the architects of Britain's colonial empire, with an eventual seat in the House of Lords and retirement in the Surrey hills where many an aspiring governor would come to sit at his feet.

What he said about the Kikuyu on his meeting them for the first time came to be quoted as the most authoritative assessment of the tribe at this point in its history. His object at the time was to defend his months of derring-do in the African bush against attack from critics at home.

'I lived among them for close on a month,' wrote Lugard, 'and I was more favourably impressed by them than by any tribe I had as yet met in Africa. We became the greatest of friends, and I had no hesitation in trusting myself almost alone among them, even at considerable distances from camp . . . I found them honest and straightforward; I had very little trouble of any sort among them. Some sheep were stolen from me by people from a village unfriendly to those around me, and as this was a test case, they all looked to see how the white man would stand such treatment. I had no hesitation in dealing with it in a determined manner. I imposed a fine, which, together with the sheep stolen, was to be paid within a given time, under penalty of my attacking the village. They deferred till the last moment, to see if I were in earnest, and then paid my demand which was not exorbitant. In fact, I took a great fancy to the local chief, Eiyeki, and especially to his brother Miroo. They were extremely intelligent, good mannered and *most* friendly.'

Ignoring the tribe's reputation for treachery, Lugard entered into blood-brotherhood with Waiyaki – his 'Eiyeki' – 'and several other chiefs' and then reduced the treaty, thus made, to writing, the chiefs putting their marks to it.[7]

On 1 November 1890, Lugard departed for Uganda with the main

body of his caravan. He left behind a junior officer, George Wilson, with orders to complete the building of the fort and the safeguarding of his supplies at a site he had chosen known as Dagoretti. With him he also left a small garrison of forty native riflemen. Wilson's nearest support was at Machakos, the supply base forty miles away across the plateau. Between Machakos and Wilson were the Masai.

Dagoretti turned out to be an impossible site. It was five miles inside the forest curtain from Ngongo Bagas, the location favoured by Lugard's employers. The stockade itself was strongly built but it was surrounded by the forest. Though this could be cleared in the immediate vicinity of the fort to give a good field of fire, it meant that water could not be reached without running the gauntlet through the 'jungle'. Collecting provisions put the defenders at the mercy of the natives. The fort only made sense if Waiyaki and his followers remained unequivocally friendly, in which case there was hardly need for one.[8]

Wilson soon ran into difficulties with the Kikuyu and was forced to abandon the fort which the Kikuyu promptly demolished.

The caravan route, however, could not be left without a station at this vital spot, the last at which supplies could be procured until Mumias was reached on the borders of Kavirondo territory at least twenty-five days' marching away. In April 1891 a strong party under Major Eric Smith set out to repair the fortunes of the white man. Smith abandoned Lugard's site altogether. Marching straight for Waiyaki's ridge, he camped in the centre of his village. On a nearby spur he erected a strong fort, complete with moat and two drawbridges and surrounded by formidable wire and stake defences. Unlike Lugard's stockade at Dagoretti, Fort Smith – or 'Kikuyu' as travellers also called it – was in the Kikuyu cultivated areas, 'some 9 miles from the edge of the forest'.[9]

The ten years that followed Lugard's appearance amongst them turned the world of the Kikuyu upside down. A series of natural disasters accompanied the white man's arrival and seemed to be God's judgement upon his people. In succession smallpox, rinderpest, drought and locusts struck both Kikuyu and Masai. Some Europeans calculated that up to 50 per cent of the Kikuyu perished in certain areas.[10] Many Kikuyu families abandoned their forward areas altogether. How could they interpret God's will? Though few, the 'red strangers' possessed weapons of terrifying power which struck from great distances and their medicine was far more potent than anything their own doctors could produce. Whence they came and whither they went, these strangers, could only be a matter of wild surmise to the tribes. Wazungu they learnt to call them, borrowing the Swahili word from the passing caravans, men who always turn about, are always busy, always on the move.[11]

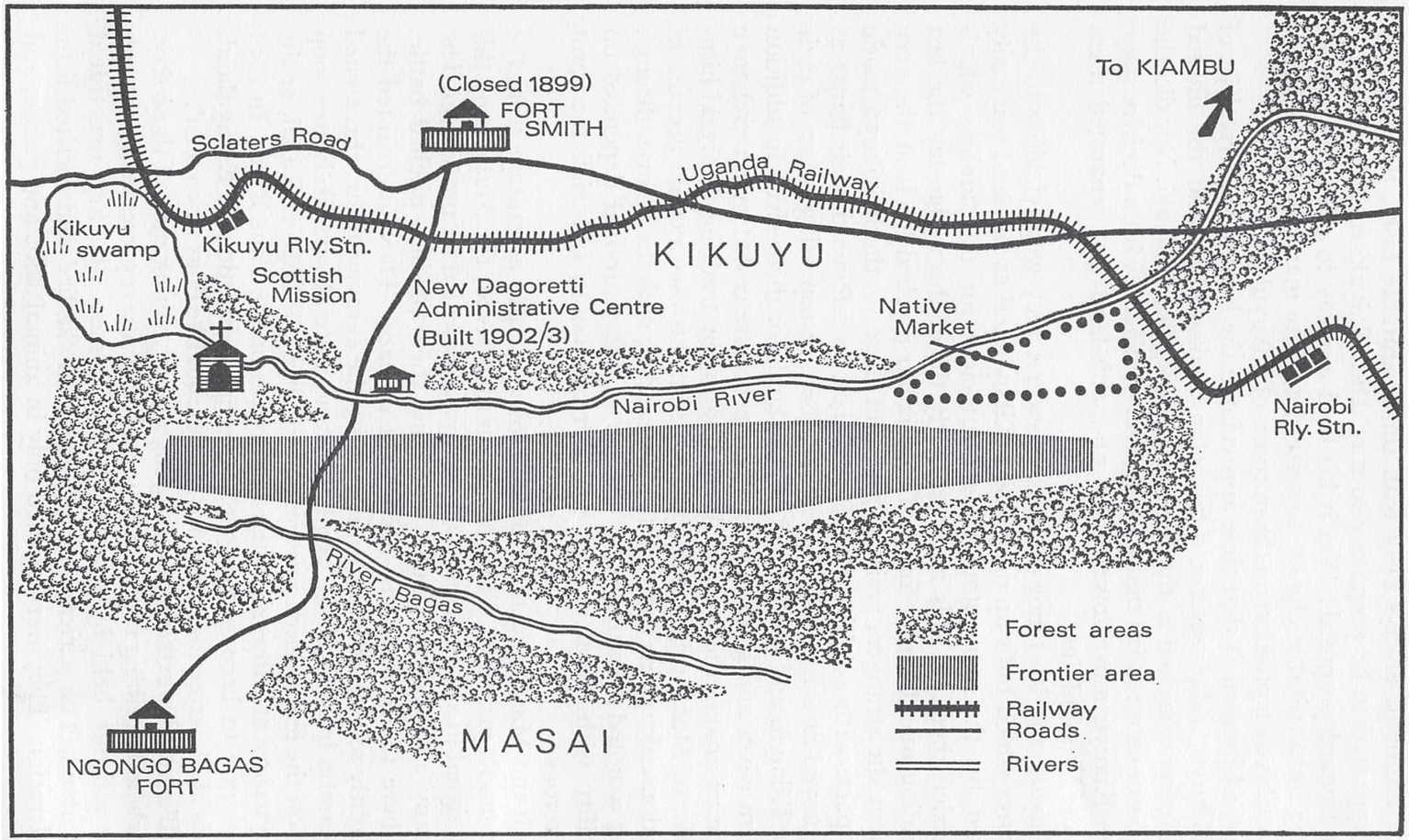
But although always busy with unaccountable tasks, the strangers also appeared to be preparing to stay. Did Waiyaki really understand what Lugard proposed? Was it his land anyway to offer? Or was he hoping for a suitable chance to seize the white man's magic and consolidate his own position on the outposts of Kikuyuland?

Few white men at that time appreciated the intense local rivalries of the Kikuyu, ridge against ridge, clan against clan, and the limited jurisdiction exercised in the tribe by a leader like Waiyaki. Nor did the first Europeans realize that their arrival coincided with a decisive stage in the Kikuyu move towards the no-man's-land that separated them from the Masai plains.

Waiyaki and his followers were pioneers; they were yielding to the pressures which built up deep inside Kikuyuland as the land originally cleared by their ancestors grew insufficient for the families which succeeded them. In this most southerly tip of the wedge lay the last remaining uncultivated forest. The Kikuyu reached for it at the very moment the strangers arrived. Many of these southern Kikuyu made local pacts with neighbouring Masai clans to safeguard their flanks as they moved forward. Together they raided unsuspecting ridges of their fellow Kikuyu, and so obtained further lands for themselves, in addition to extra wives and goats. Often such pacts were sealed by an exchange of women among the leaders. According to one tradition Waiyaki himself was of Masai origin and had fled from his own people because of some domestic quarrel and gained his standing with the Kikuyu through killing a noted Masai tyrant. On the frontier, survival depended on flexibility with tribal custom and a readiness to out-trick the most treacherous.

Both the Masai and the Kikuyu looked to take advantage from the white man's presence. When Major Smith arrived, the Masai took this as the signal to attack in force and Waiyaki appealed for protection. The company assisted the Kikuyu in staving them off in a pitched battle. Elsewhere the Masai were a constant menace. They interrupted the fortnightly service of mail runners along the caravan route, threatened the Kamba in the hills at Machakos, and were always likely to swoop down on the few isolated mission stations like the CMS at Rabai, or the Presbyterians at Kibwezi, or the Methodists on the Tana River. In 1892 a man soon to become famous in the administration of Kikuyuland, Francis Hall, wrote that 'they are always shot like dogs when seen'.

Hall's was the extravagant language which young men of those days used when describing their adventures. But it was representative enough of the attitude held by most of the white men who first penetrated Kikuyuland. The Africans were 'niggers' or 'kaffirs' and merited little consideration. They were clothed only in animal skins and grease, and



11 The Kikuyu-Masai frontier at the beginning of the colonial period

Based on sketch lent by courtesy of Her Majesty's Stationery Office

carried weird ornaments of feathers, beads, tin, teeth or anything else that came to hand. Their homes were foul-smelling huts which they shared with animals. Hall arrived at Fort Smith soon after there had been a spectacular showdown with Waiyaki.

Relieved of danger from the Masai through the assistance of the company's riflemen in May 1892, the Kikuyu reverted to harassing the strangers garrisoned among them. It was never clear to the Europeans which was the Kikuyu village involved in these attacks; reprisals usually encountered deserted homesteads whose inhabitants had fled long before the expedition reached them. The women, children and goats were hidden, and the men either stood hurling insults from a distance or else vanished into the forests.

In August 1892 the Swahili headman of the new fort was attacked. The local Kikuyu blamed members of more distant villages, but when the Europeans succeeded in capturing one of these, a woman, she blamed Waiyaki himself, 'after a good deal of rough persuasion' as the political record has it. Waiyaki came to the fort. African tradition maintains he was summoned by the European officer in command; the political record says he came of his own accord, knowing he was suspected of treachery, to demand a hearing. A scuffle occured and Waiyaki was badly cut about the head with his own sword. Next day he was sent under escort for trial by company officers at Mombasa, but he died of his wounds *en route* at Kibwezi and was buried there.

Hall found the Kikuyu to be 'very low class and very treacherous. They have continually worried the company's men ever since they arrived . . . and it is quite a common occurrence for them to cut a man up when he is out to fetch wood or water and kill him just for fun.' The method of pacification was rough, but effective. Hall went out with a European colleague and 150 armed natives from the coast.

'We burnt and destroyed everything, occasionally he or I having a long shot at some armed natives. In one place some of the men discovered a lot of goats and cattle and they took all these sharp, killing one man. We worked in two columns, he on one side of the hill, I on the other, and when we had finished met on the top. Without any rest we formed the column up, he in front with his men, then the cattle and my men as rearguard, I myself marching last. In this way I got a few long shots at the Kaffirs, for they tried to follow up on the off chance of regaining their cattle but after a few shots from me at ranges of 6 to 800 yards they soon got sick of it because I think I got two of the brutes right through.'

Because of the threat of German intervention the IBEA Company was overstretched in its attempt at full-scale penetration of Uganda. The directors faced bankruptcy and announced they would have to withdraw.

In Britain public opinion was such that no government, Conservative or Liberal, could allow the British flag which Lugard had run up in Mengo, the Baganda capital, to be hauled down again. The undertakings of the company had to be honoured.[12] In 1894 Britain declared a Protectorate over Buganda, later extended to cover the whole of Uganda, and on 15 June 1895 over the remaining East African territories administered by the IBEA Company.

Meanwhile in 1890 the European powers had met in Brussels and agreed on a programme of 'development' for Africa. They would build railways in each of their areas.

Although the IBEA Company was on the verge of bankruptcy, its directors felt bound to undertake for Britain what the colonial mission required. In anticipation of government assistance they organized a railway survey party which set out in the new year of 1892. An official report by Sir Gerald Portal, the British representative in Zanzibar, followed, which, though highly critical of the company's work, decided the Protectorate government should continue with the project when the company finally went out of business.[13]

In 1895 the first rails were laid at Mombasa and for the next five years the work of building went forward. Africa witnessed an incongruous combination of iron tracks from Birmingham and poisoned arrows, of greased spears and crude, locally made bricks; of mules imported from Cyprus and harnesses and carts from England; of coolies specially brought over from India to do the navvying, and man-eating lions which held progress up for weeks at Tsavo; of black-water fever and Eno's fruit salts; of wide-eyed tribes who valued iron for ornamentation on their bodies, and engines which slowly puffed their way from railhead to railhead through vast herds of game.

It was a busy time on the Kikuyu frontier which lay about midway along the route, at mile 345 according to the engineers' measurements. The survey party's caravan crossed with one of Bishop Tucker's on its way up to Uganda. In January 1893 Portal went through on his official investigation, returning in August with a party of Nubians whom he left at Fort Smith to help with cultivation. The illiterate Maltese, James Martin, was active transporting ivory on behalf of the IBEA Company. In April 1893 Hall was helping with a road to link Kibwezi with the Kedong Valley, which sappers had to blast out of the Rift escarpment.

In 1894 a free-lance missionary, Stuart Watt, arrived with his wife and five children. They had walked all the way from the coast and were only just dissuaded from entering Kikuyuland proper. He was followed by the Presbyterians from Kibwezi looking for a new site among the Kikuyu. Waiyaki's family appeared to harbour no ill-will and were

ready to offer them land. Was it theirs to offer? Who was there to deny it in the tumultous times all were living through? If nature lent a hand through famine or cattle disease, the frontier Kikuyu did not hesitate to press home their advantage over the Masai. Missionaries were known to possess strong magic which would add useful protection.

Kikuyu familes quickly staked their claims in the new land on the edge of the forest, and the men at the Fort now had allies among the local people. One, named Kinyanjui, was a kind of 'safari leader' to the Europeans. On Waiyaki's removal he was promoted by the British to be the local headman from which position he steadily increased in standing until, at his death in 1929, he was recognized as a paramount chief among the Kikuyu.

In 1894 Hall took command of the station himself, and now it was the turn of the Masai to appeal for protection. Lenana and Sendeyo, two sons of a powerful Masai chief, were engaged in a bloody feud with each other, and their followers ranged across British and German territory without taking much interest in the white man's activities. The weaker section, under Lenana, was harried by bands of Kikuyu and demoralized by the loss of up to two-thirds of their cattle through rinderpest.

They complained that the Kikuyu were carrying off their women and children and selling them to Kamba and Swahili from the coast. Hall brought a large number of them into the protection of his camp and used them as levies with Kinyanjui in his own punitive expeditions against more distant Kikuyu villages. Eventually he settled them at Ngong. (This did not deter the Masai from massacring a large Swahili caravan with Kikuyu porters returning from Eldama Ravine, a station nearer to Uganda. They caught them in the Kedong Valley, killing about 13 armed and 631 unarmed men. It was maintained later that the Masai attack was provoked by the Swahili attempting to molest their women, but before this was known, a trader, Andrew Dick, undertook his own one-man reprisal raid. Throughout a long, hot day in the thorn-covered scrub he collected 200 head of cattle and disposed of over 100 warriors before his rifle jammed and the Masai speared him. Such solitary acts of courage or foolhardiness became the stuff of legend for later generations of white men.) Lenana subsequently earned respect as 'our best friend and ally among the natives'.[14] He was given a monthly subsidy and became one of the judges at the Nairobi cattle show.

In June 1895, when the Foreign Office took over the administration of East Africa, all the up-country stations came under the control of Ainsworth, promoted sub-commissioner, at Machakos, as the Kamba were then thought to be 'numerically the predominant tribe'. When Hall returned from a spell of leave in August 1896 he found conditions on the frontier almost settled: 'so many Europeans have been knocking

around that the natives are quite tame and I can ride anywhere alone.' The following year activity was even greater, with the movement of an Indian Baluchi regiment up country to quell Sudanese mutineers in Uganda and with the advance operations of railway surveyors. In 1898 the railhead reached the outskirts of Kikuyuland and great inroads were made into the remaining forest areas to keep the line supplied with fuel and timber. More clearings meant more opportunities for Kikuyu settlement. In 1899 Fort Smith itself was closed and Francis Hall left to carry the British mission into the heart of the tribe where he built another fort. Here in March 1901 he died and the post was named Fort Hall after him. His grave lies in the shade of graceful jacaranda trees beside the Church of the Martyrs.

He left his stamp on Kikuyuland. As a later political report put it: 'During those early years from 1893 onwards Mr Hall taught the Gikuyu the lesson of obedience and instilled in them an implicit faith in the promises of Government.'

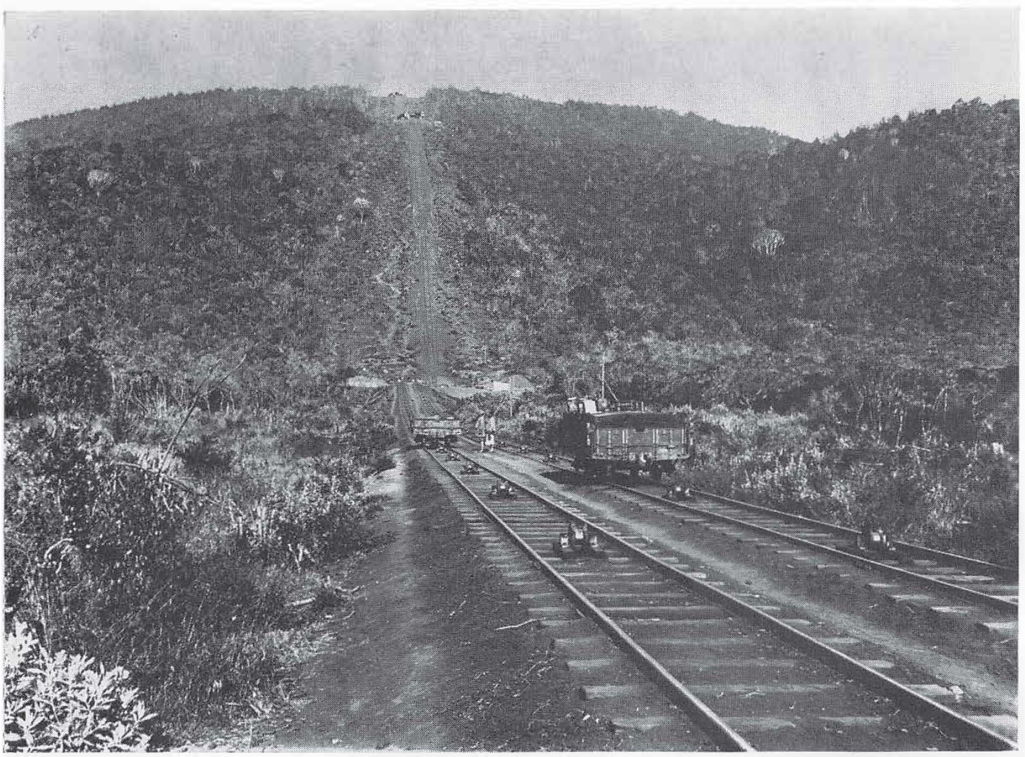
For a few more years in the Fort Hall and northern districts of Kikuyuland the same kind of punitive raids accompanied the business of mapping, road making and fort building. In 1902 a hut tax was introduced. Thus did Kikuyuland, like the rest of Kenya, come under British rule. The Kavirondo, Nandi, Lumbwa and Sotik tribes were brought to heel by similar methods. It did not much matter what the tax was; in some cases crocodile eggs were accepted. The important thing was the readiness to pay.

Hall's predecessor in command at Fort Smith, Captain Nelson, was killed on Boxing Day 1892 in some kind of mutiny. He was buried down the hill from the fort in a shallow, undulating valley of tough upland grass, with no more than a crude piece of local stone as a memorial. For many years the small graveyard was hidden by a coffee plantation; the fort itself gave way to a telephone exchange and then to a pleasant farm building filled with legend. Now the land has been turned back to pasture and the graveyard can be made out again in the undergrowth. Alongside Nelson lie the bodies of two men killed in 1898, one by a lioness and the other by the Kikuyu, and *their* graves boast fine marble slabs, a pledge by their comrades of Britain's determination to fulfil her imperial mission.

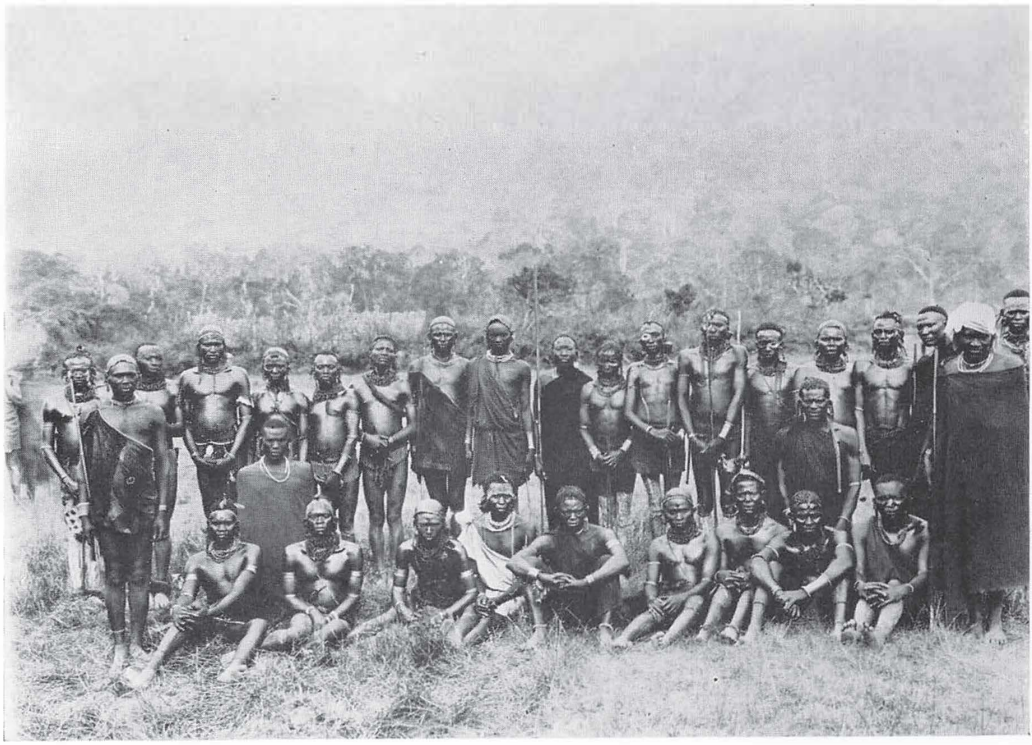
Lions and native spears – they were the twin hazards facing the men who brought the Kikuyu back into history during these fateful years. And sometime towards the end of them, in a typical thatched-roof homestead shared with sheep and goats at night, a boy was born and given the name Kamau. It is one of the commonest Kikuyu names. The world came to know him as Jomo Kenyatta.



5. The pioneers. Francis Hall is seated far right



6. The Iron Snake crossing forest and escarpment



3. Kikuyu warriors



4. Kikuyu women carrying firewood

CHAPTER 3

Kenyatta: Birth and Childhood

In those days a Kikuyu birth was not thought of as signifying the arrival of a unique personality; it was important because of the benefits it conferred on the parents and the wider family group. For the father it brought a higher grade of eldership; for the mother the justification of the price of her marriage. If it was a girl, the baby promised an increase in wealth when her time came to be married; if a boy, he would preserve continuity with the spirits of the family's ancestors, and so with the ancestors of the tribe themselves. In a sense a birth was taken for granted as part of the natural order. A man's coming into the world and his life after death were stages in a perpetual communion which stretched back to the creation of the tribe through the will of God and reached forward to all its members still to be born. The baby's life and theirs belonged to the community, as the community belonged to the soil.

There is no certainty about the exact date of Kenyatta's birth.* Such records were not kept by the Kikuyu. Their memory of the near past depended not on events in an individual's life but on whatever was happening to the community at the time – a famine, a descent of locusts, or a notable battle with the Masai. Events varied from district to district, even from ridge to ridge. Particular significance was attached to anything associated with initiation ceremonies. As each age-set of initiates grew, so their relationships towards each other and the world were fixed as part of God's decree for the universe. A child entered into this cosmic order; he came from God and his destiny was known to God.

Accordingly, the year 1895 was remembered in some parts of Kikuyuland after a particular sweet-scented flower, 1896 after an obscure name for a clan, 1897 was known as the year of the sweet potato. 1898 was the year of the jigger – the burrowing flea which lays its eggs underneath a person's skin; 1899 the year when the circumcision ceremony went wrong – a dreadful omen which was followed, in 1900, by a year in which the crops failed.[1]

* See Appendix A.

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Though the date was unimportant, the location of a birth was remembered because of its relationship with the land. Kenyatta was born some twenty-five miles north-east of Fort Smith at a place called Ngenda, a land of sugar-cane and cattle pasture where two rivers met. True to the mystical hold which the soil possessed over the living, Ngenda was to draw him back in after years until, at Gatundu, it became the strongly-guarded home of the president of Kenya, a shrine for the Kikuyu tribe and a place of pilgrimage for many who came to honour him in his old age.

His father was known as Muigai, his mother Wambui. They were ordinary *shamba* folk – people who cultivated the soil, took additional wives as they could afford them, bred sheep and goats like everyone else. Their homestead was on a spur of land which ran down into a fork of the Thiririka River. It was a pleasant site, with fine views of the sacred mountains and steep valleys falling down to the streams which wound their way between the ridges to the Masai plains.

According to Kikuyu custom every child's birth was watched carefully to ensure no offence was given to the spirits, lest disaster fell upon the family and perhaps on the tribe itself. Had the baby's feet touched the ground at the moment of birth? That called for purification. Was it born feet first? Then it must be sacrificed to the divine will. The mother either suffocated it herself or allowed the midwife to carry it out to fallow land. There she placed grass in its mouth and nostrils to stifle its cry for life and the hyenas quickly disposed of its tiny limbs. Twins were especially unlucky – a widely-held view in Africa – and were killed at once. Worst of all was for the mother to die in childbirth. The baby must carry some terrible curse to bring such evil into the homestead. Out he was placed beside his dead mother for the hyenas, and great cleansing was necessary to remove the defilement from the soil of the homestead.

But if all went well with the birth the midwife took the baby and carefully washed and oiled him. She spat a mouthful of gruel into his mouth to bless his earthly life. She carried the placenta to the family's uncultivated land and buried it with seeds and grass to bless the ever-sustaining life of the soil. The mother screamed five times to indicate a boy's arrival. Out listening in the fields the father cut five sugar-canes. His own prestige now increased and he qualified for a higher grade among the clan's elders. A sheep must be killed and a feast held. The women brewed special beer and generous quantities were spilt out on to the ground for the spirits. 'The earth is the mother whose breast gives suck to the children of the nation.'

A baby who survived the tests of birth spent his early life suspended in a goat's skin upon his mother's back as she went about her tasks in the fields and the homestead, even on the most arduous work like the