

from Facing Mount Kenya

ONCE UPON A time there lived in Gikuyuland a great medicine man known as Mogo or Moro wa Kebiro.¹ His national duty was to foretell future events and to advise the nation how to prepare for what was in store. We are told that one early morning the prophet woke up trembling and unable to speak, his body covered with bruises. His wives on seeing him were very frightened and in a state of hysteria, not knowing what had happened to their husband, who went to bed in perfect health the previous evening. Horror-stricken, the family summoned the ceremonial elders to his side with a view to offer a sacrifice to Ngai² (God) and to inquire what the great man had foreseen that had so frightened him.

When the ceremonial elders arrived, a male goat (*thenge*)³ was immediately slaughtered, and Mogo wa Kebiro was seated on the raw skin. The senior elder among the gathering took the blood of the animal, mixed it with oil, and then this mixture was poured on the head of the great seer as an anointment. At the same time the ceremonial elders, saturated with religious beliefs, recited ritual songs as supplication⁴ to Ngai. Soon Mogo wa Kebiro regained his power of speech. With his usual prophetic voice he began to narrate what he had experienced during the previous night. He told the elders that during his sleep Ngai had taken him away to an unknown land. There the Ngai had revealed to him what would happen to the Gikuyu people in the near future. On hearing this he was horrified, and in his endeavor to persuade Ngai to avert the evil events coming to the Gikuyu, he was badly bruised and exhausted and could not do anything but obey the Ngai's command to come

back and tell the people what would happen.

After a little pause, Mogo wa Kebiro continued his prophetic narrative. In a low and sad voice he said that strangers would come to Gikuyuland from out of the big water; the color of their body would resemble that of a small, light-colored frog (*kiengere*)⁵ which lives in water; their dress would resemble the wings of butterflies; that these strangers would carry magical sticks which would produce fire. That these sticks would be very much worse in killing than the poisoned arrows. The strangers, he said, would later bring an iron snake with as many legs as *monyongoro*⁶ (centipede); that this iron snake would spit fires and would stretch from the big water in the east to another big water in the west of the Gikuyu country. Further, he said that a big famine would come, and this would be the sign to show that the strangers with their iron snake were near at hand. He went on to say that when this came to pass, the Gikuyu, as well as their neighbors, would suffer greatly. That the nations would mingle with a merciless attitude toward each other, and the result would seem as though they were eating one another. He also said that sons and daughters would abuse their parents in a way unknown hitherto by the Gikuyu.

Mogo wa Kebiro urged the people not to

1. Mogo or Moro wa Kebiro (mɔɔ gō', mɔɔ rō' wā kī bē' rōo).

2. Ngai (ngī).

3. *thenge* (tʰe' nge).

4. supplication (sup' lə kǎ' shən): a humble request or prayer.

5. *kiengere* (kē e' nge re).

6. *monyongoro* (mɔɔ nyō' ngō rō).

take arms against the coming strangers, that the result of such actions would be annihilation of the tribe, because the strangers would be able to kill the people from a far distance with their magical sticks which spit deadly fires. The warriors were very angry when they heard this statement and said that they would take up arms and kill the iron snake and the strangers. But the great seer calmed them and told the warriors that the best thing would be to establish friendly relations with the coming strangers, because the spears and arrows would not be able to penetrate the iron snake, and therefore the warriors' attempt to fight the strangers and their snake would be futile.

The great medicine man advised the people that when these strangers arrived it would be the best policy to treat them with courtesy mingled with suspicion, and above all to be careful not to bring them too close to their homesteads, for these strangers are full of evil deeds and would not hesitate to cover the Gikuyu homeland and in the end would want to take everything from the Gikuyu.

When the people heard what Mogo wa Kebiro had predicted, they were very disturbed and did not know what to do except wait and face the coming danger. Many moons afterwards, about 1890 or thereabout, the predicted danger began to appear, for sure enough, the strangers dressed in clothes resembling the wings of butterflies started to arrive in small groups; this was expected, for prior to their arrival a terrible disease, called *ndigana* or *nyongo*,⁷ had broken out and destroyed a great number of Gikuyu cattle as well as those of the neighboring tribes, the Masai and Wakamba.⁸ The incident was followed by a great famine, which also devastated thousands of the tribesmen.

The first few Europeans who passed near the Gikuyu country were more or less harmless, for they passed through along the borderline of the country between the Gikuyu and

Masai or between Wakamba and the Gikuyu. They were thus directed according to the prediction of the great medicine man. The Europeans with their caravans kept coming and going the same way from the coast to Lake Victoria and Uganda. In their upward and downward journeys they traded with the Gikuyu with little or no conflict. At last, misled by European *cant*,⁹ the Gikuyu thought that the Europeans with their caravans did not mean any harm and befriended them. Forgetting the words of Mogo wa Kebiro to treat the Europeans with courtesy mingled with suspicion and not to bring them near their homesteads, the Gikuyu began to welcome the Europeans in close proximity to their homesteads.

At this stage it is interesting to give a short narrative of how the Gikuyu came to lose their best lands. When the Europeans first came into the Gikuyuland, the Gikuyu looked upon them as wanderers (*orori* or *athongo*)¹⁰ who had deserted from their homes and were lonely and in need of friends. The Gikuyu, in their natural generosity and hospitality, welcomed the wanderers and felt pity for them. As such the Europeans were allowed to pitch their tents and to have a temporary right of occupation on the land in the same category as those Gikuyu *mohoi* or *mothami*¹¹ who were given only cultivation or building rights. The Europeans were treated in this way in the belief that one day they would get tired of wandering and finally return to their own country.

These early empire builders, knowing what they were after, played on the ignorance and

7. *ndigana* or *nyongo* (ndē gā' nā, nyoo' ngoo).

8. *Masai and Wakamba* (mä sī', wā kā' mbä).

9. *cant* (kant): insincere talk, especially pious remarks by hypocrites.

10. *orori* or *athongo* (ō' roo rē, ā thoo' ngoo).

11. *mohoi* or *mothami* (moo hō' ē, moo thā' mē).

sincere hospitable nature of the people. They agreed to the terms of a *mohoi* or *mothami*, and soon started to build small forts or camps, saying that "the object of a station is to form a center for the purchase of food for caravans proceeding to Uganda," etc. For "Kikuyu was reported a country where food was extraordinarily abundant and cheap."

The Gikuyu gave the Europeans building rights in places like Dagoretti, Fort Smith and others, with no idea of the motives which were behind the caravans, for they thought that it was only a matter of trading and nothing else. Unfortunately, they did not realize that these places were used for the preliminary preparations for taking away their land from them. They established friendly relations with the Europeans and supplied them with food for their caravans, taking it for granted that naturally the white wanderers must undoubtedly have their own country and therefore could not settle for good in a foreign land, that they would feel homesick and, after selling their goods, would go back to live in their homesteads with parents and relatives.

The belief that the Europeans were not going to live permanently in Africa was strengthened by the fact that none of them seemed to stay very long in one place. Therefore, reasoning from this, the Gikuyu naturally came to the conclusion that one day all the Europeans in Africa would pack up bag and baggage and return to their own country in the same way as they came. It was a common saying among the Gikuyu until a few years ago that "*Gotire ondo wa ndereri, nagowo Coomba no okainoka*,"¹² which means that there is no mortal thing or act that lives for eternity; the Europeans will, no doubt, eventually go back to their own country. This saying was taken up as a lamenting slogan and was sung in various songs, especially when the wanderers started to show their real motive for wandering.

The early travellers reported that "Kikuyu promised to be the most progressive station between the coast and the lake. The natives were very friendly, and even enlisted as porters to go to the coast, but these good relations received a disastrous check. Owing largely to the want of discipline in the passing caravans, whose men robbed the crops and otherwise made themselves troublesome, the people became estranged,¹³ and presently murdered several porters." This was the beginning of the suffering and the use of the sticks which produced killing fire, as Mogo wa Kebiro had predicted in his prophecy of the coming of the white men. For soon after the above incident, we are told that the Gikuyu were "taught a lesson": they were compelled to make "the payment of fifty goats daily, and the free work of three hundred men to build the fort they had destroyed."

After this event the Gikuyu, with bitterness in their hearts, realized that the strangers they had given hospitality to had planned to plunder and subjugate them by brute force. The chief, Waiyaki,¹⁴ who had entered into a treaty of friendship with the strangers, was afterward deported and died on his way to the coast. People were indignant for these acts of ingratitude on the part of the Europeans and declined to trade with them, thinking that the Europeans and their caravans would get hungry and move away from the Gikuyu country; but soon the Gikuyu were made to know that "might is right," for it is reported that "from this country of teeming abundance, where in a few days I obtained many thousand pounds of food, the officer finds it impossible to purchase

12. *Gotire ondo wa ndereri, nagowo Coomba no okainoka* (goo tē' ri oo ndoo wā nde' ri rē, nā gwō' chō' mbā nō oo kī' noo' kā).

13. *estranged* (e strānjd'): newly unfriendly and hostile.

14. Waiyaki (wī yā' kē).

a single bag of grain," and parties were sent out regularly to take it by force!—and "large armed parties were necessary to procure fire-wood and water."

The prediction of Mogo wa Kebiro was slowly being fulfilled, for soon afterward the Kenya-Uganda railway (the iron snake) was completed. And the Europeans, having their feet firm on the soil, began to claim the absolute right to rule the country and to have the ownership of the lands under the title of "Crown Lands," where the Gikuyu, who are the original owners, now live as "tenants at will of the Crown." The Gikuyu lost most of their lands through their magnanimity,¹⁵ for the Gikuyu country was never wholly conquered by force of arms, but the people were put under the ruthless domination of European imperialism through the insidious trickery of hypocritical treaties.

The relation between the Gikuyu and the Europeans can well be illustrated by a Gikuyu story which says that: once upon a time an elephant made a friendship with a man. One day a heavy thunderstorm broke out. The elephant went to his friend, who had a little hut at the edge of the forest, and said to him: "My dear good man, will you please let me put my trunk inside your hut to keep it out of this torrential rain?" The man, seeing what situation his friend was in, replied: "My dear good elephant, my hut is very small, but there is room for your trunk and myself. Please put your trunk in gently." The elephant thanked his friend, saying: "You have done me a good deed, and one day I shall return your kindness." But what followed? As soon as the elephant put his trunk inside the hut, slowly he pushed his head inside and finally flung the man out in the rain, and then lay down comfortably inside his friend's hut, saying: "My dear good friend, your skin is harder than mine, and as there is not enough room for both of us, you can afford to remain in the rain while I am protecting my

delicate skin from the hailstorm."

The man, seeing what his friend had done to him, started to grumble; the animals in the nearby forest heard the noise and came to see what was the matter. All stood around listening to the heated argument between the man and his friend the elephant. In this turmoil the lion came along roaring and said in a loud voice: "Don't you all know that I am the King of the Jungle! How dare anyone disturb the peace of my kingdom?" On hearing this the elephant, who was one of the high ministers in the jungle kingdom, replied in a soothing voice and said: "My Lord, there is no disturbance of the peace in your kingdom. I have only been having a little discussion with my friend here as to the possession of this little hut which your lordship sees me occupying." The lion, who wanted to have "peace and tranquility" in his kingdom, replied in a noble voice, saying: "I command my ministers to appoint a Commission of Enquiry to go thoroughly into this matter and report accordingly." He then turned to the man and said: "You have done well by establishing friendship with my people, especially with the elephant who is one of my honorable ministers of state. Do not grumble any more; your hut is not lost to you. Wait until the sitting of my Imperial Commission, and there you will be given plenty of opportunity to state your case. I am sure that you will be pleased with the findings of the Commission." The man was very pleased by these sweet words from the King of the Jungle and innocently waited for his opportunity, in the belief that, naturally, the hut would be returned to him.

The elephant, obeying the command of his master, got busy with other ministers to appoint the Commission of Enquiry. The following elders of the jungle were appointed to

15. magnanimity (mag' nã nim' a tẽ): generosity in overlooking injury or insult.

sit in the Commission: (1) Mr. Rhinoceros, (2) Mr. Buffalo, (3) Mr. Alligator, (4) The Rt. Hon. Mr. Fox to act as chairman, and (5) Mr. Leopard to act as secretary to the Commission. On seeing the personnel, the man protested and asked if it was not necessary to include in this Commission a member from his side. But he was told that it was impossible, since no one from his side was well enough educated to understand the intricacy of jungle law. Further, that there was nothing to fear, for the members of the Commission were all men of repute for their impartiality in justice, and as they were gentlemen chosen by God to look after the interests of races less adequately endowed with teeth and claws, he might rest assured that they would investigate the matter with the greatest care and report impartially.

The Commission sat to take the evidence. The Rt. Hon. Mr. Elephant was first called. He came along with a superior air, brushing his tusks with a sapling which Mrs. Elephant had provided, and in an authoritative voice said: "Gentlemen of the Jungle, there is no need for me to waste your valuable time in relating a story which I am sure you all know. I have always regarded it as my duty to protect the interests of my friends, and this appears to have caused the misunderstanding between myself and my friend here. He invited me to save his hut from being blown away by a hurricane. As the hurricane had gained access owing to the unoccupied space in the hut, I considered it necessary, in my friend's own interests, to turn the undeveloped space to a more economic use by sitting in it myself, a duty which any of you would undoubtedly have performed with equal readiness in similar circumstances."

After hearing the Rt. Hon. Mr. Elephant's conclusive evidence, the Commission called Mr. Hyena and other elders of the jungle, who all supported what Mr. Elephant had said. They then called the man, who began to give

his own account of the dispute. But the Commission cut him short, saying: "My good man, please confine yourself to relevant issues. We have already heard the circumstances from various unbiased¹⁶ sources; all we wish you to tell us is whether the undeveloped space in your hut was occupied by anyone else before Mr. Elephant assumed his position." The man began to say: "No, but—" But at this point the Commission declared that they had heard sufficient evidence from both sides and retired to consider their decision. After enjoying a delicious meal at the expense of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Elephant, they reached their verdict, called the man, and declared as follows: "In our opinion this dispute has arisen through a regrettable misunderstanding due to the backwardness of your ideas. We consider that Mr. Elephant has fulfilled his sacred duty of protecting your interests. As it is clearly for your good that the space should be put to its most economic use, and as you yourself have not yet reached the stage of expansion which would enable you to fill it, we consider it necessary to arrange a compromise to suit both parties. Mr. Elephant shall continue his occupation of your hut, but we give you permission to look for a site where you can build another hut more suited to your needs, and we will see that you are well protected."

The man, having no alternative and fearing that his refusal might expose him to the teeth and claws of members of the Commission, did as they suggested. But no sooner had he built another hut than Mr. Rhinoceros charged in with his horn lowered and ordered the man to quit. A Royal Commission was again appointed to look into the matter, and the same finding was given. This procedure was repeated until Mr. Buffalo, Mr. Leopard, Mr. Hyena and the rest were all accommodated with new

16. unbiased (un bī' est): without prejudice; impartial; fair.

huts. Then the man decided that he must adopt an effective method of protection, since Commissions of Enquiry did not seem to be of any use to him. He sat down and said: "Ng'enda thi ndeagaga motegi,"¹⁷ which literally means "There is nothing that treads on the earth that cannot be trapped," or, in other words, you can fool people for a time, but not for ever. Early one morning, when the huts already occupied by the jungle lords were all beginning to decay and fall to pieces, he went out and built a bigger and better hut a little distance away. No sooner had Mr. Rhinoceros seen it than he came rushing in, only to find that Mr. Elephant was already inside, sound asleep. Mr. Leopard next came in at the win-

dow, Mr. Lion, Mr. Fox, and Mr. Buffalo entered the doors, while Mr. Hyena howled for a place in the shade and Mr. Alligator basked on the roof. Presently they all began disputing about their rights of penetration, and from disputing they came to fighting, and while they were all embroiled¹⁸ together, the man set the hut on fire and burnt it to the ground, jungle lords and all. Then he went home, saying: "Peace is costly, but it's worth the expense," and lived happily ever after.

17. *Ng'enda thi ndeagaga motegi* (ŋe' ndā thi ndi ä' gā gā moo te' gē).

18. **embroiled** (em brōild'): drawn into a conflict or fight.

Thinking About the Selection

A PERSONAL RESPONSE

*sharing
impressions*

1. How do you feel about what happened to the Gikuyu people? Jot down your impressions in your journal.

*constructing
interpretations*

2. Do you think the man in the Gikuyu story is justified in burning down his hut?

Think about

- the conduct of the jungle lords
- whether peaceful means might have resolved the situation
- whether using violence against an oppressor is ever right

3. What connections do you see between the man and the jungle lords in the Gikuyu story and the Gikuyu and their oppressors in real life?

4. To what extent do you think the Gikuyu are responsible for becoming an oppressed people?

Think about

- the warnings and advice of Mogo wa Kebiro
- the way in which the Europeans first gained a foothold in Kenya
- what might have happened if the Gikuyu had treated the Europeans with "courtesy mingled with suspicion"
- the experience you recalled in your journal

A CREATIVE RESPONSE

5. How might your interpretation of this selection be different if any of the three parts of the selection were not included?

A CRITICAL RESPONSE

6. How objective do you consider Kenyatta's account of the oppressed people and their oppressors? Cite details from the selection to support your views.

7. What do you think Kenyatta might be saying that would apply to all peoples?

Please answer the following questions thoughtfully and completely after reading FMK.

1. What is the name of the medicine man? _____
2. What is:
"the big water" _____ ^{iron snake} "~~light colored frog~~" _____
"light colored frog" _____ "magical sticks" _____
3. Briefly explain the prophecy.
4. According to the prophecy, how should they respond?
5. What were the first signs that the prophecy would come true?
6. What led the Gikuyu people to believe that the Europeans were harmless? (give at least three different reasons)
7. How did the European settlers play on the ignorance and sincere hospitable nature of the people?
8. Kenyatta uses the Gikuyu proverb of "Gotire ondo we ndereri, nagowo Coomba no okainoka," to show what?
9. What was the result of the murder of the settlers' porters?

10. Who was Waiyaki and what happened to him?

i. "The Gikuyu lost most of their lands through their magnanimity, for the Gikuyu country was never wholly conquered by force of arms..." Explain what this passage means.

12. Read the Fable. Who do these animals symbolize?

Lion

Elephant

13. Explain the following passages:

"I considered it necessary, in my friend's own interests, to turn the underdeveloped space to a more economic use by sitting in it myself, ..."

"In our opinion this dispute has arisen through a regrettable misunderstanding due to the backwardness of your ideas. We consider that Mr. elephant has fulfilled his sacred duty of protecting your interests."

"...but we give you permission to look for a site where you can build another hut more suited to your needs, and we will see that you are well protected."

"There is nothing that treads on the earth that cannot be trapped,"

14. To what extent do you think the Gikuyu are responsible for becoming an oppressed people?