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Facing Mount Kenya by Jomo Kenyatta

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American Journal of Sociology

*Facing Mount Kenya*. By Jomo Kenyatta. Secker and Warburg, 1938. Pp. xxi+339.

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Early social science from Africa is seldom the work of Africans. British social anthropology was founded on the study of Africa, but almost all the anthropologists themselves were imperial: those rare Africans who did achieve education were swept into colonial law and politics. Nonetheless, a few Africans have left us distinguished work. Such is Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, published in 1938 after Kenyatta, then in his forties, had studied for three years with Bronislaw Malinowski.

The book is a study of Kenyatta's own tribe, the Kikuyu. The first footnote insists that Westerners have mistaken the phonetics of the tribe's name; it should be Gekoyo, not Kikuyu. But "so as not to confuse the reader we have used the one form *Gikuyu* for all purposes" (p. xv). This footnote captures Kenyatta's stance not only in this book, but throughout his turbulent and momentous life. He always insisted on the African point of view, but made enough concessions to remain in dialogue with his opponents. Accepting his lead, I shall use *Gikuyu* here.

Jomo Kenyatta was born Kamau wa Moigoi in the heart of the Gikuyu country, north of Nairobi, at some point in the early 1890s. (The Gikuyu kept no birth records, so he knew only his age-set [*kehiowere*], which would have included a range of birth years in the metropolitan reckoning.) After the early death of his father, a minor chief, he was adopted by an uncle and soon thereafter moved in with his grandfather, a seer and magician. After an illness brought him into contact with missionaries and their medicine, he ran away to the mission and undertook Western education. In 1914 he was baptized and soon took the Christian name Johnstone Kamau. At the same time, however, he underwent full adult initiation into his tribe (with his age-set: this ritual came in late teens for boys and early teens for girls), keeping one foot firmly in his traditional past. A carpenter, apprentice, and clerk during the later 1910s, Kenyatta became involved in the drive to reclaim Gikuyu lands from the Europeans in the 1920s. (In those years, he began to be called Kenyatta, after the Swahili word for the kind of beaded belt he wore.)

It is not clear when Kenyatta first started using the name *Jomo*, although his friend Peter Mbiyu Koinange claimed that it was invented by the two of them for the publication of the book in 1938. By the end of the 1920s, he was an important Gikuyu activist and went with two others to London to present the Gikuyu Central Association (GCA) case for land return. He stayed 18 months, during which he visited, among other places, the Soviet Union.

\* Another review from 2049 to share with *AJS* readers.—Ed.

After a brief homecoming, Kenyatta returned to London, where he remained until after the Second World War, visiting the Soviet Union again in the early 1930s (he was a student there for a year). Returning to London, he took courses from Malinowski, wrote letters for the GCA, and involved himself in progressive movements both African and otherwise. On his return to Kenya in 1946, Kenyatta immediately became a central figure in independence politics. Colonial administrators imprisoned him for seven years over his role—never fully elucidated—in the Mau Mau affair of 1952–59. Paradoxically, Kenyatta’s fourteen years in London and his seven in a hard-labor camp protected him from reputational damage in the kaleidoscopic shifts of Kenyan politics, so he emerged from prison in August 1961 to a hero’s welcome, understood by British and Africans alike as the probable leader of Kenya’s future. He was prime minister on Kenya’s independence in 1963 and president from 1964 until his death in 1978, when he was well into his eighties.

Kenyatta was the oldest of the generation of sub-Saharan leaders who managed decolonization: a decade older than Nigeria’s Azikiwe and Ghana’s Nkrumah, two decades or more older than Tanganyika’s Nyerere, Zambia’s Kaunda, or Congo’s Lumumba, Mobutu, and Kasavubu. Even among the Kenyan leaders, he was, by the time of his release (at about age 70), “the old man,” commonly known as “elder” (Mzee) Jomo Kenyatta. But he was an adroit politician; one can see even in his tribal ethnography a deft blending of Malinowskian functionalism with African polemic. This ability to play both sides while never losing his African focus made Kenyatta one of the few African independence leaders who died in office and of natural causes.

Perhaps it helped that the British colonialism against which Kenyatta rebelled was recent, unlike that in West Africa, where Britain had been involved since the late 17th century, first in building the slave trade and later in abolishing it. When Kenyatta was born, Kenya had almost no Europeans. They came in his childhood and youth, created a settler colonial state during his young and mature adulthood, and were driven out when he was becoming old. To be sure, this did not mean that East Africa had not seen other outsiders: the Arab slave trade probably took more East Africans over its 1,000-year history than the Atlantic slave trade took West Africans. And Indian and Arab merchants were of very long standing in the areas that became Kenya, particularly on the coastal strip around Mombasa. But all this disappears in *Facing Mount Kenya*, which is an ethnographic rendition of the stable, peaceful Gikuyu and their disturbance by the British, who are portrayed as rapacious, hypocritical, and occasionally rather funny.

When the colonized write their own ethnographies, the result is very complicated indeed. On the one hand, ethnography was a metropolitan genre, created in the museums and universities of the imperial states. On the other, it had a profound if paradoxical commitment to represent the Other for itself. With Kenyatta, we see a colonized man of full maturity

writing in the metropolitan genre an account of a culture he has himself half left. He presents it as a unified, stable whole in the era “before the white man,” writing in the “ethnographic present” so much decried at the turn of the 21st century. At the same time, he criticizes the colonialists in the name of abstract equality, fairness, and justice, values which come more from the metropolitan canon than from the Gikuyu culture whose traditions the book so wonderfully chronicles. These powerful critical passages—sometimes angry, sometimes wry—surface when Kenyatta’s forbearance has been exhausted and ethnographic detachment disappears in Gikuyu passion. I should underscore that the passion is first and foremost Gikuyu, not African. It is his tribe and its practices that Kenyatta discusses and defends here, not African customs in general. Of the other local tribes, only the Wakamba and the Masai make substantial appearances. The former are very closely related to the Gikuyu, and, as for the latter, it is no doubt with some pride that Kenyatta tells us (p. 210) that he had Masai ancestors, since the Masai were the dominant warriors in the area.

On the surface, the book is a deadpan exercise in the functionalism of the later Malinowski. There are chapters on kinship, land tenure, economy, education, initiation, sex and marriage, government, traditional religion, new religion, and magic. A final chapter insists on the unity and integration of Gikuyu life, all aspects of which are based on family groups and age-sets. This is the order followed by dozens of British ethnographies in the interwar period.

But via this Malinowskian presentation, Kenyatta brilliantly manages to address the metropolitan rulers, in a genre of their own making, on the great political issues between the Gikuyu and the British. The kinship and land tenure chapters address the crucial issue of expropriation. The chapter on initiation discusses the practical details and tribal justification for clitoridectomy. The marriage chapter does the same for Gikuyu polygamy. The chapter on new religions explores the misfit between Christianity and African realities.

Kenyatta is at great pains to distinguish Gikuyu landholding from Western, fully alienable ownership. The Gikuyu follow a trusteeship model: the current tenant manages the property for past and future generations of his family but is nonetheless the undisputed “owner” of the land in the present. This model had of course prevailed in the West until the rise of capitalism destroyed it, reemerging (and then at the societal level) only in response to the environmental crises of the later 20th century. Yet Kenyatta’s stable picture doesn’t tell us that the Gikuyu often practiced agriculture in one area until it became infertile; then they moved on. He speaks of fallowing, but there was in fact a good deal of tribal movement in the medium term, in part driven by the ongoing incursions of the pastoralist and warlike Masai. As if to emphasize its polemic quality, the chapter concludes with a long and hilarious native story (probably made up for the occasion, for it fits the narrative all too well) about the relations

between an elephant (the British) and a man (the Gikuyu). The parody of British colonial government is as brilliant as it is merciless.

In the chapter on initiation, the ironies multiply. For here Kenyatta defends the Gikuyu practice of clitoridectomy, carried out on girls in their early teens as their full initiation (*irua*) into the tribe and to prepare them for their future responsibilities as wives, mothers, and agriculturalists. This had become a major political issue for the Gikuyu by 1930. The colonialists uniformly opposed the practice: the missionaries decried it, while the British administration was quietly trying to negotiate its replacement by some more limited ritual. That made clitoridectomy an ideal issue for anticolonialist politics. The GCA began to insist that converted Africans nonetheless circumcise their daughters, particularly including those Christian chiefs who had refrained from having their daughters circumcised. As missionary leaders responded with strong public statements, the GCA seized the occasion to pull the Gikuyu out of the missionary orbit, starting a whole mission-independent school system. In Kenyatta's rendition, it is the missionaries who make the first, stupid move. But other evidence suggests that the GCA may have seen that this issue was a way of breaking Africans free of missionary tutelage. Not surprisingly, this chapter concludes with derisive remarks about missionaries and an apparently purely ethnographic claim that "the African is in the best position properly to discuss and disclose the psychological background of tribal customs, such as *irua*, and should be given the opportunity to acquire the scientific training which will enable him to do so" (p. 154). But this is not the same Kenyatta who later tells us

It is beyond our comprehension to see how a people can reach a "higher level" while they are denied the most elementary human rights of self-expression, freedom of speech, the right to form social organizations to improve their condition, and, above all, the right to move freely in their own country. These are the rights which the Gikuyu people had enjoyed from time immemorial until the arrival of the "mission" of Great Britain. (P. 197)

In our opinion, the African can only advance to a "higher level" if he is free to express himself, to organize economically, politically, and socially, and to take part in the government of his own country. In this way he will be able to develop his creative mind, initiative, and personality, which hitherto have been hindered by the multiplicity of incomprehensible laws and ordinances. (Pp. 197-98)

The latter passages are thoroughly metropolitan. If we apply their arguments to the case of female circumcision, the girls should choose whether or not they undergo the ritual. But such choices would presume an individualism and modernity utterly at variance with Kenyatta's insistence, in the discussion of female circumcision, that only the African can know and develop African tradition.

An African male, one might note. There is no detailed analysis of male

circumcision in the book, nor of the political and economic fact that the initiation ceremonies took two months total, removing a crucial group of women and adolescents from the labor force “required” by the new European settlers. (Male circumcision rituals also disrupted the labor supply, and these facts were central in promoting colonial action to discourage these rituals.) Nor does he tell us that the missionaries he mocks based their arguments completely on the girl’s right to control her life and body, rights Kenyatta elsewhere treats as sacred. Finally, he does not mention what is the most obvious aspect of the matter for any woman: the fact—amusing, perplexing, and enraging—that the entire female circumcision debate involved no women whatever.

Polygamy is another topic that divided the missionaries and the Gikuyu. The latter delighted in pointing out the polygamy of the Old Testament patriarchs. But here the Kenyatta of metropolitan values returns, albeit employing those values in defense of a very nonmetropolitan practice. (Kenyatta himself was married four times.) It is the head wife whom he portrays as urging her husband to marry again: “Get me a companion” (p. 176). The “management of a polygamous household” is presented as a matter of individual liberty: each woman has her own hut and her own garden allotments, “entirely under her own control.” A system of strict rotation between wives obtains for sexual intercourse, but Kenyatta also tells us about wives’ behavior on evening visits of age-set peers of their husband: “On these occasions, the wives exercise their freedom, which amounts to something like polyandry. Each wife is free to choose anyone among the age-group and give him accommodation for the night” (p. 181).

He knows that the metropolitan audience needs to see some freedoms for the women, too. Indeed, the analysis of polygamy uses throughout the rights-and-freedoms language of the metropolitan Kenyatta as opposed to the tradition-is-the-proper-form-of-self-determination language of the clitoridectomy analysis. This tension between the two Kenyattas is noted by Malinowski himself, who in his introduction to the volume notes “a little too much in some passages of European bias” (p. xi).

Surrounding these contentious central chapters, where political issues are canvassed in both ethnographic and polemical terms, other chapters simply provide an insider’s view of a remarkable culture—of its education, industry, music, and religion. Here Kenyatta’s wry humor often speaks. For example, “war” among the Gikuyu means raiding neighboring tribes for cattle, as in so many early societies (the great Irish epic is after all “The Cattle-Raid of Cooley”). Such “wars” are low-intensity affairs by contrast with the carnage of the First World War, in which tens of thousands of Africans lost their lives:

The only difference [in “intertribal” relations in Europe and Africa] is that the relations between European countries involve great suffering for the majority of the people, either through economic fights, tariff barriers and distribution of wealth, etc., or through actual fights in battlefields. (P. 210)

By contrast, in Africa, he tells us, “the stock was lost and the lives of a few herdsmen. Tribal warfare was an occasional raid, with long intervals in between” (p. 209).

Also fascinating is Kenyatta’s account of the tribe’s rain ceremony, complete with his own participation as one of the two little children involved (to symbolize purity):

In the case of the ceremony in which I took part I well remember that our prayers were quickly answered, for even before the sacred fires had ceased to burn, torrential rain came upon us. We were soaked, and it will not be easy for me to forget the walk home in the downpour. (P. 249)

And he assures us, possibly with tongue in cheek, that “I wish to put it on record that every rain ceremony that I have witnessed has been very soon followed by rain. It is not believed, however, that the rain ceremony must always be successful” (p. 250).

But even then, failure gets ultimately blamed on the colonialists, although for once Kenyatta here follows pure Gikuyu logic. Through European impact and missionary activity, “the tribe has lost its unity: hence it cannot speak with Mwene-Nyaga [God] with its full contingent of voices. That being so, he is not impressed” (p. 251).

*Facing Mount Kenya* is classic social science. Its political excitement reminds us that great ethnography need not be apolitical. Quite the contrary, it is the passionate reaction to culture contact and the endless ironic inversions of its arguments and its writing that make it such an intriguing document. At first it reads quite straightforwardly, but the merest hint of contextual reflection makes the text come alive with echoes and ironies.

In the metropolis, social scientists spend their lives in their disciplines. But in the colonized world, as it shook itself free, social science was often a formative phase on the way to other things—in Kenyatta’s case, national political leadership. Yet social science came for Kenyatta after his initial contact with the metropolitan cultures and his first long phase of political activism. *Facing Mount Kenya* is, therefore, a very sophisticated book, studiously deceptive in its putative Malinowskian simplicity, rhetorically conscious in the carefully adjusted level of its occasional polemics. It is in its own way as much a commentary on the metropolis—with its cataclysmic war, its soul-destroying economic depression, its fearful fascism—as it is an ethnography of the Gikuyu. It uses ethnography to entice the metropolitan intellectual reader with a contrasting vision of the idealized if slightly exotic Gikuyu, who want nothing more than (in the last words of the preface) that “peaceful tillage of the soil which supplies their material needs and enables them to perform their magic and traditional ceremonies in undisturbed serenity, facing Mount Kenya” (p. xxi).

The book is, in fact, a magnificent achievement, both as social science and as special pleading. It is also very good reading. Malinowski saw this all from the start: “As a first-hand account of a representative African

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culture, as an invaluable document in the principles underlying culture-contact and change; last, not least, as a personal statement of the new outlook of a progressive African, this work will rank as a pioneering achievement of outstanding merit" (p. xiv).