
Kenya — the Two Rifts

J. T. NGUGI

I WAS BORN AND GREW UP IN Kenya. It is a land of hills and valleys; sunshine and rain; dry sand in the north and snow on the mountains; black and white races and a multiplicity of tribes. I have at times looked to the hills and ridges of Central Province and have remembered the old Psalm of David,

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.

My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.

The Kikuyus believed that the Lord on High, lived in the mountains, his chief dwelling place being Kerinyaga (Mt. Kenya).

But the contrasts that make the worth and beauty of the land are at the same time the basis of conflicts. Contrasts and conflicts; that fairly summarises the Kenya situation. Kenyatta saw this many years ago. He once described Kenya as a land of conflicts. Then he must have been thinking about the tensions between the three main racial groups—Asian, African and European. For these tensions form the best part of Kenya's history during the last 60 years.

The tensions have found expression at the political level. The African has always fought for a fair and better political and economic position in his own country. The Asian has always struggled to achieve political parity with the European. And the European has all the time tried to preserve and perpetuate his dominant political and economic position at the top of the pyramid. Up to 1920, the battle was between the Asian and the European, the subject of the struggle being representation in the Legislative Council in which the Asian wanted equal representation. He argued that he was a British subject, and was an immigrant just as much as the European. He also argued that he had contributed much to the country's social and economic growth. On the basis of output, had he not then, a right to political equality? The Asian lost the battle. Then the African came to the scene. He began to organise himself into political parties. Leaders came from among the "mission boys" who had been educated at the mission schools. Let us be clear about this. The African grievances did not just begin in 1920. In fact these had always been there even before 1900. But he had no way of voicing his complaints and dissatisfaction except through sporadic acts of violence and sabotage. With the emergence of people who could lead, the African voice became louder and louder. The African was now

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a factor in the struggle. The other races were aware of this. The battle then became three-cornered.

It is a credit to the African that he has always sought for constitutional and legitimate means of righting the position. Discussion and compromise had always been the tribal way of settling disputes. But this was denied to him. Until recently, political parties were not given a chance to work normally. The government while aware of their existence, shut its ears to the urgent voices. Frustration mounted on frustration. Then one day came the crisis. The Mau Mau War was and will remain a bitter lesson for Kenya . . .

With the 1960 and 1962 Lancaster House agreements the African is going to win. A large section of the Asian and European populations is reconciled to the independence of Kenya under African rule.

BUT, AND THIS IS THE POINT, the conflicts may continue! For the political tensions have in fact tended to hide the deeper or the real conflict. The real conflict is a conflict of three ways of life—ways of life that have apparently no meeting ground. It is a conflict of culture. The three races have never had a culture contact. They have never really met. They have never known each other, so how do they hope to understand one another? They must remain strangers in the same land. They must remain sharply divided by a vertical Rift. Few have been adventurous and courageous enough to cross the Rift and see what is on the other side. The African, and more the Asian and the European, has each lived in his racial shell, drinking only from the inadequate springs in that shell. These shells confront each other across this Rift.

Even among the Africans, this curse of separate development is seen in the present tribal conflicts and suspicions best symbolised by the present KANU (Kenya African National Union) and KADU (Kenya African Democratic Union) line-up. Some leaders of KADU have been heard to speak of partition of Kenya into its tribal constituents—a contradiction to what is implied by the name of the party.

In Kenya then, there is really no concept of a nation. One is always a Kikuyu, a Luo, a Nandi, an Asian or a European. I always think this dehumanising. For to live on the level of race or tribe is to be less than a full, whole man. A chick has to break the shell shutting it from light, in order to live. Man too must break the shell and be free. Political Freedom from foreign rule, essential as it is, is not *the* Freedom. One freedom is essential. This is the freedom for man to develop into his full potential. He cannot begin to travel on this road as long as he is enslaved by certain shackles. Two of these are racism and tribalism. To look from the tribe to a wider concept of human association is to be progressive. When this begins to happen, a Kenya nation will be born. It will not be an association of different tribal entities, but that of individuals, free to journey to those heights of which they are capable. Nationalism, by breaking some (tribal) shell will be a help. But Nationalism should not in turn become another shackle. Nor should it be the end. The end should be man ultimately freed from fear, suspicion and parochial attitudes.

Kenya is potentially a great country. The contrasts

that are the basis of conflicts, could be the basis of strength, beauty and progress. The different springs in every tribe and race can and should be channelled to flow together in a national stream from which all may draw. In the past, the virtues and energies to be found in different peoples, have been used for the political struggle in a society vertically divided into tribal and racial pillars. These good qualities should now be harmonised to work for a national ideal.

IN THE LONG RUN, however, tribalism and even racialism will die. Tribalism cannot withstand for long the rising tide of African nationalism. And so one looks hopefully to a time in the near future when this vertical Rift will vanish. There will then be no conflicting pillars in the same society.

But Kenya, like many other countries in Africa, is faced with another rift. This is a horizontal rift dividing the elite from the mass of the people. The lot of the African intellectual in his traditional society is always a hard one. So many demands fall on his shoulders putting him, at times in a dilemma. However, I am talking of him as constituting a possible upper class in the country especially after independence. In a sense, this rift in society dividing the upper from the lower, is a universal one, not solely confined to the emerging nations of Africa. It divides the rich from the poor, the educated from the uneducated. Disraeli saw this rift in 19th century Britain and wrote a novel, *The Two Nations*, about it.

The situation in the emerging countries is made urgent by the fact that the educated are very few and the great illiterate mass looks up to them for leadership and guidance. The educated then, have not only the political power but economic power as well. The educated have better economic opportunities than the uneducated. Will this class use their political power to entrench their economic position? Julius Nyerere, the President of TANU (Tanganyika African National Union) has clearly seen such a possibility. He has warned against a society in which the gap between the "few haves" and the "mass of have-nots" is too wide. More than this, he has pointed out the danger of the educated class assuming the position formerly held by Europeans. This could divide the nation under formation. This educated few could easily monopolise not only the political and economic power but culture as well. A culture which is the preserve of the top few is not a national culture. It is not a national stream from which all may draw.

There is no clear-cut solution to these rifts. This lies with the different individuals that make up Kenya society. The traditional African concept of *the* community should not be forgotten in our rush for western culture and political institutions which some regard as ready-made solution to our problems. This should not be equated with communism where the individual does not matter and is only important when he is serving a certain abstraction called the State. In the African way, the community serves the individual. And the individual finds the fullest development of his personality when he is working in and for the community as a whole. Rich or poor, he is considerate and quite aware of the other man. Food and wealth is for the community. The poor

are never outcasts. In this community, culture belongs to all. For the rich and poor, the foolish and the wise are all free to participate in the national life of the community in all its manifestations. Perhaps this is what some have meant when they talk of African Socialism. If so, it is a worthy ideal.

I am not proposing in this article to give a solution to such a vast problem. I have said that the solution is with the people of Kenya. One thing however is necessary in any attempt to eradicate these rifts. People must have that attitude of mind that is not only aware of the problems, but desires a solution. For Kenya a national culture embracing all can be developed. It is what earlier on I called a national ideal for which in the past the different peoples have not looked. But if the people of Kenya can lift up their eyes unto the hills and especially on Mt. Kenya and stretch up their wings ready to fly to freedom and life, the shells will break. They will be free. They will start living.

A dream? One has only to go to Kenya to know. All the people love her soil dearly. This is their common ground. Perhaps the soil which in the traditional view was always seen as a source of creative life and fertility, will unite them. In this lies the hope of Kenya. ●

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