

Dammirifa due!

NOVEMBER 22, 1963

Looking back
at the death
of J. F. Kennedy
—how Africa reacted

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IN AMERICA, ANY INCIDENT in the life of any Kennedy is big news — even the death in a plane crash of a relative by marriage. Different sections of the population are of course interested in different aspects: the editor of one of the weekly movie scandal sheets said recently that no issue was complete without a story, and preferably a cover photograph, of the latest Jackie Kennedy rumour, and a rash of articles on Robert Kennedy's political empire-building has spread from the liberal weeklies to the glossy monthlies. One of the more astonishing sides of this web of court gossip is the emotional response of JFK among "intellectuals."

During his life-time there was already the legend: the thinker who was also a man of action, as well as possessing the physical — and sexual — virility which American intellectuals could vicariously admire. Now, not only has his nebulous and heavy rhetoric been elevated to the level of the timeless aphorisms of Socrates (with Sorensen, Schlesinger, Salinger and others as the Platos of the piece), but every film-clip of the man, witty or serious, pointing his finger or swimming at Hyannisport, is guaranteed to raise a tear. JFK has become the intellectual's tear-jerker.

A favourite gambit, in fact, for those early stages of a conversation between "liberals," when they are circling like dogs to test each other's reliability, is "Where were you when Kennedy was killed?" The appropriate response is a sigh and a slight smile of recognition of a kindred spirit. Sometimes there is even a touching story. One of my favourites (I must confess my lack of immunity from the Kennedy bug) was told to me by a girl who had been in a remote district of Japan on the day of the assassination. The news came over the television to their party of four Americans while they were in a restaurant; the girls began to cry, whereupon the owner turned everyone else out of the building, closed the doors, withdrew himself. Nor was this sensitivity peculiarly Japanese: non-Americans generally seemed to view the death as a family loss for all Americans, perhaps because they felt it themselves as the loss of a distant father figure. (When Verwoerd was killed, on the other hand, people approached with an ironic smile and said "You *must* be sad at the news.")

When Kennedy was killed, on November 22, 1963, I was at the University of Ghana. In fact I heard the first news of it from a Ghanaian who burst into the bathroom of the residence hall while I was taking a shower. It was about seven in the evening and a dance was starting in Legon Hall. I cannot even say that the dance was more subdued than usual: it would be difficult to tone down the spontaneous gaiety of Ghanaian social life. But fresh bits of news trickled in and circulated while the high-life continued and the frogs croaked in the concrete drains. An event so enormous can hardly be reacted to at first: with no television, our emotions responded only as the pictures and stories began to fill the local papers.

THE OTHER DAY, LOOKING through my files, I came across the press-clippings from the Monday and Tuesday following the Friday of the death, which had the first full reports. The Monday *Evening News*, least literate and most myopically pro-Party of the papers, had touchingly lined three pages of the stories on Kennedy in black. The first page was half-covered by the words "DAMMIRIFA

DUE; DAMMIRIFA DUE, DUE!", mourning in the vernacular; the remainder of the page had pictures of Kennedy and the Ghanaian flag at half-mast. So far was the *Evening News* caught off-guard that their obituary editorial had praise for "that tantalising moment in the annals of contemporary history when the fate of the world literally hung in the balance over his superbly executed Cuban feat of unexcelled brinkmanship"! This was a response so demonstrative of regard for Kennedy in least-expected circles that it made up quite for the eulogy by the Party-poet MacNeill Stewart, trite and execrably bad as always.

On the Monday Nkrumah broadcast a tribute to Kennedy, and, reading it now, it seems that the legend had sprung up overnight. Nkrumah praised Kennedy's "tremendous courage, integrity, and warmth of feeling for his fellow-men" and called him a "relentless fighter for equality and human dignity," a champion of world peace.

What Kennedy did . . . what Kennedy said . . . What Johnson did that Kennedy had said . . . what Johnson says and does that Kennedy would not have . . . all are now so intertwined that at this time it is difficult to know how far the legend that emerged was, or would have been, a fact. What is important for America to know now is that the legend exists, that Kennedy was, as the *Ghanaian Times* said, "the New Frontier's symbol of today's dynamic youth . . . of the giants of our age," and that it sets a standard by which other American leaders are judged.

IF KENNEDY WAS GOOD, his enemies, those who killed him, were Bad. The world exorcised its fears and hates on the forces behind Lee Harvey Oswald. In this sense the determination by Americans to view the assassination as an individual act was linked to the middle-class fear of self, and the predominant view of a conspiracy held by the rest of the world was the characteristic blame by disadvantaged groups of "the other" for their deprivation. Already on the Monday after the death, further shaken by the shooting of Oswald, the *Evening News* was asking questions, under a picture of Kennedy pointing outwards: "The finger in this picture is pointing at the guilty consciences of the real killers of President Kennedy . . . Who are the brains behind this hideous crime? . . . The real assassins must be smoked out of their conspiratorial dens . . . What forces or elements stand to gain by his death? The world needs refresh its memory with the reading of two classics — *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*." The net of guilt was at this stage cast widely, speculatively, and sometimes almost metaphorically. "America is like a sepulchre all white and shining outside but dead rotten inside" said Harry Nimbus of the *Ghanaian Times*. "To the glorification of American idiocy, in less than a century they have murdered four of their Presidents . . . America must learn . . . that washing machines, electric shavers, ready automatic meals and the capability to hop from one Hilton Hotel to another is not the height of civilisation." One of those planted letters from "Patriot, Accra" blamed the death on "the evil manoeuvres of imperialism and capitalism . . . for if a people have been able to murder their own Head of State . . . what will they not do to the Afro-Americans and uncompromising champions of other races with whom the capitalists do not see eye to eye . . ." This curious reversal of Marxist theory, by which an evil society

My people when nothing moves

*when nothing moves anywhere
the only motion is the noisy
stillness in me*

*should you then
long for
me*

*look for
me*

*in forbidden songs
searching in the light
beyond petrified hypocrises*

K. WILLIAM KGOSITSILE

Vilanelle on a subject near to all our hearts

Hakuna kazi — motto and refrain;
A symbol like the plague-cross on a door
We pass in fear, and then turn back again*

*And cross ourselves and pray with guilt or pain
"God let it strike the other man," and read once more
"Hakuna kazi" — motto and refrain.*

*Like toadstools sprouting after heavy rain
The hungry men spring up, their pleas waves on a shore
We pass in fear. And then . . . Turn back again,*

*A child is in your path who hopes to gain
A cent or two by some unneeded chore.
"Hakuna kazi" — motto and refrain.*

*To a drowning man the boat will hold no more?
And maxim. How does one explain
We pass in fear — and then turn back again —*

*The leprous beggar. Growing like a stain
A slogan bleeds behind him on a door:
"Hakuna kazi" motto and refrain
We pass in fear, and then turn back again.*

JOHN ROBERTS

Hakuna kazi: No vacancies

had produced a good leader, so that when he was destroyed one blamed the people and praised the leader, was followed by the *Evening News*, who demanded that America re-examine her social and economic system.

Some of the accusations in Ghana were a little more specific. Nkrumah himself queried whether Kennedy's support of racial justice was not a motive for assassination. And that acerbic South African columnist in the *Ghanaian Times*, H. M. Basner, addicted to a conspiracy theory of history, threw scorn on the theory of a left-wing plot and subtly implied that the failure of the security services to prevent the assassination indicated the involvement of the "military-industrial complex." Basner, incidentally, must be credited with the most realistic appraisal of the limitations of Kennedy's actions to occur at that euphoric moment: the Civil Rights bill due to be passed would not, he said, satisfy American Negro aspirations.

It was however in Cairo, where I happened to be some two weeks later, that I read one of the wildest speculations. The *Arab Observer* of December 2, 1963, wrote that ". . . to Arabs the loss was particularly keen since in his last act of political importance, President Kennedy had supported the cause of the Palestinian refugees. Was it possible that in that support lay one motive for his death?" There followed a long justifying article, whose circumstantial evidence included the fact that Dallas was the local headquarters of the Texas Zionists, as well as the frequent mention of "night-club owner Jack Rubinstein" as the murderer of Oswald.

IN THE VACUUM OF DISBELIEF, shock and horror which follow such an incredible event as the assassination of the Head of State of a world power, instinctive reactions are formed and set the terms of subsequent debate. Further discussion is often rationalisation. With 26 volumes of the Warren Commission Report, 42 books directly concerned with the assassination, and millions of words said and written, argument has moved from the terms of Zionists, racists, communists to those of bullet trajectories, types and positions, the numbered frames of films, but the uncertainties remain. The Kennedy legend grows (there are now 250 books alone on his Presidency) — grows because of rather than in spite of Johnson; Robert Kennedy, through a skilful weaving of his own original themes with the phrases of his brother, is attempting to replace almost subliminally that face behind the pointing finger by his own. Whether or not Kennedy succeeds in donning the mantle, and whether he can retain the support of the new radical groups stimulated into life by the vigour and freedom of the JFK years, are important questions for Africa and the world as well as America. There can be no doubt now that November 22, 1963 marked a sharp discontinuity. But was that era from 1960 to 1963, full of idealism and rebirth in America, of independence and groping towards socialism in Africa, of thaw between East and West . . . was it an *interregnum* between decades of sterility and reaction? Or is this time now, of Vietnam, Rhodesia, the overthrow of Nkrumah and Ben Bella, of the crisis of Nigeria, the destruction of revolutionary movements in Latin America, the real pause? It is with another Kennedy's future that some of the answer lies. ●