



East Africa

HISTORY

The Kikuyu Meet Europeans

Jomo Kenyatta, the author of this selection, led the movement to free Kenya from British rule after World War II. When Kenya gained its independence in 1963, Kenyatta became the new nation's first president. Here, he describes his people's first contacts with the British in the late 1800s.

The first few Europeans who passed near the Gikuyu [Kikuyu] country were more or less harmless. . . . The Europeans with their caravans kept coming and going the same way from the coast to Lake Victoria and Uganda. In their upwards and downwards journeys they traded with the Gikuyu with little or no conflict. . . . The Gikuyu thought that the Europeans with their caravans did not mean any harm and befriended them. . . .

When the Europeans first came into the Gikuyuland the Gikuyu looked upon them as wanderers (*orori* or *athongo*) 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* 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 sincere hospitable [generous, friendly] 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 centre for the purchase of food for caravans proceeding to Uganda,” etc. . . .

The Gikuyu gave the Europeans building rights . . . 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 [introductory, beginning] 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 home-sick and, after selling their goods, would go back to live in their homesteads with parents and relatives. . . .

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 [lack] of discipline in the passing caravans, whose men robbed the crops and otherwise

made themselves troublesome, the people became [hostile], and . . . murdered several porters.” This was the beginning of the suffering and the use of the sticks which produced killing fire. . . . We are told that the Gikuyu were “taught a lesson” . . .

After this event the Gikuyu, with bitterness in their hearts, realised that the strangers they had given hospitality to had planned to plunder [steal] and subjugate [conquer] them by brute force. . . . People were indignant [angered by something unjust] 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 Gikuyu country; but soon the Gikuyu were made to know that “might is right,” . . . and parties [of Europeans] were sent out regularly to take [food] by force! . . .

Soon afterwards the Kenya-Uganda railway . . . 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. . . . The Gikuyu, who are the original owners, now live as “tenants at the will of the Crown.” The Gikuyu lost most of their lands through their [good will], for the Gikuyu country was never wholly conquered by force of arms, but the people were put under the ruthless domination of European imperialism [rule] through . . . trickery [and] treaties.

From “The Gikuyu System of Land Tenure” (retitled “The Kikuyu Meet Europeans”) from *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* by Jomo Kenyatta. Copyright ©1938 by Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd. Reprinted by permission of **Random House, Inc.**

Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. Why did the Kikuyu not view the British as a threat at first?

2. How and why did the relationship between the British and the Kikuyu change?

Activity

Prepare a speech to give in a council of Kikuyu leaders. Take the role of a British or a Kikuyu leader. In your speech, explain why the Kikuyu should or should not cooperate with the British traders.