

3-20-1961

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Wall Street journal

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### Recommended Citation

Evans, Joseph E. and Wall Street journal, "Toward a Policy for Africa" (1961). *Clippings*. 115.  
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# Toward a Policy for Africa

## Are "Economic Development," Our Institutions Really Applicable?

By Joseph E. Evans

**KAJIADO, Kenya** Before there can be much useful talk about developing a new American policy for Africa, it is essential to understand the Africans.

"It is a sentimental illusion," says an American political expert, "to assume that Africans are basically the same kind of people we are, that they just happen to have been deprived of advanced civilization and will readily take to Western economic and political institutions if they have the chance. The truth is that the gulf between their values and ours, their lives and ours, is all but unbridgeable."

A traveler's observations tend to support that view. To be sure, tropical Africa can boast outstanding intellectuals like Leopold Senghor, President of Senegal; highly intelligent politicians like Nigeria's Prime Minister, Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa; poets, writers, artists; Western-educated lawyers and doctors. It is also true that cities like Nairobi and parts of Accra and Lagos look modern and Western.

But the great bulk of the estimated 167 million people who live in tropical Africa—that is, south of the Sahara and north of the Union of South Africa—are not intellectuals or professionals, or indeed educated or literate. They do not live in the cities but in the bush.

Here is a fairly typical picture of that life, on a trail leading to the Konkoure Valley, some 100 miles inland in Guinea in West Africa; it could be almost anywhere in tropical Africa: About a dozen round thatched huts making a village so somnolent as to seem dead in the heat of the afternoon. One man walks lethargically along a path, a bare-breasted woman pounds meal, a naked child stares at the passing car.

That is all. There is no sign of any activity of commerce—nothing remotely resembling a shop—or culture, no sign of civilization past or present. Nothing, in short, to suggest even the outline of a bridge to the Western world.

"These are the citizens," sardonically observes a Frenchman, "who Guinea's President Sekou Toure says have arrived at full political maturity."

### The Masai at Home

Or take a closer look at rural African life here in Kajiado District of the East African Colony and Protectorate of Kenya. This is the administrative headquarters, 55 miles south of the capital of Nairobi, for a group, numbering some 40,000 people, of the Masai tribe scattered over 8,000 square miles of plains, complete with errie thorn trees and scampering gazelle.

The Masai used to have the reputation of being formidable warriors, but they no longer do much fighting. They grow no crops and have no wheeled transport of their own—when they move, they load their few belongings on donkeys and women. Their time is spent grazing their cattle on the plains, frequently moving from place to place in search of better grazing. Their diet is meat, milk and blood.

The Masai are striking-looking in their long thin capes; most women's earlobes were pierced in childhood and by adulthood the holes are so huge that the lobes hang almost to the shoulder. One of the most important festivals has to do with circumcision, when the teen-age boy becomes a moran, or warrior; the barbarically cruel and extremely unhygienic female circumcision is also still practiced.

To reach a manyatta or temporary enclosure for a community of these nomadic people, your Land Rover leaves the road and takes off over the plains. You are at the manyatta almost before you see it, so low are the buildings and so much a part of the landscape.

The enclosure is literally that—a fence of thorn to keep out the wild animals, with a thorn gate that is put up at night. Inside the manyatta are about eight houses, with a small open area for the men to gather and talk and a much larger area for the cattle at night. Now, during the day, there are mostly women and children in the enclosure, for the men leave about dawn with their cattle and return about dusk.

One rheumy-eyed old woman grudgingly

agrees to let the visitor inside her house. Like the others, it is about five feet high, a sort of long oblong, vaguely reminiscent of a large reclining hippo, made of branches covered with mud and cow dung. It is necessary to bend almost double to get in the tiny door, nor can one stand upright inside. It is pitch dark until someone lights a feeble little paraffin lamp. On the floor are the embers from the cooking fire. There is no furniture. A good hunk of the house is a room for calves.

As one takes an unaffectionate leave of the manyatta, questions come to mind. Why this passion for darkness and airlessness? For though the Masai houses are different from those of other tribes, the typical African hut is similarly innocent of windows. It is not a question of poverty, for it costs nothing to make windows. It is not a question of never having seen anything else, for the British have been "civilizing" Kenya for at least 60 years, and in other parts of tropical Africa the contact with the West is of far longer duration.

Some say the Africans don't want windows because this way the huts are cool after the heat of the sun. But probably a more important reason is that it suits the dark and secretive nature of the people. With their love of secret societies, their fantastic rituals, their addiction to witchcraft and their perpetual fears of unseen powers, the Africans are in all likelihood the most secretive people in the world.

### Mau Mau's Materialism

And of all the African tribes, perhaps none is more secretive than Kenya's Kikuyu, from which the Mau Mau movement drew—and still does—its main strength. Mau Mau was a triumph of witchcraft and black magic and at the same time a bestial perversion of tribal traditions, but it could not have happened at all if it did not express something deep in the African nature. All in all, it is quite a contrast to the prevalent stereotype of the African as a happy, friendly child of the sun.

Mau Mau, again, showed the latent cruelty in the African. Normally it is not so much deliberate cruelty as indifference to pain in human beings or animals. "They think it rather cute," says a Westerner who has made his life in Africa, "to chop off a man's head or flay a goat alive."

All this is not a case of a Western civilization looking down its nose at a primitive civilization, certainly not that of a white civilization criticizing a black. The African character has indeed nothing to do with color of skin. But the question of the African character has very much to do with civilization in general human terms.

One can take it as self-evident that the human instinct is to improve the conditions of life, materially and otherwise. In human terms, and not just because it is the Western way, it is preferable to live in a pleasant house, no matter how inexpensive, rather than in a stinking mud hut.

Yet here are millions of people on whom the improvements of civilization seem not to rub off at all. Why there is so little desire to imitate what are plainly more comfortable conditions is one of the mysteries of tropical Africa.

A related mystery is why tropical Africa, almost alone of any sizable region in the world, developed no civilization of its own during the many centuries when Africa was indeed for the Africans—when they were their own masters. If there were great civilizations in the African past, their monuments, arts or inventions have not been handed down.

Here, in the words of a recent Governor of Kenya, Sir Philip Mitchell, is what the British found when they came here around the turn of the century: The people "had no wheeled transport and (apart from the camels and donkeys of the pastoral nomads) no animal transport either; they had no roads nor towns; no tools except small hand hoes, axes, wooden digging sticks and the like; no manufactures, and no industrial products except the simplest domestic handiwork; no commerce as we understand it and no currency."

Part of the explanation must lie in the

African's psychological outlook and intellectual capacities. Generally speaking there is little forethought. A European lady asked an African farmer why he just had bananas on his place when he could be more profitably growing coffee; his reply was that he could eat the bananas but he could not eat coffee beans.

Again generally speaking, students of Africa can find little evidence of a capacity for abstract reasoning even among educated people. This is also described as a lack of "original thought," the kind of thinking that leads to inventions or improvements. "You can show an African how to do something," says one expert, "but you can't get him to figure out how to do it by himself."

African awareness of these limitations has led, on the part of some so-called intellectuals and political leaders, to a new cult of the "African personality." Revealing a profound inferiority complex, this creed says that the great advances of white civilization are worthless; the African contributes much more to the world just by being himself. One writer, quoted in George H. T. Kimble's "Tropical Africa," rationalizes it as follows:

"Hurray for those who have never invented anything,

Hurray for those who have never explored anything,

Hurray for those who have never conquered anything,

But who, in awe, give themselves up to the essence of things."

It would be one thing if the African could boast a spirituality superior to the West's "sordid materialism." But he cannot. His spirituality is a dungeon of terrors, revealed in its most extreme form in the savage bestiality of Mau Mau. Rejection of the white man and all his works, return to barbaric, terroristic Africa—this is indeed Mau Mau leader Jomo Kenyatta's attractive formula for "projecting the African personality."

### The Concept of Opposition

What all this means in terms of developing some kind of American "policy" for Africa is that it is going to be extremely difficult to get across ideas of economic development and free political institutions. Africans are geared for neither, and some observers doubt that even a massive program of education would necessarily change them.

Many students of Africa believe it is idiotic in particular to try to export to this area the British-type constitution, with its concept of an opposition, perhaps devoted to change but ready to defend its opposition's personal rights. Says one: "The African's notion of opposition is that if someone is your opponent he is your enemy and the thing to do is kill him or put a curse on him or intimidate him so much he won't dare stick his nose up." It is thought that something like the American system, with its checks and balances built into the governmental structure, might be more suitable.

But the introduction of any Western political system is bound to be a rather sad joke at present. In the recent Kenya elections drawings of animals—hippo and giraffe, for example—were used to identify the different parties on the ballots. This attempt to make things simple proved too complex for many Africans: The forest people had never seen a hippo or a giraffe. Beyond the irony is the illusion of thinking one can successfully have universal franchise among people who live very much like the animals with which they are surrounded.

So it would seem an American policy would have to concentrate on the relatively few intellectuals and politicians who do have something resembling our philosophy of life. A policy that sentimentally viewed the overwhelming majority of Africans as similar to us in lives, values and aspirations would not only be futile but would almost certainly make some bad mistakes. And even if Americans do seriously try to see Africans as they really are, there are other large difficulties standing in the way of an effective policy.

(This is the first of two articles on the problems of American policy in Africa. The second will appear soon.)