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How the World Betrayed a Small African Nation*

IT'S OUR TURN TO EAT

THE STORY OF A KENYAN WHISTLE-BLOWER

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The Call of the Tribe

'You're my older brother and I love you. But don't ever take sides against the family again.'

MICHAEL CORLEONE, in *The Godfather*

If you drive north-east from Nairobi, aiming for Mount Kenya, it takes a while to shrug off the city slums. Traffic slows to a crawl while doing its best not to stop entirely at Githurai roundabout, notorious for cut-throats and thieves, then bombs in relief down the Thika road. Some of the worst accidents in Kenyan history have occurred on this stretch of road, but few drivers let that deter them. Ordinary cars compete with crammed *matatus*, yellow jerrycans bobbing from roof racks like party balloons, to see who can flirt most outrageously with death while remaining on the road.

You know you've reached Thika when you start passing a series of wooden trestle tables, buzzing with tipsy wasps, where pineapples borrowed from the Del Monte plantation, a purple-grey expanse of scrubby sprouts, are cheekily sold. The motorway then crosses the swirling Chania river, whose falls are a favourite with lovelorn suicides, running briefly parallel to the railway. Then it is time to abandon the main road and turn west. If, seen from space, most of Kenya appears an arid expanse of yellow semi-desert, Central Province is its lush emerald kernel. In pre-colonial times, caravans heading towards the fearsome kingdom of Buganda would load up

here with provisions. Awed by the farming skills of the locals, admiring travellers described these green valleys as 'one vast garden'. And that is still the impression today. The waters from two mountain ranges, Mount Kenya to the north-east and the Aberdares to the west, have carved the land into a series of moist valleys and mist-swathed ridges, the historic building blocks of Kikuyu society.

Take a detour to the top of one of these, and you will find yourself gazing across a vaporous Hobbitland of bottle-green dales, each ridge echoing the line traced by its neighbour until the blue layers, like a watercolour's delicate washes, blur into an inky distance. This is a man-friendly landscape of tamed shires, generous waterfalls and accessible horizons, a world away from the annihilating vistas of Turkana and Marsabit. Rich in laterite, the earth here is rust-coloured and sucking wet. After the rain, it boils thick and greasy under tyres and cars glide uncontrollably across its surface like drunken ice-skaters. When spattered on clothes it leaves indelible marks behind, like stale blood. So fertile is the soil, it's easy to succumb to a panicky claustrophobia when venturing onto the unmarked feeder roads, as the napier grass crowds in, cutting out the sunlight, making orientation impossible. 'True Kikuyu country,' gloats my Kikuyu driver as we slither past orchards of glossy coffee bushes and giant fronds of banana, fluttering like sails at sea. 'No one here will ever die of hunger, like in Ukambani.' But this giant allotment is straining under the press of population. It bears the marks of having been divided and subdivided, the strips of land that drape the hillsides like elastoplasts – each with its own *shamba* – signs of a paterfamilias's doomed attempt to do right by each member of an overly large family. The pressure on the soil here is so intense, the ability to coax life from the earth so instinctive, even road verges serve as vegetable plots, carefully tended seedlings growing within inches of speeding wheels.

Keep heading north on the main road, through meadows grazed by hobbled goats, and you eventually reach the market town of Muranga. It's easy to drive through this unremarkable place, perched on a rocky escarpment, without suspecting it was ever of strategic

significance. But once, in an earlier manifestation as Fort Hall, one of the first British outposts, it played a vital part in a colonial empire's drive to pacify, occupy and settle East Africa's hinterland. A dozen kilometres beyond Muranga, a signposted dirt track veers off to the left and heads uphill, passing playgrounds of screaming schoolchildren in DayGlo jerseys, their bare feet coated in ochre. At the top of the ridge there is a sky-blue gate with the words '*Mukurwe Wa Nyagathanga*' – The Tree of Gathanga – painted upon it.

The compound inside may be officially gazetted as a tourist site, but it looks unkempt, virtually abandoned, the only sounds coming from the weaver birds chattering in the bush. The small office is locked up, leaving a posse of local villagers the task of hauling open the gates and showing visitors around. The mildewed skeleton of an unfinished hotel, intended to host the crowds some entrepreneur convinced himself would one day flock here, dwarves what those imagined tourists were meant to see: two traditional red-earth rondavels, huddled under a slim *mukurwe* tree which vaults across the clearing. The neglect is puzzling, given that this is supposed to be the spot where Kenya's biggest tribe first saw the light of day. This is the birthplace of a Chosen People, the Kikuyu nation's very own Garden of Eden, complete with symbolic Tree of Life. But then, the Kikuyu have always been a pragmatic people, their gaze firmly trained on the future, not the past.

According to the legend, an intriguing blend of history and religion, Kirinyaga – today's Mount Kenya, the peak the site looks towards – was the focal point of the Kikuyu world. Sitting just south of the equator, yet boasting a permanent giant moustache of snow, the summit was believed to be the seat of Ngai, God the Creator. The two licks of snow on the 5,200-metre peak, Kenya's highest, were said to be made from precious dust on which Ngai took his rest, and the mountain's name was derived from '*nyaga*' – 'ostrich' – a local bird to which the mountain, with its black volcanic base and white cap, bore a passing resemblance. Ngai created Kikuyu – the first man – in his own image, then took him up onto Kirinyaga to survey his future kingdom, a land whose forests teemed with fruit and rustled with

wildlife, its valleys constantly watered by rivers from the mountain's permanent snows.

'Build your homestead on that spot where the fig trees grow,' Ngai told Kikuyu, pointing to Mukurwe Wa Nyagathanga. So Kikuyu settled here, and when he needed a helpmate, Ngai sent him beautiful Mumbi, the world's first woman. When the couple asked for children, Ngai sent them first daughters and then some handsome sons-in-law. It was from these youngsters' loins that the founding clans of the Kikuyu tribe sprang, one to each ridge. Each of the clans was named after a daughter – Wanjiku, Wangari, Wanjeri, etc. – for the Kikuyu were originally a matriarchal society. Quixotically, it was considered bad luck to specify how many daughters, or founding clans, the House of Mumbi contained. Whether discussing offspring, livestock or goods, it was safer to stick to a vague 'nine plus . . .', rather than a specific 'ten'. To quantify was to play into the hands of one's enemies, offering them potentially dangerous information.

Thus ran the myth, a monotheistic creation story with much in common with the one found in the Bible. Ethnologists tell a slightly different story. Along with a smattering of other Bantu tribes, the Kikuyu probably arrived in what is now Kenya after an infinitesimally slow migration that began in around 2000 BC in what are today's Nigeria and Cameroon. Responding either to the drying of the Sahara or the press of alien peoples, these Bantu communities arrived in Tanzania after tracing a continent-wide loop. Some then turned towards southern Africa, where their descendants were destined to become the Zulu and Shona. Others headed north-east, aiming for the coast before swerving back into the hinterland, where some settled in the Kamba hills. The group that became the Kikuyu called a halt in today's Central Province, edging out a local population of forest-dwelling pigmies. They had been wise in their choice of new home: these highlands were not only cool and fertile, they were located above the malaria line and were largely free of the tsetse fly, sparing them two of Africa's most devastating diseases. Numbers surged so dramatically that by the sixteenth century Muranga was unbearably crowded. Some then moved north to Nyeri, the well-

watered area between Mount Kenya and the Aberdares. Others trekked south, crossing the Chania river and heading into the district of Kiambu, which now lies on the fringes of Nairobi, buying land as they went from the honey-gathering Dorobo tribe.

In his book *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta attempted to capture the essence of Kikuyu culture – fast becoming a romanticised memory – before it was lost to view, swamped by the white man's ways. Writing in 1938, when the Kikuyu population, today estimated at 7.4 million, was just one million strong, Kenyatta paints a rose-tinted picture of a stateless society in which extended families, known as *mbari*, lived in harmony on the ridges, herding goats, growing beans and brewing beer. Their tranquillity was disturbed only by occasional small wars with the nomadic Maasai, whose region stretched on either side of the Kikuyu escarpment. But the two communities' contrasting obsessions usually allowed them to rub along together peacefully enough. 'Wherever there is grass belongs to us,' was the motif of the cattle-herding Maasai, 'Wherever there is soil belongs to us,' said the agriculturalist Kikuyu.

This was a devout society, which respected the spirits of its ancestors while worshipping Ngai as supreme being. When the Kikuyu prayed they turned to face Kirinyaga, and sacrificed goats at the foot of sacred giant fig trees, nature's churches. It was a society which practised polygamy and marked the transition to adulthood with elaborate circumcision rituals which established special bonds of intimacy between members of the same age-set. The Kikuyu did not congregate in villages, and power was similarly decentralised, with councils of elders, known as *kiama*, taking key decisions and one generation passing responsibility to the next at a riverbank ceremony staged every thirty to forty years. Kikuyu warriors went about armed with spears and bows and arrows, but the community had no need of a standing army. The solitary individualism of Western thought could not have been further from the Kikuyu's collective vision of existence, in which a man's very identity was rooted in the group. 'Nobody is an isolated individual,' wrote Kenyatta. 'Or rather his

uniqueness is a secondary fact about him: first and foremost he is several people's relative and several people's contemporary.¹⁸

Crucially, Kenyatta also described a complex system of land ownership. Contrary to what the white settlers assumed, communal ownership of land was not a Kikuyu characteristic. Formally bought, carefully demarcated and privately owned, land was the bastion on which the tribal economy was founded. The ability to force the land to yield its riches was what made a Kikuyu superior, in his own eyes, to the feckless Maasai pastoralists who roamed the Rift Valley. 'There is a great desire in the heart of every Gikuyu man to own a piece of land on which he can build his home. A man or a woman who cannot say to his friends, come and eat, drink and enjoy the fruit of my labour, is not considered as a worthy member of the tribe,' wrote Kenyatta. Land not only conveyed status, it also provided a spiritual connection with past and future. 'It is the soil that feeds the child through lifetime; and again after death it is the soil that nurses the spirits of the dead for eternity. Thus the earth is the most sacred thing above all that dwell in or on it.'

It was this precious possession that colonialism placed in jeopardy, so perhaps it's no surprise that the Kikuyu showed themselves very far from docile in their early encounters with the white man. Count Samuel Teleki von Szek, a Hungarian explorer who led the first white expedition to northern Kenya in 1887, came under constant arrow attack while travelling through Kikuyu country, and claimed he had never come across more hostility during all his East African travels. A decade later, Francis Hall, the British District Commissioner after whom Fort Hall was named, found the Kikuyu 'exceedingly intractable' in the face of his attempts to hammer obedience home by setting fire to hundreds of their homesteads and confiscating tens of thousands of their goats and cattle. 'Too treacherous to be trusted to any extent, of a cunning, distrustful and treacherous nature, accustomed to look upon strangers as enemies,' he complained.

The implacable British Captain Richard Meinertzhagen, posted to Muranga in 1902, was also surprised by the ferocity of Kikuyu resistance. 'I must own, I never expected the Wakikuyu to fight like this,' he

recorded in his diary after a successful punitive raid. He watched with sceptical disbelief as the first British settlers – including the ebullient Lord Delamere, most prominent of a clique of rollicking, black-sheep-of-the-family British aristocrats making Kenya their home – confidently started drawing up grandiose plans. These breezy new arrivals, regarded by a visiting young Winston Churchill as little more than 'ruffians', were determined to transform Kenya into 'White Man's Country', whatever the British government might feel about the matter. 'Sooner or later it must come to a clash between black and white. I cannot see millions of educated Africans – as there will be in a hundred years' time – submitted tamely to white domination,' wrote Meinertzhagen. And as he prepared to leave, he correctly guessed who would be the source of future trouble. 'I am sorry to leave the Kikuyu, for I like them. They are the most intelligent of the African tribes that I have met; therefore they will be the most progressive under European guidance and will be the most susceptible to subversive activities. They will be one of the first tribes to demand freedom from European influence.'¹⁹

With the arrival of the white settlers, life for the Kikuyu became increasingly bleak. The issue was not so much the *wazungu's* confiscation of traditional Kikuyu land. According to the British Land Commission Report of 1933, whose charting of Kikuyu boundaries prior to white settlement has never been seriously questioned, only 6 per cent of that would ever be grabbed by the colonial powers, most of it in southern Kiambu. 'There is no doubt that the hardest-hit victims of land alienation were the Maasai and not the Kikuyu, the latter's clamour notwithstanding,' writes Kikuyu historian Godfrey Muriuki.²⁰ No, the *wazungu* represented a devastating challenge because they had effectively stolen the Kikuyu's future. Previously, the Kikuyu had always successfully negotiated access to an ever-widening area for their growing population with either the Dorobo or the Maasai. That territory had now been swallowed up by the White Highlands, future expansion permanently blocked. Forced for the first time to pay hut taxes by the 'traditional chiefs' imposed on them by the British, more and more young men migrated out of the

Kikuyu Reserve. They either sought work in Nairobi's expanding slums or became squatters, farming fields in the White Highlands that they could never hope to own.

Unlike the Maasai, whose rejection of modernity doomed them to marginalisation, many Kikuyu eagerly embraced the new ways, deciding that the route to success lay in adopting Christianity and Western customs. The *athomi*, 'people who read', replaced banana leaves on their roofs with corrugated iron, goatskins with shirts and trousers. Under the influence of the missionaries who had fanned across Kikuyuland they gradually abandoned polygamy and female circumcision, and insisted on learning English, language of the master race, rather than the Kiswahili the British thought appropriate. Writer Binyavanga Wainana pokes fun at these 'progressives', whose loyalty to the white man could be measured by the amount of Vaseline they used. 'You can see it in old photos: a generation of clean-cut, Vaseline Kenyans who had regular features, seemed to have no ethnicity, and carefully combed down their hair.'

Yet still they found the playing field pitched against them. In Kikuyu culture, the quality most admired is to be '*muthuri wirugamitie*' – an upstanding man, a man who earns his living from the sweat of his brow. Land ownership, traditionally, was what allowed a Kikuyu male to become captain of his destiny. Now Kikuyu males found themselves demeaned. Unable to marry because they owned no property, thwarted in their desire to found family dynasties, they had assimilated faster than any other Kenyan community, yet what had this flexibility brought them?

Decades of grievances reached a head in the late 1940s, when a banned organisation, the Kikuyu Central Association, began secretly administering traditional oaths of loyalty to young Kikuyu, effectively signing up secret fighters for a coordinated campaign of civil disobedience.

As oath-taking quietly spread through the Kikuyu community, veteran activist Jomo Kenyatta returned from long exile in London to take the leadership of the Kenya African Union, an organisation pushing, through parliamentary channels, for black rule. When the British

government refused in 1951 to bow to demands for the number of elected Africans on the colony's Legislative Council to be raised above five for a population of five million – as compared to fourteen for 30,000 white settlers – the possibility of compromise between settlers and Africans receded. One year later, alarmed by the growing number of attacks on white farms and the murders of suspected Kikuyu informers, Kenya's governor declared a state of emergency, deployed troops and arrested a hundred black leaders, including Kenyatta. It was a move which betrayed the degree of panic in the colonial administration. Despite time spent in Moscow, Kenyatta was no radical. He had so little sympathy for the revolutionary credo of the Land and Freedom Armies, the movement which would swiftly be dubbed 'Mau Mau', that its hardliners would discuss his assassination. The British decision to sentence this supposed ringleader to seven years' hard labour simply turned him into a national hero.

British press coverage of the Mau Mau rebellion would play on all the traditional Western stereotypes of the dark continent. This war in 'Terrorland', the British public was told, pitted plucky settlers' wives on lonely homesteads against a disturbingly irrational enemy in whose breast the Mau Mau's macabre nocturnal oath-taking ceremonies, involving animal sacrifice and, perhaps, bestiality, had awakened the most primeval impulses. The Kikuyu, it was said, had been plunged too suddenly into the modern world – 'Only fifty years down from the trees,' muttered the settlers²¹ – and the jarring shock of the encounter between primitive culture and Western life had triggered some sort of psychological meltdown.

The details of Mau Mau's 'terrorist' atrocities were so gruesome – an elderly settler disembowelled in his bath, a tousel-haired six-year-old hacked to death amidst his teddies by the family servants – they obscured the reality of casualty numbers. The overwhelming majority would be black, not white. Historian David Anderson estimates that while sixty white civilians and the same number of British soldiers and policemen died during the insurgency, the number of Kikuyu dead probably reached 20,000.²² For the Kikuyu community, a post-feudal society itself riven with inequalities and ripe for internal

revolution, was tragically split. On the one side stood wealthy land-owners who had prospered by collaborating with the British, mission-educated Christians who rejected Mau Mau's call for a return to traditional Kikuyu roots, and the Home Guard (subsequently renamed the Kikuyu Guard), a militia loyal to the colonial government. On the other stood Mau Mau's natural recruits: desperate young men, many of them landless squatters. Their oaths to Kirinyaga were marked by a cross of soil and animal blood smeared across their foreheads, and when fatally wounded in battle their last act, it was said, was to seize a handful of that same soil. This rich earth was what had nurtured them, the reason for laying down their lives, the element to which they returned in death.

As the campaign to suppress what was as much a civil war as an anti-colonial uprising gained momentum, with the Royal Air Force bombing and starving into submission two dreadlocked rebel armies mustered in the dank forests of Mount Kenya and the Aberdares, scarcely a Kikuyu family remained untouched. The Mau Mau did find recruits in other ethnic communities, with neighbouring Meru and Embu lending a particularly fervent hand. But Mau Mau was always predominantly a Kikuyu phenomenon, and that meant every 'Kuke' – the nickname alone sounded like a curse on settler lips – was suspect. In 1954, realising that Mau Mau cells in the capital were keeping the movement in the countryside supplied with weapons and information, the British rounded up some 15,000 Kikuyu in Nairobi. Those deemed suspicious were sent to bleak detention camps to be broken, 'cleansed' and rehabilitated, a process dubbed 'the Pipeline'. The rest were deported to newly-built villages in Central Province, complete with spiked moats and watchtowers, guarded by twitchy Home Guards. Families were often torn apart, with one son opting for life in the forest while his brother or father donned Home Guard uniform. So was the Kikuyu community as a whole, for it was noticeable that Kiambu, whose proximity to Nairobi meant its residents had been the first to be exposed to Western civilisation, produced precious few Mau Mau generals, while Muranga and Nyeri – more remote, less influenced by the white man –

produced the hardliners. The bitterness created by such divisions would rankle through the generations. The more grotesque the form violence takes, the deeper go its scars, and plenty of grotesque acts were performed during these dark days, on both sides. In the British detention camps, suspects were castrated, raped and beaten to death, while the Mau Mau decapitated, strangled and disembowelled suspected enemies and informers.

By 1960 the British authorities had won the battle, but lost the argument. A problem officials had confidently expected to last less than three months had dragged on for eight years. In that period, press coverage back home had changed beyond recognition, thanks in part to the efforts of Labour MP Barbara Castle and *Daily Mirror* journalist James Cameron. There was little sympathy for Kenya's settler administration in post-war Britain, where reports of Happy Valley debauchery had gone down particularly badly. Crushing African rebellions was an expensive business, and British taxpayers jibbed at shouldering the cost on behalf of what was seen as a community of dissolute reactionaries. Exsanguinated by the Second World War, Britain was divesting itself of a demanding empire. Why should Kenya be an exception? Accepting the inevitable, the British government invited the colony's emerging black leaders to a series of conferences in London's Lancaster House in 1960, and the shape of future self-government was gradually agreed. Three years later, after his KANU party claimed an effortless election victory, Kenyatta became the first prime minister of independent Kenya. At a ceremony in a Nairobi stadium, the British flag was lowered in tactful darkness and a new Kenyan one – black for the people, red for the blood that had been shed, green for the land – was raised to cries of '*Uhuru!*' (Freedom). Prince Philip turned to Kenyatta, seeing a lifetime's ambition fulfilled, and joshed: 'Are you sure you want to go through with this?'

What happened next underlined how thoroughly the colonial authorities had misunderstood Kenyatta. Shaking their heads at the chaos that must surely come with black rule, many settlers pocketed British government compensation, sold their farms and returned to

the motherland. The exodus threatened to destabilise the economy. One of the first actions of the man the *Daily Telegraph* had labelled 'a small-scale African Hitler' was to gather four hundred nervous settlers in a town hall in Nakuru to hear a message of reconciliation. 'There is no society of angels, black, brown or white,' he told them. 'If I have done a mistake to you, it is for you to forgive me. If you have done a mistake to me, it is for me to forgive you.' In return they roared a grateful '*Harambee!*' – 'Let's work together' – Kenyatta's battle cry.

Claiming that 'We all fought for Uhuru,' Kenyatta blithely rewrote history, recasting the anti-colonial struggle as something that stretched far beyond the Kikuyu, a blurry, noble joint effort that somehow embraced black and Asian, collaborators and forest fighters, Kikuyu and non-Kikuyu. His message to demobilising Mau Mau expecting radical reform was so severe it amounted to a repudiation. 'We shall not allow hooligans to rule Kenya . . . Mau Mau was a disease which has been eradicated, and must never be remembered again.' The revolution would not take place; Kenyatta stood for continuity, not change. Executing the same nifty manoeuvre Stalin had carried out with Lenin and Mobutu would perform with Lumumba, he claimed the mantle of the great national iconoclasts even as he neutralised their legacy. The ragged Mau Mau fighters who emerged from the bush only to find both their lands and wives appropriated in their absence were swiftly marginalised. Kenyatta invited them to independence celebrations, and fawned over them in public, but the kitchen cabinet he pulled together in 1962–63 contained not a single member of the movement. Since the Kikuyu who could afford to buy the farms of departing settlers were almost always loyalists, the rich elite that emerged was solidly Home Guard.

The impact of Kenyatta's 'Forgive and Forget' slogan – historians refer to a policy of 'orderly amnesia', of 'therapeutic forgetting'²³ – linger to this day. 'We don't care where we're coming from, we care where we're going to,' a Kikuyu will tell you in justification, but the relationship with the past is more complicated and tortured than that. In the public consciousness, a hypocritical history has taken convenient root. Just as it is sometimes impossible to find a Briton

who voted for Margaret Thatcher, and every Frenchman's father appears to have been in the Resistance, every Kikuyu seems to have had a father who fought valiantly for Mau Mau. When the NARC government, which rescinded a colonial-era ban on Mau Mau that remained on the statute books, unveiled a statue to Mau Mau leader Dedan Kimathi in central Nairobi in 2007, no mention was made at the ceremony of the existence of a pro-settler loyalist movement. Significantly, recent books on Mau Mau and the colonial era in Kenya have all been written by white Westerners.²⁴ 'When it comes to Mau Mau, a terrible pall of silence hangs over Kenyan intellectual life,' says John Lonsdale, a Cambridge professor who has dedicated his career to shattering that taboo. 'Kenyans may write their autobiographies, or record the pre-colonial histories of their ethnic communities. But they don't write about Mau Mau.'

Elderly Kikuyu living on what used to be the Kikuyu Reserve but is now just Central Province, a striking number of whom still suffer physical side-effects from being beaten with rifle butts by British soldiers or held too long in handcuffs – a stiff hip, a faltering walk, annoyingly nerveless fingers – retain a mental map of the landscape shaped by Mau Mau. These eighty- and ninety-year-olds can show visitors the location of the caves where fighters hid and were smuggled food, the spots where the Kikuyu were herded into artificial villages, the junctions where the disembowelled bodies of vanquished Mau Mau – their intestines wrapped around their torsos like bandoliers – were displayed. But none of these features on any map or in any tourist guidebook, and this silent topography will gradually disappear from community consciousness as the elders die.

In Nyeri, a cement obelisk on the main shopping street supposedly pays tribute to Mau Mau's fallen, but the plaque explaining this is missing. As pedestrians bustle past, it sits blank, ignored, anonymous. Perhaps the most creepily poignant site lies at the gravel entrance to the town's golf club. Some fifteen years ago, the story goes, workmen were sent to fill a dip that kept forming under the chairman's parking space after each heavy rain. They began digging, but dropped their tools in alarm when smoke began mysteriously wafting from the

open ditch. The neat greens are located, as it happens, on the site of a former British prison, and today's parking lot lies where the bodies of hanged Mau Mau were thrown. Rationalists may reject the tale as an urban legend, but the story certainly contains a metaphorical truth. In local minds the Mau Mau era, like the unrecorded bodies of its dead, continues to fester underground like so much toxic waste, ready to rise up and overwhelm today's Kenyans with its noxious fumes.

Of course there were grumbles amongst the Kikuyu at Kenyatta's snubbing of Mau Mau. But the awkward fact that it was the collaborators, rather than the heroes of the revolution, who inherited the earth in independent Kenya was pushed to one side as the realisation set in that there was serious money to be made. Hundreds of new schools, roads and hospitals were being built, thousands of jobs once available only to whites and Asians were opening up in the state sector, and prices for tea and coffee – which the Kikuyu were now free to grow – were high. This was when the Kikuyu determination to embrace the white man's ways really paid off.

Kenyatta had revealed the expansionist plans he nursed for his community during the Lancaster House Conferences, to the dismay of other delegates. 'He said that the Gikuyu must be allowed to take up land in the Rift Valley . . . Immediately there was a long-drawn-out "Aaah" from the Kalenjin and Maasai representatives, and Willie Murgor from the Eldoret area produced a whistle and blew a long note of alarm on it,' recalled Michael Blundell in his memoirs.²⁵ Borrowing money from Kikuyu banks and Kikuyu businessmen, tapping into the expertise of Kikuyu lawyers, the president's fellow tribespeople rushed to buy the land of departing whites under a million-acre resettlement scheme subsidised by London. Descending from the escarpment, they flooded in their hundreds of thousands into the previously off-limits Rift Valley, seizing lands the Kalenjin and other communities regarded as having been temporarily appropriated by the white man, but rightfully theirs. Given a selling scheme based on the principle of willing buyer, willing seller, there was little the poorer tribes could do.

The Kikuyu knew in their hearts that they were doing unfairly well out of the Kenyatta presidency. But those fortune favours can always convince themselves their luck is somehow deserved. It was *their* community that had suffered at the hands of the British, the Kikuyu told themselves, *their* community that had risen up against the oppressor, *their* community – better-educated thanks to its early exposure to the missionaries – which taught less politically-aware Kenyans what it meant to be free. More sophisticated, cannier than their fellow Kenyans, they had led the way in these, as so many other areas, and had surely won in the process the right to both lead the country and eat their fill. By 1971, the conviction that this pleasant state of affairs should be rendered permanent had so hardened in Central Province that a party within a party was formed – the Gikuyu, Embu, Meru Association (GEMA), whose aim was to change a constitution which provided for vice president Daniel arap Moi, from a small coalition of Rift Valley pastoralists known as the Kalenjin, to take over in the event of the president's death. If ever there was an expression of ethnic hubris, GEMA was it.

That golden era ended in 1978, when Kenyatta took ill on a podium in Mombasa, collapsed in the men's toilets and later died. Despite GEMA's best efforts, the presidency went to Moi, who could now take his revenge after years of being patronised by Kenyatta's Kikuyu cronies. His power would be built on Kenya's smaller tribes' fear of a repetition of Kikuyu rule. Moi's publicly declared philosophy might be '*Nyayo*' – to walk in the 'Footsteps' of the revered Kenyatta – but for the Kikuyu, nothing would be the same again. It was now the Kalenjins' turn to 'eat' at the trough of the state. The Kikuyu still flourished, but they now did so in spite of government patronage, rather than because of it. In Nairobi, the *matatu* routes, the taxi trade, the hotel business, real estate – areas where the domineering KANU government enjoyed no control – were all in Kikuyu hands. GEMA went into voluntary liquidation in 1980, its dreams shattered.

Once Moi gave in to pressure to end single-party rule in 1991, it was natural that the discontented Kikuyu community, at the forefront of every curve, should launch the first opposition parties.

Kikuyus today cite this as evidence that not only were they responsible for Kenya's first liberation – from colonial rule – they should also be thanked for its second, from the one-party system. In every election that followed, Nairobi and Central Province would repeatedly, fruitlessly, vote against KANU, a constant reminder to Moi that this important section of the community rejected what he stood for. When the first serious ethnic violence in Kenyan history broke out in the early 1990s, with 1,500 'foreigners' who had settled the Rift Valley during the Kenyatta years killed by local Maasai and Kalenjin and hundreds of thousands brutally cleansed – with the support of the police and government officials – the Kikuyu interpreted it as a warning that ethnic extermination was not entirely out of the question. 'Lie low like envelopes or be cut down to size,' declared Moi's chauvinistic Maasai minister for local government, William Ntimama. Whatever protestations Moi made that he was Father to One Nation, the Kikuyu would see this bloodletting, an early signal of what the future held that no one wanted to heed, as punishment for a successful community's defiance.

It was sometimes hard to tell exactly where government incompetence ended and deliberate sabotage began. But the collapse of the coffee industry, troubles in the tea factories, the decline of Kenya Cooperative Creameries – all involving sectors at the heart of the rural Kikuyu economy – would be viewed by the Kikuyu as part of a malevolent plot to pauperise the tribe Moi feared. And they pointed to the state of the roads, schools and hospitals in Central Province as further proof of the president's vindictive determination to make them pay for past 'eating'. While Eldoret, Moi's home town, got what every analyst agreed was a superfluous airport and bullet factory, the Kikuyu got potholes and schools more like farmyard barns than educational facilities. That might not have been so bad if the country as a whole was prospering, the thinking went, but just look at Moi's pathetic economic record and compare it with the growth rates of the Kenyatta era. This was what you got when a bunch of illiterate herdsmen were allowed to run the country.

* * *

Such, then, was the community from which John Githongo hailed. He was a member of the House of Mumbi, a house whose story was in many ways synonymous with that of Kenya itself, a community that managed to combine a bitter sense of grievance with a superiority complex nurtured during the long years of Kenyatta indulgence.

Most African countries have their version of the Kikuyu: hard-working, economically aggressive ethnic groups whose success in business, skill at interacting with the globalised economy and bumptious faith in their own prowess so intimidate the rest that the fear shapes a nation's destiny, reducing politics to a none-too-subtle expression of resentment by the less successful. In the Democratic Republic of Congo it is the Luba, in Nigeria the Ibos, in Rwanda the Tutsi, in Cameroon the Bamileke, in Ethiopia it was once the Eritreans. The 'Jews of Africa', these groups often dub themselves, and the things once said in Europe about the Jews are muttered about them: 'All they care about is money, money, money,' 'Give one a job and the whole clan takes over,' 'They keep themselves to themselves, just can't be trusted.' And when things turn nasty, and politicians whip up ethnic hatred to please the crowds, it is these groups that pay the price.

One of the characteristics the British left behind in Kenya was a very Anglo-Saxon enjoyment of jokes. Kikuyu jokes are legion, as often as not cracked by 'Kyuks' themselves, who have reclaimed their derisive nickname with the same confidence with which they once reclaimed their land.

Two newborn babies are lying in the maternity ward, and careless nurses get them mixed up. How to establish which is which before the very Luo Mrs Otieno and the very Kikuyu Mrs Kamau come to pick them up? 'Easy,' says Matron. 'Just jingle some coins in front of each and see what happens.' One baby falls asleep. The other wakes and holds out a pudgy hand. 'See?' says Matron. 'That one's Otieno, that one Kamau, end of story' . . . How can you tell if a Kikuyu is dead or only faking? Drop your wallet next to his bed, and if he doesn't immediately reach for it, he's definitely for the morgue . . . Then there's the one about the Kikuyu conductor of a crashed *matatu* who

complains that his passengers keep dying before paying for their seats; and the one about the Kikuyu suitor whose idea of a romantic first date is to give the girl a hoe, take her to his *shamba* and put her to work.

The Kikuyu, in the popular mind, account for both the best and the worst in Kenyan culture. On the one hand, the vast majority of the ambitious youngsters who join the African diaspora each year, heading to the United States, Britain and Canada in search of business degrees and professional training, are Kikuyu. On the other, they make up a bigger share of the Kenyan prison community than any other ethnic group. 'Where you find Kikuyu, there you find thieves,' goes the saying.

When I asked an urbane Kikuyu banker, John Ngumi, for a summary of Kikuyu qualities, he produced, at machine-gun speed, a list of characteristics which juxtaposed unabashed ethnic pride with a clear insight into just why so many of his fellow countrymen found the Kikuyu irritating. 'We're thrusting, we're loud, we're hard-headed and we're everywhere. We're too many, we're greedy, many of us lack finesse, even our table manners leave a lot to be desired. We're Africans in the raw, we don't make apologies for what we are. We're the ones who keep Nairobi fed and watered and provide a host of small services that keep the country running. The problem is there aren't enough of us to dominate, yet we're too large to ignore. We are at once both obnoxious and indispensable.'

Travelling Kikuyuland, a common note emerges, whether one is interviewing a snaggle-toothed ninety-year-old farmer in the Kiambu hills or an elegantly suited banker in a Nairobi bar, and it is one that swiftly becomes wearing. It's the note of entitlement: a sense of being special, different, better – and therefore more deserving. 'If you did an experiment and took five Luos, five Luhyas, five Kambas and five Kikuyus and gave them the same amount of money to invest, the Kikuyu would be far, far ahead,' a Kikuyu businessman will say without embarrassment. 'We simply work harder than other Kenyans.'

The great irony is that over twenty-four years of Moi rule, a community viewed as a national bully by the nearly 80 per cent of Kenyans

who were *not* Kikuyu would come to think of itself as put-upon victim. For despite all Moi's efforts to redress the post-Kenyatta dispensation, Central Province and Nairobi, a heavily Kikuyu city, still do better than any other region of the country.²⁶ 'The notion that the Kikuyu have been marginalised is total baloney, a persecution complex,' says economist David Ndi, himself a Kikuyu. 'If you look at any indicators – health, education, access to piped water, access to electricity – the Kikuyu always come out on top.' He is equally scathing about the notion that the community contributes more than its fair share economically. 'When you examine the data it turns out to be bullshit. The most productive people in Kenya, in terms of output per head, are pastoralists. One pastoralist can own two hundred head of cattle. The Kikuyu don't understand geography and they don't understand mathematics. These myths have to be exploded.'

Perhaps that sense of superiority is rooted in the peasant's wonderment at being blessed, in a largely arid country, with the miracle of moist and fertile soil. Spooning up *githeri*, a mixture of beans and maize kernels, on the *shambas*, residents will cite Isaiah 18, which speaks of a land beyond the 'rivers of the Cush', and a people 'tall and smooth-skinned . . . feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers', as proof that the Promised Land, far from being located in Israel, is actually to be found between the blue foothills of Mount Kenya and the misty mountain ranges of the Aberdares.

The men around Kibaki assumed that, as a Kikuyu, John Githongo would share that sense of entitlement. He would know that certain matters were best kept from those outside the House of Mumbi. Secretiveness had always come naturally to the Kikuyu, takers of terrible oaths: it was one of the traits the British had singled out for criticism, and the lean Moi years, when ethnic solidarity was the only defence possible against a rigged system, had underlined the importance of discretion. 'Matters of the heart are not like the palm that greets everyone,' goes a Kikuyu saying.

In addition, they knew that John would have imbibed a deep respect for his elders as part of his upbringing. In rural Kikuyu

villages it was unheard of for a child to criticise or interrupt an elder. Directly addressing a parent was regarded as unacceptably brazen – ‘How are things on the mother’s side?’ was the polite, if roundabout, way of saying, ‘How are you, Mum?’ – and children were expected to stand when an elder entered a room, or to step into the bushes if they met an adult on the road.

Admittedly, John’s ancestors originated not from Kibaki’s Nyeri but from Kiambu, an area whose inhabitants were regarded by Kikuyu further north as sneaky and deceitful. But what really mattered was that he was a Kikuyu. His father, accountant for Kenyatta, was privy to the Kikuyu elite’s financial secrets. Joe Githongo had paid a personal price during the Moi era, and proved his credentials during the rumbustious multi-party years, working as a fundraiser for Kibaki’s Democratic Party. The Githongo family had prayed and played with other Kikuyu families, and John had gone to school alongside the scions of the country’s leading Kikuyu dynasties. If he could not be trusted to take the interests of the clan to heart, to instinctively grasp what mattered to the House of Mumbi, then who could?

At this point a question poses itself, one that may never be satisfactorily answered. When the elderly members of TI’s board put John Githongo’s name forward for the post of anti-corruption chief and their friends in government enthusiastically agreed, did they do so anticipating that one day they would need to appeal to his sense of tribal solidarity? Was his appointment, which originally seemed so well-intentioned, in fact the most cynical of political moves, the propelling of an impressionable young man into a position where, should a crisis develop involving his own community, he would find it virtually impossible to resist outside pressure? Did they name him intending to compromise him?

John certainly tends to that view. His feelings towards members of the group, with the exception of Harris Mule, are far more bitter than those towards any players in the Anglo Leasing affair. In his view, the old men he had trusted with his fate behaved like Abraham preparing his son Isaac for sacrifice. ‘The *wazee* . . .’ He shakes his head in wonder. ‘They set me up. I was the puppet, and they the puppeteers.’

My own suspicion is that they possessed no such clarity of vision. They chose John chiefly because he was the obvious candidate. The instinct to entrust a potentially sensitive post to a fellow tribesman was certainly there, but it was not particular to this clique or period. It is the bane of Kenyan life, skewing employment patterns in every sector of the economy. At the back of their minds, the old men may have vaguely sensed that having ‘one of ours’ in this key post might one day prove helpful. ‘The assumption must have been, “If he gets out of line, his father will have a quiet word,”’ guesses Wycliffe Muga, columnist for the *Daily Nation*. ‘But when you feel someone is part of what you are, you simply take it for granted he will go along with what you do.’ Flush with post-election ambition, incapable of imagining a time when things were not going their way, they were more slapdash than cynical in their strategising.

In the film *The Godfather* there comes a moment when, with his father lying wounded in hospital and trusted allies being picked off by a rival mob, Al Pacino’s Michael Corleone must decide whether to rally behind the clan or walk away. The former black sheep, who until that moment has shown nothing but disdain for his Mafia heritage, never wavers. Without waiting to be asked, he jettisons a lifetime of liberal values, personally executes his father’s enemies and takes charge of the family, going on to become the most ruthless godfather of all. If they ever bothered to think about it, the Mount Kenya Mafia must have assumed John Githongo would do likewise. Oh, he might squawk and fret a bit, given his university education and professional credentials, just to show he was a man. But he would simply know, without having to be told, exactly where his duty lay.