

# AN AFRICAN DIARY

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ALVI HOUSE is in Victoria Street, an old and rather delapidated part of Nairobi where the buildings remind one that only a few years ago this was enough of a frontier town for the farmers to come in their broad felt hats, guns across their shoulders, to tie up their horses in front of the Norfolk Hotel. On one side of Victoria Street, the city has grown out of all recognition, sporting a fine new stone-faced City Hall, and a Legco (Legislative Council) building of daring but horrifying 'contemporary' design. On the other side, beyond the bazaars and bars of the River Road, it sprawls into the worst kind of African slums. At Alvi House the two worlds meet; the slums, and the Reserves beyond them, bursting in upon the 'White establishment' and the government. Here are the offices of the African Elected Members' Organization; of the Kenya Federation of Labour; the I.C.F.T.U.; the Railway Workers' and the Building Workers' Unions; Tom Mboya, Legco member for Nairobi; and the People's Convention Party, newly formed Nairobi District political party. It is said to be watched by the Special Branch day and night. Anyway, it was one of the first places I visited.

The bare cement corridors are always crowded. Kikuyu women in peasant shawls come in and out of the P.C.P. office on a Saturday morning; a queue of labourers waits continually outside Mboya's room, whether he is there or not, to consult him on any problem from a work permit to a marriage dispute; shop stewards crush round the desk of a Union Secretary; reporters from 'Baraza' or some other of the Swahili newspapers nose round for news. The editor of 'Uhuru' (*Freedom*), the duplicated P.C.P. weekly, hammers out his editorial on the party's only typewriter: "Show the imperialists that you will not tolerate domination, by positive action". He is demanding support for the "sacrifice day", called for the opening of the trial of the seven African Elected Members.

After the Emergency—the banning of the Kenya African Union (K.A.U.), the arrest of its leaders, and the detention of hundreds of trade unionists—Africans were left without any real representation, political or industrial. The Lyttelton

and then the Lennox-Boyd constitutions gave them a number of Elected Members of the Legislative Council, but mass organization is having to be rebuilt virtually from scratch. To command the support of a mass movement, vital, activist policies are necessary, so a new generation has overthrown 'moderate' leaders such as Mathu (defeated by Dr. Kiano in the March elections), who for years had been the only African member of Legco, and for some time a nominated one at that.

The P.C.P. is a small beginning in the rebuilding of a movement comparable with the mighty K.A.U. But in a few months it has gained 2,000 members, most of them since Tom Mboya identified himself with the party. "Freedom in Five Years" has become a proud slogan. The Emergency regulation forbidding political activity on any but a district level is still in force, however, and a national party is impossible. Special permission is needed for a Legco member to address a meeting in any constituency but his own. Even the 'pass' laws which apply to the Kikuyu affect the work of political organizers in unexpected ways, and advertisements like the following appear in 'Uhuru' from time to time:

"Dansi: This Party is to hold a colourful dance at the Akamba Hall on the 17th April 1958, from 8 p.m. to 12 midnight, to congratulate the newly sworn-in African members of the Legco. . . . Drinks and night passes will be made available."

Alvi House is owned by an Asian. So are most of the buildings and businesses in Victoria Street and Government Road. Bombay House and Rahimtullah House and Karachi House . . . Asian properties separate the African world beyond the River Road from the 'White establishment' of Delamere Avenue and the official centre of town, just as Asians tend to be cast in the unenviable role of buffer in social life. It is an Asian clerk on the railways who makes sure that Black and White are not booked in the same compartment; an Asian shopkeeper who hastens to serve the European customer in case he is kept waiting by an African. Far from thanking him for his pains, Europeans reserve residential areas round Nairobi for White occupation only, and the Asian has to pay higher prices for what land is left 'unreserved'. Africans, on the other hand, resent the Asians, because they monopolize trading and artisan jobs that Africans might otherwise be doing; and even when in April the Indian Congress offered some support to the African boycott

of the Lennox-Boyd constitution (Congress declared that if the demand for a round-table constitutional conference was not met by the end of the year, it would join the boycott), several African leaders concluded that they were only trying, rather late, to curry favour with the majority race and the government of the future. Yet, it was an Indian barrister who acted with Pritt to defend Kenyatta and, recently, the seven Elected Members; the only non-African to be detained under the Emergency was Pinto, a Goan; and Makgam Singh, the Sikh trade union leader, is, I believe, still banished in the Northern Frontier District.

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On the other side of town, overlooking the gracious bougainvillea fringes of Princess Elizabeth Avenue, stands Legco, and near it the grand new buildings for the Treasury, Police Headquarters and the Secretariat. "Government" looks rich and slick and secure. "Government" has changed indeed in the past six years, and we know what to thank for a great deal of the improvement—the desperate lunacy of Mau Mau! Gone are the days when settler mobs could crowd the lawns of Government House howling for vengeance on the Kikuyu. Kenya is multi-racial now, it is progressing, it is to be a model in multi-racial living to hold up to the race dictatorships of the South.

To meet White ministers in a White government in Africa who can talk calmly of an African electoral majority is refreshing: Mr. Vasey, for instance, the liberal who was too liberal to be elected to one of Mr. Lennox-Boyd's precious seats. It was hinted by a settler paper that he was "communistic". (I don't remember whether they suggested that he got his orders from the Soviet Consulate in Addis Ababa. That Consulate gives rise to much excited speculation in East Africa). He is certainly a realist where realists are at a premium, but I doubt whether he could even call himself a socialist, to judge by the criticism his last budget met with from the trade unions.

It was hard to believe, in Nairobi, that Mau Mau was only two years away. In the Highlands, within sight of the Aberdare forests where Kimathi's guerrillas stalked through the bush with leopards and rhinoceros for nearly four years, it was easy to remember. The memory of that time, of the fear and the tension, is deep in the consciousness of every settler, just as

no doubt is the memory of the horrors of a prison camp to the Kikuyu labourers now returning to the farms after months or years of detention. But where the government has done some drastic rethinking after the disaster, settler attitudes remain out of step and out of touch with what is happening in the outside world—the Highlands, a beautiful feudal little world of its own, seems unaware of even the changes that have taken place in Nairobi.

At a by-election meeting I attended, the candidates devoted most of their speeches to vying with each other in promises to “guarantee” exclusively European land tenure in the Highlands. The man who felt himself able to demand that the White Highlands be White “in perpetuity”, won the seat. Three of the four candidates were ex-army officers, for it is still advisable to have a title or, at least, be a brigadier, if you hope to be accepted in settler society.

But it would be unfair to suggest that nothing has changed. Settler influence has diminished, for one thing, and though the voices that once demanded extermination or deportation of the Kikuyu still shout occasionally, they now more often argue for “democracy”, as against “undiluted democracy.” This is a distinction apparently invented by themselves, for as far as can be determined “democracy” means, more or less, the *status quo*, or White domination; and “undiluted democracy” means Black domination, chaos and savagery.

One evening, the gradual Africanisation of the civil service was being discussed and deplored. A few African A.D.O.’s had been appointed, and, apparently, with disastrous results. The Africans should not be pushed, they were not ready for it. No one seemed actually to have met an African Assistant District Officer, so I said that I’d stayed in the house of one in Uganda. For a moment there was dead silence. Then an Englishman, now retired, who had spent nearly all his life in the service in Kenya and Tanganyika, turned to me and asked gently, “Did you really? What was he like . . . does he live—like we do?”

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After the fevered drama of Kenya politics, Uganda seems rather like a lotus-land. There are virtually no settlers, and therefore no urgent feeling among the people of being “threatened”. Practically everyone has a piece of land—and the land is so lush, fermenting with growth and fertility!—

which will not only produce enough food for himself and his family, but probably a cash-crop of coffee or cotton as well. Far from there being a 'land problem' to flood the workless upon the towns, it is necessary to recruit labour from Kenya and Ruanda Urundi for the new industries in Jinja, the mines at Kilembe, and even the public services. There has been no fundamental change in the peasant economy brought about by British rule, and perhaps, as a consequence, political demands that arouse strong popular feeling still tend to be for the preservation of traditional societies—the exile of the Kabaka of Buganda provoked the last full-scale political campaign—rather than for the transition to a new one, based on the more sophisticated concepts of universal franchise and national (not tribal) unity.

Once one has abandoned the fruitless search for a national liberation movement—not that political activity doesn't exist, of course; there are any number of political parties, and traditional governments agitating for one concession or another—one can begin to enjoy Uganda. The growth, I suspect, is beneath the surface, among young Makerere graduates, now probably government servants in some remote town, treasuring a good library and meeting occasionally for a study group on economics or politics or literature; in Makerere-run extramural classes in tiny villages, where the local schoolteachers (who have had perhaps only six or eight years of schooling themselves), clerks, shopkeepers, anyone who understands English, meet weekly with a tutor for a course on "Education and Religion", or "Elections in a Democracy"; in Makerere College itself, where English and African staff, trained in English universities, and boys and girls fresh from their village homes, may gather in their rooms at night and play records of Mozart, or dance, or talk politics.

One can discover Katwe, the decrepit, tin-roofed, Buganda-administrated township clinging to the skirts of Kampala. Here too is a seething beneath the surface of street-markets and scrap-iron. Here are the printing presses of what seem like dozens of ill-set, ill-printed and practically illegible vernacular newspapers, expressing at least as many points of view as the profusion of political parties, whose headquarters are here too, indicates. And the dance-halls, Kamulu's, the Mengo Blue Gardens, they have colourful names but most of them are bare as a barn, with a few wooden benches and a bar.

What matters is the music, and space to jive in. One can enter for a shilling. A few stray Europeans join in with rock-and-rolling African youth. Journalists, trade unionists, Buganda aristocrats, labourers and university lecturers hunch together over the bar, and shout above the noise of the band. The Special Branch man detailed to watch some young politician yawns over his drink, and hopes to get home by breakfast-time.

You can't really get away from politics, even on the intellectual eminence of Makerere hill. My first night there was the opening of a special extra-mural course to which clerks and union organizers, teachers and housewives, had come from all over East Africa. The opening address closed with the announcement, "Will all K.E.M. come up now to have their permits checked?" The K.E.M.—Kikuyu, Embu and Meru—were the three tribes involved in the Mau Mau uprising; and I was told that it was something of a triumph to have got them there at all. Makerere, I suspect, is watched with some suspicion by the three governments that support it financially. The very idea of an independent university is faintly subversive in a colonial territory, especially when the staff are ready to insist on this independence—the right to teach whom they choose, what they choose—and make their choice on academic considerations alone.

But in Mengo, at Makerere, one can forget that one is White in a Black man's country, and that is a great thing in itself. In Northern Rhodesia, to forget is all but impossible.

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It was very early when Harry emerged, bullied by an almost equally sleepy Steve, from his room. Wes had come to fetch him, for he was due to preside over a Congress executive meeting in Lusaka that very day, and we were hundreds of miles away, in Ndola. We'd all been up late the night before, listening to the Blue Morning Stars, six angelic-looking singers from a Congress youth group, who sang us Congress songs, their plaintive harmonies belying their militant political content. So Njovo found some dance music on the radio to wake us up. Mrs. Mwema hustled in to make us tea. I only discovered after I had been in her little house in Twapia two days that she and her husband had given up their bedroom for me, to move into a guest-room themselves, and I always wanted to say something to them, to explain that they ought not to honour

me so, just because I am White . . . but neither of them speaks a word of English, and we had to content ourselves with friendly gestures.

Wes had brought the morning papers. Sir Roy Welensky, it seemed, had made another attack on "extremists"; by which, of course, he meant the British Labour Party and the Africans.

"You know," said someone, when suitable comment had been made on this, "the White Paper Constitutional Proposals for Northern Rhodesia? The voting qualification is supposed to be Standard Six—he has a nerve! He's always boasting that he was an engine driver, and only passed Standard Four!"

"See you in Lusaka," said Harry. I was leaving later in the day, for Lusaka and Salisbury. Soon I was alone.

I looked round the sitting room, crowded with chairs as it had been crowded with visitors the last four days: visitors for the President of the African National Congress, or just curious folk wanting to greet this strange White woman who chose to stay in an African township rather than a smart Europeans-only hotel. Old women would pass the open doorway, and stop to bow and clasp their hands and murmur, "mitende mkwai" (if my spelling is right); and others, more sophisticated, would come in and join the company and ask me primly how I enjoyed my stay, and what I thought of their country, and would I come back, and would I please come to visit them in their homes?

The room was tiny, but full of things—the paraffin lamp on the table; a radio; a photograph of the Queen, a faded print of a Botticelli madonna, an old A.N.C. calendar with Harry's face on it, and a huge portrait of Mr. Mwema, on the walls. The dining room was even smaller. Through the back window, I could see Mrs. Mwema in the 'kitchen', a little clearing behind the house where smoke-blackened pots are stirred over open wood fires. The sun poured down on the mud walls and thatched roofs of Twapia; and the old cripple sat as usual under his tree, eating the porridge brought to him by a little child who squatted at his deformed feet.

Suddenly the window was full of faces—*white* faces. What on earth could they want here? I got up to call Mrs. Mwema, and they must have thought I was trying to escape, because one rushed to the front door and one to the back. They handed me a piece of paper: "Prohibited Immigrant . . . no appeal against this notice." That was all I could take in. It was no

use asking why, they could or would tell me nothing. Mrs. Mwema didn't understand, but she sensed disaster, and took my hand affectionately, and as I drove away with them to the police station, she watched the car go in sadness and bewilderment.

Fingerprints, photographs. Someone asked me: "Do you know Doris Lessing?" They didn't seem to want any other information, and—to judge by two young newspaper reporters who interviewed me that night, and who already had quite an accurate idea of my movements for the last few days and my connection with '*Africa South*', obtained, it seems, from the Special Branch itself—there wasn't much more I could have told them.

I was to leave for Nairobi next day. The Immigration official took my passport away, and said I was "free". Then he added: "I think you'd better stay in a hotel tonight."

"But—why? Is *that* why I'm being prohibited? For staying in Twapia?"

"Well, that has something to do with it, hasn't it?" He didn't look at me.

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To return to Kenya, after Northern Rhodesia, is like returning to freedom. The Immigration officials are actually anxious to help. In Nairobi, Africans are sitting in cafés, hotels, cinemas. And there is confidence and laughter in the air . . . later, of course, you remember that you'd better mind your step, because Basil Davidson was banned from Kenya after he was banned from the Federation. And then there's the case of the Marles, who were contesting a deportation order when I got back to Nairobi. They left a few weeks later, their only offence, according to those who knew them well, their taste for friends of all colours and races . . .