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KAMBA POLITICAL PROTEST: THE DESTOCKING CONTROVERSY OF 1938

Robert L. Tignor

The politicization of colonial peoples and their entry into the vortex of modern nation-state politics is a key question in the field of political change. What factors are crucial to mass politics? What is the relative importance of those factors usually considered essential to political socialization, such as education, economic change, exploitation, leadership, and organization? What are the stages by which political consciousness develops? Does the process occur gradually by passing through certain clear stages or can it burst forth almost unannounced in a series of dramatic events? In most cases politicization is a gradual process, closely related to the impact of modern education and economic change. Education establishes a class of intellectuals who formulate the ideals and organizational techniques of protest while economic change produces social disruption and discontented people, primed for political action. But there clearly have been variations on this theme. The outbursts themselves are often politicizing and are far more important in spreading political feelings than observers have admitted; they do more than merely mark important stages of political change. In areas where political discontent has not been allowed open expression, nationalist protest may erupt almost without warning, as in the Belgian Congo and Angola, although closer investigation usually reveals that the preconditions were there but were not seen because of censorship and security restrictions. Furthermore, societies have institutions and values of such fundamental importance that interference with them is viewed by members of that society as a threat to its very existence and produces almost instantaneous political protest, often where none had been before and where the preconditions for resistance did not seem favorable. The Kamba political protest of 1938 is an example of the latter; a previously contented and quiescent group was energized into powerful protest in defense of a deeply valued part of life. The conflict itself generated the pressures for politicizing and within the span of a half year a political party had been established where none had existed before. Stock-rearing was the essence of Kamba life, and the colonial government's challenge to it disrupted Kamba society, creating opportunities for nationalist organization and ideas. Although the government ultimately realized its mistaken policy and repudiated it, a legacy of bitterness, suspicion of government, and nationalist aims and organization had been left among the people.

Until the 1938 controversy, the Kamba were regarded as one of the least political and most contented groups in Kenya. The grievances which troubled especially the Kikuyu and were a basis for Kikuyu politics were either lacking among the Kamba or did not lead to political action. The colonial government tried to recruit Kamba labor for work on European plantations as they did with the Kikuyu, but they were unsuccessful. The Kamba were uninterested in this

type of work, and unlike the Kikuyu, Kamba chiefs did not play a role in forcing their people out as laborers in the early colonial period. During World War I the Kamba were recruited in large numbers for the war in East Africa, but their grievances did not generate protest. Like the Kikuyu and Masai they felt deprived of land by the government. In 1925 George W. Rhoad, an African Inland missionary, presented to the East African Commission on behalf of the Kamba a memorandum on their land grievances in which they claimed to be "bereft of their grazing areas and insecure in their reserve." Their present reserve, they stated, comprised only about half of the territory which was theirs, and they argued strongly for the return of the Mua Hills, Donyo Sabuk, and the Yatta plains -- some of their most prized grazing land which they had been forced to evacuate.[1] But these land losses did not lead to political action or even cooperation with Kikuyu leaders over the question of lost lands. Perhaps their relative calm was a function of the larger area they inhabited and the lesser land pressure. Although there can be no doubt that the land issue simmered in Kamba society, it did not lead to strong anti-government movements.

The Kikuyu Central Association (K.C.A.) had little success among the Kamba. In 1922, at the height of Kikuyu-government opposition, Harry Thuku visited Machakos where he convened a meeting of Kamba and asked them to combine with the Kikuyu in signing a petition of grievances to be submitted to the government. Kamba representatives refused, informing Thuku that they had little in common with the Kikuyu and that he should go back to his area.[2] During the great Kikuyu female circumcision controversy of 1929 and 1930, efforts were made again to enlist Kamba support. They were again unsuccessful, although this time the colonial government played a more aggressive role in blocking support for the Kikuyu.[3] The Kamba's support for the government was also manifested in positive ways, especially in the disproportionate numbers of them who served in the police and army.

This is not to suggest that the Kamba had never protested against their colonial rulers. There were movements involving opposition in 1911 and in 1922, but these were confined to small areas and did not generate a tradition of protest and bitterness. They arose in a spontaneous fashion and disappeared almost as quickly. In 1911 a group of prophet-like figures appeared in the area just outside of Machakos township. The leading figure was a woman, Siotune, who claimed to be possessed by a spirit which haunted a spring where she drew water. The people in the locality, who seem to have been experiencing an upsurge of fear over spirits, turned to her to exorcise their influence. Her success and presumably the growing fear of spirits and sorcery led to the appearance of other men and women who claimed to be equally possessed and to have similar powers. These leaders proclaimed that on certain days no work should be done, and eventually in certain areas the government could not recruit carriers for its officials. A young man by the name of Kiamba, whom the government described as a

1. No. 190, Denham to Amery, February 17, 1925, enclosing memorandum presented to the East African Commission on behalf of the Kamba tribe by George W. Rhoad, Public Record Office, London [hereafter P.R.O.], Colonial Office [hereafter C.O.], 533/329.
2. Ulu District Council Minutes, March 22, 1922, Kenya National Archives [hereafter K.N.A.], DC/MKS 5/1/2.
3. Machakos District Political Record Book, 1925-1930, report by J. M. Silvester, 117, K.N.A., DC/MKS 4/8.

"budding medicine man of great promise," even formed a small army of women modeled after the police. The actual political protest in these spontaneous movements was small and indirect. For the most part, people were concerned with exorcising sorcery, the fear of which may have been on the increase then because of social dislocations. But the government's inability to recruit porters suggests that the colonial system had created grievances, and we know from other sources that in most Kamba localities people hated the arbitrary recruitment of men to carry the supplies of touring government officials. Moreover, some of the outbreaks occurred near the estate of a settler, Mr. Langridge, who was said to be having difficulties with a section of the Kamba in contact with his farm. Nevertheless, the government's prompt deportation of the leaders brought an end to the movement.[4]

A more serious, though similar, crisis occurred in 1922 when a certain Ndonye wa Kauti from Kilungu claimed that God had told him to be his agent and had ordered the people to build a big house where people of all tribes would eat food. He also called for the abolition of the hut and poll taxes, cessation of road work, and expulsion of Europeans from the country. His influence increased for a time, especially after the government released him from imprisonment for failing to pay his taxes, but once again the movement was broken by his deportation.[5]

Clearly both of these prophetic movements expressed political discontent, but they did so indirectly under the cloak of religion. Nor did they spawn any organizations capable of enduring beyond the influence of the leading figure. Early political protest among the Kamba was certainly sporadic and insignificant compared to the Kikuyu or the Luo.

This whole situation was reversed when the government attempted to destock the Machakos district reserve in 1938. Misinterpreting Kamba institutions and values and misunderstanding the Kamba's willingness to cooperate with the government, the Kenya government thought that it could succeed in a radical reform which touched at the very heart of the Kamba political, economic, and value systems. To understand the crisis one must understand first the cattle economy and polity of the Machakos Kamba and then the government's growing concern over the increase of livestock in Kenya. In a seminal article dealing with cattle in East African life, M. J. Herskovits describes a cattle complex or culture where cattle held a preeminent position and gave "point and meaning to the life of the people."[6] A man's prestige and wealth were measured by the size of his herds, and people would endure considerable hardships to maintain their flocks.

4. This information comes from No. 656, Girouard to Harcourt, November 24, 1911, P.R.O., C.O., 533/92; No. 3, Girouard to Harcourt, January 3, 1912, P.R.O., C.O., 533/101; and K. R. Dundas to Provincial Commissioner, December 24, 1911, K.N.A., DC/MKS 10B/8/1.
5. Annual Report for Machakos District, 1922, K.N.A., DC/MKS 1/1/10; report on Ndonye wa Kauti by C. B. Thompson in Machakos District Political Record Book, 1921-1925, 96-98, K.N.A., DC/MKS 4/4; and R. G. Stone to Traill, April 3, 1922, K.N.A., PC/CP 8/2/4.
6. Melville J. Herskovits, The Human Factor in Changing Africa (New York, 1962), 63. The article mentioned is M. J. Herskovits, "The Cattle Complex in East Africa," American Anthropologist, XXVIII, 1926.

Perhaps Herskovits' interpretation exaggerates the religious, almost mystical, aspects of cattle raising in these societies, but it is right in stressing the dominant role that cattle played in all aspects of life. Despite being an agricultural as well as a pastoral people, the Kamba clearly attached great value to their cattle. Much of their attachment stemmed from important social and economic reasons. Livestock was a medium of exchange, used to pay dowries, penalties, and fines. When people had their sons and daughters circumcised, the circumcisers were paid in livestock.[7] In very practical economic terms, moreover, the cow represented self-sufficiency and life in depressed times. Milk and meat could be consumed, hides and skins were sold or bartered for other economic commodities, while the inner area where the cattle of a homestead were kept was made fertile by cattle refuse and became valuable agricultural land.[8] The Kamba periodically experienced droughts, famines, and epidemics, and so had good reason to appreciate the security that cattle provided.

In many ways the Kamba's economic dependence on cattle was enhanced, rather than diminished, by the colonial presence. Cattle provided a personal and tribal bulwark against many of the undesirable aspects of colonial rule. Through cattle the Kamba paid their taxes; selling hides, skins, ghee, or livestock itself, they resisted the ever-present pressures to labor on European farms -- pressures which they saw causing hardship and social disruption, in particular for the Kikuyu and Luo.[9] In theory, the increasing monetization of the Kenya economy under British rule might diminish the need for stock as a medium of exchange. The government hoped that this would be so, and in their efforts to reduce the stock population, they encouraged the Kamba to substitute money for stock in traditional transactions. In the Machakos Local Native Council meeting in March 1934 the government tried to gain acceptance for the idea of using money in the dowry.[10] These efforts were resisted, and stock was used in most traditional transactions until after World War II. The government attributed this to Kamba conservatism, but the probable truth was that there was not enough money circulating in the Kamba economy for full monetization, although they used it where essential, as in paying for taxes and schools, innoculations, and court fees. But they did not have enough money to monetize the large dowry payments or many of the other smaller cattle and goat obligations. There existed in the Kamba economy two exchanges, then, money and cattle, which were kept quite distinct from each other.

The government's interest in destocking derived from one major concern -- the overabundance of livestock in the Machakos reserve and the consequent erosion of the area. Overgrazing was depriving the area of its tree and grass cover, and when the rains came, good soil, especially from the hillsides, was being washed away. There are no reliable figures to determine the stock increase; a combination of veterinary efforts to reduce the incidence of stock diseases and the constant quarantining of the reserve to keep the Kamba flocks from

7. The use of livestock as a medium of exchange in innumerable transactions is made clear in Gerhard Lindblom, The Akamba: An Ethnological Monograph (Uppsala, 1920), passim.
8. Interview with David Kimilu, July 11, 1970.
9. Interview with Stephen Munyao, June 5, 1970.
10. Machakos Local Native Council Minutes, March 19 and 20, 1934, K.N.A., DC/MKS 5/1/2.

infecting European herds no doubt increased the numbers. Equally important was the increasing acreage under cultivation. The Machakos Kamba, keenly interested in agriculture, were taking advantage of the expanding Kenya market for their low value cash crops like maize. This increase forced the larger stock population to graze on a smaller land surface and intensified the erosion problem.

The government's recognition of overstocking dated back at least to the 1920's. The British were aware then that the Kamba were moving excess stock into the Yatta plains, opened to them as temporary grazing for their surpluses. When the government tried to remove the stock in 1924, it experienced clear signs of political protest, a series of Kamba-held "indignation meetings."[11] In the late 1920's preliminary statistical studies indicated an alarming amount of overstocking. The annual report of the Native Affairs Department of 1925 estimated that the Machakos reserve carried four times as much stock as it should.[12] A veterinary survey in Kangundo location in 1928 showed that the people possessed more than 15,000 cattle in an area that should not have had more than 8000.[13] In 1929 the Agricultural Department estimated that the carrying capacity of the reserve was 53,400 cattle but that it in fact carried 245,000 cows.[14] The Agricultural Commission of 1929 recommended destocking as the only viable solution for Machakos district, but felt that such a far-reaching program would have to be accompanied by the creation of a meat-canning factory so that the Kamba could realize some value from their surplus cattle.[15] This plan was stymied for a long time by the absence of such a factory, although negotiations for a factory were in the final stages in 1930 and collapsed only because of insufficiency of funds. In its report of 1934, the Carter Land Commission reaffirmed the urgent need for destocking and reconditioning the reserve. It recommended that a large section of the Yatta be turned over to the Machakos Kamba for grazing, but only in conjunction with vigorous culling of old, maimed, and useless livestock.

At first the colonial government tried to obtain cooperation for destocking and reconditioning from Kamba leaders through the meetings of the Machakos Local Native Council, a political and advisory body containing Kambas selected mainly by the government to represent the African point of view. The government met resistance, delaying tactics, or prevarication. As one of the Kamba councillors put it, "They were between two fires -- the government and the people in the reserves. They could not pass the resolution [about destocking] without their being grave unrest in the Reserve."[16] The most that had been accomplished by the beginning of 1936 was that in several locations herders had tried to rest some of their most severely eroded land by excluding stock. Trenching, hillside terracing, and the planting of napier grass and sisal trees to demarcate

11. Annual Report for Machakos District, 1924, by W.F.G. Campbell, 2, K.N.A., DC/MKS 1/1/15.
12. Annual Report, Native Affairs Department (Nairobi, 1925), 8
13. Annual Report, Agriculture Department (Nairobi, 1928), 108.
14. Ibid., 1929, 54.
15. No. 383, Grigg to Passfield, May 30, 1930, P.R.O., C.O., 533/397/16076.
16. Machakos Local Native Council Minutes, August 15, 16, and 17, 1934, remarks by James Mutua, K.N.A., DC/MKS 5/1/2.

individual holdings and hold the soil were also under way.[17] The stock in the Yatta had been reduced to 12,000, and only branded cattle could enter that area.[18] Even these seemingly conservative measures had not been accomplished easily. In one location a chief had resigned rather than force his people to plant napier grass, which they hated because it took so much land out of cultivation.[19] There is a clear impression that measures had been passed only because Kamba leaders feared more stringent plans and wanted to avoid them. The people were already discontented and had accepted government policy grudgingly. Still the government was becoming increasingly committed to dramatic action, especially in the light of strong recommendations from its chief soil conservation officer, Colin Maher, who wrote that the Machakos Kamba were "rapidly drifting to a state of hopeless and miserable poverty and their land to a parching desert of rock, stones, and sand."[20]

A new factor completely altered the destocking picture in 1938. This was the establishment of a privately-owned meat-canning factory along the Athi River, equidistant from the Machakos and Masai grazing areas. Previously located in Southern Rhodesia, the Liebigs firm had been enticed into Kenya by promises of an enormous trade in livestock derived mainly from the Kenya cattle-keeping peoples, especially the Kamba and the Masai. According to information obtained from Liebigs by the Kenya Weekly News, the firm had been persuaded to come to Kenya by the government and had constructed a factory at the cost of £120,000 capable of handling 70,000 head of cattle a year. They had been assured that this figure could easily be met because of the enormous surplus of stock. Their break-even point was about 40,000 cattle.[21] Moreover, the European settler population had an interest in the success of Liebigs because they hoped that its profits might be used to construct a freezing plant, enabling European cattle owners to enter the world meat export trade.[22] In hindsight, of course, the decision to construct such a large and expensive factory seems hardly credible, since no one had seriously investigated whether African stock-rearers could be persuaded to sell their stock in such large numbers. Indeed, what little ethnographic information existed suggested just the opposite, that African stock-owners were loath to sell their cattle because they constituted wealth and prestige. But no doubt the regular reports from the Machakos, Embu, Meru, Masai, and Samburu areas describing the staggering surplus of stock convinced the state that this bold step could be accomplished without difficulty. Clearly the government intended destocking in Machakos to be a first step in a general program of cattle control.

17. Machakos Local Native Council Minutes, April 15 and 16, 1936, K.N.A., DC/MKS 5/1/3.
18. Annual Report for Machakos District, by D. O. Brumage, 1-10, K.N.A., DC/MKS 1/1/27.
19. Interview with ex-chief Joseph Musila, July 9, 1970.
20. From Colin Maher, Soil Erosion and Land Utilization in the Ukamba Reserve (Machakos, 1937), quoted in C. Rosberg and J. Nottingham, The Myth of Mau Mau (New York, 1966), 167.
21. Kenya Weekly News, December 12, 1938.
22. European settler interest was indicated in the above article, carried in the Kenya Weekly News, and regularly in the East African Standard and the debates of the Kenya Legislative Council. See especially the East African Standard, December 19, 1938, where the Nairobi Chamber of Commerce expressed its dissatisfaction at the government's decision to stop destocking.

In an effort to make conditions attractive to Liebigs and to forestall plans for moving their plant to Tanganyika, Kenya Governor Robert Brooke-Popham sent out a directive in January, 1938, saying that Liebigs must be given a steady supply of stock and that a program of branding and destocking should be carried out with vigor in Machakos district and extended to Kitui, Embu, and Meru.[23] Until this directive, destocking was still in low gear. Stock surveys had been carried out only in Kangundo and Matangulu locations of Machakos district. The original goal had been to carry out these stock surveys, compiling a kind of domesday book for the district, by which the carrying capacity of each area could be ascertained and the excess stock culled.[24] As a result of the Governor's order, a program of destocking was put into hasty operation. The plan called for quick stock surveys sub-location by sub-location carried out by government officials, fixing the stock-carrying capacity of each area, and then meetings held by Kamba elders to determine how much stock each owner was to retain. Stock to be retained was to be branded. All others had to be sold, either to private dealers or to Liebigs; if not, they were to be confiscated by the state.[25]

Despite rumblings of discontent and some early telegrams and petitions to the Governor and the Secretary of State for Colonies in London, the campaign started in Matungulu and Kangundo without major incident. By July more than 20,000 cattle had been sold. Government officers reported resentment but predicted that the Kamba would accept their fate with resignation. Some officials, however, were shocked when they learned how severe the destocking was. In Matungulu and Kangundo the quotas were fixed at one-fourth and one-fifth of the total stock population. Officials thought that the Kamba might accept a reduction of one-third, but never two-thirds or more.[26] Indeed, the Kangundo and Matungulu people were utterly stunned when they discovered their herds were being reduced by sixty to ninety per cent. One man from Kangundo mentioned that of the ten cows he had only two were branded.[27] Moreover, the prices being offered by Liebigs were often one-quarter of market value. The average price paid for full-grown cattle was about fifteen shillings. Many small calves sold at prices of one to two shillings, as did sheep and goats. To the Kamba this was virtual confiscation, especially since the livestock that was allowed to enter the open market obtained much higher prices.[28] There seems little doubt that Liebigs sought to take advantage of their powerful support in the colony by offering non-competitive prices. The news of these draconian measures spread throughout the reserve.

23. There is a detailed and informative study of the destocking controversy written in 1950 by H. A. Fosbrooke, "The Kamba Problem: A Brief History of Destocking in Machakos," based on an investigation of the Nyeri provincial files. Much of the information, including the Governor's directive, is taken from this study found in K.N.A., PC/Ngong 1/108.
24. Note of a meeting held at the Secretariat, November 15, 1938, K.N.A., PC/Ngong 1/108.
25. Brooke-Popham to the Colonial Office, February 19, 1938, P.R.O., C.O., 533/492.
26. Bailward to Provincial Commissioner, October 3, 1938, K.N.A., PC/Ngong 1/108.
27. Interview with William Kitonga, July 10, 1970.
28. Fosbrooke, "The Kamba Problem."

When the government came to the Iveti location, the biggest, wealthiest, and most populous location in the district, they encountered resistance. At the sub-location of Ngelani in July, people refused to cooperate in having their cattle branded. The government made a raid of the area, taking 2500 cattle away and grazing them on land nearby but outside the reserve. The British did not feel that they had the legal power to dispose of the stock and hoped that the confiscation would bring about a change of heart in Ngelani and a willingness to cooperate with their program. But the people of Ngelani remained adamant, refused to reclaim their stock to have them branded, and instead demanded to see the Governor.[29]

Ngelani's opposition leaders were a new type of man among the Kamba. They had all been in Nairobi in the late 1920's during the Harry Thuku crisis and the development of Kikuyu political consciousness, and no doubt their suspicion of the colonial government had been heightened by these experiences. They knew something of the Kikuyu Central Association and Nairobi politics. Samuel Muindi, sometimes known as Muindi Mbingu, Elijah Kavulu, Isaac Mwalonzi, and Simon Kioko all had gone to Nairobi for part of their education because of the limited educational opportunities in the Machakos district. Machakos district was the bailiwick of the African Inland Mission, whose educational system did not compare favorably with the Church Missionary Society and the Church of Scotland Mission located elsewhere in Kenya. The African Inland Mission was a faith and prayer mission and believed that the primary goal of education was to pave the way for a Christian life. They refused government grants-in-aid for their schools, and in the 1920's had no higher schools in the Machakos district. Although the government ran a set of elementary schools and a higher technical school in Machakos township, those individuals who did not enter the government school had to look outside the district for further education. Muindi, Kavulu, and Mwalonzi all went to the Nairobi Church Missionary Society school for standards V and VI, while Simon Kioko continued his education through high school with the Salvation Army, becoming one of its officers. Muindi went into the police, Kavulu was a clerk in government service, and Mwalonzi a teacher in the Church Missionary Society school in Nairobi. But by the late 1930's they had resettled in Machakos district as wealthy stock-owners and were not active in Kenya nationalist politics.[30] Although some claim to have been members of the Kikuyu Central Association from the early days, the only Kamba that old Association leaders could recall being involved with them before destocking was Samuel Muindi.[31] With the possible exception of Muindi, they were not trying to politicize the Kamba people or create branches of the Kikuyu Central Association there. They were, in fact, wealthy stock-owners in their late thirties or early forties who through education and early experiences were suspicious of the government and familiar with techniques for opposing unpopular government programs.

29. No. 417, Wade to MacDonald, enclosing report on Machakos destocking by A. N. Bailward, July, 1938, P.R.O., C.O., 533/492.
30. This information has been compiled from numerous archival and interview sources, but especially from the Machakos District Political Record Book, 1930-1938, 86-87, K.N.A. DC/MKS 4/9, and a group interview with Isaac Mwalonzi, Elijah Kavulu, and Simon Kioko, July 2, 1970.
31. Interview with Charles Wambaa, July 14, 1970, and Marius Nganga Karatu, July 1, 1970.

Opposition had been building even before the cattle raid; at first it took the form of spontaneous secret meetings to rally support against government policy. The leaders were in touch with the Kenya Central Association in Nairobi, sending reports and telegrams to Association leaders, the Governor, the Provincial Commissioner, and the Colonial Office, and writing in the Kikuyu nationalist paper, Muiguithania. In London, Jomo Kenyatta took up their cause, writing letters to the Manchester Guardian and other publications.[32] They found an advocate in Isher Dass, who presented their case in the Kenya Legislative Council. After the government raid, the movement gained such widespread support among the Ngelani people that the leaders created a political organization modeled after the Kikuyu Central Association and with ties to it called the Ukamba Members Association. Its president was Muindi Mbingu. An oath was taken -- and in some cases force seems to have been used -- that they would not take the cattle back for branding.[33]

Ngelani opposition remained more intense, bitterly anti-government, and generalized than in other areas into which the movement of discontent later spread. This was in part a function of the better educated leaders, but it also reflected the undercurrent of bitterness felt by the Ngelani people since their displacement from the Mua Hills by European settlers in the first decade of the twentieth century. The Ngelani alone investigated the details of the agreement between the government and Liebigs over Kamba stock, and realized that the government was trying to save Liebigs at the expense of the Kamba people.[34] Since many of them knew about the Kikuyu experience, they were fearful of being stripped of their cattle and forced to work on European farms.[35] Indeed, many of their leaders thought that the government's intention in taking cattle from them was, in fact, to make them a labor reservoir for the settlers. Elsewhere the argumentation was neither so sophisticated nor so suspicious. Other Kamba were opposed not because of Liebigs or anticipated labor recruitment pressures, but because they were being deprived of stock and wealth.[36]

Unable to realize their demand to see the Governor, the leaders of the Ukamba association organized a march on Nairobi to force the Governor to see them. About 2000 men, women, and children, almost entirely drawn from Ngelani, made the trek to the capital and remained there for six weeks until the

32. Kenyatta's letter to the New Statesman and Nation, June 25, 1938.
33. Interview with Mwalonzi, Kavulu, and Kioko, July 2, 1970. They play down the oathing and deny the use of force, but other interviews suggested strongly that forcible oathing did occur in certain localities.
34. Interview with Reuben Mutuma, July 2, 1970. Mutuma was a clerk in the government office in Machakos and kept his Ngelani friends well supplied with information of the government's destocking plans and its ties with Liebigs.
35. This point was powerfully made in the Mwalonzi, Kavulu, and Kioko interview, July 2, 1970.
36. This was the prevailing feeling in nearby Kangundo location; interview with Josiah Manyaka Kivanguli, June 20, 1970, and William Kitonga, July 10, 1970.

Governor promised to see them in Machakos. When he came to Machakos on August 25, he made some notable concessions, promising to stop the compulsory sale of stock and to reintroduce voluntary sales. Still the primary conflict remained. The Governor continued to insist on destocking and the acceptance of quotas by each location, albeit in a new framework of voluntary sales; behind the concessions lay the spector of compulsion.[37]

Dramatized by the march to Nairobi, Ngelani resistance spread to other areas. In nearby Kangundo, the people who had been bench terracing stopped abruptly while at Kathwanie, a large group who had asked for help in reestablishing grasslands withdrew their request.[38] In Kangundo, William Kitonga, who had been counting cattle for the government stock survey, became an official of the local Ukamba Members Association organization and severed his ties with the government.[39] Branches of the Ukamba association sprang up everywhere. These branches met with the leaders in Ngelani to give overall direction to the opposition, but there were quite significant local variations. Most obvious was the fact that outside Ngelani people were less politicized and less bitter against the government. Generally speaking, the leaders did not have as much education as the Ngelani leaders, although they were almost all educated in missionary schools to standards III or IV. Each area had its own special grievances in addition to the culling of cattle, although all were connected with the program of reconditioning. In one area it was bench terracing, in another the planting of napier grass, and in a third the planting of sisal trees and the demarcation of individual holdings. The local branches of the central Ukamba association differed in many details. Despite bearing the same name and having the same formal set of offices, some collected dues and gave membership cards while others did not. In some an elaborate oath was taken. In a few areas, those who stood outside the the movement were forced to take the oath, while in other localities the oath was administered only to the innermost and most committed resisters. Some localities took no oath at all. Wherever the oath was taken, it was for the purpose of promoting unity against the government's destocking policies.

There was one significant similarity about the protest movement from one locality to another; that was the age of the protesters. Almost everywhere, they were the young elders, married and with children, and beginning their stock-owning careers. Destocking hurt them more than it did any other group. The older members of society with the largest herds could probably recoup their losses, but the younger elders, with their smaller herds, could not afford to accept large reductions. The young man who lost four of his five or eight of his ten cows was in jeopardy of seeing his whole herd disappear, and so it was this set of young men, usually educated, who constituted the core of the leadership. Older persons did not oppose their policies, for they hated the government's program, but they never took the lead.[40]

37. The Governor's speech and the petition presented to him by the Ngelani protesters can be found in the Machakos District Political Record Book, 1930-1938, K.N.A., DC/MKS 4/9.
38. No. 42, Robert Barnes, soil engineer, to Bailward, September 6, 1938, K.N.A., PC/Ngong 1/76.
39. Interview with William Kitonga, July 10, 1970.
40. Interview with Josiah Manyaka Kivanguli, June 20, 1970, and Mwalonzi, Kavulu, and Kioko, July 2, 1970.

An especially bitter dispute occurred in Matungulu, another large stock-raising area with a population harboring bitter recollections of their expulsion from the Mua Hills. In most locations the Kamba headmen and sub-headmen were only lukewarm, if not secretly opposed, to the government scheme. In Matungulu, however, headman Nzioka strove to enforce destocking in the face of all opposition because, according to some critics, the government had promised to make him paramount chief of the Machakos Kamba. His speeches aroused people against him; on one occasion, after some of the leaders of the opposition had been arrested by the government, the people became so incensed that they would have killed him except for the timely intervention of the government. Their wrath was not assuaged, and they finally cursed him and surrounded his house with bushes and sticks, symbolizing his ostracism from the community. A few other collaborationist Kamba government officials were also cursed and ostracized, and like Nzioka their power then diminished so rapidly that the government had to replace them.[41]

In Carl Rosberg's and John Nottingham's account of the destocking controversy, the conflict is thought to have been resolved by the Governor's coming to Machakos in August.[42] This is said to represent the capitulation of the government to Kamba resistance, but in fact, the controversy was still at full pitch then and was to remain so until early December. The government had a great deal at stake, mainly the Liebigs factory and the desire to have their program extended to other areas. Settler interest was also running high; settler representatives in the Legislative Council were calling for a vigorous enactment of the program. In the Legislative Council debate of November 15, 1938, Acting Chief Native Commissioner La Fontaine reaffirmed the government's intentions to destock and to use force, if necessary. He stated:

> There is not the slightest change in the determination of the government to reduce the stock in the eroded areas of the colony where reduction is of a vital necessity, whatever are the difficulties which may arise. I think no more binding assurance can be given. For the last three months, in accordance with the pledge which Your Excellency gave to the Akamba in August, the selling of stock by private sales in the market has been given full and patient trial. It was also encouraged at the request of the people themselves. This method has not been successful and unless there is a change of heart and intention between now and the end of this month the government will have no option but to revert to those direct methods of culling which were instituted in the early part of this year and which resulted in the removal from the reserve of some 20,000 head of cattle.[43]

Proof of the government's resolve was its arrest and deportation of Muindi Mbingu to Lamu on October 4. Still the boycott remained. The Kamba showed no inclination to accept voluntary sales, and in November the government began to devise a plan for breaking Ngelani resistance, which they regarded as

41. Interview with John Mwea Makola, July 23, 1970.
42. Rosberg and Nottingham, Myth of Mau Mau, 172.
43. Debates, Kenya Legislative Council (Nairobi, 1938), 311-312.

the key to Kamba opposition. The Attorney General had informed the Governor and the Acting Chief Native Commissioner that their seizure of the 2500 cattle was illegal and any attempt to confiscate the cattle could be challenged in the colony's courts. New legislation, however, would enable the government to return the cattle to Ngelani, and if within a week they were not claimed and branded, the government would be within its rights in confiscating the cattle and disposing of them.[44] Up until December 1, 1938, this was the government's plan of action. What would have happened had the British implemented this proposal is difficult to contemplate, although much evidence suggests that the conflict, so far non-violent, might have turned violent. The Nairobi and London archives fail to record why the government did not pursue this program. In a letter from the Acting Chief Native Commissioner to the Provincial Commissioner of December 2, 1938, La Fontaine conveyed the government's decision to postpone destocking for an indefinite time and to return the 2500 head of cattle to the people of Ngelani unconditionally. He then added the cryptic remark, "I have not detailed the grave reasons which have impelled the government to modify the policy to which expression was so recently given by myself in the Legislative Council. I will, however, communicate them to you verbally when we next meet."[45] Unfortunately, so much of the government correspondence has been lost or destroyed that the reasons for the volte-face cannot be ascertained with precision.

There is a considerable amount of indirect evidence to suggest that the government was beginning to fear Kamba violence and that it reversed its policy to avoid a confrontation. Especially interesting are the police and Criminal Intelligence Division reports, which reveal that Kamba in the police and army were becoming involved in the dispute. In fact, one of the ringleaders of early Ngelani opposition was Nduba, a Sergeant Major in the Kenya police.[46] Ukamba Members Association money collections were being made in both the police and army and among Kamba as far away as Mombasa. No doubt the colonial government did not want conflict with a people who constituted such a large part of the military arm of the state. Quite possibly, although the evidence is silent on this point, there were fears of army and police mutinies. Further investigations also showed a strengthening alliance between the Kamba opposition and the Kikuyu Central Association, another development which alarmed the government.[47] My impression is that the British assessed the situation as potentially violent, one which posed long-range threats to continued British authority as a result of discontent in the army and police and a link between the Kamba and the government's chief critics, the Kikuyu Central Association. Whatever the reason, the government called off its destocking campaign and decided to try reconditioning the reserve by promoting individual landholdings and encouraging trenching and the planting of napier grass and sisal trees. The British hoped that through education and an alliance with a group of self-interested land-owners the area could eventually be destocked voluntarily.

44. Minute from W. Harragie, Attorney General, November 19, 1938, K.N.A., PC/Ngong 1/108.
45. La Fontaine, Acting Chief Native Commissioner, to Provincial Commissioner, December 2, 1938, K.N.A., PC/Ngong 1/108.
46. Machakos District Political Record Book, 1930-1938, 86-87, K.N.A., DC/MKS 4/9.
47. Neil Steward, Superintendent of the Criminal Intelligence Division, to the Acting Commissioner of Police, September 19, 1938, K.N.A., DC/MKS 10B/15/1.

Kamba resistance can hardly be called nationalism. Their grievances were specific to the loss of their stock. Throughout the crisis their Kikuyu association-modeled political party was concerned only with this basic issue. The Ukamba association did not discuss traditional nationalist questions, such as educational grievances, lack of political representation, and economic exploitation, which had been the stock fare of the Kikuyu Central Association for a number of years. All their other concerns, such as loss of land and removal of unpopular chiefs, stemmed from the one dominating question -- destocking. Thus, when the issue was resolved in favor of the Kamba, many Ukamba Members Association branches ceased to function and many people went back to life as before.

Yet the crisis did have enormous nationalistic implications, especially for the Kamba of the most disrupted area, Ngelani. Here the bitterness could not be removed by simple government capitulation. Muindi was still in exile and grievances so long felt but repressed were now on the surface. The leaders felt strongly about collaborationist chiefs, growing labor recruitment pressures, lack of educational facilities, and European settlement in the Mua Hills. Their success in creating a political organization and resisting the government encouraged them to continue. Ties with the Kikuyu Central Association proved fruitful and were maintained. The Ukamba Members Association remained strong in Ngelani under the leadership of Kavulu, Mwalonzi, and Kioko, who continued to use the petition and telegram, so successful in 1938, to dramatize their grievances against the government. Dissatisfied Kamba from other areas now gravitated to the men of Neglani and gave more substance to their political organization. When World War II began, the British detained those leaders whom they feared the most. Many Kikuyu Central Association leaders were put in detention, and most of the Ngelani leadership was also detained, thus adding martyrdom to their claim to nationalist leadership. A rudimentary political party with nationalist aspirations had been planted and had already created linkages with the Kikuyu -- important developments for the future of Kenya.

No doubt political protest and nationalism would have appeared at some stage in colonial Kamba society, and a political party would have developed. The second world war was an enormous accelerator of these trends all over Africa because of its heavy demands and the new experiences it provided African populations; it would not have been surprising to see the appearance of a Kamba political party at the conclusion of the war. But in 1938 the conditions were not ripe for political action. There was no political leadership and no embryonic political organization -- developments which often preceded politicizing crises as was the case with the Harry Thuku riot in Nairobi in 1922. The Ngelani leaders were not budding politicians; they were aspiring cattle farmers who had turned their backs on active politics when they left Nairobi. Rather, it was the government's adamant policy striking at the most fundamental institution of Kamba life -- its cattle-rearing economy and polity -- which galvanized the people everywhere into opposition. Everywhere there was bitterness and antagonism; nowhere did the Kamba genuinely believe that they were overstocked and that erosion was turning their area into a wasteland. Moreover, the people had only to look across their artificial boundaries into the under-used, almost vacant grasslands of the European settlers in the Athi plains to behold land that would easily have accommodated any surplus stock they might have.

Leadership and organizing skill were certainly important in bringing the crisis to fruition, but the leaders and their party arose almost spontaneously. They had not been preparing for the day when the government would take a wrong step; indeed, they were leaders not because of their political skills, but because they were young men on the rise economically who could express well the grievances felt by everyone. Once the Ngelani people had demonstrated their opposition, resistance spread throughout the reserve spontaneously. No agents were needed; as soon as the news reached other communities, they too embraced open resistance.

The government's policy was incredible in its stupidity. Certainly the government was growing impatient with the inability of the people to curtail stock increase, and it was alarmed at the steady economic deterioration of the reserve. But almost no effort had been made to educate the people. Only the Local Native Councillors had been reached and because of their cowardice had not carried the government's thinking down. Clearly a wide-spread campaign of propaganda based on increasing voluntary sales and obtaining popular acceptance of the government's ideas was called for before compulsory destocking was employed. When and if compulsion was deemed necessary, it should have been introduced by stages, a small percentage of stock taken at a time, so that the people could see that reductions in cattle did lead to generally more productive herds. But the state had become convinced of general Kamba obstinacy and felt that the Kamba would oppose even the smallest changes. It concluded that if it was going to incur unpopularity, it might as well solve the problem once and for all by means of a thorough destocking program. The presence of Liebigs put added pressure on the government to make its program comprehensive. What the government authorities did not anticipate was the depth of opposition and its manner of expression. They assumed that the people would continue to be as relatively quiescent and apolitical as they had been throughout the colonial period, and that they would accept the government's program, albeit grudgingly. As in their other calculations, the government was hopelessly wrong.

The resistance of Kenya Africans did not always have the same causes, take the same form of protest, or lead to the same consequences. There were, for instance, very considerable differences in protest among the Kikuyu, Masai, and Kamba relating to their traditional institutions and colonial experiences. The Kikuyu, better educated and faster changing, spawned a political party led by a Western-educated elite, featuring such personalities as Harry Thuku and Jomo Kenyatta. Because they had established their party and political elite so quickly, issues of protest were inevitably channeled through them and exploited by them. Thus the Kikuyu flare-up over female circumcision was not quite the same as the Kamba destocking controversy. Although the institution of circumcision was deeply cherished in Kikuyu society, the issue was clearly manipulated and exploited by the Kikuyu Central Association in a way impossible for the Kamba since they did not have a preexisting party and established political leaders. Masai resistance, on the other hand, took the form of sporadic and small-scale warrior uprisings in 1918, 1922, and 1935. These were almost exclusively in defense of traditional values; the warriors rose against the recruitment of children for school and against road work levies, and in this important sense they were like the Kamba protest. But unlike Kamba resistance, these uprisings were the work of one sub-group -- the warriors -- and they failed to generate a climate of generalized protest in which a political party could be established. Those Masai who wanted to engage in continuous opposition to the government were forced to look for their support to the Kikuyu Central Association.

The most striking lesson to be derived from the Kamba controversy is that an attack upon a truly crucial institution can galvanize a whole group into action. During the crisis period the social cleavages between well-to-do and poor, educated and uneducated, and old and young are swept aside. A unified front emerges until the crisis is resolved.

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