

Mr. Josiah Njonjo is a retired Senior Chief. He lives just north of Nairobi on a farm which he bought fifty-six years ago. A keen farmer, he is also active as Chairman of Men of the Trees.

Q. Mr. Njonjo, when were you born?

A. Actually, I can't tell you the exact date, but I think I was born around 1890 because I have read about when Mr. Andrew Dick (a Scottish trader) was killed by a group of Maasai at Kedong on the edge of Kikuyu country in 1895. He had attacked them after they fought and killed a large number of Kikuyu and Swahili porters. I remember hearing about it when I was three, four, or five years old. I was old enough to go out with the goats, but only near the village because of the danger of hyena and leopard. We lived in a fortified village as all big families in our area did.

Reflections of Early Kenya

an interview with Ex-Senior Chief Josiah Njonjo

by

Anne Thurston and

Esmond Bradley Martin

My family was then living in a place called Mararo, a few miles from Nairobi. Even now I have a farm there and my family lives there.

Q. Did your father buy this land from the Dorobo?

A. My grandfather did.

Q. Was much of the Nairobi area forested when you were young?

A. Yes, all forest. The forest came down to the edge of Nairobi, to Ainsworth's Bridge (below the National Museum). Elephants, buffalo, lion, leopard, rhino, colobus monkeys, and baboons were in the forest.

Q. When did you first see Europeans in this area?

A. When they first came, I was too small to remember, but I saw Mr. Francis Hall who came to take charge of Fort Smith on the northwest outskirts of present-day Nairobi.

Anne Thurston has a B.A. in Sociology from the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. She is presently completing a Ph.D. on the impact of the Colonial period on the Kikuyu way of life.

Esmond Martin is a research assistant in the Department of Geography, University of Nairobi.

Q. What do you remember about Mr. Hall?

A. Mr. Hall came to our village because my father's elder brother was a headman. After Waiyaki, a leading senior warrior from our area, was deported, headmen were chosen and my father's brother Njubi Njonjo was one. Mr. Hall used to come and see him.

Mr. Hall was very cunning. He gave his headmen red blankets and umbrellas to show that they were chiefs, big people. A chief who went around with an umbrella could get everything freely, like goats, and even nice girls. Mr. Hall cheated them in a nice way. We used to call them "anene wa Wainyachoro", big men of Bwana Hall, or "Horo" as people pronounced it. Mr. Hall left here before 1900 and went to Fort Hall to build a fort. He died there and that is why they call it Fort Hall.

Q. How did the Kikuyu people speak with Mr. Hall? Did he know any Kikuyu, or did he speak Swahili?

A. He didn't know either. However, at Fort Smith there were Swahili porters, Moslems, indigenous coast people who had been slaves. They did not want to go back to the coast, and the Government gave them land at Fort Smith. They lived there, married Kikuyu girls, and learned a little Kikuyu. These porters translated for Mr. Hall.

Q. How did Mr. Hall choose the headmen who worked for him?

A. Mr. Hall chose men who showed themselves to be smart and who made themselves useful.

Q. How was Kinyanjui chosen to be a headman?

A. Kinyanjui was not really a leader. Waiyaki was a leader, chosen by the people. He used to go to Fort Smith to see Mr. Purkiss who was in charge then, and Kinyanjui went with him. Kinyanjui was a relative of Waiyaki's, of the same *mbari* (family group). He was a bit younger than Waiyaki, but also a warrior of about the same age. One day Purkiss quarrelled with Waiyaki and Waiyaki was arrested and taken to the coast. He died on the way at Kibwezi.

When Waiyaki went, Kinyanjui was chosen to come instead. Kinyanjui wore a red blanket like my father's brother, and carried an umbrella. He was much more powerful than any of the other chiefs and before long he was appointed Paramount Chief.



Josiah Njonjo at his home in 1975.

Q. Can you remember when the first missionary came to Kabete?

A. Oh, yes, I remember him. Mr. McGregor came first to Fort Smith (the Government offered to give him the now unused fort for the mission). He didn't want to stay there and tried to get a place near Kanyariri, but one of these big men of Mr. Hall, Karanja Marite, refused. So Mr. McGregor came to Kabete. My wife's father, Cege Kanyi, was also one of Bwana Hall's headmen. He and his family agreed to sell Mr. McGregor a plot of about 20 acres for about fifty goats. Mr. McGregor put his mission there in 1900. I remember I saw the animals, three cattle and about fifty goats. The elders put stomach contents on the boundaries and planted lilies. The land was bought freehold according to Kikuyu custom.

Q. What did the people think about the Kabete Mission?

A. They liked it and were interested in Mr. McGregor who preached the word of God.

They were pleased that he did not take land other than that which Cege Kanyi, my father-in-law, sold him. Then Mr. McGregor went to Weithaga in Murang'a District in 1902 and Reverend Harry Leakey came.

Q. What did the people think about Canon Leakey?

A. They liked him more than any of the other missionaries. He was very clever. I would not call him cunning. He came with all his heart, to teach the word of God, not to grab land. He just used the land that Mr. McGregor bought. He could have taken more land when it was being given out to Europeans, but he did not.

Q. What did people call him?

A. "Giteru"—big beard. We also speak of him as the "Light of Kikuyu" because he

The Leakey family in London, about 1905: Mary Leakey, Louis, Gladys, Julia, and Rev. Leakey. Photograph: Mrs. Gladys Beecher collection.



Kabete, 1903. Rev. Leakey with the first students and teachers at the Kabete Mission School. Left to right, back row (standing): ?, Mathayo Njoroge, ?, Daniel Kaguna, Samwell Muhindi, Shadrack Njuguna, ?, Solomon Ng'ethe, and Daudi Mwangi. Middle Row (sitting): Alfred Nokoa, his wife, his daughter, Enok (a Maasai teacher-evangelist), Benjamin Wamiti, Stephano Kinuthia, and Andrea Mukuri. Front row (sitting): Reverend Leakey and ?. Photograph: Mrs. Gladys Beecher collection.



brought the shine, the light. He brought Christianity. He was perfect. He and his wife, Mary Leakey worked hard. They were and are loved by the Kikuyu. There is no question about how much they meant to us. Even now, we have given our girls' school the name of Mary Leakey.

Q. Did you know Canon Leakey's eldest son, Louis Leakey, as a young boy?

A. Yes, he was born at Kabete, and I remember him as a baby while we were at school. He was a friend of mine. We used to call him "Wathiomo"—which means friend. When he grew older, he was given the Kikuyu name "Wakaruigi", which means clever, like an eagle. You know, eagles are very cunning birds.

Q. Were you one of the first boys to go to school?

A. There were a few others, about ten. Stephano Kinuthia was Canon Leakey's first student. He and Shadrack Njuguna were the first two boys who were baptised at Kabete. I was number twenty-four. You know, I was young; there were bigger boys than me. So, although we came together, they were baptised first.

Q. How did you happen to go to school at Kabete?

A. I liked football. When I was grazing my father's goats and cattle near the football ground at Kabete, I saw the others, those who came before me, playing with their teachers. I liked football and wanted to join them. My father was very much against it because I was the first son and he wanted me to look after his cattle. He came to the school several times to try to take me home. Once he even chased me around the Leakey's house, but I managed to hide under the kitchen table. However, after a month or two he said I could go.

Q. What did you learn at school in those days?

A. Actually, we learned to read and used to read the Bible and some church history in Swahili. The main thing was religious studies so that we could teach other people. We also learned a bit of arithmetic. There were a few books in English and later on when we had learned Swahili our teachers taught us some English.

We had two teachers from the coast. Alfred Nokoa and Gideon Long. Their fathers had been slaves taken to India. The sons came back to the coast when Sir Bartle Frere bought land there and Freretown was built. Our teachers were well trained and were brought upcountry to teach us. Canon Leakey himself was a good teacher. That was his first profession. When he taught us something, we really learned it.

Q. How many years did you go to the school?

A. From 1904 until 1912.

Q. And then what did you do?

A. When I left school I went to work at *The Leader of British East Africa* newspaper office. Gideon Kubai, Thomas Marimbe, Timothy Mwaura and I worked there and Harry Thuku joined us; he was of my age group. I was there until 1914 when I went to work at the District Commissioner's office at Ngong.

Q. What did you do there?

A. I was a clerk, really, a Goanese was the District Clerk, and I was his assistant. I also helped the District Officer, Mr. Hodge, collect taxes from the Maasai.

Q. And then World War I came. What happened during the War?

A. During the war Mr. Hodge and I were sent out to buy cattle for our army. It was very difficult because we met Germans and lions in Maasai country. I didn't like that but I learned not to be afraid of anything.

For part of the war we were based at Namanga. From Namanga, Mr. Hodge and I could see the fighting at Longido. The Germans were good fighters, but I think God punished them. When they were driven out of the Namanga area we went to the top of a hill to watch. We saw young girls carrying loads for the German soldiers. That was very bad. The British took men to carry ammunition and food, but not women.

The Germans were very proud. I remember one night when we were staying in a *manyatta* a Maasai came to tell us that there were Germans in his *manyatta*. Captain F. O. B. Wilson was with us doing intelligence work. Wilson, the askaris, and I went with the Maasai and found a German sergeant major and his men drinking milk. We took them back to

our camp. In the morning Major Brown, who was in charge, spoke English to the German sergeant major, and the German said, "Si taki kusema na bibi". Major Brown got angry. He said, "What, me? Bibi?" They were very proud. A prisoner! Telling our Camp Commandant, "I can't speak with a woman"!

Q. What did you do at the end of World War I?

A. When I first returned home, I used money I had earned during the war to purchase land just north of Nairobi where I still live. In 1919 some other young men and I began to talk about ways of getting increased freedom and the return of the Kikuyu land that had been given to settlers. With advice from Canon Leakey and other missionaries, we formed the first political association in the Kikuyu area, the Kikuyu Association.

We also asked Canon Leakey to go with us to the Paramount Chief, Kinyanjui, to discuss the possibility of some of the younger educated men being allowed to sit on the African Tribunal Court in our area. We didn't want to be in charge or to be big leaders, but we wanted to take part and to use our education in representing our areas and our churches. Kinyanjui agreed, and Government allowed Koinange Mbiyu [father of the present Minister of State] and I to sit from the Church Missionary Society, Philip Karanja James to sit from the Church of Scotland Mission, and Waruhiu Kung'u from the Gospel Missionary Society.

Not long afterward, the District Commissioner of Kiambu, Mr. Cambell, came to camp in Kabete location. As a Christian Representative I was helping Kinyanjui and Kinyanjui asked me to build a camp for Mr. Cambell. I knew how as I had done it in Maasai country when I went on safari with Hodge and others. When Mr. Cambell came, he found a stable for his horse, a kitchen prepared, a latrine, and he was happy. After that, he asked Kinyanjui to give me a part of his area as his assistant. Kinyanjui agreed because he was the age of my father and he liked me.

Q. Did you think being a chief was something like being a traditional elder?

A. Yes. When I became a chief, as I was going to be in a position to tell old men, including my own father, what to do, I felt

that I should become a full elder. I had already paid my two goats to the *Kiama* [Elders' Council] to be allowed to take part, but now I had to pay the full fees, five goats. Then I was given the stick of office. After that I was respected and people did not mind my position. The other men who sat as Christian Representatives all became chiefs around the same time and Koinange also paid the full fee to become an elder. Even now, although I am a retired chief, people respect me as their elder—because I was blessed by the elder people.

Q. How did you, as young chiefs, try to behave differently from the other chiefs?

A. Although we had become chiefs, we did not hide our efforts to get freedom and our land back, and we continued working through the Kikuyu Association. Also, we tried to speak out against things we thought were bad. We disagreed with the older chiefs who asked the people for beer and bribes. These men, whom we called Wainyachoro's chiefs, were happy if people gave them beer, sheep, he goats, or a girl, and they did things in return. Many of them did what the District Commissioners asked them to do even if their people suffered.

I myself tried not to take advantage of my people and refused to do many things that the District Commissioners expected me to do. I'll give you an example. At the time that I became a chief, the District Commissioners used to force women and young people to pick coffee for nothing, not a single cent. When Mr. Cambell ordered all of us chiefs to send people to the nearby settlers, I went to Major Belfield, whose farm bordered my location, and told him that I would bring people to work, but that I didn't want them working for nothing like slaves. I asked Major Belfield to pay them something, and he agreed; he gave them half a rupee a *debe* to start with.

When we reported back, Mr. Cambell asked every chief, "You told your people to go and pick coffee as I told you?" "Yes, but they refused." I told him what I had done and that the people felt like slaves when they were told to work for nothing. "You British," I said, "you tell us you don't want slaves. We read in history that Queen Victoria beat the Arabs for taking slaves. Now, why should I do that?" He said, "You are quite right,



Riruta, 1902. Kinyanjui with his first wife. Photograph: the Rev. Leakey; Mrs. Gladys Beecher collection.

you have done well." Because he liked what I had done, I was given a bigger location.

Q. Mr. Njonjo, am I correct that shortly after helping start the Kikuyu Association you were involved in starting another organisation, Men of the Trees?

A. Yes, as a chief, I met Mr. Richard St. Barbe Baker who was Assistant Chief Conservator of Forests in Kenya. Mr. Baker and I started the Men of the Trees in July, 1922, at Muguga Forest Station, in my location and in my division.

To start with we invited the young men and girls in the area to a dance. We gave out a first and second prize, and then Mr. Baker

presented the men with cloths and the girls with beads. After the dance, we started planting trees. Later we called all of the chiefs from the Kiambu District together to encourage their people in their own locations to plant. Eventually we planted trees throughout the Colony.

Q. What kinds of trees did you plant?

A. All indigenous trees, such as Murarachii [Cape Chestnut or *Calodendrum capense*], Muhugu [Muhugu or *Brachylaena hulleensis*], and Mutamayu [Brown or Wild Olive or *Clea africana*]. We didn't plant imported trees like Blue Gums and Black Wattle because they are not good for the soil.

Q. As a chief in the Kiambu District you must have had a lot of contact with Europeans. What did you think of them?

A. I liked many things about the British administration. If a British man told you to come tomorrow at ten o'clock, he would attend to you. The British kept their word and they did not take bribes. They did some things which we felt were rude. If you went to their office, they told you to take your shoes off, and when you saw a European you took your hat off. If you didn't you could be taken to the District Commissioner to be punished. That was very bad. However, we did not fight them for minor things like that, but because our land and our freedom to run our own affairs had been taken.

Q. What about settlers?

A. Some of the settlers were very rude, others were very good. Some of them were very good to their squatters and workers; they housed them with nice huts, paid them well, and gave them good food. Others just gave their workers dirty shanties, didn't feed them well, and besides that, they beat them and gave them poor wages. That was very bad.

Kikuyu respected the Europeans who treated them fairly and tried to work harder for them. Some of them made Europeans rich by their work for them. For example, Sir Victor Buxton, who farmed at Limuru, was very good. He was good friends with Canon Leakey and used to give Canon Leakey money to buy us meat and rice. He also gave the land for the Buxton High School at Mombasa. People liked him. Also, that lady Karen Blixen [Isak Dinesen], the people liked her very much.

Q. Why did they like her so much?

A. They liked the way she treated people. We have never forgotten how she helped her squatters. When she had to leave the country, she fought with the District Commissioner of Kiambu and forced him to give her squatters some land, part of the Forest Reserve. The District Commissioner and I went there and divided three hundred acres of forest land among them. Even today they're called Karen people.

Q. Did Karen Blixen speak good Swahili?

A. Yes, and she spoke some Kikuyu. She learned a little Maasai when she went to Maasai country with her husband who was a hunter, but she learned Kikuyu from the

squatters and the people who worked for her, mostly Kikuyu and Somalis.

I used to visit Karen Blixen with Paramount Chief Kinyanjui. She was a good friend of his and lived near his area. I went with him because I was acting as his secretary. She used to invite us into the house and make us feel at home. We sat there, in that big house, with the nice big furniture, and she gave Kinyanjui whisky to drink, although it was against the law of the Colony. There was no colour bar with her. She used to talk with us in Swahili and in English. Kinyanjui only spoke broken Swahili, so she spoke to me in English and I translated to Kinyanjui.

After Kinyanjui passed away, in 1929, the District Commissioner appointed me divisional chief of the area with about eight chiefs and a hundred headmen under me. I still visited Karen Blixen sometimes until she left Kenya a short while later.

Q. What happened during the Second World War?

A. During the Second World War, I was chosen to go to the Middle East to encourage our soldiers. I went with another chief from Kenya, two from Uganda, and two from Tanzania. I flew first to Sudan; I went to Cairo, from Cairo I went to Palestine, then Beirut, Tripoli, Damascus, and right up to the Turkish border. I went to Alexandria and El Alamein is the area where I really saw fighting.

Q. What has happened to the Men of the Trees in more recent years?

A. We have continued as an organisation since 1922. Since then we have planted thousands and thousands of trees, many of them on school grounds. We don't have our own nursery, and we don't sell trees, but we buy them from Government at a 30% discount and we give them out freely. Men of the Trees has become an international organisation, and I have gone to England to attend conferences several times by invitation.

Q. When did you retire as a chief?

A. I was a chief for forty-six years, from 1920 until 1966. I enjoyed being a chief, but it was a very hard job; it was not easy. However, I tried not to take advantage of my people and even now they come to consult me. I am happy wherever I go.