UNIT 1 AFRICA—THE DARK CONTINENT AND KENYA—THE LAND OF GIKUYU AND MUMB

Structure

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this Unit are manifold. The first is to trace briefly, the history of the African continent since the pre-historic times, and also to discuss the various meanings implied in the epithet—the dark continent—as applied to Africa by the European colonial powers.

A brief account of the colonization of the continent from the time of the arrival of the first Europeans—the Portuguese—is also given. This has been done with the aim, primarily, of providing the political-cultural background to our study of *A Grain of Wheat*. In the second part of the Unit you will be given a detailed history of Kenya since the pre-historic times to the point of its Uhuru in December 1963. In between, are the details of its first colonization by the Arabs and the Portuguese. The model of colonization followed by the British is described next. Some of you may be reading African literature for the first time. It is for this reason that a detailed background history is necessary. The struggles waged by the Africans—including the Mau Mau struggle—are also discussed in this Unit. All these have a significant bearing on our understanding of the text—*A Grain of Wheat*—which is based on the theme of the freedom struggle of Kenya.
In most books of history written by Europeans, the continent of Africa is referred to as 'the dark continent'. This expression—the dark continent—was most probably first used by travellers and missionaries who happened to visit the African continent much before political claims on its territory were made and it was colonized by various European powers. The term ‘dark’ has been used for describing the continent of Africa because, firstly, these early travellers as well as missionaries considered as ‘dark’ anything mysterious that they did not understand much about. Secondly, and more importantly, these first visitors considered Africa to be inhabited by people who were primitive, uncivilized and savages. The colour of ignorance, as we know, is black. According to these early missionaries, the Africans believed in magic and other so-called irrational rituals and customs. Once again, magic is associated with black colour as, for example, the term ‘black magic’ implies. Finally, there was the most obvious reason for calling Africa the dark continent: its inhabitants had very dark skins. These opinions, particularly about the Africans being primitive and uncivilized were accepted blindly by most Europeans who entered the continent either for trade or for colonization. In fact, the colonial administrations built upon this myth of primitivism of the Africans by stating that Africa had no history, no culture, no past.

1.1.1 Africa—the Myth of Primitivism, Political reasons thereof

There was a sound reason—from the European point of view—behind accepting such an image of the Africans. The European powers used the excuse of ‘civilizing’ these savages for entering Africa and for staying on for the economic and political exploitation of its people. Thus was created the myth of the white man’s burden which expression meant—on the face of it—that the white man had taken upon himself the onerous task—the burden—of “civilizing” the savage Africans.

However, as later researches into the history, politics, social organization and cultural achievements of the continent have shown, Africa was neither primitive nor uncivilized before the Europeans occupied it. Civilization, as we know, is much more than technological progress and cannot be equated with the possession of fly-by-wire aircrafts, flat-screen television sets, personal computers, cell phones, airconditioned cars and microwave ovens. If this were so, people belonging to the most ancient civilizations like the Indian, the Chinese, the Egyptian and the South American would all be primitive and savage. Like these, ancient Africa also boasted of various centres of civilization and culture with well-organized social and political systems and significant achievements in their respective fields of fine arts like music and dance.

1.1.2 Africa and the Evolution of Man

By now enough archeological and anthropological evidence is available to show that during the evolutionary process our ancestor—Australapithecus Africans or man-ape, as he was called—first emerged on the African continent. Rift valley region in East Africa was the most probable place where it happened. Excavations at the Olduvai Gorge in what is now called Tanzania have produced ample evidence of it being one of the oldest sites of world cultures. Discovery of primitive tools for hunting like the hand axe in not only East Africa but also in the Congo Basin and Zimbabwe shows a parallel development of this culture. This also compares well with the developments in other similar centres in India, China and parts of Europe.

1.1.3 Africa and the Ancient Egyptian Civilization

However, the most fascinating evidence about the cultural developments in Africa has been provided by a Senegalese scholar—Cheikh Anta Diop—who claims that the ancient Egyptian civilization was set up and nurtured by black Africans more than ten
thousand years ago. Relying upon evidence from various sources including historical accounts, Cheikh Anta Diop convinces us that when the great Sahara started drying up about 7000 B.C., before which it was a huge lake, a section of Africans began to trek along the routes of the river Nile. They finally settled in the valley at the mouth of the Nile delta where the river emptied its waters into the Mediterranean. Here they set up the great ancient Egyptian civilization with unprecedented progress in speculative scientific research. This cycle of the civilizational progress lasted many thousands of years during the course of which these black Africans colonized neighbouring territories inhabited by whites. The Semitic world of today is perhaps a result of a free cross-breeding between the two races.

However, like many other ancient civilizations, this civilization set up by black Africans in the valley of the Nile also ran out of steam. In the course of time it was overrun by the Persians. Then came the Macedonians, the Romans, the Arabs and the Turks in that order. More recently, the French and the British occupied the territory. This prolonged colonization resulted in the snapping of the links between the delta and the original centres of the civilization back in Africa. These centres lost touch with not only the Egyptian art but with one another as well, surviving for some time as isolated pockets during which period they concentrated more on the social, political and moral organization of their societies rather than on material development. In the meantime, Europe benefitted from the ancient Egyptian civilization via the Greeks and the Romans. Thus while Africa lagged behind in technological progress, Europe marched ahead full steam. The great empires of Ghana, Mali and Ife in West Africa, Ethiopia in the East, Zimambe in the South and Congo in South West are a testimony to the great civilization that the Africans built thousands of years ago.

Whether the hypothesis of Cheikh Anta Diop is wholly true or partially false is really not so important for us for the time being. What matters is the fact that it establishes, beyond any doubt, that ancient Africa at that time was as much primitive or developed, as much barbaric or civilized as any other part of the world, including Europe. It, therefore, proves as false the opinion of the European powers that when they arrived in Africa they found its people to be primitive.

1.1.4 Africa under Europe

Africa’s recent contact with Europe took place at the end of the fifteenth century when the Portuguese set up some rest and recuperation stations as also military garrisons on both the west coast of Atlantic and the east coast of the Indian Ocean en route to the East where they were headed, led by the legendry Vasco da Gama, for exploring the fabled riches of the Orient. Later, as the naval supremacy of France and Great Britain increased after the defeat of the Spanish Armada at the end of the sixteenth century, they too entered Africa to explore its interior for economic exploitation. By the end of the nineteenth century many more European powers had entered Africa. In fact there were military clashes among them for proclaiming supremacy over various parts of Africa. It is this that led to the holding of an European conference in Berlin in 1885 to portion out Africa among them. With this the process of colonization of Africa was initiated with common European consent and was soon completed.

1.2 PRE-HISTORIC KENYA—LOCATION, ANTIQUITY

The Republic of Kenya—abode of legendary Gikuyu and Mumbi—is an ancient land, lying on the east-central coast of Africa, across the Equator and encompassing some of the most arid as well as most fertile parts of Africa within its geographical bounds of 582,644 square kilometers. Bordered in the north by Sudan and Ethiopia, in the east by Somalia and the Indian Ocean, in the south by Tanzania and in the west by
Uganda, Kenya's a former British colony which at one time was known as the East Africa Protectorate.

Anthropologists would have us believe that man first appeared on earth in these parts of Africa, as also in many other parts of the continent, about a million years ago. Once again, like in other parts of the world, the people in this region too passed through various stages of development.

These inhabitants of Kenya seem to have come in contact with traders from some of the civilized countries of that time, such as Egypt, Greece, Persia and India. In all probability, it is these traders who first introduced agriculture and domestication of animals to the people of this period.

1.2.1 Social and Political Structure in Pre-historic Kenya

There were no classes in Kenyan society at that time. There were only different ethnic groups with varied styles of political and economic organizations. Because of a lack of means of communication, they lived in isolation from each other. The mode of production was subsistence-oriented and was based on a communal system of labour utilization which was either voluntary or obligatory or both. Each tribe was a distinctive unit, generally managed by the tribe-elders, as was the case with the Gikuyu, for instance.

Land tenure was a complex affair. While land was not saleable, each adult had rights to its use that was controlled by the tribal authority. A member had temporary use on a piece of land, which ceased when he moved to another assigned area under the shifting cultivation system.

1.2.2 Modern Kenya—the First Colonization by Arabs and First Contact with Europe—the Portuguese

The first colonization of these people and of the coastal region began with the arrival of Arab Muslims in the eighth century, who came to propagate Islam but stayed on to trade in ivory, gold, timber, iron and black slaves.

In course of time, a number of independent city states—mostly ruled by Arabs—came up all along the coast from Mogadishu to Kilwa. Most of the Arab influence was, however, confined to the coastal areas only and there is no evidence of a similar contact with the natives of the interior.

By the middle of the 15th century, the Portuguese who had by then become a major colonial power and who were looking for controlling the sources of exotic products of the Orient for trade purposes, made their first penetration of the coast, in their search for gold and spices and began to expand their slave trade. In doing so, they drove the Arab rulers from the coastal areas of Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania, which they continued to occupy and exploit for the next 200 years.

1.3 THE BRITISH

The beginning of the 19th century, however, saw more European powers, particularly the British, the Germans and the French becoming more interested in Africa in general and the East Coast in particular. A number of explorers and missionaries travelled into the interior and made contact with the Africans.

Towards the end of the 19th century, European interests in the continent had reached competitive proportions. In a conference held in Berlin, in 1884-85, in which Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Austro-Hungarian Empire, etc.
participated, it was decided to ‘partition Africa’. Germany and Britain, however, continued to clash over supremacy in East Africa. Eventually it was agreed that Lake Victoria would form the boundary between their respective areas of influence. The territories lying north of the lake—Kenya and Uganda—came under the British control, while the territories lying south of the lake—Tanganyika—became the German domain. The British government, however, chose not to administer these areas directly.

1.3.1 East Africa Trading Company

A trading company—The Imperial British East Africa Company—was founded in 1888 through the granting of a Royal Charter to Sir William Mackinnon, a shipping magnate. Besides Kenya and Uganda, a ten-mile strip of the East Coast was obtained from the Sultan of Zanzibar on lease. The Company, it was claimed, had been ‘formed for the purposes of pushing forward the civilization of Africa.’ The modus operandi of this colonization in the name of civilization was once again the same as in Asia: eventual political control in the guise of trade.

However, the Company soon found out that the trade, particularly in ivory, was extremely expensive on account of high costs of transportation. It was then decided to construct a railway right from Mombassa up to Lake Victoria. During its construction which was being done with the help of labour force brought from India, the Company had to bear huge financial burdens. The Company gradually wound itself. Its Charter was annulled in 1885.

1.3.2 East Africa Protectorate

The East Africa Protectorate was proclaimed in 1895, with Lord Harding as its first Commissioner. By 1896, the British control over the area had stabilized and the work on the railway was progressing smoothly.

Big game hunters and explorers passing through the region had been struck particularly by vast tracts of fertile land in the Rift Valley region. Among such travellers was one Captain Lugard who dreamt of large-scale agricultural farming and stock raising.

The principal inhabitants of the region, which later came to be known as ‘white highlands’ were the Gikuyu who were primarily agriculturists.

1.4 THE SETTLERS—THE LAND GRAB

With the completion of the railway in 1901, the idea of European settlement in the area was taken up in earnest so that the traffic derived from settlement would make the railway a profitable undertaking. This together with the transfer of the Eastern Province of Uganda, where most of the highlands were situated, to the East Africa Protectorate in 1902, further strengthened the possibility of non-African settlement. Harry Johnston, who was then the Special Commissioner for Uganda initially proposed to develop the area as ‘a white man’s country’.

Reports of the fertility of the land sent out of the administration to South Africa attracted a number of Europeans and as per the available records, the first batch of settlers mainly from Great Britain and South Africa arrived in 1902. These settlers occupied large chunks of fertile land for both farming and trading. Through a number of ordinances, the government reserved the Highlands exclusively for the white Europeans, excluding the native Africans and Indians.
The principal sufferers were of course the Gikuyu, since it was they who primarily inhabited the area and who were dislocated more than once after their land had been 'alienated' and given away to the European settlers—for a song. As the land-lust of the settlers increased, other tribes were deprived of their land as well. The Masai, the Nandis and the Kissis too suffered through removal to far-flung areas labelled as 'native reserves'. A series of land legislations—Land Regulations of the East Africa (1897), Indian Land Acquisition Act (1896), East Africa Land Acquisition Order (1901), and the Crown Lands Ordinance (1902)—provided the government with control of all land in Kenya and parts of Uganda for selling, granting lease or otherwise disposing of.

1.4.1 Forced Labour

Land grab was not the only problem brought about by the colonial policy of European settlers. The settlers wanted a constant supply of cheap or free labour to work on these farms and with the African reluctance to work for outsiders i.e., European farmers, they found it increasingly difficult to obtain cheap labour. The African's reluctance was due to the fact that their basic needs were provided by the subsistence economy and moreover, they did not want to work for the colonialists. In those cases where African settlements were part of European acquired lands, the Africans were declared squatters with permission to cultivate a small plot of land on the farm premises—Shamba—and to keep members of the family as well as a few cattle. Appalling working conditions, and severe restrictions on both the physical movements of the squatters and also on the number of cattle they could keep and the kind of crops they could cultivate were definitely oppressive. Moreover, the wages were abysmally low. They were subjected to most cruel punishments on the flimsiest of excuses. In fact, their plight in many ways was worse than that of their brethren who had been sold as slaves in the Americas by the Arabs and the Europeans. The result was that as in other countries of Tropical Africa, labour force in Kenya was created by 'methods of extra economic coercion.'

In fact, the settlers, with the help of successive government legislations seized more than 7.6 million acres of most fertile land. Yet even close to the end of the colonial period only 18% of this land was cultivated while millions of Africans strived to eke out a living in highly congested reserves.

1.4.2 Native Reserves

These steps together with prohibitive rates of poll and hut taxes led to massive migration of peasants in search of a living. This led to further problems in the native reserves, from which most able-bodied males were absent, earning money as wage-labourers, for paying personal taxes. Not only did it cause physical hardships for peasants who walked large distances, sometimes hundreds of miles, for many weeks and sometime months to gain employment, but it also stripped the African villages of its most efficient labour force, leaving mainly old men, women and children.

1.5 FIRST PROTESTS—K.C.A., Y.K.A., HARRY THUKU

By now, the Africans were sufficiently alarmed about the settlers' conspiracy to annex their land permanently and they formed two Associations to defend their interests. The first—The Kikuyu Association (K.A.)—was formed in 1920, with the primary aim of defending Gikuyu land. It comprised mainly of Gikuyu Chiefs and headmen. A year later, a more broadbased and more militant Association—the Young Kikuyu Association (Y.K.A.)—was formed with Harry Thuku as its secretary. Thuku, a government telephone operator, launched his agitation against not only the policy of annexing Gikuyu land, the 'Northey circulars' on forced labour, but also against the policy of carrying of 'kipande'—a card bearing the finger-prints of the bearer—by all
African male adults and the doubling of the Hut and Poll taxes from Rs. 5 to 10. Thuku received generous help from M.A. Desai, an Indian leader and journalist, in running his Association. Although, he started by enrolling only the Gikuyu, he soon extended its membership to other tribes as well. His arrest and subsequent deportation by the government led to a large demonstration in Nairobi in which over 20 Africans were killed by police firing. This act of the government triggered off the militant struggle by the Africans which led to the full-scale national liberation movement and eventual independence of Kenya in 1963.

Thuku’s Y.K.A. which had been banned after his arrest and subsequent demonstrations, reappeared in 1925, under the new name Kikuyu Central Association (K.C.A.). Its appearance had coincided with the transfer of authority among the Gikuyu from one age-group to another, an event which occurred once in about twenty years. The K.C.A., immediately demanded, among others, the Africans’ right to grow coffee, the appointment of a Gikuyu Paramount Chief, the publication of laws in Gikuyu language and the release of Harry Thuku. It also demanded direct representation by twelve Africans on the Legislative Council since the Europeans had neither ‘true sympathy’ nor ‘thorough contact’ with the people. They also expressed their fears about the security of title of their land after the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1915.

1.5.1 Female Circumcision

In the meantime, yet another confrontation broke out, this time between the missionaries and the Africans. In 1929, the Church of Scotland condemned the tribal practice of female circumcision—a form of clitoridectomy—as ‘savage’ and ‘barbarous’. Female circumcision was a custom that was regarded by the Gikuyu as also by many other tribes, as an essential element of their social structure. The issue was immediately taken up by the K.C.A., and it held large meetings in the Gikuyu reserves, highlighting the condemnation as yet another attack on their way of life by the Europeans, since the missionaries threatened to debar from church those persons practising female circumcision and polygamy and also disallow the children of such parents from obtaining education in missionary schools. Most schools, as we know, were at that time run by Christian missions. It, therefore, called the bluff of the missionaries doing ‘the wonderful job, at least in educating Africans.’ The Africans went to the extent of setting up of their own African Church and Independent African Schools, both of which institutions were to play a very crucial role in the Kenyan struggle for national independence. The controversy also provided an excellent opportunity to Jomo Kenyatta, the general secretary of the K.C.A., to increase the sphere of the influence of his organization as well as to project himself as a leader. He addressed big political meetings that helped the organization in enrolling new members and collecting money for the struggle.

1.5.2 Joint Struggle by Africans and Indians

The joint fight by the Indians and the Africans was brought about through contacts among the trade union leaders. The government tended to overlook the strength of the African Associations. The governments decision in 1938, to destroy thousands of cattle heads belonging to the Wakamba provoked a mass protest by them and brought them in touch with the Gikuyu.

At the same time, the simmering discontent over appalling working conditions among the labour broke into a full scale strike. Makan Singh, an Indian Printing Press worker, who had organized the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, and the K.C.A., played a steller role in organizing this strike that led to the appointment of a Commission to enquire into the working conditions of the labour force in Kenya. The report revealed government neglect and a scandalous state of affairs. With the outbreak of the war, K.C.A., and other such organizations of the Kamba and Teita
tribes were banned and their leaders arrested. The Indians and Europeans too suspended their political activities.

### 1.6 K.A.U., THE EMERGENCE OF KENYATTA

The Kikuyu African Union (K.A.U.) feeling frustrated, began to talk of a revolutionary struggle to free themselves from the colonial yoke. It was at this stage that Kenyatta returned to Kenya after his long stay in England and other countries of Europe and was accorded a hero’s welcome.

Kenyatta found that the country was a fertile field for political activities because of the post-war discontent. The war-returnees had become aware of the national liberation movements in Asia. As unemployment grew both in the cities and in the countryside, the cry of ‘Africa for Africans’ grew stronger. Overcrowding in the reserves and extensive soil erosion had made the Africans talk of getting back their ‘stolen lands’ from the Europeans. Kenyatta began to travel around the country and addressed large meetings. In June 1947, he was elected the President of the Kikuyu African Union (K.A.U.) and began to attack the government policies.

#### 1.6.1 African Trade Union Congress, the First Demand for Total Independence

African Trade Union Congress under the leadership of Fred Kubai and Makhan Singh also supported the struggle launched by Kenyatta in a big way. In fact, it was the ATUC, on May 1, 1950, that demanded for the first time in Kenya, total independence. Both Fred Kubai and Makhan Singh were arrested for being office bearers of an ‘illegal’ labour organization. Although the ensuing strike failed finally, it further strengthened the increasing cooperation between the Africans and the Asians in Kenya.

As frustration increased and as Fred Kubai and Makhan Singh were deported, the custom of oathing began in a big way across the whole country and a militant movement —Mau Mau—began to take shape which believed in inflicting damage on government machinery, among others, through violent means.

### 1.7 BANNING OF MAU MAU—THE EMERGENCY

In 1950, the government banned the so-called Mau Mau movement. Although Kenyatta and other so-called moderates denounced the movement, it continued to gain strength through the active cooperation of the people at large. As subsequent events were to prove, proscribing it proved to be counterproductive for the British government that got bogged down by it more and more with each passing day.

The Europeans started putting pressure on the government to arrest the Gikuyu leaders and declare a state of Emergency in order to check the so-called Mau Mau activities, that, they alleged, were both anti-Christian and anti-European. Attacks on European farms and the murder of a senior Chief—Waruhiu—near Nairobi made the new Governor, Sir Evelyn Baring to declare a state of Emergency on October 20, 1952 and immediately thereafter Kenyatta and eleven top leaders besides others were arrested. British troops were flown in from Egypt and the reins of decision-making passed from the local administration to the government in London.

The outlawing of Mau Mau, the arrest of Kenyatta and other African leaders and the repression let loose on Africans in general by the British troops and district officials soon proved to be counter-productive. Over 10,000 Africans were killed by the
security forces and another 90,000 were detained in detention camps. Violence increased, leading to more repression that in turn generated more violence in reaction. The colonial government was, therefore, caught in a vicious circle of violence. Sentencing of Kenyatta and seven others at Kipenguria trial in a most unjust manner added more fuel to this fire. The settlers, taking advantage of this situation, demanded once again a share in conducting the Emergency operations. In June 1953, the K.A.U., was also banned, creating a kind of political ‘vacuum’ that once again was filled by the trade union movement under the leadership of Tom Mboya, a young Luo. The armed struggle, however, not only continued to be waged but became more broad-based.

1.7.1 Lifting of the Emergency and the Constitution Conference in London

Finally, the Emergency was lifted in 1957 and the process of devolving more powers to the Africans began. A Constitutional Conference was called in London in 1960, wherein it was decided to give the Africans majority seats—33 out of 65—in the Legislative Council. Africans would also have the largest number of ministers, viz., four against three Europeans and one Asian. The plan naturally irked the Europeans who dubbed it as ‘a victory for Mau Mau’ and attacked the British volte face. Ngala, on the other hand, claimed triumphantly that the ‘European domination had been broken.’ The fond hope of Uhuru in not so distant a future gave a new fillip to the efforts of Africans. A new mass organization—Kenya African National Union (K.A.N.U.) incorporating the members of the K.A.U., was formed in March 1960, with Kenyatta as its President. Gichuru was, however, to act in his place until his release from prison. Soon, however, there was a split in K.A.N.U., and another party Kenya African Democratic Union (K.A.D.U.) was formed with the aim of opposing K.A.N.U.

1.7.2 Uhuru—Kenyatta as the First Prime Minister

In the 1961 elections, K.A.N.U., dominated the K.A.D.U., and in June 1963, Kenyatta became Kenya’s first Prime Minister. Finally, on December 12, 1963, Kenya gained its much awaited Uhuru.

1.8 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have discussed the various meanings of the term ‘the dark continent’ as applied to Africa and also the political objectives of emphasising—by the Europeans—the primitiveness of the continent. We have cited the arguments of Cheikh Anta Diop who counters this hypothesis by showing that it is the Africans who set up the ancient Egyptian Civilization. We have also discussed, though very briefly, the process of colonization of Africa by various European powers from 15th century onwards.

This Unit also traces the history of Kenya since its pre-historic days, focussing on, primarily the colonization by the British, the freedom struggle including the Mau Mau Movement and the eventual independence of Kenya in 1963.

1.9 QUESTIONS

1. What are the implications of the term ‘dark’ in the expression ‘the dark continent’ as applied to Africa?
2. Why was the myth of primitivism of Africa created? What is meant by the Expression ‘whiteman’s burden’?

3. What is Cheikh Anta Diop’s main argument about Africa’s past?

4. When did the Europeans first come in contact with Africa and which was the first European power to colonize parts of Africa?

5. What was the social and political nature of societies in pre-historic Kenya?

6. What was the model of followed by the British in colonizing Kenya?

7. What was the major impact of settling Europeans in Kenya?

8. In what ways did the Kenyans resist the colonial administration?

9. What was the Mau Mau Movement? What did it achieve and how?

1.10 SUGGESTED READINGS


