AN AFRICAN'S VIEW OF THE LAND QUESTION

Every day new reports come in as to riots and revolutions throughout Africa. Much of this conflict arose when the natives found that independence was of little use when a small number of white men owned most of the land. Since Kenya recently made a request for international assistance, we looked into our files for an article written in the Georgist publication Land and Liberty in August, 1963, by one Clement Were, President of the African Tenants Union of Kenya. Relative to the breakdown of law and order in the 1950's brought about by the MAUS (Hidden Ones), the secret society sworn to kill all whites in Kenya, Were wrote: "The main cause of strife is land. Mau Mau was not warfare resulting from the Africans' primitiveness. It was a war resulting from dissatisfaction with the system of owning land. Kenya being mainly an agricultural country, it is my great conviction that unless some clear straightforward policy is established for the use of land in Kenya, the troubles are bound to continue. And I am fully convinced that any political, economic or social policy in Kenya which chooses to avoid or to be vague on the land question is worthless.

"This is the reason why we members of the African Tenants' Union of Kenya (a nonpolitical organization) have found it rather tame to serve a large section of Kenya's tenants without touching upon the fundamental basis of Kenya's life—the land. And this is the main reason why our Union is very much interested in the taxation of land values."

Referring to African tradition, Were continued by stating: "I would like to point out that traditionally the Kenya African did not own land but possessed it. The African had no title deeds. He saw the land not as personal property but as a personal possession. The African, especially in Nyanza Province where I was born and grew up, had no grazing boundaries for his animals. He was free to cut grass from any field for thatching his house. He was free to get pottery clay for making his cooking and eating utensils from any clay field. All these were free, and in most parts of Kenya this policy of citizens enjoying all the natural gifts of God free of charge still continues and the people, including myself, value it highly, especially the freedom to fish in our beautiful lakes and rivers. But remember, the catches we make from our fishing are our own property, which we can sell or give to whomever we please. So whenever you hear an African cry for freedom, he still thinks in terms of traditional freedom, freedom to produce. This policy is good and Godly, but what is needed is a method of applying it within a modern economic system.

"The modern civilization with its system of ownership, where man tends to call everything property, is completely new to Kenya Africans. Very soon the human race, influenced by the policy of making everything capable of private ownership, will start claiming the ownership of the moon, the sun, and even the stars. Already modern man 'owns' airspace above his land, and water in the oceans, seas, lakes and rivers."

Mr. Were then stated that in a local library he came across the aims and objects of the publishers of Land and Liberty. He decided that he liked their modern approach to land problems so much that he introduced them to his executive committee, which was equally impressed and which insisted that they write for more detailed policy. Were stated: "We are keenly studying the policy with a hope that it may in the long-run be the accepted land policy, not only in Kenya, but in the whole world."

Being ignorant of this African's concept of land rights, the World Bank and the IMF have wasted billions of dollars in loans and grants to third world nations, which have only exacerbated their economic plight. Perhaps the light will yet shine through so that Kenya may achieve its hope and thus become a beacon for all of Africa.

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