

## THE DANCE OF FREEDOM

‘Kenya Resident’

ONE February evening, a thousand young Africans were gathered in a big hall near Nairobi. They cannot belong to a Kenya-wide political party, for in the name of freedom of association the still British government of the colony limits their People’s Convention Party to the Nairobi region; and they cannot at present hold a political meeting at all, for in the name of freedom of speech,\* and in special honour of the visit to the colony of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, all meetings in the region were banned. But dances are not banned!

They danced. They danced some African dances, some European dances and some dances composed from the best dance traditions of both continents. And then came a special dance; a troupe of Kikuyus in one of their traditional dances, graceful, slow, rhythmical, insistent. They wore their traditional costumes, gay, picturesque, feathered and carried the traditional blue and white paint on their faces. Town-dwellers they may be now; but they have not forgotten the dances, the dress, the songs, and the rhythms of their villages. There are many things they have not forgotten.

And, as they danced, they sang. Old tunes and not so old words. They sang of Jomo Kenyatta; his name came through in the rhythm. In the six years since this venerated Kikuyu leader of the Kenya African people, the head of their great and now proscribed political organisation, the Kenya African Union, was sent to prison, the British Government of Kenya has done all it can to make the people forget Kenyatta; even when questions have been publicly raised in the Legislative Council about the treatment of Kenyatta and his colleagues in their prison nearly 700 miles away on the borders of the Sudan, the Government has studiously avoided the use of their names. It would, if it could, blot out all memory of Kenyatta from the public mind, as the American government sought to do with the memory of Paul Robeson. So, how did the new young generation at this dance hall react when the old name came to their ears in the song? Had they forgotten him? Or was the name just an old memory to them? Or is it still a living burning symbol of struggle and hope?

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\*So, also, for a number of years *Labour Monthly* has been banned in the colony. It would be an offence for me to bring this, my own article, over the border into the colony.

The answer did not tarry. The moment the name was heard, it meant as much to them as it would have done ten years ago. The men burst out clapping; and the women 'trilled' that high-pitched emotion-stirring musical note that Kikuyu women use to express joy or approval. The sounds grew, and there came swelling the cries of 'Freedom! Freedom!' That lovely, compelling, world-transforming word and conception and reality, that in our short life-time has inspired and created so many new homelands.

The party was naturally nearly all African; but there was one middle-aged Indian present who offered to sing a song of his own composition. The chairman seemed a little anxious, for extempore additions to programmes may not succeed; but he knew him for a genuine friend, so he gave him the platform. He sang, and sang well, a simple moving song about their beloved leader. When this name came in the words of the song the audience, reacting readily to the name instead of attending to the importance of the song's rhythm, broke swiftly into long applause. But they were gently chided by the chairman, and thereafter remained as good as gold while the old but still tuneful voice from another continent sang a long song of praise and then their cheers were unrestrained.

Why does Kenyatta's name come forward with special insistence just at this moment? Well, the principal witness who gave evidence against Kenyatta on his trial six years ago recently swore an affidavit to the effect that, when he accused Kenyatta of Mau Mau associations, he was lying. And so he was prosecuted by the British Kenya government, the government that prosecuted Kenyatta and called this man as a witness—prosecuted not for the perjury that he confesses to having committed in 1952, but for now swearing an oath that he did then commit perjury. And in this new trial Kenyatta, the man that the government sought in vain to make people forget, was summoned as a witness to help in proving the falsity of the 1952 story.

In the dance hall the new generation, its faith as clear and superb as its traditional dancing, its understanding as true as its unbreakable longing for freedom and justice, reacted spontaneously to the name of the unforgotten, the unforgettable, the beloved leader. Fired by his name, in his and its tradition, with his example, under its new leaders, it seeks freedom and ensues it.

At last they all, Africans, Indians, Europeans, streamed out into the swift refreshing tropical twilight, minds at one in understanding that, after the night, comes the glorious dawn of freedom.